

Transcultural Aesthetics and Postcolonial Memory: the Practices and Politics of Remembering in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*

Angelia Poon

The tension between the use of postcolonial memory to bear witness to the past and the aestheticization of memory lies at the center of Malaysian-born writer Tan Twan Eng's second novel, The Garden of Evening Mists (2012), a work that features the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II and the postwar period of the Malayan Emergency. The main protagonist is a former judge named Yun Ling who, faced with the prospect of eventual memory and speech loss, is moved to record her past experiences including the time she was a prisoner of war interred and when she was an apprentice to the gardener, Aritomo. In this article, I examine the novel's self-conscious musings about the nature of memory and the ways in which memory may be represented and preserved. Tan's novel attempts to provide a meditation on the transcultural mediation and aestheticization of memory by deliberately intermingling and overlaying various cultural features, artistic traditions and ethno-cultural subjectivities when it comes to processes of remembering. The attempt to transculturally aestheticize memory is on one level a metafictional and ostensibly inclusive move to affirm the plurality of stories and multiple perspectives. Yet, this is undermined by the novel's very strategies of aestheticization, which run the risk of making memory an artistic object so "precious" and rarefied as to counter the more avowedly political function of memory—that of bearing witness to history.

Keywords: transcultural aesthetics, memory, transnational literature, postcolonial Malaysia, Tan Twan Eng

Scholars who venture into the minefield of articulating what a postcolonial aesthetic might mean often express the challenges they face in terms of a stark binary between the aesthetic and the political. According to Bill Ashcroft, postcolonial theory

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has “warily avoided the theory of aesthetics, perhaps for fear that it might contaminate the political integrity of a field that has remained staunchly critical of the filiative hegemony of English literature.”¹ Vigilance is justified on account of the aesthetic easily becoming the covert vehicle for the assertion of transcendent standards and norms that belie the will to Western metropolitan cultural authority. Aesthetics is commonly shunned in postcolonial criticism, as Elleke Boehmer observes, because it is seen as “something that does not refer beyond itself; that is irreducible to anything outside of the work.”² The complex tensions and contradictions that stem from the evacuation of the political in the aesthetic may be seen in Malaysian-born writer Tan Twan Eng’s novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*,³ a work of historical realist fiction, which in focusing on historical events and acts of memory, pits the aestheticization of memory against the question it also inevitably summons up, that of bearing witness to the past. The events in Tan’s novel unfold during the Japanese occupation of Malaya in World War II as well as the immediate postwar period of the Malayan Emergency, the guerilla war waged by the Malayan National Liberation Army against the British colonial authorities between 1948 and 1960.⁴ The central consciousness in the novel belongs to a former Supreme Court judge character named Teoh Yun Ling, who retires to her house in the Cameron Highlands suffering from “Primary Progressive Aphasia.”⁵ Faced with the prospect of eventual memory and speech loss, she is moved to record her past traumatic experiences including the time she was a prisoner of war interred by the Japanese and the years she spent with the gardener Aritomo after the war learning how to build a Japanese garden so she could dedicate one to the memory of her late sister.

In this article, I focus on *The Garden of Evening Mists* to examine specifically the novel’s self-conscious, if not always self-reflexive, exploration of the nature of memory and the ways in which memory may be represented and preserved. Tan’s novel attempts to provide a meditation on the transcultural mediation and aestheticization of memory by deliberately intermingling and overlaying various cultural features, artistic traditions, and ethno-cultural subjectivities when it comes to processes of memory. The term *transcultural* here, like its correlate *transnational*, stresses the porosity of borders whether cultural or national, abrogating the assumption of fully formed cultures and stable cultural traditions often implied in the word *intercultural* or *international*. In the novel, Tan’s attempt to transculturally aestheticize memory is on the one hand a metafictional and inclusive move to affirm the plurality of stories and multiple perspectives. The aesthetic preservation of memory is explored in the

1 Bill Ashcroft, “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51.4 (2015): 410.

2 Elleke, Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating upon the Present,” in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, eds. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, Sarah Lawson Welsh (New York: Routledge, 2010), 173.

3 Tan Twan Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Myrmidon Books, 2012).

4 The Malayan National Liberation Army was the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party. As part of their counter-insurgency campaign, the British relocated hundreds of thousands of Malaysians to tightly guarded camps called New Villages in order to cut off the supply of food and information to the guerillas in the jungle. The war was only officially concluded in 1989 with the signing of the Haadyai Peace Agreement between the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) led by Chairman Abdullah CD and General Secretary Chin Peng, and the Thai and Malaysian governments.

5 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 126.

novel through troping various artistic practices, such as writing, tattooing, woodblock printing, and gardening, which have specific cultural valences. These tropes afford Tan the opportunity of playing with symbolically evocative oppositions such as surface and depth, and transience and impermanence. Such aestheticization on the other hand, however, often opposes another more avowedly political function of memory that the text also invites the reader to consider given its attempt to ostensibly present an alternative or hitherto unexplored view of the Japanese occupation in Malaya and the Malayan Emergency. Through the transculturally aesthetic and symbolic architecture it constructs around memory, the novel prompts questions about the nature of art and its role in the processes of remembering. At the same time as it asks these questions, however, the text crucially forecloses others so that ultimately its process of aestheticizing memory runs the risk of making memory an artistic object so “precious” and rarefied as to drain it of all possible political meaning. Before examining these issues to do with the novel’s disquieting politics in greater depth, however, I wish first to frame the text’s investment in a transcultural aesthetics of memory within the increased production of transnational Malaysian and Singaporean texts in the contemporary moment that seek to provide alternative histories of the region’s past and challenge entrenched as well as discursively and materially powerful official narratives.

Transnational Malaysian and Singaporean Novels

Since the start of the new millennium, novels written by a younger generation of transnational and diasporic Malaysian and Singaporean writers have gained greater global prominence and visibility. These writers, originally from the two countries in question but often now based in other parts of the world, include for example, Tan Twan Eng, Tash Aw,⁶ Rani Manicka, Preeta Samarasan, Vyvyane Loh, Sandi Tan, and Balli Kaur Jaspal. In the first decade of the new millennium, Manicka’s *Rice Mother* (2003), Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2006), and Samarasan’s *Evening is the Whole Day* (2008) were all published by international presses. For his part, Tan, who lives in Malaysia and South Africa, published his novels *The Gift of Rain* and *The Garden of Evening Mists* in 2009 and 2012, respectively. Writers who hail from Singapore or whose upbringing has been shaped to a larger extent by that island city-state include Vyvyane Loh, who published her novel *Breaking the Tongue* in 2004; Sandi Tan for *The Black Isle* (2012); and Balli Kaur Jaswal for *Inheritance* (2013). Of all these writers, Aw and Tan are arguably the most well-known, each having made the long list of the Man Booker Prize for their debut novels.

As cultural producers who write from outside their countries of origin and upbringing, and who target an international audience for their works, these Malaysian and Singaporean writers challenge, without totally discarding, the national frame conventionally used for categorizing writers and the reading of literature; their books are the products of multiple locations, inviting comparative and translational perspectives. Indeed, they belong to an increasing pool of transnational writers worldwide whose existence and identities collectively reflect the impact that

6 Tash Aw was born in Taiwan but raised in Malaysia. Besides the *The Harmony Silk Factory*, he has written two other novels: *Map of the Invisible World* (2010) and *Five-Star Billionaire* (2013).

contemporary intensified globalization has had on labor flows, the circulation of ideas, and migration patterns including the development of flexible citizenships. In his book *Global Matters*, Paul Jay notes the “transnational turn” in literature and literary studies, describing it as:

a new, more contemporary engagement with transnational spaces, hybrid identities, and subjectivities grounded in differences related to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, and the study of how culture and its practices are shaped and reshaped in border zones and liminal spaces that transgress the clear lines between states and the more fuzzy ones between nations.⁷

Transnational texts call for a more nuanced understanding of literary work and culture that is not solely determined by nation-based paradigms. They invite critical models “emphasizing the global space of ongoing travel and transcontinental connection,”⁸ as Susan Stanford Friedman puts it. In postcolonial studies, traditional dichotomies of colonizer and colonized as well as center and periphery have to some extent ceded conceptual ground to transnationalism. The latter provides an analytical lens better suited to explain the dynamic and complex cultures of a globalized modernity based on multiple centers and multidirectional interaction. The transnational can thus resharpen postcolonialism’s critical edge and ethical project, allowing scholars in the field to better engage with and understand the triangulated interplay between colonial inheritance (what Robert Young has referred to as the “ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies”),⁹ local circumstances, and global forces that structure our present historical moment. If the transnational and the transcultural more accurately capture the nature of many contemporary texts, it is important to note that these terms apply also to readers who make sense of texts by drawing upon multifarious cultural backgrounds. Thus, as Frank Schulze-Engler observes: “the transcultural potential of texts... lies in their impact on the reader as well as in the modes of representation required to approximate the cultural complexity they engage with.”¹⁰

In his discussion of “global” Malaysian novels, Philip Holden identifies a possible reason for the increasingly transnational content of postcolonial fiction, one that boils down to the novel form itself, especially its essentially “disembedded” nature as a commodity and material artefact. The change in content may thus be “a response to the changing nature of markets, and the intensified commoditization of the novel form.”¹¹ Focusing in particular on Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* and Tan’s first novel, *The Gift of Rain*, Holden calls for a way of reading these transnational texts that does not dismiss them *a priori* for failing to be political, emancipatory, or

7 Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 16.

8 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Migrations, Diasporas, and Borders,” *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. David Nicholls (New York: MLA, 2006), 906.

9 Robert Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 21.

10 Frank Schulze-Engler, “Introduction,” *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, ed. Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), xiv.

11 Philip Holden, “Global Malaysian Novels: Prospects and Possibilities,” *Kajian Malaysia* 30.1 (2012): 52.

culturally authentic enough but that attempts instead to tease out what they could mean for contemporary Malaysian society. Just like other commodities, the global Malaysian novel will have currency and meaning in both transnational and local contexts. Indeed, one of the ways in which global Malaysian and Singaporean novels have had particular currency for their respective local contexts is in their re-evaluation of the past to serve as a critique of the way the developmental postcolonial governments of these two nations have sought to monopolize the telling of historical “truths,” especially those about race.¹² Thus Preeta Samarasan’s novel, *Evening Is the Whole Day*,¹³ for example, is set in a narrative present of 1978 to 1980 and foregrounds the subaltern figure of the Indian servant girl in middle and upper-middle-class Malaysian households, a figure traditionally unrepresented in official history but one whose marginalized existence reveals starkly the intra-racial rural-urban, linguistic, and class cleavages that still define the multiracial postcolonial nation.¹⁴ Balli Kaur Jaswal’s novel *Inheritance*¹⁵ contrasts the rapid urban redevelopment of Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s with the domestic struggles of a Punjabi family headed by patriarch Harbeer Singh to interrogate deep-seated national assumptions about material progress and modernization. Similarly compelling a closer look at established historical verities and conventional historiography are writers who focus on the historical milestone that dramatically disrupted British colonial rule—the Japanese Occupation of Malaya from 1941 to 1945. In writing about this period, Tan Twan Eng in *The Garden of Evening Mists* and Vyvyane Loh in *Breaking the Tongue*,¹⁶ for example, draw attention to the tortured Chinese body as the site of historical record as well as the role of language in determining cultural identity.

Of the new generation of transnational Malaysian writers, it is Tan Twan Eng’s writing, as well as that of Tash Aw, that has garnered considerable critical attention and acclaim by postcolonial scholars. David Lim, for example, hails Tan’s first novel *The Gift of Rain* (2007) as “arguably the most accomplished Malaysian novel published to date”;¹⁷ indeed, he is “tempted to hold [it] up as the ‘Great Malaysian Novel’.”¹⁸ Set in Penang, *The Gift of Rain* centers on the life of its biracial protagonist,

12 There are, of course, key differences between the Malaysian and Singaporean postcolonial states’ multiracial policies. The carefully calibrated official multiracialism of Singapore, which enshrines English as a supposedly neutral first language and ensures a Chinese majority amid four racial categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others), produces a racial governmentality quite different from that of a Malaysian state that accords special privileges to Malays as the indigenous group or *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and endorses Malay ethnic and cultural primacy. For more on specific differences between the Malaysian and Singaporean race situations, refer to Daniel Goh, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden, and Gaik Cheng Khoo, eds., *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

13 Preeta Samarasan, *Evening Is the Whole Day* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008).

14 For a detailed analysis of the novel that casts it in terms of a critical response to diasporic Indian writing in English as well as Malaysian cultural nationalism, see Weihsin Gui, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitanism: Postcolonial Literature in a Global Moment* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 175–86.

15 Balli Kaur Jaswal, *Inheritance* (Collingwood: Sleepers Publishing, 2013).

16 Vyvyane Loh, *Breaking the Tongue* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

17 David Lim, “Agency and the Pedagogy of Japanese Colonialism in Tan Twan Eng’s *The Gift of Rain*,” *Critique* 52.2 (2011): 234.

18 *Ibid.*, 246.

Philip Hutton, a divisive figure even in old age, who is reviled and admired by different segments of Penang's society as variously a traitor and a savior because of his actions during the Japanese occupation of the island in World War II. Born to a British father and a Chinese mother, Philip meets Hayato Endo, a Japanese consular officer in British Malaya, in 1939. Besides becoming his tutor in the Japanese language and in aikido, the latter also becomes Philip's lover. Caught between competing loyalties, Philip serves as an informant to the Japanese while also using his privileged position to save as many Malayan lives as he can. The twist in the story lies in the revelation that Philip and Endo are romantic partners caught in a seemingly endless cycle of reincarnation. Eschewing the mystical for the historical, Lim seeks in his paper to account for the novel's multivalent nature by exploring the operations of individual agency and homoeroticism in the text. Indeed, he accords the text a complexity it seems itself unaware of, arguing that Philip is "far more unfree than he believes and much freer than he knows"¹⁹ by reframing Philip's "timeless" love for Endo in the context of *shudō*, the tradition of male homoerotic and sexual relationships, which serves to underpin imperial authority in Japan. In his discussion of the same novel, Weihsin Gui argues that Tan makes intentional and strategic use of "anthropological exoticism" to critique the cultural essentialism of a global literary marketplace constantly desirous of exotic and Orientalist fare for consumption. Gui writes:

In other words, in *The Gift of Rain* Tan has created a super-exotic novel, one that is more Oriental than the Orient, and his reviewers' complaints about Tan's descriptions and dialogue must be considered in light of this deliberate excess of Orientalist signification rather than as a failed attempt at cultural authenticity.²⁰

Additionally, Gui also argues that Tan uses the queer hybridity of his protagonist Philip to interrogate the essentialist parochialism and injustice of modern Malaysian nationalism premised on Malay ethnic privilege.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that both Lim and Gui need to read against the grain to make their respective arguments about Tan's novel. Indeed, this move speaks precisely to an unself-reflexive quality in Tan's writing—particularly in relation to race and gender—that I take issue with, and which forms part of the critique I mount in my discussion of the politics of his second novel. Although I remain skeptical of Gui's reading of *The Garden of Evening Mists* as disruptive if not subversive in its use of exoticism, I do agree with Gui's assessment of how the diasporic Malaysian writer of Chinese and Indian descent may be seen as writing back both to the metropole and the Malaysian nation, impelled by the "friction between their attachment to the national homeland and their consciousness of its limitations and possibilities."²¹ The related sense of transnational writers offering possibilities and alternative visions to their countries of origin underlies Philip Holden's comparison of Tan Twan Eng's first novel with that of Tash Aw's when he observes that both, by including Japanese characters in their texts, appear thus to "hint at a larger series of Asian connections

19 Ibid., 245.

20 Weihsin Gui, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics*, 190.

21 Ibid., 197.

which exceed the history of colony to nation, and which perhaps foreground contemporary pan-Asian connections..."²² Indeed, it seems to me that as contemporary writers operating in this intensified moment of globalization and addressing a global audience, these transnational writers from Malaysia harken self-consciously back to earlier "globalizations" of which they themselves are the products, tapping into the fact that in a previous imperial and colonial age of expansion where empires rather than individual nation-states held sway, people, goods, and ideas had also circulated and moved to contribute to the formation of new social constellations and cultural imaginaries. Thus, they emphasize the transcultural texture of life resulting from centuries of exchange and interaction before and during British colonialism as well as the stresses that result from World War II and the subsequent Cold War to avoid slavishly reproducing the traditional "imperial metropole and margins of empire" model for understanding colonized spaces and subjectivities. Besides writers, other transnational Malaysian cultural producers, too, draw upon their diasporic or cosmopolitan experiences to create an alternative racial and cultural imaginary, offering utopian or even forgotten racial and cultural relationships to challenge the nation-building ideology and racial policies of the postcolonial Malaysian state. Thus, Michelle Antoinette identifies well-known Malaysian contemporary artist Wong Hoy Cheong as part of "a new breed of 'cosmopolitan' artists"²³ and someone whose art seeks to embody "new cosmopolitan, transcultural and transethnic identifications [which] interrupt the artificiality of racial governmentality as defined by the postcolonial Malaysian State."²⁴

But although this may account for the transcultural impetus in Tan's second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, it still does not tell us anything about the overall persuasiveness of the transcultural vision presented. This is a question I address by examining the novel's representational strategies for the transcultural aestheticization of memory. To aid my analysis, I draw on ideas from trauma studies, a field which in engaging fundamentally with ethical questions of representation and representability provides a useful conceptual vocabulary to be used in relation to memorialization.

Remembering and Memorializing in *The Garden of Evening Mists*

A detailed summary of *The Garden of Evening Mists* readily reveals the text's reliance on multiple time frames and its intricately plotted narrative to create an overall atmosphere of mourning where the past suffuses the present. Like *The Gift of Rain*, which also contains an elderly protagonist remembering his past, this novel begins with the newly retired Yun Ling returning to Cameron Highlands, and specifically to Yugiri, the Japanese garden she inherited from Aritomo, once the gardener of the emperor of Japan. Aritomo had arrived in Cameron Highlands before the war, acquired land from the neighboring tea estate owned by his South African friend Magnus, and stayed on to create a garden. As the narrative unfolds, we learn how Yun Ling and her older sister had been interred in a secret Japanese camp during

22 Holden, "Global Malaysian Novels: Prospects and Possibilities," 55.

23 Michelle Antoinette, "The Art of Race: Rethinking Malaysian Identity through the Art of Wong Hoy Cheong," *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, eds. Daniel P. S. Goh, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden, and Gaik Cheng Khoo (New York; Routledge, 2009), 191.

24 *Ibid.*, 192.

the war. The latter was kept as a sex slave and did not live to see the Japanese surrender. Following the war, Yun Ling goes to Cambridge to study law, returning to Malaya upon graduation. It is then that she decides to build a Japanese garden in memory of her sister, who had a keen interest in such gardens. This leads to her approaching Aritomo with the request that he create a garden for her. He promptly refuses but offers instead to teach her how to do it. Yun Ling accepts his offer, and the two eventually become lovers. As the garden nears completion, Aritomo decides to tattoo Yun Ling's back after she tells him of her wartime experience. He creates a *horimono*, "things that are incised,"²⁵ covering her entire back. Once it is finished, he goes out for a walk in the hills one day and disappears forever. In the narrative present of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a sixty-something Yun Ling recalls and records her past, preparing to live out the rest of her days in Yugiri, close to her old friend, Frederik, who now runs his uncle Magnus's tea estate, Majuba. At the same time, Yun Ling also plays host to a Japanese professor, Tatsuji, who is writing a book about Aritomo. It is from Tatsuji that she discovers more about her former lover's past in Japan and the possibility that he had been sent by the emperor as a spy to survey the Malayan landscape and aid a project called Golden Lily, which aimed to store the looted spoils of war.

Recalling a timeless fairytale or mythic narrative with no specific historical markers to situate and anchor it, the first line of *The Garden of Evening Mists* reads thus: "On a mountain above the clouds once lived a man who had been the gardener of the Emperor of Japan."²⁶ The line is deeply evocative and enigmatic, part of a deliberately constructed description of Cameron Highlands in the novel as a liminal transcultural space. Indeed, the anomalous nature of the mountainous retreat is reinforced by Yun Ling's admission of her delight at how easily she could forget when she was in Cameron Highlands that she was really also in the tropics "with the line of the equator just missing the Malayan peninsula by a fraction of an inch on the map."²⁷ In the novel, the cool and misty highlands, which served the British colonizers historically as a hill station and resort, is inhabited by a clutch of culturally and ethnically disparate characters, foremost among whom are Magnus, the South African owner of Majuba who lives there with his Chinese wife, Emily, and the mysterious Japanese gardener, Aritomo. Both men are introduced as exiles from and casualties of imperialist systems. Magnus is a veteran of the Boer War whereas Aritomo left Japan after feuding with the emperor's cousin. The two had met previously in Japan, and Aritomo was also taking up Magnus's invitation to visit him in Malaya when he decided to leave Japan. It is clear that the text takes pains to present an interconnected world, in particular a cosmopolitan, prewar colonial world where people were linked by multiple ties in culture, trade, and taste. As evidence of cultural intermingling in the even more distant past, we also learn from Frederik, Magnus's nephew, in a casual aside that rather transparently doubles up as exposition, how some words in Afrikaans sound similar to Malay words because of "the slaves taken from Java to the Cape."²⁸

25 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 160.

26 *Ibid.*, 9.

27 *Ibid.*, 101.

28 *Ibid.*, 67.

The idea of a world where cultural mixing, contamination, and *métissage* was not uncommon finds embodiment in the novel in the form of the weekly dinner parties or *braai* Magnus hosts. There, an assortment of multicultural guests, “a mix of Chinese, Malays and Europeans”²⁹ recalling the rhizomic mingling of the contact zone, was always invited. The dinner party at Majuba House becomes the occasion for a topical discussion about the place of the Chinese and Malays in Malaya when Yun Ling rebuts a Malay guest, Hamid, for championing the ideology of *bumiputera* or the idea of Malays as the “true sons of the soil.”³⁰ She tells him,

Old countries are dying, Hamid... and new ones are being born. It doesn't matter where one's ancestors came from. Can you say—with absolute certainty—that one of *your* forefathers did not sail from Siam, from Java, or Aceh, or from the islands in the Sunda Straits?³¹ (emphasis in original)

In her rebuttal, Yun Ling disassociates race from place and categorically rejects the notion of racial purity as the basis for national feeling and identity. As the incident suggests, Tan seems eager to point out the selective nature of memory and the convenient amnesia that enables such myths of natural origin and autochthony. In fact, the flows of empire and colonialism that make authenticity a fallacy and fantasy constitute what Michael Rothberg, in theorizing about trauma and critiquing the Eurocentric and Anglo-American bias of many scholars in the field, has called

memory's “multidirectionality,” a dynamic in which multiple pasts jostle against each other in a heterogeneous present, and where communities of remembrance disperse and reconvene in new, non-organic forms....³²

He adds, “Like empire, memory is both disjunctive and combinatorial: it both disassembles and reassembles.”³³ A striking example of the multidirectionality of memory in the novel is Magnus's nationalist attempts at remembering the Boer War. Having left South Africa, he continues his resistance against the British in Malaya by naming his tea estate “Majuba,” after a famous battle during the Boer War when the British were defeated, and flying the Transvaal flag. Such acts of memorialization, which show how memory may be deployed and redirected in a different context, show the possibilities for political protest as Magnus, reveling in sweet revenge, tells Yun Ling's father, “And it gives me great pleasure to know that in Malaya and all over the East they're [i.e., the British] taking in a bit of Majuba every time they have their tea.”³⁴

If Majuba House is depicted largely as a place of transcultural exchange and discussion, Yugiri—Aritomo's garden—is by contrast conjured up as a more rarefied

29 Ibid., 65.

30 Ibid., 69.

31 Ibid., 69.

32 Michael Rothberg, “Remembering Back: Cultural Memory, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Studies,” *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 372.

33 Ibid., 372–73.

34 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 161.

liminal space, a place suspended in time, geography, and culture. As Yun Ling puts it upon her first return to Yugiri after an absence of almost thirty-five years, “I felt I was about to enter a place that existed only in the overlapping of air and water, light and time.”³⁵ Traversing boundaries of the material and metaphysical worlds, Yugiri appears paradoxically an evanescent and timeless sanctuary:

For a moment I felt that nothing had changed since I was last here, almost thirty-five years before—the scent of pine resin sticking to the air, the bamboo creaking and knocking in the breeze, the broken mosaic of sunlight scattered over the ground.³⁶

When Yun Ling starts her work as an apprentice gardener, Yugiri becomes a space of mainly one-sided cultural exchange as she learns about Japanese culture from the well-read and culturally sophisticated Aritomo. Their encounters are staged like a series of lessons, such as when Arimoto points out the similarity between wood block prints and tattoos and explains how *ukiyo-e* prints depict characters from “*Suikoden*—the Japanese translation of the Chinese novel, *Sui Hu Chuan*,”³⁷ or *The Legend of the Water Margin*. Their relationship serves as the vehicle for establishing points of connection between Japanese and Chinese cultures as if to register these as some kind of index of joint civilizational superiority. Tan’s novel provides a smooth and unproblematic version of cultural translation and transculturalism, eliding any allusion to the incommensurability of cultures. It fails to provide what John McLeod, in arguing for an ethical understanding of silence, has written about the power of postcolonialism’s insights into transculturation and the contact zone:

Postcolonial studies has long insisted that meaningful, transformative change depends on much more than a glib cognizance or apprehension of the existence of different cultures that make our world complex; we need to inhabit consciousness at its disconcerting limits, at the threshold where representation is anxiously arrested.³⁸

Indeed, there are problems with the novel’s idyllic depictions of Yugiri and Cameron Highlands as transcultural spaces that steer clear of the hard questions about representability and cultural understanding that postcolonial studies should ask. For one, these are not democratic equalizing spaces, but highly stratified and hierarchical ones dependent on significant omissions and simplifications. A hint of this may be gleaned from the presence of the Indian workers hired by Aritomo for his garden. Led by the English and Tamil-speaking worker Kannadasan, these laborers are the ones whose physical exertion and effort sustain the impression of the place as free-floating and evanescent although the text elides that by drawing attention to their presence instead as evidence of Aritomo’s heroism. The latter’s retention of workers for his garden was apparently in part a ruse to save them from imprisonment, torture, and possible death at the hands of the Japanese army. Furthermore, it is telling that no

35 Ibid., 18.

36 Ibid., 18.

37 Ibid., 159.

38 John McLeod, “Sounding Silence: Transculturation and its Thresholds,” *Transnational Literature* 4.1 (2011): 12. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>. Accessed September 3, 2015.

well-developed Malay characters form part of this transcultural space in the novel. The Malays who appear are minor characters like Yun Ling's Malay secretary, Azizah, at the start of the novel, and the dinner party guest Hamid quoted previously, "straw men" characters who provide some local color with their Malaysian English-inflected speech and strategic use of Malay words in contrast to Yun Ling's impeccable standard English, and even poetic and lyrical speech patterns.

Besides the relative absence of Malay characters, the text also builds its transcultural imaginary on the strategic appropriation of the Malayan communist guerillas fighting in the jungle as convenient scapegoats. The "communist-terrorists" or "CTs"³⁹ conform to the official historical narrative and doxological portrait of them as bloodthirsty and violent. They are depicted without any sense of higher political ideals and without a legitimate cause in the struggle for independence. Instead, they are seen as threats to the sanctity of Yugiri and private spaces in the Cameron Highlands, such as when they inflict seemingly arbitrary and random violence by staging an attack on Yun Ling. The actual reason for the attack, whether it was a form of revenge for what she had done in her capacity as deputy public prosecutor, for example, is left unclear. Later in the novel, it is also CTs looking for Yamashita's gold and other treasures who cause Magnus's untimely death. Their violent ways stand in sharp contrast to the controlled aesthetic violence and discipline of such practices as gardening and tattooing in the novel.

Further underpinning the novelistic text's transcultural vision is the idea of cultural hybridity. The text explicitly celebrates this idea as we see toward the end of the novel when Yun Ling dramatically reveals her tattooed back, which is in effect Aritomo's masterpiece. Through the separate gazes of Frederik and Tatsuji who serve as witnesses, we learn that the tattoo is a hybrid work of art, its hybridity contributing to its remarkable distinctiveness. As Tatsuji pronounces, "The style is Japanese but the designs are not."⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the novel, in line with the celebration of hybridity, the notion of purity of origin and cultural authenticity is vigorously disavowed. When Frederik informs Yun Ling that he has hired a new landscape gardener, Vimalya, for the gardens at Majuba, whose aesthetic is to embrace native flora, she ridicules his decision by suggesting that everything in the area from tea to Frederik himself are alien transplants. She counters his argument about artificiality and overplanning by saying:

When you talk about 'indigenous gardening,' or whatever it's called, you already have man involved. You dig out beds, you chop down trees, and you bring in seeds and cuttings. It all sounds very much planned to me.⁴¹

Yet, if the prospect of authenticity is seen as unrealistic and impossible, even undesirable, it remains telling that Vimalya, who turns out to be the granddaughter of Kannadasan, is the one ultimately "educated" about Japanese gardens and that no reciprocal exchange of knowledge and expertise ever takes place. The implication as

39 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 39.

40 *Ibid.*, 335.

41 *Ibid.*, 23.

always is that the Japanese garden is superior. To Vimalya's question about whether the garden is just about "aesthetics," Yun Ling lectures her and impresses upon her the life-changing potential of the garden:

The garden has to reach inside you. It should change your heart, sadden it, uplift it. It has to make you appreciate the impermanence of everything in life. ... That point in time just as the last leaf is about to drop, as the remaining petal is about to fall; that moment captures everything beautiful and sorrowful about life. *Mono no aware*, the Japanese call it.⁴²

The transcultural aestheticizing of memory is in many ways supported by the narrative structure of the novel, which on one level is nothing more than Yun Ling's memoirs. This "fact" is announced clearly enough in chapter 3, for example, which opens with the rather baldly stated first line: "My name is Teoh Yun Ling."⁴³ It is preceded, however, by autodiegetic narration that lets the reader in on why she needs to write her memoirs in the first place—she is losing her memories and the means to communicate. As she puts it, the "reservoir" in which her memories are stored "has begun to crack."⁴⁴ In the narrative present, then, with Yun Ling recording her memories of the past before she forgets them, we move back and forth between the present and the 1950s, when she was apprenticed to Aritomo. At certain points of the narrative present and Yun Ling's life in the 1950s, we recede farther back in time as she shares with various characters her war experience, and even before that, the story of how she first came to hear about Aritomo from her sister. Throughout, Yun Ling's encounters with other characters also prompt them to tell her their stories. In this way, the narrative is constructed to analogously resemble a series of nested Chinese boxes, where stories are embedded in the bifurcated main narrative. The involuted aesthetic logic of the novel means that this structure is reflected, too, in its depiction of gardening and tattooing. Tattooing allows memories, personal meanings, and stories to be inscribed on and lodged in the body. Similarly, the text also shows how a garden may contain stories. When Yun Ling ponders over why Aritomo never wrote anything down, for example, she comes to the realization that the lessons he taught her "are embedded in every tree and shrub, in every view I look at."⁴⁵

In the novel, everyone, it seems, has a story to tell. In the case of Magnus, for example, we learn not only about his journey to Malaya, but also how he first met Aritomo in Japan in the 1930s and Yun Ling's discovery that he had a tattoo. Magnus's tattoo is an eye—a "beautifully rendered eye" set against "a rectangle of colours"⁴⁶ that was the Transvaal flag—done by Aritomo to symbolically replace the eye the former had lost fighting in the Boer War. Besides Magnus's story, Tan also provides sympathetic portraits of individual Japanese characters—a choice he had made for his first novel as well—when he embeds their personal histories of suffering and loss in the main narrative. Thus, Tatsuji, the Japanese academic researching Aritomo's life and work, recounts his own personal story about love and loss to

42 Ibid., 175.

43 Ibid., 37.

44 Ibid., 175.

45 Ibid., 175.

46 Ibid., 194.

Yun Ling. As a naval pilot whose father built Japan's war planes, he had fallen in love with his instructor and mentor, Colonel Teruzen, who eventually takes his place in a bombing raid and saves his life. In the novel, Tatsuji's story is interesting for containing yet another embedded tale. As he gives a narrative of his past to Yun Ling, he also tells of how he had related to Teruzen his own father's disillusionment and manner of death. Tatsuji's tale of his past reinforces the overriding impression created that there is always a story to be uncovered and that one story can lead to another in a seemingly never-ending chain. Furthermore, these stories are not discrete, never touching. We start to see points of connection across them that link various characters together. Thus, we learn that the Japanese officer Yun Ling served as a translator for during the war was Tominaga Noburu, the emperor's cousin and the old friend of Aritomo with whom the latter had fought and left Japan as a result of. Tominaga is the one who ultimately sets Yun Ling free and saves her. The ways in which Yun Ling's life appears serendipitously connected to that of Aritomo prompts her to muse:

"It was odd how Aritomo's life seemed to glance off mine; we were like two leaves falling from a tree, touching each other now and again as they spiraled to the forest floor."⁴⁷

The plurality, inclusivity, and ostensibly democratic impulse behind the novel's narrative architecture, its moral message that there is always a different perspective and a possible connection, is undercut, however, by the seam of ahistoricity that the text also seems stubbornly invested in. The novel begins boldly enough, suggesting through its trans-cultural rendering of memory that some individual Japanese also suffered as a result of the war and had painful memories despite their being on the side of the aggressors. As if in anticipation of criticism for appearing overly pro-Japanese given the continued reluctance of successive Japanese governments to fully acknowledge its wartime past, Tan has Tatsuji apologize when he hears about Yun Ling's suffering during the war. The apology is rejected, but Yun Ling later admits only feeling sorry for him when she learns of his personal story. "I want to be angry with Tatsuji. I want to ask him to leave Yugiri and never come back here again. To my surprise, I feel only sorry for him."⁴⁸ The sentiment of overwhelming sorrow expressed here reflects the way the initial emphasis on war crimes, reparations, and bringing the Japanese aggressors to justice also fades away in the course of the novel. With its eventual quietism, the novel displaces its concern with history and the politics of bearing witness in favor ultimately of a dubious existential message.

This move in the novel may be understood in terms of the distinction between absence and loss that Dominick LaCapra makes in his work on trauma and literature. Warning against the danger of conflating the two, LaCapra argues that absence is situated on a "transhistorical level," whereas loss is located on a "historical level"⁴⁹:

In this transhistorical sense absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future). By contrast, the historical past is the scene of losses that may be

47 Ibid., 193.

48 Ibid., 187.

49 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 48.

narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future.⁵⁰

According to LaCapra, losses are specific material events. Because absence is a more existential notion, historical specificity is foregone when loss is seen as absence. “Absence applies transhistorically to absolute foundations; loss applies to historical phenomena.”⁵¹ In the novel, specific wartime losses are glossed over eventually in favor of abstractions such as absence, impermanence, and the ephemeral. Reparation and indemnity have no place. Memory, according to the narrative and moral logic of the text, is merely an illusory substitute for what has inexorably evaporated and vanished. It leads nowhere. The deepest insight the novel can offer is that everything fades away with time.

The novel’s moral trajectory from loss to absence also parallels Yun Ling’s progressive lack of agency in the novel. Indeed, the novel may be read as particularly antifeminist in orientation given its duplicity in initially setting Yun Ling up as a strong woman with a firm sense of self. For someone who served as a clerk in the War Crimes Tribunal after the war to help bring Japanese war criminals to justice, Yun Ling’s subsequent willingness to cede agency to Aritomo’s control is puzzling to say the least, and nowhere more so than when she agrees to be tattooed by him. On the one hand, the text deliberately casts Yun Ling as an active agent in the way, for example, she is sexually drawn to Aritomo and initiates sex with him. But by allowing him to tattoo her back after she has recounted her traumatic experience as a prisoner during the war including how she had two of her fingers chopped off by the sadistic Japanese captain in charge of the camp, it seems inexplicable that she should then allow herself to be rendered an aesthetic and erotic object. Receiving a *horimono* by Aritomo appears to be part of a healing process for Yun Ling at the same time as it is an erotic experience for both of them, isolated from the outside world during the monsoon season and when life could be “suspended”⁵² as the Malayan Emergency raged. In contra-distinction to the pain of losing her fingers, the pain Yun Ling experiences from having her back covered by a tattoo is seen as a controlled, sublimating kind of pain; the latter is art, not torture. That her time as an apprentice with Aritomo is meant to heal her is clear from an exchange she has with Frederik. When the latter asks Yun Ling, “So how do you do it? How do you face a Jap, day after day, after what they did to you?”⁵³ she responds by noting how suppressed memories come to the fore when they are together. She says, “But now and then, something he says—a word or a phrase—spikes into a memory I thought I had buried away.”⁵⁴ Similarly, being tattooed also draws out secrets as Aritomo explains, “One of the odd things about tattooing: the *hari* draw out not only blood, but also the thoughts hidden inside that person.”⁵⁵ Thus, it is with the completion of the tattoo that Yun Ling admits she had colluded with her Japanese captors in order to survive while in the camp.

50 Ibid., 49.

51 Ibid., 195.

52 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 298.

53 Ibid., 105.

54 Ibid., 105.

55 Ibid., 299.

Not wholly a victim like her sister, Yun Ling occupies the subject position of those Michael Rothberg calls “implicated subjects,” “beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma.”⁵⁶ In exchange for food and access to her sister, Yun Ling had betrayed others in the camp to the Japanese. But the significance of this admission of betrayal and complicity is uncertain as it leads neither to regret nor recovery. If the moment appears ironically to suggest that Yun Ling has compounded her initial act of collusion by betraying herself again in this second instance with Aritomo, it seems unintended.

Once the tattoo is completed, Aritomo declares to Yun Ling, “You have a new skin now.”⁵⁷ The *horimono* is in fact an *aide memoire* as we learn when the novel draws to a close and Yun Ling finally reveals her tattooed back to Tatsuji and Frederik. Figuratively, it also suggests her encasement in her memories except that this is Aritomo’s version of her memories and the time they shared together. Thus, it is a mediated history of her memories that he has incised on her skin. Any sense that a new skin would liberate Yun Ling is quickly dispelled, however, as she appears even more tied to Aritomo as a result of it. When Frederik questions her about how she has managed to hide her tattoo all these years, she confesses that she has taken no other lover since Aritomo, adding, “He [Frederik] hears what I have left unspoken.”⁵⁸ As part of the tattoo design, Aritomo leaves a blank space on Yun Ling’s back, which eventually turns out to be part of a map that allows Yugiri to fit into the picture. As Tatsuji tells Yun Ling when he has figured it out, “The lines of your *horimono* would probably join up with the markers and the paths in Yugiri here, on this paper.”⁵⁹ The reader is teased with the possibility that this is a map Aritomo has drawn to provide Yun Ling with directions to find the secret labor camp and mine where her sister died and where both had been imprisoned. This would also suggest that he was a spy after all, one sent to survey the Malayan landscape for suitable places to hide Japanese loot. That Yun Ling is made contiguous with the garden through the map somehow makes her aestheticization by Aritomo complete. She is in this respect as well-planned and cultivated as Yugiri. That she also seems content at the end of the novel to literally fade away and dissolve into nothingness as she loses memory and language is particularly troubling. The text effectively disavows action in the end by suggesting the essential ephemeral and transient nature of all things. Even the act of writing Yun Ling seemed so urgently invested in for much of the novel seems to have been forgotten by novel’s end.

The Garden of Evening Mists seems content with a more philosophical and existential passivity that stems from its focus on individualized suffering and loss. Tan’s novel aestheticizes painful memory, seeking to veil the effects of violence with a new skin or work of art. As Stef Craps argues in his critique of trauma studies for its tendency to privilege the individual subject rather than the group or social situation: “immaterial recovery—psychological healing—is privileged over material recovery—reparation or

56 Michael Rothberg, “Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda: Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects,” *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2014), xv.

57 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 327.

58 *Ibid.*, 339.

59 *Ibid.*, 337.

restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system.”⁶⁰ Instead of a call to decisive action, in Tan’s novel, people, memories, and all forms of action, including justice for war crimes, eventually and irrevocably evaporate like mist. *The Garden of Evening Mists* ends with Yun Ling vowing to preserve Yugiri as a memorial to her sister and a testament to Aritomo’s artistry once she realizes she is no longer interested in finding her sister’s grave. Yugiri in other words becomes a manifestation of the memory of her sister’s love for the Japanese garden rather than about remembering the horrors of war. In the novel’s closing scene, Yun Ling thinks, “Tomorrow’s rain lies on the horizon, but high up in the sky something pale and small is descending, growing in size as it falls. I watch the heron circle the pond, a leaf spiralling down to the water, setting off silent ripples across the garden.”⁶¹ In this inexorable regime of memory and time, change is at best gently cumulative, its impact, if any, always delicate and tremulous. Every action fades away, leaving no mark, just like mist or ripples of water. Any possible transcultural future is made to seem a nostalgic fantasy, necessarily transient and fragile. In its emphasis on beauty, the text enshrines a civilizational understanding of culture, which confirms that the wariness with which postcolonial scholars have approached the aesthetic is warranted. Instead of “a mediation or calibration between work and world”⁶² that Elleke Boehmer has argued literary texts need to show in order to live up to their transformative potential, Tan pursues a logic of aesthetic containment at the expense of history and politics. His is a hermetic artistic vision that is always already fading.

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61 Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, 348.

62 Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating upon the Present,” 179.

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