

**Thinking “What We Are Doing”:
V. S. Naipaul and Amitav Ghosh on Being
in Diaspora, History, and World**

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Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living . . . What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (5)

What follows is a response to Hannah Arendt’s proposal that in order to understand the human condition we must simply, critically, “think what we are doing” (5). “Doing,” for Arendt, is the vocation of every human being, who necessarily labors, works, and acts in concert with, alongside, and/or in opposition to others who share the intrinsic capacity to *do*. As a laboring, working, and acting being, the human subject is always a doer in some time and some place, which is another way of saying that each human subject is subject to history. We are subjects *in* and *of* history, as we are also ineluctably subjects in and of the world. Of course, the universalist pretensions of the singular forms of “history” and “world” have long since been exposed in the critical interventions of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, among other knowledge projects. We are no longer subjects of Hegelian world history, but of diverse histories, the dynamic relations of which are as heterogeneous as their articulations.

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Here, I am interested in the possibilities and problematics of pluralizing “world,” as a project that has inflected the discourse on the experience of the doer in diaspora. Are diasporic doers of “a” world, “the” world, “this” world, or “worlds”? Is the diasporic subject of history *between* worlds? Or, as R. Radhakrishnan has argued, does every human subject dwell between? “[Take] away the cartography of betweenness,” he writes, “and along with it vanishes the human subject” (8). Betweenness, this essay will show, is a status often assigned to the diasporic subject, but it aptly describes the experience of being human.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s careful elaboration of “world” is predicated on an understanding of betweenness and plurality. She argues that each birth presupposes a world “which existed before any one individual appeared into it and will survive his eventual departure” (97). This durable and permanent world is termed the “objective world,” and it precedes and succeeds individual human subjects. The objective world is the medium in which men work and “do,” reveal themselves to each other through speech and action, and give meaning to their finite, miraculous lives. Importantly, however, the world made by work and action is not the objective world; rather, it is a “human world” born “of intercourse between men and things as well as between men and men” (Arendt 94). The former form of intercourse entails the fabrication of the material human artifice; the latter is the subjective “in-between” of speech and action, which “lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together” (182). The human world is more permanent than the beings who build it, more permanent than those who would seek to transform it. Whether human activity is directed toward maintaining the status quo or, following Marx’s revolutionary call, “[abolishing] the present state of things” (*German Ideology* 57), it is ultimately in and of this shared world.

How do we “think what we are doing” as readers, writers, and scholars in an Arendtian world of human plurality? Given the nuances of Arendt’s call, the “doing” of this essay will have to operate on at least three registers: a consideration of V. S. Naipaul and Amitav Ghosh as Arendtian “doers” negotiating the complex of diasporic authorship; a reading of their novels that scours the discursive space of the aesthetic objects for transformative, world-building characters; a meta-reading of the novel genre that will try to give literature and literary scholarship a vocation in the human world. Following Radhakrishnan’s extension of the cartography of betweenness, I will argue that the resources of the diasporic subject and author can be marshaled in the name of understanding the human condition more broadly. This essay demonstrates the significance of a return to and re-centering of the discourse on diasporic literature and subjects for any discussion of human being, acting, and potential in the world.

An Individual in History, at Work in the World

Nearly two decades ago, V. S. Naipaul’s inventive novel sequence, *A Way in the World*, opened a series of questions about “doing” and “not” doing in the human world: the labor required to develop oneself; the price of remaining on the periphery of history; the responsibility of remaking the world; the choice to write the world, instead. The novel unfolds in nine chapters, including some thinly veiled autobiography about Naipaul’s youth in Trinidad, efforts to begin as a writer, and encounters with Foster Morris, the narrator’s fictionalized mentor in England. The story of Naipaul’s narrator’s life is posed in contrast to those of Trinidadian would-be revolutionaries Lebrun (modeled after C. L. R. James) and Blair. Woven between these sections are three “unwritten stories” that (re)construct historical encounters with figures including Francisco Miranda and Sir Walter Raleigh. Naipaul is no philologist, but *A Way in the World* performs the life of Erich Auerbach’s historical being, one who comes into consciousness of himself in history, who lives “the experience of historical multiplicity” (5), and for whom an ethical vocation requires constant interrogation of birthright, heritage, home, and work in the world.

Naipaul himself has been forthright on the subject of vocation, telling the *New Yorker*’s Stephen Schiff in 1994, “I can’t serve a cause. I’ve never served a cause. A cause always corrupts” (62). The author—whose biography famously states that he went to England on scholarship in 1950, spent four years at Oxford, and “began to write, and since then has followed no other profession”—has generated and sustained his own mythology over the past half-century. Stories, some apocryphal, of Naipaul’s violent intolerance of others and strident individualism abound. A writer obsessed with “finding his own voice” (Buruma, “Lessons of the Master”), he is known to be severe and exacting, both in the practice of his chosen craft and in training his unforgiving eye upon the world. Many have condemned Naipaul’s politics of, as Edward Said writes, “[preferring] to indict guerrillas for their pretensions rather than indict the imperialism and social injustice that drove them to insurrection” (“Bitter Dispatches” 100). In 2001, just weeks after September 11th, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, confirming his place in Pascale Casanova’s “world republic of letters.”

Contemporary readers of Naipaul must remain mindful of the Trinidad that made him, the India that has haunted him, and the England that houses him still. Put differently, writing about Naipaul in the twenty-first century requires the reanimation of late-twentieth-century discourses on postcoloniality and diaspora, migration and exile, nation and translation, and acknowledgement that the questions asked

now have been determined, disrupted, and answered before.¹ Sara Suleri has identified the motivating concerns of Naipaul's writing as ones of "cultural equilibrium" and "anguish of affiliation": "What uneasy commerce can be established between the postcolonial and the writer? Which imperial gestures must such a writer perform before he can delineate the relation of his language to the canon of fiction written in English?" (149). In *A Way in the World*, Naipaul negotiates his relationship to the peripheral nation of his birth, the history that precedes and threatens to determine him, and the centered, western canon into which he strives to write himself.

From where does Naipaul write, and to whom? To which national traditions does the author belong? It is, like all rhetorical questions, an impossible one. Even as Naipaul has explicitly forsworn particular national, ethnic, and communitarian allegiances, his writing continues to be appropriated by dissertations, dossiers, anthologies, and prize-giving committees into categories of belonging as seemingly incompatible as multicultural British, transnational, Third World, Anglophone Caribbean, South Asian, Indo-Trinidadian, colonial, postcolonial, neocolonial, and postmodern. Every appellation gets it partly wrong. A writer who has spent the better part of his career plumbing the depths of the self—"Everything of value about me is in my books"; "I am the sum of my books" ("Two Worlds" 479–80)—Naipaul nevertheless remains resistant to certain identitarian identifications. England may be his chosen home, but the author isn't English. That he both invites and eludes this manner of identification is one of Naipaul's most compelling and vexing authorial attributes. A self-proclaimed exile, he is in the world but not of it. His voice sounds in that of the narrator of *A Way in the World*, who says unapologetically after encountering the lawyer Evander, a man with a revolutionary dream who appeals to him on the level of identity politics, "I wished . . . to belong to myself" (WW 18).

A decade after Naipaul's *A Way in the World*, Amitav Ghosh published *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh is a writer more readily assimilable into the categories "Indian" and "postcolonial," though his work is also marked by what Inderpal Grewal has called his "anti-colonial cosmopolitanism" (38). His novel tells the stories of Kanai, an urban Indian who runs a thriving translation and interpretation business in New Delhi, and Piya, an Indian-American cetologist whose passion for marine mammals takes her to the Sundarbans. In tide country, Kanai's and Piya's paths intersect. She connects with Fokir, a tribal fisherman whose knowledge of the islands and rivers proves vital to her research, and Kanai recalls his childhood exile in Lusibari and considers the lives of his aunt Nilima and late uncle, Nirmal. Nirmal has left a notebook to Kanai, detailing the government's violent destruction of a community

settled in Morichjhāpi. The reader accesses this notebook along with the translator, via Kanai’s rendering of the text in English, and hears the stories of Kusum and Horen along with the legend of the goddess Bon Bibi. *The Hungry Tide* poses questions about ancestry and descent, language and legacy, home and belonging.

Ghosh’s novel shares at least this with Naipaul’s: characters whose variable “ways in the world” are determined by their understandings (or lack thereof) of themselves as being(s) in history. Indeed, the stories men tell about their ways and work in the world—like those they cannot, will not, or must not tell—reveal much about the corner of the world they (think they) inhabit. In his later work, Edward Said implored his fellow academics “to think about breaking out of the disciplinary ghettos in which as intellectuals we have been confined . . . to consider that the audience for literacy is not a closed circle of three thousand professional critics but the community of human beings living in society” (“Opponents, Audiences” 146). Said called not only for the production of readable scholarship, but also for deeper and more explicit political commitments in the name of humanism. He recalled a tradition of public intellectualism in which “literature was about the world, readers were in the world; the question was not *whether* to be but *how* to be” (“Opponents, Audience” 123).

Said’s conception of world here is not Arendt’s objective world nor the enduring human artifice, but rather a world which the individual may choose to inhabit or disavow. Said believed that political change, the necessary (re)building of the world in what was then the urgent Reagan era (now the urgent post-9/11 era), would not emerge from within rarefied academic disciplines, Marxist commitments notwithstanding. R. Radhakrishnan has argued that Said’s conception of worldliness drove him away from certain academic schools of thought, particularly high theory: “theory had seemed [to Said] to have found a way of transcending the responsibility of having to be about anything except itself. It is as if theory had found ways to sublimate . . . the very worldliness of the world” (21). I will not wade much further into what remains a thorny debate about the politics of theory and praxis as enunciated by Said. But I do want to hold on to the idea that one’s conception of worldliness will be inextricably tied to the formulation and execution of one’s work in the world.

The ways in which we situate our knowledges and the terms on which we avow the locations from which we speak make evident our conceptions of our own world-making potential as well as that (and in relation to that) of other human subjects. In the same essay, Said revealingly suggests that to move from interpretation to the politics of interpretation is “to go *from undoing to doing*” (147, emphasis added). The stakes, then, of choosing to remain outside the world as Said

conceives it may be akin not just to quietism but betrayal. This, too, sheds light on the responses to Naipaul that were earlier referenced, including Said's own. It is evident now that a particular conception of worldliness undergirds the critique of both "uncommitted" novelist and theorist.

At the risk of overstating the biographical, I will briefly compare the trajectories of Naipaul and Ghosh in order to indicate the elisions—the temporal and spatial gaps and leaps—that enable this joint consideration of their novels. Ghosh was born in Kolkata in 1956, and belongs to a generation of English-language writers born and/or raised in India that includes Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Rohinton Mistry, among others. Naipaul, born in 1932 in Trinidad, is a generation older than Ghosh and a generation removed from the supposed motherland. The senior writer is the child of migrants, a second-generation diasporic Indian. As he terms himself in an early article, he is "East Indian West Indian" (*Overcrowded Barracoon* 34). "Indianness" for Ghosh is not the vexed problematic that it has been for Naipaul, but rather a generative and enabling assumption. Although he was educated in Oxford and presently lives outside India, Ghosh has not had to explain, defend, or reject his national belonging. In journalist Tarun Tejpal's words, Naipaul bears "the peculiar burden of those who come from nowhere, and have to give up much to find their rightful place in the world" (160). A writer like Ghosh, by contrast, is one "to whom the world [has been] readily given" (Tejpal 160).

Like many of his generation (Roy the activist; Tharoor the diplomat and politician; Chatterjee the I.A.S. officer), Ghosh has pursued a number of professions, moving seamlessly between work as anthropologist, journalist, professor, and novelist. As Pico Iyer writes, "What this means in practice is that Ghosh has one foot in the comfortable upper-middle-class Bengali world we know from Satyajit Ray movies . . . and the other among the displaced peoples of the world, whose sufferings and split identities he has chronicled in reportorial works distinguished for their social conscience and compassion" ("The Road from Mandalay"). This, too, is a striking difference between the Indian and the Trinidadian. For Ghosh, writing is a means to his ends—academic, journalistic, novelistic, and activist. For Naipaul, writing is an end in itself.

Writing is Naipaul's world and his contribution to it, where purpose, calling, and vocation coincide. In *A Way in the World*, this writer's path is unapologetically traced in contradistinction to that of failed revolutionaries and confounded hybrid subjects. In charting the ill-fated choices and thwarted aims of his alter-egos, Lebrun and Blair, Naipaul's narrator valorizes his own nonrevolutionary path. The result

is a novel that weaves a complex story of pragmatic individualism that almost succeeds in confirming Said’s suspicions and concealing its author’s world-making aspirations. But, returning to an Arendtian conception of work as world-making, the narrator is indeed producing a novel “thing” (in both senses of the phrase), which will be part of the enduring human artifice.

If *A Way in the World* compels an examination of the problematic of postcolonial selfhood, then *The Hungry Tide* enables an excavation of the potential of a marginal place. In a 1998 article for the *Kenyon Review*, Ghosh offers his understanding of the place of “place” in the novel: “A novel . . . must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves” (“The March of the Novel” 18). Ever the anthropologist, Ghosh did four years of preparation and research in order to write the novel; he lived in the Sundarbans, learned to catch crabs, and traveled up the Mekong River in Cambodia with a dolphin specialist. Ecopolitical and environmental concerns pervade the text: the endangerment of species that once populated the Sundarbans, especially the disappearance of marine mammals; the dangers of overfishing the rivers of Bengal; the degradation of the mangrove forests; climate change and global warming. The world-making aspirations of Ghosh’s characters are inextricably tied to the communities in/with which they live, where they are. The result is a novel whose engagement with the world centers on place—on the geography of the Sundarbans, the changing landscape of the islands, the appetites of the voracious tide—and only secondarily on the animals, indigenous tribals, and urban cosmopolitans who attempt to make their way in what Ghosh calls, echoing Naipaul, an “area of darkness” (qtd. in Ferdous and Rutsch).

The next section returns to Arendt’s elaboration of the human condition in order to problematize the conditions under which the human subject might engage in revolutionary world building in Marxist terms. A consideration of the disparate journeys, self-disclosures, and world-making projects of four characters from *A Way in the World* and *The Hungry Tide* follows. Via Naipaul, I introduce Leonard Side and Manuel Sorzano, men of Indian origin in Trinidad and Venezuela, who account for “who” and “what” they are, in Arendtian terms, in ways that reveal their fraught relationships to history. Via Ghosh, I introduce Piyali Roy and Nirmal Bose, who are both drawn (in)to the tide country of the Sundarbans, where, for different reasons, they imagine they can perform the work of their lives. This character-focused reading of the novels may strike some readers as inappropriately ethnographic. The intention, however, is to examine how each character makes his way

through the world of the novel, so that the reader will be better equipped to account for her inhabitation of history, world, and text.

Where Marx on History Meets Arendt on Action

Thus far, I have considered Arendt's conception of the objective world as distinct from the human artifice that man makes through "the work of [his] hands" (136). I have also introduced Arendt's distinction between the work of men—which yields "the man-made world of things" (173)—and their speech and action. It is worth dwelling longer on this formulation: "The man-made world of things . . . becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions . . . *The 'doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words' will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed*" (Arendt 173, emphasis added). Since words and deeds are ephemeral, located only in the intangible "in-between," men require the presence of others who may then testify to their existences and tell the stories of their lives.

For Arendt, speech and action are the only available means by which men may "appear to each other" and insert themselves into the human world: "this insertion is like a second birth . . . its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative" (176–77). Every man is born into an existing world, and thus the work and action of his life necessarily begins *in media res*. He must insert himself through word and deed into the present "web of human relationships" (183) and enter into an ongoing conversation that comprises all human history.

I hear in Arendt an echo of Marx in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte": "Men make their own history, but not spontaneously, under conditions they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them" (287). This line is often quoted, for it charts a compelling middle ground between unbounded potential action and circumscribed reaction to circumstance, however "progressive." But the lines that follow are more provocative:

The tradition of countless dead generations is an incubus to the mind of the living. At the very times when they seem to be engaged in revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances, in creating something previously non-existent, at just such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously summon up the spirits of the past to their aid, borrowing from them names, rallying-cries, costumes, in order to stage the new world-historical drama in this time-honoured disguise and borrowed speech . . . Just so does the beginner, having learnt a new

language, always re-translate it into his mother tongue; he has not assimilated the spirit of the new language, nor learnt to manipulate it freely, until he uses it without reference to the old and forgets his native language in using the new one. (287)

History, in Marx’s account, not only determines, but *over*-determines, the potential actions of living men. An incubus is oppressive, nightmarish, even parasitic (“incubus,” *OED*). Understood as incubus, “the traditions of countless dead generations” (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” 287) must be overcome before man can act freely, truly assimilate the spirit of his age, and speak in the tongue of the present. Marx’s analogic use of language is helpful in understanding the predicament of the postcolonial author and subject. For if forgetting is the necessary pre-condition for revolutionary action, then the postcolonial or diasporic subject—in whom the old ever lives, despite any assimilationist attempts—may be incapable of making history in Marxist terms.

But can a man ever actually forget his native language, or use the new without reference to the old? No matter what language he speaks, does his speech not cite that of all those who precede him? Do his actions not invoke those that fabricated the world into which he was born? To take up the problem of diasporic experience as elaborated by Stuart Hall, as an experience not of “essence or purity” but “hybridity” (235), can the subject of diaspora ever effectively “summon up the spirits of the past” to her aid? Can the hybrid subject freely manipulate “a new language” if she has never inhabited the “pure” mother tongue, the native language, which Marx would have her forget? These questions will inform the consideration of Ghosh’s characters, particularly Piya, who must assimilate the spirit of the *old* language as she encounters it anew.

If men are to make, remake, and revolutionize the world, they must first be fully human. And in order to have human lives, lives that are lived “in sheer human togetherness” (Arendt 180), they must announce themselves as actors through speech. As Linda Zerilli makes clear, this “human togetherness” is not, for Arendt, the same as “shared human nature (for example, rationality)” or the “shared experience” of racial, ethnic, class, gender, or other identity. Rather, this fundamental aspect of the human condition is “plurality” (165). Through speech, men disclose themselves as “distinct and unique” beings among equals; they reveal “who,” and not merely “what,” they are (Arendt 179). And yet the “who”-ness of the individual is almost impossible to know, never mind express. Arendt further elaborates the distinction by arguing that “*who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero—his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have

produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he is or was” (186). This distinction will inform the consideration of Naipaul’s characters, each of whom represents a subject caught between the enunciation of “who” and “what.”

Through action among men who are unique and equal, men are born again. This “second birth” is what Arendt calls the miracle of natality, the force of which is the birth of potentiality itself. For Arendt, the birth of Jesus is paradigmatic, and its account in the Gospels the “most glorious . . . expression” of “faith in and hope for the world” (247). By citing the birth of Jesus, Arendt is able to emphasize the redemptive, other-worldly quality of natality. Man brings the possibility of newness into the world; he brings forth the unexpected and “is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (178). Put simply, the birth of man is the birth of the political. To ask how, why, when, and with whom men act is to ask if there can ever truly be another world. Arendt’s theory of redemptive natality draws a stark contrast to that which is promised by Naipaul’s “speakers on the Victorian bandstand,” who draw on feelings of “racial righteousness” in order to argue that “redemption has at last come” (*WW* 38). Perhaps Naipaul disparages them because they do not realize, as Arendt does, that redemption is always already in the world of men.

Fred Dolan places even stronger emphasis on what in Arendt is “infinitely improbable,” describing the force of natality as “*impossible—and yet there it is*” (608). For Dolan, Arendt’s formulation of natality is yet more complex. Considering its miraculous quality and connection to the Christian understanding of “epiphany,” he writes: “Not politics, but the novel and poetry and other arts are where we take up the miraculous in something approaching a durable form” (609). Dolan’s reading invites consideration not only of the force of natality in the writing of (the birth of) a novel, but also of that newness which the novel itself is capable of bring forth into the world.

Disclosing the Self: “Who” or “What” Is Leonard Side?

A Way in the World begins with Leonard Side, “a decorator of cakes and arranger of flowers” whom Naipaul’s narrator never meets but hears about from a school teacher (*WW* 4). Already, from the start of the novel, the reader is in the realm of secondhand mediation, of a story of a story, which carries the “germinative power” of Walter Benjamin’s ideal (90). Whose story is being told, and who is the teller? What purchase is gained in the retelling? The story is that of a man on the margins who attempts, in Arendtian terms, to announce his existence in history and the world.

Through the teacher’s eyes and the narrator’s recollection, the reader sees Leonard Side in Parry’s Funeral Parlour, “doing things with

his fingers to a dead body” (WW 6), and at the Women’s Auxiliary Association, where he teaches women how to knead dough for bread and decorate cakes with icing-flowers. The teacher is disgusted by the operations of Side’s “hairy fingers,” disturbed by the ease with which he moves from corpse to cake, and shocked at the reverence with which his women-students receive his gifts of “little things he had iced, to eat on the spot, as a treat” (WW 7). Fawzia Mustafa writes that Side not only “jar[s] the teacher’s sensibility” but also “the narrative’s two normative registers: that which is the Caribbean, and that which is not” (202). For Mustafa, the story of Side—it cannot rightly be called “Side’s story”—establishes the novel’s central themes of inheritance, historical determinism, and hybrid subjectivity, thereby opening the discursive space of every narrative that follows.

Naipaul explicitly cues Mustafa’s reading. The title of this first chapter is “Prelude: An Inheritance,” and the narrator closes it with a powerful disclaimer that sets the terms of the autobiographical and historical episodes that follow: “I can give you that historical bird’s eye view. But I cannot really explain the mystery of Leonard Side’s inheritance” (WW 11). The narrator takes care to distinguish what can be known from that which cannot, the aspects of history that can be apprehended—“most of us know the parents or grandparents we come from” (WW 11)—from those one cannot hope to understand. This is a revision of Arendt’s theory of the disclosure of self in the realm of human affairs, on which there will be more to say in a moment. The “historical bird’s eye view” is that of “what” Side is: a man, a Mohammedan, a migrant. But it is “who” Side is—the unknowable, inscrutable, and unattainable—which has greatest motivating force and affective significance in the story of his life.

Leonard Side’s life demonstrates that men not only “carry the memories of thousands of beings,” but those memories condition who they are, the speech and actions with which they attempt to insert themselves into the world. Side is more than what Mustafa calls an emblem of “all the principal figures of the subsequent narratives” (202). In fact, the narrator actually identifies with Side, however pitiable the teacher finds him, and suggests there is much to admire in and learn from the humble aesthete. The teacher’s story is associated with the pleasant sensation of a half-dream, a fever of “knowing and not knowing” (WW 4). Descriptions of Side, which are the narrator’s reconstructions, are also markedly positive. Side is “good-looking” and works “like a magician”; he has a “special idea of beauty” (9); the women in his class like him. He is a Mohammedan in whose bedroom resides a beautiful framed portrait of Christ. Significantly, the “mixing of things” (WW 9) which upsets the teacher does *not* upset Side. He is not Frantz Fanon’s wretched split-subject.² His aesthetic sensibility

guides his work, hobbies, and homemaking, no matter how confused the combination seems to the observer.

Side need not know his probable Shia Muslim great-grandfather, Sayed, in order to try to infuse his life with integrity and world with meaning. And here I return to Naipaul's "revision" of Arendt: Side need not know "what" he is in order to speak his "who," while the narrator-storyteller is stuck in the realm of the bird's-eye view. This reading of Side is reinforced by the close of the novel, when the narrator describes the repatriation of Blair's body to Trinidad: "The box would have been taken in an ambulance to Port of Spain," he says, "and then the shell of the man would have been laid out in Parry's chapel of rest" (380). The two men to survive the failed revolutionary, Blair, are the narrator, to recount his tale, and Leonard Side, had he lived long enough, to dress the body. The novel which celebrates the narrator's liberal individualist life path recognizes the success of Side's life, too.

Inhabiting History: Welcome "Home," Piyali Roy

The Hungry Tide opens with Piyali Roy seen through Kanai Dutt's eyes, as he takes in her clothes, haircut, and revealing posture: ". . . she was not Indian," he concludes, "except by descent" (*HT* 3). With these few words, Ghosh establishes that American-raised Piya is out of place; she speaks her difference despite herself. She may not be foreign *to* India, but she is nonetheless foreign *in* India. By Kanai's initial reading, Piya seems to be the classically confused *desi*,³ one who cannot speak her mother tongue and stands out like a sore thumb in the motley multitudes of India. But Piya is not simply a stranger to the Sundarbans, for, as she discovers, there is much in and around Lusibari to speak to her of home.

Piya has traveled to India to study the Gangetic dolphins in the rivers of the tide country. Her journey is neither strictly a homecoming, nor a venture into entirely unknown territory. After being taken for a proverbial ride by a Forest Department guard and Mej-da, Piya observes that she "had no more idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things than she did of theirs—and it was exactly this, she knew, that had occasioned their behavior" (*HT* 31). Later in the novel, Nilima voices her confusion over Piya's proper place: "It's your appearance that gets me mixed up—I keep having to remind myself not to speak to you in Bangla" (*HT* 207). Bangla (Bengali) is Piya's putative mother tongue, which she has not simply forgotten, but rather "lost" (*HT* 78).

The categorical instability of Piya's "non-resident Indian" identity proves to be a double-edged sword. Had Piya understood local gender norms and social conventions, she may not have been able to enter Fokir's boat, sleep and eat near, if not with, him, and develop their

“miraculous” collaboration (*HT* 118). On the other hand, had she not been the child of her Bengali parents, Piya would not have connected Moyna’s “soft, crumpled, worn thin” sari with that worn by her mother (60), nor Fokir’s rectangle of “checkered cloth” with her father’s towel-memento (73). These powerful moments of recognition engender in Piya an affective interest in Fokir and Tutul, occasioning, for example, her efforts to learn from Fokir the word “*gamchha*” (78). One might argue that Piya veritably finds her way “home” on Fokir’s boat: “They were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less expected to see them than on this boat” (81). She begins to assimilate the spirit of Fokir’s Bangla and to revise the use of her own native English in reference to the rediscovered mother tongue.

At the close of the novel, Piya says that “home is where the Orcaella are” (329). This seeming platitude is only part of the truth of her belonging. Home for Piya is produced by the projection of her childhood memories onto the fabric of the lives of the people she meets in tide country. The dolphins may have been the ones to draw Piya (back) to India, but they are not exclusively responsible for keeping her there. Repeatedly, Piya notes that forces beyond her understanding are controlling the direction of her life. These are not simply the forces of fate, but those of history, ancestry, destiny: “Maybe the ancients had it right after all. Perhaps it was the crab that ruled the tide of her destiny” (119). Although Piya speaks this realization with glad wonder, her lapse into what sounds like Hindu fatalism recalls Marx’s caution: “At the very times when they seem to be engaged in revolutionizing themselves . . . they anxiously summon up the spirits of the past to their aid” (“Eighteenth Brumaire” 287). In Piya’s case, however, it is unclear to which past she turns, to whose spirits, and in the name of what future. The “ancients” of whom she speaks are those of the Greek Zodiac, who assigned her, July born, the sign of Cancer.

During her journey, Piya realizes that she has stumbled upon “the work of a lifetime . . . an errand that would detain [her] for the rest of [her] life” (*HT* 105). This is not necessarily a triumphant moment, for Piya conceives of her future research in subdued terms: “. . . *as an alibi for a life, it would do*; she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth” (*HT* 106, emphasis added). Piya’s attempt to rationalize her time spent in the world stems, at this point in the action, from an understanding of life as carrying an imperative “to do” in Said’s terms. Toward the close of the novel, after the jarring experience of witnessing the village mob murder of a tiger, she is better able to view herself and the work of her life in history:

Piya looked into the distance . . . She thought of Blyth and Roxburgh and the naturalists who had crossed the waters a hundred years before and found them teeming with cetaceans. She thought of all the years

in between . . . It had fallen to her to be the first to carry back a report of the current situation and she knew she could not turn back from the responsibility. (*HT* 247)

The knowledge of this responsibility—not just to the Orcaella, not just to the Sundarbans, but to history—enables Piya to move forward with her research, notwithstanding her nagging fears that what she is doing “is more or less futile” (249). She is committed to her work, even if it will not change the world; she will live a life of means, without the certainty of an end. Is this a subtle critique of Piya’s pragmatism, or a lesson from Ghosh for every self-berating researcher?

Speaking the Past: *Manuel Sorzano “Only Talks Spanish”*

“A New Man” is the brief but revealing interlude between the unwritten stories of Sir Walter Raleigh and Francisco Miranda in *A Way in the World*. Here, Naipaul considers Trinidad’s relationship to Venezuela, a country which had previously existed for him as “imaginary . . . created in [his] mind from the documents [he had] read in London” (*WW* 220). He writes as a town mouse of the big city, projecting onto the country his expectations of its “continental scale” (220) and recalling that, for the Trinidadians of his 1940s youth, Venezuela was the promised land, “a country of opportunity” (222). The narrator describes his encounters with landscape, his remapping of the Gulf that Sir Walter Raleigh had mapped in 1595. But the substantive encounter of the chapter is with Manuel Sorzano, an Indian-from-Trinidad turned Venezuelan-national who the narrator meets on a plane to Caracas.

Manuel Sorzano is a man struggling to come to grips with the complexities of his cultural, religious, and linguistic inheritance, and his mode of survival seems to be concealment. His appearance first draws Naipaul’s attention: heavy gold bracelets, assertive pigtail, and an “unexpected touch of style” (225). As in the case of Leonard Side, it is Sorzano’s curious aesthetic sensibility which gives him away. He is not quite identifiable. “He was unusual,” the narrator says. “He could be one thing or the other: it depended on what you thought he was” (225). Identity initially resides in the eye of the beholder, but as Naipaul begins to engage Sorzano, he finds traces of his immutable Indianness in his accent and the records of Hindu devotional songs and Indian pickles he’s carrying home to Venezuela. As Sorzano grows comfortable with the narrator, he lets down his guard and admits to a former life as an Indian in Trinidad, complete with a different name and family. The chapter unfolds like a mystery—who is Manuel Sorzano?—with its clues and enigmatic confessor, before culminating in Sorzano’s telling of his son Antonio’s struggle to assimilate the norms of the Guardia Nacional.

Like Side, Sorzano is marked by what he does and does not know. He does not know the dollar value of Venezuelan currency, and he wrongly refers to Hindi as Indian, but he senses intuitively the power of the Hindu religious traditions of his ancestors. By Marx’s account, Sorzano has indeed “[forgotten] his native language in using the new one” (“Eighteenth Brumaire” 287). But this forgetting, rather than enabling Sorzano to break with history, haunts him, guides his intuition, and structures the course of his life. Sorzano doesn’t speak the language of his forebears, and yet somehow it speaks him. He has disclaimed his culture, and yet, persistent, it makes its claim.

The narrator’s ambivalence is evident as he recounts Sorzano’s story, revealing his tentative admiration for a man whose “life should have been full of stress, but [who] gave the impression of living as intuitively as he had always done, making his way, surviving, with no idea of being lost or in a void” (WW 229). One might argue that what Sorzano does not know—not only currency values or language names, but also the fact that others might find his passing contemptible, his cultural confusion pitiable—is his greatest asset. L. R. Leavis even describes Sorzano’s “blindly instinctive contact with the culture of his roots” as a treasure to rival that of El Dorado (145). Although Sorzano believes in the necessity of his dissimulation (he will not even speak his Indian name), he retains faith in the rituals of his people, the prayers which are of importance to his Indian-speaking wife. Changing his name to Manuel and raising a Spanish-speaking family has not fully severed Sorzano’s ties to the history that precedes him, just as Side the Mohammedan can look with impunity upon the portrait of Christ.

Sorzano knows, as Naipaul does, that “the world is what it is” (*Bend in the River* 3). He believes in the greatness of Venezuela, saying proudly: “They treat you according to what you show yourself to be” (WW 242–43). Sorzano is the grateful immigrant, who seizes in the country of his choosing the opportunity to make a life, to strike gold, to begin anew. His appreciation of Venezuela is tempered, however, by his knowledge that the country requires his assimilative performance. He cautions the narrator: “In this country you have to know how to handle yourself” (242–43). On the whole, Sorzano conducts himself pragmatically in his adoptive country. To this end, his guard-dropping return to Trinidad and indulgence of “superstition” (Mustafa 214) may also be read as the subversive act of Monisha Das Gupta’s “unruly immigrant,”⁴ one who, almost against his better judgment, challenges the fixity of national borders and performs a fluidity of identity that belies the certainty of his Venezuelan passport.

Alternatives to Revolution: Nirmal Bose Asks, “What Is To Be Done?”

The Hungry Tide’s Nirmal Bose is a genuine Marxist. A teacher and socialist in 1940s Calcutta, he arouses the suspicion of the police and must relocate, with wife Nilima, to the island of Lusibari in the Sundarbans, where he will run the local school. Nirmal’s first impression of the tide country is that it is strange “beyond reckoning” (HT 66). He is astounded that this “other world” exists just sixty miles from his home, but he is determined, as is Nilima, to rise to the challenges presented by the island’s destitution. For the first time, they understand “what it really meant to ask a question such as ‘What is to be done?’” (67). Nilima finds her answer by engaging the women of the island, founding a Union, and eventually establishing the Badabon Development Trust. Nirmal reads pamphlets by Lenin and grows increasingly frustrated, confirming Slavoj Žižek’s point that “if you really do not know what to do, then nobody can tell you, and the cause is irredeemably lost” (88). Reading what Lenin did does not fully clarify for Nirmal what he himself is doing.

When the action of the novel begins, Nirmal has passed away and passed on a notebook of his final reflections to his nephew, Kanai. The reader thus encounters Nirmal through his writing—although the ending of the novel indicates that these may be Kanai’s mediated reconstructions of the lost notebook—and through Kanai’s and Nilima’s memories of the man. A storyteller and lover of Rainer Maria Rilke’s poetry (a Bengali translation of the *Duino Elegies* serves as constant reference and solace), Nirmal’s greatest fear is that his life, lived in words, dreams, and desires, has been meaningless: “The true tragedy of a routinely spent life is that its wastefulness does not become apparent until it is too late” (HT 120). He is hagridden by the possibility that he has squandered his time in the world.

Nirmal finds inspiration in the actions of Scottish businessman-revolutionary Sir Daniel Hamilton, who, in the early twentieth century, bought thousands of acres of the tide country from the British and attempted to make a world. In Nirmal’s description of Hamilton is the unmistakable echo of Marx in *The German Ideology*.⁵ Nirmal writes:

What [Hamilton] wanted was no different from what dreamers have always wanted . . . He dreamed of a place where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening. (HT 46)

Hamilton’s attempt moves Nirmal, at the end of his life, to become involved with the settlers on Morichjhāpi. He sees in their precarious settlement “something hitherto unseen,” a radical social experiment (141), and resolves to play his part by teaching the children of the island

to dream. It is, as Nilima says, “the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary moment” (*HT* 100). In his mind, the Morichjhāpi settlers present not only heady political possibilities but also a chance for a lapsed revolutionary to redeem himself. “A man can be transformed,” Nirmal tells Horen, “. . . he can begin again” (149). For the first time in his life, Nirmal understands the miracle of natality: “men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (Arendt 246). Nirmal is newly alive to the possibilities inherent in the human condition; he, too, can invest his words and dreams with material force.

But the settlers’ social experiment is ill fated, for the government is determined to remove them from the island. Although Nirmal knows that he will not be able to protect this budding society of farmer-poet-carpenters—“There is nothing I can do to stop what lies ahead”—he will nevertheless tell their story, so that “what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (*HT* 59). Furthermore, his story will provide counsel, in the manner of that provided by Benjamin’s real story: “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” (86). If this unfolding story is that of men in the world, then the counsel provided by Nirmal’s story is that which directs the future course of Kanai’s life, perhaps even Piya’s, and the work they are poised to begin at the novel’s close. Nirmal’s story “starts the web which all stories together form in the end” (Benjamin 98). His final act inaugurates a new context and brings into being the possibility of another world, a second novel.

Nirmal’s ultimate intervention in the world is the writing of the notebook, an action situated between what Nilima identifies as the poles of “building” and “dreaming” (*HT* 178). In Nirmal-the-Marxist, Naipaul-the-individualist finds an unlikely fellow traveler, for Nirmal’s, too, is a life lived by the pen. As he writes the story of Morichjhāpi, Nirmal feels like a “misplaced, misgendered Scheherezade” (124). The question is whether Nirmal is able to give the notebooked account despite his misplacement, or *because* of it? Elsewhere, Ghosh suggests an answer: “To write about one’s surrounding is anything but natural: to even perceive one’s immediate environment one must somehow distance oneself from it; to describe it one must assume a certain posture, a form of address” (“The March of the Novel” 23). Nirmal distances himself from the story he tells—“[Kusum] is the muse and I am just a scribe” (*HT* 134)—as if he were witness but not actor, medium but not author. His stance is not exactly the exilic stance of a Naipaul, but it begs the question of whether there is a substantive difference between observation and action, between the telling of a story and the enactment of its plot.

Rilke’s poetry convinces Nirmal of the significance of witness, moving him to “speak and testify” (*HT* 227). Arendt and Günther Stern

have shown, however, that Rilke's *Duino Elegies* were motivated by the poet's knowledge of "futility" and awareness of the degree to which human beings are estranged from the world. Arendt and Stern discern in Rilke's words "the conscious renunciation of the demand to be heard, the despair at not being able to be heard, and finally the need to speak even without an answer" (1). Rilke writes not to transform the world, but to name, rescue, and preserve the things of it. From Rilke's poetry of futility, Nirmal derives method and motivation for his own prose finale.

What We Are Doing: *Closing Thoughts on the Lives We Lead*

Every inhabitant of the world has a theory of it. Some don't think in those terms—of theory, of inhabitation. Of those who do, many are unable to account for what guides their actions, for the ways in which history determines the present, for the voices channeled from the pasts that precede them, for the betweenness that conditions not only diasporic, but all lives. Arendt implores us to "think what we are doing," to know ourselves as always inextricably among others, as belonging not only to atomized individual and family units, but to the world which gives men home, and into which each man and woman has the capacity to bring forth the new, the novel. When Nirmal asks, "What [have] I done? What was the work of my life? . . . In what way could I ever do justice to this place?" (*HT* 160, 180), he gives voice to the fears that many of us nurse: of disappointing Marx; of not bringing enough that is new into the world to live up to the promise of Arendtian natality.

When I began to read the novels in question, I thought I would endeavor to discern where world-making potential resides. Was it in Naipaul's exiles, who journey across borders, or in Ghosh's characters, invested in the establishment of home? The preceding pages have demonstrated why this would have been the wrong question. The question is not where world-making potential resides—Arendt demonstrates that all men and women are born to begin—but rather how and why we human subjects variably live and account for our potential in the world.

Reading Naipaul and Ghosh also reveals the necessity of reformulating the question of literature's efficacy in transforming the world. It is only once we have distanced ourselves from the question of literature's "ends" that we recall that Said, too, had troubled the opposition between "undoing" and "doing" with an avowal of the essential worldliness of text: "Texts have ways of existing, both theoretical and practical, that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence are worldly. The same is doubtless true

of the critic, as reader and as writer” (“Text, World, Critic” 4). Once we are willing to suspend (not relinquish) the revolutionary imperative, we can appreciate the other possibilities brought into the world by novel and author, each character’s account of self, and every rendition of a human way in the world. We see beyond Side’s “hairy fingers” to the lasting “work of his hands.” We hear in Sorzano’s Spanish the trace of his ancestor’s Hindi. And we recognize with Piya and Nirmal that there is a fine line between the work of a life and its “alibi.”

When Naipaul’s narrator says, foreshadowing the death of Blair, “A career is a career; and death is inescapable” (*WW* 27), I detect fervent pragmatism, not cold cynicism, and I want to insist on the difference. For although many of us on the academic left—students, professors, scholars, public intellectuals, would-be revolutionary agents—are rightly critical of the language of careerism and the valorization of the individual, we, too, must make a way in the world that does justice not only to the men amongst whom we live, but to the histories that precede us and the inheritances which determine our “uniquely” available “equal” paths. This is not to make the apolitical suggestion of abandoning all attempts to transform the world. Rather, we must allow ourselves to occupy the space between “dreaming” and “building,” between maintenance of the status quo and abolishment of all things. As Arendt reminds us, “acting and speaking men need the help of . . . the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all” (173). Like the poet, we, too, must take seriously our “being-provisional” in the world (Arendt and Stern 12).

We act not because we know our actions will change the world, not because we are making history, but because we are born among others and must announce ourselves, in Arendtian terms, through speech and deed. Žižek argues something similar: “The certainty on which an act relies is not a matter of knowledge, but a matter of *belief*: a true act is never a strategic intervention in a transparent situation of which we have full knowledge; on the contrary, the true act fills in the gap in our knowledge” (151–52). Like Side and Sorzano, we are caught between knowing and not knowing, and we disclose the stories of “who” and “what” we are despite ourselves. Our provisional interventions in the world, limited and boundless, are born of our faith and belief that the men and women who precede us have, in ineluctable ways, prepared us for the callings of our lives. We must therefore, with Piya and Nirmal, rise to the occasions presented to us—to write, to bear witness, to research—and forgive one another, Ghosh, and Naipaul if our legacies in the world fall to the side of the revolutionary aim. This, too, is what Arendt would have us do.⁶

Notes

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1. For a select view of what “came before,” see Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, editors, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*; Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

2. For Fanon’s discussions of the colonized psyche, see Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, both translated by Richard Philcox.

3. *Desi* refers to the native of a “*desh*” (“country” in Hindi). Sunaina Maira provides further context: “[in] South Asian diasporic communities in the United States, [*desi*] is used as a colloquial term to refer to those of South Asian descent, invoking a pan-ethnic rather than nationally bounded category” (“Identity Dub” 55, footnote 3).

4. Das Gupta’s argument concerns U.S.-based South Asian political struggles and organizations. I acknowledge that I am recontextualizing the phrase and do so in order to capture the political force that inheres in every movement across borders and boundaries.

5. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels envision a world in which “nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (53). This is a vision of a world *without* the unequal distribution of labor. Marx and Engels also demonstrate, however, that the abstract concept, or “pure” thought, only arises from and through social relations, i.e. through language-as-matter, which emerges from “the necessity of intercourse with other men” (50–51). The idea does not create the world, but the material world, with its unequal distribution of labor, gives birth to the idea. If the division of labor into menial and mental labor is what enables consciousness “to emancipate itself from the world” (52), then what manner of criticism can happen “after dinner”?

6. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes “Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it” (241). Although discussion of Arendt’s theorization of promise and forgiveness has been beyond the scope of this essay, I close with the hope that what was *not* done, too, may be forgiven for the sake of the one who didn’t do it, but endeavored to do something else.

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