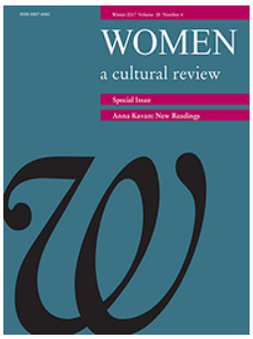

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Queering the World or Worlding the Queer? New Readings of Anna Kavan's *Who Are You?*

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Queering the World or Worlding the Queer? New Readings of Anna Kavan's *Who Are You?*

Abstract: This essay explores world-literary and queer approaches to Anna Kavan's little discussed 1963 novel Who Are You?. *It argues that world-literary scholarship demonstrates the centrality of white colonial masculinity to capitalist modernity, while a queer reading highlights the anxious performativity at the heart of such power. The most distinctive feature of Kavan's text is its unusual format, whereby the story is told once, in detail, before immediately being retold, in more concise fashion and with some adjustments. What both fields add to the analysis of this formal deviation is a shared concern with the failings of normative order—whether that be the bourgeois, heteropatriarchal family or the capitalist system itself—and, in turn, the relationship of such failure to narrative disjuncture.*

Keywords: Anna Kavan, world literature, queer theory, normativity, narrative disjuncture, patriarchal capitalism

This essay explores two critical paradigms in relation to the difficult-to-categorize writing of Anna Kavan: those of world literature and queer theory. Rarely considered in tandem, these discordant fields nevertheless demonstrate a

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number of overlapping concerns. My central focus is Kavan's 1963 novel *Who Are You?*, set in the early twentieth century in an unnamed colonial locale assumed to be what was Burma (where Kavan lived when unhappily married between 1920 and 1922).[1] The text evokes the violent disintegration of a relationship between 'the girl' and Dog Head, a pairing offset, and illuminated, by their respective interactions with the husband's servant, Mohammed Dirwaza Khan. The work's most distinctive feature is its unusual format, whereby the story is told once, in detail, over 97 pages, before immediately being retold, in more concise form, over 20 more—a disruption of narrative convention receiving little comment to date.[2] Throughout, the tensions of the girl's standpoint are made clear: she is a beneficiary of a system by which wealth is extracted for the enrichment of her kind yet, at one and the same time, she also experiences oppression (including being raped) at the hands of the brutal husband to whom she has, effectively, been traded. Wider contradictions also suffuse the novel. It navigates a path between fantasies of Burma as the source of eastern promise and the reality of ongoing resistance, between the country's status as peripheral locale and its role within the wider international economy. It is no wonder that this carefully disordered, dreamlike work does not follow linear narrative convention.

From a world-literature perspective—understood to be literature of the world system—Khan and the girl's antagonistic relationship can be viewed as the jostling of those relegated to subordinate positions at the periphery of capitalism's reach. Dog Head, master of both, embodies the malaise of patriarchal capitalist modernity. If a world-literary approach demonstrates the centrality of white colonial masculinity to intersecting oppressions, a queer reading highlights the anxious performativity at the heart of such power and draws out the homoerotic aspects of the relationship between master and servant. These schools of thought, however, are not natural bedfellows: world literature displays hesitancy about post-structuralist readings that, as Benita Parry puts it, have a 'one-sided concern with the constitution of "other-ness"/alterity/difference' (Parry 2004: 75), while queer theorists have expressed reservation about a 'certain blindness to sexuality' within the materialist tradition (Floyd 2009: 2). Nevertheless, both approaches are concerned with the failings of normative order—whether that is the bourgeois, heteropatriarchal family or the capitalist system itself—while both relate such failure to narrative disjuncture and a literary politics of excess.

Worlding Who Are You?

Following Franco Moretti's contention that 'world literature cannot be literature, bigger' (Moretti 2000: 55), scholars have been grappling with how

1 It is worth noting here that the story of *Who Are You?* is unmistakably a rewrite of the final section of *Let Me Alone* (1972 [1930]), written under Kavan's previous name of Helen Ferguson.

2 I will be quoting from the longer version unless otherwise stated. This begins with substantive scene-setting with regards to the girl's isolation and the couple's dysfunctional relationship. In contrast, chapter 19 omits such information and begins with the entrance of her friend, Suede Boots. It is also written in a plainer style and concludes differently.

to conceptualize this increasingly popular term. Borrowing from world-systems theory, Moretti suggests world literature is that of the capitalist world system, ergo there is 'one world literary system (of inter-related literatures)' which is 'simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality' (56). Much as Moretti's piece serves, to some extent, as provocation, the Warwick Research Collective shares his conviction that world literature is best understood 'through its mediation by and registration of the modern capitalist world-system' (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 9). Unpacking this, they emphasize 'the *singularity* of modernity as a social form and its *simultaneity*', making clear that 'capitalist development does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course' (12). 'Modernity', therefore, is not something that emanates from metropolitan centres outwards. Rather, it is 'the way in which capitalism is "lived"—*wherever* in the world-system it is lived' (14). This focus does not negate aesthetic concerns, however. On the contrary, I draw on the Warwick Research Collective's interest in the relationship between formal and macro-level trends, as exemplified by their claim that:

> To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar—as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies. (17)

Working with this framework, I argue that *Who Are You?* is best viewed as reflecting the contradictory faces of capitalist modernity as Kavan found them in Burma, with the 'asynchronous order' of that society feeding into the novella's own narrative schism. This echoes Jane Garrity's prescient claim in relation to Kavan's *The House of Sleep* (1947) that: 'Both in terms of formal structure as well as thematic content, Kavan's text is engaged with the condition of modernity' (Garrity 1994: 255).

First, however, I want to consider the relationship between mistress and servant from a world-systems perspective. Notable throughout is the fact that the girl is constantly depicted as failing to inhabit successfully her role as colonial wife. From her husband's point of view, she demonstrates an 'inability to run the house efficiently' and 'scarcely attempts to control their numerous servants' (Kavan 2002: 13). Locating her firmly within a domestic milieu, the private home is rendered a version of the colonial

endeavour in miniature. If her husband's task is the exploitation of Burma's natural resources and humanity, then we see a corresponding appropriation of his wife's labour towards similar ends. He also 'has other things against her: such as her not being a social success' (13), with 'social' meaning the life of the colony—that is, other Britons. Clearly, their marriage includes assigned (or assumed) tasks for which the girl proves unsuited.

Given that the text's primary concern is in outlining the deeply unpleasant dynamic between the girl and Dog Head, it might seem tangential to focus on the (seemingly) minor figure of the servant, Khan. Yet he can be seen as a pivot, around which both the girl and Dog Head rotate. A contrary individual, difficult to assign clear positionality, Khan is his master's 'own personal boy' (14)—the infantilizing tenor of such language being self-evident. He is portrayed as 'a dignified barefooted servant, with a white turban and a grey beard' (12), and 'an Old Testament prophet with his stern ascetic face' (40). Despite his Islamic name, he is aligned with Christian imagery, although echoes of the 'noble savage' are here as well. Kavan also invokes more negative associations. His beard is described as having been 'twisted grotesquely around his neck' by the wind, his 'lean bare legs shut and open like blackish scissors', while his 'large horny feet' have 'widely splayed, almost prehensile toes' (40). Harbinger of death, Christian prophet and prehistoric creature rolled into one, these descriptions do not entirely hold together. In part, this can be attributed to the precarious mental state of the girl, which bleeds through to the narration. Nevertheless, Khan's lingering and excessive presence merits further analysis.

As a consequence of the girl's failure to discharge her duties correctly, Khan is positioned as a replacement 'wifely' figure. He wishes to 'atone for her deficiencies' (14)—a statement that situates the 'boy' as a direct replacement for the inadequate 'girl'. Similarly, his claim to having been with his master 'longer than anyone' (14) ranks him above her, in terms of longevity of service at least. Accordingly, Khan regards the girl as both 'enemy and rival' (35), having 'worked against her secretly all along' (36). He is far from being alone. Certain of the other servants 'have been in the master's service before his marriage and resent her presence, putting the others against her and deliberately making her inefficiency obvious' (14). Authoritative expression is granted this inadequacy when Khan begrudges waiting on his master in her stead, rather than 'enjoying the ministrations of his own properly subservient wife' (14). Failing to be 'properly subservient', the girl is judged wanting on all counts.

World-systems theory is hardly known for its engagement with issues of gender. Kathryn B. Ward, for example, argues that 'world systems theorists … exclude the role of women in the global economy' (Ward 1993: 48).

Immanuel Wallerstein does, however, make the interrelation between racial and gendered subordination visible. Given the ever expanding nature of capitalist production, he explains, the system 'needs all the labour-power it can find' at the lowest possible cost (Wallerstein 2002: 33). Racism, according to Wallerstein, 'is the magic formula' that facilitates this objective (33), as it allows 'a far lower reward to a major segment of the work force' (34). Similarly, the system is only made possible by the 'indirect subsidy to the employers' of (primarily) women labouring within the home, which, in turn, '[s]exism permits us not to think about' (34) by 'proclaiming that their work is really non-work. We invent the "housewife" and assert that she is not "working", merely "keeping house"' (35). Both racism and sexism, then, allow 'a far lower reward to a major segment of the work force than could ever be justified' otherwise (34), creating 'a system that operates by a tense link between the right dosage of universalism and racism-sexism' (35).

These concepts are clearly evidenced in *Who Are You?*, with Khan and the girl being linked by this shared nexus of 'racism-sexism'. Both are framed throughout in relation to their labour: he for doing it, she for not. That expected of her is positioned as non-work, or duty. Similarly, Khan's service to his master, presumably poorly paid if at all, is rendered natural within the parameters of the racist colonial system. Accordingly, they share differently subordinated positions, supporting Silvia Federici's claim that 'the main mechanisms by which capitalism has maintained its power' are via 'the devaluation of entire spheres of human activity … from a large population of workers who appear to be outside the wage relation: slaves, colonial subjects, prisoners, housewives' (Federici 2012: 8). Rather than recognizing their mutual devaluation within the same apparatus, however, the pair jostle for position, illustrating Federici's further assertion that capitalism implants 'deep divisions that have served to intensify and conceal exploitation' (Federici 2004: 65). Such separation is demonstrated by Khan's vow to be 'more of a tyrant to the rest of the staff' (Kavan 2002: 16–17), and by the existence of his own trainee—a young boy who is merely his 'silent, passive appendage' (87), in diminutive echo of the older man's own relationship to Dog Head. Key here is the dissension naturalized between those battling for the limited power available in a system within which they are already disenfranchised.

Further light is shed on Khan's role, including his oddly 'privileged place in the house-hold' (14), by taking his origins into account. His name suggests that he is Muslim and so, in all likelihood, a migrant from elsewhere in South Asia. As a result, his presence speaks to Thant Myint-U's description of how 'the primary cleavage in the new Burma was … ethnicity' (Myint-U 2001: 243). Not only does the girl fail to control their staff, but specifically their 'servants of difference races' are stressed (Kavan 2002:

13)—a qualification that appears superfluous. This is later explained when Dog Head reflects:

> He would prefer to employ only Mohammedans, regarding them as more trustworthy than the local people, and only does not do so because government policy is against such discrimination. He dislikes the volatile inhabitants of the country, seeing them as irresponsible … their natural gaiety offensive. (14–15)

This allusion to 'discrimination' proves ironic as it refers only to the freedom to serve, constituting all who are not European as a servant class. 'Volatile' signals the nascent challenges to colonial governance of the time, an incipient threat neutered by the stereotyped presentation of 'happy' local populations. Equally, the 'trustworthy' Muslims marshalled in opposition are likely only perceived as such because of the limitations of their tenuous position as migrant labourers within an alien country. The acknowledgement of 'government policy', meanwhile, gestures towards the attempt to manage what Ann Laura Stoler calls the 'affective grid of colonial politics' in relation to domestic space (Stoler 2002: 7). Policy might have been 'against such discrimination' but, nevertheless, a 'twentieth century divide between "Europeans", "Indians", the "Burmese" and the "minorities" was firmly set' (Myint-U 2001: 244).

One man stands at the centre of these relations: Dog Head. For example, qualifying the servant's vow of tyranny is the explanation that this is only possible 'because of the strengthened solidarity he feels' with his master (Kavan 2002: 17)—a sentiment attesting to Myint-U's point that even those regional men 'with some power' were subordinate to those 'who were entirely foreign' (Myint-U 2001: 244). In contrast to Khan, however, the girl is unable to accept subjection to her boorish husband. While she herself 'wonders why she's been pushed into marrying him', Dog Head 'blames her totally for not appreciating the privilege of being married to him' (Kavan 2002: 20). As humorous as this sentence is, it deftly illustrates his acute sense of the benefits accrued by association with his person. Consequently, he is aghast that '[h]is wife is the only one who doesn't seem to succumb' (13), vowing that 'he'll show her … !' (22). An inevitable descent into violence follows. Yet Dog Head is not unusual in such a view. In fact, he proves representative of his kind, as illustrated when a visiting army major is later startled that the girl 'doesn't appear to appreciate the fact that he's sacrificing his valuable time in order to get to know her. How can she be oblivious of this honour?' (44). Clearly, white men are at the pinnacle of a system shored up by the 'racism-sexism' nexus Wallerstein describes (Wallerstein 2002: 35). We can, therefore, recast the girl's

alleged passivity, conceptualizing her neglect of household work in light of later claims by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James that 'the role of the housewife, behind whose isolation is hidden social labor, must be destroyed' (Dalla Costa and James 1975: 49). Equally, Raymond Williams talks of the 'structure of feeling' associated with a particular society and culture in a given period: the 'actual living sense, the deep community' felt as a 'result of all the elements in the general organization' (Williams 1998: 53). The girl's quiet disengagement from all that is expected of her as a colonial wife and mistress is reconfigured as resistance to the labour demanded by patriarchal capitalism, albeit with the caveat that her work is only transferred to those oppressed racially instead.

Queering Who Are You?

Serious study of Kavan's male characters has been occluded by a scholarly focus on her ubiquitous 'girl'. This section therefore uses queer theory to explore further her dissection of colonial masculinity. Initially, we are told that Dog Head has 'a curious inborn conviction of his own superiority which is quite unshakeable' (Kavan 2002: 13), believing himself to be 'superior to everyone else alive' (25). Physically, he is 'quite impressive, in an overbearing fashion' (25), 'lean, muscular, tough' and with the 'bright blue eyes' (15) indicative of conformity to the required racial parameters. This is precisely the image of 'self-confident British manliness' described by Elleke Boehmer—an 'ideal of robust character' suffused with 'convictions of race pride' (Boehmer 2005: 78). Presumably because of such qualities, Dog Head easily bests his wife's friend, and would-be suitor, the youthful and preening figure of Suede Boots. Nothing untoward occurs between the pair, despite their evident attraction, with Suede Boots staying true to the 'masculine chivalry inculcated during his schooldays' (Kavan 2002: 51)—words reminding us of the extent to which public schools were the 'nurseries of empire' (Rutherford 1997: 15). When Dog Head comes home to find them having tea, he quickly asserts himself: 'his blue eyes stare icily, fixedly, at the visitor, with disgust and abysmal contempt. His big aristocratic nose arches itself superciliously' (Kavan 2002: 64). 'Aristocratic' and 'superciliously' reiterate his status, with 'blue eyes' affirming the racial pride on which it is built. Similarly, 'disgust' and 'contempt' indicate where Suede Boots is situated within this social hierarchy. Commanded to leave, the younger man is deprived of his 'usual aplomb' (64) and looks 'more than ever like a furious little boy' (65). A model of mature colonial masculinity dispatches successfully what appears to be its own, younger version.

Judith Butler has described gender as 'an identity tenuously constituted in time … through a *stylized repetition of acts*', whereby 'bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (Butler 2014: 179). Dog Head's blustering enactment of patriarchal colonial entitlement can, I suggest, be seen as an exaggerated manifestation of this performativity. In fact, countering his self-confidence, both men can be reframed as displaying an anxious, compensatory masculinity. Crucial to this claim is the following excerpt from their confrontation:

> They are dressed alike. Both wear shorts, and a short-sleeved bush jacket which … has a vaguely military aspect. But while in one case this might be the uniform of a general, in the other it's more like a Boy Scout's. The wearer's young bare, rounded knees look half pathetic, half comic; most unlike the tough, sinewy, hairy knees of his much taller senior, who is in every way far more formidable, in his arrogance … beneath which can be felt disturbing suggestions of something faintly unbalanced. (Kavan 2002: 64)

This matching uniform serves to emphasize both men's habitation of a particular role. On the one hand, the derogatory emphasis on Suede Boots' boyish nature highlights his distance from convincing enactment: he serves merely as a pale imitation of the colonial 'man' he is supposed to be. Yet, on the other, the final sentence indicates that all is not well with Dog Head either. While Suede Boots underperforms colonial masculinity, I argue that the older man offers an excessive overperformance, which proves increasingly erratic as the text wears on.[3]

For example, Kavan continuously evokes those animalistic qualities implied by Dog Head's name, making clear that '[e]veryone's terrified of his rages. He has only to start grinding his teeth, and people fall flat before him' (13). The moniker itself was coined by the local population as a 'form of mockery' (15). Eagerly taken up by the anonymous narrator, we never find out the husband's actual designation—a neat rewriting of how the colonized were often renamed to suit the whims of their oppressors. Kavan's wry qualification that 'one doesn't at once see why' Dog Head has been nicknamed so is immediately undermined by her description of his 'close pelt' and his eating like 'a hungry dog' (15). This disingenuous comment positions the reader awkwardly in the face of a name we understand all too well, aligning us with both the girl and the indigenous Burmese.

Dog Head's persona unravels further as he descends into malarial fever. The explanation that 'there's that indefinable hint about him of something queer, almost like a touch of madness' (68), therefore anticipates the decline

3 The importance of this clash is suggested by the fact that, in the first telling of the narrative, the girl's friendship with Suede Boots is not registered until halfway through (50). In contrast, the revised version in chapter 19 begins with the assertion that 'Suede Boots drops in for tea as usual' (98).

to come. These strange words, with their negative invocation of both homosexuality and insanity, reinforce the idea of a fault line at the heart of Kavan's domineering colonial male, signalling greater affinity with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (2000) 'madwoman' than the image of self-confident masculinity to which Dog Head aspires. Stephanie Newell has commented that 'one might expect the figure of the white man to feature in literary texts as the securest of all bodies' (Newell 2009: 246). Yet she points to the frequency with which a 'shared form of gender anxiety arises among European men precisely as a consequence of their position outside visibility' (246). It is perhaps because they are assumed, in their matching uniforms, to be beyond visibility that we can account for the anxious performativity of both Suede Boots and Dog Head. At the very least, they attempt to conform to an overburdened model of colonial masculinity that fails to acknowledge the histories of violence and subjugation on which it rests.

Further discussion is warranted as to the relationship between servant and master based on this telling word 'queer'. David Halperin has claimed that the term acquires 'its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin 1995: 62). If the 'legitimate' and 'dominant', in this context, is the heterosexual home as a microcosm of colonial endeavour, then the dynamic between the two men certainly proves troubling. In addition to his ethnic positioning, Khan's 'privileged place' is also attributed to the fact that waiting on the master 'implies a certain intimacy' (Kavan 2002: 14)—veiled terminology that lingers in the reader's mind. A complicated dance of gestures and behaviours is visible when Khan serves Dog Head at dinner:

> Throughout the meal he's [Dog Head] said not a word to the man [Khan]. Since he still doesn't speak and only smiles at him in passing, it's hard to say why he now seems to show more than the normal goodwill towards him—almost familiarity—or how his smile exceeds the permissible, or fails to comply with conventional standards of conduct, or appears indiscreet. (16)

Just as I suggest that Dog Head offers an excessive performance of colonial masculinity, so too 'more than', 'exceeds' and 'fails to comply' all suggest similar transgression between the pair, with the confused pronouns only serving to conflate them further. Khan 'notes the slight excess … with gratification' (16), being warmed by the 'strengthened solidarity he feels with the man who has just left him' (17)—not 'master', but 'man', while, for the first time, the 'boy' is described as a 'man' as well: two men exchanging

private glances, in language saturated with excessive meaning. Important to remember, however, is Khan's position as a servant. As Robert Aldrich cautions, the 'relative wealth of Europeans' made 'the exchange of sex for money or other advantages easy' under colonialism (Aldrich 2003: 4); whatever we make of this dynamic, it is certainly not one of equality.

When Dog Head is taken ill and the girl is excluded from proceedings, Khan's role as 'wifely' substitute continues. At first, Khan is so 'preoccupied' in tending for his master that he does not even notice her (Kavan 2002: 31). When he does, he suggests 'Better missis go'—a suggestion supported by his master's more direct 'Yes—get out … and stay out!' (33). Enlarging on this scene, the narrator explains that Khan's 'main function' is 'to watch over his master' (35). 'Fanatically jealous', the servant's 'loyalty is blind, absolute; to the death he would serve', the one certainty being 'that he has served no other master, and never will' (35). This melodramatic phrasing invites incredulity, yet it has been given foundation by the earlier acknowledgement that Dog Head 'relies upon' his boy, 'perhaps more than he knows' (14). It is no wonder that Khan later refuses to act when the girl runs out into a monsoon after being raped by her husband. He 'hasn't the slightest intention of chasing off after the silly, worthless girl who is his rival —if she's really done, so much the better; it will spare him the trouble of getting rid of her' (89). Here, the servant's ambiguous positioning is brought sharply into focus, this level of agency throwing his subserviency into question, despite the negative stereotyping occasionally associated with his person. It also offers a variation on the triangulated models of desire suggested by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) and Jack Halberstam (2002).[4] In this instance, the girl appears successfully destroyed, with Khan's use of 'worthless' replicating the language of capitalist commerce and emphasizing her low 'value' within the system. The text as a whole could not be more damning about the 'legitimate' (Halperin 1995: 62) fantasy of happy, healthy colonial heterosexuality and home.

Yet the girl's disappearance does not mark a shift in the men's relations. Rather, Dog Head is killed off in grotesque fashion. After the rape scene, he entertains himself with a sick game that he has forced the girl to participate in throughout the book's duration, where he attempts to kill rats with a tennis racket. He spots 'a monstrous great brute, with a lion's mane of coarse hair and a tail like a sjambok' and 'half recalls the "rat-king" legend … the monster is said to appear to evil-doers when the monsoon breaks' (Kavan 2002: 91). This folkloric story of rats becoming joined by their tails and growing together in one mass provokes visceral distaste, while the reference to 'evil-doers' signals that Dog Head's retribution is pending. Tripping and falling on the mighty rat he believes he has killed, the man lies stunned, before realizing 'with sudden horror' that the

4 Sedgwick posits the example of two men seducing the same woman as a way to explore their hidden longing for each other (Sedgwick 1985), while Halberstam highlights the trend of gay individuals serving as rivals for a straight woman's affections before these are redirected towards a white heterosexual male (Halberstam 2002).

animal's 'cold sharp claws' are beginning to 'scrabble at his chest, becoming entangled in its furlike growth' (93–4)—the emphasis here being on two animals intertwined. 'As in a nightmare', he feels 'its teeth sinking into his throat' (94). Blood streams over his chest before he clutches at a nearby wardrobe and 'his fingers, sticky with blood, adhere … pulling it down on him. Like a giant coffin' (94)—words indicative of his imminent death. Kavan's colonial male receives his comeuppance at the hands of the lowly creatures he has harassed throughout the text, while, on a broader level, both heterosexual marriage and patriarchal capitalist modernity have been found wanting. Notable about this first ending, however, is that it takes place only within the fantasy realm.

Norms, Narrative and Chapter 19

In closing, I turn to *Who Are You?*'s distinctive rupture and abrupt reformulation of the narrative in chapter 19. From a queer perspective, links can be drawn between this device, the disruptive figure of Khan and the text's broader challenging of normative modes. What both Sedgwick's and Halberstam's discussions of triangulated queer desire have in common is an engagement with seemingly minor, or peripheral, figures. These are conceptualized further by Judith Roof, whose work questions the relationship between narrative and normative coherence. Roof is interested in those moments where 'the possibility of a different perspective produces a threat to narrative and meaning' (Roof 2002: 8)—words that are easily applied to Khan's unsettling presence. Discussing the 'shared structural relation' between the 'middle, minor and perverse' and 'the dominant, the normative and the important' (8), Roof connects such relations to the bourgeois family and the development of the novel form. Both, she suggests, represent the 'naturalized reiterations' of the 'irresistible merger of family and state', which has governed 'the conceptions, forms, logic, and operation of narrative' itself (Roof 1996: xvii)—a sentiment with obvious links to world-literary concerns about capitalist logics. As a result, 'the bourgeois need for the correct narrative, one effected by proper heterosexual, reproductive sexuality, and good timing, positions sexuality as itself causal', so that 'perverted sexuality is the cause of the bad narrative, familial disfunction, low production; and good, reproductive sexuality is the cause of profit, continuity, and increase' (35). Given the failure of the girl and Dog Head to generate 'proper' reproductive futures, it is no wonder that the novel itself breaks down in hallucinatory form.

The notion of queer temporalities also applies to this disruption. Victoria Walker has described how '[t]he temporal schism in *Who Are You?*,

so significant and yet so unexplained, seems to reconstitute time almost casually' (Walker 2012a: 188). Just as the heterosexual home is recast as a hellish nightmare, so too the book reworks time itself through formal rupture, in line with Halberstam's claim that 'queer time' is that which develops 'in opposition to institutions of heterosexuality, and reproduction' (Halberstam 2005: 1). According to Halberstam, if queerness is 'an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices', then it becomes more about a 'way of life' than a sexual identity (1). The economic realm marks the limits of this formulation, for Dog Head and Khan's unequal transactional relationship is based on normative (rather than eccentric) economic modes. Nevertheless, something about their excessive, non-verbal communication, similarly to the girl's refusal to inhabit her predetermined role, proves disruptive to the colonial 'way of life' the text evokes. As such, a 'queer hermeneutics', as Lisa Rofel puts it, 'leads us to grasp global capitalism not as a universal, unified phenomenon' but 'as heterogeneous, interconnected practices whose coherence and universalism' are 'undone by the "difference", the specific histories and unequal positioning of the postcolonies' (cited in Crosby et al. 2012: 129)—words connecting with Moretti's emphasis on a system that is 'simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*' (Moretti 2000: 56).

From a world-literary perspective, the specificities of local contexts come to the fore. Across the nineteenth century, three Anglo-Burmese Wars had been fought due to British ambitions in the region (Myint-U 2001; Charney 2010). Despite staunch resistance by local populations—the first Anglo-Burmese War was 'the longest and most expensive war in terms of men and treasure in Anglo-Indian history' (Talbot 2016: 67)—the territory was made a province of British India by 1886: 'a colonial possession within a colonial possession', as Michael W. Charney wryly puts it (Charney 2010: 2). Burma subsequently became 'an important province of the Indian empire', playing a 'vital role in the Indian Ocean economy, producing rice, oil, teak and minerals, while helping to support the eastern flank' (Keck 2015: 4)—words attesting to the territory's imbrication in wider regional geopolitics. At the same time, the social and intellectual currents that 'would lay the ground work for the emergence of Burmese nationalism' (3) were discernible from the 1890s onwards, despite the fact that an independent Burma would not be realized until 1948.

By the time Kavan and her first husband, Donald Ferguson, were resident in the country, 'challenges to colonial governance' were on the rise, with an 'increasingly robust anti-colonial nationalism' being 'fully evident in the 1920s' (Keck 2015: 3), to the extent that 'social intercourse with the Burmese was forbidden' for colonial staff (Reed 2006: 20). As Myint-U is therefore at pains to emphasize, this was a 'peculiarly unrooted colonial

regime … with little popular support' (Myint-U 2001: 10). Indeed, George Orwell's claim to 'being hated' by local populations in his controversial essay 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936)—written about his time as a police officer in the country during the 1920s—holds some purchase as background to the production of *Who Are You?* (Orwell 2003: 31). Kavan's troubled narrator is both representative and, perhaps, a victim of this 'unrooted' administration.

Returning to the question of time, Parry acknowledges the 'discontinuous temporalities attendant on the precipitate and selective introduction of capitalist modes of production into pre- or nascent capitalist societies' (Parry 2005: 73). Such temporal disjuncture is evident in the case of Burma. As Myint-U describes, the colonial authorities recast Burma retrospectively 'as an egalitarian rural society' (Myint-U 2001: 242), despite the country's rising anti-colonial sentiment. This was to the extent that Burma of 'the 1920s was not thought to have been very different from the Burma of a century before' (9)—a narrative imposition out of step with local realities. In contradiction, the period preceding British rule was actually one of 'sustained innovation and attempts at adaptation to rapidly changing local and global conditions' (9), with the country's leadership being 'fully aware of the need to refashion state structures and find a place within the emergent international system' (10). While these attempts may have floundered under the imposition of British rule, Burma's imbrication in global capitalism only accelerated as the British sought to benefit from their new acquisition, and a mixture of 'local and global conditions' (9) continued to pertain.

I do not claim that Kavan—an outsider to the region and, arguably, one more concerned with what Walker has described as the rendering of 'dispossessed and socially stigmatized [white] women' (Walker 2012a: 161)—champions Burma's indigenous inhabitants in *Who Are You?* Indeed, at the individual level, characters are often rendered in problematic fashion, despite Kavan's 'occasional expression of strongly anti-colonial sentiments' across her wider work (Walker 2012b: 7).[5] Nevertheless, the text is suffused with a sense of the asymmetrical relation between the periphery and core, as illustrated by Kavan's central motif of the brain-fever birds. Their incessant cry, 'Who-are-you?' (Kavan 2002: 7), both accounts for the book's title and can be read as an expression of the existential angst felt by Kavan's young protagonist (Walker 2012b). More prosaically, I point to the strange mixture of vocabulary marshalled to describe these birds. Indigenous to the region, they sit '[a]ll day long, in the tamarinds behind the house' (Kavan 2002: 7)—a specificity of positioning that attests to their 'locality'. At one and the same time, they are oddly 'globalized' in nature. Their cries are a 'mechanical sound', 'devoid of feeling', which is 'transmitted

5 Local populations are often described in racialized terms, while the Burmese landscape is dismissed as negation, lack or hell.

to other birds' and returns 'from all distances and directions, from everywhere at once' (7). This language echoes Karl Marx's rendering of the alienation of labour (Marx 1990)—an unexpected image in a country commonly framed as a rural idyll—while the trajectory of the birds' cries gestures towards the internationalism to which Burma's pre-colonial leadership aspired. In this case, however, the cries 'come from' rather than go out to, giving a sense of their sound pressing in from all sides, like 'machines nobody can stop' (Kavan 2002: 7). Kavan's bird call, then, can be viewed as a metaphor for precisely those local *and* global conditions described.

From a world-literary perspective, Sharae Deckard writes of how 'a type of peripheral realism in which realist aesthetics are impurely mingled with the irreal' is 'crucial to the … registration of the uneven structural relations of capitalist modernity' (Deckard 2012: 351). At first glance, this 'peripheral realism' might not immediately appear applicable to Kavan's text, given that Deckard asserts that 'the treatment of temporality, space, and causality' must remain 'fundamentally realist' (355). Colonial man did not tend to vanish after having been eaten by rats. Yet this is where 'impurely' comes to bear. In starting her story again straight after Dog Head's supposed death, Kavan draws attention to the fictionality of her work. With no warning granted, the reader is confused, turns back, wonders what is happening, reads on. This enforced disruption of narrative flow reminds us that everything we are reading—not just Dog Head's grisly end—is fiction, in keeping with Parry's description of a work that 'self-consciously inscribes reflections on the medium and uncertainties of narrative' so as to echo the temporal discordance of colonialism (Parry 2005: 72). Yet a 'fundamental realism' is subsequently asserted, for Dog Head meets his fantastical demise in the first telling of the story only. The second sees normative order restored, as he wakes, 'dislodges the cupboard quite easily' (Kavan 2002: 115) and '[t]oo tired to care about the girl … is asleep instantly' (116). The mundane tone here implies that the girl may well return too, her limited life continuing as was, with the birds' cries still filling the air 'as if they had never stopped mechanically calling' (117). The 'irreal' has been 'impurely' mingled within the narrative, before rupture and the 'fundamental realism' of patriarchal capitalist modernity is reinstated, having, in truth, 'never stopped' (117).

More positive readings can be drawn from this ending, however, when both queer and materialist lenses are applied simultaneously. Dog Head's whimpering under the cupboard makes his 'pathetic position' (115) more than clear, continuing to reflect the anxiety pinpointed by a queer dissection of colonial man. Forced to recognize that '[n]obody cares that he's crushed under an oppressive weight, in darkness and misery' (115), the master is, momentarily at least, forced into the position of his own gendered

and racial subordinates. This has a catastrophic effect on his sense of self, despite the fact that he is shortly freed: 'he seems to fall in on himself, to disintegrate' (116). Colonial man, if not dead, certainly appears to have had his superiority brought into question in fundamental terms. Furthermore, given that the reader is likely invested in the girl having made her escape, we are left puzzled as to whether to accept this revised, second ending or whether to draw our own conclusions instead—as Kavan has already given us two endings, why not conceive of a third? The mundane second ending—premised on the continuation of all that has gone before—can therefore be reframed as a utopian call to the reader to imagine something more—what Nicholas Brown calls 'an as yet unimaginable future' based on 'a lack or contradiction in the actually existing social totality' (Brown 2005: 22). Precisely this kind of future is gestured towards by the novel closing not on the master or mistress, but on 'the servants … still sleeping', and the 'dilapidated house' looking 'as though it were already an abandoned ruin, empty and fallen into decay' (Kavan 2002: 117). Published in 1963, some 40 years after the events it depicts, *Who Are You?* was inevitably informed by the knowledge that not only Kavan's marriage, but also colonialism in what was to become Myanmar was shortly to end—a rupture foreshadowed in the text's own narrative construction. Despite their contradictory—and some would say incommensurable—emphases on 'difference' versus 'inequality' (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 7), both queer theory and world literature here demonstrate the interlinked nature of capitalism, colonialism and heteropatriarchy.

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