Niche Formations: Rethinking Literary Opportunity in Modern Southeast Asian Literature

By

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Introduction

Niche: A Keyword for Our Times?

This dissertation is about a ubiquitous yet ambiguous term in contemporary literary discourse: *niche.* Over the past century, *niche* has migrated from its origins in architectural terminology to become a generative conceptual metaphor in disciplines as disparate as ecology, economics, and sociology. Far from being merely a word that refers to a recess in a wall typically for an *objet d'art*, the term has inspired a rich body of theoretical work in these disciplines, whether on the combination of factors that enable a species to thrive within a given environment, the logic of targeting particular consumers within a given market, the spread of cultural forms within a given society, and much more.[1] Curiously, *niche* has not gained like traction in literary studies even as it is present in scholarship across literary fields and frequently used in popular literary criticism.[2] While this pervasiveness of and yet lack of critical attention to the term as it is used in literary discussions means that its definition is often taken for granted, it also means that the term possesses a certain utility for our understanding of literary phenomena despite there remaining about it a slipperiness.

An interview given by the author and academic Shirley Geok-lin Lim in 2000 exemplifies this ambiguity that *niche* bears. In the interview, Lim was asked, "[H]ow were you

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[1] For a recent overview of the history of the concept of the ecological *niche*, see Arnaud Pocheville, "The Ecological Niche: History and Recent Controversies" (2015). Some representative works in other disciplines that theorize the concept of the *niche* are Tevfik Dalgic, "Niche Marketing Principles: Guerrillas versus Gorillas" (1998) and Noah P. Mark, "Culture and Competition: Homophily and Distancing Explanations for Cultural Niches" (2003).

[2] Notably, if one were to input *niche* in Google Books' Ngram Viewer (taking the data from this tool, certainly, at face value), one would notice that the term roughly triples in frequency of usage in books published between 1960 and 2019.

able to find your niche — or island, if you will — in American and/or Malaysian society?"[3] The interview had been conducted for a study concerned with the migration experiences of women writers from island or peninsular locations who had resettled and received some acclaim for their works in America; Lim, who was born in Malaysia and had been living in the United States since 1969, had by the time of the interview published or co-edited several notable books of criticism, short story collections, and poetry volumes along with a memoir. After reflecting at length on what it meant for her to become an American citizen and observing, in doing so, that writing about her life in the United States in her memoir enabled her "to understand my little place in [America's] large and confusing history," Lim eventually replies, "Do I have a niche? Yes, of course, but it is a self-constructed niche."[4]

That the interviewer offers "island" as an alternative to *niche* and thus likens a *niche* to an island is not inexplicable; the interviewer seems to have wanted to reframe her question around the geographical focus of her study. But this substitution nonetheless points to a conception of a *niche* as not just a space, but a small space — like an island. Lim appears to understand a *niche* as such too; when she says that her memoir-writing was a way for her "to understand my little place" in America's history, she seems to have grasped the point of comparison between a *niche* and an island that the interviewer was making. And yet Lim's final response reveals a different idea of what a *niche* is altogether. On the one hand, she does not even answer "how" she was "able to find [her] niche." Rather, she asks rhetorically, in return, whether she has a *niche* at all. On the other, Lim does not qualify her *niche* — which she subsequently affirms that she has —

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[3] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "'Cultural Roots' vs. 'Cultural Rot': An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim, September 29, 2000," in Pauline T. Newton, *Transcultural Women of Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 168.
[4] Lim, "'Cultural Root,'" 169.

according to where it is located, as the interviewer had prompted. Instead, she describes it according to how it is formed. In modifying the interviewer's question into the form of a closed question, Lim exposes the interviewer's assumption that she already possesses a *niche*. In claiming her *niche* to be "self-constructed," Lim alters the interviewer's assumption that a *niche* is something that is already there for someone to "find." Whereas Lim's first revision of the interviewer's question indicates a tendency to immediately associate certain authors or kinds of writing with the term *niche,* her second indicates not only the polysemous character of the term, but also a lack of clarity about the very nature of a *niche*.

Along the lines of Lim's response, I interrogate in this dissertation uses of *niche* in scholarly and popular literary discussions on the one hand, and offer on the other an alternative conceptualization of *niche* that unsettles its frequent use in these discussions as simply a term that signifies a smallness. As starting points, I ask: what does the concept of the *niche* actually signify such that it has proven attractive as a theoretical tool across a number of disciplines? If the term does indeed connote a smallness, how does this smallness differ from other kinds of smallness? Does *niche* bear other connotations and if so, what are they? And how does this spatial term differ from others also used in literary studies such as "position" and "ghetto"?

My objective in thus reexamining and redefining the use of the term *niche* in literary discussions is twofold. First, to understand why the term has gained salience in the contemporary literary lexicon. The intrigue of the concept of the *niche*, I show, lies not so much in its reference to a type of space, even though it is a spatial metaphor. Rather, it lies in its reference to a type of relationship between a subject and its environment. If this significance of the term explains its import in and into a number of disciplines, it is also plausibly the reason literary critics have reached for the term when seeking to explicate, say, the relationship between an author's writing

and their sociohistorical contexts — and more often than not, when studying authors who would be profiled demographically as minorities, including authors whose background is marked to some degree by transnational interaction or movement. Lim's interviewer, after all, was trying to get Lim to speak about her relationship with her "environments" of America and Malaysia.

My second objective is perhaps more ambitious: to explore how the concept of the *niche*, through conceptual frameworks that I develop based on it, allow us to rethink several paradigms that have long been used to register transnational literary interactions. What I term the *authorial niche*, *niche nationalism*, and *the publishing niche* are all built on my argument that the term *niche*, in literary studies, captures a mode of literary production that involves the exploitation of, rather than the adaptation to or refusal of, one's extant geocultural conditions. The outcomes of this mode of literary production, whether the uniqueness of an author's works, the formulation of an aesthetic solution, or the diffusion of literary tropes, can accordingly be grouped in the conceptual category of what I call *niche formations*. Thus, rather than interpret features in the works of authors from former colonies or diasporic, usually minority, authors (like Lim) as instances of "writing back" to or "compromise" with the cultural legacies of empire or the dominant culture of a new homeland, I approach them as *niche formations* that are, in one way or another, "self-constructed," as Lim says.

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Constructing the conceptual category of *niche formations* naturally requires examining and comparing uses of the term in literary discourse. By "literary discourse," I mean writing, whether in academic texts or in more popular venues like *The New York Times* or *Quartz*, that engages with any textual or extratextual facet of creative writing — from formal or thematic aspects of literary works to interviews or conversations with authors to analyses of publishing or

bookselling trends and so forth. Given the polysemic character of *niche*, I focused only on metaphorical uses of the term. That is to say, I discounted from my study uses of *niche* in literary discourse that obviously refer to its literal, architectural meaning.

By far and away, *niche* in literary discourse appears to be most frequently taken to mean a market for a particular kind of book. I list below four academic studies published relatively recently which use, as I interpret it, the term in this sense:

1. Michelle Abate's *The Big Smallness: Niche Marketing, the American Culture Wars, and the New Children's Literature* (2016), which examines what she calls "niche market picture books." These books, according to her, "are not trying to appeal to the masses" and are instead "about a very specific topic for an equally specific audience" even though they "engage with a broad range of socio-cultural topics" and have "enjoy[ed] big sales or, at least, big publicity."[5]
2. Jeremy Rosen's *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* (2016), in which he identifies what he calls the "bibliophile niche." The "bibliophile niche," for Rosen, is comprised of readers who appreciate the so-called genre of "minor-character elaboration" novels — a "genre constituted by the conversion of minor characters from canonical literary texts into the protagonists of new ones."[6] "Today's risk-averse large-scale publishers have embraced and actively promoted [this] genre," Rosen says, "because its formal logic — explicit intertextual dialogue tethered to the adoption of diverse points of view — helps them identify and appeal to niche markets: an educated and well-capitalized

[5] Michelle Abate, *The Big Smallness: Niche Marketing, the American Culture Wars, and the New Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3-4.
[6] Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.

'bibliophile' niche of readers who recognize the prestige of great books even if they haven't read them and identity groups that are reconceived as target publics."[7]

3. Gisèle Sapiro's article "Translation and the Field of Publishing" (2008), which investigates the state of publishing translations in France using the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, and which suggests that translated books from certain languages comprise a *niche*. Translations, Sapiro observes, can be for publishers "a means for accumulating symbolic capital and building a credible list," but "[f]or newcomers and small firms, specializing in translation from particular languages like Chinese can also constitute a 'niche' with limited competition." It is such publishers, she says, who are typically responsible for "discovering writers in peripheral or semi-peripheral languages, following the 'niche' strategy."[8]
4. Emily Apter's *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), which suggests that books that concern given national or ethnic identities comprise a *niche.* In arguing against an uncritical embrace of the "disciplinary construct" of "World Literature," Apter writes that she "harbor[s] serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward a reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded 'differences' that have been niche-marketed as commercialized 'identities.'"[9]

While these four examples give us an overview of the ways *niche* has been employed as a business term in literary discourse, they also raise issues surrounding the definitions,

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[7] Rosen, 121.
[8] Gisèle Sapiro, "Translation and the Field of Publishing: A Commentary on Pierre Bourdieu's 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing,'" *Translation Studies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 157.
[9] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013): 2.

connotations, and morphology of the term itself. If *niche,* as we saw with the exchange between Lim and her interviewer, is often associated with a smallness, how does that quality stand in relation to Abate's observations that "niche market picture books" may cover a "broad range" of topics and boast "big" sales or publicity? What does the smallness referred to in that interview have to do with the "small" publishing firms Sapiro mentions, or the smallness that several other terms in these quotes may invoke such as "minor" (Rosen), "limited" and "peripheral" (Sapiro), and "specific" (Abate) or "specializing" (Sapiro)? Is the distinction between "niche" and "genre" merely that one is about a kind of market, and the other a kind of book, as Rosen seems to suggest? Would there be any real difference in meaning between the two terms if Rosen had, say, used the phrase "bibliophile genre" instead? Given the intention of Apter's book, what explains the negative inflection to *niche* that she appears to add — an inflection which is absent in these other quotes? And does it matter that *niche* is used sometimes as a modifier (Abate and Apter), sometimes as a noun (Rosen and Sapiro)?

These questions will be pursued in my chapters. For now, I want to underscore that the use of *niche* in literary discourse occasionally goes beyond its reference to a market for a particular kind of book. This non-economic sense of the term is evident in the interview Lim gave, but it is also present in, for example, Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World* (1987), in which we get the following uses of *niche*: "the characters involved [in Balzac's *Cousine Bette* and Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*] are assigned to their definitive niches,"[10] and "[Sir Walter] Scott's characters all have their own niche in the Edinburgh mausoleum."[11] Other and more recent uses of *niche* in literary discourse that I interpret as non-economic in sense include those found in

[10] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture* (New York: Verso, 1987): 154.
[11] Moretti, 268n33.

Alexander Beecroft's *An Ecology of World Literature* (2015) — "Authors, texts, and literatures, I would argue, respond to the scarcity of recognition not as economic beings but as actors in an ecological context, searching for the niche in which they are most at home"[12] — and in Regina Gagnier's "The Global Circulation of Victorian Actants and Ideas in the Niche of Nature, Culture, and Technology: Liberalism and Liberalization," which offers the following definition of *niche*: "A symbiological approach also considers the specific niche in which the story takes place, the environment in which the literature evolves."[13] Notably, these examples of *niche* employed in a non-economic sense always use the term in the form of a noun.

This second set of quotes both recalls the provenance of *niche* in architecture and suggests another two senses of the term: one that has to do with character, and another with ecology. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers three figurative definitions of *niche* as a noun in addition to its literal definition as "[a] shallow ornamental recess or hollow set in the wall, usually for the purpose of containing a statue or other decorative object." The first figurative definition is "[a] place or position suited to or intended for the character, capabilities, status, etc. of a person or thing." The second figurative definition, which the *OED* notes is a term in ecology, is "[t]he actual or potential position of an organism within a particular ecosystem, as determined by its biological role together with the set of environmental conditions under which it lives." The third figurative definition, which the *OED* notes is a term in business and "originally U.S.," is "[a] position from which an entrepreneur seeks to exploit a shortcoming or an

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[12] Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York: Verso, 2015): 20.
[13] Regina Gagnier, "The Global Circulation of Victorian Actants and Ideas in the Niche of Nature, Culture, and Technology: Liberalism and Liberalization," in *Interventions: Rethinking the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Andrew Smith and Anna Barton (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017): 26.

opportunity in an economy, market, etc.; (hence) a specialized market for a product or service."[14] Whereas the earliest usage of *niche* in its literal sense dates, according to the *OED*, back to the fourteenth century, the earliest usage of the term in its first figurative sense dates to the early eighteenth century, the second, to the turn of the twentieth, and the third, around the 1960s.

Of these three figurative definitions of *niche*, it is the ecological sense of the term which has proven the most portable across disciplines and disciplinary subfields, for reasons that I will identify in more detail in my chapters. Conceptual frameworks such as the "developmental niche," the "cultural niche," and the "cognitive niche" — which, respectively, are frameworks used in human development and family studies, sociology of culture, and evolutionary psychology — each draw on the concept of the *niche* as theorized in ecology.[15] And as we shall see in Chapter One, the ecological conceptualization of *niche* has even been used to rethink

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[14] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "niche (*n.*)," accessed February 15, 2021, www.oed.com. The *OED* in fact gives three literal definitions of the term; The other two are "a small, vaulted recess or chamber made in the thickness of a wall or (occasionally) in the ground; an alcove" and "the hole, lair, etc. of an animal. More generally: a place of retreat or refuge." However, because the focus of my project is on the metaphorical uses of *niche*, and because these two literal definitions of *niche* are in essence variations of the first literal definition of the term, I will be using only the first literal definition of the term whenever I refer to it in this project.

[15] The "developmental niche" framework was developed by Charles M. Super and Sara Harkness. They explain that "[w]e have borrowed the term 'niche' from biological ecology, where it is used to refer to an organism's place or function in a biosystem" (559).

The "cultural niche" is widely used in sociological studies of culture and is based on the conceptualization of niche in the study of ecology of affiliation in sociology. Noah P. Mark's "Culture and Competition: Homophily and Distancing Explanations for Cultural Niches," for instance, draws on the idea of the "cultural niche" as developed in the work of J. Miller McPherson which, as Pamela A. Popielarz and Zachary P. Neal point out, "borrow[s] the niche concept and other related theoretical machinery explicitly from the field of biological ecology" (66).

Notably, the concept of the niche is also used in the branch of sociology that studies the ecology of organizations. There, the work of Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman on the "organizational niche" also draws, as they note in their book *Organizational Ecology*, on the concept of the niche in ecology: "The main point of contact between existing organization theory and modern ecological theory is the concept of the niche" (95).

Finally, the "cognitive niche" is a framework developed by anthropologists John Tooby and Irven Devore and expounded upon by cognitive psychologists like Steven Pinker. As Pinker notes in a 2010 article, Tooby and Devore suggest that humans exploit a cognitive niche in the world's ecosystems. In biology, the 'niche' is sometimes defined as 'the role an organism occupies in an ecosystem. The cognitive niche is a loose extension of this concept" (8993).

design in the discipline from which the term originated, architecture. The conceptual frameworks I offer in this dissertation — the *authorial niche*, *niche nationalism*, and the *publishing niche* — likewise draw primarily on the ecological conceptualization of *niche* and theories of *niche* in other disciplines that are built on this conceptualization even as they incorporate the other two figurative definitions of *niche* noted above. That is to say, while it would seem to be the economic sense of *niche* which is used most prevalently in literary discourse, this project repurposes and retrieves, so to speak, the slightly older, ecological sense of *niche* to develop these theoretical frameworks for literary studies, and to reveal what we could think of as the conceptual thread that underpins and links all three figurative definitions of the term in spite of their apparent differences.

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In examining the use of *niche* in literary discourse, this project understands *niche* to be a "keyword" in accordance with Raymond Williams's sense of the term. It is worth revisiting the parameters of a "keyword" here to better grasp the methodological intervention my project makes. According to Williams's introduction in the first edition of *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), a keyword possesses two distinct but interrelated characteristics: "significance" and "difficulty." By words that have "significance," Williams means words that are prevalent in "general discussion." These words range from "strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage to words which, beginning in particular specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience."[16] By words that have "difficulty," Williams means words that have "variable usage"[17] — that is, words with

[16] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): xxvi.
[17] Williams, xxvi.

multiple meanings, and so "difficult" in the sense of being multilayered or bearing "explicit but as often implicit connections"[18] such that these words are arenas in which "problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested."[19] This latter characteristic is that which distinguishes a keyword from say, a "buzzword" — a word which, although also "significant" in "general discussion," as Williams would say, does not tend to invite debate over its significance.

Williams was certainly not the first to compile such a vocabulary of the "variations and confusions"[20] that exist in the English lexicon. By the time the first edition of *Keywords* was published in 1976, critics like William Empson and C.S. Lewis had published, respectively, *The Structure of Complex Words* in 1951 and *Studies in Words* in 1960 — works which similarly examined the historical development and implications of a number of polysemic words. Empson had in fact also used the term "keyword" in his own study.[21] But where Williams's *Keywords* might be said to differ from these studies is in its insistence that the meanings of words are imbricated with their social and historical contexts. While Empson, for instance, was concerned with the meaning of a word in relation to its individual speaker or recipient, Williams was more concerned with the meaning of a word in relation to the broader social and historical practices surrounding its usage.[22] As he describes it, his project is "an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical

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[18] Williams, xxvii.
[19] Williams, xxxiii.
[20] Williams, xxxv.
[21] In his "Comment for the Second Edition" of *The Structure of Complex Words* (also published in 1951), Empson writes that "Several reviewers suspected me of believing, in practice or even in theory, that every long poem has one 'keyword,' and can be explained by analyzing the meaning of that." William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (New York: New Directions, 1951): xi.
[22] For a further analysis of the ways Williams's study differs from Empson's, see Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe, "Compacted Doctrines: William Empson and the Meaning of Words," in *William Empson: The Critical Achievement,* eds. Christopher Norris and Nigel Mapp (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 170-195.

and social conditions."[23] However, in his review of that first edition of *Keywords*, Quentin Skinner points out a fault with Williams's approach: that it leads him to "the image of language as a mirror of social reality." Using the example of Williams's observation that the emergence of capitalism "gave rise to 'interesting consequent uses of language,'" Skinner argues that for Williams, "[t]he process of social change is traced as the primary cause of developments in our vocabulary; conversely, such developments are traced as reflections of the process of social change."[24] While Skinner concedes that "it is true that our social practices help to bestow meaning on our social vocabulary," it is also "equally true," he continues, "that our social vocabulary helps to constitute the character of those practices," and that language is not merely an "epiphenomenon" of social practices, but can be "one of the determinants" of those practices.[25]

Williams appears to have taken Skinner's criticism on his conceptualization of the relationship between language and social reality to heart. In the 1983 edition of *Keywords*, Williams revises his introduction to state explicitly that he "does not mean that language simply reflects the processes of society and history," and that "on the contrary, it is a central aim of this book to show that some important social and historical processes occur *within* language."[26] His argument for paying attention to the linguistic unit of a word is based on his reasoning that "most of the social and intellectual issues" which comprise what he calls the "difficulties" of a keyword "could not really be thought through [or] cannot even be focused unless we are conscious of the words as elements of the problems."[27] At the same time, Williams acknowledges that he does not

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[23] Williams, xxxv.
[24] Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon," *Essays in Criticism* 29, no. 3 (1979): 220.
[25] Skinner, 222.
[26] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), xxxiii.
[27] Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed., xxvii.

think "the clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and often evidently confused by them." A better understanding of "class," for instance, would not resolve class-related issues. Nonetheless, he maintains that "what can be really contributed" with a study like his is "not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness"[28] which can be brought to bear on the examination of the "social and intellectual issues" in which a word may be immersed.

Williams's acknowledgement that words are not just the "epiphenomena" but may be the "determinants" of social and cultural practices or issues, along with his assertion that a vocabulary like his is "necessarily unfinished and incomplete"[29] and the advent of digital tools that facilitate the tracking of words across a large number of texts, have catalyzed a body of work in the twenty-first century which similarly take as their units of analysis words that are either or both "significant" and "difficult." These "keywords studies," as we might call such works, appear to follow two strains. The first tends to take the form of an essay collection in which a number of contributors each offer pieces about a term identified as a keyword. Such collections either examine keywords relevant to culture and society broadly, as Williams did, or keywords specific to fields within literary and cultural studies. Notable recent examples of the former kind of collection include *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), edited by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, and an online database titled *Keywords Project*, which was initiated in 2007 and supported by the University of Pittsburgh, the journal *Critical Quarterly*, and Cambridge University's Jesus College, where Williams was a fellow. Notable examples of the latter type include the *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (2009), edited by Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing, and *A New Vocabulary for Global*

[28] Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed., xxxv.
[29] Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed., xxi.

Modernism (2016), edited by Eric Hayot and Rebecca Walkowitz. These studies overtly acknowledge their indebtedness to Williams's work and appear to take up Williams's call for "amendments, corrections, and additions"[30] to his vocabulary, addressing more contemporary words or different understandings of the words Williams considered that have emerged in the wake of new social issues and fields of study.

The second strain of "keywords studies" continues this expansion of Williams's project in terms of the words examined but focuses more on clarifying a word's multiple meanings to offer "just that extra edge of consciousness" about a social, cultural, or intellectual issue. Such studies sometimes look at a single word, sometimes a cluster of words. One notable example of the former type is Christy Wampole's *Rootedness: Ramifications of a Metaphor* (2016), which looks at how the word "root" became a politicized metaphor for belonging. A couple of notable examples of the latter type are Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), which examines the colloquial words "cute," "zany," and "interesting" to explore how late capitalism has transformed aesthetic experience, and Roland Greene's *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (2013), which examines words like "invention," "language, "resistance," "blood," and "world" to shed light on changes in science, literature, and politics during the early modern period. Unlike the above-mentioned collections, works in this strain of "keywords studies" do not cite Williams's *Keywords*, but they may nonetheless be understood as taking up Williams's approach of grasping sociohistorical issues through a consideration of seemingly everyday words and as premised on the notion that language has normative force.

Being a word that, while originating from a "particular specialized context," is now "quite common," and being a word whose polysemy appears to cause a conflict of

[30] Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed., xxxvii.

"contemporary belief and affiliation," as the case of Shirley Lim's interview shows, *niche*, I submit, is a word that is a keyword as Williams defines it. *Niche Formations* thus joins these works inspired by Williams's in its scrutiny of a word that is both "significant" and "difficult." Like them, it at once parses through the multiple meanings of a word and explores how our ideas about a given topic have been shaped by its definitions and usage. Yet my dissertation differs from this body of work in developing conceptual frameworks that are themselves based on the "keyword" it examines. In other words, *Niche Formations* is not just a philological or semantic project, but also a project that mobilizes its very point of focus — the term *niche* — to offer new apparatus that update existing paradigms for conceptualizing transnational literary interactions in tune with new concerns brought about by the acceleration of cultural globalization. Each of my chapters rethinks a particular paradigm or a set of paradigms, including the notion of "writing back" that has typically been used to frame the writing of authors from former colonies, as well as that of "transculturation" and *cannibalismo*, which have been used to describe literary production that involves the encounter and mixing of at least two different cultures.

In reimagining these paradigms, *Niche Formations* as a whole intervenes in an issue of literary studies that is perhaps best articulated by Edward Said during his presidential address at the 1999 Modern Language Association convention. Said begins his speech by noting that, at the cusp of the twenty-first century, a number of scholars, including himself, have come to realize that "the traditional frameworks in which we study literature" are increasingly untenable. "[T]here is a profound insufficiency now," he says, "to the notion that a Wordsworth poem can be seen as emanating from English literature of the late eighteenth century, or as the work of a solitary genius, or as a work of art, removed and distinct from other works such as pamphlets, letter, parliamentary debates, and so on." Yet for him, the imminent problem is not just that

cultural globalization has "eroded the formerly perdurable national and aesthetic frameworks, limits, and boundaries" that would have been used to study a work like a poem by Wordsworth. It is also that cultural globalization, in "eroding" these frameworks, has thrown into question the ways literary scholars have conceived of the relationship between a literary text and its contexts. "I myself have no doubt, for instance, that an autonomous aesthetic realm exists," Said continues, "yet how it exists in relation to history, politics, social structures, and the like, is really difficult to specify."[31] The challenge for twenty-first century literary scholars, according to him, is to figure anew not so much the scope of the sociohistorical contexts to which a literary work may be ascribed but rather, the nature of the relationship between the work and these contexts precisely because the stability of the latter can no longer be assumed. Thus when Said asks, toward the end of his speech, "Can one formulate a theory of connection between part and whole that denies neither the specificity of individual experience nor the validity of a projected, putative, or imputed whole?"[32], he is in fact asking for scholars to reconsider whether a text, as a "part" of some "whole" body of work that is defined one way or another, can be understood as "emanating from," or "removed and distinct from," or embodying some other "theory of connection" with, that "whole" which bears in mind both the existence of "an autonomous aesthetic realm" and "history, politics, social structures, and the like." Said, in other words, is asking for literary scholars to reconsider how they have drawn the relationship between the development of a literary work and the sociohistorical conditions that are indubitably attendant to its development — whether the demands of the literary marketplace, political exigencies, an author's cultural or ethnic heritage, so forth — such that neither the integrity of the former qua art nor the substantiality of the latter qua reality are denied.

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[31] Edward Said, "Globalizing Literary Study," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 64.
[32] Said, 68.

The challenges that Said observes in his speech were not directed at any particular period or region of literary study as conventionally understood; his speech, after all, was simply titled "Globalizing Literary Study." Accordingly, the scholarship which has emerged since Said's address and which appears to respond to these concerns come from scholars working within an array of fields. The rise of what I have been calling "keywords studies" is arguably one such response, particularly with regards to Said's concern that the "traditional frameworks" of literary study will no longer do. In building on Williams's legacy and tracking a given word's etymology and incidence across national, temporal, or disciplinary boundaries, these studies, *Niche Formations* included, are advancing a methodology that is capable of surpassing the limits of such frameworks. That said, a significant number of the works which seem to take up instead Said's second concern about the relationship between a text and its context may be categorized under the field of "new" world literature studies — a field that, at its most basic, can be understood to have as its object of study a revised notion of "world literature" that includes more than just Western European texts, and as attempting to tackle the various theoretical or methodological problems, including those Said voices, which such an expanded corpus of texts pose.

Within this body of work, we may discern two distinctive approaches to Said's second concern. The first approach, broadly speaking, holds that the material conditions of a stratified and unequal world profoundly affect, even constrain, the development and dissemination of literary texts. Studies taking this approach tend to borrow frameworks from sociology to offer explanations for the thematic or formal elements of a literary text that factor in structures of international political and economic power. While Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory formed the basis for Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), it is rather

Pierre Bourdieu's work which has loomed over the majority of such studies; Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, trans. 2004) is perhaps the most prominent and systematic adaptation of Bourdieu's field theory for world literature studies. Moretti and Casanova's texts in turn laid the foundation for a number of subsequent studies, such as the Warwick Research Collective's *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), which continue to draw on socioeconomic theories to delineate the social forces that condition world literary production and circulation. Because these studies understand that the conditions of possibility for a literary text are irrevocably those of its surrounding sociohistorical conditions, they imply that a text exists in what could be called a derivative relationship with its contexts.

The second approach can be understood as a counter to the first. Studies taking this approach tend to fault the first for its reduction of literature to nothing more than a byproduct of sociohistorical conditions. While they do not deny that global inequalities must be accounted for in literary production processes, they argue that these conditions do not constrain or predetermine a text's themes or its formal features and that literary texts, conversely, possess normative potential through their capacity to reimagine these conditions. Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016) is perhaps the clearest expression of this second approach. He points out that because models like Moretti's and Casanova's assume literary works to be merely reflections of social forces, they ignore "the normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethicopolitical horizon it opens up for the existing world."[33] "Through the powers of figuration," he says, literature "enables us to

[33] Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

imagine a world,"[34] and for that reason, literature "is itself an important force in contesting existing hierarchies in the struggle to remake the unequal world created by capitalist globalization."[35] Cheah's argument for literature's "active causal power in the world"[36] finds resonance in Debjani Ganguly's *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (2016). For Ganguly, the contemporary novel's world-making power is located in its capacity to bear witness to global acts of violence and terror and as such, to "express a new kind of humanitarian ethic, a new internationalism built on a shared dread of human capacity for evil."[37] If the relationship between a text and its contexts that the first approach posits is one of causality, this second approach flips the direction of that causality, contending instead that a text exists in what could be called a normative relationship with its contexts.

Interestingly, the dispute between these two approaches to Said's question about a text's relationship to its sociohistorical contexts parallels the dispute between Skinner and Williams about a word's relationship to social practices: both the studies of what we might call the "normative" approach and Skinner are asserting that a "part" (whether a text or a word) has more "active causal power" over its respective "whole" (whether sociohistorical conditions or social practices) than the first, "derivative," approach or Williams — at least initially — will allow. And certainly, these two approaches stand as valuable attempts to develop frameworks through which literature may be analyzed with attention to global inequalities. Yet it seems to me that answering Said's question by way of these two approaches bears a problematic implication. Namely, that the formal and thematic concerns of a text are only explicable as *either* the result of

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[34] Cheah, *World*, 44.
[35] Cheah, *World*, 58.
[36] Cheah, *World*, 36.
[37] Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 10.

an author conforming to their sociohistorical conditions, *or* the result of an author seeking to escape "through the powers of figuration" these conditions altogether. In other words, I am not so much contesting that the "derivative" or "normative" approaches are unsatisfactory responses to Said's question than the either-or binary which they present. This binary, I argue, risks obscuring and undervaluing the ways that authors, especially authors from the so-called "peripheral" countries or regions that studies like Moretti and Casanova's identify, have neither submitted to nor shunned the sociohistorical conditions attendant to their writing.

In *Niche Formations,* I show that there is an alternative formulation of the relationship between a text and its contexts, of an author's response to their sociohistorical conditions, which moves the study of literary texts in an age of intensified globalization beyond the binary posited by the "derivative" and "normative" approaches. By way of the concept of *niche,* I propose that we can conceive of this relationship as one that is exploitative. This approach holds that the formal and thematic concerns of a text are the result not of an author deferring to nor evading, but rather instrumentalizing, the various sociohistorical conditions that are attendant to their moment of writing. Indeed, to the extent that paradigms of transnational literary interaction like "writing back" or "transculturation" are themselves attempts at explicating the relationship between an author and their sociohistorical conditions (such as the cultural legacies of colonialism or the cultural displacements caused by diasporic movement), the conceptual frameworks based on the concept of the *niche* which I offer to rethink these paradigms constitute the intervention my project makes into the debates in the "new" world literature studies about the formation and circulation of literary texts in consideration of global inequalities.

Granted, the term "exploitative" itself is fraught, like *niche* (as the quote from Apter above suggests), with negative connotations. As one definition of "exploitative" provided by the

OED states, to characterize something as "exploitative" is to characterize it as "involving [the] unfair or unethical exploitation of someone or something." That such negative connotations have accrued to terms like *niche* and "exploitative" may be due to the legacies of critiques of capitalism and the realities of current global inequalities; these terms are indeed frequently used in contemporary business discourse. Yet the very first definition the *OED* offers for the term is merely the following: "Concerned with utilizing or deriving benefit from a situation, resource, etc.; *esp.* concerned with the extraction of value from a natural resource." [38] It is precisely with the intent of rethinking and repurposing terms like *niche* and "exploitative" by reaching for their alternative, if not original, definitions in order to explore their potential for the resolution of a problematic of literary study that I insist upon using "exploitative" in *Niche Formations* to name the relationship between an author and their sociohistorical context which I argue *niche* captures.

In advancing this latter idea, I draw out an implication that is present in the "normative" approach but not fully explored in the above-mentioned studies: that the sociohistorical conditions within which an author's texts are developed and disseminated are malleable and facilitative instead of immutable and constraining, as the "determinative" approach implies. If a literary text is assumed to have "active causal power in the world," that then means that "the world" (qua a text's contexts or the sociohistorical conditions in which it was produced) is open to renovation. Going further still, I suggest that this shift in the conceptualization of these sociohistorical conditions — a shift that is a corollary of conceptualizing the relationship between an author and these conditions as exploitative — means that these sociohistorical conditions can be understood as opportunities which authors capitalize on to their benefit. That is, to conceive of sociohistorical conditions as malleable and facilitative is to conceive of them as

[38] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "exploitative (*adj.*)," accessed February 15, 2021, www.oed.com.

opportunities for authors rather than as constraints or obstacles, as the "determinative" approach would have it. Put differently, I show in *Niche Formations* that authors, in particular authors from so-called peripheral regions or, more broadly, authors who are considered minorities or outsiders by some measure, are capable of thriving not so much despite, but rather on the basis of, the obstacles they face — obstacles that are in fact opportunities.

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The theoretical apparatus I present in *Niche Formations* is potentially applicable to twentieth and twenty-first century authors and texts of any geographical region that has been involved in modern formal empire, or that have to do with the displacements of peoples that followed from imperial rule. After all, the paradigms of transnational literary interaction I seek to rethink have been used for texts from across various regions of study which have experienced imperialism in some form. It therefore stands to reason that the frameworks I offer would be useful for the same body of work.

Yet the attention my project pays to these paradigms and this range of material in the first place is motivated by the effects of the unequal structures of global literary production that few would dispute are a consequence of empire. As the uses of *niche* I've cited so far show, the term is often used in relation to authors or texts who are considered a minority by some demographic measure. If the sociocultural hierarchies instituted by imperial rule are one reason that the very idea of a minority author or text exists, then my focus on what we may call the literary objects of empire is due to the frequency with which these objects are qualified as *niche* in literary discourse. Simply put, the tendency to associate *niche* with minority authors and texts, and the emergence of the category of minority authors and texts as a corollary of empire's legacies, explain my choice to examine literary objects of empire in this study. This emphasis in turn

allows me to develop my argument that literary texts can be understood as the output of authors who are in fact capitalizing on, rather than being constrained by, the systemic obstacles that are the remainder of formal empire.

The minority authors I focus on in my chapters are, accordingly, authors who could be categorized as postcolonial or diasporic authors — Joseph Conrad, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Viet Thanh Nguyen. To state the obvious, these three authors are all authors who would identify as male and heterosexual. Admittedly, the decision to center the legacies of empire as the primary cause, so to speak, of the systemic obstacles that authors can face comes at the cost of omitting a consideration of systemic obstacles that may be caused by gender and sexual discrimination. Gender and sexuality are indubitably imbricated with empire. But the paradigms of transnational literary interaction I seek to revise have themselves not necessarily been limited in applicability to the gender or sexual orientation of a given author. This study is therefore not so much unconcerned with the implications of gender and sexual discrimination as it is intent on offering conceptual frameworks for rethinking the writing of postcolonial and diasporic authors regardless of their gender or sexuality. It is my hope, nonetheless, that these conceptual frameworks may be reconsidered in light of the systemic obstacles authors encounter that are brought about by gender and sexual discrimination.

Two further parameters guide my choice to focus on the figures and works of Conrad, Pramoedya,[39] and Nguyen. First, the use of *niche* in its figurative sense in discourse that concerns these authors. This parameter is necessary for me to be able to demonstrate the various uses and understandings of *niche* in relation to literary objects, and to subsequently arrive at a definition of *niche* for literary studies on which I build the conceptual frameworks of *authorial*

[39] Throughout this project, I will refer to Pramoedya using what is technically his first name rather than his last name, in accordance with the convention of citing Indonesian authors as such.

niche, *niche nationalism*, and *publishing niche.* Implementing this parameter in my study, however, does not mean that these frameworks are only applicable to the works of Conrad, Pramoedya, and Nguyen. Rather, I focus on these cases of authors who have been associated with the use of the term *niche*, both directly and indirectly, in order to be able to construct these frameworks that, to reiterate, would hypothetically be useful for other postcolonial or diasporic authors and their texts.

The second parameter delimiting my choice of these three authors is a primary focus on texts about or by authors from Southeast Asia even as I do consider texts from other regions in my chapters. Whereas Pramoedya was an Indonesian author, Viet Thanh Nguyen is Vietnamese, or more precisely, a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American who migrated to the United States with his family when he was a child. Joseph Conrad, of course, is not Southeast Asian in heritage, but is one of the first twentieth-century "western" authors whose works were set in Southeast Asia. This regional focus is motivated partly by a supposed dearth of scholarly attention on Southeast Asian literature. Writing in 2011, Ronit Ricci observes that "Southeast Asian literary cultures…remain marginal in most World Literature courses despite their richness, the lessons they have to offer on particular and global histories, translation practices, religious thought, aesthetics and poetics less widely studied, performative traditions, and more."[40] A 2018 *Splice* article about the *Mekong Review* — a literary magazine focused on writing from the countries bordering the Mekong river — which describes the magazine as *niche* both suggests that the term refers to a marginality and the marginality of the region's literature that Ricci identifies.[41] Yet the authors I study would not in and of themselves be generally considered marginal or

[40] Ronit Ricci, "World Literature and Muslim Southeast Asia," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (New York: Routledge, 2012), 505.
[41] George Wright, "Against the odds, the niche literary magazine *Mekong Review* finds its audience in Southeast Asia," *Splice*, February 8, 2018.

niche, to the extent that the term indicates a marginality. Conrad has long been part of the English canon, Pramoedya was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize, and Nguyen is a Pulitzer Prize winner. This disjuncture between the prominence of these figures and the apparent marginality of writing from or about Southeast Asia explains my focus on the writing of this region — I find it productive for rethinking the concept of the *niche* beyond the use of the term as a synonym for a marginality or smallness.[42]

Now, Ricci does not delve into the reasons for this "marginal" status of Southeast Asian literature. But we may surmise that it is due in part to a lack of specialists on the literatures and languages of this region in comparative literature and English departments across North America and the United Kingdom. Unlike, say, Africa or South Asia, Southeast Asia admittedly does not possess as strong a tradition of Anglophone writing, and most of the specialists versed in the region's languages enough to study its literatures are either "area studies" scholars based in departments like history or anthropology, or are located at universities within the region or more proximate to it, like Australia and New Zealand (Ricci herself is tenured at Australia National University). That said, the Modern Language Association approved the formation of a permanent Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies forum in Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian Diasporic Literature and Culture in 2017. Scholars participating in this forum and the various panels sponsored by it during annual MLA conventions have sought to push the study of Southeast Asian literature beyond historical and anthropological approaches, and it is to this body of work that my project, in constructing conceptual frameworks for and beyond the study

[42] This disjuncture in fact also explains the dissertation's focus primarily on prose works rather than say, poetry (even as I return to a poem of Lim's in the conclusion). Purely in terms of how widely consumed a given genre is, prose, especially in the form of the novel, is indisputably the dominant form of writing today. My decision to examine authors who have all written novels is therefore motivated by my aim to build my reconceptualization of *niche* with texts that would not already be considered marginal or niche for generic reasons and yet have also been associated with the term *niche*.

of literature about and from Southeast Asia, aims to contribute. Indeed, if the forum's name itself is an argument that the study of the literatures of Southeast Asia includes but must also always exceed Anglophone writing, my decision to examine in my chapters both Anglophone and non-Anglophone texts likewise makes the case for approaching the literatures of Southeast Asia in consideration of works written both in English and in other languages.

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My chapters are organized most evidently according to a chronology of when each of the authors they center were writing — Conrad, at the turn of the twentieth century, Pramoedya, during the mid-twentieth century, and Nguyen, in the twenty-first century. But this sequencing is also aimed at capturing the evolution of the term's definition throughout the twentieth century. So whereas Chapter One delineates the relationship between the original, literal definition of *niche* in architecture and its later, figurative definitions — in particular, its redefinition in the field of ecology which, to recall, occurred around the early twentieth century —, Chapters Two and Three, however, center only the latter, with Chapter Three focusing on the most recent figurative definition, in business and economics.

Each of my chapters are generally structured as follows. I begin by examining the *niche*-related discourse surrounding Conrad, Pramoedya, or Nguyen, pursuing in the process the various questions about the definitions and uses of *niche* raised earlier in this introduction. I then weave my analyses of this discourse with various theories of the concept of the *niche* from other disciplines to construct the conceptual frameworks of the *authorial niche,* in Chapter One; *niche nationalism,* in Chapter Two; and the *publishing niche,* in Chapter Three. Each chapter concludes with my use of these frameworks to reconsider, respectively, the figures or works of Conrad, Pramoedya, or Nguyen.

Taken together, however, my chapters build upon each other to form an argumentative arc which both makes the case for rethinking and utilizing a conceptualization of *niche* for literary studies, and acknowledges the limits of doing so. Chapter One thus works to set up a definitive conceptualization of *niche* for literary studies. Chapter Two extends this conceptualization and, in the process, deepens our understanding of it, by exploring its applicability to a different literary object. Chapter Three, finally, rethinks the propositions of the previous two chapters by exploring the limitations of the concept of *niche.*

Chapter One, "Joseph Conrad's Authorial Niche," examines the figure of Conrad through the concept of the *authorial niche.* It is motivated by two features of Conrad's authorship: first, his significant influence over later generations of authors, and second, the preponderance, unusual in scholarship about early twentieth-century writers, with which the term *niche* is used to describe his work. The chapter begins with a scrutiny of two comments Virginia Woolf makes about Conrad's authorship that raise the question of how Conrad's influence on later authors has been interpreted. I argue that answering this question first requires reexamining how Conrad's works have been contextualized, and propose that we rethink the relationship between Conrad's works and his biographical as well as sociohistorical contexts — as an immigrant to the United Kingdom, as a sailor-turn-writer, as a writer working in the turn-of-the-twentieth century literary marketplace — through conceiving of his location in literary space as an *authorial niche.* To develop the idea of the *authorial niche*, I provide an exegesis of various uses of *niche* in literary discourse, then distinguish *authorial niche* from seemingly similar concepts like *niche author*, *minor author*, and *authorial position* to further define it. The chapter concludes by showing that it is the relationship between an author and their contexts that the *authorial niche* implies which allows us to conceive of the relationship between Conrad and authors like Salman Rushdie,

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and V.S. Naipaul as more than just that of these authors "writing back" to Conrad, as has been conventionally understood.

Chapter Two, "Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Niche Nationalism," focuses on the cultural politics of mid-century Indonesia, when the question of nation-building in the midst of Cold War tensions preoccupied the country's leaders, intellectuals, and writers. I offer *niche nationalism* as a concept for grasping how the nation's cultural producers of that period, including Pramoedya, were able to reconcile the apparently contradictory desires of cultivating through their work a sense of national independence, on the one hand, and a sense of international independence, on the other — desires which were both expressed during the first large-scale Afro-Asian Conference in 1955 (also known as the Bandung Conference). To construct this conceptual framework, I draw on but also extend the conceptualization of *niche* articulated in Chapter One by way of theories based on the concept of the *niche* that were developed in the fields of international relations and evolutionary biology. I then argue that this framework allows us to better understand both the structure and key thematic elements of Pramoedya's Buru Quartet, and to situate the politics of the quartet as those of Indonesia during the mid-century even though the quartet was published during the 1980s and set narrative-wise during the turn of the twentieth-century. In doing so, I show that *niche nationalism* stands as a framework for approaching the politics and cultural production of Indonesia and, plausibly, those of other newly-decolonized countries during the immediate post-World War II period, that exceeds the limitations of other conceptual tools for the study of cross-cultural interaction like transculturation and *cannibalismo*.

Chapter Three, "Viet Thanh Nguyen and the Publishing Niche," pivots around Nguyen's comment at a public event that the so-called *niche* of Asian American literature is "both an

opportunity and a trap" for Asian American authors. Although a dichotomous mode of thinking, Nguyen's observation is a useful heuristic for evaluating the concept of the *niche* and the conceptualization of it for literary studies that were developed in the previous two chapters. This chapter, accordingly, expands upon Nguyen's comment to investigate the pitfalls and potencies of the concept of *niche* within the context of the contemporary publishing industry — that is, the concept in the form of what I call the *publishing niche.* With the aims of defining the *publishing niche,* I begin the chapter with a consideration of how the transformations to publishing and bookselling which swept over these industries throughout the 1960s resulted in a proliferation of *publishing niches*. But I also suggest that this phenomenon was aided by the rise of an industry practice known as "comping." It is the logic of "comping," I argue, which explains why a *publishing niche* is "both an opportunity and a trap," particularly for authors of a demographic minority. Subsequently, I consider the negative and positive implications of *publishing niches.* I return to a theory of the *niche* from the discipline of evolutionary biology that was introduced earlier in Chapter Two to suggest that there is a certain benefit to the idea of the *publishing niche* which goes beyond it being just an "opportunity" for the individual minority author. Using Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and the history of its publisher, Grove Atlantic, as case studies, I show that the potential of *publishing niches* lies in their capacity to be sites at which progressive change to the wider literary landscape begin.

A final, oblique, and serendipitous thread ties the three chapters of this dissertation together: what we might call the "ghost" of Conrad. Nguyen himself admits that *The Sympathizer* was inspired by Conrad; in an interview, he says that he "wanted to tell a serious story and an entertaining story, and spy novels have a long tradition of being able to do both

through authors like Joseph Conrad."[43] Indeed, the linchpin of *The Sympathizer* is Nguyen's retelling of the making of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now,* itself perhaps the most famous retelling of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Pramoedya too was no stranger to Conrad's writing: in an interview, he acknowledged that among European authors, Conrad's works distinctively include "historical facts which have not been recorded elsewhere"; specifically, in *Almayer's Folly*, "the history of armed struggle against colonialism not recorded in Dutch historiography." "What Conrad wrote," Pramoedya keenly observes, "does not merely come from his imagination, but is based on historical fact."[44] It is to this interplay between "historical fact" and Conrad's "imagination," the relationship between Conrad's contexts and his texts, that we now turn.

[43] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Viet Thanh Nguyen: From Both Sides," interview by Jack Smith, *The Writer,* October 21, 2018.
[44] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Pramoedya's Fiction and History: An Interview with Indonesian Novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer," interview by Christopher GoGwilt, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 156.

Chapter One

Joseph Conrad's Authorial Niche

"[T]here is something exotic about the genius of Mr. Conrad," wrote Virginia Woolf once, "that makes him not so much an influence as an idol, honored and admired, but aloof and apart." Woolf, lamenting the lack in British letters then of a "master in whose workshop the young" — like herself — "are proud to serve apprenticeship," suggests that Joseph Conrad could indeed have been such a "master" if not for some eccentricity to his "genius" that both frustrated "apprenticeship" and hindered his authorial figure from location in a communal space like a "workshop."[1] In an essay published the following year addressing the same crisis, Woolf reasserts her observations, but with a slight change: "Mr. Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful."[2] As if to clarify why Conrad cannot be an "influence" for, and why Conrad's place is "apart" from, British authors, Woolf makes explicit this time that "something exotic" of Conrad's: his Polish heritage.

Written between 1923 and 1924, these particular comments of Woolf's about Conrad are exemplary of two conventions in Conradian criticism developed over the course of about a century. The first is methodological. In most contemporary accounts of Woolf's stance toward Conrad, scholars have charged Woolf with a nativism. Because Woolf appears to "say that Conrad's texts are none to alter the English language,"[3] they deplore the "insularity at work"[4] in

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[1] Virginia Woolf, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.
[2] Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction," in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, 44.
[3] Juliane Prade-Weiss, "M(O)ther Tongues: On Tracking a Precise Uncertainty," in *(M)Other Tongues: Literary Reflexions on a Difficult Distinction*, ed. Juliane Prade (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 9.
[4] Natania Rosenfeld, *Outsiders Together: Virginia and Leonard Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 94.

her words and the "parochial jingoistic attitude"[5] she projects. But in rushing to righteously protest Woolf's "insularity," these scholars do not ask why Woolf would bother to acknowledge Conrad's admirability in both essays if all she means is to dismiss Conrad's authorship. To spurn an author for "jingoistic" reasons hardly requires tributes, however begrudgingly given. Woolf, then, is referencing Conrad's heritage not simply out of some bigotry, but in order to account for his greatness in an era she finds bereft of good writing. Since she cares to conjoin Conrad's ethno-nationality with his admirability, Woolf is in fact also saying that Conrad's skill is of such magnitude in comparison to his peers that only a biographical factor can explain it.

Looked at this way, Woolf's comments thus become one occasion of writing about Conrad that justifies his works by the parameters of his life. Across volumes of Conradian scholarship, Conrad's background has been consistently used to reason through his talent, style, themes, politics[6]— so much so that if contemporary scholars tend to interpret Woolf's comments as a denunciation of Conrad's worthlessness, it would seem to be because they are habituated to explanations of Conrad's worth and writing as the outcome of his background. Indeed, by 2010, a companion to Conrad's works can confidently declare that "[n]aturally, all authors are products of their cultural and historical circumstances, but if ever there was an author who was the product of the historical and cultural circumstances in which he lived, it was Joseph Conrad."[7] In

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[5] Yael Halevi-Wise, *Interactive Fictions: Scenes of Storytelling in the Novel* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 122.

[6] Across over a century of criticism on Conrad, Conrad's background, particularly his ethno-national identity and his status as a Pole in England, has been used to reason through almost every facet of his authorship. Of his style, Richard Curle says, "It is perhaps, this northern and Slavonic melancholy which gives to [Conrad's] irony its singular quality" (161). Of his novels' themes and events, Gustav Morf says, "The sinking ship is Poland…Jim yielded and jumped, i.e. Conrad became a British subject" 163-64). Of his political views, including on gender, Andrew Michael Roberts says, "Conrad's experience of displacement and cultural marginality…leads to a highly problematic sense of masculinity as fractured, insecure, and repeatedly failing in its attempts to master the world" (3).

[7] John Peters, *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

light of Woolf's attempt, decades earlier, to employ Conrad's biography as a solution for the enigma of his "genius," we might think rather that if ever there was an author who was the product of historical and cultural *contextualization*, it was Joseph Conrad.

The second convention of Conradian criticism Woolf's comments exemplify is descriptive. In setting Conrad "apart" for praise even as she appears to set him "apart" simply on the grounds of his birthplace, Woolf is participating in a tradition among Conrad's many critics of vacillating over the literary categories Conrad belongs to — whether he is a late Victorianist or early modernist, a writer of popular or highbrow fiction, a "bloody racist" or sympathizer of the colonized or, as Woolf ponders, an exemplar of "the great tradition" or an "exotic" whose works would now be considered part of the global Anglophone canon.[8] Thus a critic like John Marx, writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, is able to remark that because Conrad's figure "usually ends up in the middle" of any such debates, it has achieved "a curious kind of stability," a "stability in instability."[9]

What is striking about these debates, however, is not so much their range but the idiom of space in which they have typically been articulated. Woolf's and Marx's observations are just two examples. More famous, perhaps, is Fredric Jameson's distillation of these debates in his chapter on Conrad in *The Political Unconscious*:

> Nothing is more alien to the windless closure of high naturalism than the works of Joseph Conrad. Perhaps for that very reason, even after eighty years, his place is still unstable, undecidable, and his work unclassifiable, spilling out of high literature into light reading and romance, reclaiming great areas of diversion and distraction by the most demanding

[8] For authoritative discussions on these debates about Conrad's authorship, see various essays in Allan H. Simmons, ed. *Conrad in Context* (2009).
[9] John Marx, "Conrad's Gout," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 1 (1999): 91-92.

> practice of style and écriture alike, floating uncertainly somewhere in between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson. Conrad marks, indeed, a strategic fault line in the emergence of contemporary narrative, a place from which the structure of twentieth-century literary and cultural institutions becomes visible…[10]

Conrad's works, Jameson says, "spill out," "reclaim great areas," "float uncertainly." By this exergasia of movement through space, Jameson insists on the nature of Conrad's place in, presumably, the "Western" literary canon — one that, being "unstable, undecidable," is unspecified. Yet in the second half of this passage, Jameson changes his mind. Conrad's place is no longer unspecified. Rather, it is now a place so specified that from it, the "structure of twentieth-century literary and cultural institutions becomes visible." In his own acknowledgement of the undecidability of Conrad's place, Jameson performs that very undecidability. Like Woolf, Jameson is at once of two minds about Conrad; like Woolf too, he expresses that ambivalence over Conrad's figure in a language of space. To the persistent contextualization of Conrad in his critical archive, we might add not just a persistent uncertainty about his figure, but also a persistent *spatialization* of it.

Woolf's comments about Conrad are thus significant for revealing that not much has actually changed in the ways Conrad's critics have framed him and his works since the time of his writing. A contextualization of Conrad is often *de rigueur* for explaining the formation of Conrad's authorship, and a spatialization of Conrad's figure, whether literally (he is "a Pole") or figuratively ("his place is still unstable"), tends to result from that contextualization. But Woolf's comments are more significant, even remarkable, for instantiating a conundrum scholars have since pointed out about those ways. When Woolf explains Conrad's distinctiveness by way of his

[10] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 206.

context (it "makes him," she says, "admirable"), that contextualization at the same time hinders Woolf from perceiving Conrad as an influence (it "makes him," she also says, "not very helpful"). Unwittingly, Woolf is enacting one of the consequences of contextualization troubling scholars a century later: its potential to obscure an author's affinities with others. Some scholars value contextualization — whether biographical, historical, or cultural — not only as a means for showcasing the singularity of a text, but also for enabling responsible criticism. As Conradian biographer Zdzislaw Najder puts it, "knowledge of [Conrad's] Polish background allows [readers] to select the proper 'dictionaries,' appropriate historical and cultural frameworks of reference in interpreting his stories and novels."[11] Others, however, are less sanguine. Most famously, perhaps, Roland Barthes complained that to sacralize the figure of the author is to stifle the "multiplicity" of a text.[12] Scholars of non-Anglo-American texts have long argued that to ethnicize is both to essentialize and reduce literature to mere anthropological information.[13] Most relevant to Woolf's comments, contemporary proponents of transnational or transhistorical literary analysis point out that to nationalize or periodize is to occlude boundary or era-crossing comparisons and connections, if not to delimit the schemas available for drawing such comparisons and connections.[14] Contextualization and context, in short, are vilified as forces

[11] Zdzislaw Najder, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.
[12] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147-48.
[13] Keith Booker, for instance, points out that "anthropological readings…have sometimes prevented African novels from receiving serious critical attention as literature rather than as documentation of cultural practices" (65). But this critique of anthropological readings of literary texts has been reiterated by critics of any body of non-Anglo-American literature.
[14] See, perhaps most prominently, Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), as well as Michaela Bronstein's *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* (2018). Later in this chapter, I engage more fully with an essay of Bronstein's, a version of a chapter in this monograph of hers.

powerful enough to arrest the fullness of literary experience — not to mention the appreciation of a text and its author's agency in the formation of his authorship.

Taking its cue from Woolf's comments, this chapter explores the implications of the habitual contextualization of Conrad's figure in the history of Conradian criticism. Woolf, of course, could not have foreseen the influence Conrad would have among later authors — his "descendants,"[15] as Peter Nazareth calls them, now number and are spread more widely than the regions Conrad once roamed. Yet how have interpretations of that influence been shaped by the enduring notion of him as a "product of the historical and cultural circumstances in which he lived"? In fact, how, to begin such interpretations in the first place, have critics handled the limits to the contextualization of Conrad that Woolf's comments demonstrate? Converse to recent studies which often stress or deemphasize Conrad's contexts in order to posit Conrad's influence, this chapter proposes instead a rethinking of the relationship between Conrad's figure and his contexts that these studies assume. Only by first attending to the way we understand that relationship can we better figure Conrad's relationship to later authors without necessarily rendering Conrad's figure as one that is overdetermined by history or ahistorical.

To that end, I argue in this chapter for a conceptualization of the relationship between Conrad and his contexts that is based on the mode of authorial formation implied by a spatial term used to describe Conrad since Woolf's time: *niche*. In teasing out the implications of this term, I suggest that framing Conrad's space in literary history — a space "apart," according to Woolf and so many others, but a space nonetheless — as an *authorial niche* allows us to apprehend that Conrad instrumentalized, rather than was simply a "product" of, his sociohistorical circumstances. That shift in thinking required by approaching Conrad as an

[15] Peter Nazareth, "Conrad's Descendants," *Conradiana* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 101.

author who developed an *authorial niche,* I claim, is crucial for discerning the manifold ways Conrad's "descendants" responded to his legacy. Moreover, to the extent that Conrad is often held up as forerunner not just of British modernism but also of transnational Anglophone writing, such an approach sheds light too on the mode of authorial formation pursued by other and later authors whom we similarly enlist under the rubric of transnational.

But first, what is an *authorial niche*? And what might it mean to say that Conrad developed one?

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For all the various spatializations of Conrad's authorship, it has, curiously enough, consistently attracted the use of the term *niche.* The earliest instances come from contemporaries of Conrad's. In a 1910 essay, Arnold Bennett observes that "[i]n every generation [critics] select some artist, usually for reasons quite unconnected with art, and put him exceedingly high up in a niche by himself. And when you name his name you must hush your voice, and discussion ends. Thus in the present generation, in letters, they have selected Joseph Conrad, a great artist, but not the only artist on the island. When Conrad is mentioned they say, 'Ah, Conrad!' and bow the head."[16] And in a 1927 lecture, Sir Hugh Clifford declares that "[i]f Conrad had never written another word, 'Youth,' I think, would have secured him a permanent niche in the temple of English literature."[17]

Niche reappears in Conradian criticism from the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. In his analysis of Conrad's struggles as a writer, Edward Said suggests Conrad "knew that, if the continuous effort at writing brought nothing else, it must and would find him a small

[16] Arnold Bennett, *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch, 1908-1911* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917), 231.
[17] Hugh Clifford, "A Talk on Joseph Conrad and His Work," in *Conrad in the Public Eye: Biography/Criticism/Publicity*, ed. John G. Peters (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2008), 39.

niche in contemporary letters; he would settle for that."[18] In his overview of Conrad's life, Owen Knowles deduces that reviews to *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* "must have left Conrad with the feeling that he could simultaneously find a commercial niche as an English writer without compromising his increasingly serious artistic ambitions."[19] In his survey of Conrad's career, Allan Simmons notes that "the *Morning Post* confirmed that Conrad had secured his own personal niche: 'if we allow Mr. Kipling to be supreme on land, Mr. Conrad has no equal on the seas."[20] In his appraisal of Conrad's readership, John Marx claims that "by imagining an audience as international as the settings for his fiction, Conrad tended to dislodge the association between reading and national belonging (elaborated most famously by Benedict Anderson) and instead associated readership with niche marketing."[21] And in his inquiry into Conrad's relationship to popular fiction, Carey J. Snyder argues that "Conrad found his market niche by salvaging romance and adventure."[22]

These uses of *niche* tell us three seemingly conflicting things about Conrad's authorship and the term *niche*. First, that Conrad impressed his critics as an author who belonged to the uppermost echelons of the literary world ("exceedingly high up in a niche"; "a permanent niche in the temple of English literature"). Second, that Conrad appeared to his critics, at the same time, as a canny observer of contemporary literary marketplace dynamics ("find a commercial niche"; "found his market niche"; "associated readership with niche marketing."). And third, that

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[18] Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966; New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 59. Citations refer to the Columbia University Press edition.
[19] Owen Knowles, "Conrad's Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J.H. Stape (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.
[20] Allan Simmons, *Joseph Conrad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 158.
[21] John Marx, *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 29.
[22] Carey J. Snyder, *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters: Ethnographic Modernism from Wells to Woolf* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 62.

Conrad nonetheless struck his critics as an idiosyncratic writer, less an icon (as for Woolf) than an iconoclast ("small niche in contemporary letters"; "his own personal niche"). By corollary, *niche* seems to be a term that can be at once a laudatory and an economic expression, even as it can connote an eccentricity, if not an obscurity. These apparent semantic differences are moreover complicated on the one hand by differences related to chronology — between the term's use during the first half of the twentieth century and the second, into the twenty-first — and on the other, by differences related to morphology — between the term's use as a noun (e.g. "permanent niche," "market niche") and as a modifier ("niche marketing").

Given such variances to the term *niche*, an understanding of what I call an *authorial niche* and its utility as a conceptual framework for Conrad's authorship demands first a clarification of the term's significance with regards to authorship both as a noun and as a modifier. Before examining definitions of the former upon which the concept of *authorial niche* is based, I look at current applications of the latter to an authorship. What does it mean, in other words, for an author to be dubbed with an epithet common across literary criticism and popular discourse nowadays: *niche author*, or *niche writer*?

One sense of *niche author* or *niche writer* that emerges from a survey of its contemporary usage is an author whose audience is small. For instance, in a study comparing the reputations of Romantic writers, H.J. Jackson observes that the Scottish novelist Mary Brunton "is occasionally the subject of academic articles and chapters in literary histories, especially as a foil to [Jane] Austen or as part of the literary history of Scotland. But as far as the nonacademic audience is concerned, she remains a niche writer, unknown and unread…an original and gifted writer who nevertheless fell by the wayside."[23] This implication of *niche writer* as an author "unknown and

[23] H.J. Jackson, *Those Who Write for Immortality: Romantic Reputations and the Dream of Lasting Fame* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 91.

unread" is present as well in a 2014 *The New York Times* profile of the Spanish author Javier Marías, supposedly "a perpetual contender for the Nobel Prize in literature." "Despite these accolades and the acclaimed gifts of his English translator, Margaret Jull Costa," the article declares, "Mr. Marías remains something of a niche author among English-speaking readers."[24] The strikingly similar syntax of both these examples — a statement asserting the author's skill or value, followed by another recognizing that the author's reception "remains" limited — suggests that to be a *niche writer* or *niche author* is not necessarily to be an author without literary "gifts," and so "unknown and unread." Rather, he or she is simply an author that, for some external factor or other, has not obtained widespread fame. In Brunton's case, it would seem to be because her "body of work was small" and therefore "eclipsed" by Austen's and Sir Walter Scott's[25]; in Marías's case, because his books came out with an independent American publishing house, and possibly the unease of English-speaking readers with "long sentences."[26]

On account of this quantitative implication that *niche author* and *niche writer* bear, the epithets are frequently employed as a means of contrast in remarks about the growth of an author's renown. Take, for example, the following two observations about Haruki Murakami and Jane Austen. Murakami, according to his long-time translator Jay Rubin, "was a niche author, but particularly after *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, he started to get noticed."[27] Austen, according to critic Claire Harman, was for "the high Victorians" a "half-forgotten niche writer, with a readership that looked insignificant compared with that of [Charles] Dickens, [Wilkie] Collins, and [William Makepeace] Thackeray, all selling in their hundreds of thousands to the

[24] Stephen Heyman, "Javier Marías: Spain's Elegant Master Novelist," *New York Times*, September 25, 2014.
[25] Jackson, 91.
[26] Heyman, n.p.
[27] Cooper Levey-Baker, "Meet Jay Rubin, the Translator Who Helped Introduce Haruki Murakami to America," *Sarasota Magazine*, November 15, 2018.

new mass market."[28] The use of *niche author* and *niche writer* in these instances underscore the eventual emergence of Murakami and Austen from obscurity into popularity — Murakami and Austen would hardly strike a contemporary reader as "unknown and unread."

As epithets that function as a measure of an author's audience reach, *niche author* and *niche writer* hinge on the use of *niche* as a modifier that signifies a numerical smallness. What explains this capacity of the term? Arguably, the original, literal definition of *niche* as an architectural term that refers to "a shallow ornamental recess or hollow set into a wall, usually for the purpose of containing a statue or other decorative object" ("niche," n1). This "recess or hollow" is always smaller in dimension than the wall in which it is set. Accordingly, we may surmise that the understanding of *niche writer* and *niche author* as an author with a small audience derives from the attribute of smallness already attached to the literal definition of *niche.*

But there is another sense of *niche author* or *niche writer* that depends rather on the capacity of *niche* to work as a modifier signifying a particularity or uniqueness This potential of *niche* to express not just a quantity but also a quality is apparent in a 2017 *The Independent* article on the science-fiction and fantasy author Neil Gaiman. After surveying Gaiman's career since 2002, the article then notes that fifteen years later, "Gaiman was no longer considered a cult or niche author; in fact he was on his way to becoming a household name."[29] Similar to the Murakami and Austen examples above, *niche author* is used here in opposition to "household name" to draw a comparison between Gaiman's renown during 2002 and during 2017. Yet the article's use of *niche author* as an alternative to "cult author" hints that *niche author* may mean more than just an author who has a small readership and is thus not a "household name." If

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[28] Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010), 94.

[29] David Barnett, "*American Gods* is more relevant than ever with Donald Trump in the White House and Brexit on the horizon," *Independent*, April 27, 2017.

"cult" as an adjective designates an attribute, usually unorthodox or fringe, that inspires both veneration and devotion, then the article's description of Gaiman as "a cult or niche author" suggests that *niche author* may equally refer to an author whose work possesses a certain non-mainstream quality, possibly a uniqueness, that in turn attracts certain readers.

Like the previous sense of *niche author* (which I will refer to from now on as NA1 for convenience), this other sense of *niche author* (NA2) also depends on the use of *niche* as a modifier whose implications can be traced to the term's original architectural definition. Unlike NA1, however, NA2 derives from the idea of an architectural niche as a wall-recess sized only, or fitted, to the ornamental object for which it was created and which, moreover, is extraneous, or "fringe" — because ornamental — to the overall wall-structure. For NA2, the aspects of uniqueness and "fringe-ness" also attached to *niche* as an architectural term go hand-in-hand to explain the use of *niche* as a modifier signifying a non-mainstream quality unique to an author's works instead of the quantity by which an author's works is read.

To be sure, NA1 and NA2, as the example about Gaiman's authorship indicates, are often conflated. How? A contingency, based on whether an author's work attracts an audience. Because an author whose work possesses a non-mainstream quality (i.e., NA2) may appeal merely to a small number of readers, that author may, consequently, be considered an author "unknown and unread" (i.e., NA1). This contingency, however, does not detract from the distinction to be made between NA1 and NA2 on the grounds of the way *niche* as a modifier is understood. In fact, since NA2 depends only on the use of *niche* as a signifier of a quality, NA2 may also refer to an author who possesses a large number of readers — readers who, insofar as NA2 also carries connotations of the term "cult," can be thought of as fans and who, though their number may be large, are comprised only of the segment of the reading public that is attracted to

that non-mainstream quality of an author's works. Take, for instance, a 2010 BBC Radio 5 blogpost titled "Terry Pratchett: Meeting Britain's 'biggest niche author.'" As the blogpost notes, Pratchett is "read and enjoyed by millions" [30] and, by the time of his death in 2015, had not only been translated into over thirty languages, but had also sold over seventy million copies of his books worldwide. If the superlative "biggest" is therefore taken as a colloquialism for "most read," then this blogpost suggests that an author with a large readership can be labeled a *niche author*. Here, *niche author* is used along the lines of NA2 rather than NA1 to describe Pratchett since Pratchett is an author with a huge readership whose size is nonetheless dependent on a quality of his work that marks him off from the mainstream. The point to bear in mind as such is this: an author may carry the epithet *niche author* no matter the numerical figure of their readers — in which case NA2 is the relevant definition of the epithet — even as it is an author being understood as NA2 in the first place that determines the number of their readers, and so their potential of being understood as NA1. Moreover, if, for NA1, it is frequently a factor external to an author's work that results in their low readership numbers, it is instead, for NA2, a quality internal to an author's work that results in their readership numbers, whether low or high.

At this juncture, one might wonder: what exactly does the "non-mainstream quality" which distinguishes NA2 from NA1 refer to? Let's return to the example of Terry Pratchett. Although Pratchett's oeuvre spans science fiction and horror, he is primarily known as a fantasy author famous for his *Discworld* series — a collection of forty-one novels set in a flat world balanced atop the backs of four giant elephants and a giant turtle swimming through space that is populated by wizards, witches, dwarfs, trolls, and the like. This general description of Pratchett's work suggests that the "quality" which warrants Pratchett's status as a *niche author* is the genre

[30] Adam Rosser, "Terry Pratchett: Meeting Britain's 'biggest niche author,'" *BBC Radio 5 Live*, September 7, 2010.

of writing under which his books are grouped, fantasy. Indeed, because genre, broadly understood, can mean the particular qualities of a given work that may be non-mainstream, there is a tendency across contemporary discussions of cultural phenomena to equate *niche* with genre. By this tendency, saying an author is a *niche author* is the same as saying that author is a genre author; saying an audience is a *niche audience* is the same as saying that that audience is the audience of a genre. For instance, a 2018 *Quartz* article describes an Amazon Studios production strategy as an attempt to pursue book-to-television adaptation "projects that have large and passionate niche audiences, which the fantasy genre is known for."[31] Here, the use of *niche* as a modifier for the audience type ("large and passionate") that the fantasy genre is "known for" indicates that the "quality" which *niche* signifies, and which has the potential to command a sizable and enthusiastic following, is the genre at hand, fantasy — a genre long considered to be non-mainstream (even if now debatably so).[32]

Franco Moretti also appears to equate *niche* with genre in his remarks about changes to the composition of the British literary marketplace during the nineteenth century. Until around 1820, he observes,

> the typical reader of novels had been a 'generalist' — someone 'who reads absolutely anything, at random,' as Thibaudet was to write with a touch of contempt in *Le liseur de romans.* Now, however, the growth of the market creates all sorts of niches for 'specialist' readers and genres (nautical tales, sporting novels, school stories, *mystères*):

[31] Ashley Rodriguez, "Amazon is gunning for HBO's cult fantasy crown," *Quartz*, October 6, 2018.
[32] A number of news articles published from 2010 onwards have noted fantasy's move into the mainstream. A 2011 *Atlantic* article, for example, suggests that the surge of fantasy film franchises over the past decade, including the *Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Chronicles of Narnia* and *Twilight series,* mark "fantasy's entry into the mainstream" (E.D. Kain, "Fantasy's Spell on Pop Culture: When Will It Wear Off?", *Atlantic*, August 2, 2011). That such articles exist is itself indicative of fantasy's changing status.

> the books aimed at urban workers in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, or at boys, and then girls, in the following generation, are simply the most visible instances of this larger process, which culminates at the turn of the century in the super-niches of detective fiction and then science fiction.[33]

Granted, Moretti uses *niche* in this passage not as a modifier but as a noun that means a segment of the literary marketplace — a figurative definition of the term which I will consider in more detail below and in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, when he notes that "detective fiction" and "science fiction" emerge as "super-niches" at the turn of the twentieth century, he effectively suggests that *niches* in a literary marketplace correspond to genres such as detective and science fiction which, like fantasy, are often considered non-mainstream. Yet if Moretti was only using *niche* to refer to genre, why then would he care, when he considers the consequences of the "growth of the market," to distinguish between the creation of "niches for 'specialist' readers" *and* "genres"? Put otherwise, what might Moretti mean by differentiating between a book we would consider as part of a *niche*, and a book as part of a genre?

Given Moretti's choice of conjunction — an "and" rather than an "or," unlike the case with "cult or niche author" as with the Gaiman example above — it would seem that *niche* and genre are not necessarily equivalent. By corollary, the "quality" which *niche* as a modifier signifies is not necessarily that of genre. Moretti in fact provides a clue as to what the difference between the two terms might be when he offers examples of genres in parentheses — "nautical tales, sporting novels, school stories, *mystères* — but precedes this list with the observation that *niches* are for "specialist," not "generalist," readers who are, as he crucially clarifies, "aimed at." Following Moretti's line of thinking, what appears to distinguish *niche* from genre is the former

[33] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York: Verso, 2005), 8.

connoting a pointedness, a targeting. A book considered part of a *niche* is not just a book for a "specialist" reader (since a book of a given genre might be considered a book for a "specialist" reader too), but rather, a book for a "specialist" reader to whom that book is targeted at or, put differently, a book produced with a "specialist" reader in mind.

This element of targeting attached to *niche* as a noun can again be traced back to the architectural origins of the term as a space fitted to the ornamental object for which it was created. It implies, in turn, two characteristics about the "quality" that *niche* signifies when used as a modifier for an authorship. First, that "quality" can be more "special" or particular than genre because an author is not writing by the rules of a genre, but rather targeting the readers of a genre. In thus writing toward a group of readers within an already narrowed group of "specialist" genre readers, the author is narrowing even further the potential range of "qualities" of his work. Second, that "quality" is produced by the author. Even if it may later be attributed to him by readers or critics, it is the author in question who, in targeting a group of readers, chooses to narrow the potential range of "qualities" of his work.

These characteristics of the "quality" which *niche*-as-modifier signifies and which distinguish *niche* from genre — characteristics which we might think of as particularity and self-production — resonate with the definitions of *niche* and genre offered by Narasimhan Anand and Grégoire Croideau in *The Oxford Handbook of Creative Industries* (2015). To delineate how *niche* and genre, concepts that "underpin theoretical explanations and empirical studies of creative industries," are "relate[d] to each other," and to clarify "their differential insights," Anand and Croideau synthesize conceptualizations of *niche* from organizational ecology and marketing, and conceptualizations of genre from cultural sociology. Drawing from the work of Michael Hannan and John Freeman, who define the *niche* of an organization as the space of

resources in which organizations "can survive and reproduce itself,"[34] and the work of David Shani and Sujana Chalasani, who define *niche marketing* as "a process of carving out a small part of the market whose needs are not fulfilled,"[35] Anand and Croidieu surmise that "[t]he concept of *niche* is production-centric, or very closely anchored to the orientations and actions that [cultural] producers take to differentiate their economic activity from competitors in the marketplace."[36] Drawing from the work of Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu, who argue that genres are classificatory devices implicated in sociological processes of differentiation, Anand and Croidieu surmise that genres are "systems of orientation, expectations, and conventions that bind together an industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of creative experience." "The level of analysis associated with genre," Anand and Croidieu add, "takes a broader perspective of industries and markets when compared to the concept of niche."[37]

For Anand and Croidieu, as such, *niche* differs from genre in that it is an analytical concept of a smaller scale that concerns the differences manufactured by producers to distinguish themselves from other producers in view of their targeted consumers. Accordingly, the use of *niche* as a modifier for an authorship, framed in their terms, indicates a "quality" in a text that can be smaller in scale than a literary genre which an author creates and employs in their work to distinguish (and which distinguishes) it from that of other authors in view of their targeted readers. Thus, to go back once more to the example of Pratchett, the "quality" which earns him

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[34] Hannan and Freeman, 947.
[35] David Shani and Sujana Chalasani, "Exploiting Niches Using Relationship Marketing," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 9, no. 3 (1992): 34.
[36] Narasimhan Anand and Grégoire Croidieu, "Niches, Genres, and Classifications in the Creative Industries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Creative Industries*, eds. Candace Jones, Mark Lorenzen, and Jonathan Sapsed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 333.
[37] Anand and Croidieu, 334-35.

his status as *niche author* is not only that of the genre he is writing in, fantasy. Rather, it is the kind of fantasy he writes, which critics have described more lightheartedly as comical, more cynically as satirical. As the BBC blogpost puts it, "[Discworld] is not just a realm for literary mischief; it's also the place where Sir Terry explores ideas about identity, society and politics. The fact that he uses magic and characters with odd names in almost recognizable versions of places we might have found here, on our Earth, a couple of hundred years ago is neither here nor there."[38] Pratchett is therefore a genre author, insofar as his books fall within the "orientation, expectations and conventions" of fantasy; but he is also a *niche author*, insofar as his books differ in their humor from the works of authors like J.R.R. Tolkien or George R.R. Martin. In fact, to the extent that fantasy is already regarded as a non-mainstream genre, but works like those of Tolkien and Martin are typical, or mainstream, of the fantasy genre, Pratchett's books can be considered doubly non-mainstream — hence, the appropriateness of identifying him as a *niche author* in the second sense (NA2).

(A digression, here, to clarify how, in light of the difference between *niche* and genre in literature that I am arguing for, we might understand Moretti's use of the curious phrase "super-niche" to refer to detective fiction and science fiction, which are indeed genres. In his article "Super-niches? Detection, Adventure, Exploration and Spy Stories," David Glover acknowledges that "Moretti never offers a working definition of what constitutes a super-niche" and consequently attempts to derive a clarification of the phrase from the essay of Moretti's in which it appears. Glover notes that "[i]n his exploratory analysis of genres between 1740 and 1900, Moretti identifies forty-four types of novel ranging from the 'picaresque' to 'imperial Gothic,' which he sees as the result of 'six major bursts of creativity' or cycles of innovation

[38] Rosser, n.p.

when ‘forms change once, rapidly, across the board, and then repeat themselves’ for twenty-five or thirty years before the process restarts. In line with established thinking, Moretti’s final surge of literary invention begins in the latter part of the 1880s. What distinguishes this conjuncture, however, is that the emergence of the super-niches [of detective fiction and science fiction] throws the neat cyclical pattern into disarray. For these hyper-genres are no longer merely ‘temporary structures’ with a relatively short lifespan, but instead have attracted so large and diverse a readership as to reach beyond the confines of the normal cycle and become a permanent addition to the repertoire of popular fiction.” Glover also cites another essay of Moretti’s, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” in which Moretti, although he does not use the phrase “super-niche,” suggests that a “super-niche” is a “large genre” that encompasses a number of variations. Glover thus seems to interpret “super-niche” to refer to a genre that has not only found permanence in the literary marketplace because of its large and diverse readership, but also to a genre that is diverse in and of itself.[39]

This understanding of “super-niche” as a “hyper-genre” or “large genre,” however, does not ultimately differentiate between the terms niche and genre. Glover has simply increased in tandem the size of what both terms refer to. In view of the distinction between *niche* and genre that I am making, wherein *niche* signifies a “quality” even more specific than genre, and in view of the evolutionary and expansionary processes Moretti has in mind and that Glover rightly emphasizes, I would suggest that Moretti’s “super-niche” can be understood rather as a specific quality of particular works that gained traction among a number of authors and in the literary marketplace to the point that it becomes identifiable and concretized as a genre.)

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[39] David Glover, “Super-niches? Detection, Adventure, Exploration and Spy Stories,” in *Late Victorian into Modern*, eds. Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 232-33.

Now, why would an author choose to narrow the potential range of "qualities" of his work? The answer is simple: to gain competitive advantage. By differentiating their work from other authors in the literary marketplace and so fulfilling hitherto unmet market needs, authors are able to increase, to quote Hannan and Freeman, their chances of "surviving and "reproducing" themselves. This logic explains the preponderance of contemporary writing guidebooks and articles that urge would-be authors to become *niche authors* — a 2010 *Forbes* article touting "The Magic of Niche Marketing for Authors" and a 2014 *Publishers Weekly* article explaining the process of "Finding a Niche" are just two examples. Guides such as these reveal another characteristic of the "quality" that defines NA2: that it must be consistent across an author's body of work so that it appears not as a one-off phenomenon, but a specialization or an expertise. The *Publishers Weekly* article, for instance, quotes a self-published e-book science fiction author advising new authors not only to "create a series," but to "build on each book."[40] The *Forbes* article, in quoting a literary public relations coordinator who describes *niche marketing* for authors as a matter of "relationship building" with targeted reader groups whether through book tours, blogs, and the like, in effect counsels authors to extend the credibility of their specialization beyond their books, if not to manufacture an authorial persona that embodies it.[41] To be NA2, as such, is to develop a specialization considered non-mainstream not only by targeting audiences whose needs are unfulfilled, but also by ensuring a consistency of subject across a series of books.

With these differences between the two senses of *niche author* (or *niche writer*) currently circulating in contemporary popular and scholarly discourse in mind, we might ask here: could

[40] Betty Kelly Sargent, "Finding Your Niche: On Genre Fiction and Indie Authors," *Publishers Weekly,* April 28, 2014.
[41] Alan Rinzler, "The Magic of Niche Marketing for Authors," *Forbes,* July 29, 2010.

Conrad be considered a *niche author* in either sense of the epithet? There are certainly aspects about Conrad's authorship that suggest so. Conrad's readership, to recall, was initially small — a facet of his career that his first publisher, T. Fisher Unwin, had intuited from its very start. As Conrad recounts in an 1894 letter to his aunt Marguerite Poradowska, Unwin had offered Conrad a low advance for his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, not only because "you [Conrad] are unknown," but also because "your book will appeal to a very limited public."[42] It was only with the publication in 1914 of his seventh novel, *Chance*, that Conrad attained widespread recognition and commercial success. Until then, reviewers of Conrad's work had noted that Conrad's lack of popularity belied his commendable skills. In a 1900 review of *Lord Jim*, for instance, Arnold Bennett pronounces "Mr. Conrad [to be] one of the most remarkable novelists of the period, [yet] the strange thing is that a writer so original, so forceful, so intensely and glowingly picturesque, and so 'stylistic,' has not achieved an even wider popularity than has fallen to the lot of Mr. Conrad."[43] To the extent that a comment like Bennett's echoes the observations above about the obscurity of Mary Brunton and Javier Marías, Conrad can be construed as a *niche author* in the first sense (NA1), at least during his early career. Like Brunton and Marías, he remained "unread and unknown" *despite* his apparent talents.

At the same time, a case could be made for Conrad being a *niche author* in the second sense (NA2). In the abovementioned essays, Woolf seems to suggest that Conrad, among British authors, was an author out of place ("Mr. Conrad is a Pole"). In an earlier essay, though, Woolf seems to suggest something not so much obverse as converse — that Conrad was an author in his

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[42] Laurence Davies, ed. *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 29.
[43] Arnold Bennett, unsigned review of *Lord Jim*, *Academy*, November 10, 1900, in *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews, Vol. 1: Almayer's Folly to Youth*, ed. Allan H. Simmons (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 295.

own place, an author whose works bore some trait associated especially with him and which distinguished him from possible comparisons. In her 1921 review of Conrad's then recently published *Notes on Life and Letters*, Woolf, rephrasing an earlier review of hers on *The Rescue*, remarks: "*The Rescue* we felt was full of splendor, and yet we had never before realized so plainly the marked boundaries within which Mr. Conrad practices his art. He flies his standard, we felt, with complete sovereignty over certain territories, but beyond them there is chaos. He never risks himself outside."[44] For Woolf, the "territories" Conrad "flies his standard with complete sovereignty over" are presumably those of adventure stories set at sea or somewhere foreign. *The Rescue*, after all, was the latest of Conrad's books in that vein, being the last installment of what has since become known as the Lingard trilogy begun with his very first novel, *Almayer's Folly.*

Yet Woolf would probably have hesitated to concede that Conrad was merely a writer of popular adventure stories along the likes of Frederick Marryat or Robert Louis Stevenson. When, in her 1923 review of several of Conrad's books written on the occasion of their reprint, she calls Conrad "an elderly and disillusioned nightingale singing over and over, but hopelessly out of tune, the one song he had learnt in his youth…the same song about sea captains and the sea, beautiful, noble and monotonous,"[45] her very choice of metaphor for Conrad — a "nightingale" — signals that Conrad was not just a run-of-the-mill writer of nautical tales. Rather, he was also a writer who wrote with a care for art Woolf herself could not deny. In her 1924 obituary for him, Woolf observes that strikingly, Conrad's "readers were people of the most opposite age and sympathies": both "[s]choolboys of fourteen" as well as "the seasoned and the fastidious."[46]

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[44] Virginia Woolf, "A Prince of Prose," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3: 1919-1924,* ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Mariner Books, 1991), 291.
[45] Woolf, "Mr. Conrad: A Conversation," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3,* 376-77.
[46] Woolf, "Joseph Conrad," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3,* 521.

Thus if, for Woolf, Conrad's works fell within the "marked boundaries" that are in effect the generic conventions of nautical adventure stories, they were nonetheless strange renditions of that genre they would otherwise appear to belong to.[47] More contemporary studies such as Andrea White's *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition* (1993) and Andrew Glazzard's *Conrad's Popular Fictions: Secret Histories and Sensational Novels* (2016) have likewise demonstrated that Conrad's works consistently employed yet subverted such generic conventions. It is on account of Conrad straddling "high literature" and "light reading," in Jameson's words, that we might consider him a *niche author* in the second sense (NA2) — an author who, like Terry Pratchett, would seem to be writing "monotonously" across a series of books according to the norms of non-mainstream genres, but who in fact was satiating readers of those genres whose concurrent desire for "beautiful" and "noble" writing were hitherto unfulfilled.

So, Joseph Conrad, *niche author*, according to both senses of the epithet. Yet why, despite the epithet's apparent applicability to Conrad's authorship across its early, late, and posthumous stages, would we nonetheless hesitate to conceive of Conrad as — why have Conrad's many critics never once designated him to be — a *niche author*?

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[47] Woolf was not alone among contemporary reviewers of Conrad's to detect Conrad's troubling of generic categories. A 1901 review of *Lord Jim*, for example, observes that "Joseph Conrad has not chosen to be a 'popular' writer, though there is enough of stirring adventure and vivid description in *Lord Jim* to furnish forth a first-rate novel of the 'popular' sort" (in *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews, Vol. I*, ed. Allan H. Simmons, 345). A 1903 review of *The Secret Agent*, for another, reasons that "Mr. Conrad's detective story must not be confused with the popularly accepted article [since] it is possible that the people who gobble up the works of Sir Conan Doyle and Mr. William Le Queux may find *The Secret Agent* too heavy for their digestive organs" (in *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews, Vol. II*, ed. John G. Peters, 360).

In an 1898 letter, Conrad remarks of several then-commercially successful authors who wrote science fiction and romantic melodrama that they were "of inferior intelligence" and "not noticed critically by the serious reviews."[48] Similarly, as Edward Garnett recalls, Conrad had declared H. Rider Haggard, renowned for his adventure tales, "too horrible for words."[49] Conrad's much-documented disdain for genre fiction that appealed to particular readers, coupled with his supposed lack of business acumen ("My method of writing is so unbusinesslike," he declared to his agent J.B. Pinker in his first letter to him[50]), are plausible reasons as to why calling Conrad a *niche author* might strike one as peculiar. Taken at his word, Conrad scarcely appears a *niche author*, at least in the second sense of the epithet — his opinions concerning literary art and the literary marketplace do not lend themselves to a portrait of him as an author savvily narrowing the range of his work to cater to readers' demands and to gain competitive advantage in an increasingly crowded literary marketplace.

Various Conradian scholars have nonetheless argued that Conrad was much more calculative and commercially attuned than his statements about the literary marketplace would allow us to believe.[51] But such arguments also resist labeling Conrad as a *niche author* even as

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[48]Joseph Conrad, letter to Aniela Zagórska, in *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Laurence Davies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 109. The authors to whom Conrad refers are Grant Allen (who wrote science fiction), Marie Corelli (who wrote melodramatic romance), and Hall Caine (who also wrote melodramatic romance).

[49] Edward Garnett, *Letters from Joseph Conrad: 1895-1924* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), 23.

[50] Joseph Conrad, letter to J.B. Pinker, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Vol. 2: 1898-1902*, eds. edited by Frederick Robert Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 195.

[51] See, for instance, Marx's *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire*, Snyder's *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters*. Studies examining Conrad's relationship to the literary marketplace of his time from various angles abound; see, for instance, Cedric Watts, "Marketing Modernism: How Conrad Prospered" (1996); Joyce Piell Wexler's *Who Paid for Modernism?: Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence* (1997); Susan Jones's "Modernism and the Marketplace: The Case of Conrad's *Chance*" (2007); David Finklestein's "Decent Company: Conrad, *Blackwood's*, and the Literary Marketplace" (2009); and Carey James Mickalites's *Modernism and Market Fantasy: British Fictions of Capital, 1910-1939* (2012).

they rely on the term *niche* to describe Conrad's authorship. This resistance appears to be the consequence of two factors. First, the resonance or lack thereof between *niche author* and another epithet that also suggests a peripherality, "minor author." Second, the tendency of *niche author*, particularly in its second sense (NA2), to be understood as a pejorative. With the aim of moving closer toward a definition for what I call Conrad's *authorial niche*, I examine in this section both these factors in turn, disambiguating along the way *niche author* from *minor author* and the use of *niche* as a modifier from the use of *niche* as a noun.

What is a *minor author*? Like *niche author*, *minor author* holds two different senses. The first sense, which I will refer to as MA1, is used often in general discourse to refer to an author who is not a "major author." That is, if "major author" means an author who is well-known, if not canonized, then a "minor author" means quite simply an author who is less widely-known. For instance, a 2018 *New York Times* obituary of William Goldman, erstwhile novelist and scriptwriter of award-winning films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President's Men*, observes that "[i]f he'd stuck exclusively to novels, Goldman would most likely be eulogized now as a minor author, a middle-range talent who plied his craft in the shadow of more illustrious contemporaries."[52] A *minor author*, according to its use here, can thus mean an author of relative obscurity.

The second and perhaps more esoteric sense of *minor author* (MA2) emerges from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorization of "minor literature." Working with a notion of the "major" as the hegemonic or the dominant rather than just the well-known, Deleuze and Guattari specify three criteria of a "minor literature": "the deterritorialization of language, the connection

[52] A.O. Scott, "William Goldman's Journey from Page to Screen," *New York Times*, November 19, 2018.

of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation."[53] In other words, a "minor literature" is a literature which goes against the grain of established linguistic and literary conventions, a literature whose non-hegemonic status compels every aspect of it to be politicized, and a literature which functions as a vehicle for political expression of a community. Based on these three criteria, MA2 is an author who produces a politicized and collectivized writing through radicalizing the use of a major language. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, writing as a minor author is "[t]o make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of non-culture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape." For Deleuze and Guattari, "true minor authors" include authors like Antonin Artaud, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Franz Kafka, upon whose work their conceptualization of minor literature rests.[54]

The definitions of *minor author* above allow us to make two observations concerning its relation to *niche author*. Firstly, MA1 corresponds in sense to NA1. Granted, we might note that unlike NA1 — which, to recall, refers to an author who possesses only a small readership despite their talent — MA1 can refer to an author of "middle-range talent," as the *New York Times* example above shows. Nonetheless, MA and NA1 may be regarded as interchangeable since they can both refer to authors who are generally "unknown and unread." Moreover, insofar as an author is NA1 because an author is also NA2, MA1 may also be regarded as interchangeable with NA2. An author may be considered less well-known, in other words, because of a particular quality to their writing which does not appeal to a wide audience. However, and secondly, MA2

[53] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana B. Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18.
[54] Deleuze and Guattari, 26-27.

neither corresponds in sense to NA1 nor NA2. We may note that the dissimilarity between MA2 and NA1 has to do with the correspondence of NA1 to MA1, which we have already distinguished from MA2. We may also note that the dissimilarity between MA2 and NA2 has to do with the definition of MA2 itself; unlike NA2, it does not signify a specialization nor an individuality implicit to specialization. After all, a *minor author*, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, references an author whose works are a "collective enunciation." But the fundamental reason for the dissimilarity between MA2 and NA1 or NA2 has to do with a difference in implication between the terms *niche* and *minor*. The former implies what I propose to think of, over other expressions for some kind of restraint or delimitation, as a boundedness, since boundedness, and the idea of the boundary, always presume a discrete "inside" that is enclosed by a similarly discrete "outside." This implication of a boundedness is present in NA1. For Mary Brunton and Javier Marías, as our working NA1 examples, the "inside," respectively, would be the academic and the non-English-speaking audiences to whom their works are familiar; the "outside," non-academic and English-speaking audiences. That boundedness is also present in NA2. For Terry Pratchett, as our working NA2 example, the "inside" would be his darkly comic mode of fantasy, the "outside" would be the genre of fantasy in general. Indeed, the specialization and individuality attached to the definition of NA2 are themselves the consequence of the boundedness *niche* implies.

Minor — at least as Deleuze and Guattari are using it — does not carry this implication of a boundedness. On the contrary, *minor* for Deleuze and Guattari involves a subversiveness that, if framed in terms of the idea of a boundary, is about disrupting boundaries or resisting boundedness. That subversiveness is implicit in the first criterion of "minor literature," the "deterritorialization of language" — that is, the upending of limitations placed on language use

by institutional or societal norms. It is also implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's declaration that "[w]e might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature."[55] Put simply, the difference between the terms *niche* and *minor* is that whereas boundedness is integral to the former, it is antithetical to the latter. To be NA1 or NA2 is to be characterized by a boundedness, whereas to be MA2 is to be characterized by a resistance to boundedness. Accordingly, MA2 is not interchangeable with either NA1 or NA2.

This resonance or lack thereof between *niche author* and *minor author* explains in part the absence of the use of *niche author* in Conradian criticism. If, on the one hand, one were to argue that Conrad's oeuvre meets the criteria of MA2, then Conrad would not be labeled a *niche author* since MA2 simply does not correspond in significance to either NA1 or NA2. If, on the other, one were to argue that Conrad's oeuvre does not fall under the definition of MA1, then Conrad would not also be labeled a *niche author* since MA1 corresponds in significance to NA1 and NA2. This latter line of argument marks that abovementioned interchangeability between *minor author* and *niche author* — an interchangeability that is evident, for instance, in the following observation from a 1994 *The Atlantic* article about Robert Stevenson's reputation: "F.R. Leavis, in *The Great Tradition*, dismissed Stevenson as a romantic writer guilty of fine writing, and the critical community in general has designated him a minor author not worthy of the serious admiration that we accord his friend Henry James."[56] Given that Stevenson is often regarded as an author of a particular kind of fiction — children's literature and horror, broadly

[55] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 18. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the disruption of boundaries Deleuze and Guattari intend by the term "minor" is expressed figuratively as a "line of flight" (*ligne de fuite*) wherein "flight," as their English translator Brian Massumi notes, "covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance" (xvi).
[56] Margot Livesey, "The Double Life of Robert Louis Stevenson," *Atlantic*, November 1994.

— who was remarkably popular during his time, it would not have made a difference if *minor author* in the quote above had been replaced with *niche author*. Indeed, if one were to substitute Conrad for Stevenson in the quote above, it stands all the more to reason why Conrad has not been labeled a *niche author*: because F.R. Leavis did ordain Conrad into "the great tradition," and because of the resonance between *minor author* and *niche author*, dubbing Conrad a *niche author* would be a misrepresentation of Conrad's legacy.

To be sure, Conrad could be called a *niche author* by the same token of resonances or lack thereof between *niche author* and *minor author* if it is argued that his oeuvre does not meet the criteria of MA2, or if it is argued that his oeuvre does fall under the definition of MA1. The first line of argument would not be implausible; the second has already been followed through in the previous section. Even so, the labeling of Conrad as a *niche author* would continue to be unlikely because of the potential of *niche author*, particularly in its second sense (NA2), to be used as a pejorative that indicates a lack of artistic excellence. This derogatory sense of *niche author* is hinted at in the quote from *The Atlantic* above. Bearing in mind the resonance between MA1 and NA2, the description of Stevenson as a "minor author not worthy of the serious admiration that we accord his friend Henry James" suggests that *niche author* can be shorthand for an author whose works are without literary merit. But to further illustrate and explain why *niche author* can be taken as a pejorative that constitutes a value-judgment about an authorship rather than just a descriptive that constitutes an observation about the quantity of an author's audience or the quality of an author's works, let us turn to a thread concerning the possible winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature on World Literature Forum — an online discussion board of sorts at which users discuss world literary topics. In this exchange involving three forum participants — Stiffelio, Redheadshadz, and Angelina Mas — over four posts out of some

four hundred and fifty posts by other participants, it becomes clear that the negative connotation *niche author* (or in this case, *niche writer*) can bear is rooted in an understanding of *niche* as a noun that is limited only to its figurative definition as a business term.

17 August 2013, 6.04pm

Stiffelio: [Louise] Erdrich is certainly a possibility some time in the future. Not only is she a good and prolific writer but she is from Native American ancestry and writes mainly about that subject, so that would fill a nice niche for the Academy, wouldn't it?

17 August 2013, 6.25pm

Angelina Mas [responding to Stiffelio]: Erdrich would be a good pick; *The Round House* is excellent, while the collection that she published prior to that, *A Plague of Doves*, is even better. Indigenous writers do not strike me as a 'niche' for the academy; among indigenous writers she and Simon Ortiz and Thomas King are all quite good and interesting because they are cosmopolitan and in the cases of Erdrich and Ortiz, writing from a commitment to indigenous concerns across national borders. Erdrich has been involved with P.E.N., I believe, and Ortiz is a writer (poet, primarily) who has worked steadily across multiple tribal divisions for many years, began publishing his first work as part of the 'Red Power Movement' in the late 1960s.

18 August 2013, 00.26am

Redheadshadz [responding to Stiffelio]: I feel like they did the same thing with Toni Morrison, filling in a niche, so I wonder if that would work against Erdrich. Or maybe enough time has passed that that's not a concern.

> 18 August 2013, 2.38am
>
> Angelina Mas [responding to Redheadshadz]: I have a hard time thinking of Erdrich as a niche writer. She is unusual among indigenous writers in a way that she deals not just with indigenous problems such as sovereignty or the depiction of the human relation to the landscape, in *A Plague of Doves*, but in doing so with subtlety and grace…. I think of Morrison less as a 'niche writer' than as part of a very interesting movement at the end of the 1980s, in the supposed 'culture wars' over sorts of literature by dead versus living people was worthy of study [sic]. Ah, the good old days! There's a wonderful cranky essay by African American critic Stanley Crouch, called 'Aunt Medea' (1987), where he complains that *Beloved* seems a made-for-tv and lo and behold, it was done such, starring Oprah, although what really bothers Crouch is that African American men are not portrayed in a flattering way, in *Beloved*.
>
> Well, regardless of whether Morrison is a 'niche' writer or not, I think it's fair to say that she's at the center of the canon of US literature at the moment, and that any US writer chosen for the Nobel, particularly with Morrison still alive, will have to stand the test of being compared to her. It's a test that a good many US writers can't pass.[57]

Stiffelio begins the conversation with the use of *niche* as a noun. At first glance, their use of the term seems to accord with the term's meaning in business rhetoric: when Stiffelio suggests that Erdrich's "Native American ancestry" and her "writ[ing] mainly about the subject" would "fill a nice niche for the academy," they appear to be applying the logic of *niche marketing*, which assumes that a competitive advantage is to be gained through targeting a particular and

[57] "Nobel Prize in Literature 2013 Speculation," *World Literature Forum*, accessed October 18, 2019, https://www.worldliteratureforum.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-61288.html. The thread appears to have been removed and is no longer accessible.

previously unfulfilled need. Stiffelio thinks, in other words, that Erdrich's heritage and oeuvre provide Erdrich with a "nice" competitive advantage over other non-Native American contenders for the Nobel Prize since the prize has yet to be awarded to a Native American writer. Redheadshadz likewise appears to be applying this logic when they worry whether Toni Morrison's 1993 win "would work against Erdrich." From their point of view, the particular need that has been fulfilled, thereby diminishing Erdrich's competitive advantage, would be the Nobel Academy's awarding of the prize to an author who is a woman of color. Both Stiffelio and Redheadshadz thus seem to be employing *niche* in the same way as Moretti who, as I suggested earlier, was using the business definition of the term to refer to a segment of the literary marketplace that, because targeted, possesses particular qualities. In this instance, the "segment" of the Nobel Academy's roster of winners for the Prize in Literature which Erdrich's win would target would be for a writer who is a woman, who is of color, and who is Native American.

This potential of *niche* as a noun to convey a kind of literary salesmanship and a targeted narrowness provokes a twofold rebuttal from Angelina Mas about the term's use in the discussion. On the one hand, when Angelina Mas asserts that "[i]ndigenous writers do not strike [them] as a 'niche' for the academy," they are resisting the notion — which they take to be implied in Stiffelio's opening statement — that Nobel Prize in Literature winners are authors whose works are bestowed recognition simply because they stand for specific literary communities as defined by gender or race. The Nobel Prize in Literature, Angelina Mas is saying, is not an arena where the politics of representation are to be negotiated, which would be the case if an author like Erdrich winning the prize were framed in terms of "filling a nice niche." Here, Angelina Mas's idealistic defense of the prize's aesthetic sanctity demonstrates a prejudice against the presence of the term *niche* in discussions of literary merit. That prejudice

appears to be rooted in the association they are making between the term and a lack of aesthetic autonomy or "disinterestedness" — that is, the business sense of the term. They return to that association when, in responding to Redheadshadz, they recount Stanley Crouch's critique of *Beloved* as a book "made-for-TV."

On the other hand, when Angelina Mas elaborates on the "cosmopolitan" breadth of indigenous authors, insists that Erdrich writes with "subtlety and grace," and observes that Morrison is currently "at the center of the canon of US literature," they are resisting instead the notion — also implied in Stiffelio's opening statement — that such writers of color must be confined to writing about issues related to their minority heritage and thus considered non-mainstream. Here, Angelina Mas's defense of the scope and talent of writers of color like Erdrich and Morrison tellingly indicate that they associate the term *niche* and the epithet *niche writer* with a narrowness of scope in writing and a concomitant want of literary talent. Angelina Mas, in short, is saying that if indeed Erdrich and Morrison's wins of literary awards were a matter of filling in *niches*, and if indeed Erdrich and Morrison were *niche writers*, they would not be worthy of the highest honor available to authors because of the absence of "disinterestedness" and literary talent which *niche* and *niche writer* connote. For them, the standards of writing to which winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature are held are "good" and universal, which they assume *niche* and *niche writer* cannot signify.

What stands out in Angelina Mas's rebuttal to Stiffelio and Redheadshadz, however, is a shift from the term *niche* (in their response to Stiffelio) to *niche writer* (in their response to Redheadshadz) which neither Stiffelio nor Redheadshadz make. This shift calls attention to two points about the forms and definitions of the term *niche.* First, there is a difference in inflection or undertone between the use of *niche* as a noun and *niche* as a modifier which allows Angelina

Mas to amplify her disagreement with Stiffelio and Redheadshadz's use of *niche* in the discussion. That difference, wherein *niche author* becomes a derogatory term, is based on an understanding of *niche* as a noun solely in its business sense. Consequently, as Angelina Mas's first response demonstrates, a *niche author* tends to be taken to refer to an "interested" author — that is, an author who writes more so out of commercial or social motivations than an author who writes "for art's sake."[58] Yet Angelina Mas's response additionally shows that a *niche author* also risks being perceived as nothing more than a "one-trick pony" precisely because of that narrowing which garners him both his epithet and his success. In this instance, a signature authorial style, borne out through specialization on a subject across a series of books for the sake of success, devolves into a signal of scant literary talent. These connotations *niche author* bears — an "interestedness" and a lack of literary talent — explain the aversion of Conradian scholars toward using the epithet despite the presence of *niche* in their observations about Conrad and despite the traits Conrad's oeuvre shares with that of a *niche author* in both senses of the term.

The second point that Angelina Mas's use of different forms of *niche* calls attention to is the existence of different figurative meanings of *niche* as a noun. As noted above, the pejorative inflection Angelina Mas attaches to *niche author* is dependent on an understanding of *niche* as a noun according to its business definition. It is this definition of *niche* that prompts Angelina Mas

[58] This understanding of *niche author* as an "interested" author is compounded by the tendency, to recall, of *niche* to be conflated with *genre* and, accordingly, of *niche authors* with genre authors. Because an author labeled a *niche author* is often writing within a non-mainstream genre, that author may suffer, like a genre author, from being disparaged as an author who does not write literary or "serious" fiction. The author of the BBC blogpost above naming Pratchett a *niche author* alludes to the belittlement to which *niche* or genre authors are liable when he notes that "[n]ot affording [Pratchett] the same respect as you would a Rushdie or a Murakami because he's 'just a fantasy author' is rude, and Sir Terry doesn't do rude" (Rosser n.p.). That belittlement is itself rooted in what Pierre Bourdieu would identify as the reproduction of social — particularly class — hierarchies in cultural forms, wherein works of genre fiction, because of their popular appeal and their "interestedness," would be regarded as déclassé or "low" culture (a belittlement Conrad himself, as noted previously, participates in).

to contest Stiffelio and Redheadshadz's use of the term in a discussion about literary merit. Yet neither Stiffelio nor Redheadshadz seem to find the term's use problematic in such a discussion. Their lack of hesitation suggests that there is another meaning of *niche* which they perhaps had in mind but which Angelina Mas did not acknowledge in their haste to defend authors like Erdrich and Morrison from the connotations that *niche* and *niche author* can bear. While Stiffelio and Redheadshadz do appear to be using *niche* according to its business definition (and in fact, the discussion's focus on a literary competition lends itself to that interpretation), they could also be interpreted as using the term according to an alternative, non-business definition that instead allows them to underscore the particular qualities of Erdrich and Morrison's oeuvre. Thus whereas for Angelina Mas, *niche* — as a noun, but especially as a modifier — is an expression of an author's unworthiness, the term instead for Stiffelio and Redheadshadz is an expression of an author's uniqueness.

These multiple figurative definitions of *niche* as a noun are more evident in the following passage from Matthew Hart's *Nations of Nothing But Poetry* (2010), which examines the reception of the British poet Basil Bunting:

> [Bunting's] late emergence [in the early twentieth century poetry scene] has had a predictable effect on Bunting's reception. As [James McGonigal and Richard Price's] recent survey of his literary-historical reputation puts it, from being 'unable to find his niche' at the height of literary modernism, in the period since 1966 he has become 'niched in the current marketing sense of that word: which is to say, immediately recognized and valued by a minority among the minority of readers of British poetry

> today.' Part of that niche status stems from Bunting's identification as, in Donald Hall's words, 'the last minor master of the modernist mode.'[59]

There are three forms of *niche* at work here: as a noun ("unable to find his niche"), as a verb ("has become 'niched'"), and as a modifier ("niche status"). As with the example of Gaiman above, where *niche author* referred to both NA1 and NA2, the uses of *niche* as verb and modifier to describe Bunting's reception "in the period since 1966" correspond respectively with the use of *niche* as a signifier of both a quantity and a quality. In other words, if we were to apply the epithet *niche author* to Bunting, Bunting would be NA1 since, according to McGonigal and Price, he is "immediately recognized and valued by a minority among the minority of readers of British poetry today." Bunting, however, is NA1 because he is also NA2; as Hart, quoting Hall, explains, "part of that niche status" is due to him being "'the last minor master of the modernist mode'" — that is, his non-mainstream specialization.

That said, McGonigal and Price's observation that, post-1966, Bunting has become "niched in the current marketing sense of that word" explicitly signals that there is an older, non-marketing sense of *niche* which differs from their use of the term as a verb as well as the passage's subsequent use of *niche* as a modifier. If, by "current marketing sense" of *niche*, McGonigal and Price take the term to mean, like Moretti, a segment of the literary marketplace,[60] the older, non-marketing sense of *niche* which they employ when they say Bunting was "unable to find his niche" would appear to mean something like an author's distinctive place in a larger structure (for Bunting, that structure would be the early twentieth century British literary landscape).

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[59] Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83.

[60] Unlike Moretti, however, McGonigal and Price do not (erroneously, in my opinion) stress the targeting aspect of *niche* and merely take the specificity which the term references to mean a numerical smallness.

This older, non-marketing sense of *niche* would accord with the first of three figurative definitions for *niche* as a noun provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as noted in the introduction: "A place or position suited or intended for the character, capabilities, status, etc., of a person or thing."[61] For clarity's sake, I will refer subsequently to this first figurative definition of *niche* as the *individual niche* to distinguish it from its other two figurative definitions, the *ecological niche* — which we will return to below — and the *business niche.* Three factors distinguish the *individual niche* from the *business niche*. First, age. Whereas the *business niche*, according to the *OED*, emerged in the 1960s, the *individual niche* emerged some two centuries earlier, in the 1700s. This chronology explains McGonigal and Price's distinction of one definition from the other by contemporaneity. Second, relation to the literal, architectural definition of *niche*. Whereas the *business niche*, at least as McGonigal and Price are using it, draws like NA1 on the smallness that an architectural *niche* calls to mind, the *individual niche* draws like NA2 on the particularity, if not "fringe-ness," attached to *niche* as an architectural term.

The third and final factor distinguishing the *individual niche* from the *business niche* is connotation. Whereas the *business niche* and, concomitantly, *niche author* — NA2 especially — can bear a negative connotation in literary discussions, the same cannot be said for the *individual niche* when used in reference to an authorship. There is no suggestion of *niche* being a derogatory term when, for instance, an article comparing Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne's travel writings observes that "Hawthorne may indeed have consciously worked to carve out his own literary niche without appearing a mere imitator of Irving."[62] Nor when an

[61] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "niche (*n.*)," accessed February 15, 2021, www.oed.com.
[62] Steven Petersheim, "History and Place in the Nineteenth Century: Irving and Hawthorne in Westminster Abbey," *College Literature* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 133.

introduction to a collection of essays on Rebecca West explains that "[West] was not quite as smoothly canonized" as contemporaries like Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and George Orwell due "in part with [sic] the fact that the above-named artists (other examples could be substituted) had carved out discernible niches for themselves: Woolf, the high modernist artist and feminist intellectual; Lawrence, the modern mystic and frank explorer of sexuality; Orwell, the prophetic purveyor of dystopia and fearless critic of authoritarianism."[63] Rather, both examples indicate that the term *niche* is a figurative expression of an author's place that is "suited" for their "character" as well as their "capabilities" and that is distinctive or unique to them on account of the "qualities" specific to their work, their specializations — for instance, Woolf's feminism, Lawrence's mysticism, Orwell's dystopianism. This distinctiveness is underscored by the use of possessives in McGonigal and Price's quote ("find *his* niche") as well as in the above two examples ("*his* own literary niche"; "niches for *themselves*").

Seeing as the quotes concerning Bunting and West suggest that they are typically not considered part of the British literary canon because they do not possess *individual niches*, the use of *niche* as a noun in discourse on authorship can even be understood as an indicator of a greatness. That association between the term *niche* and an author's distinctiveness which can amount to a canonical status may have prompted Stiffelio and Redheadshadz to employ the term in speculating upon Erdrich's possible Nobel win. It is certainly this association which the critics contemporaneous to Conrad were relying upon in their descriptions of Conrad — "high up in a niche by himself" (Bennett), "permanent niche in the temple of English Literature" (Clifford). And while the term has taken on a "marketing sense" from the late twentieth century onwards, it is also this association of the term with a distinctiveness which more contemporary Conradian

[63] Bernard Schweizer, "Introduction," in *Rebecca West Today: Contemporary Critical Approaches*, ed. Bernard Schweizer (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 21.

scholars rely upon, regardless of the various qualifiers preceding the term that they use — "find him a small niche in contemporary letters" (Said); "find him a commercial niche as an English writer" (Knowles); "secured his own personal niche" (Simmons); "found his market niche" (Snyder).

So far, I have defined the two senses of *niche author* (or *niche writer*) used in current discourse and disambiguated *niche author* from *minor author*. Additionally, I have examined the distinctions between the use of *niche* as a modifier and as a noun as well as the different figurative definitions of the latter. These clarifications allow us to arrive at a preliminary definition of what I call an *authorial niche.* Based on the definition of the *individual niche,* an *authorial niche* is a space within a given body of literary work — for instance, the genre of horror fiction or a national canon — that is "suited" for an author's particular "character" or "capabilities" as manifested in the particular qualities of their work. As with *niche author,* where *niche* is used as a modifier, the term *niche* in *authorial niche,* where *niche* is used as a noun, implies a boundedness. In the case of *niche* as a modifier, the term, as we have seen, signifies a boundedness with regards to audience (which can mean a numerical smallness) and to the range of qualities of an author's work (which can mean a specialization). In the case of *niche* as a noun, the term refers to a bounded space which an author occupies that is bounded by his or her specializations. Thus, to use the quote above concerning Woolf, Lawrence, and Orwell as an example, their "discernible" *authorial niches* can be thought of as bounded spaces within the literary landscape of turn-of-the-twentieth century Britain wherein the "outside" for Woolf, as one figure, would be the "inside" in one way or another for Lawrence, Orwell, and other authors, including Conrad. In brief, an *authorial niche* is a place within a body of work that is unique to an author.

To the extent that *niche,* when it appears in Conradian criticism, refers to the *individual niche,* and to the extent that what I call the *authorial niche* is based on the definition of the *individual niche,* we may conceive of the space Conrad occupies to which such criticism refers as Conrad's *authorial niche.* At this point, however, a question arises. Given that the *authorial niche* is based on the definition of the *individual niche,* and given that the *individual niche,* according to the *OED*'s definition, refers to a "place" or "position" of "a person," what distinguishes an *authorial niche* from an author's *position* which, like *niche,* is also a spatial term for an authorship? What's the difference, in other words, between a phrase like "Conrad occupied a *niche*" and "Conrad occupied a *position*?" To better define an *authorial niche* and explore the significance of framing Conrad's space in literary history as an *authorial niche,* I disambiguate in the next section *authorial niche* from what I will refer to subsequently as an *authorial position.*

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Perhaps the thinker most associated with the theorization of *position* as a concept for discourse on authorship is Pierre Bourdieu. His sociological analysis of French literary history finds its most recent revival in Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*. In arguing that the form of a literary work can be explained by the laws of a hypothetical "literature-world" that is "relatively autonomous" from the "real world,"[64] Casanova expands the nationally-circumscribed social space of Bourdieu's analysis but retains much of the latter's theoretical apparatus, including the concept of *position.* It is Casanova's conceptualization of an author's *position* or *authorial position,* with reference to Bourdieu's, against which I define further the concept of an *authorial niche.*

[64] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), xii.

So, what is a *position*? Broadly speaking, a *position* is a primary component of Bourdieu's conception of social space, what he calls a "field," which he defines as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions"[65] or as a "space of positions."[66] As alternatives for *position*, Bourdieu occasionally uses the phrases "point in the field" or "point in social space."[67] In the simplest terms, then, a *position* is the location of a unit of analysis within a given social space. Bourdieu uses *position* to reference, for example, the location of the literary field among say, the educational or religious fields within what he calls the field of power, or the location of a Symbolist poet among say, a Romantic or a Surrealist poet within the field of nineteenth century French poetry. Likewise, Casanova uses *position* to refer to the location of various units of analysis in the national and world literary spaces her book examines, chiefly the *position* of a national literature in world literary space, and the *position* of an author within national and world literary space.

From this general definition of *position*, we can surmise that an *authorial position* for Bourdieu and Casanova refers to the location of an author (as the unit of analysis in question) in literary space. To the extent that an *authorial niche*, also broadly defined, is an author's place within a larger structure, we might also think of an *authorial niche* as the location of an author in literary space. This apparent synonymity between *authorial niche* and *authorial position* as well as the presence of *position* in the *OED*'s definition of the *individual niche*[68] begs the question of

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[65] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 97.
[66] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 30.
[67] Bourdieu and Wacquant, 101, 136.
[68] As noted earlier, there are three figurative definitions of *niche* offered by the *OED*, what I have called the *individual niche*, the *ecological niche*, and the *business niche*. *Position* features in each of the these three definitions of *niche*. : the *individual niche* is defined as "a place or position suited to or intended for the character, capabilities, status, etc., of a person or a thing"; the *ecological niche* is defined as "the actual or potential *position* of an organism within a particular ecosystem, as determined by its biological

why *niche* does not feature at all in Casanova's book — whether in its original French or in its English translation — and in fact appears only once throughout Bourdieu's works about literary production, in *The Rules of Art* (1992).[69] There are two reasons for this general absence of *niche* in Bourdieu and Casanova's terminology. The first concerns Bourdieu's understanding of *niche* or, more precisely, the definition of *niche* he chooses to prioritize. In a passage detailing the process by which an avant-garde movement establishes itself, Bourdieu writes: "The new avant-garde occupying the position (or, in the language of marketing, the *niche*) abandoned by the consecrated avant-garde will find it all the easier if it justifies its iconoclastic ruptures by invoking a return to the initial and ideal definition of the practice, that is to say, to purity, obscurity, and to the poverty of its beginnings."[70] The word Bourdieu uses in the original French for *niche* is *le créneau*, which is the French equivalent for *niche* both in its literal — that is, architectural — and figurative English definitions. Bourdieu, however, seems to associate the term primarily with "the language of marketing." It is thus possibly because of his restriction of his understanding of *niche* to its business definition that he does not, even as he offers *niche* as an alternative term for *position* in the sentence above, employ *niche* more widely in his work. Since Bourdieu (and Casanova) claim that the literary field is homologous in its structure to, yet

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role together with the set of environmental conditions under which it lives;" and the *business niche*, "a *position* from which an entrepreneur seeks to exploit a shortcoming or an opportunity in an economy, market, etc.; (hence) a specialized market for a product or service" ("niche").

[69] *Niche* in fact appears in another of Bourdieu's works concerning literary production — an essay, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," which was reproduced and translated in the collection *The Field of Cultural Production*. The presence of *niche* in that essay, however, is the work of the translator. The term appears in a section theorizing the process by which a manuscript comes to be published, and in the English translation, it reads as such: "Because subjective intentions and unconscious dispositions contribute to the efficacy of the objective structures to which they are adjusted, their interlacing tends to guide agents to their 'natural niche' in the structure of the field" (Bourdieu, *Field*, 134). In the original French, however, Bourdieu uses the phrase *lieu naturel* (natural place), not "natural niche." The use of *niche* is thus indicative of the translator's understanding of *niche* rather than Bourdieu's, and for that reason I am discounting it from my examination of Bourdieu's use of *niche.*

[70] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 255.

"relatively autonomous" in its operations from the economic field, and since *niche* is a term Bourdieu takes to belong to the business or economic field, making *niche* part of his conceptual terminology would only undermine his insistence on the autonomy of the literary field. At most, Bourdieu's use of *niche* in this one instance is an aid by way of analogy that he provides his readers to shed light on the interactions between artistic movements.

The second and more obvious reason underlying the absence of *niche* in Bourdieu and Casanova's works is a difference in signification between *position* and *niche* that belies their seeming synonymy. We can begin to discern what that difference might be when we replace, as a thought experiment of sorts, *position* with *niche* in a sentence. Take, for instance, Casanova's following assertion, with which she opens her book: "Many writers have described, albeit partially and in quite diverse ways, the difficulties associated with their *position* win the world of letters and the problems they had to resolve in creating a *place* for themselves within the peculiar economy of literature."[71] In this sentence, there are two words for which *niche* might be a potential substitute, and which are both part of the *OED* definition of the *individual niche*: "position" and "place." If we were to replace "position" with *niche* so that the pertinent clause hypothetically reads as "the difficulties associated with their *niche* in the world of letters," the sentence would appear catachrestic — *niche* there would strike a reader as somehow unsuitable for what the sentence is trying to capture. However, if we were to replace "place" with *niche* so that the pertinent clause reads hypothetically as "the problems [writers] had to resolve in creating a *niche* for themselves," the sentence would continue to be coherent. The catachresis that occurs when "position" is replaced with *niche* and yet is absent when "place" is replaced with *niche* is not due to the possibility that "place" is a term closer in meaning to *niche* than *position* (and in

[71] Casanova, *World*, 9.

fact, "place," is not always easily replaced with *niche*). Rather, it is because of the presence of a word preceding *position* in that clause, "difficulties." "Difficulties" impedes the easy substitutability of *niche* for *position* here for the reason that *niche* signifies the opposite of the obstacles or drawbacks that "difficulties" signifies — a sense of advantage is inherent to the term *niche*. Precisely because the *individual niche*, to recall, refers to a suitable, indeed favorable, *position*, *niche* could not have been used in lieu of "position" in that clause; its very meaning contradicts the hardships Casanova intends to describe. By the same token, *niche* could have used in lieu of "place" since its meaning does not contradict the intent of the clause containing "place" — the "problems" in "creating a place," as the clause indicates, are "resolve[d]."

This thought experiment demonstrates that despite their apparent similarity, there is a difference in signification between *niche* and *position* that consists of the sense of advantage which *position* does not necessarily bear and which *niche* always does. Accordingly, one way of differentiating between an *authorial niche* and an *authorial position* is to describe an *authorial niche* as a type of *authorial position,* an advantageous one. But since that sense of advantage which *authorial niche* carries, as we have seen, is the outcome of an author's specialization, or the qualities that are unique to an author's work, another way of differentiating between an *authorial niche* and an *authorial position* is to describe the former as a location in literary space that is unique, and the latter as a location in literary space that is just specific — that is, not a location that is one of a kind or idiosyncratic, which "unique" strictly describes, but nonetheless a location that is peculiar to an author, being one location among other locations in literary space. This qualitative difference between an *authorial niche* and an *authorial position* which I am suggesting here — uniqueness for the former, specificity for the latter — is rooted, I argue, in the conceptualization of social space and mode of formation each concept presupposes. These

differences accordingly imply author-context relationships particular to each concept. With the aim of clarifying the significance of conceptualizing Conrad's space in literary history as an *authorial niche*, let us now flesh out these differences by firstly, looking more closely at Casanova's definition of an *authorial position* which, as we shall see, carries the presuppositions and implications of the model of literary production she offers to explicate the form of a literary text.

Possibly the most distinctive feature of Casanova's conceptualization of an *authorial position* is its twofold structure. This structure is yet another theoretical element Casanova imports from Bourdieu's work, albeit with a modification. For Bourdieu, the first definitive criterion of a *position* is the volume of "capital" that an occupant of a *position* possesses, such as "recognition." The second is the type of "objective relationship" a *position* exists in with regards to other *positions*, such as "domination, subordination, homology, etc."[72] For Casanova, the first definitive criterion of an *authorial position* is similarly "capital," particularly "literary capital," the volume of which is based on an author's nationality.[73] As she puts it, "the writer stands in a particular relation to world literary space [ie his *authorial position*] by virtue of the place occupied in it by the national space into which he has been born." However, the second definitive criterion of an *authorial position* for Casanova is not the type of "objective relationship" between *authorial positions*. Instead, as she says, an *authorial position* "also

[72] Bourdieu, *Rules*, 97. The full definition Bourdieu provides for *position* in *The Rules of Art* is the following: "positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents, or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc."

[73] The "literary capital" of a nation is in turn based on four interrelated criteria: the age of its literature, the existence of a professional literary milieu, the perception of a national literature's value among other nations, and the "literariness" of its language, that is, its "formal and aesthetic possibilities" (Casanova, *World*, 14-18).

depends on the way in which [an author] deals with this unavoidable inheritance [of national "literary capital"]; on the aesthetic, linguistic, and formal choices he is led to make, which determine his position in this larger [world literary] space."[74] For Casanova, as such, the two criterion that define an *authorial position* in world literary space are an author's inherited national "literary capital" and the scope and nature of an author's works.[75]

I foreground here this twofold structure of an *authorial position* as defined by Casanova in order to note that it emblematizes a sociological debate Casanova attempts to solve with her model of literary production — a debate which again finds its origins in Bourdieu's work. In the preface to *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova claims that the purpose of "situating a work on the basis of its position in world literary space" is to enable literary critics to perform "the reading and interpretation of literary texts that may be at once, and without any contradiction, internal (textual) and external (historical)."[76] Her claim about the utility of her model is precisely that of Bourdieu's about his,[77] which in turn is an extension of his preoccupation with

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[74] Casanova, *World*, 41.

[75] While an author's "choices" do imply the creation of "objective relationships" between *authorial positions*, Casanova's refusal to define an *authorial position* by the terms of Bourdieu's second criterion suggests a decision to bypass elaboration, in her model of literary production, of a crucial component of Bourdieu's: the concept of *habitus*. In a word, *habitus* refers to a set of inclinations or dispositions that an individual acquires by internalizing the logic of a field from his particular *position* and which organizes an individual's perception of, and actions within, a field. In his work on literary production, Bourdieu employs *habitus* to explain an author's *position-takings* — an author's *habitus* prompts him to pursue particular aesthetic strategies and consequently place himself in a particular *position*. It is just this notion of *habitus* that Casanova adapts as her second criterion of an *authorial position* without naming it as such; that she qualifies the aesthetic choices of an author as "choices he is led to make" suggests as much. Having folded the concept of *habitus* into her definition of an *authorial position*, Casanova makes no overt mention of it throughout her work — possibly to avoid becoming embroiled in a decades-old debate about the conceptual utility of *habitus*. Bourdieu's critics in particular have argued that the "habitus" does not allow an individual to possess any agency, for if the concept describes an individual's internalization of existing social conditions that guides his behavior, then his actions are always already predetermined by these conditions.

[76] Casanova, *World*, xii-iii.

[77] In *The Field of Cultural Production*, for example, Bourdieu declares that "[i]n defining the literary and artistic field as, inseparably, a field of positions and a field of position-takings we also escape from the usual dilemma of internal ('tautegorical') reading of the work (taken in isolation or within the system of

overcoming what is broadly called the "agency-structure" debate, or the dichotomy between the subjectivist and objectivist approaches of social theory. The "internal (textual) - external (historical)" dualism in the literary field, Bourdieu might say, is homologous to the "agency-structure" dualism in the field of the social sciences. It is this "agency-structure" dualism which motivates both Bourdieu and Casanova's work that is reflected in the twofold structure of Casanova's definition of an *authorial position.* What Casanova identifies as "the place occupied in [world literary space] by the national space into which [an author] has been born" is tantamount to the causal or deterministic power of extant social conditions stressed in objectivist accounts, or the "structure" side of the "agency-structure" debate. What Casanova identifies as "the way in which [an author] deals with this unavoidable inheritance" is tantamount to the voluntarism or free will of an individual stressed in subjectivist accounts, or the "agency" side of the "agency-structure" debate. Casanova's definition of an *authorial position,* in short, encapsulates the "agency-structure" debate that her model of literary production, in the vein of Bourdieu's, attempts to resolve.

This sociological debate embedded in Casanova's work is crucial for understanding why Casanova offers a particular conceptualization of social space in her model of literary production. As mentioned above, the "central hypothesis" of *The World Republic of Letters* is the existence of a "literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space."[78] For Casanova, as such, social space — that is, "world literary space" — is conceptualized as "relatively autonomous." This conceptualization of social space allows

works to which it belongs) and external (or 'allegorical') analysis, i.e. analysis of the social conditions of production of the producers and consumers which is based on the — generally tacit — hypothesis of the spontaneous correspondence or deliberate matching of production to demand or commissions" (34).

[78] Casanova, *World*, xii.

Casanova to propose, on the one hand, that an author can make "aesthetic, linguistic, and formal choices" (which accords with the subjectivist approach of social theory). Without this premise in her model of literary production, the works of authors, as actors in the social space of world literary space, would be overdetermined by the actual, historical contexts in which authors are living. On the other, this conceptualization allows Casanova to acknowledge that the works of authors are also somewhat determined by the actual, historical contexts authors are living (which accords with the objectivist approach of social theory) since world literary space is only "relatively" autonomous from the "everyday world." Casanova's conceptualization of world literary space-*qua*-social space as "relatively autonomous" is thus the theoretical lynchpin upon which her solution to the "agency-structure" debate within the field of literary production rests.

Even so, a number of critics have pointed out that Casanova's model remains too deterministic to serve as a solution for the impasse between objectivist and subjectivist approaches to literary analysis. In Pheng Cheah's recent critique of Casanova's book, for instance, this charge takes the form of him arguing that the notion of "relative autonomy" severely hampers the "normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethicopolitical horizon it opens up for the world."[79] A world literary space that is only "relatively autonomous," Cheah says, means that it is always and merely a "secondary manifestation" of real world struggles. Consequently, literature within a social space conceptualized as "relatively autonomous" cannot be an "ethicopolitically committed force" capable of "compet[ing]" with other discourses, such as "literature produced by the commercial market," in the "ongoing making of the real world."[80] Cheah's complaint is thus that the potential of literature's "autonomy" from the real world — what he calls its "normative force," or "world-making"

[79] Cheah, 5.
[80] Cheah, 33-34.

power[81] — is rendered moot by the concept of "relative autonomy" itself.[82] Framed in terms of an author's agency, Cheah's critique suggests that an author, as an actor in a social space conceptualized as "relatively autonomous," does not ultimately have the capacity to make meaningful "aesthetic, linguistic, and formal choices." Because Casanova's conceptualization of social space as "relatively autonomous" is ultimately incapable of moving her model away from objectivist approaches, literary production in her schema is rendered more conditioned by the factors of an author's "everyday world" than she can claim. A "relatively autonomous" world literary space, in short, is a social space that is deterministic in nature.

This deterministic nature of social space in Casanova's model explains why the process of forming an *authorial position* is at best an act of "compromise." In her book, Casanova identifies three "great famil[ies] of strategies"[83] that authors pursue to "achieve literary existence,"[84] that is, an *authorial position* in world literary space— assimilation, rebellion, and revolution.[85] Joyce's *Ulysses,* for instance, is a text that Casanova categorizes as written

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[81] Cheah, 45.

[82] Notably, critiques against Casanova's model like Cheah's are auxiliary to earlier critiques about Bourdieu's conceptualization of social space. Anthony King, for one, points out that Bourdieu's concept of the "field" — literary or otherwise — "transform[s] the interactions between individuals into objective, systemic properties which are prior to individuals," and that "[o]nce society has been turned into an objective rather than intersubjective reality by the use of concepts like the habitus or field, individual agency and intersubjective negotiation and struggle are necessarily curtailed" (426).

[83] Casanova, *World,* 221.

[84] Casanova, *World,* 177.

[85] "Assimilation" involves authors embracing the norms and values of a dominant or metropolitan literary culture. Such authors include the Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul and the Belgian Henri Michaux, who "assimilated" respectively into British and French literary space. "Rebellion" occurs when authors opt over assimilation to differentiate themselves from the culture of literarily dominant nations by founding a distinct national literature culture. These "rebels," who in the process place literature at the service of the formation of a national identity, often renovate the folk or mythic traditions of their countries while appropriating metropolitan literary forms and techniques. They include artistes of the Irish Literary Revival, the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and the Cuban Alejandro Carpentier. "Revolution" involves authors both refusing acculturation to metropolitan literary culture and insisting on the autonomy of literature from national-political purposes. These "revolutionaries," who Casanova notes can appear only after a national literary heritage has been founded, inaugurate new literary practices that "revolutionize" established metropolitan and local literary norms. See Casanova, *World,* 205-53, 324-47.

according to a "revolutionary" strategy. This strategy consequently situates Joyce in a "revolutionary" *authorial position* in world literary space. Yet in a passage detailing the efforts of authors to achieve that "literary existence," Casanova notes that "[t]he solutions that little by little are arrived at [by authors] — rescued, as it were, from the structural inertia of the literary world — are the product of compromise."[86] The form of a text like *Ulysses* and an *authorial position* like Joyce's, Casanova is saying, are the outcome of a compromise even though the strategy Joyce employs to write *Ulysses* is "revolutionary" and his *authorial position* is classified as "revolutionary." When she later describes Joyce's "establish[ment] [of] Paris as a new stronghold for the Irish" as a matter of "reconciling [the] contraries [between] conformity to the standards of [Irish] national poetry and submission to English literary norms,"[87] it is precisely this formation of an *authorial position* through the act of compromise which she is referring to. Why Casanova cannot ultimately identify a text like *Ulysses* — Joyce's "solution" to "achieve literary existence" — as a product of "revolution" and must instead pronounce it a "product of compromise" is due to the conceptualization of social space in her model of literary production. Because a "relatively autonomous" world literary space is in fact deterministic in nature, an author can only form an *authorial position* upon reaching a "compromise" between his individual inclinations and the actual, historical contexts in which he is living. The conceptualization of social space Casanova offers in her model does not permit for any other mode of formation of an *authorial position*, no matter an "assimilationist," "rebellious," or "revolutionary" one, except that of "compromise."

Having identified the conceptualization of social space in Casanova's model and the mode of formation of an *authorial position* it allows, we are now able to firstly, explain the

[86] Casanova, *World*, 177.
[87] Casanova, *World*, 318.

quality of an author's location in literary space which an *authorial position* refers to, and secondly, define the relationship between an author and his context which an *authorial position* implies. As mentioned earlier, an *authorial position* refers to a location in literary space that is specific, rather than unique, to an author. Precisely because an author must "compromise" — must concede to a degree his subjective inclinations to the pressures of his historical context in the formation of an *authorial position* — and so does not — indeed cannot, if the conceptualization of social space as "relatively autonomous" were to hold true — retain all his individuality in the making of his *authorial position*, his *authorial position* cannot be unique, or one of a kind. His *authorial position* can be specific to him insofar as his inclinations and his sociohistorical circumstances are peculiar to him and insofar as the "compromise" he makes to form his *authorial position* are peculiar to those inclinations and circumstances. But his *authorial position* cannot be unique insofar as he must comply to an extent with his sociohistorical circumstances and its demands to form his *authorial position*. We may, of course, describe an *authorial position* as unique (in which case, I would argue, that *authorial position* is in fact an *authorial niche*), but if we were to abide by the implications of Casanova's model, the key quality of the concept of an *authorial position* is theoretically speaking specificity, not uniqueness. After all, if Casanova can group authors and their supposedly "complex strategies" into three "great families," it is due to *authorial positions* being specific rather than unique in quality. By the same token of "compromise," the relationship between an author and his context which an *authorial position* implies is what we could call adaptive. In making a "compromise" to "achieve literary existence," an author is in effect adapting to the operational laws of a "relatively autonomous" world literary space. "Assimilation," "rebellion," and "revolution," in

other words, are the various strategies of adaptation authors pursue to accommodate the conditions of a social space which they cannot individually alter nor discount.

So, to sum up the various characteristics of an *authorial position* as Casanova defines it: an *authorial position* presupposes (a) a conceptualization of social space that is "relatively autonomous" and (b) a mode of formation that involves "compromise," which in turn means that an *authorial position* (a) bears the quality of specificity and (b) implies an author-context relationship that is adaptive. Before we examine the characteristics of an *authorial niche,* let us briefly consider here how Conrad's works might be explicated by conceiving of his location in literary space as an *authorial position*. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova places Conrad alongside authors such as Emil Cioran, Milan Kundera, Panait Istrati, Samuel Beckett and Johan Strindberg who, she notes, "all adopted one of the great world literary languages." Their adoption of these languages, she continues, was not because they were "compelled to do so for any political or economic reason." Rather, "it can be explained only by the weight of the unequal structure of the literary world, for only the invisible power of the belief that ennobles certain languages and of the discredit that devalues others can force some authors — without any apparent coercion — to exchange their native language for another."[88] This explanation Casanova provides for a feature of Conrad's work — the only one she makes in her book — abides by the presuppositions and implications of an *authorial position*. Firstly, Casanova's grouping of Conrad with other literary émigrés exemplifies the specificity of an *authorial position* — Conrad's adoption of a "great world literary language" is specific to his particular history, but is not unique to him. Moreover, in suggesting that Conrad adopted English because of "the unequal structure of the literary world," Casanova reveals the extent to which preexisting

[88] Casanova, *World*, 281.

conditions in her conceptualization of social space ("the literary world") are taken as conditions which limit an author's freedom to write and which determine his authorial choices. The apparent abundance and lack of prestige, respectively, of English and Polish as literary languages meant that Conrad was "force[d]" to build a literary career in the former language. Accordingly, an observation like Ian Watt's on Conrad's criticism of the "complacency, insularity, and philistinism of English society,"[89] and Conrad's own admission, in 1907, that English "is still a foreign language to me, requiring an immense effort to handle,"[90] would be interpreted by Casanova as indicative of the personal and linguistic "compromises" Conrad made in the formation of his *authorial position.* By the same logic, Casanova would interpret Conrad's literary renderings of nautical tales, detective fiction, and adventure stories in colonial settings — genres popular among British audiences then — as yet more "compromises" he made to "achieve literary existence," "solutions that [are] little by little arrived at" given the conditions of the British literary marketplace, his desire to be a writer of "serious" fiction, and the poverty, literary capital-wise, of Polish literature. These explications of the formal features of Conrad's work as so many "compromises" in turn instantiate the adaptive nature of the relationship between an author and his context which an *authorial position* implies — in the making of his *authorial position,* Conrad is simply adapting to the immutable conditions of a world literary space wherein Poland is a literary backwater.

How might we account for the same features of Conrad's oeuvre — language, topical foci — by way of the concept of an *authorial niche*? To do so, let us now consider the presuppositions and implications of an *authorial niche*. As noted previously, what I am calling

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[89] Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 23.
[90] Joseph Conrad, *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 1890-1920*, eds. and trans. Paul Jones Sturm and John A. Gee (New York: Kennikat Press, 1973), 109.

the *authorial niche* aligns most closely with the *OED*'s definition of the *individual niche.* In order to develop the concept beyond an *OED*-based definition, however, I will be relying more on the figurative use of *niche* in ecology, primarily because there exists a rich body of theoretical work across a number of disciplines employing that sense of *niche* upon which I can draw, but also because I hope to show that there exists a continuity of definition across the various figurative and disciplinary uses of *niche.*

The use of *niche* in ecology is credited to the naturalist Joseph Grinnell, who in 1917 first relied on the term to describe the geographic habitat of a bird. Yet it is George Evelyn Hutchinson's formalization of the concept half a century later which has proven the most fertile for use across disciplines. Hutchinson's *niche,* as the concept has come to be known, refers to an area that is both within a multi-dimensional space of environmental variables (resources such as light, nutrients, so forth) and defined by particular environmental variables which "permit [a] species to exist indefinitely."[91] This focus of Hutchinson's *niche* on the physical parameters that enable an organism's survival and propagation is echoed, for instance, in sociologists Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman's 1977 definition of an organizational population's *niche*: "the area in constraint space (the space whose dimensions are level of resources, etc.) in which the population outcompetes all other local populations."[92] It is likewise present in psychologist J.J. Gibson's 1979 definition of *niche* which he offers when contriving his famous notion of "affordances": "a *niche* is a set of affordances," that is, "what [the environment] *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes.*"[93] Indeed, the *OED*'s definition of the *ecological niche* as

[91] G.E. Hutchinson, "Concluding Remarks — Cold Spring Harbor Symposium," *Quantitative Biology* 22 (1957): 148.
[92] Hannan and Freeman, 947.
[93] J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 1979), 119-20, emphases original.

the "set of environmental conditions under which [an organism] lives" derives from Hutchison's formalization of the concept.

Why this widespread appeal of Hutchinson's *niche*? Possibly because of the conceptualization of social space implicit to Hutchinson's *niche*. In signifying a set of variables that support an organism's "indefinite existence," Hutchinson's *niche* presupposes that the conditions of an organism's surrounding environment, while given, are enabling. To the extent that an organism's environment is analogous to social space, and an organism analogous to an actor, Hutchinson's *niche* therefore also presents a conceptualization of social space as a space where preexisting conditions are taken less as determinative restraints on, than as opportunities for, an actor's growth. It is this idea which consequently proved useful to social theorists for overcoming the "agency-structure" debate of social theory. Take, for instance, Gibson's notion of "affordances." As noted above, Gibson defines "affordances" as "what [the environment] *offers* the animal." The notion of "affordances" thus refers precisely to the conceptualization of social space as enabling conditions implicit to Hutchinson's *niche*. Gibson, however, also notes that "[a]n affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective…. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior."[94] By framing his notion of "affordances" in terms of the

[94] Gibson, 121. This conception of social space that is at once subjective and objective, or rather, is neither subjective nor objective, but comprised of individual actions and constant negotiation between individuals, is in fact that which Anthony King claims Bourdieu originally developed in his earlier writings. In his critique of Bourdieu, King observes that what Bourdieu describes under the name of "practical theory," whereby "isolated individuals do not stand before objective structures and rules which determine their actions but in networks of relations which they virtuosically manipulate," does offer "a social ontology which obviates the dualism of structure and agency," since "there is no longer the individual and society, the subject and the object, but only individuals interacting with other individuals." However, it is when Bourdieu incorporates concepts like the "habitus" and "field" that, as King argues, "Bourdieu, apparently unknowingly, slips away from its [practical theory] ontological implications toward the very objectivism which he sought to refute." In a sense, then, the conception of social space implicit to Hutchinson's *niche* that Gibson calls attention to recalls "the practical and intersubjective nature of social life" of Bourdieu's "practical theory" that King sees would have allowed Bourdieu to

"dichotomy of subjective-objective," Gibson effectively employs the conceptualization of social space implicit to Hutchison's *niche* as a means of resolving the "agency-structure" debate of social theory.

Yet the potency of Hutchinson's *niche* extends beyond the notion that preexisting conditions are opportunities. More importantly, Hutchinson' *niche* presupposes a conceptualization of social space that objectively exists but is at the same time what we might call malleable or open in nature. If the preexisting conditions of a given social space are assumed to be resources which facilitate the development of actors instead of restraints against which actors struggle in their development, then it follows that that social space is open to being acted upon. What is therefore most radical about this conceptualization of social space is the idea that social space is subject to change by actors — an idea that in turn underscores the extent to which actors are able to actualize their agency. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the idea that a social space-qua-environment is modifiable by actors-qua-organisms is fundamental to *niche*-construction theory. For now, let us note that the conceptualization of social space presupposed by Hutchinson's *niche* stands in contrast to the "relatively autonomous" social space proposed by Bourdieu and Casanova's models insofar as the latter remains deterministic in nature because it takes preexisting conditions as curbs on an actor's growth, and the former malleable in nature because it takes preexisting conditions as openings for an actor's growth.

In light of this malleable and facilitative conceptualization of social space implied by Hutchinson's *niche*, how are *niches* formed? For Gibson, the mode of formation of a *niche* involves "perception," which he defines as "not a response to a stimulus but an act of

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sustain his challenge to objectivism and properly claim resolution of the subjective-objective, or structure-agency debate (421-22).

information pickup."[95] Organisms, accordingly, "pick up information" from an environment replete with "affordances" to form a *niche*, a "set of affordances." This notion of "information pickup" as the mode of formation of a *niche* is subsequently developed by Caroline O'Donnell. In her book *Niche Tactics* (2015), which argues for an approach to the relationship between an architectural construction and its site (a relationship homologous, to use Bourdieu's words, to the author-context relationship) that is based on the ecological sense of *niche,* O'Donnell describes the mode of formation of a *niche* as an organism's "*selective* and *subjective* abstraction of components of a habitat."[96] As she goes on to explain, "the process by which an animal *abstracts* its environment can be considered to reside partially in the environment and partially in the animal. Ecological abstraction involves an extraction but also a projection of some kind of meaning in order to isolate the specific and useful elements from the white noise of the generic perpetual world. The *niche* can be considered to be a concise collection of *affordance-umwelt* arrows, back and forth, between animal and environment, each propelling the other forward."[97] The language O'Donnell uses to describe "abstraction" as the mode of formation of a *niche* — a process which "reside[s] partially in the environment and partially in the animal" — points to the legacy of Gibson and, accordingly, Hutchinson, in her work. However, possibly in order to avoid confusion with "perception" as a visual action (which Gibson primarily focuses on), O'Donnell renames Gibson's process of "perception" to "abstraction" instead.

Nonetheless, I will argue here that O'Donnell's notion of "abstraction" does not sufficiently capture the morphological developments that can occur both to organism and environment in the process of forming a *niche* — changes O'Donnell gestures toward when she

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[95] Gibson, 50.
[96] Caroline O'Donnell, *Niche Tactics: Generative Relationships Between Architecture and Site* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 20, emphases original.
[97] O'Donnell, 22.

observes that the concept of the *niche* involves "animal and environment each propelling the other forward." "Abstraction," in other words, carries too much of a cognitive connotation to express the formal or bodily changes that occur during the formation of a *niche*. In addition to "abstraction," then, I would like to draw on the social anthropologist Tim Ingold's notion of "embodiment" to describe the mode of formation of a *niche,* including an *authorial niche.* Ingold's 1993 essay "The Temporality of the Landscape" enters the "structure-agency" debate of social theory by offering the idea of the "taskscape" as a way to "move beyond the sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities" (an objectivist perspective) and "the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space"[98] (a subjectivist perspective). To define the "taskscape,"[99] Ingold redefines "landscape" in the passage below, which is worth quoting in full to grasp the similarities between his work and the scholars above in terms of their conceptualization of social space and the distinction he makes between modes of formation:

> Like organism and environment, body and landscape are complementary terms: each implies the other, alternately as figure and ground. The forms of the landscape are not, however, prepared in advance for creatures to occupy, nor are the bodily forms of those creatures independently specified in their genetic makeup. Both sets of forms are generated and sustained in and through the processual unfolding of a total field of relations that cuts across the emergent interface between organism and environment

[98] Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152.
[99] Ingold defines the "taskscape" as such: "It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape. Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so - by analogy - the taskscape is an array of related activities. And as with the landscape, it is qualitative and heterogeneous: we can ask of a taskscape, as of a landscape, what it is like, but not how much of it there is. In short, the taskscape is to labour what the landscape is to land, and indeed what an ensemble of use-values is to value in general" (158).

> (Goodwin 1988). Having regard to its formative properties, we may refer to this process as one of embodiment. Though the notion of embodiment has recently come much into fashion, there has been a tendency — following an ancient inclination in Western thought to prioritize form over process (Oyama 1985:13) — to conceive of it as a movement of *inscription*, whereby some pre-existing pattern, template or programs, whether genetic or cultural, is 'realized' in a substantive medium. This is not what I have in mind, however. To the contrary, and adopting a helpful distinction from Connerton (1989: 72-3), I regard embodiment as a movement of *incorporation* rather than inscription, not a transcribing of form onto material but a movement wherein forms themselves are generated (Ingold 1990: 215).[100]

Much like O'Donnell, Gibson, and Hutchinson, Ingold is working with a conceptualization of social space — here the "landscape" — that objectively exists but is malleable or open in nature, "not prepared in advance for creatures to occupy." Ingold, however, appears to go a step further than these scholars do when he also suggests that neither are the "bodily forms of those creatures independently specified in their genetic makeup." But Ingold is simply following through a possibility that arises from a conceptualization of social space that is malleable and open. If the "forms of the landscape" are open, there is no reason why the forms of "creatures" cannot be so either. On that premise, Ingold is able to suggest that "both sets of forms are generated and sustained in and through the processual unfolding of a total field of relations." This process he calls "embodiment." As he clarifies by way of Paul Connerton, another social anthropologist, "embodiment" does not refer to "a movement of *inscription*," which would occur in a conceptualization of social space that takes preexisting conditions as restraints, and which

[100] Ingold, 156-57.

implies an environmental determinism. On the contrary, "embodiment" refers to "a movement of *incorporation,"* wherein both the forms of "landscape" and "creature" are generated in relation to each other, incorporate each other, but cannot be determined by the other, since both are characteristically malleable. O'Donnell in fact offers an example of "embodiment" when she notes that "studies have shown that the thorniness of the East African acacia tree — the giraffe's preferred food — is induced by herbivorous activity. In return, the lips, tongue, and inside of the mouth of the giraffe are covered in papillae and its skin is thick, to protect against these very thorns."[101] In other words, the features of the giraffe are an incorporation of the features of the acacia tree — an integration into its body, so to speak — in its development, just as much as the features of an acacia tree are an incorporation of the habits of the giraffe in its development. What is often thought of as the differentiation of species or speciation involves this process of an organism embodying, "selectively and subjectively," the facets of its environment. Accordingly, when one speaks of a giraffe's *niche*, one is speaking of a theoretical space comprised of a set of variables that "affords" the giraffe to "exist indefinitely" that is formed through "embodiment" — the giraffe incorporating the thorniness of an acacia tree into its bodily features so that its leaves become its *niche*.

Conceiving of the mode of formation of a *niche* along the lines of Ingold's notion of "embodiment"-qua-"incorporation" helps explain why, on the one hand, a *niche* is unique to an animal (or an *authorial niche* unique to an author) and why, on the other hand, the concept of the *niche* itself refers to a location in an environment or social space that is characteristically unique, not specific. To explicate the first point, let us return to the example of the giraffe. The leaves of the acacia tree, as part of the *niche* of a giraffe, is unique to the giraffe because only the giraffe,

[101] O'Connell, 21.

and no other organism, "incorporated" the thorniness of the acacia tree as a surrounding environmental variable into its formal features. As Gibson observes, "an affordance of support for a species of animal [has] to be measured relative to the animal. They are unique for that animal."[102] A *niche*, as a "set of affordances," is therefore "unique for that animal." In the same vein, we might say that an *authorial niche* is unique to an author because only a given author, and no other author, "incorporated" a given and particular set of his surrounding sociohistorical circumstances into the form of his writing. But, as Gibson crucially continues, "[affordances] are not just abstract physical properties. They have unity relative to the posture and behavior of the animal being considered." To explicate the second point, then: a *niche* is a theoretical space unique in quality because it has a "unity relative" to the form of an animal — a "unity" made possible through an animal's "embodiment" of environmental facets in its physiology. By corollary, the uniqueness, rather than specificity, of an *authorial niche* emerges not from an individual author writing without consideration of his sociohistorical circumstances (a subjectivist approach), but from a "unity" between the two that is brought about through a process of "embodiment." It is this characteristic of uniqueness that *niche* bears which the narrowness associated with the term in fact refers to, and which in turn brings about a competitive advantage. Quite simply, the *niche* of acacia tree leaves, being unique to the giraffe, offers the giraffe a competitive advantage for indefinite existence over other herbivores on a savannah.

From the conceptualization of social space and the mode of formation that the concept of *niche* presupposes, it follows that the relationship between an author and his sociohistorical context which an *authorial niche* implies is instrumentality or, to use the term employed in the

[102] Gibson, 127.

OED's figurative definitions of *niche*, exploitative. A conceptualization of social space that is facilitative and malleable allows for that instrumentalization to occur. A mode of formation through "embodiment" requires that an instrumentalization of surrounding sociohistorical circumstances transpire. To rely on the example of the giraffe once more: a giraffe, in developing a thickness of mouth and skin, is in fact instrumentalizing rather than simply adapting to the features of acacia trees since it is by being uniquely able to exploit acacia tree leaves for sustenance that the giraffe gains competitive advantage over other local herbivorous creatures. This relationship of instrumentality explains why, in their elaboration of the differences between the concepts of *niche* and *genre*, Anand and Croideau observe that "[t]hrough this concept [of *niche*], producers are seen primarily as economic actors reacting to their environment in making choices about factors of production that capitalize on opportunities to optimize their financial performance"[103] — to "capitalize on opportunities" is to exist in a relationship of instrumentality with one's environment. And it is this relationship of instrumentality which also explains the frequent use of the word "carving" in relation to *niche* — the commonly-heard phrase "carving a niche" is a metaphorical rendition of an individual's instrumentalization of surrounding circumstances.

Based on the above, we can see that, as with the concept of an *authorial position*, an *authorial niche* carries a set of presuppositions and implications that effectively make up a schema for explicating the form of a literary text — one that is an alternative to that proposed by Casanova. An *authorial niche* presupposes (a) a conceptualization of social space that is malleable and facilitative (rather than "relatively autonomous") and (b) a mode of formation that involves "embodiment" (rather than "compromise"), which in turn means that an *authorial niche*

[103] Anand and Croidieu, 333.

(a) bears the quality of uniqueness (rather than specificity) and (b) implies an author-context relationship that is exploitative (rather than adaptive). Thus, rather than explain Conrad's use of English as a matter of the language's prestige (an explanation that falters in light of the point that Conrad was as fluent and could have found a wider audience in French[104]), we would explain it as a matter of Conrad having embodied in his work the environment of the English language in which he was situated during his years sailing under the British flag and his life in England after. Conrad, to be sure, had once claimed that "it was I who was adopted by the genius of the [English] language."[105] But seeing as critics have also noted the ways in which Conrad's writing broke new ground for literary uses of the English language,[106] we might thus frame Conrad's choice of language and its aftermath as an instance of the mutual generation of forms through "the processual unfolding of a total field of relations." That Conrad had also once pointed out how he "had to make material from my own life's incidents arranged, combined, colored for artistic purposes"[107] additionally suggests that the features of his work are the outcome of his exploiting rather than conforming to the circumstances of his life, and that these circumstances are resources for rather than restraints on his authorial inclinations. By this line of thinking, Conrad's literary renditions of popular genres would not be products of him adapting to the conditions of a British literary marketplace hungry for such fiction. Rather, they would be products of him taking advantage of not only those marketplace conditions, but also the dearth,

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[104] As Watt notes, even though Conrad spoke French "idiomatically" and wrote with "a good many incidental errors of idiom and spelling," French would nonetheless "have the advantage of giving him a European audience, including many more readers than would English in his native country" (21-2).
[105] Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea and A Personal Record* (1906; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), vii. Citations refer to the 1988 edition.
[106] Discussions of Conrad's innovative use of language abound. See, for instance, Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad* (1996).
[107] Joseph Conrad, letter to A.T. Saunders, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Vol. 6: 1917-1919*, eds. Laurence Davies, Frederick J. Karl, and Owen Knowles (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100.

at least then, of literary renditions of such fiction — not to mention his life experiences as a sailor. In fact, claims like Andrea White's that Conrad's nautical anecdotes in *The Mirror of the Sea* allowed him to "connect himself with a particularly English past and to foreground an essentially English lineage"[108] are working precisely on the assumptions that Conrad's works were instrumentalizations of his sociohistorical circumstances and that these circumstances could be instrumentalized. Accordingly, when Conradian scholars describe Conrad's works and place in literary space as unique, it is not simply because Conrad's contexts were unique, as is frequently claimed, but because of Conrad's exploitation of those contexts.

To recapitulate what I have explored so far: I have distinguished between the uses of *niche* as a modifier and a noun with regards to authorship, the epithet *niche author* and the concept *authorial niche*, as well as the concepts *authorial position* and *authorial niche*. And as we have just seen, the conceptualization of Conrad's location in literary space as an *authorial niche* offers a different set of explanations for features of Conrad's oeuvre. However, the significance of claiming that Conrad developed an *authorial niche* extends beyond that. The exploitative relationship between an author and his contexts implied by the concept, I suggest, also allows us to reconsider the ways Conrad's influence among later authors has been conceived. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on Conrad's legacy among his so-called "descendants" from former colonies, because their appreciation of Conrad as more than just an author of empire puts pressure on how critics have long understood Conrad's relationship to his contexts.

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[108] Andrea White, "Writing from Within: Autobiography and Immigrant Subjectivity in *The Mirror of the Sea*," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives*, eds. Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White (New York: Routledge, 2005), 242.

In his memoir published twenty-three years after the infamous *fatwa* on his head, Salman Rushdie recounts the process by which, in following police orders, he came to assume the pseudonym "Joseph Anton." After toying with the names of "writers he loved," Rushdie settled on "the first names of Conrad and Chekhov." The combination, he explains, carried the benefit of being a plausible name, but it was also fitting for his circumstances, for whereas Chekhov was "master of [the] loneliness and melancholy" Rushdie then felt, Conrad, being "the translingual creator of wanderers, lost and not lost, of voyagers into the heart of darkness, of secret agents in a world of killers and bombs, and of at least one immortal coward hiding from his shame," was almost the writer of Rushdie's own life history. For that reason, only Conrad could give "him the motto which he clung as if to a lifeline in the long years that would follow," a quote from the "now-unacceptably-titled *The Nigger of the Narcissus*" wherein the character James Wait tells himself "I must live until I die" — only Conrad had imagined and experienced the world similarly enough to Rushdie to offer Rushdie mantras for living.[109]

What conceptual paradigms do we have to understand this particular relationship between Rushdie and Conrad? When critics like Jaclyn Partyka suggest that "*appropriating* the names of two of the most admired and canonical authors in Western literature allows Rushdie to reassert himself within the consecrated realm of respected literary authorship,"[110] the relationship between Rushdie and Conrad appears to be one not uncommonly drawn between a postcolonial Anglophone author and a canonical "Western" author, that of the former "writing back" to the latter — the sentence's choice of verb and its establishment of a difference between Rushdie and "Western literature" imply as much. Otherwise, when critics like Zoe Heller decry the "lordly

[109] Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2012), 164-65.
[110] Jaclyn Partyka, "*Joseph Anton*'s Digital Doppelgänger: Salman Rushdie and the Rhetoric of Self-Fashioning," *Contemporary Literature* 58, no.2 (Summer 2017): 219, emphasis added.

nonchalance" with which Rushdie, through the pseudonym and throughout his memoir, "claims kinship with any number of great literary men,"[111] the relationship between Rushdie and Conrad remains unexamined or unspecified — the emphasis is instead on Rushdie as a self-aggrandizing individual. Given these two tendencies, it would seem that critics have found it impossible to imagine that the very author who coined the proverbial phrase "the empire writes back" could conceive of Conrad, participant of the British empire at its height, as anything more than a figure to be "written back" to. That familiar framework endures despite Rushdie's attempt to move beyond a construal of Conrad as a colonial author who wrote books "now-unacceptably-titled" to one from whom aphoristic insights can be drawn.

The case of Rushdie's relationship to Conrad illustrates the extent to which scholars instinctively interpret allusions to Conrad in works by non-Anglo-American authors as oppositional or revisionary efforts. This reflex conceivably originates in the reactions of Conradian critics to Chinua Achebe's 1975 censure of *Heart of Darkness*. Countermands to Achebe's accusations of Conrad's racism typically boil down to the argument that Conrad provided, especially through the irony infusing the novella, the possibility for "his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies."[112] Thus, even if the novella was unable to transcend the "climate of prejudice"[113] at the time of its publication, it nonetheless "gestures toward meanings that [it itself] cannot understand, but that are perceived as *there* and awaiting a time when they will be spoken."[114] Scholars have

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[111] Zoe Heller, "The Salman Rushdie Case: On *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*," *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 2012.
[112] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 26.
[113] Cedric Watts, "'A Bloody Racist': About Achebe's View of Conrad," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 13 (1983): 208.
[114] Benita Parry, "The Moment and Afterlife of *Heart of Darkness*," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White, 41

consequently taken such redemptive readings of *Heart of Darkness* as cues to interpret Conrad's presence in postcolonial works as so may instances of texts that "speak" those "meanings" of the novella that are "awaiting." Graham Huggan, for instance, argues that Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* and V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* are Caribbean reinterpretations of *Heart of Darkness* that execute "a completion of [the novella] which is considered not to have gone far enough."[115] It is criticism like Huggan's that insists on the potency of *Heart of Darkness* which fuels the conviction that the primary, if not only, relationship between authors from former colonies and Conrad is adversarial and motivated by a politics of reclamation.

Granted, the paradigm of "writing back" has proven a remarkably fruitful analytical tool for writing from former colonies. But critics have also questioned the costs of its status as the de facto framework for this body of work, namely, how it shortchanges the richness of literary perspectives from, if not the diverse circumstances of literary production within, former colonies. Arun Mukherjee, for instance, points out that "[t]his kind of theorizing leaves us [postcolonial authors] with only one modality, one discursive position [even though] our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs and we may have more need than constantly to 'parody' imperialists."[116] Peter Hulme, for another, worries that if the "opposition of the colonial and the postcolonial is allowed to become too fixed…then the critical enterprise risks becoming located at such a high level of generality ('postcoloniality') that the particular conditions that produced particular books can remain ignored, indeed even unavailable."[117] Not unlike Achebe's protest

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[115] Graham Huggan, "Anxieties of Influence: Conrad in the Caribbean," *Commonwealth* 11, no.1 (1988): 3.
[116] Arun P. Mukherjee, "Whose post-colonialism and whose postmodernism?" *World Literature Written in English* 30, no. 2 (1990): 6.
[117] Peter Hulme, "The Locked Heart: The Creole Family Romance of *Wide Sargasso Sea*," in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 72-73.

that Conrad's "reducing [of] Africa to the role of props" is too high of a price to pay to depict "the break-up of one petty European mind,"[118] such reevaluations of the "writing back" model charge that the reduction of postcolonial literature to this "one modality, one discursive position" is too high of a price to pay for the sake of designating the "postcolonial."

To remedy these limitations of the "writing back" paradigm while remaining attentive to its obvious political appeal, critics have thus generally sought to pay closer attention to "the particular conditions that produced particular books." In more recent reconsiderations of the relationship between Conrad and postcolonial authors, as such, critics like Byron Caminero-Santangelo argue that "[a]ny convincing account of Conrad's influence on [Tayeb] Salih's novel [*Season of Migration to the North*] must ultimately take into careful consideration the particular historical moment in which the novel was produced." Only by doing so, he suggests, does it then become possible to grasp that "[w]hen Salih echoes Conrad, he is not merely writing against or even elaborating upon Conrad's own critique of turn-of-the-century imperialism and colonialism" — he also "used certain Conradian elements to expose and attack the contradictions of late twentieth century neocolonialism in Sudan."[119] This scrutiny of the historical and geographical contexts of engagements with Conrad's work by authors from former colonies is moreover touted to bring with it the boon of decentering the metropolitan. Padmini Mongia, for instance, distinguishes between African, Caribbean, and Indian responses to Conrad's work to observe that Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy, although still "engaged in a revisionary enterprise questioning the worlds that colonial fictions and history have polarized,"[120]

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[118] Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no.4 (Winter 1977): 788.
[119] Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 9-10.
[120] Padmini Mongia, "Between Men: Conrad in the Fiction of Two Contemporary Indian Writers," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White, 89.

nonetheless do not fit "[a]pproaches to Conrad [which, in] emphasizing 'influence' or 'writing back' keep Conrad at the center of a Western master narrative of the history of the novel."[121] Consequently, they present instead an alternative paradigm that Mongia suggests, referencing Dipesh Chakrabarty, "might be seen as 'provincializing Europe."[122] The emplacement of postcolonial texts within their contexts of production therefore allows critics to show that "writing back" is but one stance an author from a former colony can take toward Conrad's works rather than the only one, and that the applicability of the framework itself to a postcolonial text that references Conrad is contingent upon its author's specific contexts.

Interestingly, this focus on the contexts of a text, or what we might call a hypercontextualization, of the later, postcolonial text is often simultaneously accompanied by a decontextualization of Conrad's works, a stripping of them from the rubrics of turn-of-the-twentieth century racial prejudices and imperialism so that they become solely artifacts of art. This double methodological move in turn allows critics to offer "use" in lieu of the implicitly hierarchical notions of "influence" or "writing back" as the framework through which Conrad is placed in relation to writers from former colonies. A case in point is Michaela Bronstein's examination of the relationship between Conrad and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Bronstein identifies at the outset of the article, pointedly titled "Ngũgĩ's Use of Conrad: A Case for Literary Transhistory," Ngũgĩ's geocultural location: "The *Kenyan* writer, critic, and activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o."[123] To further contextualize Ngũgĩ and his works, she cites Ngũgĩ's views on Conrad

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[121] Mongia, 98.
[122] Mongia, 98.
[123] Michaela Bronstein, "Ngũgĩ's Use of Conrad: A Case for Literary Transhistory," *Modern Language Quarterly* 75, no.3 (2014), 411, emphasis added. To be sure, this double methodological move transpires as well in other studies of Conrad's relationship to later authors and to those not generally considered postcolonial. Close attention to Peter Mallios's *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity* (2010), for instance, likewise reveals a detailing, on the one hand, of the sociopolitical contexts of American

and his own writing, and even notes that *A Grain of Wheat*, the novel on which she builds her case for Ngũgĩ's "use of Conrad," was written during Ngũgĩ's time at the University of Leeds, "a transitional moment in his career."[124] In a section centered on *Nostromo*, however, Bronstein omits the novel's preoccupation and Conrad's involvement with imperialism and makes no reference to Conrad's views on writing, focusing only on Conrad's narrative techniques. It is this decontextualization of Conrad's works in her own article which enables Bronstein to build on Ngũgĩ's avowal that Conrad's "techniques impressed [him]" — even though he also admits, as a sign of his contextualization of Conrad within the cultural history of empire, that he "found Conrad's vision limited"[125] — and argue that "Ngũgĩ's reading and appropriation of Conrad dehistoricizes him and also deploys him for a latter-day political effect."[126] For Bronstein, as such, the "potential use of Conradian form" by later postcolonial authors like Ngũgĩ requires not only the hypercontextualization of the postcolonial author and text in question, but also that critics "hold attention to [Conrad's] early twentieth-century political context in abeyance"[127] — that is, the decontextualization of Conrad and his works from the cultural history of empire.

In asking critics to disregard Conrad's contexts so that connections between Conrad and other authors become evident, Bronstein implies that she shares with Woolf her concern that Conrad's particular contexts make him "not very helpful" for later authors. This methodological solution Bronstein in effect offers to Woolf's conundrum, however, is arguable for two reasons. On the one hand, the hypercontextualization of the works of an author from a former colony and

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authors, and on the other, an idea of Conrad's figure so unstable in terms of its contexts that they become moot.

[124] Bronstein, 423.

[125] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986), 76.

[126] Bronstein, 412.

[127] Bronstein, 432.

a decontextualization of the works of a so-called "Western" author indicate an unevenness of treatment between both kinds of texts that ignores the kind of inequality a framework like "writing back" is meant to address. On the other, the decontextualization of Conrad's works would fail, from the perspective of a critic like Edward Said, to give due recognition to "horrific pressures" such as the "turbulence of war, ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and unhappy dislocation" which Conrad experienced and which, as Said insists, "render even the most humdrum and ordinary of [Conrad's] sentences both threatening and full of dislocating force."[128] Those faults aside, Bronstein's solution remains problematic since she does not fully explicate the grounds on which Ngũgĩ is able to "use" Conrad. That is, if we were to agree with Bronstein that Ngũgĩ "dehistoricizes" and "deploys" Conrad, we would need to ask first how it is possible for her to argue that Ngũgĩ does so despite being himself contextualized as an author from a former colony who would, in turn, have every reason to contextualize Conrad only as an author of empire.

This capacity of Ngũgĩ's to dehistoricize Conrad, I suggest, comes from a particular approach on Ngũgĩ's part to the relationship between Conrad and his contexts which Bronstein herself does not take and so neglects to consider as a crucial component for rethinking the relationship between Conrad and later authors. When Bronstein demands critics to place "in abeyance" Conrad's contexts, she in fact also implies that she shares with Woolf her conviction that Conrad's works are the "product of" his contexts, particularly that of British empire, and that the relationship between Conrad and his contexts is adaptive. Otherwise, there would be no reason for her to go to the lengths of performing and suggesting the decontextualization of Conrad's works. When Ngũgĩ, however, states that he "found Conrad's vision limited" and yet

[128] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xxii.

that his "techniques impressed me," Ngũgĩ indicates that he understands Conrad's works to be more than simply "products" of Conrad's contexts. Otherwise, Conrad's works for Ngũgĩ would simply be works to "write back to" seeing as they were written during the height of British imperialism.

What is the understanding of Conrad's relationship to his contexts which an author like Ngũgĩ can be said to bring to bear on Conrad's oeuvre such that his relationship to Conrad cannot be limited to an oppositional one? To answer that question, it is useful to recall here the attachment of the term *niche* to Conrad's figure throughout Conradian criticism, as well as the significance of that term in relation to an authorship. As we saw previously, the *authorial niche* implies an exploitative relationship between an author and his contexts. Framing Conrad's location in literary space as an *authorial niche* thus helps us articulate an alternative to the relationship between Conrad and his contexts commonly assumed by Conradian critics that in turn helps us reconceptualize Conrad's relationship to later authors. Certainly, Ngũgĩ did not himself claim that Conrad's figure belongs in an *authorial niche*. But the exploitative relationship between an author and his contexts which the concept of the *authorial niche* calls attention to provides an explanation as to why Ngũgĩ is able to and does indeed claim to have been motivated by Conrad's artistry. In admitting more recently that he "accepted everything Achebe said about Conrad's biases," and yet "somehow, [Achebe's] essay failed to explain what had once attracted me: Conrad's ability to capture the hypocrisy of the 'civilizing mission' and the materialist interests that drove capitalist empires,"[129] Ngũgĩ implies three things. First, that he recognizes Conrad's instrumentalization of, with his skills as an author (his "ability to capture"), his historical contexts in his works. Second, that he is simply making a distinction between

[129] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "The Contradictions of Joseph Conrad," *New York Times*, November 21, 2017.

Conrad's authorship and Conrad's contexts, rather than "dehistoriciz[ing]" Conrad from the context of empire, since he accepts Achebe's points about Conrad. Finally, that Conrad's authorship does not necessarily have to be thought of as a "product of" Conrad's contexts, even when the two are thought of together. Only by thus acknowledging that Ngũgĩ approaches Conrad as an author who, as Conrad himself pointed out, "make[s] material from [his] own life's incidents," and not as an author "dehistoricize[d]" from his contexts, can we then grasp how the relationship between Ngũgĩ and Conrad may not be just that of "writing back" and agree with Bronstein that it ought to be one of use. Indeed, we might add here that if, due to the legacies of British colonialism, Conrad's works are considered as an element of Ngũgĩ's extant sociohistorical circumstances, Bronstein's argument for Ngũgĩ's use of Conrad can be thought of as part of Ngũgĩ's formation of his *authorial niche*.

The possibility of moving beyond the framework of "writing back" through recognizing that postcolonial authors approached Conrad as an author who exploited his contexts holds true even for authors who were fascinated by Conrad less for his storytelling skills than for his stories. A case in point is V.S. Naipaul, who addresses his relationship with Conrad most directly in his 1974 essay "Conrad's Darkness." Critics like Natalie Melas argue that the essay is about "the impossibility of a colonial reading grounded in purely literary judgment"[130] and thus demonstrates Naipaul's interpellation both of himself as a postcolonial subject and Conrad as an author of empire. Upon a closer look, however, the essay reveals Naipaul's conscientious attempt to reflect on a "multiplicity of Conrads" and to dissect Conrad's works by bearing in mind not only the "imperialist myth of the man of honor" that surrounds Conrad, but also that of Conrad being "the stylist of the sea." With regards to Conrad "the stylist," Naipaul finds him to be too

[130] Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 91.

much so — "in his fictions," he says, "Conrad had refined away, as common-place, those qualities of imagination and fantasy and invention that I went to novels for." With regards to Conrad "the imperialist," though, Naipaul finds him to be unparalleled in his observations of the colonial world — Conrad, Naipaul declares, holds "value to [him because] he is someone who sixty to seventy years ago meditated on [his] world [with an] honesty" and "with great effort of thought and sympathy."[131] Unlike Ngũgĩ, then, Naipaul is not attracted to Conrad for the "majesty and musicality of his well-structured sentences."[132] But, like Ngũgĩ, the care with which Naipaul takes to distinguish and then cast judgment between Conrad "the stylist" and Conrad "the imperialist" shows that despite his acute consciousness of Conrad's contexts and his own, he recognizes Conrad's works to be stylizations of his sociohistorical contexts and so the output of an author who was simply making use of his contexts. Even as he notes in the essay that "[e]very great writer is produced by a series of special circumstances," he declares pointedly that Conrad "chose, as we now know, incidents from real life; and he meditated on them."[133] Naipaul, we might say, comprehended that Conrad's relationship to his contexts accords with that which the concept of an *authorial niche* implies. Naipaul's approach to Conrad's authorship consequently provides us with the grounds to rethink his relationship to Conrad. When, in a 2005 profile, he boasts that "there is no reportage in my thing [*A Bend in the River*]. I was looking and creating that world. I actually think the work I've done in that way is better than Conrad,"[134] we realize that Naipaul is in fact responding not to Conrad the "imperialist" but Conrad "the stylist." In contrast to an author like Achebe, Naipaul is not countering Conrad's representations of the

[131] V.S. Naipaul, "Conrad's Darkness," *New York Review of Books,* October 17, 1974.
[132] Ngũgĩ, "Contradictions," n.p.
[133] Naipual, "Conrad's Darkness," n.p.
[134] V.S. Naipaul, "The Irascible Prophet: V.S. Naipaul at Home," interview by Rachel Donadio, *New York Times,* August 7, 2005.

colonized world but, as he claims, improving upon Conrad's *presentation* of his representations of the colonized world. This claim can be made by him only because he approaches Conrad as an author exploiting his contexts, and it is that approach, to stress the point, which in turn allows us to perceive that Naipaul's relationship to Conrad, if not quite that of "use" as with Ngũgĩ, at least exceeds an oppositional stance.

In focusing on the case of the postcolonial writer's relationship to Conrad, I do not mean to suggest that it is only because the figure of the postcolonial writer, whose contexts like Conrad's have more often than not been excavated as explanations for some facet of their fiction, is as such especially sensitive to the kind of relationship an author has with his contexts. Doing so would be tantamount to falling back into the same groove of thinking that posits Conrad's unique perspective and style to be preordained by his circumstances. Rather, I mean to suggest that the attempts of critics to relate postcolonial writers and Conrad apart from through the framework of "writing back" usefully recalls the disjuncture between Conrad's "genius" and his contexts so often elided in Conradian criticism, and opens up the question of how else the two might be related. To be sure, the answer to the latter is not limited to an exploitative relationship. Anita Starosta, for instance, has suggested that we might think of Conrad's relationship to his contexts as one that is ironic. Taking into consideration Conrad's use of irony throughout his fictional and memoir work, and taking irony to mean, in de Manian terms, a rhetorical mode in which two given discourses "disrupt each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text should be," Starosta proposes that "instead of treating biography and other extratextual elements as an explanatory force that might ground a [fictional] text [of Conrad's], we might take them to stand

in ironic relation to it."[135] Yet it is only by conceiving of Conrad's location in literary space as an *authorial niche,* and recognizing that his relationship to his contexts might therefore be an exploitative one, that we are not only able to address the singularity of Conrad's works that compelled Woolf and legions of later Conradian critics to find "explanatory force" in Conrad's contexts, but also to bring into view what was occluded by the assumption, conventionalized since Woolf's time, that Conrad's texts are "products of" his contexts: that Conrad could be and was indeed "helpful," as Woolf says, for later authors, and that the relationship between Conrad and postcolonial authors can be construed, without simply casting aside Conrad's contexts, as something other than that of "writing back.

[135] Anita Starosta, *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Postimperial Difference* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 91.

Chapter Two

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Niche Nationalism

Sometime in *Child of All Nations*, Minke, the protagonist of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Buru Quartet,[1] finds himself unexpectedly participating in the daily life of a farmer and his family while on vacation in the Dutch East Indies countryside. The experience proves unbecoming for Minke, a member of the Javanese aristocracy—he finds the plain food indigestible, he is kept awake by the sounds of frogs and mosquitoes, and he fails miserably at an attempt to hoe. Yet it is during this episode that Minke recognizes he is indeed the novel's titular figure: a "child of all nations." Even as he recollects learning, upon reflection of the farmer's initial wariness, about Javanese peasant behavior at his Dutch-medium school, he realizes simultaneously that "Europe is not my only teacher! This modern age has given me many breasts to suckle from, that of my own native peoples, of Japan, China, America, India, Arabia, of all nations on the face of this earth. They were the mother-wolves giving me life to become a builder of Rome! …With humility I admitted: I am the child of all nations of all time, past and present. Place and time of birth, ancestors, surely those are only a coincidence, hardly something sacred."[2] In the Javanese heartland, among his fellow countrymen, Minke has an epiphany that he is more than just a child of the Indies.

[1] The Buru Quartet consists of *Bumi Manusia* (1980), *Anak Semua Bangsa* (1980), *Jejak Langkah* (1985), and *Rumah Kaca* (1988). They were translated by Maxwell Lane and published, respectively, *This Earth of Mankind* (1982), *Child of All Nations* (1984), *Footsteps* (1990), and *House of Glass* (1992). All citations of the novels in this chapter refer to the Indonesian editions. Except for the titles of the novels themselves, and except where noted, all translations from the novels as well as any other works in Indonesian are mine.

[2] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Anak Semua Bangsa* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1980), 165.

To the extent that the Buru Quartet is understood as a nationalist coming-of-age story, this scene marks a key juncture in Minke's growth. In *This Earth of Mankind,* the first novel of the tetralogy, we are introduced to a Minke who claims himself to be "distinct from my countrymen in general."[3] In the passage above, from the tetralogy's second novel, we are instead presented with a Minke who tries to "know his countrymen."[4] Indeed, the acts of recollection and reflection Minke performs in doing so are well-worn *Bildungsroman* devices Pramoedya uses to show Minke's evolving sense of self and the kindling of his national consciousness. This approximation of the scene's significance, however, does not quite explain the curious thematic dissonance the scene presents. Why, after all, does Minke develop here not simply the awareness that his selfhood is constituted by the *national* (his "own native peoples"), but also the awareness that his selfhood is constituted as well by the *international* ("all nations on the face of this earth")? Put in terms of narrative structure, why would Pramoedya situate the awakening of what we might call Minke's global consciousness in, of all places, a segment of the quartet concerned so explicitly with the provincial?

To address these questions, I examine not so much the cultural politics of turn of the twentieth century Indonesia, which is when the Buru Quartet is set, than of the so-called Third World during the 1950s and 1960s, when Cold War tensions and decolonization worldwide not only sculpted new spheres of sovereignty but also enabled novel circuits of cross-continental connectivity. I propose a framework for grasping the interplay between the national and the international of that period which I claim the scene above manifests and which is based on the concept of the *niche: niche nationalism. Niche nationalism* builds on and, in the process, explicates, the presence of the term *niche* in about three decades' worth of studies and reportage

[3] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Bumi Manusia* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1980), 2.
[4] Pramoedya, *Anak*, 169.

concerning the conduct of newly-decolonized nations on the global stage. Being at once a political solution and a logic of cultural production that I suggest is particular to the nation-building programs of these nations, *niche nationalism* involves the instrumentalization of "foreign" elements present within given national boundaries to foster a sense of interdependence among nations even as the formation of discrete national identities and national development remained foundational in these programs. My use of *niche* as a modifier in what I am calling *niche nationalism* therefore serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it extends into a different analytical situation the idea, developed in the previous chapter, that the term *niche* refers not so much to a smallness than to an exploitation of surrounding conditions. On the other, it deepens our understanding of the concept of the *niche* by foregrounding its capacity to signify an interdependence — a quality seemingly counterintuitive to the uniqueness the term designates but is nonetheless another implication of the concept.

In what follows, I develop the framework of *niche nationalism* by elaborating on the tenets of *niche diplomacy* and *niche construction theory*, two theoretical models grounded in the implications of the concept of the *niche*. I suggest that *niche nationalism* enables us to conceptually relate two seemingly contradictory aspirations of newly-decolonized nations as expressed particularly during the 1955 Bandung Conference: to assert national independence and to cultivate international interdependence. Subsequently, I turn to Pramoedya's Buru Quartet to demonstrate that *niche nationalism* not only allows us to explain the scene above but also, and more importantly, Pramoedya's heavy use of *wayang purwa* (Indonesian shadow puppet theater) traditions in the quartet despite his vilification of the form. In arguing that, with the framework of *niche nationalism,* the Buru Quartet can be understood as Pramoedya's attempt to actualize the cultural politics of the immediate post-Bandung Conference moment even though they were

published only in the 1980s and temporally set almost a century prior, I show that *niche nationalism* offers us a way to approach the politics and cultural production of 1950s-1960s Indonesia which exceeds the limitations of other conceptual tools for the study of cross-cultural interaction like transculturation and *cannibalismo*. To begin, however, let us examine current discourse about the political activities of newly-decolonized nations during the Cold War in which the term *niche*, as with scholarship about Conrad, consistently, and curiously so, appears.

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If one were to perform a rhetorical analysis of the literature about the political maneuverings of nations following the end of World War II, it would perhaps be no surprise for one to find the predominance of a spatialized vocabulary. Not only were the conflicts of the Cold War driven as much by geopolitical considerations as ideological ones; the formation of new nations in the wake of decolonization also meant that matters of territory pervaded global affairs then, and so the discourse about them. The historian Vijay Prashad, for example, describes what has come to be known as the "Bandung Spirit" as the sense, on the part of Third World politicians and intellectuals, "that the colonized world had now emerged to claim their space in world affairs, not just as an adjunct of the First and Second Worlds, but as a player in its own right."[5] Here, "space" functions both literally and figuratively; if the metamorphosis of former colonies into new nations was by definition about their "claim" to sovereignty over physical area, it was also about their assertion of diplomatic power and presence in the global arena.

What's more intriguing about this discursive convention, however, is the qualification of that "space in world affairs" claimed by the "colonized world" as a particular metaphorical space: a *niche*. This tendency occurs most frequently in studies and reportage about the Non-

[5] Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A Biography of the Short-Lived Third World* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2007), 45.

Aligned Movement (NAM), an organization established in 1961 that is arguably the formal culmination of several international meetings among the leaders of former colonies, including the Bandung Conference in 1955. Below are some exemplary instances of the use of *niche* in reference to the NAM's political space:

- From a 1978 U.S. International Communication Agency report: "Originally, the [non-aligned] movement attempted to find a niche, somewhere between capitalism and socialism."[6]
- From the 1981 proceedings of the eighth Annual National Security Affairs Conference: "The natural niche for these nations was the non-aligned movement, which accommodated all developing nations, anti-Western as well as anti-communist."[7]
- From a 1986 the *New York Times* article on the commemoration of the NAM's twenty-fifth anniversary: "When the movement was founded in 1961, the main leaders […] hoped to carve out an independent niche that would protect fragile nations of medium and small size from domination by the Soviet Union and the United States."[8]
- From a 1996 op-ed column in the *Indian Express*: "Non-alignment was the logical extension of the strategy of asymmetry to the foreign policy of a newly independent country that did not wish to become a pawn in other people's quarrels. The only

[6] Jonathan F. Gunter, *The United States and the Debate on the World Information Order* (Washington D.C.: Academy for Educational Development, 1978), 44.
[7] Vladimir Petrov, "Dynamics of Confrontation," in *The 1980s: Decade of Confrontation? Proceedings of the Eighth Annual National Security Affairs Conference, 13 – 15 July 1981* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press), 18.
[8] Sheila Rule, "Sanctions Test Mettle of Leaders at Harare," *New York Times*, September 7, 1986.

reason we [the formerly-colonized] counted in the world…was because we had carved an asymmetrical niche for ourselves in the disposition of diplomacy."[9]

- From a 2006 Council of Hemispheric Affairs editorial documenting Cuba's ascension to the presidency of the NAM: "NAM's original goal, formulated amidst the Cold War confrontation of 1961, was to create a niche for newly independent countries seeking to avoid an alliance with either superpower, while strengthening their relative economic and political position."[10]
- From a 2007 essay on the legacy of the "Bandung Spirit": "[The Bandung Conference] resulted in securing a 'niche of the Cold War' which gave non-aligned countries a maneuvering space between two opposing powerful countries. Taking advantage of this niche space, non-aligned countries wanted to try to pursue alternative political and economic trajectories."[11]

In order to begin defining the framework of *niche nationalism*, let us first consider the work *niche* is doing in these quotes. At first glance, it would seem that, not unlike the use of *niche* with regards to *niche author* in the first sense (NA1), *niche* in some of these quotes signifies on the one hand a smallness, underscoring that such nations are not "superpowers." Indeed, if the NAM is composed of "fragile nations of medium and small size," then the space it occupies in the global political arena would accordingly be but the size of a *niche* — that is, a small space. On the other hand, it would seem that, not unlike the use of *niche* with regards to *niche author* in the second sense (NA2), *niche* in some of these quotes signifies a particular and usually non-

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[9] Mani Shankar Aiyar, *A Time of Transition: Rajiv Gandhi to the Twenty-First Century* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2009), 259.
[10] "Cuba's Leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement: Challenge to U.S. Hegemony?" *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, October 16, 2006.
[11] Hee-Yeon Cho, "Revitalizing the Bandung Spirit," in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat (New York: Routledge, 2007), 586.

mainstream attribute. In this case, *niche* refers to the ideological space of the NAM, as an attribute particular to the organization, that is "somewhere between capitalism and socialism," if not "anti-Western as well as anti-communist." The significance of *niche* in discourse about the NAM thus appears to neatly align with the quantitative and qualitative connotations that the term can bear.

However, as explored previously, the term *niche* fundamentally implies a relationship of instrumentality between a subject and its given surroundings. We might thus surmise that the use of *niche* in discourse about the NAM also calls attention to the instrumentalization by the NAM's participant nations of various factors of the global political landscape during the Cold War. Let me elaborate on this point by way of the function of *niche* in the concept of *niche diplomacy*, as articulated by political scientist Andrew F. Cooper. *Niche diplomacy* involves a "form of country/activity differentiation" based on a country's "specialized interests and task-related experience," whether bureaucratic, technical, or material. Its practitioners are typically nations that are "middle powers [which] do not possess the ability to operate in an influential fashion across the [foreign] policy spectrum"; *niche diplomacy* consequently offers them an "enhanced status in the international system" as well as "the possibility of building up a constructive role [in the international system] in a fashion which distinguished them from great powers." At first glance, then, *niche* as a modifier for this mode of diplomatic conduct appears to be working, like in discourse about the NAM, to signify a smallness and a particularity. Yet as Cooper specifies, *niche diplomacy* requires "the ability of individual countries, like biological species or [corporate] firms, to identify and fill niche space on a selective basis through policy ingenuity and execution."[12] That "identification" and "filling" of political space which *niche*

[12] Andrew F. Cooper, "Niche Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview," in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 4-6.

diplomacy entails therefore indicates that the use of *niche* in *niche diplomacy* functions to capture not so much a smallness or a particularity but an exploitation of surrounding conditions. In employing *niche diplomacy*, a "middle power" nation is instrumentalizing to their advantage their "task-related experience" and prevailing global "issues" — both of which constitute, in essence, that nation's given surroundings.

Granted, Cooper's study concerns the activities of middle powers after the Cold War. But the establishment of the NAM can be understood as an act of *niche diplomacy* on the part of newly-decolonized nations seeing as the aims and participants of *niche diplomacy* parallel those of the NAM. For instance, when the former Indian diplomat Mani Shankar Aiyar, in his op-ed quoted above, characterizes "non-alignment" as a "strategy of asymmetry" — meaning a foreign policy stance which drew on, as he explains later, the Gandhian "non-conventional weapon of non-violence"[13]— he is referring precisely to the sort of diplomatic maneuver of less powerful nations that Cooper would identify as *niche diplomacy.* Rephrased in Cooper's terms, the establishment of the NAM would be an "ingenious" policy collectively "executed" by nascent nations that evinced their "ability" to "selectively identify and fill" the "niche space" of non-alignment during the Cold War. If the establishment of the NAM can be considered as such an act of *niche diplomacy,* then we might liken the significance of *niche* in discourse about the NAM to its significance in *niche diplomacy.* The extant conditions exploited by nascent nations in this case would be their collective desire "to avoid an alliance with either superpower, while strengthening their relative economic and political position," in addition to the presence of a political space for an ideological stance "somewhere between capitalism and socialism" within the international order of the Cold War.

[13] Aiyar, 259.

The concept of *niche diplomacy* thus helps us understand how the use of *niche* in discourse about the NAM and the diplomatic behavior of nations more broadly can imply a nation's or nations' instrumentalization of extant political circumstances to their advantage. This implication of the term is key to what I am calling *niche nationalism*. Yet there is another implication of *niche* which *niche diplomacy* also helps foreground that is hinted at in discourse about the NAM and equally crucial to the framework of *niche nationalism*: interdependence, or mutualism. Technically, interdependence is itself a corollary of the exploitative relationship with one's given surroundings. The reasoning for this connection between these two implications of *niche* is as such. A subject's instrumentalization of its extant circumstances, as noted previously, enables the formation of a location in social space for that subject which is unique or, put differently, of a unique specialization for that subject. To the extent that a specialization denotes a competence, a specialization can work like a double-edged sword: while it does mean that a subject gains a competitive advantage in one domain because of competence there, it may nonetheless also mean a disadvantage or vulnerability in another domain because of a lack of competence. That vulnerability in turn may invite or require a dependence on the specialization of a second subject, but the vulnerability of that second subject may likewise invite or require a dependence on the specialization of the first subject. The competencies or their lack thereof of either subject consequently establishes a relationship of interdependence between both subjects.

This implication of an interdependence that *niche* carries is borne out in the practice of *niche diplomacy.* Cooper notes that *niche diplomacy* prevails when it comes to "social issues which are essentially global and interdependent in nature" such as "poverty and human welfare, ecology and human rights." To clarify the point Cooper is making, such issues are "interdependent in nature" not only because they are "essentially global," that is, because their

causes and effects extend beyond a single nation's boundaries. They are also "interdependent in nature" because the "country/activity differentiation" *niche diplomacy* involves means that such issues "require forms of skillful multilateral management" which aggregate each nation's "task-related experience[s]."[14] In other words, the incompetencies concomitant to a nation's specialization necessitate interdependent relationships among nations, and so qualifies such issues as "interdependent in nature." A case in point is the issue of establishing stability in Southern Africa during the 1980s, given the problem of apartheid in South Africa and the bid for Namibia's independence from South Africa then. David R. Black cites the policies Canada and Sweden took toward the region as instances of *niche diplomacy.* Canada's leaders were able to promote international pressure on South Africa because of its memberships in the G-7 and the Commonwealth — memberships which Sweden lacked. But "[w]here Sweden *had* developed a diplomatic comparative advantage was in its relations with Southern African states and liberation movements, earned largely through its generous aid programs in the region," and which, as Black notes, "was particularly unusual among Western countries, having been carefully nurtured since 1969." These relations consequently enabled Sweden to carry out "bridge-building" activities such as encouraging Namibia's independence movement to reconcile itself to the United Nation's transition plan for Namibian independence. [15] Thus, inasmuch as the issue of Southern African stability was interdependent in terms of being a cross-border concern, the respective diplomatic capabilities of Canada and Sweden also established a relationship of interdependence among nations in the handling of the issue, thereby rendering the issue as interdependent.

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[14] Cooper, 2.
[15] David R. Black, "Addressing Apartheid: Lessons from Australian, Canadian, and Swedish Policies in South Africa," in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War,* ed. Andrew F. Cooper (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 109, emphasis original.

The relationship of interdependence among subjects that the term *niche* implies is also present in what biologists F. John Odling-Smee, Kevin N. Laland, and Marcus W. Feldman call *niche construction theory*. Basically, *niche construction theory* recognizes that the instrumentalization by organisms of biotic or abiotic environmental elements to construct their *niches* within a given ecosystem holds the potential to affect natural selection processes such that their own evolutionary dynamics and those of other organisms are affected.[16] The theory thus accords with another previously explored implication of *niche*: the idea that extant conditions are malleable and facilitative, rather than fixed and deterministic, and so open to exploitation by a subject. Yet it is that potential for the evolutionary dynamics of organisms to be affected through *niche* construction which suggests that the theory also extrapolates from the interdependence that *niche* implies, and is not merely foregrounding the interdependence inherent to any ecosystem. If changes to the evolutionary processes of an organism can be brought about specifically through the *niche* construction activities of another organism — that is, its specialization — then that indicates the extent to which an organism's specialization establishes relationships of interdependence with other organisms. Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman point to the mutual dependence between ants and acacia trees as an example. Here, the tendency of ants to destroy seedlings and attack creatures that pose threats to its nests is understood as the ants' *niche* construction behavior or specialization. This specialization of the ants, which acacia trees exploit to protect themselves from other competing plants, browsers or pests, consequently prompts the proliferation of nectaries and thorns on acacia trees (the trees' specialization) to encourage the presence of the ants, since the nectaries and thorns are in turn exploited by the ants as food and

[16] F. John Odling-Smee, Kevin N. Laland, and Marcus W. Feldman, *Niche Construction: The Neglected Process in Evolution* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1. We will consider the implications of this theory more fully in Chapter 3.

shelter.[17] To the extent that the ants' inhabitation of acacia trees and the growth of nectaries and thorns on acacia trees are evolutionary trajectories that result from the specializations of each organism, *niche construction theory* thus assumes the same interplay of specializations, incompetencies, and resulting interdependence among subjects as *niche diplomacy* in order to posit that the *niche* construction activities of organisms hold evolutionary consequences.

What's important to note about the interdependence that the concept of *niche* implies is that it is as much a strategy of development aimed to benefit the subjects involved as it is an upshot of specialization. The subjects in the examples above all derived advantages in terms of their wellbeing by developing not only a uniqueness but also by cultivating interdependent relationships. This strategic interdependence explains in part the use of *niche* to qualify the NAM's political space. As noted above, the implication of an instrumentalization of extant conditions which *niche* bears suggests that the NAM's political space is a space created through the instrumentalization by newly-decolonized nations of extant political conditions. By the same token, the implication of a strategic interdependence which *niche* also bears suggests that the NAM's political space is a space created through not just through a coalition but also a strategic interdependence between nascent nations. That interdependence is particularly exemplified in proposals for enhancing the economic development of newly-decolonized nations, an ancillary to the NAM's goal of ensuring its constituents' sovereignty. During the first Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization conference in 1957 — an organization that, in several respects, could be said to be a precursor of the NAM — the Chinese delegate declared that "[e]very nation has its own unique experiences along the lines of culture and science, which are helpful to other nations. For instance, water conservancy of India, cotton-growing experience of Egypt, paddy rice

[17] Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman, 105-6.

planting of Japan, architectural art of Nepal, etc., are all worthy of being studied by China."[18] This sense of the potential for economic development through the forging of interdependent relationships between nations, given their respective specializations, was later echoed in the calls for economic cooperation among NAM members by heads-of-state present at the movement's first summit in 1961. It is thus this strategic interdependence among the NAM's members and the interdependent character of the NAM's political space, alongside the instrumentalization of Cold War political conditions by newly-decolonized nations, which the use of *niche* in discourse about the NAM signals.

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Up till this point, I have examined two theoretical frameworks based on the concept of *niche, niche diplomacy* and *niche construction theory,* to foreground two implications of *niche* — a relationship of instrumentality between a subject and its extant conditions, and a relationship of interdependence between subjects. These implications, which I will for the sake of convenience refer to from now on as instrumentalization and interdependence, go toward explaining the use of the term *niche* in discourse about the NAM. These implications also form the basis of what I am calling *niche nationalism,* a framework which I claim helps us grasp better the politics and cultural production of the immediate post-Bandung Conference era, as well as the formal and thematic concerns of Pramoedya's Buru Quartet. Below, I articulate my definition of *niche nationalism* by way of contrasting the framework against several seemingly analogous concepts, beginning with niche nationalism itself as a phrase used in contemporary and scholarly discourse.

[18] Chu Tu-Nan, "Cultural Exchange Between the Countries of Asia and Africa," in *Afro-Asian Peoples Conference, 26 December 1957 – 1 January 1958: Principal Reports Submitted to the Conference* (Cairo: Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Permanent Secretariat, 1958), 345.

A quick database search for *niche nationalism* reveals its use in news articles to name resurgent twenty-first century nationalist movements that are based on some claim to a distinctive ethnic identity. A 2007 the *Guardian* article, for instance, uses *niche nationalism* to head a paragraph about the efforts of "Cornish nationalists," who "cite an indigenous language [and] a black and white flag" as "evidence of a distinctive culture," to "claim that [Cornwall] is not part of the UK and should therefore be granted the right to its own money, embassy, and Eurovision entry."[19] The listing of what a 2018 *The American Interest* article calls "Hungarian niche nationalism" alongside "Austrian provincial narrowness, Le Pen's revolt against the centralized system of the republican Sun Kings, the religious infused particularism of Poland, True Finns up north, xenophobes in sunny Italy"[20] further indicates the capacity of *niche nationalism* to describe an ethnic identity-based and revanchist neo-nationalist movements. These examples suggest that the utility of the phrase depends on an understanding of *niche* as an ostensible signifier not just of a particularity but also a smallness which, when applied to the notion of nationalism, comes to mean a minority population and a territorial segmentation.

Yet there is another sense of *niche nationalism* which draws instead on the instrumentalization of extant conditions that *niche* implies. This sense of the phrase appears particularly in the work of the sociologist David McCrone from the 1990s onwards. While McCrone does employ *niche nationalism* in relation to European neo-nationalist movements, he nonetheless uses the phrase to identify them as movements that exploit concerns of the contemporary political landscape, regardless of sociocultural factors or ideological leanings, in order to gain voter support. The "trick" of *niche nationalism*, says McCrone, "is to play the [political] system so as to capitalize to maximum advantage, mixing and matching ideology,

[19] Leo Benedictus, "Way out west," *Guardian*, January 2, 2007. 2
[20] Jan Techau, "Brexit Watch: Nasty Normal Europe," December 24, 2018.

strategy, and voter appeal."[21] ("Nations and Regions" 244). Unlike nationalist movements which employ "more traditional forms of nationalism that seek to defend and maintain social and cultural values," neo-nationalist movements which employ *niche nationalism* present "themselves on the Left as well as the Right, as in favor of neo-liberalism as social democracy, as civic as well as ethnic, depending on the circumstances."[22] McCrone cites as an example of the utility of *niche nationalism* the improved electoral performance of the Scottish National Party in 1992. The party's success, according to him, was due to its "capacity to tailor its appeal to political contingencies, and to naturalize itself as the party of 'all the nation,' a category which can be redefined as the moment allows."[23] Thus, even though *niche nationalism* as McCrone defines it may lead to movements that are described as *niche nationalism* in contemporary news articles — that is, revanchist or separatist movements based on claims of a distinctive ethnic identity — McCrone's use of the phrase distinctively employs the instrumentalization *niche* implies to call attention to the political behavior typical of these movements rather than merely their phenotypical features.

What I am calling *niche nationalism* parallels McCrone's definition yet diverges from it not simply in terms of the context to which it applies, but also the work *niche* is doing. *Niche nationalism* refers to a logic of cultural production that characterizes and motivates works from newly-decolonized nations particularly within the decade or so following the 1955 Bandung Conference. It involves the attempts of cultural producers to instrumentalize in their works elements considered foreign or non-native to their newly-obtained identities, yet already present

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[21] David McCrone, "Nations and Regions: In or Out of the State?" in *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, eds. Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 244.
[22] David McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow's Ancestors* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 144.
[23] McCrone, *Sociology of Nationalism*, 143-44.

within national space, with the aim of cultivating a belief among the peoples of newly-independent nations in the necessity of an interdependence between nations as a strategy of national development. Like McCrone's sense of *niche nationalism*, then, my definition of *niche nationalism* builds on the implication of instrumentalization of immediate surroundings that *niche* carries to describe a mode of nationalistic behavior. At the same time, it differs from McCrone's in mobilizing the implication of interdependence *niche* also carries to specify a tandem mode of nationalistic behavior, international interdependence—that being, to clarify, an end that is at once a means, not so much an ultimate goal in and of itself than a political approach pursued by early postcolonial nations for the overarching purpose of national development. Put differently, my definition of *niche nationalism* extends McCrone's insofar as it includes, as part of *niche nationalism*'s characteristics, the interdependent behavior that is a corollary to the exploitative behavior which the concept of *niche* implies.

Now, with this understanding of *niche nationalism* in mind, one might ask: if *niche nationalism* refers to the instrumentalization by cultural producers of foreign elements in their works, what distinguishes it from paradigms of cultural production which similarly involve engagement with the foreign, namely, transculturation and modernist anthropophagy? Further, if *niche nationalism* refers to a nation's reliance on, or at least recognition of, international interdependence as a strategy for national development, how does it differ from what is known as internationalism, or even what Akira Iriye calls "cultural internationalism" — "the fostering of international cooperation through cultural activities across national boundaries"[24]? To arrive at a clearer sense of *niche nationalism*, I address in the rest of this section these questions, starting

[24] Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 3.

with brief definitions of transculturation and modernist anthropophagy, then a comparison between the two concepts and *niche nationalism*.

Transculturation and modernist anthropophagy both originate from the context of Latin American culture and literature. The former was proposed by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940 as a term that "better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another" than simply acculturation, since that "process of transition" involves not only the "acquiring [of] another culture" (acculturation), but also the "loss or uprooting of a previous culture" (deculturation) and "the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena" (neoculturation).[25] Transculturation was subsequently adapted for the study of Latin American literature most prominently by the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama. Rama, however, goes further than Ortiz in stressing that transculturation is not a passive but an active process which entails a "selection and inventiveness" that is "directed not only at the foreign culture but also particularly at the community's own culture."[26] This sense of an active engagement with the foreign is present as well in modernist anthropophagy, which emerged during the interwar period in Brazil. Promulgated by the poet Oswald de Andrade, modernist anthropophagy is a transposition of customary cannibalism among indigenous Brazilian tribes into an aesthetic practice: the schema advocates for the deliberate consumption and use of foreign cultural elements by Brazilian artistes in their works. De Andrade's pun in his *Manifesto antropófago*, "Tupi or not tupi, that is the question,"[27] captures the "creation of new cultural phenomena" that this process intends —

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[25] Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 102-3.
[26] Ángel Rama, *Writing across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, ed. and trans. David Frye (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 23.
[27] Oswald de Andrade, "Cannibalist Manifesto," trans. Leslie Bary, *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no.38 (1991): 38.

the phrase commingles Hamlet's famous lines and the popular name for the Native Americans of Brazil.

From the descriptions above, it would seem that transculturation and modernist anthropophagy resemble *niche nationalism* insofar as the two paradigms also designate a mode of cultural production that is conceived of as a purposeful exploitation and incorporation of foreign cultural elements. The similarities between the three frameworks continue if we consider that both transculturation and modernist anthropophagy are typically taken as terms that denote a nationalistic behavior. John Beverley, for instance, suggests that "[f]or both Rama and Ortiz transculturation functions as a teleology, not without marks of violence and loss, but necessary in the last instance for the formation of the modern nation-state and a national (or continental identity that would be something other than the sum of its parts, since the original identities are sublated in the process of transculturation itself."[28] Luís Madureira, for another, observes in quoting the Brazilian critic Renato Ortiz that the "'common territory' shared by *modernistas* of every political stripe during this second nationalist period was an effort to build a conceptual bridge between the 'will to modernity' and 'the construction of national identity.'"[29] Given that *niche nationalism*, as mentioned above, is ultimately a strategy aimed at national progress and, as I explore in more detail in the next section, also presented a solution by which early postcolonial cultural producers could craft an autochthonous narrative of nationhood, all three frameworks thus appear to parallel each other in terms of their reference to a modernizing and nationalistic impulse.

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[28] John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 45.
[29] Luís Madureira, *Cannibal Modernities: Postcoloniality and the Avant-Garde in Caribbean and Brazilian Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 29.

To be sure, transculturation and modernist anthropophagy are not necessarily nationalistic modes of cultural production. That understanding of the two terms is based only on their historicization. The continued application of transculturation across a variety of contexts, from psychiatry to horticulture [footnote], indicates that the term is instead fundamentally about, and is most useful when it describes, a process of encounter between and the mixing of at least two cultures. João Cezar de Castro Rocha has also argued in his re-reading of the "Manifesto Antropofágo" that a "divorce [of the manifesto] from both national elements and idiosyncratic Oswaldian traits" allows for an "understanding of anthropophagy as a specific cultural procedure" whose "strength…is related to being capable of assimilating whatever belongs to others, so as to transform it into a renewed element."[30] Moreover, in the attempt to rethink transculturation and modernist anthropophagy beyond the paradigm of the national, critics have foregrounded the counter-hegemonic and subversive potential of the two frameworks. For example, Daniel F. Silva contends that modernist anthropophagy is not so much "a cultural project of reformulating national identity" than "a project tied to decolonial writing against Empire [which] stops just short of national identity, by narrating a place from which national identity and a reformulation of the nation-sign can emerge."[31] Such movements away from a nationalistic understanding of transculturation and modernist anthropophagy would seem to suggest that *niche nationalism* differs from these two frameworks in being an inherently nationalistic framework — there is no "divorcing" of *niche nationalism,* as I intend the framework to be understood, from the idea of the national.

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[30] João Cezar de Castro Rocha, "Let Us Devour Oswald de Andrade: A Rereading of the *Manifesto antropófago*," trans. David Shepherd and Tania Shepherd, *Nuevo texto critico* 12, no. 23-24 (1999):10-11, 15.

[31] Daniel F. Silva, *Anti-Empire: Decolonial Interventions in Lusophone Literatures* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 43.

Be that as it may, I would nonetheless suggest that the more important point of difference between *niche nationalism* and these two frameworks lies rather in the former being a framework that references the attempts of cultural producers to cultivate a consciousness of international interdependence. In other words, it is the motivation underlying the transnational cultural interaction that each of these frameworks capture which distinguishes *niche nationalism*. All three frameworks, certainly, are analogous to each other in terms of describing a mode of cultural production that involves the instrumentalization of foreign elements. But *niche nationalism* distinctively identifies a desire for what we might call a mutualistic relationship between the native and the non-native which galvanizes that instrumentalization. In thus capturing this under-explored aspect of cultural production from newly decolonized nations, *niche nationalism* offers us a way to reconceptualize postcolonial cultural engagement with the foreign that exceeds the oppositional or revisionary intent typically assumed as the rationale of such engagement by postcolonial studies.

Let us now consider the question of how *niche nationalism* differs from internationalism. Internationalism first emerged as a term in the mid-nineteenth century in association with the formation of the First International. This version of internationalism advocated for a solidarity among the working classes that transcended national boundaries, being based on shared experiences of oppression. That language of solidarity was subsequently adapted by early postcolonial leaders to encompass the shared experiences of colonial oppression and racism across former colonies. Yet there is another sense of internationalism, a "liberal, nation-embracing, and anticommunist version" which envisioned a "world order compatible with national patriotism and 'collective security,'"[32] that gained traction after World War I. This

[32] Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 5-6.

strand of internationalism explains why the current standard international relations sense of internationalism, which a framework like Iriye's cultural internationalism refers to, entails the notion that national interests are best secured through a global stability brought about by international cooperation.

The historian Sunil S. Amrith has argued that even though both these kinds of internationalism — one based on a sense of global solidarity among the oppressed, and the other based on the belief in the value of an international order for national development —"stood in uneasy counterpoint and contention in the Asian arena of the 1950s," it was the latter which was "ultimately more powerful" and came to dominate the political visions of newly-decolonized countries.[33] Given Amrith's observation, and given that I intend *niche nationalism* as I define it to apply to the cultural politics of the same period Amrith is concerned with, it would indeed seem that my definition of *niche nationalism* resembles internationalism as understood in its current standard international relations sense, if not cultural internationalism. What I would like to stress here once more, however, is the implication of instrumentalization *niche* carries, which allows me to capture with the framework of *niche nationalism* two forms of exploitation happening in the politics of the time. First, the exploitation by nascent nations of international interdependence for the purposes of national development (and in fact, more broadly, the exploitative tendency undergirding internationalism, which Cooper's notion of *niche diplomacy* also alludes to). Second, the exploitation by cultural producers in their works of foreign elements that are present within their given national space, or what could be thought of as the extra-national, ultimately for the purposes of national development. It is this latter exploitative

[33] Sunil S. Amrith, "Asian internationalism: Bandung's echo in a colonial metropolis," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no.4 (2005): 558.

behavior which especially differentiates *niche nationalism* from internationalism even as it can be conceived of as a variant of internationalism.

These two forms of exploitative behavior which distinguish *niche nationalism* from internationalism become all the more necessary to be understood as part of the politics and cultural production of former colonies during the mid-twentieth century if one considers the motives of early postcolonial leaders and thinkers and the challenges they faced. I will now turn to the 1955 Bandung Conference and its cultural ramifications with the aims of clarifying even further, by way of such contextualization, my definition of *niche nationalism* and its utility.

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The Asian-African Conference or Bandung Conference, as it has come to be known, took place between April 18 and April 24, 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. With some six hundred delegates from twenty-nine countries in attendance, it was the largest gathering to date then of representatives from former colonies, and as an act of self-determination by these new nations, it marked a watershed moment in postcolonial history. Yet the happening of the conference itself evinced a seeming tension between a recognition of these nations' newly-obtained independence and of their need for mutual dependence among nations. This tension was palpable across the speeches of the leaders present. Take, for example, that of the Indonesian president Sukarno, with which he opened the conference. Even as he commends the conference's significance as a feat of nations now "free, sovereign and independent" and states that at long last, "the affairs of Asia are the concern of the Asian peoples themselves," he adjures that "we cannot, we dare not, confine our interests to the affairs of our own continent. The states of the world today depend one upon another and no nation can be an island unto itself. Splendid isolation may have once been possible; it is so no longer. The affairs of all the world are our affairs, and our future

depends upon the solutions found to all international problems, however far or distant they may be."[34] The apparent inconsistency of Sukarno's speech — moving, as it does, from the claim that nations are "free, sovereign and independent" to the insistence that they yet "depend one upon another" — was echoed by later speakers. The Chinese premier Chou En-Lai, for instance, adds to his affirmation of the political and economic independence of former colonies that "[o]f course, our demand for political independence does not mean a policy of exclusion towards countries outside of the Asian-African region…nor does [economic independence] mean the exclusion of economic cooperation with any country outside of the Asian-African region."[35] The Filipino diplomat Carlos P. Romulo, for another, follows his observation that "within the nation we can regain our self-respect and grapple with our local problems" with the assertion that "for the primary goals of economic transformation and well-being and peace, the nation no longer suffices."[36] With every expression of national sovereignty in these speeches came another that conditioned its robustness.

How might we understand such seemingly contradictory pronouncements? We could, for starters, consider these speeches as manifestations not only of what the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the two concerns of decolonization discourse dominant during the Bandung era — "development" and "dialogue" — but also of what he implies to be their incompatibility. "Development" refers to the desire of early postcolonial leaders and thinkers for the modernization of their nations that in turn "made the West into a model for everyone else to

[34] Ahmed Sukarno, "Speech by President Sukarno of Indonesia at the Opening of the Conference," in *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung* (Jakarta: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955), 25.
[35] Chou En-Lai, "Speech by Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai," in *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung* (Jakarta: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955), 59.
[36] Carlos P. Romulo, "Speech by Carlos P. Romulo," in *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung* (Jakarta: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955), 115.

follow."[37] "Dialogue" refers to the desire of these leaders and thinkers for "a global conversation of humanity [that] could genuinely acknowledge cultural diversity without distributing such diversity over a hierarchical scale of civilization."[38] On the basis of Chakrabarty's postulates, we might view the attestations of independence made at Bandung as expressions of the desire for "development" — sovereignty being but one and the first step to modernization — and the calls for interdependence as expressions of the desire for "dialogue." Yet as Chakrabarty goes on to suggest, "development" and "dialogue" are incongruous with each other due to the ramifications of the desire for "development." "One consequence of this developmentalism," Chakrabarty explains, "was a cultural style of politics that I call *pedagogical*."[39] This mode of politics, "which had to do with [the] desire [of early postcolonial leaders] to see their respective nations take their pride of place in the global order of nations," meant that "the very performance of politics reenacted civilizational or cultural hierarchies: between nations, between classes, or between the leaders and the masses,"[40] since "[t]hose lower down in the hierarchy were meant to learn from those higher up."[41] It is this reenactment of "civilizational or cultural hierarchies" that "developmentalism" entails which countervails the "dialogical" side of decolonization discourse. As Chakrabarty notes, "[b]ehind the idea of pedagogical politics was the emergent and territorial nation-state putting development ahead of diversity."[42] Following Chakrabarty's account, then, we would understand the vacillations at Bandung as verbalizations of that inherent discord Chakrabarty identifies between the "developmentalist" and "dialogical" sides of decolonization

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[37] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Legacies of Bandung: Decolonization and the Politics of Culture," in *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 46.
[38] Chakrabarty, 47.
[39] Chakrabarty, 46, emphasis original.
[40] Chakrabarty, 46.
[41] Chakrabarty, 55.
[42] Chakrabarty, 55.

discourse, of the hierarchal premise and motive of such "pedagogical politics" rubbing against the concurrent desire for a non-hierarchical "global conversation of humanity."

Chakrabarty's perceptive analysis of the dichotomies pervading decolonization discourse thus offers us a plausible explanation for the seeming inconsistencies of these speeches. Yet to take these speeches as simply embodiments of the incompatibility between "developmentalism" and "dialogism" implies that there would've been no real need for the occasion of a conference like Bandung in the first place. Instead, what if we were to understand these speeches through the framework of *niche nationalism*? From this perspective, and to the extent that Chakrabarty's notions of "development" and "dialogue" remain useful as categories for identifying the preoccupations of early postcolonial leaders, the strange volte-faces that infused these leaders' speeches appear less to be their wavering between "development" and "dialogue" than their laboring to affirm that "dialogue" was crucial for "development." Bearing in mind especially the first form of exploitation *niche nationalism* describes — the exploitation of international interdependence for the purposes of national development — the framework therefore helps us see that "dialogue" does not necessarily have to be conceived as antagonistic to, and in fact can be advantageous for, "development." Granted, Chakrabarty is correct to observe that the drive for "development" and the desire of early postcolonial leaders for their nations to "take their pride of place in the global order of nations" led more often than not — as various postcolonial histories have shown — to the "putting [of] development ahead of diversity." But if he is also correct in observing that there was at the same time a desire for a "global conversation of humanity" and an "acknowledge[ment of] cultural diversity," then we could rethink, via the framework of *niche nationalism*, the speeches at Bandung and the occasion of the conference itself as initiatives on the part of these leaders to make the case for the necessity of "dialogue"

through putting it in the service of "development." In other words, *niche nationalism* helps us grasp that "dialogue" and the "acknowledge[ment]of diversity" it encourages were for these leaders not aspirations of less priority than, but rather assets for, "development."

A quick interjection here. One might argue that understanding the Bandung conference through the framework of *niche nationalism* results in an unduly cynical appraisal of its event. Indeed, most contemporary literary and cultural scholarship on the conference lean toward underscoring the ways that, in the words of a recent symposium program description, "Bandung cultural politics enacted a humanism that was radical and guiltless over its call to combat the dehumanization of societies."[43] My purpose here isn't to deny the humanist aspirations of early postcolonial leaders and thinkers, but to to think through how a conference like Bandung was plausible in a period otherwise of feverish nationalism and nation-building. As the historian Christopher Lee puts it, "Bandung contained both the residual romance of revolution, as well as the *realpolitik* of a new world order in the making."[44] This *realpolitik* of the conference — the cultivation of international interdependence for the goal of national development — is what I wish to distinguish through the framework of *niche nationalism.*

Along the same lines, I would like to suggest that *niche nationalism* enables us to grasp the *realpolitik* motivating the cultural and literary activities of former colonies between the 1950s and 1960s. That period saw not only the establishment of organizations like the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA) which, by means of conferences, anthologies, and its flagship journal, *Lotus*, promoted cross-continental literary collaborations and translations, but

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[43] "Bandung Humanisms," *Institute for Comparative Literature and Society*, Columbia University, https://icls.columbia.edu/initiatives/bandung-humanisms/

[44] Christopher J. Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung," in *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 3

also a profusion of foreign components, whether in terms of aesthetics or subject matter, in literary works themselves. Such activities, however, have typically been framed by scholars in the idiom of alterity to buttress critiques against hegemonic cultural schemas. Aamir R. Mufti, for one, suggests that the "alternative practices of the international that were conducted and institutionalized in the shade of Bandung," which sought "to bypass the circuits of interaction, transmission, and exchange of the emergent global bourgeois order in the early postcolonial decades," offer us a way to conceive of the category of "world literature" as something other than the product of global neoliberal capitalism.[45] Duncan M. Yoon, for another, points out that the era's South-South connections provide us with an "alternative conceptualization of postcolonialism based on transnational solidarities of Cold War global South" rather than just a category defined by colony-metropole relations.[46] For Hala Halim, such connections also serve as "a productive antidote to the dominance of Euro-American approaches" in comparative literature practices since through them, one can "trace an alternative comparatist line of descent from precisely the same post-World War II, Cold War period [as that of the Euro-American academy's] undertaken within the Global South itself."[47] And for Peter Kalliney, identifying the way that "Bandung modernists" like Aimé Césaire and Wole Soyinka "rely on transnational perspectives in their representation of the possibilities and challenges of anti-colonial

[45] Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 91-2.
[46] Duncan M. Yoon, "'Our Forces Have Redoubled': World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no.2 (September 2015): 234.
[47] Hala Halim, "*Lotus*, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparativism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 32, no.3 (2012): 564-65.

movements"[48] would allow scholars to chart "alternative cartographies" of aesthetic modernism that exceed a Euro-American focus.[49]

"*Alternative* practices of the international"; "*alternative* conceptualization of postcolonialism"; "*alternative* comparatist line of descent"; *"alternative* cartographies" of modernism — as these studies show, the flourishing of transnational cultural activity during the Bandung era provides fertile ground for scholars to deploy critiques of alterity which, in the vein of the paradigm of "alternative modernity," seek to challenge dominant conceptual frameworks by way of historical plurality. Yet in the process of extracting potent "alternatives" from, and so implicitly ascribing anti-bourgeois or anti-Euro-American designs to, the Bandung conference's cultural by-products, these studies obscure several points. First, the Bandung conference's historical conditions of possibility — nations now "free, sovereign, and independent." Second, the drive for national advancement that led Chakrabarty to claim that early postcolonial leaders prioritized "development" above "dialogue." Third, the historical intimacy between culture and politics across former colonies which supports the endurance of axioms like "[p]ostcolonial literature…will always engage with the politics of the real"[50] and, fourth, accordingly, the extent to which early postcolonial cultural production was frequently wielded as a tool by a politics propelled by that drive for national advancement. A resolution from the second AAPSO conference in 1960, for instance, states that "[t]he political struggle itself, however, can and should be vigorously supported by cultural activities on the part of the intellectuals and artists

[48] Peter Kalliney, *Modernism in a Global Context* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 58.
[49] Kalliney, 31.
[50] Robert J.C. Young, "World literature and postcolonialism," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (New York: Routledge, 2012), 217.

from all walks of life."[51] Given that that "political struggle," as the framework of *niche nationalism* helps us understand, included national advancement through the cultivation of, in the words of Sukarno at Bandung, a "true consciousness of the interdependence of men and nations,"[52] it stands to reason that the transnationalism of early postcolonial cultural production was more so about the goal of national development than the counter-hegemonic motives which the above-mentioned studies suggest. The appeal to "world writers" formulated at AAWA's first conference in 1958 reveals, after all, a commitment to cultural exchange across the world rather than just the global South: "While we the writers of Asia and Africa wish to strengthen our cultural contact with all countries in the world, including the western countries, we reject the division of culture into superior and inferior, Eastern and Western. We shall strive, therefore, for the inter-relation of all cultures and for the preservation of the entire precious store of world culture."[53] To be sure, if these studies had attended to the nationalistic strains of the period's cultural production (with its baggage of cultural chauvinism, diffusionism, teleologism, and so on), they would've mooted their case. But as a consequence of not doing so, they risk an ahistoricization that renders understanding of Bandung's cultural aftermath incomplete. By prompting us to recall that a "consciousness of interdependence" was perceived by early postcolonial leaders and thinkers to be crucial for national development, *niche nationalism* thus allows us to grasp the nationalist *realpolitik* underpinning the period's cultural production and, in doing so, provides us with a more historically-situated explanation for its transnational qualities.

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[51] Permanent Organization for Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity, *Opening Speeches, Closing Speeches, and Declarations* (Cairo: Permanent Secretariat of the Organization for Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity, 1960), 30.
[52] Sukarno, "Opening Speech," 27.
[53] Afro-Asian Writers' Executive Committee, *Documents on Culture of the Struggling Afro-Asian Peoples* (Jakarta: Indonesia National Committee for the Afro-Asian Writers Conference, 1963), 28.

The framework of *niche nationalism* also helps us understand how early postcolonial thinkers and cultural producers were able to craft a unique and sovereign national identity even as they advocated for international interdependence, as well as recalibrate a current historiographical trend of postcolonial cultural and literary production. Whereas the points made above regarding the *realpolitik* of the Bandung conference and the transnationalism of its cultural aftermath follow from the first form of exploitative behavior *niche nationalism* accounts for, these points follow instead from the second form of exploitative behavior the framework describes — the exploitation by cultural producers in their works of foreign or extra-national elements already present within their given national space. Let us recall here that an undercurrent of decolonization discourse was the anxious desire for an autochthonous account of nationhood. When, for instance, the Indies intellectual Sanusi Pané asks, "Must we forever be satisfied with what has been left behind by others and found worthless, trudging behind in the wake of other nations?",[54] he is demanding of anti-colonial thinkers a unique national identity worthy of an independent nation that would sustain hard-won claims to political independence. (Indeed, we find Pané's query echoed in Partha Chatterjee's aggrieved response to Benedict Anderson's thesis on the spread of nationalisms worldwide: "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?"[55]). However, this demand, not unlike the incompatibility between "developmentalism" and "dialogism" that Chakrabarty identifies, stood seemingly in counterpoint to the concurrent aspiration of early postcolonial thinkers to cultivate a "true consciousness of the interdependence of men and nations." The need

[54] Sanusi Pané, "Java en de 'Buitengewesten'" ("Java and the 'Hinterlands'"), *Timboel* 5, no.19 (1931):1. Translation from Ethan Mark, "'Asia's' Transwar Lineage: Nationalism, Marxism, and 'Greater Asia' in an Indonesian Inflection," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 3 (August 2006): 461.
[55] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

to accept potential foreign support for national growth, not to mention the cultural remnants of colonialism and histories of diaspora in these nations, would belie the possibility of an autochthonous narrative of nationhood.

What I call *niche nationalism* allows us to name a solution early postcolonial cultural producers arrived at to develop an idea of the national as sovereign and yet open to the foreign. Given the political impetus to foster a consciousness of international interdependence, and given the ineluctable presence of cultural elements within national space that, within a national frame of reference, would be considered extra-national, these cultural producers sought not to adapt but to exploit the latter in their works. The reasoning for their pursuit of this particular mode of cultural production accords with the differences between the processes of adaptation and instrumentalization as explicated in the previous chapter. Unlike a process of adaptation, which would involve an assimilation of the national to the foreign, a process of instrumentalization involves an incorporation within the national of the foreign. Whereas the former process would as such result in the loss of the integrity of the national to the extra-national, the latter would result in a uniqueness for the former important to claims of sovereignty. By thus embodying rather than acculturating to the extra-national in their works, early postcolonial cultural producers were able to promote an acceptance of the foreign within an account of nationhood as well as cultivate a recognition of its utility for national development without compromising the sovereignty of national identity. The exploitative behavior *niche nationalism* describes, in other words, enabled postcolonial cultural producers to conceive of the non-national as national, thereby fulfilling at once the demand for an autochthonous national identity and the need for a consciousness of international interdependence that, at the same time, functioned for early

postcolonial leaders as an expedient by which the existence of the extra-national in a narrative of nationhood could be justified.

To flesh out this mode of cultural and indeed, spatial production, I will examine in the rest of this section as a case study the Indonesian literary scene between the 1950s and the 1960s. Let us consider first a section of Sukarno's speech at the first NAM summit in Belgrade in1961, which offers an illuminative articulation of *niche nationalism* at work. In briefing the summit's attendees about the formation of what he calls Indonesia's "national ideology," Sukarno declares:

> We [Indonesians] have learned that the basic ingredients of any national ideology must be the national inheritance of that nation itself, its heritage from the past, the traditions which bind its people together, and set the pattern of their life…. To this basic ingredient add all useful ideas from other countries. In Indonesia, for example, we drew the equality of man from the Jefferson declaration — the American Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson. We drew spiritual socialism from Islam and Christianity. We drew scientific socialism from Marx. But put this mixture into the mold of [Indonesia's] national identity and the result is a national ideology which binds the people together and frees all energy for the tremendous task of construction.[56]

We note here Sukarno's pointed repetition of "drew" as well as the eclecticism of "useful ideas" incorporated into and embodied by Indonesia's "national ideology." These elements of Sukarno's speech point to that instrumentalization of the extra-national regardless of their "Eastern" or "Western" origins which, bearing in mind the abovementioned intimacy between culture and politics during this period, guided early postcolonial Indonesian literary production.

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[56] Ahmed Sukarno, "Address by President Ahmed Sukarno," in *Neither East Nor West: The Basic Documents of Non-Alignment*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1973), 18.

Now, I want to stress here that this mode of cultural production and the strategy of growth it aligned with — national development through international interdependence — was by and large espoused by mid-twentieth century Indonesian authors whatever their aesthetic and political credos. Allow me to elaborate. Histories on the modern literary production of former colonies which extend until the end of the Cold War commonly portray the literary and intellectual milieu of these nations as polarized between either "cosmopolitan" authors, who adhered to the principle of aesthetic freedom to the point of being apolitical and who welcomed aesthetic influence from elsewhere, particularly the West, or "nationalist" authors, who adhered to the principle of socially engaged art to the point of being only every political and who were inclined toward an ethnocultural chauvinism. I cite as cases in point the literary histories of Vietnam and the Philippines, two regional neighbors of Indonesia. In Vietnamese literary history, mid-twentieth century authors are typically categorized as members of either the *Nghệ thuật vị nghệ thuật* ("Art for Art's Sake") or the *Nghệ thuật vị nhân sinh* ("Art for Life's Sake") intellectual circles; in Philippine literary history, correspondingly, as members of either "The Veronicans" or the Philippine Writers' League.[57] Similarly, in Indonesian literary history, authors active between the nation's formal independence from the Dutch in 1950 to Sukarno's overthrow in 1965 are typically classified as belonging to either *Gelanggang* (literally translated as "arena") or LEKRA (the acronym for *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*, the Institute for People's Culture), groups which argued respectively for "disinterested" and "committed" writing. Frequently, this historiographical factionalization included appending to these "cosmopolitan"

[57] For more on these literary groups, see Ben Tran, "Queer Internationalism and Modern Vietnamese Aesthetics" (2012) and Augusto Fauni, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (2005).

and "nationalist" classifications the labels "bourgeois" and "proletarian" — a tendency which, while reflective of these nations' internal political dynamics then, is nonetheless also reflective of the way Cold War dualisms inflected the conceptualization of these literary histories.

Such polarization, however, occludes the extent to which mid-century "cosmopolitan" authors were nonetheless preoccupied with the politics of nation-building, and "nationalist" authors with foreign aesthetic and intellectual currents. The aesthetic manifestos released by *Gelanggang* and LEKRA one shortly after the other in 1950 are telling in this regard. The *Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang* ("*Gelanggang* Testament") opens with the following declaration: "We are the legitimate heirs to world culture and we will continue this culture in our own way. We are born from a multitude of peoples and the understanding of citizenship for us is that of a medley of peoples from which a healthy new world can emerge."[58] LEKRA's *Mukadimah* (literally, "preface") decrees that "[t]he attitude of the People toward either foreign or overseas cultures is not at all one of enmity. The essence of progressive foreign cultures will be extracted as much as possible for the advancement of the culture of the Indonesian people. But in extracting this essence, we will not copy in a childish way."[59] Certainly, the repetition of "world" in *Gelanggang*'s manifesto and the specification of "Indonesian" and "people" in LEKRA's evidence these groups' respective ideological orientations. Yet in taking care to prescribe that "world culture" will be perpetuated "in our own way" and an "understanding of citizenship," the *Gelanggang* manifesto suggests that *Gelanggang*'s supposedly "cosmopolitan" authors were as

[58] The *Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang* was originally published in the October 10, 1950 issue of the periodical *Siasat/Gelanggang.* The full text in Indonesian is available in Goenawan Mohamad, *Eksotopi; Tentang kekuasaan, tubuh dan identitas* (Jakarta: Grafiti, 2002), 85-6. An English translation of the full text is available in A. Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature, Vol. 1*, 3rd ed. (1986), 127.
[59] The full text and an English translation of LEKRA's *Mukadimah* can be found in Keith Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts; The Indonesian Institute of People's Culture, 1950-1965* (1986), 209-18.

concerned with the political act of forming a national identity as "nationalist" LEKRA authors. And in avowing a lack of "enmity" toward "foreign or overseas cultures," the LEKRA manifesto suggests that the supposedly "nationalist" authors of LEKRA were as open to the extra-national as "cosmopolitan" *Gelanggang* authors.

Rethinking Indonesian literary history via the framework of *niche nationalism* thus helps us grasp the common desire of early postcolonial authors to develop the national through the embrace of the international that lay beneath their apparent categorical differences. This observation does not mean to flatten the distinction between *Gelanggang* and LEKRA, but to recall as a crucial facet of the period's literary production the momentousness of new nationhood. As Keith Foulcher more recently reminds us, "it is important not to lose sight of the fact that in the Indonesian literary and cultural debates of the 1950s and 60s, there was a shared commitment to modernity along Western European lines that overrode the sharpening lines of political engagement and conflict of the period."[60] But the framework also and more crucially helps us grasp the means by which early postcolonial authors sought to realize that "commitment to modernity." Tony Day has suggested that "[d]espite their divergent politics, both [the *Gelanggang* and LEKRA] manifestos used similar language to claim the whole world, and not just the positive aspects of past or future cultural relations with the [former colonial power of the] Netherlands, as a source for the development of modern Indonesian culture."[61] That "claim[ing of] the whole world…as a source for the development of modern Indonesian culture" which Day identifies as a motif of both manifestos is more precisely understood through the

[60] Keith Foulcher, "On a Roll: Pramoedya and the Postcolonial Transition," University of Sydney, Indonesian Studies Working Papers, no.4 (January 2008): 14.
[61] Tony Day, "Still Stuck in the Mud: Imagining World Literature during the Cold War in Indonesia and Vietnam," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 138.

framework of *niche nationalism* as the desire to instrumentalize the extra-national for the sake of the national. By boldly asserting themselves as the "legitimate heirs of world culture," *Gelanggang* authors were at once articulating their capitalization for Indonesian culture of the "world culture" that Indonesia, being an archipelago situated at the crossroads of historical global trade routes, had inherited over centuries, and claiming their "legitimate" right as newly-minted Indonesians to do so. By making the distinction between the "extraction" and "copying" of "progressive foreign cultures," LEKRA authors were articulating their intent to instrumentalize rather than merely adapt extra-national elements in the development of a unique and sovereign national identity. Through the framework of *niche nationalism,* the supposed quarrel between *Gelanggang* and LEKRA becomes not so much about the function of art nor the characteristics of Indonesian culture, but simply about how best to express their instrumentalization of the foreign in their works.

Before I examine Pramoedya's Buru Quartet to demonstrate *niche nationalism* at work within a text, I would first like to explicate the sweeping claim I seem to be making with the framework: that all literary works from this period can thus be deemed nationalistic. The dangers of such a claim have been well-rehearsed; if Aijaz Ahmad had once, in protest against Fredric Jameson's infamous proposition that "[a]ll third-world texts…necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory,"[62] reminded us that "the ideological conditions of a text's production are never singular but always several,"[63] Christopher Prendergast has more recently pointed out, in disbelief against Casanova's nation-centered model of the literary world,

[62] Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 69.
[63] Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1987): 24.

that "a monolithic image of 'nation' can mask all manner of divisions and constituencies"[64] that factor into the making of a literary work. This argument against the inability of a nation-centric approach to account for the multi-faceted nature of literary production is in turn echoed by some Indonesian literary scholars. William Derks, for instance, argues that because scholarly discourse about Indonesian literature has typically adopted Western-oriented approaches — approaches which tend to qualify as literature only print material and to perpetuate "the philosophical stand inherited from the European Romanticists that literature (together with language) constitutes the matrix of a nation and even civilization," Indonesian literary activities that in fact emerge from a "literary system that is strongly orally oriented" and that are not necessarily concerned with the nation have been on the whole overlooked. [65] To address this neglect, scholars have sought to go beyond a nationalistic lens in the study of modern Indonesian literature. Day, for one, contends that a short story of Pramoedya's, "Revenge" ("Dendam"), can be understood as more than just a "by-product of, a nationalist response to, Western imperialism."[66] For him, the revolutionary newness of Pramoedya's style and images, which Benedict Anderson had previously attributed to Pramoedya's revolutionary nationalist views, is instead a continuation of a tradition of linguistic inventiveness central to Old Javanese literary aesthetics.

As intriguing and important as such revisionary endeavors are, I would nonetheless maintain that we cannot so easily jettison what, as far as we can ascertain from the *Gelanggang* and LEKRA manifestos — not to mention proclamations at Bandung as well as at AAPSO and AAWB meetings — was clearly the sincere belief of Indonesian authors at the moment of

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[64] Christopher Prendergast, "The World Republic of Letters," in *Debating World Literature,* ed. Christopher Prendergast (New York: Verso, 2004), 12.
[65] William Derks, "A Literary Mycelium: Some Prologomena for a Project on Indonesian Literatures in Malay," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no.3 (2001): 368-70.
[66] Tony Day, "Locating Indonesian Literature in the World," *Modern Language Quarterly* 68, no.2 (2007): 193.

decolonization in the importance of a nationalistic stance as at once a mode of anticolonial resistance and a catalyst for national development. To say that these cultural producers were by and large motivated to develop in their works a national culture is not quite the same as saying that they were obligated by the political circumstances of the time to do so, nor that political intentions overrode their concern with aesthetics. If anything, LEKRA's decision to adopt social realism over any other given stylistic approach evidences an investment in the aesthetics of their nationalistic politics. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that the orthodox division between supposedly "disinterested," "cosmopolitan" writers and "committed," "nationalist" ones does not hold water during an era when the form of the nation was believed to be the best guarantor of universal human rights, if not of a humanity, and for that reason, it is not impossible to detect in even the most seemingly "cosmopolitan" of writers then undertones of nationalist feeling, and in the most seemingly "nationalist" of writers, cosmopolitan tendencies. Through the framework of *niche nationalism*, all third-world texts necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory, yes, but with two qualifications: first, that "third world" is less a signifier that distinguishes between the capitalist and socialist blocs and former colonies, as Jameson uses it, and more so one that refers specifically to an historical moment when the category itself held for the formerly-colonized an actual liberationist valence; and second, that that national allegory was always understood to be sustained to some extent by extra-national devices.

With this clarification, let us now turn to Pramoedya's Buru Quartet, which I will show was written in the spirit of an era when imagining the outsides of a nation as part of its insides was as crucial as imagining the insides of a nation at all.

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The Buru Quartet comprises novels Pramoedya composed while imprisoned between 1973 and 1979 on Buru, an island about fifteen hundred miles east of his native Java that served as a penal colony during the so-called New Order regime of Muhammad Suharto, Indonesia's second president. They were published in Indonesian between 1980 and 1988 and translated into English between 1990 and 1992. The temporal timeframe of the quartet, however, spans from 1899 to 1913, a period marked by colonial consolidation and expansion throughout the Dutch East Indies as well by a rising anticolonial nationalism. The tensions of this political climate are reflected to an extent by the quartet's narratorial perspectives. All four novels are written in first-person, but whereas the fourth novel, *House of Glass*, is narrated by Pangemanann, a Menadonese intelligence officer working for the Dutch colonial administration, the first three novels — *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, and *Footsteps* — are narrated by Minke, a Javanese nobleman turned anticolonial newspaperman.

These first three novels are at once *Bildungsromane* and historical novels. While they chart Minke's maturation, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, they are also Pramoedya's fictionalization of the life of Tirto Adhi Soerjo, a Javanese aristocrat renowned for his proto-nationalist writings against the Dutch who launched the first Malay-language and native-owned newspaper, *Medan Prijaji*, in the Dutch East Indies. On account of this historicity, as well as their historical scope, developmental narrative arc, and thematic focus on vernacular journalistic production, these very novels laid the groundwork for Benedict Anderson's famous thesis about the importance of print-capitalism for the emergence of a nationalist consciousness.[67] Anderson's thesis in turn forms the basis for Pheng Cheah's reading of these three novels not simply as *Bildungsromane*, but as an interventionist nationalist *Bildungsromane* tasked with "an active

[67] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

causal role in the nation's genesis."[68] This type of *Bildungsroman* generally reprises the genre's characteristic motifs, namely the integration of a youthful protagonist into an existing social world. But since "the predicament of decolonization is [such] that there is no preexisting community for the individual to be reconciled to," a community — in the form of the nation — "that is an antidote to colonialism has to be conjured up or created anew" within these novels.[69] The *Bildung* of the protagonists therefore "must involve the interiorization of viewpoints from different social classes and religious groups" to allow for that creation of a new community.[70] Insofar as such *Bildungsromane* "seem to invite their implied addressees to do the same [interiorization] through specular identifications with the protagonists," these novels function as a means of generating a nationalist consciousness among their readers.[71] The *Bildung* of the protagonists they narrate "supply the occasion and catalyst for their implied reader's *Bildung* as a patriotic subject."[72] In the case of the Buru Quartet, as such, Minke's *Bildung* is at once the *Bildung* of the Indonesian nation — he "personifies the nation"[73] — and the cultivation of his nationalist consciousness the "catalyst" for the cultivation of a nationalist consciousness among Pramoedya's readers.

The case Cheah makes for the Buru Quartet to be read as *Bildungsromane* with an activist mission is supplemented by various statements Pramoedya has made about his authorial intentions. In a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* interview, for instance, Pramoedya asserts that "[i]t is impossible to separate politics from literature or any other part of human life" and declares that

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[68] Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 240.
[69] Cheah, *Spectral*, 243.
[70] Cheah, *Spectral*, 244.
[71] Cheah, *Spectral*, 244.
[72] Cheah, *Spectral*, 240.
[73] Cheah, *Spectral*, 265.

"my books, such as the Buru Quartet, are part of the process of nation-building."[74] The historicity of the Buru Quartet is of paramount significance to Pramoedya's vision. As he explains elsewhere, he aims to "bring our Indonesian history to the attention of young people [as a] contribution to the development of democracy in Indonesia."[75] This "contribution" that Pramoedya intends through his fictionalization of history is twofold in nature. On the one hand, as Christopher GoGwilt suggests, the quartet's recounting of the origins of Indonesian nationalism "preserves an archive of Indonesian history against the official amnesia of [Suharto's] New Order" [76]— a regime which, following a military coup in 1965, renounced many of Sukarno's policies and, as noted above, incarcerated Pramoedya along with many of Sukarno's other supporters. On the other, the writing and publication of the quartet during Suharto's regime itself indicates that Pramoedya intended the quartet to perform its political work not only by standing as a document against a politicized erasure of history, but as a document offering a corrective to Suharto's idea of the Indonesian nation. As Cheah suggests, "the quartet also has a normative task beyond its historiographical function…. Pramoedya wishes to retrieve the forgotten ideals of a revolutionary past that had somehow taken a wrong turn in political history…and to implant seeds of change in the minds of his readers in the hope of reorienting the nation on its rightful path."[77] This recuperative intent of the quartet accordingly implies that interpretation of the novels should begin with the understanding that they are the output of an author resuming a career forcefully truncated by fourteen years of imprisonment,

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[74] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Pramoedya Toer," interview by Steve Profitt, trans. by Aya Ratih, *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1999.
[75] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Interview with Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Jakarta, September 1981," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 11, no. 4 (1981): 512.
[76] Pramoedya, "Pramoedya's Fiction and History," 150.
[77] Cheah, *Spectral*, 253-4.

and so writing not only as if from within a period when cultural production was bestowed with an explicitly political and didactic vocation, but also when the Indonesian nation was set on a course of development along Sukarno's ideals.

Given this interpretative starting point for the novels, might it not thus stand to reason that among the "forgotten ideals" Pramoedya wishes to retrieve are that recognition of the "medley of peoples" that make up Indonesia's citizenry and that lack of "enmity" toward "foreign or overseas cultures" which the *Gelanggang* and LEKRA manifestos declared? That the "rightful path" Pramoedya hopes to reorient the nation on involves the fostering of a "true consciousness of the interdependence of men and nations"? A statement Pramoedya makes in a 1991 essay — that in writing the quartet, he "began deliberately with the theme of Indonesia's National Awakening which, while limited regionally and nationally, nonetheless remains part of the world and of humanity"[78] — suggests that the international was never far from his conceptualization of these otherwise nationalistic novels. Pramoedya's prominence in the Indonesian literary scene during the immediate post-independence era, on top of his role as chair of the Indonesian delegation to the first AAWA conference in Tashkent in 1958, additionally point to his familiarity with, as well as his advocacy for, the idea of the Indonesian nation and the strategy for its development that Sukarno promulgated. More significantly, a lecture of Pramoedya's given in 1981 echoes both the above-mentioned manifestos and Sukarno's speeches at Bandung and Belgrade in its assertion of a distinct Indonesian identity and its exhortation to enhance that identity by instrumentalizing elements from the cultures of the world, including that of "the West." After acknowledging in that speech that "the strength [of] the West is located within the strength of the Western individual [which] has been nourished by his

[78] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "My Apologies, in the Name of Experience," trans. by Alex G. Bardsley, *Indonesia* 61 (1996): 4.

democratic ways and aided by his fundamental rights," Pramoedya declares that "[f]rom the lessons of the West, Indonesia can also become strong with individual Indonesian beings that are strong."[79] As such, if for Cheah the idea of the nation envisioned by Sukarno which Pramoedya strives to resurrect with the Buru Quartet is a "public sphere of civil society [that] presses against the state and makes demands on it in the name of the masses,"[80] that "public sphere," I would argue, is one populated by a "multitude of peoples" and infused with the "essence of foreign cultures." Indeed, to the extent that, as his 1981 lecture especially suggests, Pramoedya's aims as an author and his means of achieving those aims through his writing correspond with those of authors active during the immediate post-Bandung era, I would claim that Pramoedya's writing of the Buru Quartet is an act of what I have been calling *niche nationalism.*

In the rest of this section, I examine the ways Pramoedya realizes this logic of cultural production throughout the quartet. To start, let us return to the scene with which this chapter began. We are now in a position to understand that Pramoedya strikingly situates the awakening not just of Minke's national but also his international consciousness — that he is a "child of all nations" — in a moment of the narrative set in the Indonesian heartland because he wants to impart the idea that the process of becoming national and nation-building, as Sukarno would have it, must occur through engagement with the international. The scene reinforces this idea both extra-diegetically and diegetically. First, let us note that Minke's countryside sojourn is Pramoedya's attempt to render in the quartet the practice of LEKRA's Maoist-rooted doctrine of TURBA, or *turun ke bawah* ("go down below"). This doctrine held that middle-class intellectuals should familiarize themselves with, as well as learn from, the reality of peasant life

[79] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Sikap dan Peran Kaum Intelektual di Dunia Ketiga," *Peranan Intelektual* (Kuala Lumpur: Insan, 1987), available at https://sites.google.com/site/pramoedyasite/home/works-in-bahasa-indonesia
[80] Cheah, *Spectral*, 256.

for the purposes of nation-building.[81] Hong Liu has suggested that Pramoedya, being impressed by Chinese cultural policies following a trip to China in 1965, had "incorporated some key PRC literary doctrines into his modified vision for Indonesia."[82] The scene thus appears to be an instance of this latter effort of Pramoedya's. However, the scene evidences Pramoedya's *niche nationalist* stance not so much because it concerns a particular method of nation-building, but because it indicates in the first place Pramoedya's advocacy for the incorporation of nation-building methods from abroad into the project of nation-building in Indonesia. Second, let us recall that Minke's insight into his fellow countryman's mindset arrives not from listening to the farmer, but only after, when he remembers the pamphlet written by an European which his Dutch teacher had passed on to him and which had projected the farmer's wariness toward Minke as an apparent outsider. To the extent that Minke's encounter with the farmer is a moment of national awakening, this sequence of events indicates Pramoedya's desire to stress that national consciousness and the Indonesian nation itself can only be brought into being and nourished through interaction with the foreign. The scene, in other words, shows that Minke's (and the Indonesian nation's) growth transpires through Minke's instrumentalization of the "lessons of the West" he has received, thus resonating with Pramoedya's *niche nationalistic* call in his 1981 lecture to draw upon the foreign in the pursuit of national development.

This last point about Minke's stay in the countryside is of course grounded in the assumption that Minke, like Cheah suggests, is a personification of the Indonesian nation. But the *niche nationalistic* work that the quartet accomplishes is also crucially enabled by Pramoedya's personification of its distinctively international cast of characters. In a 2008 talk

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[81] For more about this doctrine, see Foulcher, *Social Commitment*, 110-11.
[82] Hong Liu, "Pramoedya Ananta Toer and China: The Transformation of a Cultural Intellectual," *Indonesia* 61 (1996): 120.

given at a Thai university, Benedict Anderson had called attention to Pramoedya's decision to populate the quartet with foreigners, noting that it "marked a major turning point in Pramoedya's career":

> In the many books [Pramoedya] published between 1950 and 1965, there are virtually no foreigners, no local Chinese and almost no non-Javanese Indonesians. In the Tetralogy, however, one finds Eurasian journalists and gangsters, a pathetic Japanese prostitute, a young female Chinese activist who has fled persecution in China, a brave Madurese guard, a sinister Menadonese secret policeman, a Dutch feminist, a crippled French painter, a local Chinese brothel-keeper, a princess from the farthest eastern margin of the Indonesian archipelago, good and bad Dutch officials, and so on. This new outlook is sharply signaled in the titles of the first two Buru novels, which can literally be translated as *This Earth of Mankind* and *Child of All Nations*. Both reject any kind of Luang Wijit Watthakan-style ethnicised nationalism.[83] There is no grand international panorama like this in any other fiction by a writer from Southeast Asia over the past 50 years.[84]

On the one hand, this panoply of characters varying in ethnicity, race, and nationality exemplifies Pramoedya's historiographical aims to provide an accurate representation of the Dutch East Indies social landscape. As Anderson goes on to explain, Pramoedya, before his imprisonment, had "discovered [in his] systematic research on the complex origins of Indonesian nationalism…just such a cosmopolitan world in the colony of 1910-25, which the standard

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[83] Luang Wijit Watthakan (or Wichitwatakan, more frequently referred to as Wichit) was a Thai statesman as well as dramatist and novelist who was a key architect in the formation of Thai national cultural policy during the interwar period. As Anthony Reid describes, the Thai Minister of Defense at the time, Plaek Phibungsonkhram (commonly known as Phibun), made Wichit "his mouthpiece to promote ethnic nationalism, [being] increasingly attracted to the fascist model of 1930s Japan, Italy and Germany" (311).

[84] Benedict Anderson, "Definitions of Nationalism and Identity in the World and in Asia: Lectures by Benedict Anderson," *Reader 6* (Siem Reap, Cambodia: Center for Khmer Studies, 2008), n.p.

nationalist textbook writers either knew nothing about or censored," and when composing the Buru Quartet, he had attempted to "be as true to the past as he could manage."[85] On the other, Anderson's somewhat offhand observation that "the standard nationalist textbook" tends to omit the cosmopolitanism of the Dutch East Indies reminds us that Pramoedya meant also for the Buru Quartet to work as if such a "nationalist textbook." That normative purpose consequently suggests that the quartet's characters are not just representations of the foreigners and non-Javanese inhabiting Java at the turn of the twentieth century; they are also the representations or "essences" of foreign and non-Javanese entities whose merits, according to Pramoedya, ought to be incorporated into national development.

This personification of Dutch East Indies society in the quartet bears out its *niche nationalistic* qualities in two regards. In terms of Pramoedya's authorship, it shows Pramoedya's instrumentalization in his work of foreign elements already present within Indonesian national space. In terms of the quartet's normative aims, it allows Pramoedya to convey the idea that national development occurs through the instrumentalization of the international since Minke's development, as the scene in *Child of All Nations* discussed above suggests, is stimulated by his interactions with foreign characters. So when Cheah notes that "[t]he process of becoming national involves a series of discussions with teacher figures such as Jean Marais, Khouw Ah Soe, Kommer and Ter Haar,"[86] it is of utmost significance that these characters are, respectively, a Frenchman, a Chinaman, an Eurasian, and a Dutchman. Pramoedya even goes to the extent of demonstrating that the very clothes of Javanese nobility are shot through with foreignness; at the ceremony held for his father's appointment as a *bupati*, a regent, Minke notes the presence of a Mr. Niccolo Moreno, a "white person" who is presumably Italian since he "spoke in a strange-

[85] Anderson, "Definitions," n.p.
[86] Cheah, *Spectral*, 277.

sounding, monotone Dutch" and who explains to Minke that "he often dressed and adorned the *bupatis*" as well as "the Sultans of Sumatra and Borneo" and "the costumes of the guards of the kings of Java"[87] while he dresses Minke up for the ceremony.

Minke, as such, is evidently no "child of midnight"[88]; the universality he claims of his birth and education exceeds the specificity of the British, Islamic, and Hindu strains of Saleem Sinai's. Rather, as a "child of all nations of all time," Minke is "born of," in the words of the *Gelanggang* manifesto, "world culture," personified as the quartet's foreign and non-Javanese characters. Yet to further promote his *niche nationalistic* message, Pramoedya does not stop at the personification of "world culture." He adroitly sets up Minke's formative interactions with these foreign characters as interactions of friendship — friendship being a trope that not only allows him to render in a better light what could otherwise be viewed negatively as exploitative behavior on Minke's part, but also to actualize in his novels the international goodwill and cooperation that were deemed necessary for national development at Bandung. A prime example of Pramoedya's efforts to demonstrate the formative power of friendship is located in Minke's decision to switch from writing for the public in Dutch to Malay. This switch is widely regarded by the quartet's critics as a pivotal marker of Minke's national awakening since Malay, being a *lingua franca* among the diverse inhabitants of the Dutch East Indies, enabled Minke to unite and broaden the audience for his proto-nationalistic writings.[89] But these critics have ignored the equally important point Pramoedya is making with regards to this switch: that it was prompted in

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[87] Pramoedya, *Bumi*, 132.
[88] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Random House, 1981), 130.
[89] Christopher GoGwilt, as one such critic, explains that Malay "provid[es] a shared medium of communication among the multiplicity of a shared medium of communication among the multiplicity of linguistic groups throughout the Malay Archipelago." Malay thus functions as the cultural means by which Minke can "crystallize an alliance of anti-colonial political forces among the heterogeneity of ethnic groups among the Dutch East Indies" (10, 27).

the first place by Minke's foreign friends, Jean Marais and Kommer. By going to the lengths of depicting Minke's initial resistance to Jean Marais and Kommer's advice, his subsequent reflection on their words in an extended passage of internal debate, and his eventual concurrence with them, Pramoedya shows that Minke would not have taken the decision to use a language that would eventually become Indonesia's official language without receiving the insights and cause for self-interrogation furnished by these friends.

In the same vein, Pramoedya choreographs throughout the quartet's first three novels various epistolary exchanges and scenes of discussion between Minke and the daughters of a Dutch colonial officer, Miriam and Sarah, the Chinese activists Khouw Ah See and Mei, and the Dutch editor Ter Haar to show their contributions to the formation of Minke's nationalist consciousness. These contributions are meant to be understood as the "useful ideas from other countries," in Sukarno's words, that are instrumentalized to build the ideal Indonesian nation Pramoedya means for Minke to represent: from Miriam and Sarah, Minke learns of the potential and pitfalls of "Association Theory,"[90] from Khouw Ah See and Mei, the techniques and values of social organization, from Ter Haar, the relationship between colonialism and capitalism. Unlike that classic hero of the *Bildungsroman* Wilhelm Meister, to draw another comparison, Minke does not wander so much as he talks, and it is in his talking with friends, more specifically, his foreign friends, that Minke gathers those "seeds" that will allow him-qua-the Indonesian nation to flourish.

[90] Association Theory" was a social experiment launched by the Dutch orientalist Snouck Hugronje. In essence, it attempted to provide Native elites with a Western education with the idea that these elites would eventually take over the administration of the colony. The project only ended up creating cronies of Dutch colonialism. In *Footsteps,* Minke meets the historical figure Achmad Djajadiningrat, one of Hugronje's pupils, in the hopes that Achmad would provide support for Minke's attempt to form a political organization. Achmad refuses him.

To bolster his use of the trope of friendship as a means for carrying out the quartet's political work, Pramoedya peppers the first three novels of the quartet with proclamations from characters that express the importance of friendship. Here are three instances:

- Early in *This Earth of Mankind*, Nyai Ontosoroh, who is a former Javanese concubine of a Dutch landowner and who is at once friend and mother-figure to Minke, remarks on Minke's friendship with Jean-Marais, whose furniture business Minke helps out with: "'That is good,' said Nyai, 'humans who are rightfully so must have friends, selfless friendships. Without friends life will be too lonely.'"[91]
- In *Child of All Nations*, Kommer enters into a debate with Nyai on Minke's progress as a writer. Nyai disagrees with Kommer's advice for Minke. Kommer counters: "He has already received plenty of praise. But the seeds that will allow him to grow, from whom will he receive them if not from his friends who are honest with him?"[92]
- In *Footsteps*, Miriam praises Minke for having "flown to the highest reaches of the sky without the help of anyone." Minke demurs: "You're mistaken, Mir. I didn't flourish by my own hand. Every good person has helped me, including yourself, and even now, you and your husband help me too. Who is the person who can grow without help?"[93]

These quotes reveal Pramoedya's insistence on friendship as a stimulus for growth — not to mention as a stipulation to be considered "rightfully human" — inasmuch as they surface his tendency to use his characters as soapboxes for his views. Importantly, however, Pramoedya renders these lessons about friendship as lessons transmitted to Minke by characters whom he

[91] Pramoedya, *Bumi*, 57-8.
[92] Pramoedya, *Anak*, 178.
[93] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Jejak Langkah* (Jakarta: Mitra, 1985), 225-26.

considers friends, thereby not only illustrating to his readers friendship at work, but also ensuring that his readers find Minke's willing instrumentalization of these lessons plausible.

Pramoedya additionally takes care to scaffold the growth of Minke's understanding of the need for friends throughout the quartet in the same way as he scaffolds the growth of Minke's nationalist consciousness. In the first quote above, we see Minke merely listening to Nyai Ontosoroh expound about the importance of friends. This quote is located in the first book, where we meet a Minke whose nationalist consciousness has yet to be awakened. In the third quote, though, we see Minke himself asserting that importance of friends, demonstrating his internalization of Nyai Ontosoroh's lesson. This quote is located in the third book, where we meet a Minke who has emerged more fully as an anti-colonial nationalist agitator. Keeping in view that Minke is the personification of the Indonesian nation, this parallel Pramoedya creates between these two forms of growth Minke experiences allows him to underscore his point that amicable relations with the foreign — represented in the quartet as Minke's friendship with foreigners — are requisites for national development.

This emphasis on, and function of, friendship in the quartet suggest that Pramoedya is effectively tapping into the political possibilities of this affective relationship which scholars like Leela Gandhi have articulated. For Gandhi, friendships in colonial contexts between colonizer and colonized enabled the development of "new and better forms of community and relationality hitherto unimaginable within the monochromatic landscape of imperial division," manifesting as such "more self-consciously creative forms of anti-imperialism."[94] Pramoedya treats this political potential of friendship most starkly toward the end of *Child of All Nations*. Nyai Ontosoroh is about to have her property confiscated and transferred to Maurits Mellema, the

[94] Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

legal son of the deceased Dutch landowner Herman Mellema. Since Nyai Ontosoroh was merely Herman Mellema's concubine, she has no rights to his farmland even though she had for years managed it. Nyai Ontosoroh asks Minke to invite Jean Marais and Kommer over so that they are present at the handover. At this point, Minke wonders aloud, "What can they do?" — only to be admonished, pointedly, by Nyai: "Friends in times of trouble are friends in everything. Don't belittle friendship. Its power is far greater than hostility."[95] (*ASB* 318). Minke, Nyai Ontosoroh, Darsam (her Madurese manservant), Jean Marais, his daughter Maysoroh, and Kommer then settle on the verandah. When Maurits, "[t]all, athletic, chest broad and muscular, nose straight and pointed like those of Greek statues in pictures"[96] arrives, this ragtag group takes him to task. While Maysoroh cries, Darsam roars, Jean Marais jeers, Kommer sneers, even a chorus of outraged villagers suddenly appears, and Maurits, overwhelmed, creeps away "like a frog astray among mankind."[97] The melodrama of the scene works to drive home Pramoedya's message: that with input from the foreign via the conduit of friendship, a common political goal — in this case, protest against the injustices of the colonial legal system — can be accomplished.

Up till this point, we've considered Pramoedya's instrumentalization of Indonesia's cosmopolitan past alongside his use of personification and the trope of friendship to cultivate in his readers a recognition of the utility of the foreign for national development. But seeing as this recognition is in fact only a part of, to recall, Sukarno's larger *niche nationalistic* project of fostering "a true consciousness of the interdependence of men and nations," Pramoedya goes beyond showing Minke's instrumentalization of the foreign and demonstrates Minke's contributions to foreign entities (represented as foreign characters) in order to illustrate for his

[95] Pramoedya, *Anak*, 318.
[96] Pramoedya, *Anak*, 340.
[97] Pramoedya, *Anak*, 352.

readers that vision of international interdependence. This motive helps explain Pramoedya's decision to include several details and incidents in the quartet's first three novels that appear at first glance strangely incongruous with its overall focus on Minke's coming-of-age story. First, for instance, Minke's position as Jean Marais's assistant in the latter's furniture business, helping Jean Marais sell "the latest styles and models [of furniture] from Europe."[98] Second, Nyai Ontosoroh's instructions to Minke to offer Khouw Ah Soe "our protection"[99] when he is accused of entering the Indies illegally, even though she has never met Khouw Ah Soe before. Third, Minke's affair with Miriam, which begins when Miriam, desperate to conceive, reaches out to Minke for help since, as she says to him, "[y]ou are my friend."[100] Understood as allusions toencounters between the native and the foreign in which the native extends help to the foreign, these segments of the quartet's narrative, when considered in tandem with the developmental lessons Minke obtains from his foreign friends, evidence Pramoedya's efforts to actualize in his novels the international interdependence that defines *niche nationalism*.

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There remains one final point to be made about the Buru quartet, and that concerns how it achieves its transformative force among Indonesian readers — so much so that, if its publication history is proof to go by, the novels were banned by Suharto's regime until the turn of the twenty-first century because of their alleged subversiveness. For Cheah, this "adversarial role [of the quartet] vis-à-vis [Suharto's New Order] state"[101] is powered by the narratological choice Pramoedya makes to shift the narration of the quartet from Minke to Pangemannan in the fourth novel, *House of Glass.* Given his role as a native Dutch intelligence officer, Pangemanann,

[98] Pramoedya, *Bumi*, 44.
[99] Pramoedya, *Anak*, 77.
[100] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 317.
[101] Cheah, *Spectral*, 255.

Cheah rightly suggests, "personifies the [Dutch] colonial and [Suharto's] neocolonial states."[102] But given that Pangemanann is at the same time the officer who seizes and studies Minke's notebooks (that is, the quartet's first three novels), Pangemanann is also according to Cheah "the condition of possibility for the survival and transmission of Minke's manuscripts," and as such "their first and most conscientious reader."[103] It is within this latter capacity of Pangemanann's character that the transformative force of the quartet, according to Cheah, is rooted. As he observes, "[i]n his reading of Minke's notebooks, Pangemanann shows the reader how Pramoedya wishes the quartet to be read. He rehearses all the questions an alert reader ought to raise about the quartet's themes, genre, and function [to the point that he] begins to grasp what Pramoedya wants the reader to see: that Minke is not simply a concrete individual but an ideal sociological type."[104] In other words, if Minke is an "ideal" Indonesian citizen whom Pramoedya's intended readers are meant to emulate, Pangemanann is Pramoedya's ideal reader whom the quartet's actual readers are also meant to emulate in order to understand that function of Minke's character. By embedding such a model for understanding the quartet within the quartet itself, Pramoedya, Cheah says, ballasts the transmission of the quartet's political message to his audiences.

Cheah's argument insightfully explains the necessity of Pangemanann's character and the quartet's pivot to his perspective. But it assumes a conviction on Pramoedya's end that his readers would conceive of mirroring Pangemanann's reading practices without quite clarifying the source of that conviction. That is, why would Pramoedya place such faith in his readers' ability to recognize that they should approach the quartet as if it were, in Anderson's words, a

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[102] Cheah, *Spectral*, 265.
[103] Cheah, *Spectral*, 342-43.
[104] Cheah, *Spectral*, 322.

"nationalist textbook," and so learn from both Pangemanann and Minke's thoughts and actions? Indeed, to the extent that the quartet can be understood as a *niche nationalistic* work, why does Pramoedya expect that its foreign characters and Minke's interactions with them would be taken by his readers as allusions to the foreign and models for behavior toward the foreign? While we may certainly look to any number of theories about the mechanics of literature's sociopolitical agency for answers to these questions, the one I offer is grounded in the instrumentalization of surrounding conditions which the concept of *niche* implies and forms part of Pramoedya's *niche nationalism*. Pramoedya's confidence in his readers, I propose, is explained by his exploitation of the grip that an Indonesian theatrical form originating from India arguably continues to hold over them: *wayang.*

Wayang is the general term for Indonesian shadow puppet theater.[105] Literally translated, the word means "shadow" in Javanese. Scholarship on this theatrical form suggests that its roots lie in the southern Indian *tholu bommalata* or shadow puppet theater tradition which arrived in Indonesia along with the spread of Hinduism there during the early centuries of the first millennium. Tellingly, a traditional *wayang* performance involves the unscripted dramatization of episodes from the Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* During a traditional *wayang* performance, a puppeteer or *dhalang* sits behind a large white screen above which a lamp is affixed, maneuvering leather puppets carved to represent characters from these epics.

[105] The Indonesian word for "shadow" is *bayang*; *wayang* is its equivalent in Javanese. My use of *wayang* in the rest of this chapter refers primarily to the performative tradition of *wayang kulit* (*kulit* translates literally as "skin") which involves the use of flat puppets made of buffalo hide mounted on sticks. *Wayang kulit* is the most common form of the broader category of *wayang purwa*, which refers to plays that draw on the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* for story material. Other performative expressions of *wayang purwa* include *wayang klitik*, involving wooden puppets; *wayang golek*, involving three-dimensional dolls rather than flat puppets; *wayang wong*, involving human actors; *wayang gedok*, involving human actors wearing masks, and others. Additionally, I focus in this chapter on Javanese *wayang* traditions, even though there exists a strong Balinese tradition as well, since Pramoedya was a native of Java and therefore referring to such traditions in his work.

The projected shadows of these puppets are then viewed by audiences on the other side of the screen. *Wayang* performances typically last from dusk until dawn, and are held during festive occasions such as weddings and circumcision ceremonies.

Throughout the late twentieth century, *wayang* characters and stories have been extricated from this traditional mode of performance and adapted to various cultural media including television, film, and comics. Such adaptations testify to the centuries-old popularity and pervasiveness of *wayang* in Indonesian cultural production and everyday life to the point that the art-form can be categorized as a way of knowing, a worldview. As Pramoedya, through the mouthpiece of a fictional Dutch scholar speaking to Pangemanann in *House of Glass*, explains:

> To understand *wayang* is to understand the history of the outlook on life and the outlook on the world of Javanese people. To master the *wayang* world as a subject, *Meneer*, means to master the Javanese people. This is one of the basics to becoming an Indies colonialist. If there is a Javanese person who has mastered it as a subject, who is able to loosen himself from the clutches of that *wayang* world, his road would still be a long one to reshape himself, *Meneer*. This universe of *wayang* is an edifice of its own which cannot be touched by modern notions. Whether a Javanese person is Christian, whether he is Muslim, whether he is without religion, they are all sucked into it as Prapanca and Tantular document.[106]

Not without intention does Pramoedya augment *wayang*'s "world" to "universe" over the course of the passage. *Wayang* is for the Javanese at once theatrical entertainment and theory of

[106] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Rumah Kaca* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1988), 78. Prapanca and Tantular were 14th-century Javanese poets whose works documented the syncretism of Buddhist and Shaivite thought traditions in Javanese culture.

cosmos.[107] One might in fact describe *wayang* as a kind of language, being nothing short of a system that informs, coheres, and reinforces an idea of society and social behaviors through a set of consensual prescriptions. This epistemological, even ontological, stature of *wayang*, so imposing and reified as to be "edifice"-like, endows this storytelling medium with a "mastering" or didactic function. Although the passage indicates that *wayang* was exploited by the Dutch for the purposes of colonial control, it also implies that the Dutch were merely perpetuating a centuries-old practice of using *wayang* as a means of social management by parents, religious leaders, and premodern rulers alike — a practice that Indonesian politicians, post-independence, subsequently continued.[108]

It is this didactic function of *wayang* along with his audience's fluency in it which I argue Pramoedya too exploits to impart his quartet's *niche nationalistic* message. More specifically, it is the allusive logic *wayang* operates on which gives Pramoedya the confidence that his novels' allusions will be approached as allusions by his readers. For a cultural form whose defining formal feature is a shadow — an entity at once perceptibly dense yet physically disembodied, attached to yet autonomous from its object — there would be no more natural rhetorical mode by which its content could be conveyed than through allusion. The term in Javanese for this storytelling technique is *pasemon*. As Laurie J. Sears explains, *pasemon* is derived from the

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[107] The word in the original Indonesian text that is translated as "*wayang* world" is *pewayangan* — this word translates literally as "puppetry," specifically the puppetry of *wayang* (there exist other words for "puppet" in Indonesian not particular to *wayang*). In Indonesian Malay grammar, the circumfix "pe-" and "-an" creates an abstract noun when attached to a noun or verb. *Pewayangan* thus also means the entire apparatus of *wayang* – from puppeteer to puppets to audience and so forth; hence, my translation, and that of Max Lane's, as "*wayang* world."

[108] James R. Brandon, for instance, documents that "Islamic partisans were responsible for changing the virtuous Brahman priest Durna (Drona in Sanskrit) into an ugly, hooked-nose, scheming archvillain" possibly to discredit Hindu priests in favor of Muslim clerics. Muslim clerics also sponsored wayang performances in order to attract large crowds to whom they would then preach, presumably with the aims of conversion (280). See also Ruth T. McVey's "The *Wayang* Controversy in Indonesian Communism" (1986) and Laurie J. Sears's *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (1996) for more on the history of the relationship between *wayang* and Indonesian politics.

Javanese root word "semu," meaning "to seem like" or "to be colored by." *Pasemon* "serves to bring the [*wayang*] observer/hearer's attention to those domains which often lie outside the boundaries of any particular story," domains such as historical events, current political conditions, even the relations of a given family sponsoring a *wayang* play.[109] By using *pasemon*, the *dhalang* transmits moral or ethical lessons and political messages or critiques.[110]

Such lessons, however, are located not only in the story being performed, but also in the *wayang* characters themselves. Anderson describes this function of *wayang* characters as such: "The heroes of *wayang* were the consciously approved models by which a child grew up. Whereas Christian religious education arises from general abstract precepts of universal application, a *wayang* education develops out of a set of concrete mythological models and examples. The Javanese child learns from the models and examples of behavior the philosophical teachings which will later orient him to the outside world."[111] In other words, if in a tale like *Everyman*, characters such as Knowledge, Beauty, and Strength personify the "general abstract precepts of universal application" Anderson mentions, characters in a *wayang* play like Arjuna, Bima, and Karna from the *Mahabharata* personify particular attributes of human character: Arjuna models someone who is "tender-hearted yet iron-willed," Bima someone with "unswerving honesty, loyalty, fortitude," Karna someone in possession of "physical perfection,

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[109] Laurie J. Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 7.

[110] A quote from Marshall Clark's study on a number of novels written in the 1970s and 1980s that employ *wayang* tropes exemplifies this use of *wayang* as veiled political critique: "[L]iterary reworkings of the *wayang*…can be read as a means of "shadow-boxing" in the face of the New Order powers-that-be…. Just as a boxer only shadow-boxes whilst warming-up or practicing before a fight, Indonesian writers critical of the New Order state were in a sense imagining, foreshadowing, and enacting in their mind's eye the "real" fight to come in 1997 and 1998, the fight to overthrow Suharto" ("Shadow Boxing: Indonesian Writers and the *Ramayana* in the New Order," *Indonesia* 72 (2001): 161.

[111] Benedict Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 39.

military skill, and moral sensitivity."[112] *Wayang* characters, simply put, are part of the *pasemon* that characterizes *wayang*, adding to the didactic function of a *wayang* performance.

Pramoedya's use of *wayang* elements in his writing is most evident in his first novel, *The Fugitive* (1950). In brief, the novel concerns the fugitive actions of Hardo, an Indonesian commander of the invading Japanese army turned rebel, and two of his comrades, Dipo and Karmin, during the twenty-four hour period right before the surrender of the Japanese in Indonesia on September 2, 1945. As Harry Aveling points out in his introduction to his English translation of the work, the parallels between *The Fugitive* and a traditional *wayang* are threefold.[113] First, Hardo, Dipo, and Karmin correspond in terms of characteristics to Arjuna, Bima, and Karna from the *Mahabharata.* Second, the rebellion they wage against the Japanese mirrors the war, narrated in the *Mahabharata*, that the Pandawa family wages against their cousins, the Kurawas, to regain their rightful territory. Finally, the novel's overall timeframe of a single night along with various scenes accord with the general chronology, structure, and conventionally performed acts of a *wayang* show. Pramoedya affirms in a 1996 interview that "Ya, *The Fugitive* was influenced by the [sic] Wayang."[114] *Wayang*, however, also infuses Pramoedya's other works. Anderson notes, for instance, that scenes from Pramoedya's short story "Revenge" would be "incomprehensible unless one bears in mind a series of famous tableaux from traditional Javanese *wayang* culture."[115] ("Sembah" 225). Given the nationalistic themes of *The Fugitive*, written shortly after Indonesia gained independence, and given that

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[112] Anderson, *Mythology,* 24-28.
[113] Two translations of *The Fugitive* into English exist. Harry Aveling's, including his introduction, was published in 1975 under Heinemann's "Writing in Asia" series. The second, by Willem Samuels, was first published in the United States in 1990 with William Morrow & Co.
[114] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Interview December 26, 1996," interview by Sebastian Tong and Fong Foong Mei.
[115] Benedict Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 225.

"Revenge" is that short story which Day attempts to offer a non-nationalistic reading of as an alternative to Anderson's, the importance of *wayang* to Pramoedya's writing and nationalism — as well as his *niche nationalism*, I would argue — should not be underestimated.

Yet Pramoedya has publicly expressed his distaste for *wayang*. His repudiation of the cultural form appears to have begun when he was fourteen. In his essay "The Last Time Watching Wayang" ("Terakhir Kali Menonton Wayang"), included among the writings he produced during his imprisonment that were later collected and translated as *The Mute's Soliloquy* (*Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*), Pramoedya writes, "From 1939 onwards, I had decided: enough, enough, this is as far as it goes, close the book on *wayang*, you've read all that was published by Balai Pustaka on *wayang*, you've had your fill staying out all night, you've done enough sneaking between your schoolbooks and family duties."[116] This memory suggests that Pramoedya rejects *wayang* for the escapism it appears to encourage. But Pramoedya's denunciation of *wayang* also has to do with the mindset that he associates with its consumption, what he calls "Javanism." As he clarifies in a 2006 interview, "Javanism is an unthinking loyalty and obedience to a superior — to any superior."[117] For Pramoedya, this unthinking servility, arguably influenced by the caste-system of the Hinduism long transplanted to Indonesia, both enabled Dutch and Japanese colonization and boosted the rise of Suharto's dictatorship. Pramoedya thus rejects *wayang* because of its feudalistic cosmology; to him, *wayang* perpetuates the Javanism that he sees negating the capacity for self-determination needed for the formation of a democratic nation-state.

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[116] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu: Catatan-catatan dari Pulau Buru* (Jakarta: Lentera, 1995), 35.
[117] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Exile: Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Conversation with Andre Vltchek and Rossie Indira* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 85.

Pramoedya's condemnation of *wayang* makes his early works seem as if merely youthful experiments. His critique of Javanism, perhaps unsurprisingly, appears in the Buru Quartet: in *Footsteps,* Minke attributes the challenges he encounters in forming an anti-colonial organization among his fellow countrymen to the "Javanism [that] was potentially dangerous for clearing and laying the foundations of a modern democracy."[118] Nonetheless, I would maintain that when composing the Buru Quartet, Pramoedya cannily capitalizes on his audience's fondness for and familiarity with *wayang* to ensure that his quartet's *niche nationalistic* message is at once palatable and comprehensible to them. In fact, if we conceive of Pramoedya's *wayang*-infused earlier works as the output of a fledgling author attempting, not unlike Joseph Conrad, to form an *authorial niche* by taking advantage of the historical conditions surrounding the moment of his writing — namely, a reading public at once versed in *wayang* and hungry in the immediate post-independence era for a marker of national cultural identity — then Pramoedya's use of *wayang* in the Buru Quartet later in his career can be understood as a development of the *authorial niche* he had earlier formed. Additionally, Anderson observes that Pramoedya appears never to have been fully able to wrest himself from the storytelling traditions of *wayang.* According to him, "Pramoedya — a modern writer in the only true sense of the word, condemned never to see the effects of his work on his reader's face or in his voice, separated by print and market — longs for that reader's response [of listeners of communal oral narratives]. (He can see around him all the old Javanese artists, *dalang*, dancers, gamelan players, singers, batik-makers and so forth, who still have that opportunity)."[119] In light of Pramoedya's past use of and proximity to *wayang*, it

[118] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 372.
[119] Benedict Anderson, "Reading 'Revenge' by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1978-1982)," in *Writing on the Tongue*, ed. A.L. Becker (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 57.

thus stands to reason that Pramoedya would turn to this cultural form in the Buru Quartet to promulgate his *niche nationalist* ideals.

Pramoedya himself has suggested that he never intended to eliminate *wayang* from his work altogether. During the same interview in which he acknowledges his use of *wayang* elements in *The Fugitive*, he contends, after the interviewers note that *This Earth of Mankind* makes references to *wayang*, that "I am a critic of Javanese culture. While I have consciously used Javanese elements, I have done so with a critical eye, not under its influence."[120] This recognition of Pramoedya's — that any change for the Indonesian nation must occur through a thoughtful engagement with, rather than a complete disavowal of, Javanese culture — likewise appears in the Buru Quartet. Within that same passage from *Footsteps* above, Minke realizes that "[t]he great danger was losing the sympathy and trust of the people, simply because I had offended this Javanism of theirs."[121] If the solution Minke eventually decides he must pursue in the face of a recalcitrant Javanism is to present his political ideas "carefully and gently"[122] to his fellow countrymen, "approach[ing] things as politely as possible, peeling off one layer [of Javanism] this year, another the next,"[123] so too is Pramoedya's which, as I show in the remainder of this section, involves not only using a cultural form beloved by his intended readers, but also subtly renovating *wayang*'s form and how it works as a didactic device.

Let us first consider the maneuvers Pramoedya makes to establish the centrality of *wayang* to the transmittal of the Buru Quartet's political message. When Minke is introduced in *This Earth of Mankind*, he is presented as a modernized individual appreciative of twentieth-century technological advancements. He marvels, for instance, that "from sheets of printed

[120] Pramoedya, "Interview December 26, 1996," n.p.
[121] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 373.
[122] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 373.
[123] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 372.

paper" he can now see for himself "pictures of landscapes, big and important men, new machines, American skyscrapers" as well as receive "news from Europe and America that reported the latest discoveries."[124] Minke's musings at the power of print here, of course, are the kernels of Anderson's thesis about the intimacy between print-capitalism and the formation of a modern nation-state. But more important to the point at hand is Minke's subsequent comparison of these modern phenomena to fantastical elements in *wayang.* The "greatness" of these "latest discoveries," he exclaims, "rivaled the supernatural powers of the warriors and gods of my ancestors in *wayang* stories…. People were even already planning to fly like Gatotkaca, like Icarus."[125] Minke's likening of the magnificence of modern inventions to the magic of mythical characters is revealing of his psyche. Even though he appears to be keen on modernization and progress, he cannot think past *wayang.* He does not mean to demean this traditional cultural form by juxtaposing it with modern technology. Rather, the likeness he finds between the two indicates that he intuitively makes comparisons in the language of *wayang* and that *wayang* continues to be the epistemological device by which he comprehends the world. By showing Minke's intuitive turn to *wayang* in this passage, Pramoedya in effect dramatizes what he believes to be the instinctive impulse of his Indonesian readers to grasp any story or situation through *wayang*. In doing so, he encourages his readers to identify with Minke — an identification which invites his readers to enter into the mode of approaching the quartet as if a *wayang* performance. Pramoedya thus lays the grounds from the outset of the quartet for his readers to apply *wayang*'s allusive logic throughout their reading of it, both capitalizing on the likelihood that they would and assuring them that they should figure the characters of Jean Marais, Khouw Ah Soe, Kommer, and the like as if *wayang* characters who personify, in this

[124] Pramoedya, *Bumi*, 2.
[125] Pramoedya, *Bumi*, 3.

case, the "essences" of those particular nations that Pramoedya sees historically true and valuable to the development of the Indonesian nation.

This association of the quartet with *wayang* conventions set up in the first book is reinforced later in the third. Confounded by the challenges of forming a political organization, Minke reflects that he "had prepared myself to be an organizer. To be a *dhalang* with the story of how an organization founded on many peoples was raised into one of a single people…. Clearly this was no more simple than any other work under the sky. The *wayang* puppets were not made from dead leather that could be painted and embellished as we liked."[126] On the one hand, Minke's thoughts here indicate an evolution in Minke's relationship with *wayang.* As mentioned previously, Minke's likening of his encounters with technology to *wayang* elements in *This Earth of Mankind* indicates that he is a consumer of *wayang*, someone used to being on the audience's side of the *wayang* screen. However, several years later in *Footsteps*, Minke is instead a producer of *wayang*, the puppeteer behind the screen. Given that, in the "*wayang* world," the *dhalang* is conventionally bestowed a deity-like power, constructing as subjects of his will and teachings *wayang* puppets and audience members alike,[127] Minke's assumption of the vocation of *dhalang* marks his mastery of *wayang* as a subject rather than being merely a subject of *wayang*. This shift accordingly mirrors Minke's growth as an individual and the growth in his national consciousness between the first and third novels, from wide-eyed student at a Dutch school to grassroots activist.

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[126] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 351.

[127] A passage from "De Wajang," an essay by Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, advisor to Sukarno, is illustrative of the *dalang*'s power: "Behind [the screen], the performer, will take his place. The Javanese sees in him the source of all life, because without him, no matter how artistically designed, the wajang puppets will never come to life. The Javanese proverb: *wajang manut dalang* [the wajang follows the dalang] adequately expresses how he views them" (qtd. in Sears, 135).

On the other hand, and more importantly, Minke's assertion of his role as a *dhalang* suggests that the quartet's first three novels, being the story he narrates of protonationalist organization, are analogous to the three major acts (*pathetan*) that any given *wayang* performance (*lakon*) is composed of. Even without a full exegesis of these novels which details the various types of scenes (*jejer*, *adegan*, or *perang*) that would be found in a conventional *wayang* performance — which in any case would not matter, since it is rather the *pathet* than the scenes that are repeated in each performance — the overall narrative trajectory of the quartet's first three novels bears significant resemblances to the structure of a *lakon*. A.L. Becker describes the narrative arc of a *lakon* as having

> a spatial, rather than temporal, beginning, middle, and end. It must begin and end in a court, the first the court of the antagonists, the last the court of the protagonists…. The middle section must be in nature, usually in the forest on a mountain, but sometimes too, in or beside the sea…. Any scene in a *wayang* plot may be transposed or omitted except for the constrain that the plot begin in a court, have its center in nature, and return to a court.[128]

With this structure in mind, the trial at the end of *This Earth of Mankind*, in which Maurits Mellema gains inheritance of Herman Mellema's estate and custodianship of his illegitimate daughter, Annelies, can be understood as corresponding to the "court of the antagonists" that defines the first *pathet*. Minke's journey to Eastern Java's agricultural lands in *Child of All Nations* is an expression of the nature setting distinctive to the second *pathet*. Finally, the closing scenes of *Footsteps*, in which Minke confers with various propagandists and organizers, can be likened to the "court of the protagonists" that characterizes the third *pathet* — Minke is holding

[128] A.L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 41-42.

court, so to speak, with the supposed "protagonists" of the future Indonesian nation. Minke's claim to be a *dhalang* as well as the structure of his narrative thus affirm for Pramoedya's Indonesian readers that the quartet's first three novels may be approached as if a *wayang* performance.

So far, I have shown that Pramoedya's incorporation of *wayang* elements into the quartet are part of his efforts to transmit the quartet's *niche nationalistic* message. He takes advantage of *wayang*'s popularity to ensure that the quartet is understood the way he wants it to be understood despite his avowed dislike for the form. Yet precisely in view of that dislike, Pramoedya's persistence in using *wayang* in the quartet additionally suggests that he intends to go beyond relying on it as an expedient for getting his ideals across. That larger goal, I argue, is to renovate *wayang*. Rather than reneging on the form altogether, Pramoedya reconceptualizes *wayang* with the Buru Quartet, removing the Javanism it encourages in order to allow for the reconstruction of Indonesia into a properly democratic nation-state.

The passage in which Minke claims to be a *dhalang* already hints at this change to *wayang* traditions that Pramoedya is making. Even as he compares his political work to that of a *dhalang*, Minke recognizes that it requires him to have "merged the work of *brahmin* and *sudra*, teacher and student, listener and speaker, messenger and propagandist."[129] The vocation of *dhalang* for Minke, in other words, is no longer just that of maneuvering puppets nor as vaunted and sacred as it traditionally is. But the more significant change to *wayang* that Pramoedya enacts in structuring the quartet's first three novels according to the conventions of a *wayang* performance is, quite simply, rendering a typically unscripted theatrical performance into a textual one. This transposition across media, which demands the act of reading rather than

[129] Pramoedya, *Jejak*, 351.

watching *wayang*, prompts a transfer of the responsibility of interpretation for the narrative being told. During a traditional *wayang* performance, it is the *dhalang* who bears the task of storytelling and meaning-making. The audience, by corollary, watches with "unthinking loyalty and obedience," as Pramoedya says, the performance of stories whose characters and significance, being already within the collective consciousness, they do not have to wonder at. But when, as in the case of the quartet's first three novels, the *dhalang* is so to speak a writer and *wayang* a form to be read instead of watched, the experience of the narrative, the meaning-making process, becomes the prerogative of the solitary reader. They must participate in its interpretation on their own grounds instead of depending on age-old dogmas in "a spirit of groupism."[130] The force of *wayang* as a worldview is therefore diminished, and *wayang* becomes a tool that the spectator-as-reader must actively think with rather than passively be instructed by in the process of education. By thus writing *wayang* and thereby compelling his readers to figure for themselves the significance of the narrative and its elements, Pramoedya is able to instrumentalize *wayang*'s didactic function even as he dispels the Javanism it promotes.

The notion that the quartet's first three novels are in effect the three transmediated acts of a *wayang* performance implies that the fourth novel works as if a manual for the quartet's audience on how to read, not watch, *wayang*. Ever the teacher, Pramoedya realizes that the change to *wayang* he is instigating requires instruction for his readers to apprehend. Hence his inclusion of a fourth novel, a coda of sorts which marks a deviation from the three *pathetan* structure of a conventional *wayang* performance.[131] This understanding of the role *House of*

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[130] Pramoedya, *Exile*, 52.

[131] Arguably, Pramoedya was experimenting with this modification of the conventional three-act *wayang* structure in *The Fugitive*, which is also divided into four acts. As noted above, *The Fugitive* follows closely traditional *wayang* conventions. However, the novella's ending deviates from the traditional ending of a famous episode in the *Mahabharata*: Karna's death at the hands of Arjuna. Whereas in the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna kills Karna because it is Arjuna's duty as a warrior to do so, Hardo (whose

Glass plays in Pramoedya's political project builds on Cheah's observation noted earlier that Pangemanann, the novel's narrator, is Pramoedya's ideal reader. Cheah, to recall, suggests that Pangemanann functions as a model for the Indonesian reader — his responses to Minke's notebooks (the quartet's first three novels) "show the reader how Pramoedya wishes the quartet to be read." If those three novels are, as I have been arguing, *wayang* in written form, then Pangemanann's responses to them in the fourth novel, to rephrase Cheah, show the reader how Pramoedya wishes *wayang* to be read.

To establish Pangemanann as the ideal *wayang* reader, Pramoedya first likens his behavior to that of a *wayang* spectator. Throughout *House of Glass*, Pangemanann seeks identification with Minke, whom he declares he admires despite being responsible for his arrest. He occupies Minke's house after Minke has been exiled, he compares his own interactions with women to those of Minke's that he reads about in Minke's notebooks, and he even admits that his composition of *House of Glass* was inspired by Minke's own writings.[132] In this regard, Pangemanann is not so different from a *wayang* spectator who finds in *wayang* characters "models for his own personality" (Minke, in Pangemanann's reading of his notebooks, is character rather than *dhalang*). But Minke's notebooks only go so far in providing Pangemanann a template for his behavior and understanding of society. When, for instance, Pangemanann turns to Minke's notebooks to search for answers to a question about the nature of native political organizations that his superior in the colonial police force asks him, Pangemanann "could not

character corresponds with Arjuna's) forgives Karmin (whose character corresponds with Karna's) for his betrayal toward the end of *The Fugitive*. Pramoedya's amendment to this episode in the *Mahabharata* may be understood as his rejection of the constant violence wayang otherwise espouses. But this change in the narrative can also be understood as obligating Pramoedya to include a fourth chapter in the novel, an aberration to the conventional structure of *wayang* to which the first three chapters of the novel do in fact correspond.

[132] See Pramoedya, *Rumah*, 77, 176, 278.

find any certain answers."[133] When Pangemanann escorts Minke after his return from exile, he realizes that he is "unable to determine if this Minke who was sitting next to him was the same as the Minke that [he] had fantasized about in *This Earth of Mankind*," which then leads him to ponder, "Is there a relationship between reality and fantasy?"[134] Pangemanann's questioning of the veracity and viability of Minke's figure and his notebooks here is precisely the kind of questioning that emerges from the independent thinking which Pramoedya desires to activate in his reader. As Pangemanann comes to realize, he had never before encountered books like Minke's that would've offered him guidance on how to analyze Minke's writings.[135] Consequently, unlike a *wayang* spectator who would've been able to draw on collective knowledge about *wayang* to grasp a particular *lakon*, Pangemanann is not only compelled to become engaged in the process of making meaning out of Minke's *wayang* narrative, but must also do so autonomously. In offering through Pangemanann's behavior a guide of sorts to written *wayang* and cultivating, as such, not the figure of the passive *wayang* spectator but of the engaged *wayang* reader, *House of Glass* completes Pramoedya's revisionary, *niche nationalistic* project — the readers of the quartet, citizens of Indonesia and "heirs to world culture" themselves, being at heart the extant conditions that Pramoedya capitalizes on to fulfill his vision of a reconstructed Indonesia.

In a 1999 interview, Pramoedya appears to have rethought the international interdependence that I argue he advocates for in the quartet. When the interviewer points out that "Indonesian independence cannot have turned out as [Pramoedya had] imagined and asked "[w]hat happened," Pramoedya replies, "I had idealism when I was young, but in reality the

[133] Pramoedya, *Rumah*, 118.
[134] Pramoedya, *Rumah*, 304.
[135] Pramoedya, *Rumah*, 177.

interference from abroad has been too much." In response to the interviewer subsequently asking if that "interference" was "[f]rom the West," Pramoedya says "Yes, and from multinational corporations…. Now is the absolute victory of multinationals." Interestingly, however, Pramoedya then goes on to point out that "[t]here is an alternative [to the global encroachment of multinationals]. That's what Sukarno taught. Do not invite capitalism, but if you want to develop, it's OK to borrow money. I'm against capitalism but not capital."[136] While these comments of Pramoedya's are indicative of his socialist leanings and, for that matter, Sukarno's, the distinction that he carefully makes between "capitalism" and "capital" indicates that he in fact is still holding onto the idea that the progress of the Indonesian nation can proceed only through international interdependence, whether in terms of "borrow[ing] money" or, in the words of the LEKRA manifesto, in terms of "extract[ing]" the "essence of progressive foreign cultures." More importantly, Pramoedya's insistence on being open to the foreign and viewing it as "capital" even as he remains staunchly nationalistic reveals what is ultimately at stake in conceptualizing his politics as *niche nationalism* and the concept of *niche nationalism* itself: that the presence of the supposedly foreign within the supposedly local is not necessarily the result of foreign "influence" or "interference," but can be instead a matter of instrumentalizing the foreign that is always already present and available. In other words, *niche nationalism* helps us conceive of the nationalisms of former colonies not merely as what Partha Chatterjee would dub selections of "certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas," but rather as creations of the formerly colonized that emerge through a process of capitalizing on the legacies of colonialism. While this understanding of the nationalisms of former colonies that *niche nationalism* articulates is about restoring to the formerly colonized the agency and

[136] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Pramoedya Ananta Toer Interview," interview by Matthew Rothschild, *Progressive,* April 12, 1999.

autonomy that Chatterjee argues Anderson's thesis bereaves them of, it is at the same time about recognizing that these nationalisms are developed through acts of instrumentalizing extant sociohistorical conditions, as shot through with the foreign as they may be — acts which ultimately define the concept of *niche*.

Chapter Three

Viet Thanh Nguyen and the Publishing Niche

During the Q&A session of a 2017 public conversation held at the University of Southern California with the actor John Cho and the English professor-turn-novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, an audience member, the filmmaker Abel Vang, asked Nguyen if, in the "literary world," Nguyen had experienced the same discrimination as an Asian American screenwriter who "for writing content that's Asian American…would not get into a room," and whose "agents dropped them because their script had an Asian American lead." To Vang, it had seemed that whereas Asian American authors of literary fiction "would be praised for [having an Asian American protagonist] and would get a book deal or whatnot," Asian American screenwriters "would get passed on because [their] character just happens to be Asian." Nguyen began his reply by agreeing with Vang that it was more likely for an Asian American author writing about Asian American subjects to have their work accepted. But then he adds, "There is a problem there. The Asian America [sic], it's a niche, which means it's both an opportunity and a trap."[1]

Nguyen's inclusion of the term *niche* in his response to Vang was most likely prompted by the question that another audience member, the actor Dylan Locke, had posed to Cho and Nguyen just prior to Vang's: "I was wondering how you feel about the sort of tiny tiny [sic] niche and place that Asian American actors and artists have in society." While Nguyen had not responded directly to Locke's question (Cho had answered instead), he appears to have seized upon the term Locke had used to articulate the logic of literary production that to him explains Vang's perception of the relative success Asian American authors enjoy and to offer, in the

[1] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "USC Visions and Voices — A Conversation with John Cho and Viet Thanh Nguyen," *Viet Thanh Nguyen,* November 30, 2017.

process, an answer to Locke. Elaborating, Nguyen says, "If you go out there and you say, 'I am the new x Asian American writer [sic]' — first it was Vietnamese American, now it's Hmong American, for example — the publishing world would be like 'Yeah, that's cool. Now we can market that. Now there is an Asian American audience for that. We'll publish your book.'"[2] As far as this conversation is concerned, Nguyen understands *niche* along the same lines as Moretti, as we saw in Chapter One — that is, according to the term's figurative definition in business as "a specialized market for a product or service." For Nguyen, the existence of a specialized market for Asian American literature functions as an assurance to publishers that there will be a readership for works that feature Asian American subjects written presumably by Asian American authors. Hence, why he determines the qualification of "Asian America" and the concept of *niche* itself to be an "opportunity," particularly for "new" Asian American authors.

Notably, Nguyen is careful to define "new" as only a matter of ethnicity: "Vietnamese American," "Hmong American." This clarification forms the basis for his observation that the *niche* of "Asian America" is at the same time a "trap." "The reason it's a trap," Nguyen explains, "is because they too in the publishing world have their stereotypes of what it is that Asian American literature should be." Nguyen then recounts the struggle he faced to get *The Sympathizer*, his first novel, published. As a professor of Asian American literature, he says, "I know what kind of stories we are supposed to tell." For a Vietnamese author like himself, those stories should essentially be "the story of the grateful refugee." By his reckoning, all but one of the fourteen publishers that his agent had thought would be interested in *The Sympathizer* rejected the novel because it "doesn't tell that story." This experience demonstrated to Nguyen the trouble that comes along with Asian America being a *niche*: that specialized market compels

[2] Nguyen, "USC Visions and Voices," n.p.

publishers to accept only what he deems are hackneyed stories about Asian American subjects and, in turn, ensnares Asian American authors into writing such stories in order to be published. In this scenario, newness is reduced to ethnic differences, specialization results in the perpetuation of stereotypes, diversity of perspective and experience become suppressed. "[E]ven in the publishing world, where Asian American literature is hot," Nguyen asserts, "you still have to struggle to get your own, if you have a unique vision, to get that vision out there [sic]."[3] For Nguyen, as such, the space in the literary marketplace that the *niche* of Asian America does open up for Asian American authors is nonetheless a confined space that is restricted to types of, rather than "unique," stories about Asian Americans. Hence, why he also determines the qualification of "Asian America" and the concept of *niche* to be a "trap" even as it is an "opportunity."

The use of *niche* in this exchange recalls two ambiguities about the term that we explored in Chapter One. The first has to do with the term's function as a descriptor of a quality — its capacity to mean either a smallness or a particularity that is perceived to be non-mainstream. Whereas Locke had used *niche* to describe the minimal presence of Asian American artistes in the creative industries, Nguyen had used *niche* to describe the type of stories expected of Asian American authors. The shift in the understanding of the term that Nguyen's response to Vang shows harks back to the potential of *niche* as a modifier to work either or at once as a signifier for a quantity or a quality. To be sure, both Locke and Nguyen employ *niche* as a noun in this conversation. But to the extent that by *niche*, Locke and Nguyen effectively mean *niche market*, that difference in understandings of *niche* as a modifier explains the shape Nguyen's answer took.

[3] Nguyen, "USC Visions and Voices," n.p.

The second ambiguity about *niche* that this exchange recalls has to do with the term's function as a judgment of value in discussions about literature — its capacity to be either an expression of praise or denigration, or to convey either a desirable or unenviable condition. Nguyen's observation that a *niche* is an opportunity can be likened to the use of *niche* by Conrad's contemporaries to assert his greatness insofar as *niche* in both these instances conveys a desirable attribute. Along the same lines, Nguyen's observation that a *niche* is a trap can be likened to the potential of *niche author* to be understood as a derogatory epithet, like we saw with the World Literature Forum thread, insofar as *niche* in both these instances conveys an unenviable condition. However, the ambiguity of the term Nguyen identifies has in fact to do more so with what the term as a noun denotes rather than what it connotes. In other words, Nguyen is not using *niche* itself as an expression of an evaluation, but is instead evaluating the idea of a specialized market which *niche* can signify. It is thus more accurate to say that Nguyen identifies here the capacity of *niche* to be, rather than to convey, a desirable or unenviable condition.

As we saw in Chapter One, the potential of *niche* to be associated with undesirable attributes in literary discussions can be explained by the tendency of the term to be understood solely according to its figurative definition in business. *Niche author*, as a consequence of this tendency, becomes an epithet that accuses an author for being unable to produce works that go beyond the same few topics, or for being motivated by some interest beyond that of just art. Nguyen's remarks above, however, suggest that that potential is due instead to the nature of the publishing business. In other words, the negative valence the term bears can be accounted for not only by semantic but also structural factors.

Expanding upon Nguyen's observations, I examine in this chapter the negative and positive implications of the concept of *niche* as understood specifically within the context of the contemporary publishing industry — namely, *niche* defined as a specialized market for books considered non-mainstream. For the purposes of referential clarity, I will call this conceptualization of *niche* the *publishing niche*. To be clear, a *publishing niche* is synonymous with what in popular parlance is called a *niche literary market*. However, I retain *niche* as a noun for this particular conceptualization of *niche* to indicate that the *publishing niche* is the literary version of what I previously referred to as the *business niche*.

What are the characteristics of a *publishing niche*? Let us first note that a *niche literary market* is the literary market counterpart of what I earlier identified as a *niche author* in the second sense (NA2) seeing as both a *niche literary market* and NA2 are defined by the notion of a literary specialization that is qualified as non-mainstream. In other words, NA2 is the authorial manifestation of a *niche literary market*, and the characteristics of a *niche literary market* are those by which NA2 is defined. Insofar as a *publishing niche* is synonymous with a *niche literary market*, a *publishing niche* is likewise the literary market counterpart of NA2, and its characteristics likewise those by which NA2 is defined. Put differently, *niche* as it is used in NA2 bears the same significance as *niche* in *publishing niche* (not to mention *niche literary market*). Given that *niche* in NA2 signifies a quality rather than a quantity (the latter, to recall, being that which *niche* in *niche author* in the first sense, NA1, signifies), a *publishing niche* may have a large or a small audience. That is, the number of readers of a *publishing niche* depends on the appeal of the quality of the specialization which defines it as a *publishing niche* in the first place. And given that that quality of the specialization which *niche* in NA2 signifies is further

defined as one that is regarded as non-mainstream, the specialization that comprises a *publishing niche* is a non-mainstream specialization.

While a *publishing niche* may thus be identified as one by any number of topical or formal literary specializations so long as these are perceived as non-mainstream, I look in this chapter at *publishing niches* for literary works that involve themes or subjects related to communities considered minorities at least within North America. "Non-mainstream" here, accordingly, refers to non-majority populations, and I will attend primarily to works that concern those populations as defined along racial and ethnic lines. Such works may not always be written by authors who identify with or are identified as belonging to these communities, but because of the structural reasons Nguyen hints at, they typically are.

This chapter begins with a sketch of the transformations to publishing and bookselling that occurred from the 1960s onwards which not so much introduced the idea, but rather encouraged the proliferation, of *publishing niches.* As Moretti, to recall, notes, the "growth of the market" during the first half of the 1800s had already "create[d] all sorts of niches for 'specialist' readers" — a process which he says "culminates at the turn of the [nineteenth] century in the super-niches of detective fiction and then science fiction." But this structuring of the Anglo-American literary marketplace into *publishing niches* in fact continued beyond the nineteenth century. The consolidation of publishing houses into international conglomerates as well as the advent of digital printing services and online book retailers — all of which, it must be remembered, dovetailed with the heightened demand for the diversification of reading material that was the corollary of the decolonization processes, countercultural revolutions, and civil liberties movements of the 1950s and 1960s — enabled the emergence of a multitude of *publishing niches* during the late twentieth century into the twenty-first.

Keeping these sea-changes to the book business in view, I focus on an industry practice that I suggest contributes not only to the development, but also hardening, of *publishing niches*: "comping," or the practice of identifying comparative titles for a manuscript during the acquisitions stage. At once a measure of a book's profitability and its "fit" with a publishing house's lists, comping became a standard acquisitions procedure sometime during the turn of the twenty-first century, and can be understood to mark the way that the corporatization of publishing has prompted book acquisitions processes to depend on more than just an editor's so-called taste and include data collection. I argue that it is the logic of "comping," itself undergirded by the problems of comparative thinking, which explains why a *publishing niche* becomes, in Nguyen's words, "both an opportunity and a trap" for authors of a given racial or ethnic group.

In the rest of this chapter, I use Nguyen's observation about *publishing niches* as an heuristic to index the limits and potencies of *publishing niches*. I consider the dangers of *publishing niches* for both readers and authors before examining their potential. Drawing on what is known in the discipline of evolutionary biology as *niche construction theory*, I show that, despite their "trap-like" implications, *publishing niches* are the sites from which progressive change to the contemporary literary landscape is instigated. To exemplify this potential of *publishing niches*, I frame the publication of Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) as an act of *niche construction* on the part of its publisher, Grove Atlantic, situating the reorientations to Asian American literature that the book enacts within the longer history of changes to the American literary landscape that its publisher itself initiated. But to grasp these changes at all, a survey, first, of the American publishing landscape during the second half of the twentieth century.

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In Chapter One, we saw that *niche* as a noun possesses three figurative definitions — what I called the *individual niche*, the *ecological niche*, and the *business niche.* And as we also saw, the differences between these three figurative definitions of *niche* are supplemented by differences in when they entered the English vocabulary. Whereas the first use of the *individual niche* dates to the early 1700s, and that of the *ecological niche* to the early 1900s, the first use of the *business niche* dates to the 1960s; the *OED* records its initial usage in a 1963 book titled *The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Northern Norway* by the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth.[4]

It's perhaps not surprising that the *business niche* gained traction as a term in the daily lexicon and as a business concept from the 1960s onwards. The Fordist systems of standardized mass production and mass consumption that had sustained global north economies for much of the twentieth century were giving way then to so-called post-Fordist paradigms that were characterized by the use of new technologies, economies of scope rather than scale, and the corresponding embrace of flexible specialization as a business strategy. These newer modes of production both motivated and were facilitated by the series of conglomerate mergers which occurred during the 1960s, now known as the "conglomerate boom." Fueled by perceptions that corporate risk could be reduced through diversification and the financial and operational synergies enabled by the pooling of capital, the "conglomerate boom" in turn motivated and facilitated the fragmentation of product marketplaces into *business niches.*[5]

The Anglo-American trade publishing industry was not left untouched by the "conglomerate boom." Up until around the mid-twentieth century, the publishing landscape was

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[4] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "niche (*n.*)."

[5] For overviews of conglomeration and its various perceived benefits, see, for instance, Neil H. Jacoby, "The Conglomerate Corporation" (1970; Friedrich Trautwein, "Merger Motives and Merger Prescriptions" (1990); and Timothy M. Hurley, "The Urge to Merge: Contemporary Theories on the Rise of Conglomerate Mergers in the 1960s" (2006).

somewhat of a cottage industry comprised of dozens of publishing houses that were established and owned by individuals who were themselves editors. Familiar imprints today such as Alfred A. Knopf, William Morrow, and Jonathan Cape bear the name of their founders. But a combination of factors — including the retirement of these publisher-owners, the benefits of vertical integration between hardback and paperback production, and the interest, prompted by the rationale for conglomeration outlined above, of corporations in sectors like entertainment and education to acquire trade publishers — led to the corporatization and consolidation of publishing houses during the second half of the twentieth century. By the 2010s, six large publishing houses had emerged: Penguin, Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, and Simon & Schuster. These houses, collectively known as the "Big Six," were all subsidiaries of media-focused conglomerates and accounted then for about fifty percent of American book sales.[6] With the merger of Penguin and Random House under the parent company Bertelsmann in 2013, the "Big Six" became the "Big Five" which itself, with the pending sales of Simon & Schuster to Penguin Random House announced toward the end of 2020, will effectively become the "Big Four."[7]

The consolidation and conglomeration of the publishing industry meant that publishing houses, like players in other industries, possessed at once the means and the motivation to pursue the diversification of their products — books — and develop, in the process, *publishing niches.* As Sarah Brouillette notes in her study of postcolonial writers in the global literary marketplace, "the synergies of corporatization have provided more venues and opportunities for niche

[6] See John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (2010) for a comprehensive overview of changes to the publishing industry in the second half of the twentieth century.
[7] For reportage on this, see, for instance, Alexandra Alter and Edmund Lee, "Penguin Random House to Buy Simon & Schuster," *New York Times*, November 25, 2020.

marketing." She additionally observes that in view of the competition between publishers for readers' attentions, "publishers recognized that they could not afford to ignore any segment of the reading public, and in response, they have continually sought ways to access readers as members of specific and identifiable reading communities."[8] The increased efficiencies, reduced risks, and intensified competition of a corporatized publishing industry that to Brouillette supported the creation of *publishing niches* for postcolonial literature likewise supported the creation of *publishing niches* for racial and ethnic literature, not least Asian American.

This diversification of the Anglo-American literary marketplace that followed from the mergers of publishing houses would appear to counter the fears of industry pundits that the conglomeration of publishing would lead to the homogenization of literary works. As independent publisher Dennis Johnson, in a 2020 *The Atlantic* article about Penguin Random House's purchase of Simon & Schuster, puts it, "the bigger the big publishers get…the more risk averse they become. The less willing they are to lose money…. And then the safer, less boat-rocking, bigger-demographic-satisfying stuff they publish becomes what the marketplace they dominate adapts itself to sell. The risk aversion becomes systemic."[9] Such fears, as we shall see, are not entirely unfounded. For now, however, let us consider two other structural transformations to the publishing landscape that additionally supported the formation of *publishing niches*: the availability of digital printing methods, specifically, short-run digital printing (SRDP) and print-on-demand (POD), and the rise of online bookselling platforms. Both these developments transpired during the 1990s and are part of the renovations to the publishing industry brought about by the so-called digital revolution of the late twentieth century.

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[8] Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 52.
[9] Dennis Johnson, "The Bigger the Publishers, the Blander the Books," *Atlantic*, December 9, 2020.

Understood through the framework of the book supply chain, within which the conglomeration of publishing houses — as the sites of title acquisition — marks a change to the start of the chain, the growth of digital printing and online book retail mark changes to later stages of the chain: manufacturing and retail.

Prior to the advent of digital printing, publishers relied on what is known as offset printing, a lithographic process in which images or text on inked plates are printed onto a rubber cylinder and then transferred (offset) onto paper. Offset printing allows for high print quality and economies of scale: the higher the print run, or copies printed, the lower the unit cost per book. But because initial set-up costs are high, it is not economical for print runs of less than a few hundred copies. On one level, this economic disadvantage of offset printing meant that backlist titles — essentially, titles that are at least a year old — which sell at a lower volume than frontlist or current titles were often allowed to go out of print; the costs of reprinting such titles at lower quantities and stocking them at warehouses would not make financial sense. On another, it meant that publishers were more averse to acquiring specialized titles that were projected to appeal only to smaller audiences and thus sell only limited quantities — a tendency which encouraged "blockbuster books" thinking and in turn hindered the diversity of material available in the literary marketplace.[10]

SRDP and POD services offered workarounds to the economics of offset printing. Both quite simply involve printing onto paper digital files that have been sent by the publisher to the printer. SRDP, as its name suggests, refers to the use of digital printers for small or "short" print runs from anywhere between ten to four hundred copies of a book; for print runs above four hundred, offset printing becomes the more cost-effective method. POD, as its name also

[10] Thompson also offers a more detailed overview of the changes to publishing that digital printing introduced.

suggests, refers to the use of digital printers to print a book "on demand" — that is, when there is a demand for a given title. The POD supplier — the largest of which, globally, is Ingram Content Group's Lightning Source — prints and ships a book directly to the customer in response to an order placed by a customer through a retailer. Unlike SRDP and offset printing methods, POD does not require the stocking of physical copies in a warehouse and allows for single copies to be printed. Together, SRDP and POD services lowered warehouse overhead costs and allowed for a flexibility of print run quantities which additionally lessened the amount of capital a publisher had to tie up in physical stock.

These implications of digital printing proved especially advantageous for small-budget independent presses. Not only did they help ensure the financial viability of such presses, which typically operated on small budgets; they also encouraged their proliferation. While it is impossible to provide an exact number of existing independent presses either in the United States or the United Kingdom, a 2015 *Literary Hub* article indicates that the majority of independent presses were founded around the time digital printing was introduced. Of the twenty-one presses surveyed, five were established in the 1970s, one in the 1980s, six in the 1990s, and nine in the 2000s.[11] Being typically mission-driven or non-profit, independent presses tend to seek out or are willing to take on the more experimental, non-mainstream or specialized works deemed too risky by corporate publishers. By enabling the founding and survival of independent presses, digital printing methods contributed to the development and sustainability of *publishing niches* that served segments of the reading public otherwise sidelined by corporate publishers.

Changes to bookselling infrastructures also supported the formation and existence of *publishing niches.* Around the same time as mergers were sweeping over the publishing industry,

[11] Courtney Gillette, "The Origin Stories of 21 Indie Presses," *Literary Hub*, November 10, 2015.

the locus of book retail activity shifted from small independent bookstores to bookstores located in the shopping malls that sprung up in the wake of suburbanization. These mall stores were eventually overtaken by the book "superstores" of national chain retailers, namely Barnes & Noble and Borders. To turn a profit in spite of real estate costs, however, superstores had to prioritize stocking fast-moving bestseller titles and non-book inventory such as stationary. Shelf space for slower-moving backlist and specialized titles became negligible.

The emergence of Amazon in 1995 and the other online book retailers that followed dramatically reshaped the book retail landscape, reorienting attention to the sales potential of backlist and specialized titles. It's worth recalling here Amazon's original slogan: "Earth's biggest bookstore." While the speed with which it delivered books and the discounts it offered on books played a role in Amazon's rise, the company's early success was largely due to its exploitation of online space as a retail location for books. Because it was not restricted by the costs of physical retail space, Amazon's inventory was huge. That huge inventory in turn enabled Amazon to capitalize on the demand for a vast number of backlist or specialized books which was previously unmet due to the constraints of brick-and-mortar bookstores. Although this demand was lower than the demand for frontlist or mainstream titles, it proved as a whole to be a significant and profitable market.

This business strategy of aggregating and offering to consumers a wide variety of less-popular or harder-to-find products that sell at a lower rate, which runs counter to the approach of offering a limited variety of more popular, high-demand products, was dubbed "the long tail" by former *Wired* editor-in-chief Chris Anderson. Surveying sales data from the media and entertainment industries in the early 2000s, Anderson observes that "[o]ur culture and economy are increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits (mainstream

products and markets) at the head of the demand curve, and moving toward a huge number of niches in the tail" — that is, the "long tail." Key to this shift were advances in digital distribution, search technologies, and broadband penetration; combined, they increased retailer reach and consumer access, and proved that "narrowly targeted goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare."[12] In the case of books, Amazon's pioneering solutions to physical retail constraints both revolutionized book distribution and sales and incentivized booksellers and publishers to unearth and create existing and new *publishing niches*.

So far, I've provided an overview of three transformations to the book business which dramatically altered the structures of the literary marketplace from the late twentieth century onwards. Such transformations — bigger publishing companies, new printing methods, wider bookselling opportunities — must be understood as working in relation to each other to encourage the development of *publishing niches*. The existence and sale of a specialized book, for instance, depends not only on its acquisition by a publisher looking to gain an edge over another publisher, but also on that publisher knowing that they would be able to access the market for that book through online channels as well as print lower quantities to avoid overstock. Such transformations, however, must also be understood as merely the environmental conditions that are favorable to the development of *publishing niches*. We have not considered, in other words, how *publishing niches* themselves come to be. To that end, we will now take a closer look at an industry practice that perhaps inadvertently, but nonetheless undeniably, contributes to the creation of *publishing niches*: comping.

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[12] Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 52.

Comping, in publishing, refers to the practice of comparing a given manuscript to other titles: "comp titles," or "comparative titles." Comparisons of one book to another, certainly, are not limited to the business of publishing — one thinks, for instance, of the comparisons a critic may draw for a review of a newly published book, or those a student of literature performs in response to an essay prompt. The comparisons that are the focus of this section, however, concern those between an unpublished manuscript and already published titles. They are made at any point in a manuscript's life cycle that involves its acquisition by another party, such as when an author queries an agent and when an agent attempts to sell a manuscript to an editor, but they are formalized in publishers' seasonal catalogs that are typically sent to retailers or used at bookfairs. Comp titles in these catalogs are based on those that editors draw up during the acquisitions stage of a manuscript.

To better understand the nature of comping, it is first helpful to conceive of manuscript acquisitions as a process involving acts of judging that occur within what Lucien Karpik, in *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities* (2010), calls a "market of singularities." Markets of singularities are "markets of *singular,* incommensurable products [that] encompass those exchanges governed by the search for a 'good' or the 'right'…fine wine, novel, doctor, lawyer, or consultant."[13] In such a market, the choice of a singular product is made not through "decision," which Karpik defines as a modality of economic choice that relies "primarily on calculation," but instead through judgment, which relies "primarily on qualitative criteria (which does not mean that calculation does not come into the picture)."[14] Choices made through judging are "based on direct comparisons of singular products, on comparison of knowledge provided by

[13] Lucien Karpik, *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*, trans. Nora Scott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3, emphasis original.
[14] Karpik, 35.

judgment devices, and on interaction between the comparison of knowledge and the interpretations stemming from a direct contact appreciative of the products themselves."[15] "Judgment devices," according to Karpik, are essentially cognitive aids that help a consumer navigate a market of singularities. Such devices are developed by various actors including producers, sellers, marketers, mass media, and public authorities, and can be categorized into networks, whether personal, trade, or practitioner; appellations, such as quality labels; cicerones, that is, critics or guides; rankings, which are hierarchized according to a certain criterion; and confluences, which refers to techniques for channeling buyers such as location and store displays.[16]

Among the markets of singularities that Karpik examines in his study is the literary marketplace, in which the choice to purchase one novel over another by a reader results from acts of judging that involve judgment devices such as literary prizes and book reviews. But seeing as Karpik's study is fundamentally about consumer behavior and, specifically, about the ways they make rational choices in the face of incommensurability, I would extend his framework of analysis (as far as literary works are concerned) beyond that of the choices a reader qua consumer makes in a bookstore to include the choices an editor qua consumer makes in acquiring a manuscript. The market of singularities here is thus the marketplace of unpublished manuscripts submitted by agents, and the choice an acquiring editor makes about whether to pursue a particular manuscript likewise involves judgment on their part.

As noted above, Karpik pinpoints three modes of judgment by which a consumer may arrive at a choice in a market of singularities: direct contact with a product, knowledge about a product gained through the use of judgment devices, and direct comparisons between products.

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[15] Karpik, 42.
[16] Karpik, 45-46.

In the marketplace of unpublished manuscripts, direct contact of a product is simply an editor's reading of a submitted manuscript — usually its first fifty pages. The judgment devices an editor draws upon may include the sales figures of an author's previous books (which may be considered, to use Karpik's categorizations, a kind of ranking); the strength of an author's platform, that is, their credentials and visibility (a matter of both appellation and confluence); the status of the agent who submitted the author's manuscript in the first place (in which case the agent is a cicerone); and the opinions and knowledge of colleagues in-house, whether within the editorial department or in the sales, marketing, and publicity departments (an editor's network, in other words). And finally, the direct comparison between products translates as the practice of comping.

Conceptualizing the practice of comping through Karpik's framework helps us understand two characteristics about comping that explain why it is a key process in manuscript acquisitions. First, that it is a type of consumer behavior and as such, aimed not at identifying market competition but rather, at identifying market precedents to minimize risk. Unlike, for instance, the comparisons to their manuscript that a scholar draws in a book or grant proposal in order to distinguish their intervention in a given field, the comparisons that an editor draws during the acquisitions stage are for the purposes of developing projections about the potential of a manuscript. "The logic of comps," as Laura B. McGrath puts it, "is straightforward: *Book A* [the manuscript] *is similar to Book B* [an already published title]. *Because Book B sold so many copies and made so much money, we can assume that Book A will also sell so many copies and make so much money*."[17] While the comparisons between a manuscript and an already published

[17] Laura B. McGrath, *Middlemen: Making Literature in the Age of Multimedia Conglomerates* (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2018), 88, emphasis original.

book may be based on some combination of criteria such as plot, style, genre, voice, subject matter, or argument, and the comp title should have been published within the past three to five years in order to be current, the fundamental criterion for a comp title is that it is a relatively successful title. Selecting comp titles with low sales figures moots the idea of comping, whereas selecting comp titles with wildly high sales figures creates unrealistic expectations. Comping, accordingly, is a kind of risk management in which an editor hedges their investment in a manuscript via models of the manuscript's hypothetical success in the form of similar, already published books.

The second characteristic about comping which Karpik's framework helps us see is that it is a mode of judgment and as such, a way by which value becomes attached to a manuscript. A market of singularities, to recall, is defined by the search for what can be valued as "good" or "right." Insofar as what is "good" for an editor at a profit-oriented trade publishing house is a matter of if and how well the manuscript will sell when published, and "right" a matter of how well the manuscript fits with the publishing house's lists and extant titles in the marketplace, judging the extent to which a manuscript is "good" or "right" depends in part not only on the sales figures of the titles that are comped to the manuscript, but on the existence of comp titles at all. As an editor whom McGrath interviewed observes, "If you can't find any comps, it's not a good sign...it's absolutely going to be a huge factor in how much money you're allowed to offer, especially if it's a debut."[18] The existence and popularity of comp titles thus work to assure an editor that a manuscript is "good" or "right" seeing as comp titles evidence both the presence and the size of an audience for the kind of book that the manuscript will be. The extent to which a manuscript is "good" or "right" is then signaled, as the editor quoted above suggests, by the size

[18] McGrath, *Middlemen*, 100.

of the royalty advance offered to its author; a "good" manuscript may secure its author a five-figure advance; a "great" manuscript, a six-figure advance. Advances are, in other words, an expression in monetary form of a manuscript's value — a value that is in the first place ascribed through comping.

The practice of comping thus aids an editor in making a choice in the marketplace of manuscripts by providing a way to minimize the risks of acquisitions and to assign a value to a manuscript which, because in a sense unfinished, is still of indeterminate value. Granted, there is always some debate about the plausibility and so, the utility, of the practice; as John B. Thompson observes, "[e]veryone knows that there is an element of speciousness in the citing of comparable books."[19] But the more interesting and important concern for our purposes is the implications of comping that exceed its ostensible function of choice-making, namely, the formation of *publishing niches* and their ramifications for authors of color. The very reasons why comping is part and parcel of the acquisitions process are also the reasons why comping creates and hardens the boundaries of *publishing niches*. If, because of the motive to minimize risk, a certain manuscript stands a better chance of being acquired and published when it bears likenesses to certain extant titles, then this reasoning for the publishing of a book builds up over time a specialized market for that kind of book. And given that a manuscript is attached a value, that is, deemed good or right enough to be acquired, on the basis of there being similar titles in the marketplace in the first place, the manuscript's eventual publication represents an addition to the market for those kinds of titles, and it is the continuous addition to the market of titles that resemble one another which develops likewise over time a *publishing niche*.

[19] Thompson, 202.

To be clear, *publishing niches* are not inherently "good" or "bad" for authors of color. But the sketch above of how *publishing niches* are formed through the practice of comping goes toward explaining why, as Viet Thanh Nguyen says, they can be both "opportunities" and "traps" for authors of color. We are now able to see that when Nguyen claims that the *publishing niche* of Asian America is an opportunity for Asian American authors because "the publishing world would be like 'Yeah, that's cool. Now we can market that. Now there is an Asian American audience for that," it is precisely the practice of comping as the foundation of a *publishing niche* to which he refers. The possibilities of minimizing risk and attaching value to a manuscript that comping intends are that which renders a *publishing niche* an opportunity for an author of color. By the same token, Nguyen's claim about *publishing niches* being traps is rooted in the practice of comping and the problems attendant to it. These problems are at heart the problems of comparative thinking which scholars like Rita Felski and Susan S. Friedman have acknowledged. Comparison, they observe, can be "a homogenizing process [which] distorts the uniqueness of the objects being compared, reduces them to variants on a common standard, and relies on a downgrading of certain cultures in relation to others."[20] As a process of comparison, comping is inherently fraught with these same faults. In the next section, we will consider how these faults bear out, as Nguyen suggests, on the kinds of works by authors of color that the publishing industry appears to allow them to publish.

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In a 2020 study by Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente about racial inequalities in the UK trade publishing industry, comping is cited as one of the reasons underlying the lack of diversity in books being published. The challenge comping poses to authors of color is twofold. The first

[20] Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, eds. *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 1.

problem, as publishing professionals whom Saha and van Lente interviewed point out, is the lack of data for titles by authors of color, which hinders the comping and consequently the acquisition of manuscripts by authors of color. Echoing the editor whom McGrath quoted in the previous section, a respondent to Saha and van Lente's study says, "finding a comparison can prove incredibly difficult, or the comparisons might not necessarily have the numbers the editor or sales might want, so it might mean that a book isn't published, cos [sic] there isn't a comparison to go with it." Other respondents, however, recognize that this problem is in fact a "chicken-and-egg situation" — how can an editor comp a manuscript by an author of color if no comp titles exist, and yet how can comp titles for authors of color exist if no manuscripts by such authors are being published — and may be as such merely an excuse editors rely on for not acquiring a manuscript by an author of color.[21]

Whereas this first problem that comping presents to authors of color has to do with preventing them from getting published at all, the second has to do with restricting the kinds of books authors of color are able to publish. This second problem concerns the uncertainty of editors as to whether the racial background of an author should be taken into consideration when comping. An editor to whom Saha and van Lente spoke "criticized the practice of making books by writers of color the 'black' or 'Asian' version of successful books by white authors." For this editor, such comparisons indicate that editors, the majority of whom are white, "need to find a cultural example within [their] own context that makes [them] feel comfortable."[22] In other words, they find the comping of manuscripts by authors of color to published titles by white authors telling of the inability of editors to recognize the specificity of writing by authors of

[21] Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente, *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020), 19.
[22] Saha and van Lente, 18.

color even though doing so may mean resolving the first problem, the seeming dearth of comp titles for manuscripts by authors of color.

This editor's protestations against comping manuscripts by authors of color to "successful books by white authors" resonate with Felski and Friedman's observation that comparison "distorts the uniqueness of the objects being compared [and] reduces them to variants on a common standard." That "common standard," in this case, is writing by white authors. Even though it would appear that comping authors of color to white authors is a meritocratic approach which disregards an author's racial background so that comparisons based on the literary criteria mentioned above may be drawn instead, this approach nonetheless reveals an implicit bias toward writing by white authors since those criteria are set by such writing in the first place.[23] McGrath's dissertation research on the most frequently used comp titles for fiction in the trade publishing industry, based on data gathered from publishers' seasonal catalogs for 2016, shows that such titles, that is, the most "[i]nfluential comp titles — those that will prompt a publisher to make a sizable investment in an author and a book, both in terms of the advance and the marketing budget — have all been written by white authors."[24] A follow-up article McGrath published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that uses data gathered from seasonal catalogs for 2019 shows that 41 out of the top 50 most frequently used comp titles, and 478 out of the top 500, were written by white authors.[25] These figures, McGrath says, suggest that "[f]or a writer of color to be deemed a worthwhile investment by the publishing industry and the literary establishment, they must be favorably and accurately compared to a white writer."[26] Given that

[23] Matthew Salesses's *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* (2021) addresses this issue, with a focus on MFA workshops.
[24] McGrath, *Middlemen*, 117.
[25] Laura B. McGrath, "Comping White," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 21, 2019.
[26] McGrath, *Middlemen*, 117.

comping is a way for value to be attached to a manuscript, comping a manuscript by an author of color to titles by white authors — whose sales figures, to recall, are what qualifies them as comp titles — implies that a manuscript by an author of color may only be valued according to the criteria of titles by white authors that allowed the latter to achieve those sales figures in the first place. As such, the upshot of "comping white," as McGrath calls this phenomenon, is not simply that it makes white editors "feel comfortable"; it also leads to a "homogenization of literary style," encouraging only the publication of books by authors of color that meet a white "standard" and so exacerbating the lack of diversity in books being published.[27]

The need to "comp white" for authors of color in order to get published, however, does not give us a full explanation as to why comping is one of the reasons for the lack of diversity in books being published, nor why *publishing niches* are "traps" for authors of color. The rest of that explanation lies in the seeming solution for "comping white": to comp, instead, authors of color to authors of color. This approach to comping was also resisted by Saha and van Lente's interviewees. A respondent who identified as a person of color "spoke out against how writers of color are comped with other writers of color even though they may share nothing in common other than the same racial background: 'It could be a book about sunflowers, and someone will make the comparison to Reni Eddo-Lodge [a Black British author whose 2017 debut was a non-fiction title about race relations in Britain] and it's like, you're only doing that because it's a book by a black woman and that it's non-fiction."[28] For this editor, the attempt to take into account an author's racial background when comping runs the risk of reducing a manuscript, not to mention its comp titles, to merely their authors' racial identities.

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[27] McGrath, *Middlemen,* 118.
[28] Saha and van Lente, 18.

The comparison of one author of color to another simply on the basis of their sharing identical racial backgrounds has long grated on authors of color themselves. For instance, in a 2010 *Huffington Post* article, the Chinese American author Celeste Ng wrote, "I'm placing a bet now: when I publish my first novel, there's a better-than-even chance that someone out there will call me 'the next Amy Tan.'" Ng goes on to list several novels by Chinese American authors who were indeed compared to works by Amy Tan or another Chinese American author like Maxine Hong Kingston. She additionally notes that "[a] similar fate befalls writers of other minorities…. Black writers get compared to black writers; Jewish writers to Jewish writers; gay writers to gay writers." The reason Ng herself would be called "the next Amy Tan," she hypothesizes, "would not be because — or not primarily because — we have similar themes or subjects or styles. Let's be honest: it would be because we are both Chinese American."[29] Although engaging with the issue of comparison from the angle of post-publication reviews, Ng, like the respondent to Saha and van Lente's study above, is resisting the comparison of one author to another purely on the grounds of racial similarities.

At the time of Ng's writing of this article, Ng had yet to publish either of her novels — *Everything I Never Told You* was released in 2014, and *Little Fires Everywhere*, which was selected by Reese Witherspoon for her book club and later adapted into a television miniseries, in 2017. It turned out that reviewers did not compare Ng's books to Amy Tan's works. *Marie Claire*, for instance, compared *Everything I Never Told You* to Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* on the count of Ng's novel being likewise a "ghostly debut"[30]; *Goop* compared *Little Fires Everywhere* to Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, claiming that Ng's novel "ranks up there

[29] Celeste Ng, "Why I Don't Want to Be the Next Amy Tan," *Huffington Post*, March 18, 2010.
[30] "Praise for *Everything I Never Told You*," *celesteng.com*, https://www.celesteng.com/praise-einty

with all-time great suburbia fiction."[31] Ng's publisher, Penguin Press, likewise generally comped Ng's books to white authors. As McGrath notes in her 2019 *Los Angeles Review of Books* article, *Everything I Never Told You* was comped to titles such as Anton DiSclafani's *The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls*, Lori Roy's *Bent Road*, and Kimberley McCreight's *Reconstructing Amelia*. "Other books about mothers of teenagers and missing girls," observes McGrath.[32] *Little Fires Everywhere* was comped to recent novels by Lauren Groff, Liane Moriarty, Emma Straub, and other white authors. Having her work comped and compared post-publication to titles by authors who are not of Chinese heritage would appear, on the one hand, to satisfy Ng's urging in her article for her books to be compared to others "for literary merit, not for our mutual culture," and for those making comparisons to "focus on the writing itself: the characters, the language, the narrative style."[33] On the other, these comparisons neatly prove McGrath's point that authors of color must "comp white" in order to be published and, for that matter, well-received. "As far as publishers were concerned," McGrath concludes, "Ng was not going to be the Next Amy Tan; she was going to be the Next Reese Witherspoon Adaptation."[34]

Curiously, McGrath fails to note that *Everything I Never Told You* was in fact also comped to the Vietnamese author Duong Thu Huong's *The Zenith.*[35] I mention this omission not to accuse McGrath of cherry-picking her data to make her argument, but rather, to make the

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[31] "Praise for *Little Fires Everywhere*," *celesteng.com*, https://www.celesteng.com/praise-lfe
[32] McGrath, "Comping White," n.p.
[33] Ng, "Why," n.p.
[34] McGrath, "Comping White," n.p.
[35] A *Library Journal* review (available on celesteng.com) additionally compared *Everything I Never Told You* to "prophetic debuts by Ha Jin, Chang-rae Lee, and Chimamanda Adichie" — that is, their novels, respectively, *In the Pond, Native Speaker,* and *Purple Hibiscus*. While Ng's debut was presumably compared to Adichie's because they both feature disintegrating families and are both by minority writers, it was presumably comped and compared to Duong, Jin, and Lee's novels not just because they are all Asian authors, but also because all three of their novels, like Ng's, are stories that turn on Asian male characters who are outwardly taciturn — characters who correspond to the stereotype of the passive Asian.

point that comping does not only create and reinforce expectations about what writing by authors of color should look like in terms of "literary merit"; it also creates and reinforces expectations about what kinds of stories authors of color should tell about their respective communities. Here, the reductiveness of comping a manuscript by an author of color to a title by an author of color is not about reducing an author to their racial identity, as Saha and van Lente's respondent worries, but about reducing the variety stories that authors of color would have to tell to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would call a "single story."[36] As Ng herself observes in her article, "[c]omparing Asian writers mainly to other Asian writers implies that we're all telling the same story — a disappointingly reductive view."[37] Ng's debut, presumably, was comped to Duong's novel not only because they are both female Asian authors, but also because both their novels are stories that turn on Asian male characters who are seemingly helpless. One could thus make the argument that Ng's debut was acquired since it told a story involving an Asian man that did not diverge from accepted narratives, if not stereotypes, about Asian men that, when published, sold well enough.

That Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* was comped to Duong Thu Huong's *The Zenith* does not take away from McGrath's argument that Ng's debut was most likely acquired because it met "white" literary criteria, and that "comping white" increases the chances of publication for an author of color. Instead, it indicates another way by which comping hinders the diversity of books being published that is obscured by the limitations of McGrath's dataset even as her research is also concerned with the homogeneity of books published. McGrath, to recall, had focused her data-mining around the question of what comp titles for fiction have been the most influential. As she put it in her *LARB* article, "I wanted to know which comps get cited most

[36] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The danger of a single story," *TEDGlobal2009*, July 2009, n.p.
[37] Ng, "Why," n.p.

frequently (and by extension, communicate high value)."[38] What McGrath did not take into account, however, was that the majority of fiction titles published in the United States are by white authors. Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek's research into the number of current authors of color published by major houses (Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, Doubleday, HarperCollins, and Macmillan) shows that 95 percent of the books out of a dataset of 7,124 books published between 1950 and 2018 are by white authors.[39] In his monograph, So shows that 97 percent of the authors published between 1950 and 2000 by the biggest publishing house, Penguin Random House, are white, and that 98 percent of novelists on bestsellers lists for the same period are white. As So notes, these percentages are all the more striking seeing as white people represented 75.1 percent of the U.S. population in 2000, and 60 percent in 2018.[40] Given these figures, and given the focus of McGrath's data collection efforts, McGrath would not have arrived at any other conclusion than that of the criteria for acquisition being set by "white writing" — the likelihood of influential comp titles being written by white authors was bound to be higher simply because the overwhelming majority of books that are being published are by white authors. Because McGrath's dataset cannot but lead to this conclusion, it cannot offer any other explanation for the lack of diversity in books being published apart from that of authors of color needing to "comp white."

What happens if, instead of looking at the most influential titles, we looked simply at the comp titles for manuscripts by authors of color? The table below shows the comp titles of five novels by Asian American authors that were published within the past five years by an imprint at

[38] McGrath, "Comping White," n.p.
[39] Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek, "Just How White Is the Book Industry?" *New York Times*, December 11, 2020.
[40] Richard Jean So, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 2-3.

one of the Big Five houses. All five are categorized as adult literary fiction; all five are also by authors of different ethnicities. Three of the novels are debuts, but all were reviewed in major media outlets like *NPR* and the *New York Times,* appeared on various "best books of the year" lists, and were nominated for or won various prizes.[41]

Table 1: Sample of comp titles for novels by Asian or Asian American authors published within the last five years[42]

Title	Comp Titles
The Association of Small Bombs (2016), by Karan Mahajan. This is Mahajan's second novel.	• *The Lowland* (2013) Jhumpa Lahiri (Asian/Bengali) • *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) Mohsin Hamid (Asian/Pakistani)
Pachinko (2017), by Min Jin Lee (Korean). This is Lee's second novel.	• *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) Amy Tan (Asian/Chinese) • *The Lowland* (2013) Jhumpa Lahiri (Asian/Bengali) • *China Dolls* (2014) Lisa See (Asian/Chinese)
America Is Not the Heart (2018), by Elaine Castillo (Filipino) This is Castillo's first novel.	• *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) Junot Díaz (Latin American/Dominican) • *Americanah* (2013) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (African/Nigerian) • *We Need New Names* (2014) NoViolet Bulawayo (African/Zimbabwean) • *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016) Madeleine Thien (Asian/Hong Kongese-Malaysian) • *What We Lose* (2017) • Zinzi Clemons (Asian/South African)

[41] I have omitted from Mahajan's comp titles Mahajan's first novel, *Family Planning* (2008), and from Lee's comp titles her first novel, *Free Food for Millionaires* (2007). Authors who are publishing their second or later novels tend to be comped to their debuts or other previous novels; this practice is standard across the industry, as it allows publishers to consider the sales of an author's previous books as a measure of potential success.

[42] These comp titles are drawn from edelweiss.plus, a cataloging service used by the industry.

Table 1 (continued)

Title	Comp Titles
The Unpassing (2019), by Chia-Chia Lin (Taiwanese). This is Lin's first novel.	• *Girl in Translation* (2010) Jean Kwok (Asian/Hong Kongese) • *Snow Hunters* (2013) Paul Yoon (Asian/Korean) • *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) Celeste Ng (Asian/Chinese) • *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2014) Cristina Henríquez (Latin American/Panamanian) • *Make Your Home Among Strangers* (2015) Jennine Capó Crucet (Latin American/Cuban) • *Home Fire* (2017) Kamila Shamsie (Asian/Pakistani) • *History of Wolves* (2017) Emily Fridlund (white/Swedish)
How Much of These Hills Is Gold (2020), by C. Pam Zhang (Chinese). This is Zhang's first novel.	• *Homegoing* (2016) Yaa Gyasi (African/Ghanian) • *The Underground Railroad* (2016) Colson Whitehead (American/African American) • *Pachinko* (2017) Min Jin Lee (Asian/Korean) • *Exit West* (2017) Mohsin Hamid (Asian/Pakistani)

There are several observations in terms of authorial ethnicity or racial background that we may draw from the table above. First, only Chia-Chia Lin's *The Unpassing* was comped to a title by a white author, Emily Fridlund's *History of Wolves*. Second, Castillo, Lin, and Zhang's novels were comped to titles by Latin American, African American, or African authors in addition to authors of Asian heritage. And finally, only Karan Mahajan and Min Jin Lee's novels were comped to titles by authors who would be considered Asian even if they are not of the same ethnicity.

We may also deduce the reasons behind the selection of comp titles for these five novels. Broadly speaking, the comp titles seem to have been chosen because they bear thematic similarities to a given novel and were written by authors who would be considered minorities. Zhang's novel appears to have been comped to titles that likewise deal with refugee movement and finding a sense of belonging in a new place. Lin's novel appears to have been comped to titles that likewise deal with the sense of displacement that comes with immigration; the exception being Fridlund's novel, which may have been comped to Lin's because both are set in the wilderness and concern the death of a young boy. Castillo's novel appears to have been comped to titles that likewise deal with immigrant communities and the trauma of political upheaval that took place in home countries. Lee's novel appears to have been comped to titles that likewise deal with historical events, family relations, and themes of immigration. And Mahajan's novel appears to have been comped to titles that likewise deal with political radicalization and societal change in South Asia.

While certainly incomplete, the dataset above shows that manuscripts by authors of color do not always have to be comped to titles by white authors in order to be published. In fact, it seems rather to be the case that such manuscripts are comped not or not only to titles by authors of the same racial background or ethnicity, but also to titles by authors who would be considered minority authors. Thus, if the argument that comping contributes to the lack of diversity in published books were to hold, it would be because authors of color were comped to authors of color in general, rather than to authors of the same racial background.

Again, this mode of comping does not necessarily disprove McGrath's point that manuscripts by authors of color may stand a better chance of being acquired if they comp to titles by white authors. Apart from Ng's books, other titles by Asian authors which were

published by one of the Big Five and which have "comped white" include *Private Citizens* (2016), by the Thai American author Tony Tulathimutte; *Goodbye, Vitamin* (2017), by the Malaysian American author Rachel Khong; *Severance* (2018), by the Chinese American author Ling Ma; *Trust Exercise* (2019), by the Korean American author Susan Choi; and *New Waves* (2020), by the Vietnamese American author Kevin Nguyen. Nonetheless, it is striking that the two most successful novels in the table above (to the extent that "success" is measured by being shortlisted for the National Book Award and being named as one of the *New York Times Book Review*'s "Top Ten Books" of the year), Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* and Lee's *Pachinko*, were both comped strictly to authors of Asian heritage. Along with the fact that all five of the novels in the table above were lauded in some way and reviewed by major media outlets, it would seem that publication and national recognition for an Asian author, or for a minority author more broadly, are predicated on comping to titles by Asian authors or minority authors that, crucially, bear the same thematic concerns.

Comping, Saha and van Lente observe, "privilege[s] books that repeat certain patterns and established authors, making it harder for new voices."[43] As we have seen, this observation applies whether an editor comps a manuscript by an author of color to a white author, or to an author who, if not of the same racial background, is at least also considered a minority author. For the former approach, those "certain patterns and established authors" are "patterns" from titles by white authors, those "established authors" white authors. For the latter approach, these "patterns" are from titles by other authors of color, these "established authors," successful authors of color. Put another way, and to use Felski and Friedman's terms once more, the "common standard" to which a manuscript by an author of color is held is not writing by white

[43] Saha and van Lente, 3.

authors, as would be the case for the former approach. Rather, it is writing by other authors of color or, more accurately, writing by other authors of color that have been accepted as such by a publishing industry and a reading public that is predominantly white. We might thus think of the need for authors of color to meet this "common standard" in order to get published as a kind of "comping white," as McGrath would say, insofar as it is still a white audience who determines what kinds of stories authors of color are deemed publishable. But the difference between "comping white" as McGrath understands it and "comping white" in this case is that the success of an author of color depends not on telling a story like a white author would, or telling stories that a white author would tell, but telling a story about communities of color which are the same as those previously told by other authors of color and which white audiences have come to expect from authors of color.

It is because of this caveat to success for a minority author that there is a lack of diversity in books being published, and why *publishing niches* become, in Viet Thanh Nguyen's words, a "trap." To recall, Nguyen had reasoned during the Q&A session of the 2017 USC public conversation with John Cho that the *niche* of "Asian America" is a "trap" because "the publishing world have their stereotypes of what it is that Asian American literature should be." In his monograph *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016), he observes that "[m]inority writers know they are most easily heard in America when they speak about the historical events that defined their populations. These writers can speak of something else, but they are rewarded for speaking about their history and their race." Indeed, "[e]ach racially defined ethnic group in the United States," he says,

> gets its own notable history for which it is remembered by Americans. Blacks get slavery and the plantation, and the legacies they leave in blackness and the ghetto. Latinos are of

> the Americas but are neither North American nor white (at least the Latinos that come first to the American mind), their lives supposedly marked by barrios and the border. Native Americans get genocide, dispossession, and the reservation. Vietnamese Americans get the war.[44]

Having examined the comp titles for several recent novels by Asian American authors, we are now able to understand precisely how those "stereotypes," those "notable histor[ie]s for which each racial group is "remembered," emerge and are reinforced in the American imagination: through the practice of comping. Even as *publishing niches* for minority authors like that of Asian American literature "reward" minority authors, that is, are opportunities for them, they are at the same time a trap because the practice of comping, which constitutes the foundations of a *publishing niche* in the first place, restricts the diversity of stories a minority author, Asian American or otherwise, "gets" to tell. As a practice that not only enables publishers to assign value to a manuscript but also to minimize risk, comping encourages the acquisition and publication of books by minority authors that meet a publisher's and indeed, the public's, expectations about what minority stories should look like. As a consequence, the minority writing that is being published by the biggest houses, and therefore reaching the widest possible audience because of available marketing and publicity resources, is writing that is confined to the same tropes. The diversity seemingly promised by the proliferation of *publishing niches*, a proliferation enabled by the conglomeration of the publishing industry, digital printing methods, and new distribution channels, remains elusive.

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[44] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 200-201.

Up till this point, we've examined the reason that *publishing niches* may be problematic: the practice of comping by which they are formed homogenize narratives about communities of color. The implications of this particular form of homogenization have been well documented, perhaps most famously by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her 2009 TEDGlobal talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Adichie points out that the repetition of certain stories about communities of color — stories that are often negative in some way — runs the risk of developing stereotypes that simplify a community. "[S]how a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become," she says. This formulation of a "single story" to Adichie is a matter of "power," which she defines as "the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." Such a "definitive story," built through the rehearsal of essentializing differences, is worrisome for Adichie because "it makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult." But no one person or place is made up of a "single story," Adichie insists, recounting various anecdotes about Africans to illustrate that Africa and its peoples are not just a "single story of catastrophe." And, as she reminds her audience, "it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all the stories of that place and that person."[45]

For Nirvana Tanoukhi, this last assertion amounts to Adichie placing the responsibility of averting "the danger of a single story" on the reader instead of the writer. If a "proper" grasp of a place or a person requires "engaging with all the stories of that place and that person," then Adichie, Tanoukhi argues, is not asking the writer to take more care in their representations of a place or a people. Rather, she is asking the reader to "commit to accumulating multiple accounts of a place and its people." Moreover, if the creation of a "single story" boils down to who has the

[45] Adichie, "Danger," n.p.

power to do so, then "writing more, writing their own stories, does not protect Africans from simplification or misrepresentation."[46] And indeed, Adichie's admission that she "did not have a single story of America" because she "had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and Gaitskill"[47] would appear to prove Tanoukhi's point.

Yet what Adichie is also saying here is that a "single story" about a place like Africa exists because readers aren't able to "have" a multiplicity of stories about Africa. That inability to "have" more than just the "single story" of Africa has to do with those with power who determine just exactly which and how many stories readers get to "have" about a place or a people in the first place — namely, the publishing industry that, as we have seen, operates on the logic of repeating past successes in order to minimize risk and in the process creates *publishing niches*. So in their own ways, both Tanoukhi and Adichie are pointing to the same issue at hand: if "writing more, writing their own stories," won't "protect" Africans from a "single story," it is because of the way the publishing industry discards those "many stories" in favor of a "single story"; if it is up to readers to "engag[e] with all the stories" of a place or a person, they are nonetheless unable to do so for the same reason.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's notion of "narrative scarcity" is Adichie's "single story" by another name. "Narrative scarcity," he explains in a 2018 talk at Google, "means very few of the stories out there are about you, whoever you happen to be, whatever kind of minority you happen to be coming from." In contrast, "[n]arrative plenitude is when almost all the stories are about you," such that "you can take it for granted that some fundamental part of who you are is being shown to you in the stories that you encounter."[48] If "single story" means for Adichie "one story" not so

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[46] Nirvana Tanoukhi, "The Movement of Specificity," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013), 669.
[47] Adichie, "Danger," n.p.
[48] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Viet Thanh Nguyen and Vu Tran: 'Narrative Plenitude,' Talk at Google," *Viet Thanh Nguyen*, October 11, 2018.

much in terms of quantity but in terms of kind, "narrative scarcity" for Nguyen similarly means "a few stories" not so much in terms of quantity but in terms of kinds of stories. Additionally, if the making of a "single story" for Adichie is in the hands of those with power, Nguyen likewise recognizes that the situation of "narrative scarcity" is due to those with power. As we've seen with his comments about the *niche* of Asian America as a "trap," and as he puts it in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "in an economy of narrative scarcity and inequity, the ones with real power are the outsiders (to the ethnic literature) who are the insiders of the literary industry: agents, editors, publishers, reviewers, critics."[49] Since both the paradigms of "a single story" and "narrative scarcity" emerge through the process of comping, they may both be considered upshots of *publishing niches*.

Unlike Adichie, however, Nguyen is not so much concerned with the implications of homogenous narratives about communities of color for readers than for writing by authors of color — or more precisely, the implications of the demand for such narratives on the part of those with power for writing by authors of color. An "economy of narrative scarcity," Nguyen says, encourages certain generic features in the writing by authors of color that concern their own communities. These features include "translation within the story, when the author or the narrator explains some feature of the ethnic community, such as its language, food, customs, or history," and an "affirmation," usually "implicit," of "the American Dream, the American way, and American exceptionalism, the belief that no matter how bad it was over there, things are better here."[50] Writing by authors of color that focus on their own communities also tends to involve "[t]he movement from the homeland to the adopted land, as refugees and exiles, and finally the return and the reconciliation [with the homeland]," or is "set in ethnic enclaves such

[49] Nguyen, *Nothing*, 203-4.
[50] Nguyen, *Nothing*, 204.

as Little Saigon."[51] Such features — which, notably, are applicable in one way or another to any of the five titles and their comp titles in the previous section's table — are what Nguyen at the USC conversation called the publishing world's "stereotypes" of Asian American literature, if not literature by authors of color more broadly. They are the "common standards" to which manuscripts by authors of color are comped, the specializations that make up the *publishing niche* of literature by authors of color.

These generic features are imbricated with another implication of the demand for homogenous narratives by authors of color about communities of color: the supposed authenticity of their work. Adichie gestures toward the presumed need for certain generic features in a work by an author of color, features which are the consequence of "a single story," in order for that work to be considered authentic. She recounts an anecdote about a professor of hers who informed her that her novel "was not 'authentically African.'" "The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man," she says. "My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African."[52] Nguyen likewise suggests that such generic features are perceived to be necessary for a work by a minority author to be deemed "authentic." Seeing as a work bearing these generic features means that that work already involves characters who are of the author of color's own community, "an ethnic author using ethnic characters," Nguyen observes, therefore "somehow appears more 'authentic' than a nonethnic author doing the same." For Nguyen, though, the issue with "authenticity" is not whether a work with these generic features is or is not "authentic" enough, but that such signs of "authenticity" imply that a minority author is not artistic, not a creative. "[A]n ethnic writer writing about her ethnic people is 'natural' but also limited,"

[51] Nguyen, *Nothing*, 206.
[52] Adichie, "Danger," n.p.

Nguyen says, "whereas a writer writing about a population he or she does not belong to may be appropriating but is also being artistic in a way that the ethnic writer is not." Nguyen points to "the regard that [Robert Olin] Butler received" for his collection of stories *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), in which Butler, a white man, writes from the perspective of a number of Vietnamese characters.[53]

Being recognized as authentic, Nguyen is thus saying, comes at the cost of being recognized as creative (even though, of course, that authenticity is manufactured and so as artistic or creative an act on the part of the author of color as writing from the perspective of characters of color is thought to be on the part of the white author). And seeing as authenticity is frequently touted as an attribute of works situated within the *publishing niche* of writing by authors of color — it is a quality, as noted above, that depends on the generic features of such writing which are at the same time those that comprise the *publishing niche* of writing by authors of color — it is this apparent cost of authenticity which explains the potential of the term *niche* when used as an adjective, if not the epithet *niche author*, to be taken as a slur for authors of color. Take, for example, the use of *niche* in the essayist and poet Cathy Park Hong's article "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," which examines the dismissal by avant-garde poets of poetry that centers issues of race. Hong points out that to be classified as an "identity politics poet," that is, a poet whose work "is always 'just about race,'" is apparently to be "niche-focused." That Hong lists "niche-focused" alongside other descriptions such as "anti-intellectual," "without literary merit," "no complexity," "used as bait by market forces'

[53] Nguyen, *Nothing*, 210.

calculated branding of boutique liberalism,"[54] and so forth suggests that *niche* can be a derogatory term for poets of color that refers to a lack of artistic craft or creativity.

Hong's insinuation that *niche* is a slight for the poet of color like her whose works confront issues of race may be applied to authors of color whose works likewise deal with communities or characters of color. If *niche author* is shorthand for an author whose works may be categorized as part of a *publishing niche*, the epithet may as such be understood as a pejorative not only because, as we saw in Chapter One, it supposedly refers to an author who writes out of commercial or social motivations or who is a "one-trick pony." It is also because *niche author* seems to imply that an author is not creative, that their works are merely molded by the demands of the publishing industry or their life circumstances (as opposed to an author who, as Conrad says, "make[s] material from [one's] own life's incidents arranged, combined, colored for artistic purposes" — an act of creativity that the concept of the *authorial niche*, as I argued in Chapter One, captures and insists on). To bring up, once more, Angelina Mas's protestations in the World Literature Forum discussion against the labeling of Louise Erdrich as a *niche writer*: "I have a hard time thinking of Erdrich as a niche writer…she deals not just with indigenous problems such as sovereignty or the depiction of the human relation to the landscape, in a *Plague of Doves*, but in doing so with subtlety and grace." The "subtlety and grace" with which Erdrich, for Angelina Mas at least, wrote *Plague of Doves* is to them the craft and creativity that *niche authors* or *niche writers* are assumed to lack by virtue of being authors who write authentically about their communities — hence their resistance to the use of the epithet for Erdrich. In short, to the extent that authenticity is a supposed characteristic of works within the *publishing niche* of writing by authors of color, and to the extent that to be considered authentic for an author of

[54] Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant Garde," *Arcade: Literature, the Humanities, and the World*, November 3, 2014.

color is to also be considered without creativity, then to be described as *niche* or labeled as a *niche author* is for the author of color is to be deemed an author without craft or creativity, without literary merit.

Interestingly, Hong's article goes on to frame the aversion to poetry that addresses issues of race as a ghettoization of such poetry. "[S]ome of us (and here I use the first person plural loosely)," Hong observes, "dread the possibility of being tarred as an 'identity politics' poet, and perhaps to such a degree that it's turned into our own detriment: we may overly exercise a form of self-restraint, scraping our writing of explicitly toxic racial matter, so we won't be exiled to *that* ghetto.[55] To be an "identity politics poet" is thus not only to risk being labeled as "niche-focused," but also to risk being ghettoized. Hong's use of both *niche* and "ghetto" in relation to poets and, by extension, authors of color, seems to suggest that the two terms, or more accurately, a *publishing niche* and a literary ghetto, are highly similar. Both concepts, certainly, draw on spatial terminology that denotes a demarcated or bounded space. And while Hong's article demonstrates that both may also be used in reference to authors or works by authors of color, both may also be used in reference to other kinds of works. We may think of a *publishing niche* for guides to hiking with one's dog in state parks, for instance, and even though it is well-known that the term "ghetto" was originally and continues to be a heavily racialized term, contemporary popular discourse has come to employ it in reference to genre fiction, women's stories, queer writing, and so forth as well.[56]

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[55] Hong, "Delusions," n.p.

[56] For instance, a recent retrospective on the *New York Times Book Review*'s legacy, published on the occasion of its 125th anniversary, observes that "[f]or years the novelist Anthony Burgess, chief fiction reviewer of *The Observer* in London, was said to decide which women would be permitted to leave the 'ghetto' of female writing" (Parul Sehgal, "Reviewing the Book Review," *New York Times*, February 26, 2021). Another instance: an obituary for Ursula K. LeGuin observes that "LeGuin was a strong champion of the intellectual strength of science fiction and fantasy at a time when they were often relegated without

Yet a *publishing niche* and a literary ghetto, to state the obvious, are concepts that differ. How? For starters, the former is based on an architectural term, the latter geographical. This difference may not seem important, but it does allow us to conceive of the formation of the demarcated spaces which each of these concepts refer to in different ways. Whereas a *niche* can be thought of as a demarcated space that is formed through the segmentation of a given structure, a ghetto can be thought of as one that is formed through the segregation of a given terrain. The former is a process of division, the latter one of exclusion. So we might think of a *niche* as a space that is part of a larger space, and a ghetto that is outside of that space altogether. This exclusionary quality of the ghetto goes toward explaining why, unlike *niche,* it is always used as a pejorative. But perhaps the key reason that the term ghetto always carries a negative connotation is because it is fundamentally a space that is constructed through the imposition of external factors. In her exploration of the use of ghetto in relation to Asian American communities, Yoonmee Chang observes that "[t]he causes of ghettoization are structural. Ghettoization is not caused by the individuals who are ghettoized, nor is it overcome by their efforts alone…. Ghettoization 'happens' to [ghetto dwellers], suggesting that they are passive victims, shadow people living in the economic and spatial margins of society with little power to do otherwise."[57] This mode of formation stands in contrast to that of the *niche.* A *niche,* as I previously argued, is formed through the instrumentalization of surrounding circumstances, which in turn implies an agency for the occupant of a *niche* that is lacking, as Chang says, for the ghetto dweller. Thus while it is possible to imagine an author thriving in a *publishing niche* (or

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a thought to the realm of the unserious 'genre ghetto'" (Constance Grady, "Ursula K. LeGuin, legendary science fiction and fantasy author, is dead at 88," *Vox*, January 24, 2018).

[57] Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 29.

their *authorial niche*, for that matter), the same cannot necessarily be said for an author that is "ghettoized."

That said, a *publishing niche* and a literary ghetto are frequently used interchangeably especially when it comes to works by authors of color not only because they both refer to a bounded space but because of the very reasons that *publishing niches* are considered problematic. *Publishing niches*, as we have seen, encourage the homogenization of narratives by authors of color, which in turn encourages the essentialization of racial-cultural differences. A *publishing niche*, in other words, may posit race and culture as irreducible differences. Likewise the literary ghetto. Robert Park's early twentieth-century model of ghettoization argues that ghetto dwellers may escape the ghetto if they assimilate into mainstream, namely white, society. This argument nonetheless implies that ghetto dwellers are ghetto dwellers in the first place because of racial-cultural differences that are irreducible and that must be divested of in order to leave the ghetto. While Park's model has since been challenged by more contemporary studies, the concept of the ghetto is nonetheless still primarily defined by the essentialization of racial-cultural differences. As Chang puts it, "[t]he ghetto is also a space formed in response to structural, racial-cultural differences."[58] It is this insistence on race and culture as irreducible differences which may characterize a *publishing niche* and which always characterizes the literary ghetto that explains why the two concepts appear synonymous. But since a *publishing niche* does not always carry a negative connotation, we may think of a literary ghetto as a degenerate form of a *publishing niche*, that is, a concept that captures only the negative aspects of a *publishing niche.*

[58] Chang, 29.

Now, in consideration of the homogenization of stories about communities of color that *publishing niches* can perpetuate, and the implications of that for both readers and writers, *publishing niches* would appear to be a significantly problematic aspect of the contemporary literary landscape. In fact, the notion of a specialized market for non-mainstream books poses problems for booksellers too. In a 2020 the *New York Times* article about Black publishing professionals, for instance, Kori Wilson, the operations manager of the African diasporic literature-focused Sisters Uptown Bookstore, remarks on the challenges of being "considered a niche in the [bookselling] business." "With the larger publishing houses, when they would have their book tours for upcoming seasonal releases, we weren't part of that group," Wilson says.[59] From the perspective of a bookseller, working within a specialized market for non-mainstream books bears the risk of losing out on potentially profitable opportunities because of a perceived lack of customer reach.

Nonetheless, there are what we may think of as upsides to *publishing niches.* To recall Nguyen's point once more, *publishing niches* can be "opportunities" for Asian American authors, if not authors of color more broadly, insofar as they enable at the very least such authors, by virtue of there being precedents, to make it past the gatekeepers of the publishing industry. Moreover, the very existence of a retailer like Sisters Uptown Bookstore already implies some potential to *publishing niches*. Wilson acknowledges that being a retailer of specialized books "did make a difference as far as notoriety and being recognized in the industry as an independent bookseller [are concerned]."[60] There is a distinctiveness of identity, Wilson is saying, which *publishing niches* allow to be claimed (and which, as we saw in Chapter One, is

[59] Kori Wilson, "'A Conflicted Cultural Force': What It's Like to Be Black in Publishing," interviews by Concepción de Leon, Alexandra Alter, Elizabeth A. Harris, and Joumana Khatib, *New York Times*, July 1, 2020.
[60] Wilson, n.p.

inherent to the concept of the *niche*) even though, as Adichie argues, that very same distinctiveness, hardened through the way *publishing niches* are formed, hinders "our recognition of our equal humanity." Granted, working within a *publishing niche* may not be immensely profitable for Wilson as a bookseller. But there is evidence to suggest that *publishing niches* do provide financial rewards for publishers. A 1996 *New York Times* article tellingly titled "Small Presses Thrive in the Diversity Niche," for instance, describes the financial and symbolic successes reaped by small publishers that specialize in multicultural children's books. The article additionally points out that "while some major publishers were pioneering in this area [of multicultural children's books] three decades ago, it is now a niche few can afford to ignore."[61] And while a 2001 the *New York Times* article notes that "the creation of specialized imprints for blacks within several mainstream houses risks ghettoizing new black authors," that same observation suggests, and as the article goes on to describe, that the *publishing niche* of African American writing was lucrative enough in the first place for mainstream houses to form such "specialized imprints."[62]

These articles indicate that *publishing niches* like those of multicultural children's literature and African American writing are typically formed in the first place by small, independent, and often non-profit publishers. That major corporate publishers have also moved into producing books which fall within these *publishing niches* suggests that *publishing niches* and the small publishers that develop them can play a role in effecting changes to the broader literary landscape — in this instance, prompting major publishers to pay attention to minority writing, and thereby increasing the visibility of minority writing as well as opening up more

[61] Julie Lew, "Small Presses Thrive in the Diversity Niche," *New York Times*, October 14, 1996.
[62] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Cashing in on Black Readers; Book Niche Is Seen Keeping Writers Outside the Mainstream," *New York Times*, July 16, 2001.

venues for their publication. As Anita Diggs, former director of one of the "specialized imprints" mentioned in the 2001 the *New York Times* article above, puts it, "I am doing 22 ethnic books a year. If Ballantine did not have this imprint, do you think it would be doing 22 ethnic books a year? Neither do I."[63] Such changes to the literary landscape can be explained, of course, as motivated by the desire of corporate publishers to increase profits and spread risks out through capitalizing on *publishing niches.* But there is nevertheless a theoretical explanation for these changes that is based on the concept of the *niche* itself — what evolutionary biologists call *niche construction theory*, which we explored briefly in the previous chapter. In the next and final section, we will examine more closely the tenets of *niche construction theory* and their applicability to the ecosystem, so to speak, of publishing.

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Niche construction theory, to recall, refers to the idea that organisms not only instrumentalize but also modify their environmental conditions in the formation of their *niches* (more precisely, what I have called *ecological niches*), and that such modifications contribute in the long term to evolutionary change both at organism and ecosystemic levels. The theory finds its roots in the work of the evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin. Lewontin argued in the 1980s that organisms, rather than passively adapting to their environmental conditions, are instead actively modifying these conditions to the degree that natural selection pressures are also modified. Lewontin's work, however, was understood more as part of his critique of adaptationism, and his larger point that environmental modification by organisms possess evolutionary consequences was at the time sidelined. It was the biologist F. John Odling-Smee who was the first to later develop Lewontin's insight on the evolutionary potential of organism-led environmental

[63] Kirkpatrick, n.p.

modification and who coined the term *niche construction*, which emphasizes that the concept of an *ecological niche* involves an organism's interaction with its environment that is active and not merely reactive.[64]

As we saw in Chapter One, this mode of interaction between an organism and an environment is foundational to what I called an *authorial niche.* It is also the premise upon which proponents of *niche construction theory* are able to claim that *niche construction* revises standard evolutionary theory. For our purposes, we will focus on the two main aspects of standard evolutionary theory that *niche construction theory* alters. First, inheritance system. Standard evolutionary theory holds that evolution occurs only through genetic inheritance, wherein natural selection influences which individual organisms survive and replicate their genes in their offspring. *Niche construction theory*, however, holds that evolution also occurs through what Odling-Smee called "ecological inheritance." Ecological inheritance refers to the notion that the modifications to their environmental conditions caused by organisms (their *niche constructions*) are inherited by subsequent generations, thus affecting their evolution. As a process that depends "merely on the persistence, between generations, of whatever physical changes are caused by ancestral organisms in the local selective environment of their descendants," ecological inheritance "more closely resembles the inheritance of territory or property than it does the inheritance of genes."[65] An example of ecological inheritance influencing an organism's evolution is that of earthworm physiology. Earthworms are originally freshwater creatures. To survive in a terrestrial environment, they carry out various activities such as tunneling and eliminating calcite in soil, activities which dramatically change soil

[64] Kevin Laland, Blake Matthews, and Marcus W. Feldman, "An introduction to niche construction theory," *Evolutionary Ecology* 30 (2016): 191.
[65] Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman, 13.

structure and chemistry over multiple generations of earthworms. These changes in turn influence the persistence of some characteristics of earthworms that are the legacy of their freshwater ancestry, like the structure of their skin and their kidneys.[66] The argument for proponents of *niche construction theory* is thus that ecological inheritance — the changes made to the environmental conditions by previous generations of earthworms in the construction of the earthworms's *niche* — along with genetic inheritance explains the phenotypical and behavioral characteristics of organisms like earthworms.

The second aspect of standard evolutionary theory that *niche construction theory* revises concerns the extent to which evolutionary change within an ecosystem can be accounted for. A theory of evolution based only on the notion of genetic inheritance means that evolutionary changes for a given organism and its given surroundings are the result only of evolutionary changes at the level of that organism itself which may in turn bring about changes to that organism's surroundings. A theory of evolution that includes the notion of ecological inheritance, however, means that the evolutionary changes for an organism and an ecosystem are also the result of environmental modifications caused by another organism. As Odling-Smee and his co-authors Kevin N. Laland and Marcus W. Feldman observe, "any organism's selective environment is potentially modifiable by any other organism that happens to be a neighbor or that shares, or that has previously shared, some common physical aspect of a mutual environment or that is capable of exerting an indirect influence by affecting the flow of energy or materials through that environment."[67] To go back to the example of earthworms: their activities, as is well-known, affect plant growth by contributing to soil stability, aeration, drainage, and so

[66] Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman, 11-12.
[67] Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman, 15-16.

forth.[68] The *niche construction* activities of one organism, in other words, can affect not only the evolutionary trajectory of that organism's descendants, but also those of other organisms and the ecosystem more broadly.

Given the especial capacities of humans to modify their environmental conditions, it's perhaps no surprise that *niche construction theory* has proven fertile in the social sciences. Biological anthropologists and archaeologists have used it to theorize the evolution of certain human genetic features or cognitive capabilities as well as to account for the transmission or changes to sociocultural practices across generations.[69] The basic idea here is that certain cultural activities, construed as acts of *niche construction*, may modify human physical or sociocultural environmental conditions which in turn affect selection processes that determine the reproduction of human genes or sociocultural practices over time. In the rest of this section, I extend this idea to the realm of the publishing industry to offer an account of several changes to the composition of the post-World War II American literary landscape that assumes the aforementioned literary landscape to be the equivalent of a sociocultural environment, a publisher that of an "organism," a *publishing niche* that of an *ecological niche*, and the development of a *publishing niche* to involve acts of *niche construction* by a publisher (acts which include comping). While one may argue that any given publisher's *niche construction* activities played a role in the evolution of this literary landscape, I take as a case study the "organism" of Grove Press, an independent publisher which effected several important changes to the American literary landscape during the 1950s and 1960s. I then consider Grove's

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[68] Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman, 11.

[69] Perhaps the most frequently cited example is that of dairy-farming which, understood as a *niche construction* activity, creates natural selection pressures that favor the reproduction of genes for adult lactose absorption. See Odling-Smee, Laland, and Feldman, 247-48. For more examples, see Jeremy Kendal, Jamshid J. Tehrani, and John Odling-Smee, "Human niche construction in interdisciplinary focus" (2011).

publication of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* as a *niche construction* activity that not only enables Grove to sustain its *publishing niche*, but may also effect changes to the landscapes of Asian American and American literature.

Grove Press was established by John Balcomb and Robert Phelps in 1947. At the time of its purchase in 1951 by Barney Rosset, the son of a successful Chicago investment banker, its list consisted merely of three reprints — Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, *The Verse in English of Richard Crashaw*, and *The Selected Writings of the Ingenious Mrs. Aphra Ben*. Over the next two decades, amidst the wave of conglomerations sweeping over the industry, Rosset turned Grove Press into a mid-size independent press. By 1967, it had over a thousand titles under its imprimatur, and Rosset had made the company public. The company also published the *Evergreen Review*, a literary magazine, and expanded to include a film distribution business, two film theaters, and a book club. Internal conflicts and financial difficulties eventually compelled Rosset to sell Grove Press to Ann Getty and George Weidenfeld in 1985; Rosset was fired by Getty the following year.

In the prefatory notes to an interview with Rosset for a 1997*The Paris Review* article, Ken Jordan describes Grove Press as "the principal home for writers who challenged the American mainstream — from both a literary and political perspective."[70] This view of Grove Press's status as a publisher of avant-gardist, countercultural works in the American publishing scene is echoed across media coverage on the press. For instance, a 1953 *Newsweek* article, one of the earliest profiles on the press, describes Rosset as an "advance guard" publisher,[71] and in a 1967 *The New Yorker* article, John Updike, reviewing Grove's translations of novels by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Genet, and Robert Pinget, declares Grove Press "that happy caterer to our

[70] Ken Jordan, "Barney Rosset: The Art of Publishing No.2," *The Paris Review* 145 (1997): 172.
[71] "Advance Guard Advance," *Newsweek*, March 3, 1953, 95.

prurience and progressivism [who] continues to nourish the illusion of a literary avant-garde by dishing up hitherto obscure modern masters (Jorge Luis Borges, Witold Gombrowicz), pornography with a taint of sociological or psychological interest (*My Secret Life*, *The Story of O*), native scat-writing (LeRoi Jones, William Burroughs), and such imported delicacies as the three French novels about to be savored."[72] Apart from the authors Updike notes, Grove published absurdist playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, New York school poets like Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, revolutionary figures like Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, and world literary figures like Amos Tutuola and Kenzaburo Oe — all authors whose works were experimental or somehow disrupted the status quo of midcentury American letters and thought.

If the publishing of works by these authors established Grove's reputation as a publisher of avant-garde, countercultural works that were frequently international, such works also constituted its *publishing niche,* the specialized market of books Grove was publishing in. Two descriptions by former Grove editors of the way Grove developed its lists in fact captures the instrumentalization of extant conditions that the concept of the *niche* always implies. Kent Carroll, Grove's editorial director from 1975 to 1981, observes that "[t]here was all this literature that had been written in Europe from the 1930s — Henry Miller — up until the 1950s — Beckett that hadn't been published in the U.S. for a range of reasons. The most obvious one is that it was considered obscene or, in some cases, politically subversive…. [O]nce Barney began to exploit that body of work it turned out to be the mother lode."[73] Similarly, Gilbert Sorrentino, an editor at Grove during the same period, notes that "the genius of the house lay not so much in

[72] John Updike, "Grove Is My Press, and Avant My Garde," *New Yorker*, November 4, 1967, 223.
[73] Kent Carroll, qtd. in S.E. Gontarski, "Introduction: The Life and Times of Grove Press," in *The Grove Press Reader: 1951-2001,* ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 2001), xvii.

discovering writers, but in making itself receptive to writers who had already been writing for a very small and *au courant* audience…. Grove actively sought materials which most other publishers would run from in panic, then Rosset had the means whereby to acquire, publish, and distribute them."[74] Grove's *publishing niche*, in other words, was formed through its exploitation both of extant untranslated material in Europe (and elsewhere) as well as the reluctance of other houses to publish such material, and was comprised of this material. Thus when Loren Glass notes in his book, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (2013), that he will be "emphasizing the multiple agents involved in establishing Grove's unique niche in the postwar field,"[75] or when he observes that "[b]etween 1970 and 1985, Grove continued to work the niche it had established for itself in the 1950s and 1960s,"[76] it is the *publishing niche* of international avant-gardist and countercultural writing that Glass is referring to.[77]

Glass's book, the first full-length study of Grove Press's history to be published, documents the various activities that Grove carried out to publish such works. These activities may be understood as acts of *niche construction* insofar as they constitute modifications to the American publishing industry of the 1950s and 1960s that Grove enacted in order to construct its *publishing niche.* They included setting up extensive networks with translators and publishing houses in Europe, developing original "quality" paperback lines and expanding distribution

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[74] Gilbert Sorrentino, qtd. in Gontarski, xviii.
[75] Loren Glass, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 8.
[76] Glass, 214.
[77] At one point, Glass mentions that "Grove achieved this significance [of its colophon as a signifier of countercultural sympathies] through focusing on a series of cultural and generic niches" (32). Glass's use of *niches* here is somewhat tautological, seeing as he already points out that Grove's reputation was achieved through its "focusing," and in fact ought to be replaced with "markets" such that we might understand Glass to be saying that Grove's *publishing niche* was achieved through its focusing on a series of cultural and generic markets.

channels for these books, more affordable than hardcovers, to college and university audiences, as well as litigating, successfully, to publish works like an unexpurgated version of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady's Chatterly Lover* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Indeed, by 1967, a *New York Times* article could describe Grove as a "publishing concern that has made a success by converting what used to be considered far-out literary material into books that are in with a growing public," and note that "Harvard, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Chicago were the leading users of Grove Press books of all kinds."[78]

These *niche construction* activities, however, did more than establish Grove's *publishing niche* and enable its evolution into a successful mid-size independent publisher. They also effected changes to the publishing ecosystem as a whole, influencing the evolutionary trajectory of other publishers and "converting," as the above mentioned article suggests, the American literary landscape. On the one hand, these modifications to the publishing environment that Grove pursued led to the incorporation of experimental and international writing into the libraries, bookstores, classrooms of postwar America. As Glass observes, "[b]y the end of the 1960s, the avant-garde had in essence become a component of the mainstream, and Grove Press, more than any other single institution, was responsible for this fundamental transformation of the cultural field, the consequences of which are still with us."[79] On the other, they helped ensure that the censorship of texts for reasons of obscenity would no longer be a major concern for publishers and writers. As esteemed Random House editor and co-founder of *The New York Review of Books* Jason Epstein acknowledges of Rosset, "He's altered the climate of publishing to *everybody's advantage.*"[80] And as longtime Grove editor Fred Jordan says of the press's

[78] Harry Gilroy, "Grove Press Buys 2 Other Concerns: Adds Cinema 16 Films and Mid-Century Book Club," *New York Times*, January 5, 1967.
[79] Glass, 12.
[80] Jason Epstein, qtd. in Gontarski, xiv, emphases original.

accomplishments, "Beyond changing the law it is also probably fair to say [that] every writer writing today is to some extent changed by the knowledge that entire ares of human experience which had been taboo for writers of other generations are, *if he or she wishes to explore them*, freely available."[81] Grove's *niche construction* activities, in short, left what evolutionary biologists would call an ecological inheritance that reconfigured the growth of other publishers, the work of writers, and the tastes of readers.

Understanding Grove's history through the framework of *niche construction theory* helps us grasp that a *publishing niche* may have consequences that exceed a single publisher's *raison d'être* as well as the process by which change may occur in a literary landscape. Most studies of Grove have stressed the significance of the transformations to the freedoms of American publishing that the press brought about through its battles against Comstock-era laws, and indeed, that obscenity is no longer a frequently-raised charge against the publication of a book points to the importance and effectiveness of this *niche construction* activity of Grove's. That said, I will focus in the remainder of this chapter on another legacy of Grove's *niche construction* activities: its making available and acceptable to American audiences international or internationally-focused works that are countercultural in some way. It is arguably this particular change to the American literary landscape which accounts for the phenomenal success of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, a book Grove brought out (albeit as an imprint of Grove Atlantic Press[82]) in 2015, as much as it is Grove's *publishing niche* that explains in the first place its decision to publish the novel which, as Nguyen says, thirteen other publishers rejected. Yet Grove's publication of *The Sympathizer*, I suggest, could also be viewed as a *niche*

[81] Fred Jordan, qtd. in Gontarski, xiv, emphases original.
[82] Rosset sold Grove Press to Ann Getty and George Weidenfeld in 1985. The press then became known as Grove Weidenfeld. Grove Weidenfeld merged with Atlantic Monthly Press in 1993. Grove Atlantic maintains four imprints: Grove Press, Atlantic Monthly Press, Black Cat, and The Mysterious Press.

construction activity in itself that not only works to sustain Grove's *publishing niche* through modifying the "environmental conditions" of ethnic writing, but also effects changes to the Asian American and American literary landscapes. To that end, let us now turn to Nguyen's fictional debut itself.

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The Sympathizer has been described across its numerous reviews as many things. In the words of a the *Guardian* article, the novel "can be read as a spy novel, a war novel, an immigrant novel, a novel of ideas, a political novel, a campus novel, a novel about the movies, and a novel, yes, about other novels."[83] This multiplicity of genres is thematized through the multiple doubled identities of the unnamed narrator — a bastard child of a French priest and a Vietnamese woman, a captain for the South Vietnamese government who is a sleeper agent for North Vietnamese communist forces, a native of Vietnam who received an American college education and becomes a refugee in the United States. The novel, framed as a confession written by the narrator at a North Vietnamese reeducation camp to communist leaders, follows the narrator as he flees Saigon upon its fall in 1975 with other South Vietnamese elites, his communist loyalties unrevealed, and resettles in Los Angeles. There, he becomes involved in the production of a Hollywood movie about the Vietnam War (which readers will identify as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, although the movie is never named as such in the novel), but is injured by an on-set explosion while filming in the Philippines. Upon his recovery, the narrator is sent to Vietnam as part of the exiled South Vietnamese government's counterrevolutionary plans. The invasion fails before it begins, and the narrator is captured by the North Vietnamese, finally meeting his direct superior for that side and writing the aforementioned confession. He is

[83] Randy Boyagoda, "*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen review — a bold, artful, debut," *Guardian*, March 12, 2016.

eventually released, and the novel ends with the narrator preparing to leave Vietnam once more as one of the so-called boat people.

If one were to consider *The Sympathizer* from the perspective of an acquiring editor who, among other factors in the acquisitions process, must consider whether a manuscript aligns with their publishing house's lists and vision, it would not be difficult to see that the novel possesses several elements which align it with Grove's. Grove was no stranger to publishing works about Vietnam and the Vietnam War. It had brought out, for instance, a collection of prison poems by Ho Chi Minh during Rosset's tenure, and the previously mentioned Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Robert Olen Butler even after Rosset had left the press. And the scene in which the narrator recounts how, as a boy, he masturbated with a squid that was meant for dinner — a scene Nguyen admits was a riff off a similar one in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*[84] — would probably have been the sort of scene to cause the book's banning and Rosset's challenging of the ban in court. But perhaps the most plausible reason for Grove's acquisition of *The Sympathizer* is a certain unconventionality and subversiveness about it which its acquiring editor, Peter Blackstock, identifies in a 2015 *Publishers Weekly* article. "The first thing that struck me about the book," Blackstock says, "was the voice, so assured and unusual — garrulous, persuasive, somewhat supercilious, very subversive, but totally winning."[85] Given these qualities, the novel's acquisition by Grove is not out of a line for a house whose *publishing niche* has always been comprised of books that are disruptive or countercultural in one way or another.

As we saw at the start of the chapter, Nguyen had said to the USC audience that his novel did not conform to the "kind of stories we [Asian American authors] are supposed to tell." He

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[84] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "An Interview with Viet Thanh Nguyen," interview by Michael LeMahieu and Angela Naimou, *Contemporary Literature* 58, no. 4 (2017), 454.
[85] Daniel Lefferts, "First Fiction Spring 2015: Viet Thanh Nguyen: A Subversive Debut Adds a New Facet to an Old Story," *Publishers Weekly*, January 9, 2015.

elaborates on his aims in a 2017 *MELUS* interview, saying that he had wanted to write a novel that not only did not make "the commonly accepted political moves on the part of ethnic literature," but also did not replicate "the apolitical dimensions of generic American literature," which he identifies as writing by white authors.[86] For Nguyen, "generic American literature" is apolitical due to the way MFA programs work. In a 2017 *NYTimes* op-ed, for instance, he points out that there is a tendency in MFA workshops to privilege craft over an engagement with the political — a tendency which scholars like Eric Bennett argue emerges out of the workshop's origins during the Cold War era as an American and white cultural bulwark against socialist, politicized writing (which authors like Pramoedya advocated for).[87] This tendency toward the apolitical in MFA workshops, attended by and large by white students and taught by and large by white instructors, shapes on the one hand "generic American literature." On the other, it "leaves, in the United States," Nguyen says in a 2019 interview, "those marked as international or minority writers in the position of constantly harping on the political."[88] But because of the nature of the publishing industry, as we saw earlier, that political work thrust upon "international or minority writers" may in turn become "commonly accepted political moves on the part of ethnic literature." The objective Nguyen thus set for himself in writing his first novel was not to eschew the political task of minority writing altogether, since that would mean producing the type of apolitical writing he disdains, but to take on that political task in a manner which reworked the conventions of ethnic literature.

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[86] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "On Writing, Radicalism, and Literary Value: An Interview with Viet Thanh Nguyen," interview by Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung, *MELUS* 42, no.3 (2017): 208.
[87] See Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Viet Thanh Nguyen Reveals How Writers' Workshops Can Be Hostile" (2017) and Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War* (2015).
[88] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Empathy, Pain, and Power in Literature: A Conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen," interview by Emily Cordo, *Porter House Review,* September 16, 2019.

The Sympathizer may be interpreted as a rethinking of expectations about Asian American and ethnic literature in any number of ways, but I will focus on the novel's attempts to disrupt the two generic features of minority writing which Nguyen himself identifies in *Nothing Ever Dies.* The first, to recall, is "translation within the story, when the narrator explains some feature of the ethnic community." In a response to a question from an audience member at a 2017 event held at San José State University about Nguyen's framing of the novel, Nguyen admits that he resorted to the structural device of a confessional not only because it was historically accurate with the experience of reeducation camps, but also because it allowed him to stage the novel as if it were one Vietnamese person writing to another, thus "preventing translation from taking place." "It was my way of saying I'm going to be a minority writer, but I'm going to write just as if I was a majority writer who never has to translate," Nguyen explains. "And everybody else who is not Vietnamese," he adds, "will be forced to eavesdrop on this conversation."[89] Perhaps the passage that most clearly captures the audience to whom Nguyen intends his novel to address is when the narrator, upon hearing a Vietnamese version of Nancy Sinatra's "Bang Bang," digresses into a page-long rumination about the song's significance:

> *Bang bang* was the sound of memory's pistol firing into our heads, for we could not forget love, we could not forget war, we could not forget lovers, we could not forget enemies, we could not forget home, and we could not forget Saigon. We could not forget the caramel flavor of iced coffee with coarse sugar; the bowls of noodle soup eaten while squatting on the sidewalk…and while the list could go on and on and on, the point was

[89] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Viet Thanh Nguyen in Conversation with Andrew Lam," *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 9 (2018): 21.

> simply this: the most important thing we could never forget was that we could never forget.[90]

Here, the repeated use of the first-person plural works at once to indicate that the narrative is directed at a Vietnamese reader and to exclude the non-Vietnamese reader. Even as the passage offers to the non-Vietnamese reader a description of what a Vietnamese diasporic individual cannot forget, the "we" signals to that reader that they are merely "eavesdropping" into a reminiscence of a place and its people that is not theirs to "never forget."

The novel's conceit is thus that it is a text written in Vietnamese by a Vietnamese person (albeit of mixed heritage) to another Vietnamese person even as the novel itself is an English-language novel. Ben Tran suggests that this conceit, which relies on a discrepancy between the novel's "implied language" (Vietnamese) and its "language of representation" (English), is a "literary dubbing," akin to and yet a revision of "Hollywood's filmic dubbing." "Whereas Hollywood's filmic dubbing [of Vietnamese characters] prioritizes the American perspective while alienating Vietnamese viewers," Tran argues, "Nguyen's literary dubbing prioritizes the minority perspective while disorienting the American experience." In so doing, Tran continues, "[t]he novel does not so much give voice to the voiceless — the Vietnamese have been speaking and writing for a while now — as it does seek to disabuse the cultural systems that perceive the Vietnamese as voiceless."[91] I would add here that the novel's "literary dubbing" enables Nguyen to "disabuse the cultural systems that perceive" the writing by Vietnamese authors and, by corollary, minority authors, as artless, or only political to the point of being without craft. In a 2017 conversation with Paul Beatty, Nguyen reveals that when writing *The Sympathizer,* he "used the thesaurus in almost every single sentence" and that "it was a very deliberate choice

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[90] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2015), 230.
[91] Ben Tran, "The Literary Dubbing of Confession," *PMLA* 133, no.2 (2018): 414.

because I felt that, for better or worse, I had to prove that I could be a writer who many people expect not to know English very well who actually does know English better than most Americans do." When pressed by Beatty as to whom Nguyen was "proving that," Nguyen replies, "To myself," but then adds, "And to everybody else. You know? Minority writers have a lot to prove….There's always unfair expectations placed upon us that we're going to have to represent the race or that if we do win a prize because we were good writers it's because we wrote about the race."[92] If Nguyen's care with the literariness of his writing is borne from the anxiety of being viewed as an author without so-called literary merit, it is the maneuver of "literary dubbing," premised on the structural device of the confessional, that allows him nonetheless to surmount that anxiety while remaining within the novel's diegetic frame. The conceit of one Vietnamese person addressing another Vietnamese person implies a fluency on the part of the reader in the (implied) language of the novel, but rather than use this fluency as a reason for writing in a colloquial or unartistic manner, Nguyen capitalizes on that fluency to render the narrative "literary" and justify the novel's literariness. The novel's literariness, in other words, is grounded in the assumption that its reader is able to handle the literariness of the narrator's confession which, after all, is a document that is written rather than spoken, and so can afford to be "literary." The absence of translation in *The Sympathizer* is, as such, Nguyen's refusal of a "stereotype" of ethnic writing as much as it is the means by which Nguyen makes a political point — here, subverting presumptions about a lack of literariness to politicized minority writing.

The second generic feature of ethnic writing that *The Sympathizer* rethinks is that of the "affirmation [of] the American dream." This affirmation, Nguyen says, happens in a literary

[92] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Paul Beatty in Conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen," *The Believer* 119, June 15, 2018.

work "partially through what it depicts and more so through what it does not mention or criticize." In the case of Vietnamese American literature, there is a tendency for works "to bring up the failure of American ideals during the war, while simultaneously affirming how America rescued refugees from that war."[93] Nguyen sets up the capacity of *The Sympathizer* to disrupt this convention of Vietnamese American literature by making as a quirk of his narrator's character an ability, as the title of the novel tellingly indicates, to sympathize. In the early pages of the novel, the narrator admits his "weakness for sympathizing with others."[94] By the same token, however, the narrator lacks allegiance to anyone. It is this logical upshot of the narrator's character which Nguyen instrumentalizes to "mention or criticize"[95] all sides of the war. So while the narrator informs the North Vietnamese leader to whom his confession is addressed that "he cannot help but sympathize"[96] with the South Vietnamese, he confesses elsewhere that he is also sympathetic to a journalist who critiques the murder of an individual that was orchestrated by the South Vietnamese exiled in Los Angles. In a 2017 interview for *The Writer*, Nguyen had explained that "[a]lthough hundreds of novels had been written about the Vietnam War in several languages, none had done what I wanted to do [which] was to write a novel that addressed the viewpoints of all sides, and to be critical of all sides."[97] If to sympathize (rather than empathize) is to maintain still some distance from a given side that allows for both its consideration and its critique, then Nguyen's rendering of his narrator as someone who is able to sympathize is calculated to achieve this motive of writing a novel about the Vietnam War that is unprecedented in its incorporation of the perspectives of all those who were involved in the war.

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[93] Nguyen, *Nothing*, 204-5.
[94] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 36.
[95] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 36.
[96] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 125.
[97] Nguyen, "Both Sides," n.p.

At the same time, this holistic approach to the war creates the opportunity for Nguyen to forestall the "affirmation" of America typical of ethnic writing. In *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen's critique of the idea of America takes the form of satire. The novel derides, for instance, the figure of the American scholar who, in spite of their knowledgeability about "the Orient" and their well-meaning intentions, persists in being unable to recognize an Asian person as anything more than an object of study. Upon his arrival as a refugee in Los Angeles, the narrator works as a clerk for the chair of the Department of Oriental Studies at a college who asks the narrator, with the intention of helping the narrator develop himself, to undertake the exercise of listing down in two columns on a sheet of paper his "Oriental" and "Occidental" qualities — to which the narrator responds by listing such qualities as "teacup is half empty" along with "somewhat yellowish white" under the "Oriental" column, and "glass is half full" along with "somewhat palish yellow" under the "Occidental" column.[98] But the novel's satirical treatment of supposed American benevolence is perhaps most evident in its fictionalization of the making of *Apocalypse Now*. In a scene, for instance, where the narrator meets the film's director for the first time, he boldly informs the director, identified only as "the Auteur" in the novel, that the script did not get certain details right, namely, how the Vietnamese to be in the film speak:

> If I remember correctly, pages 26, 42, 58, 7, 91, 103, and 118, basically all the places in the script where one of my people has a speaking part, he or she screams. No words, just screams…. So let me just point out that in your script, you have my people scream the following way: *AIIIEEEEE!!!*…. But having heard many of my countrymen screaming in pain, I can assure you this is not how they scream.[99]

[98] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 61-62.
[99] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 126-27.

The Auteur insists that "[s]creams are universal," but the narrator proceeds to scream literally to make his point, then writes "onomatopoeically across the cover page of the screenplay in big black letters: *AIEYAAHHH!!!*" "That's how we scream in my country," the narrator concludes.[100]

While the scene is making an intertextual reference to Frank Chin et al.'s landmark anthology of Asian American writing,[101] the very absurdity of the issue at hand — the screams of the Vietnamese, of all things, are wrong — serves to drive home one of Nguyen's points: that American portrayals of the Vietnam War have not so much excluded the Vietnamese, but have always misrepresented them. Going further, the narrator's refusal to be grateful for there being "speaking parts" at all for the Vietnamese and his rewriting of the way a Vietnamese person screams can be understood synecdochally as the refusal of Nguyen's novel to participate in the affirmation of American benevolence and its reservation of the right of Asian American authors like Nguyen himself both to critique America and to represent themselves and their own people. It is not enough to give the Vietnamese "a speaking part" or to publish a minority author's works, Nguyen is ultimately saying with this scene; that "speaking part," that publication of a minority author, must not only be right, but must also be on their own terms, which may consequently allow their work to be critical rather than to be always merely affirmative toward the idea of America.

If Nguyen's reworking of these generic features of ethnic American writing is perhaps the reason behind its acquisition by a publisher known for publishing countercultural works, it is also perhaps the reason behind the selection of titles to which *The Sympathizer* was comped. Of its seven comp titles, none are by Asian American authors. Three appear to have been chosen for

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[100] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 127.
[101] Frank Chin, Jeffery P. Chan, Lawson F. Inada, and Shawn H. Wong, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Washington D.C., Howard University Press, 1974).

similarly dealing primarily with war as a theme: Bob Shacohis's *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul* (2013), Anthony Marra's *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* (2013), and Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2012). Another three appear to have been chosen for similarly being novels that involve espionage: Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son* (2012), and Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007). The seventh, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), appears to have been chosen as a comp for likewise being narrated with satirical overtones by a protagonist of dubious morality. While Tan Twan Eng and Aravind Adiga are Asian authors and do write about their own communities, neither are based in the United States, and so are arguably not Asian American authors. Here, McGrath's argument that minority authors must "comp white" in order to be published would seem to hold, but we may reinterpret this phenomenon instead as evidence that Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* "comped out," so to speak, of other Asian American titles, and that Nguyen thus did indeed succeed in creating a novel that did not conform to the expectations held by publishers for Asian American writing.

More intriguing, perhaps, is the matter of which books Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* acted as a comp title for. To date, I have identified four titles which were comped to *The Sympathizer*: Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* (2019), Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* (2020), and Nguyen Phan Que Mai's *The Mountains Sing* (2020). While all four are Asian, only Vuong and Yu would be considered Asian American — Vuong is Vietnamese American, Yu Taiwanese American. Aw, a Malaysian author, is based in the UK, and Nguyen Phan Que Mai, a Vietnamese author, is based in Indonesia. If we were to put aside Aw and Nguyen Phan Que Mai's works for the reason that they are more so international authors rather than Asian American authors even though they are Asian and have

had books published in the United States, what stands out immediately with regards to Vuong and Yu's works are the similarities they appear to bear to *The Sympathizer* precisely with regards to their subversion of the two generic features of Asian American writing that Nguyen had himself sought to subvert. In skimming the reviews of Vuong's novel aggregated on *BookMarks* (including Nguyen's for *TIME*), one repeatedly finds high praise for Vuong's skillful use of language even as the novel does not shy from addressing so-called "identity" issues such as queerness in Asian communities and the legacy of the Vietnam War. Additionally, in a 2019 the *New York Times* profile, Vuong, more or less borrowing Nguyen's words, says that he had structured the novel as a letter from the narrator to his mother so that "[i]n order to read the book, people have to eavesdrop as a secondary audience upon a conversation between two Vietnamese people."[102] As for Yu's novel: if one were to generate a word cloud from the reviews of it aggregated on *BookMarks*, the word that would feature most prominently would be "satire" — the novel being, indeed, a humorous yet pointed indictment of the prescribed roles Asian Americans are forced to play in Hollywood productions.

Of course, it is easy to explain the resonances between these two latter novels and *The Sympathizer* as examples of two Asian American authors drawing inspiration from, or being influenced by, another Asian American author (or, to use the framework of the *authorial niche,* Vuong and Yu exploiting Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* as an extant condition in the developing of their *authorial niches*). The fact I want to highlight here, though, is that both Vuong and Yu's works were published by major publishers (Vuong's by Penguin Press, Yu's by Pantheon Books, both imprints of Penguin Random House) and both were nominated for or won major literary awards. In consideration of the way comping and the publishing industry works, this fact

[102] Ocean Vuong, "Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book," interview by Kevin Nguyen, *New York Times,* May 25, 2019.

suggests that we are not just witnessing here the phenomenon of literary influence, but also perhaps a change in the Asian American literary landscape in terms of what Asian American authors are allowed to publish by — and this is the key point — major publishing houses. Given that these books do bear similarities to *The Sympathizer*, Grove's publication of *The Sympathizer* may thus be understood as a *niche construction* activity insofar as it appears to have prompted a change in the expectations for Asian American writing at other and major publishing houses. In other words, Grove's publication of *The Sympathizer* can be considered a *niche construction* activity that involved the modification of given environmental conditions (these "conditions" being the generic features of ethnic writing, and the "modification" Nguyen's reworking of those features) which in turn resulted in a change to the evolutionary trajectories of other organisms and the ecosystem as a whole ("organisms" being other publishers, "evolutionary trajectories" the kinds of books they choose to publish, and the "ecosystem" the Asian American and American literary landscapes).

Hypothetically, this ecosystemic change, namely, a broader acceptance of countercultural Asian American works like Nguyen's that is evidenced by the success of Vuong and Yu's books, would strengthen Grove's *publishing niche* in countercultural books, since even though it would mean that other publishers would be looking to compete in the acquisition of such books by other authors, it would also mean possible future success for like books that Grove would publish. But the more important takeaway here is that if it is Grove's *publishing niche* which presented the opportunity for Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* to be published in the first place, it is also Grove's *publishing niche* and the *niche construction* activities it undertook over the years — including its publication of *The Sympathizer* — to sustain it that arguably provided authors like Vuong and Yu the opportunity too to publish their works.

While I have in this chapter taken as an exemplary case study Grove Press and Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, it would probably not be difficult to frame the work of other independent publishers with various other *publishing niches* as *niche construction* activities and to trace the changes to the American literary landscape these activities led to. Examples that come to mind include New Directions, which plausibly paved the way for Grove Press, being founded earlier than Grove, and which likewise publishes translations and countercultural works; the Feminist Press, the oldest continuing feminist publisher in the world; and Graywolf Press, publisher of groundbreaking works, most recently, like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014). To rephrase Nguyen slightly, as such: the *publishing niche*, it can be a trap, but a chance (for change) too.

Conclusion

Shirley Lim's "Self-Constructed" Niche

This dissertation has argued for a conceptualization of *niche* in literary studies that goes beyond the term's typical usage as a signifier of a smallness. By drawing on previous theorizations of the concept in other disciplines, it shows that *niche* can instead be construed as a term that captures a particular relationship between an author and the sociohistorical conditions attendant to their moment of writing — one that is exploitative. Understanding this relationship as such allows by corollary a shift in the conceptualization of those sociohistorical conditions themselves. If a text can be said to be the result of an author's exploitation of these conditions, then those conditions are not constraints within or against which an author writes, but instead, opportunities for them.

Over the course of my chapters, I have explored how rethinking this relationship as well as the nature of an author's surrounding sociohistorical conditions sheds new light on the oeuvre of Joseph Conrad, the cultural politics of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Buru Quartet, and the impact of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* along with the legacy of its publisher, Grove Press. By recasting these literary objects as *niche formations* — outputs of this exploitative relationship — we are able to reconsider the rubrics we currently possess for understanding transnational literary interactions and the way change occurs in the contemporary literary landscape. Such revisions suggest the utility of the concept of the *niche* for literary studies. As the mass of theoretical work in other disciplines that has emerged around this concept evidences, there is not quite any other concept like *niche* which denotes an exploitative relationship between a subject and its surrounding environment. For that reason, the concept of the *niche* stands as a useful, if not unique, foundation upon which a theoretical apparatus capable of responding to the question of

how to redraw the relationship between a text and its contexts in an era of intensified cultural globalization, posed so long ago by Edward Said, may be built.

As we have seen, the term *niche* in contemporary literary discourse has been used to qualify a number of authors from a variety of backgrounds writing across different genres. Yet more often than not, it is brought up in relation to an author's ethnicity, race, or nationality. If we were to use the idea of the *authorial niche* to frame Pramoedya and Nguyen's spaces in their respective national literary histories or world literary history as we did with Conrad's, we would find that their works are explicable as a matter of them instrumentalizing elements pertaining to their ethnicity, race, or nationality. These elements are, in short, part of the sociohistorical conditions from which they write, the very opportunities for their writing.

This instrumentalization of these elements is precisely what explains, to return to the very start of this dissertation, Shirley Lim's insistence that her *niche* is "self-constructed." As a final example of a text that illustrates the logic of the concept of the *niche* explored in this dissertation, let us consider Lim's "Pantoun for Chinese Women," a poem initially published in her second collection, *No Man's Grove* (1985). In looking at this poem, perhaps Lim's most widely-taught, I explore by way of a conclusion the possibility of extending the theoretical apparatus laid out in my chapters — which had been developed with a focus on works by men and on prose — to a work by a woman and to the genre of poetry.

As its title suggests, Lim's "Pantoun for Chinese Women" takes the form of the *pantoun*, a poetic form whose origins lie in the Malay Archipelago — today comprised of the nations of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Known there as the *pantun*, this *abab* rhymed form traditionally exists in two kinds: as a stand-alone quatrain, and as a series of quatrains, the *pantun berkait* — *berkait* meaning "tied" or "linked." In this latter kind, the second

and fourth lines of a given stanza are repeated exactly in the first and third lines of the subsequent stanza. Here is an example of a *pantun berkait* from the British Orientalist scholar William Marsden's *A Grammar of the Malayan Language* (1812), translated by Marsden himself and which I cite in full below for reasons that will become clear below:

Kupu-kupu terbang melintang	Butterflies sport on the wing around,
Terbang di laut di hujung karang;	They fly to the sea by the reef of rocks,
Hati di dalam menaruh bimbang	My heart has felt uneasy in my breast,
Dari dahulu sampai sekarang.	From former days to the present hour.
Terbang di laut di hujung karang,	They fly to the sea by the reef of the rocks,
Burung nasar terbang ke Bandan;	The vulture wings its flight to Bandan,
Dari dahulu sampai sekarang,	From former days to the present hour,
Banyak muda sudah kupandang.	Many youths have I admired.
Burung nasar terbang ke Bandan,	The vulture wings its flight to Bandan,
Bulunya lagi jatuh ke Patani;	Dropping its feathers at Patani.
Banyak muda sudah kupandang,	Many youths have I admired,
Tiada sama mudaku ini.	But none to compare with my present choice.
Buluyna jatuh ke Patani,	His feathers he let fall at Patani,
Dua puluh anak merpati;	A score of young pigeons.
Tiada sama mudaku ini,	No youth can compare with my present choice,
Sungguh pandai memujuk hati.	Skilled as he is to touch the heart. [1]

[1] William Marsden, *A Grammar of the Malayan Language* (London: Cox and Bayles, 1812), 272. I have bolded the repeated lines.

Hypothetically, the *pantun berkait* can extend indefinitely.[2] This quality of the *pantun berkait* appears to derive from the *pantun*'s use as a form of verbal jousting.[3] What's further distinctive about a *pantun*, however, is the supposed complementarity between a quatrain's first two lines, the *pembayang*, and its final two lines, the *maksud*. The *pembayang* (literally translated, something that throws a shadow — *bayang* being, as we have seen, the Malay word for shadow that, in Javanese, is *wayang*) constructs an image or event that symbolically foreshadows the import of the sentences in the *maksud* (literally translated, meaning). The meaning of the *pantun*'s second half, in other words, is figuratively alluded to through the imagery of the *pantun*'s first half. In the example above, the imagery of flight in the first two lines of each stanza ostensibly alludes to the "flights of heart" the persona is experiencing that is described in the second two lines of each stanza.

Lim's "Pantoun for Chinese Women," a poem that, in a word, addresses the issue of female infanticide in China,[4] appears at first glance to be a *pantun berkait.* Throughout its eight stanzas, the second and fourth lines of each stanza are repeated in the first and third lines of each subsequent stanza. However, unlike a traditional *pantun berkait*, the very last line of the last stanza instead repeats the very first line of the last stanza. To illustrate, here are the first two and last two stanzas of Lim's poem:

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[2] As the French scholar René Daillie observes in his study *Alam Pantun Melayu: Studies on the Malay Pantun* (1988), "There are some [*pantun berkait*] made up of two quatrains only, but there is no theoretical limit to their number, and anyone can always add one or more new stanzas to a given string of *pantun berkait*" (48).

[3] Marsden explains that *pantuns* could be "recited in alternate contest for several hours [with] the preceding *pantun* always furnishing the catchword to that which follows, until one of the parties be silenced or vanquished" (128). In this respect, the *pantoum* is not unlike the Madagascan *hainteny*, which scholars have suggested shares roots with the *pantoum*. See the introduction to Leonard Fox's *Hainteny: The Traditional Poetry of Madagascar* (1990), for details about the Malayo-Austronesian origins of the *hainteny*.

[4] The poem includes the following epigraph: "'At present, the phenomena of butchering, drowning, and leaving to die female infants have been very serious.' — *The People's Daily*, Peking, March 3rd, 1983."

They say a child with two mouths is no good.

In the slippery wet, a hollow space,

Smooth, gumming, echoing wide for food.

No wonder my man is not here at his place.

In the slippery wet, a hollow space,

A slit narrowly sheathed within its hood.

No wonder my man is not here at his place:

He is digging for the dragon jar of soot.

[…]

She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood.

My husband frowns, pretending in his haste

Women are made from river sand and wood.

Milk soaks the bedding. I cannot bear the waste.

My husband frowns, pretending in his haste.

Oh clean the girl, dress her in ashy soot!

Milk soaks our bedding, I cannot bear the waste.

They say a child with two mouths is no good.[5]

The repetition of the first line of the first stanza as the last line of the last stanza in Lim's poem indicates that Lim is in fact not employing the traditional form of the *pantun berkait*. As the

[5] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *No Man's Grove* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 1985), 63. I have bolded the first and last lines of the poem.

example from Marsden's *Grammar* above shows, the *pantun berkait* does not end, if it ends at all, with such a repetition. Lim, as such, is instead employing what we might identify as the French version of the *pantun* — the *pantoun*, or the *pantoum*.

The story of how the Malay *pantun* came to be the *pantoun* or *pantoum* — the version of the form that most students of poetry would recognize it by — goes something like this. In 1829, Victor Hugo published a poetry collection, *Les Orientales*, which included in its footnotes "several extracts of oriental poems"[6] he received from Ernest Fouinet, a French Orientalist novelist and poet. Among these extracts, which include *qasidas* and *ghazals*, was a *pantoum* — the very same from Marsden's *Grammar* above, translated into French by Fouinet. Nine years later, an ardent admirer of Hugo, Théophile Gautier, published what he called a *pantoum* in his novel, *El Dorado* (1838). From Gautier onward, the form appears in the work of various Parnassians and Symbolists. Versions of so-called *pantoums* varying in formal strictures were written by Charles Baudelaire ("Harmonie du Soir" [1857]), Paul Verlaine ("Pantoum négligé" [1871]"), Leconte de Lisle (*Poèmes Tragiques* [1884]), René Ghil (*Le Pantoun des Pantouns: poème javanais* [1902], and others.[7]

It is possibly thanks to the Symbolist poet Théodore de Banville, however, that the *pantoun* became relatively fixed in the form that it is known by today. In his 1872 *Petit traité de poésie française*, de Banville introduces a means of closure for the *pantun berkait*: the poem's last line should repeat the first line with which the poem began.[8] While it is unclear why de Banville implements this stricture for the form, it effectively halts the *pantun berkait*'s

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[6] Victor Hugo, *Les Orientales*, *Oeuvres poétiques*. (Paris: J. Hetzel & Cie,1829; Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 43. Citiations refer to the 1964 edition.
[7] The French scholar Georges Voisset suggests that the use of *pantoum* in Hugo's *Les Orientales* was a typographical error; the correct French orthography of *pantun* would have rendered it *pantoun*. Voisset's *Histoire du Genre Pantoun* (1997) offers a detailed history of the *pantun*'s "travels."
[8] Théodore de Banville, *Petit traité de poésie française* (Paris: A. Le Clère, 1872), 221.

hypothetically infinite extension. de Banville's version of the *pantun berkait* is that which eventually crossed the English Channel, and then the Atlantic; Henry Austin Dobson appears to be the first British poet to use the form ("In Town" [1877]), and James Brander Matthews the first American ("En Route" [1878]). The form, as such, came to Anglophone literature via French poetry circles and not through Britain's colonial holdings in Malaya, and it is this French iteration of the *pantun* which continues to be written by poets today, including Lim.

At this point, let me make something clear: all those who grew up in Malaysia — like myself, and like Lim — know what a *pantun* and a *pantun berkait* are. One might say that they are national poetic forms, having been coopted by contemporary (ethno)nationalists as evidence of the richness of Malay culture. Malaysia's national poet laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh, for instance, declared in a 2007 interview that "the finer Malay *pantuns* are as good as any of the great poems of the east and the west."[9] So the fact that Lim elected to use the French version of the *pantun berkait* (which I will identify as the *pantoun* for clarity) rather than its traditional version (the *pantun*) is striking. That she does so, I argue, is a matter of her developing that "self-constructed niche" or, in the terms of this dissertation, constructing her *authorial niche* as a diasporic, feminist writer. In various interviews, essays, and her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1997), Lim has spoken and written not only about her feminist approach to her creative writing and scholarship, which emerges from her consciousness of being a woman of Chinese heritage and so expected to abide by Confucianist patriarchal codes of conduct,[10] but also about the lack of acknowledgement she would have received as an English-language writer had she

[9] Muhammad Haji Salleh, "Muhammad Haji Salleh," interview by Mohammad A. Quayum, in *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian and Singaporean Poets*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 133.
[10] See, for instance, Lim's essay "Why Do You Write" (1993) and her essay collection *Writing Southeast/Asia in English: Against the Grain* (1992).

remained in Malaysia. In a 2015 essay, for instance, she observes that "[p]ost-1969, Malaysian English-language 'local' writing was officially categorized as not a national literature, the national status being restricted to literature written in Bahasa Malaysia."[11] Because of "state disapproval of creative English-language writing and limited support of non-Bumiputras,"[12] as she goes on to explain in that essay, Lim decided to emigrate and remain in the United States to pursue a career as a writer.

Given Lim's status as a postcolonial subject from Malaysia, one might certainly understand Lim's use of the *pantoun* rather than the *pantun* as a reappropriation of the form from, if not exactly Malaysia's former colonizers, at least from European Orientalists more broadly — a "writing back" to Europe, so to speak. Yet given the situation of English-language writers Lim describes above — a sociohistorical condition pertinent to Lim, as it were —, we might understand Lim's decision to write a *pantoun* as instead a matter of her instrumentalizing that marginalized status of English-language Malaysian writers like herself and employing a form that is not tied to an idea of an ethno-nationalized Malaysian literature even as it is a form that is Malay(sian) in origin. Put another way, Lim's choice of the *pantoun*, what we might call a diasporic yet Malay poetic form, is the result of her capitalizing on her diasporic yet Malaysian identity. In the same vein, the language that the poem is written in itself, English (rather than Malay, despite Lim being familiar with the latter[13]), can be understood as a matter of Lim capitalizing on the legacy of British colonialism in Malaysia, and the poem's thematic focus, as

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[11] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "English in Malaysia: Identity and the Market Place," *Asiatic* 9, no.2 (2015), 2. Lim's mention of 1969 is significant. 1969 was the year that racial riots erupted between the Malay and Chinese communities in Malaysia over resentment of Chinese economic dominance despite their minority status. The riots led to the implementation of measures such as a Malay language-based curriculum in schools and affirmative action policies for Malays.

[12] Lim, "English in Malaysia," 17. "Bumiputra" is a Malay term for Malays; literally translated, it means "prince of the earth."

[13] As Lim notes in her memoir, her mother used to speak to her in Malay (*Among the Moon Faces*, 3).

Lim capitalizing on her identity as a woman of Chinese heritage — ostensibly to draw attention to the practice of Chinese female infanticide, but also perhaps as a way of signaling her motherland's "murder" of its "children" like herself on the basis of a Malay-centric literary ethno-nationalism.

These formal and thematic choices Lim makes in "Pantoun for Chinese Women" are present throughout her body of work. Indeed, if, in writing novels that appear to be renditions of popular genres like the adventure novel and the spy novel, Conrad can be said to have been taking advantage of the conditions of a British literary marketplace receptive to such works to develop his *authorial niche*, so can Lim be said to have been taking advantage, at the peak of her career during the 1980s and the 1990s, of the conditions of an American literary marketplace receptive to feminist, women's, postcolonial, and ethnic writing to develop her *authorial niche.* Together, Lim's works make up what I would call Lim's *authorial niche*: her unique space in world literary history, constructed through her exploitation of her various identity markers and the various sociohistorical conditions attendant to her moment of writing. Or better, her "self-constructed" *niche*, as she would say — being a reminder that, for all its negative connotations, for all its insinuations of a smallness, a narrowness, an artlessness, the concept of the *niche* itself, especially for those who are a minority by some measure, is at heart a concept about opportunity.

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