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Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

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Élodie Raimbault

OUTLINE

TEXT

Introduction

1 By starting *The Impressionist* with an epigraph from Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim*, Hari Kunzru acknowledges from the onset the intertextual dimension of his novel.

> "Remember, I can change swiftly. It will all be as it was when I first spoke to thee under Zam-Zammah the great gun—"
> "As a boy in the dress of white men—when I first went to the Wonder House. And a second time thou wast a Hindu. What shall the third incarnation be?"
> —Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*. (Kunzru 1)

The dialogue originally appears in chapter 5 between an orphan boy raised by an Indian woman, Kim, and an elderly lama, his friend and mentor who travels across Northern India in search of the Buddha's holy river. In the early chapters, 13-year-old Kim discovers his white ancestry, and is recognised by the British as the son of an Irish soldier. The lama bears witness to spectacular changes in the boy's social identity as Kim learns how to transform his appearance and his behaviour, so that others will believe he belongs to any community, social class, caste or ethnicity. Wishing to take advantage of his hybrid identity, the British take over Kim's education to turn him into a spy. In particular, they teach him how to impersonate countless different ethnicities and social groups so as to travel through India without being identified as a British agent.

2 The character's ability to change identities has become a core motif in the tradition of detective stories.[1] Also a prominent element in texts representing the colonial situation, this motif mirrors colonial patterns of mimicry and hybridity, as defined by Homi Bhabha:

> […] colonial mimicry is the desire for a formed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.* Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. […] The line of descent of the mimic man can be traced through the works of Kipling, Forster, Orwell, Naipaul […]. He is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English. (Bhabha 85–86)

While learning to take part in colonial regulation and power by otherizing himself culturally, physically and linguistically, Kim consecutively experiences an exhilarating sense of empowerment and an identity crisis. His talent for indeterminacy paradoxically both facilitates and compromises his participation in the Great Game.[2] In *The Impressionist*, Hari Kunzru's main character, Pran, shares many of Kim's characteristics, but takes even further the ambivalence of mimicry, that is "at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 86), and ultimately threatens the imperial power.

3 Pran's trajectory in the 1920s echoes Kim's search for his true identity. Pran is also a half-outsider: the secret offspring of Forrester, a British colonial surveyor, and Amrita, an Indian woman who died in childbirth, Pran was raised as the spoilt son of a high-caste Hindu who had unwittingly married the pregnant Amrita, until his mixed origins are dramatically revealed and he is brutally cast away at the beginning of the novel. Facing many hardships and bearing witness to historical events, the orphaned youth moves through space and up the social scale, trying to survive and find his place in India, in England and finally in Africa, by impersonating successive identities.

4 Kunzru was awarded both the Betty Trask Award and the Somerset Maugham Award for *The Impressionist* (2002). Born in England to an Indian father of Kashmiri descent and a British mother, Kunzru grew up in the suburbs of London, graduated in philosophy at Warwick university, and now lives in New York. The great success of his first novel set him on the path for an international literary career. He "moved between worlds socially as well as geographically, and […] [his life journey has] also made it possible for [him] to discuss places of economic and cultural power with an insider's gaze" (Jeanniard du Dot 16). Often described as one of the new voices of postcolonial literature, in that he explores the point of view of racialized outsiders like Pran, Kunzru is "fascinated by the porousness and speed of the contemporary world, where identity is uprooted from its geographical soil and dispersed through the circuits of global capital" (Childs and Green 61). Writing the story of Pran, Kunzru engages with picaresque texts by Cervantes, Voltaire, Thomas Nash or Henry Fielding (Kunzru and Aldama 113–114) and with canonical colonial intertexts, among whom Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, E. M. Forster's A *Passage to India* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. In particular, he repurposes Kipling's dynamic motifs of travel, hidden identity and self-definition.

5 In both *Kim* and *The Impressionist*, the main characters' social trajectories can be read as a story of empowerment of subalterns. [3] Despite a movement of social elevation that echoes the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, the picaresque frameworks of both novels create limitations to and variations from such an archetypal storyline. Moreover, Kunzru's 21st-century rewriting of a colonial story generates a resurgence of certain aspects of the imperial experience

that were kept hidden, or implicit in the hypotext. The title *The Impressionist* indicates that the novel deals with impersonation; identity changes indeed structure the succession of chapter headings specifying the names Pran adopts (in turn, "Pran Nath", "Rukhsana", "White Boy", "Pretty Bobby", "Jonathan Bridgeman", "Bridgeman, J. P. (Barab.)") until the last chapter which bears the novel's title. It also raises the issue of performance, suggesting Pran becomes a kind of entertainer, playing on the slippage between mimicry and mockery. The cultural reference to Impressionists must also be interrogated: artistic Impressionism explored new ways to represent the material world and the impressions of the moment and, in like fashion, Kunzru's text explores the relationships between memory, perception of the outside world and identity.

6 The ways in which Kunzru's text converges with Kipling's will first be studied, considering how the type of the picaresque character is repurposed in the postcolonial context. Kunzru also builds upon the open, loose structure of Kipling's novel, taking further the latter's analysis of how imperial structures can be seen as "the machinery of imperial government" (Kunzru 98) which creates new identities. Finally, the specificity of Kunzru's version of the tale of the colonial *picaro* will be analysed: in particular, his materialist approach of history and his ability to make the imperial reality resurface through a material imagination include a discussion of imperial violence precedingly suppressed by Kipling.

The postcolonial reclaiming of the picaresque

7 Bart Moore-Gilbert expressed the idea that "the enduring appeal of *Kim* for South Asian writers, and its flexibility as a template, is indicated in its recurrence as an intertext in *The Impressionist* (2002) by Hari Kunzru" (47). The idea that *Kim* provides a prototypical narrative of the postcolonial search for identity is also explored by other critics, among whom Muhammad Safeer Awan, who argues that Kipling's linguistic inventions inspired many Indian and Pakistani authors: [4] "Kipling must be acknowledged as a source of inspiration, at least in terms of the employment of a 'hybrid' language, for a number of writers who adopted (and adapted) English as the

medium of their creative writings" (2–3). Although Kunzru does not strictly speaking belong to such a group of writers, as he was born in England and English is his own native language, he purposely uses such kiplingian strategies to convey the impression of a vernacular language in an English text, with phrases emphasising idiosyncrasies in the speech of Indian characters, words seemingly translated from Urdu or Hindi, or vernacular words transliterated in the Latin alphabet; for instance, the photographer who partakes in Pran's misfortunes at a Nawab's palace is called a "picture wallah" (Kunzru 87). Kipling's *Kim* also was prototypical of postcolonial narratives in its revitalization of picaresque tropes, among which the choice of a rogue as the main character.

The *picaro*

8 The picaresque derives its name from the Spanish *picaro*, meaning "rogue". The genre is a kind of biting satire, centred on the career of a hero who lives by his quick wits. Usually he is clever, cautious, and not without malice. Claudio Guillén writes that "the *picaro* both incorporates and transcends the wanderer, the jester, and the have-not" (67). He mingles naiveté and awareness, simplicity and cunning. Kim is presented as a cheerful version of the *picaro*: a friendly, witty, funny and easy-going boy, nicknamed "Little friend of all the world" (Kipling 155), he lives among the crowds. In *The Impressionist*, Pran immediately appears much more malicious and dangerously self-centred. Due to "his arrogance or his unappealing practical jokes" his household considers him a threat: "the boy was a curse" (Kunzru 28–29). Pran is witty and resourceful, but also dishonest, immoral, and cynical. He attempts to rape a servant under the eyes of her own mother, Anjali, who brings about his downfall. Presented by the narrator as "personifying fate, doom, justice, karma and all manner of other vast impersonal forces given to crushing antlike mortals underfoot" (Kunzru 38), Anjali was present on the day when he was conceived and is the last remaining witness to the truth of his origins. She belatedly reveals his true identity as a bastard so as to punish Pran for his attack against her daughter, which leads to his banishment from the household.

9 Pran's trajectory as a *picaro* suddenly turns him into a subaltern, in Spivak's sense of the term. Exiled from his early life of luxury as the pampered son of a high-caste, conservative and very distinguished Kashmiri lawyer, Pran has to start his career as an impressionist at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, lonely and without the ability to speak for himself. Over the course of the first chapters, Pran becomes in turn a beggar, a prostitute, a slave. In the section of the novel during which Pran is named Rukhsana, he is kept in a palace *zenana*, an area where women and girls are secluded, and is to be turned into a eunuch. The debased luxuries enjoyed by the colonists and the upper classes create a grotesque parody of Orientalist literature which turns into a bleak realistic story of sexual violence and slavery.

10 Pran's experience is much more violent than Kim's. While Kim's hardships as a vagabond and a disoriented orphan are alleviated by his numerous friends' support, Pran has to cope with a hyperbolic accumulation of bullies and attackers, beginning with his family circle but gradually including the whole city:

> Pran lies in the dust, smelling the onion-stink on his clothes. A crowd gathers, fascinated by the unprecedented events unfolding before their fortunate eyes. The chowkidar brandishes a lathi and Anjali gives a reprise of her miscegenation speech, adding that the evil boy has, to cap it all, just caused Pandit Razdan's untimely death. Then the door is slammed shut, the bolt drawing across it with a heavy metallic rasp. […] Out of the crowd arcs a lump of dung, which hits him, hot and wet, on the back of the neck. (Kunzru 41–42)

Pran loses his privileged communal identity as he is cast away and despised by even the lowest castes. When he is told that he looks Eurasian, he tries to ask for help from the Anglo-Indians [5] of the Agra Post and Telegraph Club. Through the eyes of Eurasian character Harry Begg, the narrator shows how the Anglo-Indian community practises a form of colonial mimicry that Kunzru satirises by highlighting how it makes the rhetoric of racism and imperial hierarchies resurface:

> They, the Anglo-Indian community, know where their loyalties lie. They know which side of themselves they favor. They wear their hats

> and read all they can of Home and avoid the sun like the plague, feeling pain with every production of melanin in their skin. Of course they do not call it that. They have other names. Dirt, grubbiness. (Kunzru 47)

Despite his physical resemblance to the Anglo-Indians, Pran is driven out of the club and beaten by Harry Begg, in a fit of rage. While he ironically fails to join this biological community, it is precisely the same Anglo-Indian talent for mimicry that will enable Pran to survive in an exceedingly violent environment, and to move up socially.

11 As per Bhabha's analysis of the ambivalence of mimicry, it appears that Pran's talent stems both from a necessity to conform and from a desire to mock: once he understands his new hybrid identity, Pran takes advantage of the colonial system, and his story is a vehicle for satire. The satirical dimension of both *Kim* and *The Impressionist* corresponds to the *picaro*'s traditional role of exposing the flaws of his contemporaries, like a jester. [6] Hybridity and mimicry apparently empower the *picaro* characters of Kim and Pran: imitating the British enables them to navigate the strict social framework of the Raj. It also transforms them into archetypes experiencing an existential identity crisis originating in the colonial encounter.

Structural similarities

12 In *Literature as System*, Claudio Guillén explains how the genre of the picaresque has evolved from a simple, linear sequence of episodes focused on the *picaro*, a structure he describes as

> […] loosely episodic, strung together like a freight train and *apparently* with no other common link than the hero. Since *Lazarillo*, however, other narrative devices have been superimposed on this basic structure. The use of recurrent motifs, circular patterns, and incremental processes is particularly frequent in the picaresque. The first-person form supplies an additional framework. These various devices create an objective or a subjective order beneath or above the linear sequence of events. […] This type of narrative allows for endless stories-within-the-story. It can have a sequel, or remain incomplete, or both. (84–85)

Such highly intricate structures abound in both *Kim* and *The Impressionist*. In his memoirs, Kipling described his novel as "of course, […] nakedly picaresque and plotless" (Kipling 1991, 133). This provocative statement specifies the story's basic structure, particularly the picaresque forms of the episodic structure and the open ending. However, the frequent interspersion of micro-narratives [7] gives the novel a more intricate form, despite its apparent shapelessness.

13 The motif of mosaic-building has a metatextual function in *Kim*, suggesting that the reader's hermeneutic role is to piece together many episodes and thus reveal the whole image. Kim's master Lurgan breaks an earthenware pot in front of his eyes and then teaches Kim to train his mind to visualize both the broken object and its intact form.

> There was one large piece of the jar where there had been three, and above them the shadowy outline of the entire vessel. He could see the veranda through it, but it was thickening and darkening with each beat of his pulse. Yet the jar—how slowly the thoughts came!—the jar had been smashed before his eyes. (Kipling 201–202)

The mental reconstruction of the shattered form is provoked by a syncretic vision, even if it is based on an illusion. Kim almost magically visualizes the complete form, but does not forget that the fracture is real. The ideal and the real are simultaneously revealed to him. Not only does Kim prove able to see beyond appearances and to look for a motif behind the disorder of reality, but he also starts learning how to piece together his own broken identity, which is alluded to allegorically here.

14 This motif of the mosaic is also one of the prominent intertextual echoes that appear in *The Impressionist*. In a scene when the character is in an altered state of consciousness, like Kim in the preceding quotation, Pran's sense of self is similarly described as being "in pieces" and "[a] pile of Pran-rubble":

> Pran moving outwards from the centre, gathering momentum. Whoever might be in charge, it is certainly not him. "Him", in fact, is fast becoming an issue. How long has he been in the room? Long enough for things to unravel. Long enough for that important faculty

> to atrophy (call it the pearl faculty, the faculty which secretes selfhood around some initial grain), leaving its residue dispersed in a sea of sensation, just a spark, an impulse waiting to be reassembled from a primal soup of emotions and memories. Nothing so coherent as a personality. Some kind of Being still happening in there, but nothing you could take hold of.
> You could think of it in cyclical terms. The endless repeated day of Brahman—before any act of creation the old world must be destroyed. Pran is now in pieces. A pile of Pran-rubble, ready for the next chance even to put it back together in a new order. (Kunzru 65)

After showing the limitations of the metaphor of the pearl, which figures identity as a precious, layered and self-made unit, Kunzru reuses the image of the broken whole in a more radical manner, suggesting that the ideal unit cannot be recreated once it has been broken, and that only a new, restructured, hybrid identity may emerge out of this scene of desolation.

Rewriting the imperial identity-making machine

A critique of empire

15 The structures of empire are pictured in *Kim*, particularly the Anglo-Indian educational system when Kim is sent to school to better adopt his social identity as a *Sahib*: "St Xavier's looks down on boys who 'go native all-together.' One must never forget that one is Sahib, and that some day, when examinations are passed, one will command natives" (Kipling 173). The school instructs future administrators of the Raj technically and morally, shaping their consciousness of being imperial executives. Janet Montefiore has shown how Kim's Jesuit education aims at "emulat[ing] the aristocratic Roman virtues of *gravitas* and authority" (Montefiore 114). Teaching Western Enlightenment, notably via the study of arithmetic and cartography, St Xavier aims at giving Anglo-Indian students the strength to resist what Europeans saw as Indian magical thinking through a "rational" mastery of reality.

16 Yet, Kipling does not fundamentally present the imperial structures as oppressive. They are not the reason for Kim's lack of stability: the cause is rather to be found in the circumstances of his birth and early youth, following the framework of the picaresque plotline that favours notions of chance and fortune. Conversely, Kunzru's critique of Empire anatomizes the imperial ability to shatter individual identities, a destruction shown to be relentless. Kunzru pictures the Empire as "a vast machine in which subjectivities are produced, fixed in place and re-circulated" (Childs and Green 69), foregrounding the absurdity of the process of identity-making. In a transitory phase, Pran survives by becoming "Pretty Bobby", a young man who entertains British soldiers, ingratiating himself by playfully imitating their various accents. A self-taught chameleon, Pran loses himself while imitating others, gradually becoming more and more spectral:

> Bobby's capacity for mimicry helps in his world. He can reduce British Other Ranks to fits by imitating regional accents. Oroight there, mate? Och, ye dinnae wanna worrit yersel'. Now then, sirs, if you please to follow me I know a very good place… Bobby deals in stereotypes, sharply drawn. […]
> Bobby is a ghost, haunting thresholds, pools of electric light. He hovers at the limit of perception, materializing in his collar and tie like someone only semireal, ethereal enough to trust with your secrets, safe in the knowledge that he would melt in direct sunlight. (Kunzru 231)

Kunzru's use of eye-dialect is reminiscent of Kipling's in his early Anglo-Indian short stories, published in the 1880s and 1890s. Kipling made an impression upon his metropolitan readers due to his realistic exoticism, visible particularly in the imitation of a variety of Anglo-Indian, Indian, and British dialects. Janet Montefiore interprets this in the context of the emergence of modernist experimentations:

> Proto-modernist mimicry is closely bound up with Kipling's imperial theme through the way his writing "layers" its standard English against the lively oral vernaculars: the Irish brogue and stage cockney spoken by his soldiers (turned later to very different modernist ends by T. S. Eliot and Bertolt Brecht) and the rich, archaised English which is Kipling's approximation to the Indian vernacular mixture of Urdu and Hindi […]. (112)

Indeed, in both *Kim* and *The Impressionist*, the characters' multilingual abilities and their mutability lead to their existential instability, as they experience identity as a performance which challenges the notion of a core self.

17 After stealing the administrative identity of an Englishman, Jonathan Bridgeman, and making sure that he can physically pass as white, Pran travels to England and discovers that he needs to practice innumerable rituals denoting Englishness. To ensure the quality of his performance in a selective public school, Pran applies to his own life the academic methodologies of anthropology and sociology, taking fastidious notes about social behaviour and upper-class etiquette.

> The school is a machine for producing belonging, and accordingly everything is done in groups, from showering in the morning to the composition of essays in evening prep. Every gesture of Jonathan's day is honed to its functional minimum by two hundred years of institutional evolution, like some upper-class version of Mr Taylor's factory system. […] In his notebook he writes, *Englishness is sameness*, and, *The comfort of repetition.* […] Jonathan notes all this down: *nobility of discipline*, *respect for religion important but belief optional*, *check your plate first.* His notes spread out into all areas of school life, from the rules of rugby football to the construction of a jam sandwich. Week by week his understanding of this world improves, the white spaces on his map filling up with trails and landmarks. (Kunzru 306–307)

This explicit comparison of the school system's moulding of identities to Taylorism suggests it partakes in the oppression of individuals like an industrial process. Pran's mastery of European methodologies is also signalled by the reference to cartography in the Conradian metaphor of the white (or blank) spaces which appears in *Heart of Darkness*.[8] Pran maps the territory of Englishness, preparing for his conquest of Jonathan's social class. Knowing in detail about his new environment helps his performance of whiteness and Englishness in general, but also, more crucially, of a specific class ethos. Kunzru analyses Pran's adaptation to a high-end English education in prep school and in Oxford as a scientific endeavour that mirrors the imperial strategies for using the European explorers' scientific findings in the fields of cartography, ethnography and

philology. This exemplifies Foucault's articulation between power and knowledge: Pran uses his knowledge to conquer England, and his performance of Englishness causes him to really experience Englishness, in turn making him more English.

Reversing Kipling's "fantasy of the white subject"

18 In an interview, Hari Kunzru explained his parodic intertextual intentions:

> *Kim* is the fantasy of the white subject who can see the hidden easternness of things. I wanted to change that round, to make western whiteness the exotic thing. […] I wanted to write in praise of the unformed and fluid. [9] (Feay 17)

Kipling's empowerment of his *picaro* does express an Orientalist desire to know India so as to conquer it: *Kim* offers the Western reader the pleasure of identifying with a white character who has a genuinely endotic [10] relationship to India, thus fulfilling the "fantasy of the white subject". Kunzru's comic reversal of this Orientalist gaze is one of his parodic tropes, found in the first page of the section "Jonathan Bridgeman", where Europe is ironically exoticized and eroticized: "Ah, the mystic Occident! Land of wool and cabbage and lecherous round-eyed girls!" (Kunzru 281). Such a reversal could be considered as a powerful postcolonial strategy, critical of Orientalism, yet the brevity of the passage and its comic tone blunt the sharpness of the criticism, by caricaturing the issue.

19 Kipling's Orientalist inclination to scatter in his fiction information about vernacular languages, religions, and other Indian particulars actually exceeds the mere creation of picturesque local colour: his type of idealized realism has been repeatedly acknowledged as predominantly truthful by Indian and Anglo-Indian readers. For instance, the complexity of the character of the lama proves Kipling's ability to fully characterize a Buddhist, and to ground his story in reality. The lama, a scholar and a priest, teaches the Buddha Dharma and strictly follows his pilgrimage; yet, his contact with Kim and a variety of other characters leads Kipling to develop the character's

interpersonal relationships, showing him as able to learn from others and to adapt to his companion's cultural outlook.

20 However, when Kim's ability to take on different identities is likened to reincarnation, the references to Hinduism or Buddhism are deceiving: the lama's interpretation of Kim's shifting identities in terms of incarnations (in the epigraph chosen by Kunzru for instance) is incorrect. Kipling suggests that Kim's shifting identities are a kind of transmigration determined by his *karma* and that they are caused by the Indianness of his life. In fact, his identity changes are pragmatic, elusive, and superficial. The incessant transformations lead Kim to experience a deep but temporary identity crisis, which cannot be interpreted as a form of retribution for past actions, therefore fundamentally differing from reincarnation. Kim's crisis is likened to a hypnotic trance that does not lead to any illumination:

> A very few white people, but many Asiatics, can throw themselves into a mazement as it were by repeating their own names over and over again to themselves, letting the mind go free upon speculation as to what is called personal identity. When one grows older, the power, usually, departs, but while it lasts it may descend upon a man at any moment.
> "Who is Kim—Kim—Kim?"
> He squatted in a corner of the clanging waiting-room, rapt from all other thoughts; hands folded in lap, and pupils contracted to pin-points. In a minute—in another half-second—he felt he would arrive at the solution of the tremendous puzzle; but here, as always happens, his mind dropped away from those heights with a rush of a wounded bird, and passing his hand before his eyes, he shook his head. (Kipling 233–234)

21 In *The Impressionist*, Pran's successive identities are also called "incarnations", but always superficially, in relation to the metaphors of clothes (Kunzru 283) or skin covering and hiding the character: "Maybe he should revert to an earlier incarnation. Or should he go on? Is Sweet's blackness another kind of skin he could put on and inhabit?" (Kunzru 403-404). Although Pran's attempts at empowering himself through his talent for impersonation are repeatedly thwarted, his indomitable persistence highlights the force of another fantasy: contrary to that of the white subject identified by Kunzru in *Kim*, the

fantasy of the *picaro* concerns his ideal ability to free himself of all social, racial and gender constraints. Ironically, when taking part in a debate, Pran (now Bridgeman) is overwhelmed by his impersonation and shocks his audience by using the caricatural kiplingian cliché of the white man's burden:

> J. P. Bridgeman [...] responding to Mr Barker's mention of the importance of the League of Nations, treated the House to a long and somewhat otiose statement of the White Man's mission to "farm the world". [...] he stood up and began to speak about America, a speech which soon became about the West and then slid into the clash of colour and the tide of racial movement on the shores of humanity and whiteness whiteness whiteness until he realized what he was doing and sat down. Sometimes it just comes out, the guilt. He has to watch for it. (Kunzru 335)

22 Psychologically and symbolically, Pran fails to achieve the *picaro*'s freedom from social and racial categories. Echoing Kunzru's avowed desire to "praise the unformed and fluid", the impressionist's strategies of empowerment repeatedly end up in failure, Pran's inability to fix his identity resonates with the postcolonial issue of the fluidity of identity.

Resurgence of the colonial world

The material imagination

23 Hari Kunzru explained how he used the picaresque to recreate the colonial world from a satirical point of view, using his character as a pretext:

> I was writing a picaresque very consciously with books on my mind like *Tom Jones*, *Candide*, and Nash's *The Unfortunate Traveller*. The central character is very much this type of hero—an outsider with a skewed pair of eyes looking on a crazy world. And, like the heroes of picaresque novels, he is something of a blank slate; he lacks an identity. So, the colour of the book doesn't come out of any psychological depth of his character, but rather as he moves from set-piece scene to set-piece scene as the pageantry of empire plays out all around him. (Kunzru and Almada 113)

24 In the picaresque, as Guillén argues, there is a "general stress on the material level of existence or of subsistence, on sordid facts, hunger, money. […] Hence a profusion of objects and details. There are no *relicta circunstantia*—no topics, persons, or things unworthy of interest and compassion" (83). Accordingly, Kunzru produces highly detailed descriptions and realistic narrations of momentous natural phenomena and traumatic events, using internal focalization and impressionistic notations to heighten the evocation of the materiality of events. Numerous passages from *The Impressionist* detail bodily functions, physical pain or pleasure.

25 In the section "White Boy", Pran, disoriented and uninformed, discovers the immediate aftermath of the 1919 Amritsar massacre—the internal gaze focuses on details, objects and his sensory perceptions, in the present tense. The narrator then enlarges the perspective and intervenes in the passage to offer a comprehensive evocation of the historical event, from other points of view:

> Pran is left standing by a charred heap of rubble, the ruined shell of the Alliance Bank.
> Terrible things happened here. Horrors. The place bears its memories near the surface, memories of heavy wooden bank furniture dragged out on to the street and doused in kerosene. The image of Mr Thompson, the manager, his screaming face blackening in the flames as he is cremated by the chanting mob. […] All around the city, memories. Burning and looting. After the banks, the post office. The police station. The English shops in the Hall Bazaar. White men beaten to death. Mrs Easdon, the zenana hospital doctor, splashing her face with a bottle of black ink, struggling into a sari while downstairs bottles were smashed in the dispensary and the Anglo-Indian nurses raped. Elsewhere, in the quiet town of Jalandhar, the general's dinner party is interrupted by a telegram. (Kunzru 177)

The picaresque focus on material details and the fluidity of shifting points of view are impressionistic; due to shock, the character's visual perception is disconnected from his ability to interpret phenomena. An analepsis detailing the moment of the massacre foregrounds the visual perception of a secondary character, with a metaphor which creates emotional distance:

> The soldiers knelt and for the briefest moment, like a premonition, there was silence.
> Then, without warning, they started to fire.
> Das saw the first wave of bodies fall, a breath of wind rustling a cornfield. Then he was caught up and pulled away. (Kunzru 177–178)

The impressionistic description of the scene viewed by Pran is accompanied by the narrator's decoding of the events. The cultural references introduced by the narrator—for instance, the toponyms Amritsar (Kunzru 175) and Jallianwala Bagh (Kunzru 178) and the pro-independence slogan "*Mahatma Gandhi ki-jai*" (Kunzru 176)—contextualize the story and heighten the reader's impression that the story is colliding with history. The micro-narrative about a white woman hurriedly trying to protect herself against Indian rapists by wearing a sari and darkening her complexion echoes the rape endured by Pran, also disguised in a sari (Kunzru 86), during the previous section.[11] The motif of rape also works as an intertextual echo to Mutiny Novels, a sub-genre of Anglo-Indian historical fiction set during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, in which many stories of interracial disguise are to be found in the context of violence against women. Among common tropes of the Mutiny Novel, Jaine Chemmachery highlights the Gothic combination of sensationalism, "excess in representation and graphic detail", with the motif of unspeakable horror, "[constructing] the event as both horrific and impossible to narrate" (7). The intertextual resurgence of this colonial genre helps the reader interpret the scene of violence witnessed by Pran in Amritsar as a cornerstone in the history of modern India, but the ideological reversal between colonialist Mutiny Novels and *The Impressionist* leads us to understand in a different light Indian acts of violence against British representatives of the Raj.

History and memorialization

The Impressionist does not use trivial details and material perceptions only as tools for building historical realism. The novel's focus on materiality also participates in the creation of a literary site of memory. Pierre Nora's concept of "*lieux de mémoire*" considers the crystallization of memory around an entity which has become a

symbolic element of the memorial heritage of a community. Historical novels certainly entail both a reconstruction and a commemoration of history, becoming sites of memory if they reach a significant audience, as Kunzru's novel did. Following Nora's typology, Kunzru's approach of the historical novel can be seen as modern and polyphonic, in the sense that it is an "attempt to write a history in multiple voices. […] a history less interested in causes than in effects; less interested in actions remembered or even commemorated than in the traces left by those actions and in the interaction of those commemorations" (Nora xxiv). In this perspective, Pran's status of *picaro* enables Kunzru to represent the violence of the 1919 massacre and to question the ways in which it can be memorialized. As Maëlle Jeanniard du Dot explains:

> […] through Pran's gaze, the crumbling of imperial power is made visible and observable, whereas he "hurries past" the place where Indian protesters were killed. […] the fires of the riots and of the massacre convey their own erasure, leading to memories that are "near the surface" yet require the active observation of traces in order to be excavated. (96–97)

27 The *picaro*'s agency is limited, but his ability to see and remember leads to a resurfacing of past events, particularly of traumatic scenes. Taken as a rewriting of *Kim*, Kunzru's novel appears strikingly explicit: mentioning and describing the violence of the British Raj constitutes a response to Kipling's choice to suppress and ignore such events in his idealized vision of the colonial situation.

28 It seems particularly apt that the 1919 massacre is evoked in a scene set on the location of the massacre, but a few days after it. The process of resurgence is shown to arise from the material traces left behind and Pran's discovery of Jallianwala Bagh transforms the text into a site of memory of colonial violence, that needs to be acknowledged as such. The text shifts from historical narrative in the preterit ("Soon bodies were strewn over the parched brown grass. That was how it started") to the present tense of memorialization on the next line: "Gradually the city walls materialize through the heat haze" (Kunzru 176).

29 This process is contrasted to other modes of memorialization in the novel. From the perspective of the *memsahib*s who managed to escape, the events of Amritsar are interpreted in teleological and patriotic terms: "something in these memsahibs has been elevated by their plight. It connects them to history, to their grandmothers of the Mutiny, to the symbolic destiny of the Englishwoman in tropical climes, which is to make do, to endure" (Kunzru 183). The heroization of suffering colonial representatives is another common trope of the Mutiny novel, which expresses the ethos of the Anglo-Indian social group in which Kipling was raised. By contrast, Pran's sufferings remain individual, unheroic, and useless in his search for a community.

30 When Pran studies in England as Jonathan Bridgeman, the narrator playfully alludes to another missed opportunity: while he could have been considering the meaning of history and the dynamic notions of individual and national identity, his professor only presents a conventional view of English history through pageantry and essentialist generalizations:

> His place in the history sixth could have been useful, allowing him to add a diachronic understanding of his subject (Englishness) to the synchronic. But in the sleepy classroom of Mr Fox, pipe-smoker and Sunday painter, history is not so much about change as eternal recurrence. The boys are taught to trace the destiny of their island through a series of devotional tableaux, jewel-like moments which reveal essences, principles, axioms drawn out of race and blood. (Kunzru 307)

This aestheticization of England, shown to be idealized, ahistorical and eternal, evokes stereotypical Orientalist images. The text thus criticises historians like Mr Fox for considering history as passive and repeated remembrance. Hari Kunzru's novel aims at a more ambitious, active process of memorialization. Writing *The Impressionist* as a literary site of memory, Kunzru participates in the postcolonial movement foregrounding the decolonial impact of bearing witness to past colonial societies. He has thus managed to respond to postcolonial needs and create an accessible story that renews and subverts the traditions of 19th-century historical fiction.

Conclusion

31 Hari Kunzru's rewriting of Rudyard Kipling's novel plays on the readers' expectations, repurposing the picaresque and the popular adventure tale in the postcolonial context. The social pressure of the colonial context on a picaresque character is analysed in both novels, which use fiction and the motif of identity changes to engage with the readers' fantasy of escaping the limitations of constrained identities. The postcolonial specificity of Kunzru's version of the tale of the colonial *picaro* entails a materialist approach of history and a powerful discussion of imperial violence precedingly suppressed by Kipling.

32 Despite paying homage to the traditional genres of the picaresque and the historical novel, *The Impressionist* can be seen as an example of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in *Poetics of Postmodernism*. Indeed, the novel both parodies the grand narratives of the British empire produced in the 19th century, that are its main intertexts, and offers a resurgence of those texts. Its play on intertextuality and its conscious confrontation of history with metafiction suggest that it challenges literary canons from the inside.

33 Because Kunzru merges a historical approach with the picaresque, the shift towards allegory in the final section of the book finds its place in this discussion of memorialization. Pran is taking part in a British anthropological expedition studying the Fotse society in Africa, when he undergoes a crisis, abandons his scientific activity and again changes his identity. The scene of Pran's scarification at the hands of a sorcerer is intended to end his infinite search for identity, "orienting him, linking him irrevocably to the time and the place these marks are being made, so that wherever he may drift or fall asleep, he will always be in relation to this instant" (Kunzru 461): the scar is called a "braille of scar tissue" (Kunzru 465) in the final paragraph, signalling the crucial association of materiality and text. Like a scar, the novel acts as a form of memorialization of past violence, whose resurgence determines the subject's identity.

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NOTES

1 The character of Strickland, introduced by Kipling in several short stories and in *Kim* as one of the young spy's teachers, is an undeniable ancestor of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, both for his predisposition for disguise and for his qualities as a virtually unofficial detective, on the fringes of regular administration, wandering freely among the local population.

2 The phrase "Great Game" refers to the Anglo-Russian rivalry in central Asia and to the diplomatic, military and intelligence actions conducted in that context. See P. Hopkirk, *Quest for Kim. In Search of Kipling's Great Game* and T. Ter Minassian, *Sur l'échiquier du Grand Jeu. Agents secrets et aventuriers (xvx^e^-xxi^e^ siècles)*.

3 The term "subaltern" refers to the lower social classes and those displaced to the margins of a society; in the colonial context, a subaltern is a native person subordinated due to their community, class, caste, race, ethnicity, or gender. The field of Subaltern Studies is a branch of postcolonial theory aiming to reveal the suppressed history of the subalterns of empire. G. C. Spivak explained that contrary to other oppressed classes, the subaltern is silenced, has no history and is thus

prevented from collectively organizing. See G. C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*; and I. Merle, "Les *Subaltern Studies* : retour sur les principes fondateurs d'un projet historiographique de l'Inde coloniale".

4 Giving examples of appropriation of English by Indo-Pakistani writers, Muhammad Safeer Awan lists Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Ahmed Ali in the colonial period, and Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh, in the post-1947 period. Among their strategies of appropriation and indigenization of English, he lists "glossing, untranslated words, syntactic fusion, code-switching, vernacular transcription, lexical innovation, translation equivalence and contextual redefinition" as directly inspired by Rudyard Kipling's writings (Awan 4).

5 In *The Impressionist*, the term Anglo-Indians means "Eurasians" and does not refer to the English who have settled in India as in Kipling's stories.

6 "The *picaro* […] observes a number of collective conditions: social classes, professions, *caractères*, cities, nations. This rogues' gallery has been a standing invitation to satire. And, of course, to comic effects. […] Let us not forget that the *picaro* himself is the narrator and the satirist. As a 'half-outsider', his moral credentials are equivocal, though not his expert sense for fraud and deception" (Guillén 83–84).

7 On Rudyard Kipling's structural use of micro-narratives, see É. Raimbault, "Invention d'un espace textuel et littéraire", in *Le géomètre et le vagabond*, pp. 239–242.

8 *Heart of Darkness* is an explicit intertext of Kunzru's. The metaphor appears in this famous passage: "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. […] True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names; It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery —a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" (Conrad 8).

9 Quoted in M. Jeanniard du Dot, p. 48.

10 "Endotic" describes something that is banal and familiar, as opposed to exotic.

11 In the section "Rukhsana", Pran is held captive in the zenana of the palace at Fatepur. The prince offers him to the British Major to be raped, so as to

blackmail the Major to forward a political plot (Kunzru 92).

ABSTRACTS

English

Hari Kunzru set his first novel *The Impressionist* (2002) in the colonial period and played with imperial intertexts. By starting his historical novel with an epigraph from Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim*, Hari Kunzru explicitly acknowledged that *The Impressionist* is a rewriting: not only does the character of Pran share many of Kim's characteristics, but as *picaro*-types they also both indicate a generic approach to travel narrative that is specifically picaresque. Pran's trajectory in the 1920s echoes Kim's search for his true identity. A half-outsider, Pran is the offspring of a British colonial surveyor and an Indian woman, raised as if he were a high-caste Hindu until his mixed origins are dramatically revealed and he is cast away as a stranger by his Hindu family. Facing many hardships and bearing witness to historical events, the orphaned youth moves through space and up the social scale, trying to find his place in India, in England and finally in Africa, by impersonating successive identities. With Pran's story Kunzru repurposes Kipling's dynamic motifs of travel, hidden identity and self-definition, bringing to the fore issues of mimicry and hybridity in a book which reworks *Kim*'s episodic and open-ended structure. This paper considers how Kunzru's rewriting of Kipling conveys his interest in the postcolonial questioning of stereotypes and social constructs: Kunzru makes the colonial world reappear in its materiality, developing Kipling's material imagination to even greater lengths by including explicit scenes of violence through a profusion of details having to do with objects and the body. Kunzru starts a dialogue between *Kim* and his novel, between satire and moments of pastiche, leading to a consideration of postcolonial identity that goes beyond issues of inclusion. The novel subverts the grand narratives of the British empire and offers a resurgence of memory. Associating materiality and text, *The Impressionist* acts as a form of memorialization of past violence.

Français

Hari Kunzru situe son premier roman, *The Impressionist* (2002), dans la période coloniale et joue avec les intertextes impériaux. En commençant son roman historique par une épigraphe du roman *Kim* (1901) de Rudyard Kipling, Hari Kunzru reconnaît explicitement que *The Impressionist* est une réécriture : non seulement le personnage de Pran reprend-il de nombreuses caractéristiques de Kim, mais en tant que *picaros*, ils témoignent tous deux d'une approche générique du récit de voyage spécifiquement picaresque. La trajectoire de Pran dans les années 1920 fait écho à la quête de Kim pour sa véritable identité. Pran est le fils d'un géomètre colonial britannique et d'une Indienne. Il est élevé comme s'il était un hindou de haute caste jusqu'à

ce que ses origines hybrides soient dramatiquement révélées et qu'il soit rejeté comme étranger par sa famille hindoue. Confronté à de nombreuses épreuves et témoin d'événements historiques, le jeune orphelin évolue dans l'espace et parcourt l'échelle sociale, essayant de trouver sa place en Inde, en Angleterre et enfin en Afrique, par le biais d'identités successives. Avec l'histoire de Pran, Kunzru reprend les motifs dynamiques du voyage, de l'identité cachée et de l'autodéfinition de Kipling, mettant en avant les questions de mimétisme et d'hybridité dans un livre qui retravaille la structure épisodique et ouverte de Kim. Cet article examine comment la réécriture de Kipling par Kunzru traduit son intérêt pour la remise en question postcoloniale des stéréotypes et des constructions sociales : Kunzru fait réapparaître le monde colonial dans sa matérialité, développant encore plus l'imagination matérielle de Kipling en incluant des scènes explicites de violence, via une profusion de détails liés aux objets et aux corps. Kunzru entame un dialogue avec *Kim*, entre satire et pastiche, qui débouche sur une réflexion sur l'identité postcoloniale qui dépasse les questions d'inclusion. Le roman subvertit les grands récits de l'empire britannique et propose une résurgence de la mémoire. Associant matérialité et texte, *The Impressionist* constitue une forme de commémoration de la violence passée.

INDEX

Mots-clés
Kunzru (Hari), Kipling (Rudyard), picaresque, littérature postcoloniale, intertextualité, mémoire

Keywords
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