Trials of Rituals: Female Bonding and the Colonial "Other" in Marianne Wiggins's *John Dollar*

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Abstract:
My claim is that by projecting backwards into the past present homophobic and xenophobic attitudes, Wiggins makes a forceful attempt in reassessing their roots in colonial literature. The context Wiggins reexamines addresses above all the silenced subject matter of interracial lesbian desire. Does this imply that John Dollar is a 'lesbian text?' What is a lesbian text, after all? The willingness to decipher a hidden subtext or to engender an ending that is not the anticlimactic hoax, which the 'failed' solution of John Dollar at first glance seems to be, envisions a lesbian narrative space of transgression. It is from this focus that I attempt to queerly read Wiggins's resignifying narrative strategies as means to undermine the master plot which, as Farwell puts it, 'is not just androcentric or phallocentric, it is also basically heterosexual' (95).

> Anyone reading this will wonder why there are no men: We ate them. (Wiggins, *Separate Checks* 8)

1 Susana Onega, discussing postmodern re-writings of the Puritan Commonwealth, quotes Christopher Bigsby, who in his lecture "Backwards to the Future" makes out a backward looking trend among British writers, artists and entertainers of the 1980s for which he offers a twofold explication: It expresses, on the one hand, a longing for a past "safely fixed and transformed by nostalgia. The past is turned into icon. It is a past, moreover, in which Britain had seemed secure, powerful, confident, the past of empire and war supremacy." On the other hand, Bigsby continues to claim,

> there is a counter current in that the past revisited was a past which tended now to be changed with 80s insecurities. […] Contemporary doubts about gender roles, racial attitudes and national myopia are projected backwards into the past where their roots are presumed to lie. […] Those who wish to change the future must first change the past or lay claim to it on their own terms. (qt. in Onega 439-440)

Linda Hutcheon has classified this trend of rewriting the past as "postmodern historiographic metafiction," namely "novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge" (285). Hutcheon takes J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* (1986) as one example to show the difference between Daniel Defoe's handling of fiction and fact - of "story" and "history" -, and that of Coetzee. While Defoe's narrative strategy in *Robinson Crusoe* makes claims to veracity actually convincing readers of the story's factuality, "most readers today (and many then) had the pleasure of a double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the 'real'" (Hutcheon 287). Coetzee's novel, on the other hand, reveals the futile attempts of "telling the

truth." Not only do storytellers silence and exclude certain past events and people: historians have done the same. Featuring a silenced female storyteller who actually was a castaway on "Cruso"'s [sic] island but thinks herself not capable of relating the story adequately, the novel reflects on the absence of women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century. Historiographic metafiction like Coetzee's self-reflexively "acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its (only) *textualized* accessibility to us today," says Hutcheon (295).[1]

2 Marianne Wiggins's novel *John Dollar* (1989) takes part in this trend. Although starting out sometime close to our present and somewhere close to St. Ives in Cornwall, the major part of the narrative dates back to events that take place in colonial Burma when the "Treaty of Versailles was signed" and "Parliament in London passed the Government of India Act, excluding Burma" (*John Dollar* 27). Charlotte Lewes is a young English World War I-widow seeking employment as a teacher in the colonies. In 1917, "God and history" takes her to Burma where she is to "foster and preserve the standards of the Empire in English children" (9-10). After the British annexation of the Burmese kingdom making it a province of India in 1886, Burma has been prone to complex cultural struggles. Charlotte's purpose as "cultural missionary," i.e. as a means to bolster a deteriorating empire and help to maintain social rituals of racial difference, turns out to be futile, however. Marooned on an island off Burma, eight girls - pupils of Charlotte - witness and practice violent acts murder and cannibalism. The sole survivors of these catastrophic events are Charlotte and one of the girls, Monkey, who spend the rest of their lives together in what I perceive to be a homosocial, if not homoerotic alliance. The death of Charlotte and Monkey's burying her mark both the narrative's present point of reference and the effort on Monkey's behalf to remember these past experiences.

3 To place Wiggins in the revisionary field of gender, race and nationality that Bigsby has described, actually calls for some provisionary explanations. Above all, Wiggins is an American author primarily concerned with current American affairs, as most of her other texts verify and to which the title of her novel *John Dollar* points as well. However, in this particular narrative, Wiggins follows the traces of British colonial literature much in the sense of Bigsby's "counter current:" as an attempt to resignify the past. Wiggins herself claims that while the title relates to the power of the United States as perceived outside the U.S., her intent is to write about this kind of power as expressed by Britain in the days of the Raj (qt. in

[1] For a reading of yet another similarly puzzling example of a historiographic metafiction, namely the queering of Defoe's novel in Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique* (1967), see Poole, "Michel Tourniers Anal/yse."

Morris).[2] Thus, revisiting the British Empire to comment on yet another empire, *John Dollar*, says Wiggins, is "a book about imperialism and the United States is an empire, the empire of the dollar" (qt. in James, "Stress"). In this sense, Wiggins's interest corresponds to what Maggie Kilgour finds to be a present "concern with our cannibal past - not our savage prehistory, but the history of imperialism and its subsumption of 'cannibal' societies - as well as our cannibal present - the modern world of isolated consumers driven by rapacious egos" (241).

4 The close relation between the longstanding tradition of the cannibal narrative and colonialism has been revalued from different angles. As Peter Hulme points out, until recently "histories and analyses of cannibalism were written from firmly within the European or Western tradition, which saw itself as fully civilised. For this tradition, cannibalism was a feature of life in many non-European parts of the world: pre-Columbian America, the Pacific, Africa" ("Cannibal Scene" 3). This seeming imperial verity has undergone a thorough revision in current studies on cannibalism where the colonizer's claim of the existence of cannibalism is deciphered as a tool of imperial drive for power, i.e. as an outgrowth of a disturbed European imagination. In literary and cultural studies, according to Hulme, cannibalism now mostly figures as "as a term within colonial discourse to describe the ferocious devouring of human flesh supposedly practised by some savages" ("Cannibal Scene" 4).

5 However, *John Dollar* is more than just a parable of imperialist cannibalism. It marks a singular variation in the colonial tradition of tales about ritualized anthropophagy and is, as I shall propose, a queer revaluation of the history of the colonial cannibal tale as such. The larger part of the novel takes place at a time when stories about traveling to colonies, accounts of ship wreckages, isolated islands and savage cannibals are well known and read. Most works that *John Dollar* explicitly or implicitly alludes to as intertextual cross-references like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Michael Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* center around male — or rather male homosocial — experience of undergoing a utopian experience that nevertheless clearly remains within the boundaries of European colonial attitudes. Although Defoe's "noble savage" Friday differs from his ferocious cannibal "brothers," the narrative asserts the distinction between colonizing Self and colonized Other until the end. Crusoe's description of Friday marks this crucial difference since it evokes a "monstrous

[2] It is noteworthy to mention that Wiggins published *John Dollar* while being 'expatriated' in London: Before getting a divorce from Salman Rushdie in 1993, she lived in forced exile with her husband. *John Dollar* (dedicated to Rushdie) has been compared to his *Satanic Verses* which in turn is dedicated to Wiggins (see James, "The Ayatollah's Other Victim").

double" behind the seemingly noble savage:

> He was a comely, handsome Fellow, perfectly well made; with straight strong Limbs, not too large; tall and well shap'd, and as I reckon, about twenty six Years of Age. He had a very good Countenance, not a fierce and surly Aspect; but seem'd to have something very manly in his Face, and yet he had all the Sweetness and Softness of an European in his Countenance too, especially when he smil'd. His Hair was long and black, not curl'd like Wool; his Forehead very high and large, and a great Vivacity and sparkling Sharpness in his Eyes. The Colour of his Skin was not quite black, but very tawny, and yet not of an ugly yellow nauseous tawny, as the Brasilians, and Virginians and other Natives of America are, but of a bright kind of a dun olive Colour, that had in it something very agreeable; tho' not very easy to describe. His Face was round, and plump; his Nose small, not flat like the Negroes, a very good Mouth, thin Lips, and his fine Teeth well set, and white as Ivory. (Defoe 205-206)

The monstrous double figures as compilation of all that Friday is not ("large," "fierce," "curl'd," "black," "flat," etc.). Gregory Woods points out that this specter never quite vanishes: "The good black man, who having learnt to wear clothes proceeds to learn, never loses the phantom who stands at his side: the bad black man, or savage, or cannibal. His clothing never entirely succeeds in civilising his body. There is about him always the threat, which is also the forlorn dream of postcolonial white racists, that he will 'go back' to 'where he belongs'" (135).

6 I have used the expression "homosocial" to describe the relationship between men with the implications Eve Sedgwick has supplied. It is Sedgwick's aim to "draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, [...] to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (1). Although most critics have asserted the lack or elimination of sexuality in Defoe's novel, some do note a romance going on between Robinson and Friday (e.g. Hulme in *Colonial Encounters* 208-214), or even claim a reference to an archetypal homosexual pairing. Leslie Fiedler here speaks of "a tradition of the pseudo-marriage of males" in the European novel that has led to "dark spouses" in the American novel from Chingachgook (in James Fenimore Cooper) to Queequeg (in Herman Melville):

> *Robinson Crusoe*, in particular, seems to embody an archetype much like that which haunts our classic fiction; and this is proper enough for a novel so bourgeois and Protestant that one is tempted to think of it as an American novel before the fact. The protagonists are not only black and white, but they exist on the archetypal island, cut off from the home community by the estranging sea. Cannibal and castaway, man-eater and journal-keeper, they learn to adjust to each other and to domesticity, on what is surely the most meager and puritanic Eden in all literature. (363)

While Defoe's male-relationship remains rigidly within the class-pattern of master and servant, Ballantyne's "colonial romance" depicts a harmoniously egalitarian, albeit desireless

homosocial bonding between the group of three boys that is described as being both truly unproblematic as to any homosexual implications and devoid of any racial and class-related complications: "There was, indeed, no note of discord whatever in the symphony we played together on that sweet Coral Island; and I am now persuaded that this was owing to our having all tuned to the same key, namely, that of *love*! Yes, we loved one another with much fervency while we lived on that island; and, for the matter of that, we love each other still" (124). Wiggins, however, not only resignifies racial biases; in focusing specifically female experience she comments on all three main types of colonial island narratives as categorized by Gregory Woods:

> In one, marooned children of both sexes grow through adolescent rites of passage into a "natural" heterosexuality and division of gender roles. In another, isolated males form a relationship with landscape and the elements, then relate homosocially and homoerotically to each other, in febrile renegotiations of their masculinity, before returning to white heterosexual civilisation. In yet a third, an ideal community is conjured up in order to recommend the author's own political theories. (126)

My claim is that by projecting backwards into the past present homophobic and xenophobic attitudes, Wiggins makes a forceful attempt in reassessing their roots in colonial literature. She partakes in the precarious textual politics of resignification that Judith Butler has claimed to be a continuous recirculation of trauma. The naming of a trauma is a sort of repetition "that is, strictly speaking, not remembered, but relived […]. Social trauma takes the form, not of a structure that repeats mechanically, but rather of an ongoing subjugation, the restaging of injury through signs that both occlude and reenact the scene" (*Excitable Speech* 36-37). A restating or counter-appropriation of trauma, Butler explains, is to be seen as a "ritual chain of resignification whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable" (14). This means that counter-speech understood as a performative act is not constrained to its originating context: "Not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context" (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 40). The possibility of resignification, according to Butler, requires the misappropriating of the speech's force from the prior context and the opening of new contexts, "speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms" (41). The context Wiggins reexamines addresses above all the silenced subject matter of interracial lesbian desire. Does this imply that *John Dollar* is a "lesbian text?" What *is* a lesbian text, after all?

7 According to Lillian Faderman, "perhaps literature need not confront the matter of same-sex sexuality head on to be 'lesbian'" (51). Instead, she says, a work might be considered lesbian, "if it can be shown that lesbian subject matter is somehow encoded in it" (54). Faderman adopts Adrienne Rich's call for re-vision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with

fresh eyes, of entering old texts from a new critical direction" (Rich 90) for her own attempt of redefining a lesbian canon. Discussing the issue of a "lesbian perspective," Bonnie Zimmerman insists on the primacy and duration of women-bonding and female friendship. For her, a lesbian perspective calls for a lesbian resisting reader who creates new possibilities and transforms old realities by resisting "heterotexts" and "privately rewriting and thus appropriating them as lesbian texts." This reader resists what is expected or desired, i.e. she is highly conscious of her own agency taking "an active role in shaping the text she reads in accordance with her perspective on the world" (Zimmerman 139). What is at stake is the unveiling of hidden subtexts of female friendship as well as the reversal of old destructive cultural stereotypes and literary conventions attached to the idea of lesbianism. Resisting canonical readings means also to grasp various possibilities that a text offers no matter whether the author has willfully intended them or not. This calls for an envisioning of an end to the story other than marriage or death, claims Zimmerman: "The self-conscious lesbian reader sees or imagines other possible endings" (145). The willingness to decipher a hidden subtext or to engender an ending that is not the anticlimactic hoax, which the "failed" solution of *John Dollar* at first glance seems to be, envisions a lesbian narrative space of transgression. This deconstructive twist happens most often, according to Marilyn Farwell, "when two women seek another kind of relationship than that which is prescribed in the patriarchal structures, and when it occurs in the narrative, it can cast a different light on the rest of the novel, even on those portions that seem to affirm heterosexual patterns" (98). It is from this focus that I attempt to queerly read Wiggins's resignifying narrative strategies as means to undermine the master plot which, as Farwell puts it, "is not just androcentric or phallocentric, it is also basically heterosexual" (95).

8 Above all, there is one girl, Monkey, who is singled out in more than one way. She is the only major non-white character, she openly articulates a lesbian desire towards one of the other girls, and she enters a life-long partnership with the teacher, eventually. The narrative frame establishes the importance of this character: The novel opens and closes with her narrative focus. It is precisely her female bonding with Charlotte that forms the crucial means in the critique of colonialism. Both female characters are signified as colonial Others in very different, yet complementary ways. Joining them, the narrative deconstructs the two powerful but false premises which, according to Laura Stoler, colonial authority relied on:

> The first was the notion that Europeans in the colonies made up an easily identifiable and discrete biological and social entity; a "natural" community of common class interests, racial attributes, political affinities, and superior culture. The second was the related notion that the boundaries separating colonizer from colonized were thus self-evident and easily drawn. (52)

Monkey's real name is Menaka, but the other girls call her Monkey telling her she is ugly, "half a loaf" (*John Dollar* 52). Monkey is born of an Indian mother and a British father: "Her parents had succumbed to an insanity they thought was Love, white man, black woman, and they'd made a hybrid child" (54). Monkey as a concubine child poses a classificatory problem, since she not only represents a danger to the idea of racial purity and cultural identity, but due to her ambiguous legal status is subject to the scrutiny and imposed charity of the white community. As a living proof of "cultural contamination," Monkey takes both part in the colonial activities like all other (white) children and remains apart by an internal racial segregation. This hybrid status becomes obvious when the group of girls is stranded on the island without any guidance at first. The girls quickly establish a hierarchy according to their age and form a circle whenever they are meeting. The text suggests that they unconsciously rely on a traditional ritual image: the circle. As Lesley A. Northup points out, few ritual images "encapsulate the spirit of women's ritualizing as effectively as the circle" (117). Casting a circle not only creates a safe space, such "a configuration makes it possible for ritual participants to interact most fully with one another" (Northup 117). Nevertheless, Wiggins's female communal interaction operates on the grounds of exclusion. Monkey remains a pariah, "our slave-y" (*John Dollar* 176), as "they've left her from the circle, like a satellite" (124). Monkey has no voice in the proceedings of the girls' community; she is the abject colonial Other:

> Monkey's race nullifies privilege in their view, in her view as well. Hers is the role of submitter, conceding, of seeking permission, of earning their yes. Less than a guest at their table, hers is the part of an upstart, the bastard relation. Tacit and sacrosanct, theirs is dominion in which she colludes. To be any way other than that, to rebel, to object, to abjure the text would be outlawed, illegal. (*John Dollar* 121)

Monkey's ethnic hybridity is doubled by her ambiguous gendered and sexual identity. Her femaleness is at stake by the "hate speech" she encounters: the girls call her "Brother Monkey" (125).[3] And quite contrary to the other girls, Monkey harbors a distinct lesbian desire. She is in love with one of the girls, Jane: "She waits for Jane to notice her, or answer. While she waits, she wonders what it would be like if Jane ever would look at her. She wonders what it would be like to touch her" (60). Resignifying her status as outsider, she claims not to mind being left from the circle: "Monkey likes where she's sitting because she can stare at Jane all she wants and not one can see her […]. Jane looks perfect, Monkey thinks" (124). While the others girls ignore or discriminate against her, she takes advantage of

[3] It is remarkable that besides Monkey and Charlotte there is a lot more 'gender trouble' in *John Dollar*: the twins Sloan and Sibyl reject girlish things (48) while their brother seems like the perfect daughter (49); Nolly's real name is Norris (52) and Amanda's "resemblance to her father was grotesque" (64).

this enforced exclusion by joyously watching her beloved. Monkey erotically charges her touching Jane in what I take to be a mock ritual of racial submission with the "slave" cowering at the "master's" feet:

> She dared to hold Jane's feet, to rub them through the blanket. Her heart was beating fast. (89) (You can put your head down on my feet, Jane murmurs.
> May I - ? Monkey whispers. You won't mind?
> - go ahead.
> - Thank you.
> - *Pleasure*, Jane recalls.) (130)

The homoerotic resignification of ethnic and class difference is reinforced by Monkey's internalized (racial) self-hatred that in turn points toward the colonial logic of Orientalism as Edward Said has described it. Monkey's father remains an absent, yet powerful figure in Monkey's life, while her mother has been marked as the beautiful oriental woman, a label that Monkey has adapted from the memory of her father: "All he ever asked her to do was to take care of her mother, watch over the most beautiful of women […]. [Why] was she so wayward, so perverse, so bad? Why was she unworthy of anybody's trust, of everybody's love - ?" (145). Monkey's position as a "product" of colonial concubinage implies a double standard. The notion of "insanity" as to an interracial love(-affair) has been retrospectively applied, whereas concubinage actually was quite common and tolerated in the colonies until the early 20th century. Moreover, even after its official ban in 1909, concubinage in the British Empire was tacitly condoned and practiced long after.[4] Surprising as it may sound, "the colonized woman living as a concubine to a European man formed the dominant domestic arrangement in colonial cultures through the early twentieth century" (Stoler 59). Unlike prostitution with its undesired side effects like syphilis and subsequent infertility of European men, concubinage kept men under control and out of brothels or - what was thought to be even worse - homosexual relations (Nandy 9-10, also Hyam, "Empire" and "Concubinage"). It is even more striking, therefore, that Monkey is designated as "queer" in every conceivable sense.

9 Besides Monkey, Charlotte is the other Other in Wiggins's novel. From the outset, Charlotte presents a serious challenge for the colonial society: she is single and keen on making new experiences that not always conform to British standards of behavior. Her colonial experience is troublesome because of two serious impediments: Firstly, the death of her husband has left her "unsexed" (10). Gradually, she realizes the fictitiousness of her

[4] In 1909, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Crewe, issued a circular known as the "concubinage circular" or "Crewe circular" that expressed a strong disapproval of colonial officers becoming involved with local women (see Callaway).

former life:

> What had previously defined her world now served to torment her - she went searching through their old books looking for some words of comfort and heard herself screaming in her mind at stupid heroines instead. Through *Clarissa*, through Jane Austen, through the Brontës, through Flaubert, she hungered for a different sort of story, one to reinvent the world she knew. (14)

The female experience offered in these readings and sufficient until then, now no longer serves Charlotte as a way to describe her own life. Seeking a substantial relocation, she chooses asylum abroad.

10 Secondly, she is badly equipped with information on her future home in the colonies. Again, literature does not provide her with an understanding of what she wants and needs: "Her knowledge of the East was sketchy, based on Kipling and a desultory reading of descriptions of the tenets of Islam and the myths of Hinduism, which were required for the personnel of schools receiving grants-in-aid from Government in Burma, even though the Burmese were devotees of the Buddha" (10). Charlotte may not altogether be aware of the inadequacy of the information provided: The Burmese had indeed received from India the Buddhist culture, but does she know that the Burmese had transformed and modified it? And although she may have read Rudyard Kipling's poem "Mandalay," she probably does not know that Mandalay was the place where in 1897 the first of a number of Buddhist societies had appeared that marked Burmese opposition to British rule. In short, Charlotte is unaware that 1917, the year of her arrival in Rangoon, "seemed disastrous" (Aung 36) for the British armies before the United States joined the allies in that year. The date indeed coincided with a change in Burma's colonial situation leading to an emergence of nationalism that primarily took place in the realm of education, i.e. the very field of Charlotte's reason for being there.

11 During the time of the enforced incorporation of Burma into India pursued by the British, India had encouraged Christian missionaries to found schools by offering them "grants-in-aid." These mission schools that "soon turned out to be almost the only means of modern education in Burma" (Fredholm 26) were known for their criticism of Buddhism. The alternate model was the government schools whose teachers, British and Indian, were civil servants unwilling to continue old educational traditions. The British favored this mode, but only few schools were actually established. The Burmese who attended the new schools managed to gain higher education, some of them in London. The Burmese people looked upon them as new leaders because they called for political independence by giving attention to the national religion, culture and education. In 1906 they founded the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) - patterned after the Young Men's Christian Association - and

established a number of schools supported by private donations and government grants-in-aid. By 1919, however, Burma felt excluded from the reforms introduced in India by the British (cf. the Government of India Act). The YMBA led the Burmese in a nationwide protest that asked for Burma's separation from India, a call to be granted the same measure of self-government as the Indians had been given, and involved a boycott of British goods as well as of mission and government schools. Not until 1923 were constitutional reforms granted; but until then the YMBA had opened their own schools, now calling them "National" schools where they taught Burmese history, literature, and language rather than the English language. In 1917, the YMBA also passed a resolution condemning marriages between Burmese women and foreigners which was "the first open expression of the Burmans'[5] claim of having a unique and superior bloodline" (Fredholm 28).

12 Thus, as this short excursion makes clear, Charlotte's appearance in colonial Burma is concurrent with an unstable political situation, a fact that the text does not explicate. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Charlotte does not "fit" the colonial community in Rangoon. On the one hand, the British in Burma[6] find her "odd" because any "self-respecting single woman" would want to settle for blissful matrimony: "They interpreted her dedication to her work as one more admirable example of the ethic of self-sacrifice in the female of their species and never entertained the shadow of a doubt that what she really came for, what she'd come around the world for, was a husband" (*John Dollar* 24). Charlotte, however, has no intention to remarry, and a gradual estrangement evolves that draws her "farther and farther away from the people who believed they were her own" (25). Launching a "small rebellion" (22), she dresses as Burmese men and women do, takes walks in the bazaar alone, smokes native tobacco, and even enjoys opium. The Burmese inhabitants of multicultural Rangoon, on the other hand, find her exceptional. Her two-colored eyes ("one blue, one green: the independent signs of her two natures" [4]) lead them to believe she is something not quite human:

> Among the Chinese, Indians and Burmese she was made to feel that she was from a different Heaven […]. Others were afraid of her - the Hindu women hid their children's faces from her gaze. She was said to have a second head she kept somewhere [...] which held the matching eyes to this one. She was said to sleep with one eye always open (the green one! which could watch the spirits of the dead!). She was said to have been born without the aid of parents, to exist on a higher plane of

[5] As Lwyn notes, "[the] term 'Burman' refers to the majority ethnic group of Burma. The term 'Burmese' refers to all the ethnic nationalities who make up the Nation-State" (18).

[6] Originally, Wiggins had planned for India to be the setting of her novel. When she learned that British colonists in India always sent their children back to England to school, however, she changed the location to Burma (cf. Morris). For differences between the various countries in Southeast Asia especially concerning British Victorian traveling women see Susan Morgan.

> humanity, to be luminous at night, to be free of sensual desire, to feed on no known food except the crystal distillation of pure joy, to be nearer to nirvana than a monk: she was said to be half-man half-woman. (23)

It suits Charlotte well, however, this experience of being (considered) a hybrid, of living "somewhere between known boundaries, extraterritorially" (23). She willfully starts to lead a double life: By day she succumbs to her celibate role of unsexed woman, by night, however, "she was another sort of ghost - she was invisible by race, by reason of extreme minority among a crowd in whom she was the one exemption, minority of one" (31). Her double identity gradually takes on a symbolic meaning: "She liked to feel she was amphibious, swimming through a double life. She was neither one thing nor the other, not a gill-fitted English woman who'd gone troppo nor an indiginous [sic] inhabitant of the native land" (23). Her feeling amphibious leads to an extraordinary confirmation, a spiritual and indeed corporeal rebirthing. One night, she sees some dolphins, jumps into the water, and mingles with them: "As they swam it seemed they made a single body. The dolphin that she held to took its air in rhythm with her breathing […]. In a fold of skin along its belly she found two nipples" (35). What first seems to be a highly erotic female-to-female experience leads to a metamorphic climax, however:

> Through the light which lifted off the water she was sure she saw the dolphin running upright, taking off his shirt and running toward her on his legs, a vision of a man who ran toward her across a field of light, this man who rushed to her as if he lived for nothing else but running to her, on the water. (36)

This mythical Dionysian male actually materializes in the figure of John Dollar, a stranger of whom "[n]o one knew where he had come from" (36). Cross-referentially, this scene both confirms Charlotte's state of ambiguity as woman/man/animal - a "mermaid" as John Dollar calls her (37) - and John Dollar's own ambivalent status of what turns out to be an impotent Eucharist.[7] Although John and Charlotte enter a sexual relationship, this must be seen on the screen of a mythical narrative, which in turn resignifies the function of John as heterosexual male lover. As Teresa de Lauretis remarks,

> [in] the mythical the hero must be male regardless of the character, because the obstacle, whatever its personification (sphinx or dragon, sorceress or villain), is morphologically female - and indeed, simply, the womb, the earth, the space of is movements. As he crosses the boundary and "penetrates" the other space, the mythical subject is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of difference. (43-44)

Here, while John indeed marks difference, Charlotte is, in de Lauretis's diction, not just "an

[7] Originally, Wiggins had considered to title her novel *Eucharist* (cf. Gehr).

element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (44), but susceptible to transformation. The dolphin-swim is part of Charlotte's ritual passage taking her from heterosexual wedlock via the chimerical love affair with John Dollar to homosocial coupling with Monkey. At first, however, Wiggins casts a dark vision of female homosociality. The island community she depicts, remains within the heterosexist, patriarchal, and thus extremely destructive system. Trying to negotiate their identities, all they can think of are cannibal fairy tales like "Hansel and Gretel" and "Little Red Ridinghood," while Monkey's stories in which "no one ever ended in another being's stomach" (*John Dollar* 160) remain untold. As Steven Connor rightly states, "[d]eprived of fathers and their law, the girls are in a sense forced to become the authors of themselves, but, without any clearly-formed sense of identity, their acts of self-authorship are parasitic upon the absent law of the father" (89).

13 Thus, finding the paralyzed John Dollar on a deserted beach poses an extraordinary strain on the fragile female community. While it seems that with him male authority is restored, John Dollar actually fails: he cannot prevent the girls from witnessing their fathers being burnt and eaten by a tribe of cannibals. Having conceived the natives as "tiny naked people, other children" (182), the girls try to make sense of this horror: "When there is nothing left to do within one's understanding of the world one does what can't be understood […]. [The] other children left defecations, […] like offerings. Amanda is the first to understand their meaning. Falling with a cry onto her knees, she smears her face with some, her neck, her chest, she eats it" (187).

14 This scene again resignifies what Hulme calls "the primal scene of 'cannibalism' as 'witnessed' by Westerners" which most often (see Defoe, for example) is of its aftermath rather than its performance: "[There] is no more typical scene in the writing about cannibalism in whatever genre than that in which a witness stumbles across the remains of a cannibal feast" ("Cannibal Scene" 2-3). Here, the girls actually witness the cannibal feast, which as the text suggests leads to the breakdown of their communal covenant. The devouring of the remains of their fathers marks the transgression of the paternal law and symbolically borders on incestuous behavior. Yet building "a kind of totem" of the cannibalized bones inaugurates the law again with a difference: a sacrificial principle is affirmed and the worship is transferred to the surrogate father, John Dollar:

> Without speaking, they withdraw from it [i.e. the totem], understanding it is never to be spoken of, never to be touched, the bones, never to be broken, that perimeter, its ultimate offense, obscenity, its inviolability. They are different now. Even those whose fathers were not massacred are different. They are silent, changed, contaminated, beyond grief, ecstatic. Day is dawning. John is waiting for them. Blacked with shit and whitened with the sand, they gather things they hope will please him - pretty shells, a

> rock, a shrimp, a cinder. (187-188)

Nolly and Amanda, the two oldest girls, now pass from the former communal female ritualizing to yet another form of ritual: "Every night they had been paring skin off him, eating morsels from his legs, his flesh, stanching his blood with a hot brand from the fire which he couldn't feel but which left him charred and rotting" (207). Their ritual is meant as a sort of incantation, assembling bits and scraps of both the Lord's Supper and the pagan sacrifice:

> Everything - their spoken words, their gestures, their exertions - had been shaved, reduced to the demotic, emblematic, everything the ritual contained became symbolic of its former self, symbolic of its former symbol like a love that calls itself a love when it's grown loveless, like a love that is a war. (206)

Nolly and Amanda act as high priestesses taking "literally one of the predominant symbols of the Anglican church: the Eucharist," as Gail Dohrmann points out. "They have consumed the body of their savior" (71). This is more than just a "perversion" of the strictly homosocial biblical ritual of the Holy Communion into yet another primal scenario of incest. The transformation and dehumanization of John Dollar from a mythical Dionysian figure "into a drugged abstraction that fulfills their need for worship and allows them to forget the urgency of survival" (Dohrmann 71), mocks the ritual function of the mythos of Dionysus who not only turned men into dolphins (i.e. symbols of rebirth), but was torn apart by a group of woman followers and experienced resurrection in a Christ-like manner.

15 At the same time, the cannibal ritual as performed by the adolescent girls suggests an instance of resignification on the level of postmodern historiographic metafiction. Accordingly, the devouring of John Dollar functions as comment on the imperialist discourse operating in colonial Burma. Tinzar Lwyn speaks of the "messiah complex" constructed by colonial discourse, giving "the rescuer a sense of agency, privilege and superiority" (9, 11). The belief in the colonizer's own superiority was a central tenet of the imperialist discourse as was the alleged need of the colonized Other to be saved from his/her own barbarous tradition. "Contemporary colonial discourse," says Lwyn, "perpetuates such a messianic relationship through representation of Burma that serve to reaffirm the privileged place of the identity of the Western subject. The identity of the West as saviour presupposes and necessitates the existence of the Other as an object to be rescued" (7). Here, Burma is resignified as West's barbaric Other: While Burma remains the site of barbarity, John Dollar — the mythical Western Messiah — is devoured by daughters of the ruling colonizing class. John Dollar's "penetrating" the feminized space of Burma climaxes in a violent parody of his mythic potency. Instead of proving as the "Western phallic father" who, according to Lwyn, is "the

bearer of 'civilisation' and 'provider' for the women and children" (12), John Dollar himself must passively wait to be released from his torturous treatment, and his sacrificial death does not promise resurrection.

16 Moreover, with John Dollar's demise both the heterosexual and colonial plot come to an end as well. Charlotte, being temporarily blinded, does not know that the girls are on the same island as she is. Only when Monkey finds her, is her sight miraculously restored. This symbolic act of being finally able to see again refers to the notion of passage that has been introduced to Charlotte early on and should be seen, I think, as an metatextual instance pointing toward an understanding of the novel as a whole. Already on her way to Rangoon, she is confronted with Cavafy's homoerotic prints of boys as well as his poem "Ithaka" both of which point toward her own destiny: "As you set out for Ithaka / hope your road's a long one, / full of an adventure, a discovery. / Arriving there is what you're destined for" (Cavafy qt. in *John Dollar* 17). What Charlotte arrives at, what she is capable of "seeing," is her bonding with Monkey. Only after reading the novel to its end does one understand that the two have been living together for six decades in total seclusion. The reader hardly gets any information about their lives:

> She was unused to men. She was unused to people. Charlotte and she had lived for six decades on high land where rock was the backbone just under the earth. They had done nothing. They looked at the sea […]. [They] took single meals never breathing a prayer of thanksgiving […]. [When] they spoke, if they spoke, they were careful of saying not much. Birthdays were always forgotten. The seasons were never rejoiced. The summers in Cornwall were never too hot to remind them of where they had come from, of Hell. They lost their religion to silence, they lost their forbearance to fear. Year after year they refused to forget, to look forward, look inward, look anywhere, but to sea […]. Nothing progressed. Nothing changed. Except Charlotte was dead and soon, the Indian knew, she herself would die, too. (5)

It is not until Charlotte's death that Monkey must confront a crisis that in turn triggers her memory and the ensuing narrative. For the first time since leaving the island together with Charlotte, Monkey encounters both men and their laws. Reflecting on how to bury Charlotte, Monkey relives her own fate as colonized Other by applying cannibal imagery to describe the former colonial masters:

> The english [sic] makes laws […]. This law, exclusive, ecclesiastic, for keeping the dead from the dead, under ground […]. He buries his dead so the other white castes will not cook them and eat them. Worms and the maggots are better than teeth of one's enemies, that's why the white caste is always at table. He eats and he eats […]. He eats people. Her name was something a long time ago that the english had chewed from its whole state of 'Menaka,' into a word they said 'Monica' into the status of 'Monkey,' for short. He translated her person, he chewed and he chewed. The Indian knew a translation, though, too. She translated his laws into liquid, into the likely suspicion of outlawry, floating face-up on her being, pretending a surface, a sea: she could bury, o

yes. She had buried before. (7)

At the very end, it becomes clear that *John Dollar* is above all the story of Monkey and of her claim to ethnically unbiased lesbian desire:

> When she [i.e. Monkey] thinks about that day she thinks about it from above as if she were the smoke, she sees the way that Charlotte took her hand and made her heart feel whole again, as if it were still possible to feel some sort of love […]. [And] they walk, Monkey sees, refusing to see what happened next: they walk and they walk and they walk and they walk and they walk, she believes. (214)

The interaction of colonizer and colonized as manifested in the queer relationship between Charlotte and Monkey indeed may be seen as an act of resistance and as subverting strictly dichotomous and essentialist colonial arrangements. It is not so much the barely unveiled homosocial bond as such that is at stake here, but rather the task of remembering and relating the story of past and ongoing "craziness." Monkey actually claims both herself as well as Charlotte of being "crazy," of endlessly burying the dead and the memories related to them: "Sixty years, or a lifetime, just digging, she judged" (8).

17 At the end, it is up to the queerly resisting reader to make sense of the outset of the novel. Monkey, who was not able to tell her stories to the other girls, turns out to be the one who survives and *is* capable of story-telling, "a modern-day Scheherezade with the texts of a hundred and one stories in her memory" (Greiner 123). Monkey's story is like the stories of women on the border who, according to Lwyn, "act as an antidote against the 'truth' of the colonial voice. The absent voices destroy the dichotomy between victim and agent in explaining issues of women's subjectivity, and the notion of the West as Burma's saviour" (17). The story Monkey tells challenges colonialist discourse, but it does so by a reliving of her trauma in the "Last Act of the Apostle" as the first chapters first subtitle announces. She remembers *John Dollar*'s strange burial: "Charlotte had picked up his bones. The arms and the legs and the head. Then she and Monkey had puzzled them out in the earth till they looked like a man. Place his head facing Hell, Charlotte said. Monkey twisted the skull. 'Place him eyes-down in the earth'" (8). Clearly, this burial is a resignified ritual: *John Dollar* is buried face down designating him as damned.

18 The solution of the island cannibal experience here obviously differs from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the intertext that unmistakably comes to mind when reading *John Dollar*. Marianne Wiggins herself admitted to have reread Golding's novel thinking: "Wrong, guys. Girls wouldn't do it this way" (qt. in Stead). As Stefan Hawlin in his critical reading of Golding's novel has shown, *Lord of the Flies* "is a seriously imperialist text" (133). Read against the background of British cultural politics in the 1950s, the novel shows a deep

ambivalence concerning the ongoing decolonizing process. Thus the text, Hawlin claims, only thinly disguises "the cliché about bestiality and savagery of natives, the 'painted niggers' in the forest" (125). Moreover, Hawlin quotes Kipling who called the African "half devil, half child" (131), a reference that evidently reappears in Wiggins's girls watching the "tiny naked people, other children" (182) devouring their fathers. This cliché, reaffirmed by Golding and resignified by Wiggins, is based on the cultural misrepresentation linking blackness, childishness and savagery. The regression of Golding's boys into savages mirrors the fate of the natives without the "parental guidance" of their white colonizers. In Wiggins's novel, unlike Golding's, there is no rescuing naval officer: in *John Dollar*, the dysfunctional savior, is eaten up, and with him all that he signifies. Does this render *John Dollar* a utopian or rather dystopian narrative?

19 Discussing William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in the context of utopian and dystopian fiction, Kathleen Woodward points toward the similarities of both forms, since both advocate social change. Utopian - as well as dystopian - literature embodies "a critique of existing social organization" and alerts us "to the possible negative impact on society of certain practices, desires and arrangement of power" (202). The principal use of utopianism is theoretical, not practical, and it is here that in Woodward's reading, Lord of the Flies does not actually qualify as dystopian fiction but rather as "realistic," a term Golding himself used. According to Woodward, Golding is not critical to his own form of government, "his vision is politically conservative, even reactionary" (203).[8]

20 *John Dollar* here contrasts most queerly as (dys)topia. It does not matter what the reader does not know about the time Monkey and Charlotte spent together, it is the fact that they *chose* to live a life of seclusion, silence, and solitude that matters. Apart from any sense of sexual affirmative identity politics, their unspoken of shared life is the ultimate resignification of abject Burmese tradition. Viewed from a colonial perspective, passivity marks the "Oriental" woman. According to Lwyn, however, there is a difference between passivity and quietness: "Quietness interpreted as passivity in the West: as absence." Within Burmese quietness exists the space of resistance, instead. In living in quietness, Monkey and

[8] Although I quite approve of Woodward's reading, I still would claim that Golding's novel depicts a distinct homosociality that is "characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (Sedgwick 1). I find it most difficult, therefore, to agree with Woodward's remark that by choosing "a homogeneous group of middle-class white children, all of whom are boys," Golding does not portray a "society" but rather a collection of people with "no racial tension, no sexual tension, no tension of cultural difference […] no bonds of love or even close friendship. […] It cannot even reproduce itself. It is small wonder that it turns pathological" (208). On the contrary, I would claim that it precisely is the precarious relational negotiation between the males which leads to the plot's escalation, and not an absence of any societal ties among the boys.

Charlotte have queerly resignified the idea of passivity into the site of resistance: resistance to the "englishman's devil" (5), to patriarchy, to colonialism, and to heterosexuality, ultimately.

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