Introduction

When during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods (roughly 1880–1914) the British Empire was still growing towards its largest territorial extent, an interesting trend could be observed in English fiction: narratives emerged in which occult forces help the colonised turn the tables on the British coloniser. This reversal of domination is sometimes only half-realised, as in narratives telling of occult phenomena following characters from imperial settings home to Britain. In Arthur Conan Doyle’s story “The Brown Hand” (1899), for example, an Anglo-Indian doctor who has returned to Britain is haunted by the ghost of an Afghan whose hand he had amputated. In “The Ring of Toth” (1890) and “Lot No. 249” (1892), Egyptian mummies come to life at the Louvre and in the rooms of an Oxford student.\(^1\) Inexplicable curses, demonic possession and ghostly visitations threatening to undermine British control of the colonies are the ingredients of a great number of tales.

At the other end of the spectrum are narratives that imagine reverse domination as full-blown reverse colonization, i.e. as invasion of Britain by the colonised who now rule and exploit the Britons. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* belongs to these narratives. The protagonist, described as the last of a conquering race, is transferred to London and threatens to create a new and ever-growing circle of semi-demons enslaving Britain’s native population.\(^2\) Eitan Bar-Yosef has analysed reverse colonization in H. Rider Haggard’s novel *She* (1887) in which the African Queen Ayesha plans to pillage London and depose Queen Victoria, and in E. Nesbit’s *The Story of the Amulet* (1906) in which the Queen of Babylon invades London, feeds the hungry masses and butchers the members of the stock exchange.\(^3\) Reverse colonization also occurs in Rudyard Kipling’s early fiction (“The Mark of the Beast,” “At the End

---

of the Passage,” *The Light that Failed*), in Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories (*The Sign of Four*, “The Crooked Man”), in H. G. Wells’ science fiction tales (*The Time Machine, The War of the Worlds*) and in many of the adventure novels of G. A. Hope, Henry S. Merriman and John Buchan, as Stephen D. Arata has shown.\(^4\)

Patrick Brantlinger has counted these narratives of reverse domination\(^5\) amongst what he calls ‘imperial gothic’. According to Brantlinger, the “three principal themes of imperial Gothic are individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world.”\(^6\) Late Victorians’ fascination with the occult had roots in the prevailing and restrictive world view of scientific materialism and positivism which led them to search for new sources of faith in telepathy, séances and psychic research.\(^7\) The search also led to the far reaches of the Empire, where strange gods and “unspeakable rites” still had their millions of devotees. Publication of Madame Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* in 1877 marks the beginning of this trend, and the stunning success of Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879) suggests the strength of the desire for alternatives to both religious orthodoxy and scientific skepticism. For the same reason, A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) was widely popular, as was his earlier *The Occult World* (1881).\(^8\) While both imperialism and occultism functioned as *ersatz* religions in times of increasingly dominant scientific explanations of the world and the declining authority of Christianity, Brantlinger argues that their fusion in imperial gothic precisely at the climax of the British Empire represents something different from a search for new faiths: it expresses anxiety over a possible decline of the Empire and over how easily civilization can turn into barbarism, and domination into powerless-\(^9\) even while some of the narratives in question end with a restoration of order. Stephen Arata has argued that while the “fear is that what has been represented as the ‘civilized’ world is on the point of being colonized by ‘primitive’


\(^5\) The phrases “reverse domination” and “reverse colonization” have the unfortunate echo of “reverse discrimination” and “reverse racism” – phrases that are used by people who are actually participating in racist violence, whether physical or symbolic, to legitimate claims to being targeted. I want to state that I use the phrases “reverse domination” and “reverse colonization” because they describe the power dynamics imagined in the texts more precisely than others. I do not support claims of “reverse discrimination” and “reverse racism” made by participants in racist violence.


\(^7\) Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 228.

\(^8\) Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 228.

forces,” late Victorian and Edwardian reverse colonization narratives are “also responses to cultural guilt. In the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms.”

According to Eitan Bar-Yosef, these narratives suggest that “racial and moral decline made the nation vulnerable to attack by forces whose brutality was merely a monstrous reworking of Britain’s own imperial practices.”

If we make a leap of a hundred years to the period from the late 1980s to the present – the period in which reverse domination narratives reappear – historical phenomena of imperialism have changed dramatically in the wake of the shifting geopolitical situation. The British Empire imploded after World War II. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the decolonizing movements had led to the liberation of almost all former colonies and a capitalist globality. Political scientists and political philosophers as different as Francis Fukuyama on the one hand and Toni Negri and Michael Hardt on the other have described the end of the Cold War as a globalization of capitalism. Yet imperialism survived in the guise of “informal imperialism” (Robert C. Young) that does not rely on the physical and administrative means of subjugation that characterised the colonialism of much of the twentieth century. Cultural imperialism, often ascribed to the United States, is at play here, but as its synonym ‘Coca-colonization’ suggests, economic dominance has been the sole force behind informal imperialism. A significant change that the globalization of capitalism has brought in the late twentieth century is the rise of new centres of economic dominance outside Euro-America: Asia’s financial and manufacturing capitals and – due to their near-complete control of oil prices – the Gulf States. The China that Marx and Engels described in their time was still the object of informal imperialism. In recent decades, it has made full use of the political force of its competitive commodity prices.

Until now, critics concerned with literature written by and about Western migrants have focused on texts that repeat the perspective of colonial narratives in the tradition of Flaubert, Conrad and Kipling. Bruce Robbins, for instance, has

14 Young, Empire, Colony, Postcolony, 117–134.
15 “The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians‘ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It [. . .] creates a world after its own image.” Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, Manifesto of the Communist Party (New York: International Publishers Inc., 1948), 13.
shown how such narratives import the hegemonic perspective to Africa and Asia, render the Western self superior to the exotic other while the east serves as a scene of spiritual or erotic self-exploration. Critics such as Caren Irr have focused on recent ‘world novels’ such as Aleksandar Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* that feature multi-stranded narration, broad geographical reach, cosmopolitan ethics, multilingual sensitivity, a renewed commitment to realism and mostly American protagonists engaged in picaresque travels. James Annesley, Stephan Besser and Yra van Dijk have read novels about Western migrants as ‘fictions of globalisation’ that imagine global consumer capitalism and rework contemporary discourses and debates around globalization by having their characters travelling to the Middle East experience alienation and failure.

What is missing, I argue, is an account of the revival of the reverse domination narrative among recent British and American fiction about Western migrants. Examples include Paul Theroux’s *Kowloon Tong*, Lawrence Osborne’s *Ballad of a Small Player*, Hilary Mantel’s *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* and Dave Eggers’ *A Hologram for the King*. Whereas nineteenth and early twentieth century reverse domination narratives featured an invasion from the periphery to the imperial centre, recent instances of the genre feature the migration of professionals from the Global North to the new economic centres in the Global South and the subservient status of these professionals in former colonies or spheres of influence. Gothic elements underpin this reversal of power. While the narratives from a hundred years ago perform an uncanny mimicry of colonial tropes of invasion and appropriation by the coloniser, the mimicry performed by recent reverse domination narratives models itself on the marginalised figure of the migrant from the Global South in a hegemonic Northern culture, such as Caribbean and Pakistani migrants in Britain. The Western migrants in the Middle and Far East are shown in roles formerly reserved for the migrant from the Global South even while they fill qualified positions in the Asian or the Gulf States’ labour market – and even as the novels betray a sense of presenting characters who are similar to, but not quite the same as colonised nineteenth century Indians or twentieth century Congolese. The European, US-American and Canadian

migrants to the South remain citizens of those nations that are still global centres of informal imperialism. The narratives about their ordeals in the South are, ultimately, *neo-imperial* gothic: an update of the narratives of reverse domination from the late Victorian and Edwardian periods which drew on gothic elements. Typically, the Western migrants of these recent narratives come to the Global South intending to stay for a limited time. They realise late that they have in fact migrated for good and have somehow become uncannily similar to migrants who have made their way from the South to Europe and North America.

The literary models for these narratives are not typical colonial genres such as tales of adventure and quest, the colonial pastoral, or colonial historical fiction which underpin late Victorian reverse domination narratives. Neo-imperial gothic narratives do not even exhibit any awareness of their Victorian forerunners. What has given the genre of the gothic narrative of reverse domination a new lease on life is its adoption of the figure of the migrant from more recent postcolonial fiction concerned with the experiences of first-generation migrants, most often of alienation and subalternity, and tinged with a strong sense of the differing national cultures of home and abroad. Examples of this kind of postcolonial migration narrative are especially the novels of authors such as V. S. Naipaul, Jean Rhys, Caryl Phillips, Jamaica Kincaid, Ben Okri, Sam Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming and others: authors belonging to the first generation of “postcolonial” writers not because they necessarily wrote all their works after liberation, but because they wrote with an attitude of resistance to colonization. The novel has been these authors’ preferred literary form – arguably because it takes a central place in the canon of the British Empire which postcolonial writers have sought revise by “writing back to it,” as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have argued. Yet arguably also because the novel form is particularly good at conveying experience and subjectivity over time, as David Lodge has argued. Experiences of migration and the impact of these experiences on migrants’ subjectivities is what the above-named authors describe.

Recent reverse domination narratives mimic selected tropes of these postcolonial migration novels such as migrants’ “experiences of cultural exclusion and

---

22 “The novel is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time.” David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 10.
division” and their “resist[ance to] colonialist perspectives.” They ignore many other tropes of postcolonial migration novels, however, especially the consciousness that migration from the former colonies to the colonial centre is causally related to the inverse European colonialist expansion that preceded it. The recent narratives of reverse domination cannot themselves be called postcolonial. By the standards of the genre theorists David Fishelov and Alastair Fowler, they can however count as instances of the reverse domination narrative and of the migration narrative because they exhibit essential features of both. All instances of a genre exhibit some thematic (and sometimes also formal) qualities essential to the genre such as plot structures, settings, stock characters and character constellations, atmospheres, expectable actions and outcomes, and linguistic particularities. Single instances of the genre hardly ever exhibit all of these qualities at the same time. Fishelov and Fowler submit that genres are defined by a small number of necessary criteria shared by all instances of the genre, and a larger number of typical, though optional criteria, so that some instances are more prototypical of a genre than others.

Contemporary reverse colonization narratives’ mimicry of postcolonial fiction concerned with the experiences of first-generation migrants has an uncanny effect on Western readers because it suggests that subaltern migrancy associated with strangers is now becoming an experience familiar to Westerners; and, on the literary level, because postcolonial fiction concerned with the experiences of first-generation migrants is now appropriated by and suggested to be appropriate to the West. The focus tends to be on local value systems being imposed on and clashing with diasporic Western systems of value. The language in which twenty and twenty-first century authors of reverse domination narrative write is often a thematic concern in the narratives, where the supposed European lingua franca occupies minority status as opposed to Arabic, Mandarin or Cantonese. As in postcolonial writing, language is an embattled ground of asymmetric power relations.

The uncanny is an important gothic element in recent reverse domination narratives. It expresses fears of decline and marginalization as did the imaginings of reverse domination around the end of the nineteenth century. This is the

23 Boehmer, Colonial & Postcolonial Literature, 3.
25 The gothic in recent narratives of reverse domination has little in common with what critics have called “postcolonial gothic” as a subversion of Enlightenment rationality associated with the coloniser (for ex. Andrew Smith and William Hughes, “Introduction: The Enlightenment Gothic and Postcolonialism,” in Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre (Basingstoke:
perspective I take in the following readings. The recent gothic narratives of reverse domination do not mirror actual socio-economic trends. While responding to real socio-economic trends, they are principally fantasies. These fantasies and their gothic elements such as the uncanny testify to Western anxiety of losing economic, political and cultural influence to cultures that, formerly seen as marginal, are now perceived as threats to global dominance.

**Paul Theroux, *Kowloon Tong***

Particularly since the end of the Cold War in 1989, a large number of multinational companies with headquarters in Asia have appeared on the global economic scene, some of them ‘born global.’ With the rise of companies such as Samsung in South Korea, Mobile in China, and Reliance Industries Ltd. in India the multinational label has ceased to be monopolised by the West. By 2007, Asian “emerging market” countries had 70 corporations in *Fortune’s* ranking of the world’s largest corporations. A decade earlier it had only been 20. The rapid growth of some Asian economies, together with the stalling and recession of Western economies, has meant that increasing numbers of Western migrants have arrived in countries such as Korea, Taiwan and especially China, which now hosts the second largest number of Western expatriates after the USA.26 At the same time, large numbers of Western migrants have moved to Asia on their own initiative, finding employment as teachers of English as a foreign language, because the Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, Thai and Cambodian middle class (to name only some rising Asian economies) strive for proficiency in English in order to attain qualified employment in globally active Asian corporations. Lawrence Osborne, a nomadic novelist who has been attentive to this trend, has a British emigré to Asia, aged around thirty, ruminate in his novel *Hunters in the Dark* (2015):

> English teachers were two a dozen in [Phnom Penh] and most cities like it. They formed a kind of sub-society all over the Far East, a loose confederation of dubious individuals with their own social niche and their severe reputation for being mangy and broke [. . .]. Several

---


of his friends at college had gone on to pursue that way of live in places where the koel birds sing and nothing more was ever heard of them. The tropical English teacher in his cargo shorts and flip-flops and his bad haircuts, saving his pennies by eating local every night [...].

Like other diasporas around the world, the new Western migrants are a diasporic minority in strong national cultures that regard them as a mobile workforce. The new Western migrants differ from earlier ones in number but also, more significantly, in not being received as representatives of an aspired-to Western modernity, and in being expected to quickly adapt to local mentalities. U.S.-American migrants to China reported in 2008 that their expectations of the country were not at all met by what they found when taking up work in a Chinese firm. The rampant consumerism, rising middle classes and rush to modernise they found in China did not make China more “Western” to them. Chinese business practices and cultural norms struck them as very different from those of Western cultures. Understanding the behaviour and actions of their Chinese employers and fellow workers was challenging not only because of language barriers but because of foreign cultural norms which they were expected to adapt to.

In the following I will discuss an example of reverse domination fiction that holds a prominent place in the genre because it addresses a key event in East Asia’s rise to global power and arguably a turning point in world history: Britain’s handover of its colony Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. The novel is Paul Theroux’ *Kowloon Tong*, published in the year of the handover and set in the months before it. The handover is both symbolic of the shift of power between the former European coloniser and China, and coincides with China’s spectacularly rising economic prowess. In this novel, I will argue, the shift from the Westerner’s position from hegemon to service provider, and from following the models of colonial to postcolonial fiction, is not an accomplished fact but occurs as the plot develops. *Kowloon Tong* concerns a factory called Imperial Stitching in the Hong Kong neighbourhood of Kowloon Tong, owned by the British Neville “Bunt” Mullard. Bunt receives an offer to acquire it from the sinister Mr. Hung, who turns out to be an officer of the People’s Liberation Army. The English factory owner tries to resist but Mr. Hung, using threats and blackmail, eventually pushes Bunt out of Hong Kong. An allegorical fantasy of the political events to come, the tale imagines a dramatic end to colonial co-existence in the form of a

---

hostile takeover. As will become clear, the novel’s lurid plot and flat characters exemplify typical features of recent reverse domination narratives with little ambivalence.

The novel’s recapturing of the life of Bunt’s mother Betty, and of the fate of Imperial Stitching, tells a story of economic and moral decline. Living in what Betty Mullard calls “Albion Cottage,” with the Queen’s portrait on the wall and the house full of British-made appliances no longer manufactured, she seems herself an anachronism like Imperial Stitching. The factory was founded in 1950 by Bunt’s father with the help of a Chinese business partner who had fled from the mainland. In its heyday, the factory’s specialization in uniforms guaranteed that the colonial administration would order in large quantities. The Mullards have led a colonial life of ease since, with Chinese servants and the conviction that “nothing would change for either of them, ever. Their lives were fixed for good as master and servant.” They are unable to understand Cantonese because they never needed it. A first irritation, prophetic of greater change, occurred in 1967 when Imperial Stitching’s name was torn off the factory roof: during the Cultural Revolution, pro-communist protesters in Hong Kong rebelled against the city government and British colonial rule. During the following decades, the factory shrank because Chinese mainland producers offered their textiles at better prices. Margaret Thatcher’s announcement in 1984 that Hong Kong would be handed over in 1997 announced the next step downward.

The private life of Bunt Mullard mirrors the decline of Imperial Stitching. Compensating the factory’s loss of significance and being commandeered by his mother, he exploits factory hands who cannot afford to push him away. Mei-Ping, one of Bunt’s workers, is coerced into being his lover. Bunt spends his breaks with Kowloon’s prostitutes. Taught by his father to ask for a gweilo policeman, i.e., a British one, when calling the police, Bunt does not hesitate to make use of his at first privileged colonial status at the cost of others.

The novel suggests that though born in Hong Kong speaking his first words in Cantonese picked up from his nannies, Bunt feels a migrant, neither fully British nor fully a citizen of Hong Kong. He self-pityingly uses this condition to justify his behaviour to himself. In rare moments, he becomes aware of his hunger for violent domination: “Bunt often felt like seizing their skinny shoulders and dragging them down, and he hated himself for his demented rapist’s fantasies.” These fantasies are in character with Bunt’s repeatedly mentioned fascination with crime reports in the newspapers mixing sex and crime. Notably, his fantasies of rape follow a discussion between him and his mother on colonialism. She had said about what she calls the “Chinese takeaway:” “You think they’re going to be teaching the British view of colonialism? It will be the official Chinese version of world history. Look at immigration. Who will qualify? Only the people the Chinese want.”

The juxtaposition of Bunt’s violent fantasies with a discussion of who owns the interpretation of British colonialism suggests that Bunt’s disturbing thoughts belong not merely to his individual psychology but are part of the colonizing mindset – an association of colonialism with psychopathology that has been a trope of postcolonial criticism since Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks*. Bunt typifies the last, degenerate colonial and exhibits the essential ‘sickness’ of colonialism without being portrayed as evil, however. It is Mr. Hung, taking over the role of dominator, who is tirelessly associated with greed, sadism and murderousness. Acting as epitome of evil, he exceeds the bounds of psychology and gives the reverse colonization allegorically enacted by him a gothic quality.

I agree with Mary Louise Pratt that particularly Theroux the travel writer has made a career out of saying how horrible the Third World is, but I also agree with Douglas Kerr’s claim that “the best defence of the awfulness of Hung is the awfulness of Bunt.” In *Kowloon Tong*, the turning of the tables between coloniser and colonised means that no party morally maintains the upper hand. Both are compromised by colonial desire. The fact that large parts of the novel are focalised through Bunt means that the reader is served explicit condemnations of the Chinese Hung but must infer Bunt’s awfulness. Yet Bunt’s thoughts themselves demonstrate, rather than cover, the pathologies of his mind corrupted by the same colonizing impulse that drives Hung.

38 Theroux, *Kowloon Tong*, 145.
41 Kerr, “A Passage to Kowloon Tong,” 80.
Beside the supernatural and the sublime, the uncanny is one of the key motifs in gothic fiction. Sigmund Freud defined it as that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar. Simultaneously frighteningly unfamiliar and strangely familiar, the uncanny contributes to gothic fiction’s evocation of terror by undermining the characters’ sense of being at home in the world, but also literally in their domicile. Freud characterises the uncanny as unhomeliness. Homi Bhabha argues that Freud’s notion of unhomeliness “captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world,” and that it is “a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition.” It is precisely a feeling of being without home as a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition that the Mullards’ Chinese opponents instil in them. Before Hung enters the scene, the Mullards’ servant Wang is described as a chilling, threatening presence in their home, looking “even more snake-like when he smiled [. . .]. His laughter was [. . .] even more sinister.” When Bunt’s Chinese business partner, Mr. Chuck, is buried, a train of mask-wearing, wailing figures appears. They are the deceased’s relatives: “They were Chinese, but like monks in white cowls – druidical and threatening, pagans ambushing Mr. Chuck’s Christian burial.” Bunt fears that they will lay claim to a share in the factory.

Mr. Hung lures the Mullards into selling the house in which Imperial Stitching is located, the company that anchors them in Hong Kong. Fred Botting reminds us that through the ages, the motif of the house inherited the function of the castle in gothic fiction:

as both building and family line it became the site where fears and anxieties returned in the present [. . .] By nefarious means Gothic villains usurp rightful heirs, rob reputable families of property and reputation [. . .]. Illegitimate power and violence is not only put on display but threatens to consume the world of civilised and domestic values.

Kowloon Tong follows this prototypically gothic plot. When a generous offer of money does not suffice, Hung resorts to blackmail; he knows of Bunt’s tax fraud, of his visits in brothels and his exploitative relation with Mei-Ping. Forced to sell Imperial Stitching, Bunt realises that Hung’s motives are not merely economic: “Hung

45 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.
46 Theroux, Kowloon Tong, 5.
47 Theroux, Kowloon Tong, 12–13.
48 Botting, Gothic, 2–3.
49 Theroux, Kowloon Tong, 86.
had attached himself to Bunt, who resented him. It was as though, having proven Bunt to be weak, Hung now wanted to insinuate himself further, to exploit him more, to exhibit ownership, to toy with him, to savour the foreign devil’s humiliation.\textsuperscript{50} Having deprived Bunt of his claim to belong by ‘usurping’ his home, Hung sadistically desires to turn the Englishman into a dependent subject. Bunt is forced to interpret each of his steps in relation to his new master. Hung uncannily exhibits the same colonizing turn of mind and its fantasies of suffering as Bunt did before him. The pathological dimension of these desires is brought out when Hung invites Bunt, Mei-Ping and her fellow worker, Ah Fu, for drinks in a bar. Hung, whose tongue turns blue from too much alcohol, forces a piece of jade into Ah Fu’s mouth as if to choke her, finally letting her spit it out. A day later, Bunt receives news that Ah Fu has disappeared. He suspects that she might have fallen victim to a crime committed by Hung who, after eating chicken feet, had said to Ah Fu that he wants to eat her foot.\textsuperscript{51} The novel makes clear that this lurid display of dominance, showing Bunt how powerless he is against Hung’s violation of the women working at his factory, is enabled by economic factors. Selling the factory means also selling the worker Mei-Ping to Hung: if Bunt reported Hung to the police, it would be the end of the deal, and he would lose the factory and Mei-Ping either way.\textsuperscript{52}

The term “mimicry” crops up in the novel precisely when Hung’s display of dominance resembles Bunt’s most closely: both exploit women. When Hung presents Bunt with a check to keep him silent about Ah Fu’s disappearance, Bunt muses: “A Chinese check, like a Chinese everything else, was so much an imitation it was probably unusable, just an exercise in mimicry.”\textsuperscript{53} The choice of vocabulary betrays a strategy that characterises the Chinese Mr. Hung as much as Kowloon Tong’s poetic of reverse domination. Colonial mimicry, Homi Bhabha argues, occurs when colonised subjects imitate and take on the habitus of the colonisers. It derives from the “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”\textsuperscript{54} The colonised mimics are “the appropriate objects of a colonialist chain of command, authorised versions of otherness.”\textsuperscript{55} But by repeating the coloniser with a difference, the colonised are able to resist colonial authority while appearing to submit to it. When the colonised repeat the coloniser with a difference, they performatively question the notions of “essential” or “authentic” identity and allow for a double optic: while colonial

\textsuperscript{50} Theroux, \textit{Kowloon Tong}, 100.
\textsuperscript{51} Theroux, \textit{Kowloon Tong}, 115, 133–135, 159.
\textsuperscript{52} Theroux, \textit{Kowloon Tong}, 216.
\textsuperscript{53} Theroux, \textit{Kowloon Tong}, 155.
\textsuperscript{54} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 122.
\textsuperscript{55} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 126.
mimicry seems derivative of the coloniser’s identity, the so-called original can also appear derivative of its imitation. As colonial mimicry reveals that there is no natural identity, it “reverses ‘in part’ the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the coloniser’s presence; a gaze of otherness.”56 Bhabha links this partiality to metonymy: mimicry is not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically.57 The effect is always uncanny: a return of the familiar in unfamiliar form. Kowloon Tong’s reverse domination narrative adds this uncanniness to its already gothic scenario of the cannibalised Ah Fu. The check presented to Bunt may seem fake to him but in fact metonymically repeats British colonial rule with a difference: instead of applying violence, money and threats are enough to subdue Bunt and enlist Mei-Ping as colonised subject in the service of the new Chinese proprietors.

The novel’s ending underlines this mimicry. As soon as Bunt has finalised the deal with Hung, he is ushered out of a restaurant by Chinese thugs, to be brought to the airport where he is to board a plane never to return to Hong Kong. A memory comes to Bunt of how he used to sack employees: “‘See him out’, Bunt would say, and the man would be propelled like a bundle down the stairs and into the street. That was how Bunt felt now, like a sacked employee.”58 The communist People’s Republic taking over Hong Kong gets rid of surplus labour just as the capitalist Bunt used to. The former British masters become employees who can be sacked and treated like a commodity (“like a bundle”). At no point is Bunt touched or his physical integrity violated. Typical of reverse domination narratives since the end of the bi-polar world order, imperialism is enforced by the workings of capitalism. Whereas until 1989 imperialism could still be considered a process of one ideological system dominating another, recent narratives of reverse domination imagine it as informal, economic imperialism.

As the familiar European colonialism returns with a difference in Chinese domination, mimicry as a desire to conform to the behaviour and norms of the coloniser turns into domination pure and simple. When Bunt desperately continues to play the part of coloniser, the novel suggests that Bunt mimics Mr. Hung, who is in fact in control. As the novel is focalised through Bunt – only a few parts through his mother – the description of events is tinged with Bunt’s horror at a reversal of hierarchies that, to him, is incomprehensible, irrational, demonic. In the twentieth century, gothic fiction has continued to focus on the dark underside

56 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 126.
57 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 128.
58 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 237.
of Enlightenment beliefs in progress, modernization, and free trade through its
dramatizations of “supernatural and natural forces, [. . .] religious and human
evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption.”59 Walter
Mignolo’s The Darker Side of Western Modernity and Achille Mbembe’s Cri-
tique of Black Reason have demonstrated how Enlightenment beliefs served
Europeans in their justification of colonialism.60 To the Mullards, Mr. Hung’s re-
verse domination makes him appear like a devil, a supernatural force turning
them into strangers in their own homes and disrupting the secular Enlightenment
narrative of progress. They can imagine a narrative of progress featuring a Chi-
inese protagonist only as a horror story.

Conclusion

Kowloon Tong illustrates the subversive mimicry of well-known tales of new
homes found and of progress through reason and free trade particularly clearly
by way of its schematic plot and characters. The fact that the novel is only one –
albeit prominent – example of recent reverse domination narratives becomes
clear when we briefly look at Lawrence Osborne’s novel The Ballad of a Small
Player (2014). While gothic narratives of reverse domination comprise novels
about other regions such as the Gulf States, Osborne’s novel is set in Hong Kong
and Macau and exhibits particularly many parallels with Theroux’s. The motto
from Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus prepares the gothic atmosphere:
“Faustus: How comes then that thou art out of hell? / Mephistopheles: Why this is
hell, nor am I out of it.”61 The novel follows an English lawyer, son of a vacuum
cleaner salesman from Croydon to Macau and Hong Kong after he fleeced an
early widow. The man assumes the identity of Lord Doyle, determined to gamble
away his days in casinos. These casinos are fantasy versions of the European cul-
ture he left, with names such as “Greek Mythology” and “The Mona Lisa:” a mim-
icry that, at face value, seems to testify to China’s aspiration to be like Europe, but
is in fact a commodification of European culture for a Chinese version of capital-
ism. Largely alone amongst gamblers from mainland China, Doyle mimics the
master of colonial times (“Lord Doyle” etc.) but finds himself ridiculed in the casi-
os: “I was the only gwai lo there that night, and the regulars who knew me

59 Botting, Gothic, 1.
60 See also Young, Empire, Colony, Postcolony, 97.
61 Lawrence Osborne, The Ballad of a Small Player (London and New York: Hogarth, 2014),
n. pag.
glanced at me with their usual contempt. No matter. I had their measure, the little scum. If I lost again I’d do it with an exceptional indifference that would show them the pecking order of life. The novel combines Doyle’s quest with a ghost story when Doyle meets the haunted call-girl Dao-Ming, whose ghost follows him and guarantees that he wins every bet. While Doyle restores his position of ‘master’ at the gambling table, collecting the chips of the Chinese players, maintaining this position is as hopeless as is Bunt’s in Kowloon Tong. Doyle turns into a puppet manipulated by a Chinese call-girl: a mimic controlled by those he desires to command.

Ballad of a Small Player was published in 2014 when Hong Kong’s “umbrella movement” demanded the right for Hongkongers to choose their own leaders. Since then, and especially after the violent 2019/2020 protests, the People’s Republic of China has cracked down on those who want to maintain Hong Kong’s relative independence. China’s control over the city is now stronger than ever, and Hong Kong’s transformation into an ordinary Chinese economic centre like Shanghai has put Western economic migrants in the city under pressure. According to a survey conducted by the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong in May 2021, more than forty percent of them said they might leave the city due to concerns over China’s imposition of national security laws. But not all of them will leave. While it is not clear how China’s tighter grip on the ex-colony will affect Western migrants, the fact that forty percent consider leaving suggests parallels with the time before Britain’s handover of the colony to China in 1997 when Westerners’ fears of marginalisation gave rise to fantasies of reverse domination.

As the economic hegemony of the West continues to wane and as China is increasingly seeking direct economic confrontation with the United States and Europe, contemporary readers should not be surprised to see the publication of more novels in the vein of Kowloon Tong and Ballad of a Small Player. The fact that China has since the handover of Hong Kong not exhibited colonial desires in as coarse and blatant ways as Kowloon Tong’s Hung makes the continued existence of the genre more rather than less likely, for it bears repetition that the gothic narratives of Western subjects fulfilling seemingly subservient roles in the East haven been imaginations of Western decline rather than documents of socio-economic and geopolitical change. Whereas the narrative imaginings of migration by postcolonial authors have drawn on their personal and/or their parents’ experience and knowledge of migration, the accent of reverse domination novels by

62 Osborne, The Ballad of a Small Player, 36.
Western authors such as Paul Theroux clearly falls on imagining rather than knowing migration. As I have tried to show in this chapter, the genre’s imagination of migration is not fed by lived experience but by Western anxiety over losing economic strength to other regions. There is no reason to expect this anxiety to abate as long as the West has anything to lose.

**Bibliography**


