Rivers of Dayak Dreams: The Aporia of Knowledge and the Melancholia of Race in Three Memoirs about Borneo

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Abstract

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The space and people of Borneo have long been subject to colonial curiosity and exoticism. In and after the age of high imperialism, knowing Borneo's "secrets" and seeing through the mist of its jungles had been the ambition of many an adventurer and ethnographer. This article challenges the dominating power dynamics between the actively observing outsider and the passively observed indigenous by looking at specifically failures in historical endeavors to "know" the island. My data is drawn from two semi-autobiographical novels each by the Chinese Sarawakian author Li Yongping, the Dutch author Michael Perelaer, and a memoir by the indigenous Dayak autobiographer Riska. Their juxtaposition allows an experimental attempt at bringing the fields of Sinophone studies, Dutch colonial literature, and Southeast Asian history in conversation with each other. The result shows that an active field of language and cultural barrier, for which I use the term "aporia", is continuously and consciously maintained by the indigenous communities, resisting imperialist efforts to epistemologically take possession of the island's traditionally secretive and introvert knowledge.

Part I: The Melancholic Memories of Colonizing Borneo in a Dutch and a Chinese Travel Fictions

> "I don't know why I gazed at her, aphonic, that Punan girl……She looks back at me playfully, her eyes filled with an enigmatic smile. For seconds and seconds, I could only hear my own heartbeat…… It took just a trice for her to disappear around the corner of the hill. All of a sudden, her two little ponytails were as if swallowed by the vastness of the virgin jungle. I won't see her again in my whole life. My feet were fastened to that mountain trail for a long time, with my neck and ears poking out to catch any sound of her sandals' movement from a distance. I felt that my heart was lost in sleepwalking. Following her small, floating silhouette, tracing the streams in the jungles, I entered the heart of Borneo." *Source of the Great River,* Li Yongping, 2008[1]

> "It is undeniable that our Europeans had gazed the dear Hamadoe many times with admiration, who so well deserved her name of 'honey-sweet', when she was dressed freely and unhindered in Dayak style, that is, with the beautiful upper body entirely exposed and the rest covered only with a 'saloi' - a short dress that only extends from the waist to the knees. And yet, now that the jewel of feminine beauty was offered to him, Wienersdorf hesitated and was about to stammer an apology, just before Johannes helped him answer the Punan that his friend accepted his marriage offer (for his sister Hamadoe) gratefully, and would consider himself happy to be the beautiful Hamadoe's husband……" *Borneo from South to North,* M. T. H. Perelaer, 1881[2]

The hesitant, demure sharing of a gaze between the Chinese youth and a Dayak Punan girl above was one of the only moments where the reader could find rest from the Li Yongping's overwhelmingly expressive depictions of sexual violence and grotesque racism in his 2008 novel, *Source of the Great River*. Meanwhile, the Western man's accepting of a Dayak Punan girl's marriage offer was effectively the only romantic scene among the sober, collected narration of the 2-volume "ethnographic novel" by Michael Theophile Hubert Perelaer in 1881. These foreign traveler's eroticized amazement with indigenous women is a cliché in the genre of

[1] Li, Yongping, 大河尽头 (*Source of the Great River*), vol. 1, Rye Field Publishing Co., Taipei, 2008, pp. 55-56

Borneo is currently ruled by three states, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. The Indonesian part is called Kalimantan and was historically a Dutch colony. The Malaysian part is divided into Sarawak and Sabah, historically colonized by the British. You need a note about language/translation here, it doesn't seem this book is published in English.

[2] Perelaer, Michael Theophile Hubert, *Borneo van zuid naar noord: ethnografische roman* (*Borneo from South to North*), vol. 1, Elsevier, The Hague, 1881, p. 20

travelogues and travel-fictions, and in both passages we see the archetypal indigenous femininity under the veil of colonial gender power.[3] But in this case the very same woman, silent and perhaps silenced advertently, embodies a medium by which foreign males "knew" the island Borneo in two fictions written in a century-and-a-half apart. At a glance it is a terrible fact that the *same woman* suffers twice: she remained static all this time appropriated as a symbol of the illegibility and the mystery of Borneo. Her conquest, be it via marriage or just an affectionate gaze, metaphorizes a triumph for the outsiders. Thinking in other terms, the sharing of a similar tragedy in fact reveals that common and localized knowledge could be drawn across the thick borders between the literary and ideological worlds each of the two pieces belongs to. By focusing on the contextual and intertextual discourses manifested in these two novels, my thesis will try to put light on various vectors of epistemological and racial agencies in travel writing and the travel fictions as *aporetic* sites of remembering the colonial experience.

Historical Background and Synopses

The concept of Dayak is by definition a "colonial category" as Ann Stoler argues in her essay about the anthropological facet of colonialism.[4] According to Perelaer himself, the word Dayak was an ethnonym initially attributed to the Ngaju people of lower Kapuas, with the root being "dadayak" meaning "limped people", a hypothesis that is popular among "dayakologists" during the 19th century.[5] As expressed by John Bamba, an ethno-linguist of Dayak peoples and himself a Dayak, the term still generates confusion among Dayaks people themselves.[6]

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[3] Dunwoodie, Peter. "Writing the (In)Visible: Exotic and Colonialist Fiction", in *Writing French Algeria,* Oxford University Press, 1998

[4] Stoler, Ann, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule", *Comparative Studies in Society and Histor* Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1989), pp. 134-136

[5] Perelaer, *Borneo van zuid naar Noord,, vol.* 1, p. 149; Low, Hugh Brooke and Roth, Henry Ling, *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo: Based Chiefly on the Mss. of the Late H. B. Low, Sarawak Government Service*, Truslove & Hanson, 1896, pp. 40-41

[6] Bamba, John, ed. *Keberagaman Subsuku Dan Bahasa Dayak di Kalimantan Bara*t (Religions of Dayak Sub-ethnicities and Languages of Dayak in West Kalimantan), Institut Dayakologi, Pontianak, 2008, pp. 1-3

According to Bamba, in the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan alone there are 473 sub-ethnicities of Dayaks, and "although they felt connected to each other, they know surely that they are actually different."[7] Hence, the pragmatic function in the inception of this umbrella term was by no means for clear ethno-linguistic identifications, but only for the sake of legibility for colonial apparatuses. It is essentially synonymous to "the Other", in the sense that the Dayaks are those literally "other than" the identifiable Europeans, Malays, Chinese, Banjars, and Arabs. Hence, throughout the convoluted colonial history of Borneo, including times of domination by the Chinese, Malays, British, Dutch, Japanese, and now the Republic of Indonesia, and under various aliases such as "*lazi*" (C: 拉子) or "*lauzi*" (C: 唠子) by the Chinese, the meaning of "Dayak" remains symbolic of the unknown, the *Other,* the impenetrable "essence" and subject of anthropological explorations.

One of the few actually shared traits among Dayak peoples is the significance of rivers in their daily activities: they are the arteries of the island Borneo, linking tribes to tribes, marked territorial boundaries, provide for the diet and irrigation, as well as channel for commerce. The two biggest ones are both called *Kapuas* in Malay and are the main locations of our stories.[8] Our authors, as outsiders, naturally view the rivers as the portal, and perhaps the only one, through which they could access the Dayaks. At the estuary (M: *kuala*) of the rivers, the Dayak identities (Dayak Iban for Li and Dayak Ngaju for Perelaer) are depicted as intermingling heavily with the Malays, practically giving the authors an easier task in their fictive ethnologies: they were both more familiar with Malay languages and customs. As the main characters travel up the rivers, cultural familiarity decreased the further they go, and as they reached the river source (M:

[7] Bamba, John, *Keberagaman Subsuku Dan Bahasa Dayak*, p. xxiv, 1, 2
[8] The great river in Li's novel denotes the Kapuas river that flows through West Kalimantan, while Perelaer mainly talks about the Kapuas river of South and Central Kalimantan provinces nowadays.

dahulu), a particular Dayak group becomes the center of attention in both novels. They are the Dayak Punan. According to Bamba's description in 2008, "the Punans are a sub-ethnicity living in the *Kapuas-Hulu* (source of Kapuas) regency, that is no longer 'foreign' to us…… but many people still believe that they are only an imaginary entity or some kind of legend about Dayaks."[9] In the works of Li and Perelaer, nonetheless, they are *exactly* imaginary entities and legends: they were described as secluded from the outer worlds, deeply spiritual with deities presumably fabricated by the authors, reminiscing (in Li) or proudly practicing (in Perelaer) their headhunting traditions, and are the perfect embodiment of the *noble savage* archetype. Between the "Malayic" Dayaks and the Punans, there are hardly any more information dedicated to identifying each of the Dayak communities in between, further confirming that the Dayaks were reduced to mere symbols in either works.

Source of the Great River is set in early 1960s Western Borneo, where decolonization had seemed to be accomplished by then. The Java-based Republic of Indonesia replaced previous Dutch East Indies authorities and proclaimed sovereignty over the populations that used to be Dutch colonial subjects. Now they were subjects to a new post-WWII world order whose relentlessness matched, if not surpassed the Dutch rule. The author stresses suffering of the island and its inhabitants under neo-colonialism and neoliberalism, depicting saddening scenes of capitalistic abuses of the jungle ecology and racial abuses as well. In the novel, White men were not victims of decolonization at all: they came with renewed colonial élan in research groups, tourist groups, UN groups and NGOs, as the new bringers of civilization to the indigenous. These motifs are likely drawn from Li's personal experiences growing up in 1960s Sarawak, where formal British colonial dominance in fact had lingered longer than the case in Kalimantan.

[9] Bamba, John, ed. *Keberagaman Subsuku Dan Bahasa Dayak di Kalimantan Barat*, p. 255

The author adopts a first-person point-of-view, narrating to an imaginary listener, a teenage Taiwanese girl named Zhu Ling (C: 朱鴒) who "takes interest in exotic stories."[10] It is perhaps safe to assume that the book is written mainly for the audience in Taiwan.

The story itself is simple. A Chinese (Hakka) teenager boy, Yong, from Kuching, Sarawak arrives in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, for a summer reunion with his father's mysterious Dutch friend, Miss Kristien van der Laan (which I appropriate from the original Chinese pseudo-transcription 克斯亭房龙小姐), whom Yong has a keen sexual fantasy about since the beginning. The latter was the daughter of an old business partner of his father since before the Japanese occupation and could be seen as symbolizing the old-fashioned colonialism (I: *Tempo Doeloe*) that the author somewhat reminisce to. She gathers a group of travelers, all White expatriates in the region, to set off on an adventure to the center of the island by sailing in passenger ships along the Kapuas river. Yong, the first-person narrator of the story, was excited in the beginning but was revealed more and more chilling information about Borneo's colonial past and about race and racism. With emotionally charged language, the author depicts the ten-day journey as full of haunting visions of ghosts, nightmares, wet dreams, and frequent scenes of humans going insane. The densely psychological images and descriptions that permeate this novel provides us with a rich field for our affective analysis in this article.

Compared to Yong's journey as a detached tourist on a steamboat, the other novel involves traveling the large island at a much slower pace and in a more immersive fashion. Perelaer's main travelers are two Swiss, Wienersdorf and Schlickeisel, a Walloon (French Belgian, D: *Waal*) La Cueille, and a Dutch-Javanese mestizo Johannes, all serving as mercenaries in the Dutch Royal East Indies Army (KNIL) and are stationed in Banjarmasin in

[10] Li, *Source of the Great River*, vol. 2, p. 194

Southern Borneo in the 1870s. Such a combination seems odd but is understandable since the author, an incumbent lecturer at Leiden University when the novel published, needed to navigate the Dutch government's censorship as he touched upon many sensitive topics, just like his predecessor Multatuli did a few decades before.[11] Hence the title, the author also wrote it with a clear intention of educating the metropolitan public with ethnographic, linguistic and ecological knowledge of Borneo. He writes with rational, patronizing and pedantic language and explains every cultural detail meticulously. The plot begins with the protagonists deciding that their military life was unbearable and against their nationalistic subscriptions (for the Swiss). They planned out their desertion with the ultimate goal of fleeing across the island diagonally on foot, and seeking protection by the British. Despite many setbacks of living the fugitive life, both natural and artificial, they overcame them with relative comfort. An interesting aspect of the plot is that the three-and-a-half White men, in order to deceive pursuing Dutch troops and smooth communication with Dayaks, dyed themselves dark with help of a Dayak friend, and they remained dark and indistinguishable from Dayaks by all parties unless they reveal their real identities. This specific racial *feat,* along with other themes associated with colonialism allow us to ponder the nature of colonial travel fiction writing from fresh perspectives.

Literature as Situated Testimonies of History

Our two novels were written with a large interval of time and disparate literary traditions between them. A comparative research of both will inevitably draw in discussions about the respective literary circumstances under which they were written, as well as the corresponding contexts of their major audiences. Part of the intention of this article lies in the discourse across

[11] Perelaer is indeed comparable to Multatuli in criticizing the colonial government, albeit to different effects. See Dharmowijono, Widjajanti. *Van koelies, klontongs en kapiteins: het beeld van de Chinezen in Indisch Nederlands literair proza 1880-1950*., University of Amsterdam, 2009, p. 149

boundaries between Dutch and Chinese Indies literature.[12] Both works have yet to receive as much academic attention compared to their contemporaries of the same genre, especially Perelaer's writings which are at times dismissed as "armchair (ethnographic) authorship" and "lacking Multatuli's satirical gifts and full of stereotypes".[13] Situated between the rich *Indische Letteren* ("East Indies Letters") tradition flourishing during the height of Dutch imperialism in the *Nusantara* Archipelago, which boasts names like Multatuli, Louis Coupereus, and Marie Dermoût, and the burgeoning "science" of colonial anthropology, Perelaer and his works could be characterized as awkward. While Dutch and American historians have extensively studied the Dutch repertoire of Indies literature, the Chinese-language equivalents remains largely in the shadow.[14] In this case, Li's situation is even more awkward. He was born and raised a colonial subject of the British colony of Sarawak but in *Source of the Great River* his semi-autobiographic protagonist set on a journey on the Dutch/Indonesian side of the border, his knowledge of which was never first-hand. The writing of this certain piece actually took place in Taiwan, many decades after he departed from Borneo, putting additional fog to any effort of untangling his book's political complexities. To help discern how Li's work has been appreciated and critiqued by his audience, I have included my interview with Ms. Pan Zhaoxuan, history lecturer at a Chinese university and a passionate reader of Li's novels.

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[12] The traditional Chinese term for this genre is "Nanyang Wenxue", or "Literature of the Southern Ocean". This term appears to be Sino-centric but is in fact widely used by authors of diaspora origin, while the current, more politically-correct term being "Mahua Wenxue" or "Shahua Wenxue" meaning Malaysian Chinese Literature or Sarawakian Chinese Literature. The term "Indies" is Dutch-centric.

[13] Harrisson, Tom, "Explorations in Central Borneo", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 114, No. 4/, The Royal Geographical Society (1949), p. 131; Winks, Robin W., and James R. James Robert Rush. *Asia in Western Fiction*. Studies in Imperialism. Manchester: University Press, 1990, p. 139

[14] Nieuwenhuys, Robert. *Mirror of the Indies: A History of Dutch Colonial Literature*. Library of the Indies. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982; Groppe, Alison, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China*, Amherst: Cambria Press, 2013

See Wang, Derwei, "原乡想象，浪子文学——李永平论 (*Imagined Land of Origin, Literature of Diaspora: On Li Yong-ping*)", *Jiangsu Social Sciences v. 4* (2004): 101-105

Such awkwardness of the authors themselves are by no means hindrances for our analysis of the myriad of meanings in these works. On the contrary, the value of these novels as "situated testimonies" of the historical and personal circumstances under which they were written, are immense. As Laurie Sears argues in her 2013 book bearing the same title (*Situated Testimonies*), colonial literature, when put under the lenses of psychoanalysis, often times yield unexpected knowledge and insights about the more intimate experiences of colonialism. Drawing from thinkers of the psychoanalytical school, e.g. Jean Laplanche and Karl Abraham, Sears argues that many experiences of the authors personally that were associated with harm often manifested themselves in a postponed state in their literary works, in the forms of trauma, nostalgia, obsessions, and fantasies. [15] Sears also points out that analysis of historical literature in fact offers an approach that detours from the conventional archives' lack of affective and decentralized perspectives. The anthropologist Ann Stoler, in her work *Along the Archival Grain*, also critiqued the censorship and formalities of the rigid realm of documentation in Dutch East Indies and suggested the marginal, traditionally dismissed texts that escaped such realm be paid more attention.[16]

Travel Writing and Imperial Knowledge

In acknowledging the value of intimate, affective knowledge of history, I agree with both scholars. However, in the case of Borneo, where Dutch official archives are scant and Chinese and Dayak archives are nearly non-existent, the dynamic of epistemology is again different from the scenarios of Batavia and Java where Stoler and Sears drew their conclusions. In *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler exemplified the Foucauldian paradigm stressing the importance of

[15] See introduction chapter of Sears, Laurie, *Situated Testimonies: Dread and Enchantment in an Indonesian Literary Archive*, Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.
[16] Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (City: Press, Year), 23.

knowledge's circulation in the policing and ruling of an empire by presenting the sophisticated realm of actions around knowledge among the intellectuals and officials of Batavia.[17] Similar networks could be seen in Sears' analysis of Javanese and Dutch literati circles, eg. the intellectual interactions between Pramoedya and Tirto Adhi Soerjo.[18] On the contrary to these urban and literate landscapes, contemporary Borneo was essentially a vast frontier environment where Dutch, British, and Chinese presence had hardly ever succeeded in protruding into the jungle-clad mountains of the Dayak, the unknown people, rendering Foucauldian models of governmentality largely inept. Instead, I am arguing in this article that a dominant form of colonialism and power projection in Borneo, as revealed in both novels, came via anthropological means of knowledge acquisition. This was not knowledge in the same way that the colonial government learned of radical underground publications, or the colonial subaltern who spread the news of a corrupt official while trying to outmaneuver censorship. In other words, these novels engage with the tradition of travelogues and ethnographers, e.g. Joseph Conrad and Levy-Strauss, as much as with that of critique of the colonial establishment, such as Multatuli or Pramoedya.

"Knowing" the indigenous had been a recurring motif in colonial writing. In this article I will elaborate on how a major signifier of success and purpose in both our novels lies in the characters' knowledge production about the Dayaks, whose "knowing" embodied the ultimate trophy of generations of colonialists in Borneo. The verb "knowing" here is charged with unequal power relations, and is interchangeable at times with other signifiers of power such as "entering", "accessing", "claiming", or "penetrating". Thinking in these terms, the quotes in the beginning of the article manifest the authors' hidden desire for knowledge as a key that allowed

[17] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 8, 34, 67
[18] Sears, *Situated Testimonies*, p. 3-7

intimate access to the native. For Li, the exchange of loving gaze between Yong and the Dayak girl struck home in his quest for "the heart of Borneo". The loss or missing of that moment encapsulates the immense regret and melancholy throughout the book that the protagonist failed to make that contact, or "entrance", to Borneo. For Perelaer, letting a White character marry a willingly Dayak bride symbolizes the success of his imagined penetration of the island, both literally and metaphorically. As aforementioned, Perelaer's transformation of the White European characters by dropping their esteemed racial attributes and "becoming" Dayak also reveals much about this obsession and "impossible mission" of knowing the Dayaks.

The figure of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is perhaps the most well-known literary figure of a White man obsessed with understanding, appropriating, and even representing the natives. Kurtz was an erudite and literarily endorsed young man, with confidence in "knowing" the natives of the Congo river but his lopsided, god-like power led him into a field of confusion as he "penetrated into the heart of darkness."[19] White men like Kurtz appear time and again in Li's novel, and they come under the author's massive caricature about their arrogant assumptions about their knowledge of the indigenous and their unblushing appropriative attitudes toward it. For example, in depicting a scene where a Scottish traveler lay down tired and panting after amusing his group by mimicking exaggeratedly the Dayak war dancing, Li uses highly racist language to expose the utter failure of this attempt at "penetrating into the heart of Dayaks":

> You see Donny with his open and drooling mouth, lowering his large, flaccid, half-bald head, straightening his waist and protruding out his massive buttocks, erecting and exhibiting his 6-feet 4-inches body that is pale from lack of exposure to sunlight. Under the equatorial sun, all his muscles bulge like a floating dead corpse, dotted with freckles like stamens and scarlet pimples emerging here and there. Under the blinding rays reflected by the river, his body appears also like that of an alien, lecherous Apollo that

[19] Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness,* Blackwood's Magazine, 1899

> intruded unknowingly into this realm of Dayaks. After being sodomized by Dayak avengers, this Apollo was nailed to the bank of the great river, on a cross upon piles of grey human bones next to the *Red-haired's Fort*, in the heart of Borneo.[20]

This passage, among many more in the volumes of *Source of the Great River*, shows how Li viewed the long tradition of White men's obsession with imperialistic knowledge of the native as mere embarrassments and only reinforcing the foreign-ness of these intruders. Nevertheless, this dismissive stance against the Whites' ambition by Li is nowhere near a deconstructivist dismantling of the power structure associated with imperial knowledge. Rather, Li reserves the privilege of knowing and interpreting the Dayak for his protagonist, that is his *Self* as a Chinese, confirming the centrality of knowledge acquisition in his novel. The conversations between Dalus Nelson Bihai, a Dayak youth (fluent in English) and the narrator, Yong, feature increasing expressions by the former on how he views the White people with disgust and distrust. But evident from these conversations, Dalus would prefer to *offer* his often times cryptic, hidden knowledge about the secret events of the journey and more importantly, the Dayak's worldview, with Yong on the ground that he was "good-hearted" and "simple".[21]

On the topic of how travel writing exemplified imperial knowledge production, Mary Pratt's eclectic monograph *Imperial Eyes* lends a useful example.[22] Drawing from cases of exploratory traveling and the texts they produced since the 18th century, Pratt argues that colonial travelogues are essential devices in the process of imperial knowledge accumulation. Inequality in access to "knowledge-making" and "knowledge-building" between the West and the *Other* made the travel writings, where definitions and categories and systems were drawn, effectively

[20] Li, Yongping*, Source of the Great River,* Vol. 1, p. 331 Redhead, or Red-haired (Hokkien Chinese: Angmo, 红毛), is a common derogatory term for White people among Chinese in Southeast Asia.
[21] Li, Yonging, *Souce of the Great River,* vol. 2, p. 204-219
[22] Mary Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*

sites of imperialism.[23] In one of her analysis of botanic traveling and recording, she made the clear identification that 'knowledges exist not as static accumulations of facts, bits, or bytes, but as human activities, tangles of verbal and non-verbal practices."[24]

A more recent anthology edited by Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst loosely followed the same framework as Pratt, albeit focusing less on the locus or the perspectives of the *Other*, but on the deeper effects travel writings had on the legitimacy-making processes of imperialism. They argue that the intellectual developments of rationalism and scientism in modern Europe further consolidated the construction of epistemological regimes, or "truth regimes" that in turn contributed to the imperial structures of power.[25] This is useful because Perelaer himself could be situated in the historical movement of scientism and the "scientification" of colonial studies. He tried to establish the fictional rationality and objectiveness in his disciplinary inclination towards the anthropologists, which are clearly shown through his excessively pedantic explanations of indigenous terms and concepts. When challenged, Perelaer had made repeated defenses of his novels' "truthfulness" in his engagements with the audience, despite the obvious irony.[26] Meanwhile, posing as a fervent anti-imperialist that held generally negative attitudes toward Western appropriations of Borneo's cultures, Li tries to tear down the legitimacy of White social scientists whenever he could by showing their utter hypocrisy and evilness in his book. When asked about whether the emotionally-charged narration of Li might be considered "knowledge", my interviewee Ms. Pan again answered that his expressive language and exotic

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[23] Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London; New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 115
[24] Ibid, p. 29
[25] Kuehn, Julia, and Paul Smethurst. *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*. Routledge Research in Travel Writing 1. New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 5, 6
[26] "Boekaankondiging", *Tijdschrift voor Neerland's Indië* jrg 10, 1881 (1e deel) [volgno 2], accessed online from https://www.delpher.nl/nl/tijdschriften/results?query=Perelaer+Borneo+1881&page=1&coll=dts

vocabularies makes one often depend on contexts and imagination to comprehend its meaning, not mentioning objectiveness.[27]

The concepts of "anti-conquest" and "auto-ethnography" proposed by Pratt are also key to understand both our novels. "Anti-conquest" denotes the literary practice of (un)consciously stripping the European of any hostile intentions and make him appear innocent and as victim, all meanwhile destructions are happening. "Auto-ethnography" means the self-explaining effort by indigenous peoples to meet the curiosity of colonialists and to clarify stereotypes that the indigenous are aware of.[28] The context under which *Borneo from South to North* was written largely destined that a racist master narrative was inevitable: the *White Man's Burden* determined the European protagonist had to be righteous and altruistic. The author could be seen, however, making attempts to maneuver around the inclination towards "anti-conquest". This tendency is shown in his move to make all main characters non-Dutch, and thus enabling the utterance of grievances and derisions of the Dutch East Indies establishment from their mouths. By doing this, he allowed the "Self" to be under attack from a strawman *Other*, albeit this *Other* remains under the altruistic doctrine of "anti-conquest."

"Auto-ethnography" originally denotes instances of indigenous people's strategizing within the colonial power structures: by compromising their status to become subject to unequal, ethnographic knowledge-production, they at least negotiated some agency of expression. In the case of the two Borneo novels, I argue that pseudo-auto-ethnography becomes a narrative device with which the authors maintain their legitimacy. The heavy presence of Dayak cultural interpreters and mediators in both works in part demonstrates the authors' lack of confidence in

[27] Pan Zhaoxuan, Transcription from interview on Nov. 5, 2019.
[28] Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London; New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 18, 22, 38

their own grasps of knowledge about the indigenous groups, and often times the Dayak characters bear the main burden of explaining their worldviews to the audience. In the next section I will discuss in more detail the area of insufficiency and inadequacy that lie between the authors' ambition to "know" the Dayaks, and the reality in which they failed at such an endeavor.

Aporias of Translation and Memories

In Vicente Rafael's 2016 book *Motherless Tongues* the author defines the idea of *aporia* as "site that prevents passage, blocks progress, and arrests movement from one place to another." In explaining the meaning of this term, he cites Ancient Greek parallelism between the forbidding, inaccessible and therefore, *aporetic* ocean, and the *aporetic* language employed by disciples of Sophism that denied their critics clear and legible approaches to claim that they understand them, lest argue against them.[29] Drawing from the denying effect of *aporetic* language, Rafael argues that under colonial circumstances, the language barriers and the untranslatable aspects of indigenous languages formed as an *aporia* that blocked imperial epistemological encroachment. In Rafael's book *aporia* is mainly discussed as an active embodiment of indigenous agency and strategizing due to its resistance to imperial knowledge-production. In our texts, where the narratives come from the intruders themselves, the *aporia* could be felt as an impassable block against the authors and their characters. As the characters moved inland from the coastal areas, which was considered "known" to both authors, to the deepness of Borneo, this knowledge and the confidence associated with it diminished. Even though the reader could easily sense the myriad of literary devices with which the authors tried to mask this loss of legitimacy and power, the effect of the *aporia* of untranslatability becomes

[29] Rafael, Vicente, *Motherless Tongues, The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation*, Duke University Publishing, 2016, p. 12

obvious through the linguistic shifts in both novels, exposing the authors' failures in their epistemological ambitions.

Both Li and Perelaer are fluent in Malay, the *lingua franca* of most of the coastal regions throughout the *Nusantara* Archipelago. The experience of growing up in Sarawak, whose estuaries and cities house many Dayak Ibans, must have also granted Li with elementary knowledge of local Dayak Iban languages, which linguistically also fall in the category of Malayic Dayak languages. This is represented in *Source of the Great River* where Li uses, and clearly prefers phonetic transcriptions of indigenous words and speeches whenever he can, sometimes followed by a Chinese paraphrase. Occasionally his transcriptions of Malay words are done in Hokkien Chinese, the topolect prevalent in Southeast Asia and Taiwan, sometimes with antiquated spellings, further impairing his work's accessibility to Mandarin speakers. An example that makes appearance frequently is his transcription of the Malay phrase *kawan bagus,* meaning "good friend(s)", into Chinese characters 胶湾峇固斯, a combination that involves all the mechanisms mentioned above and excessively confusing for un-initiated audience. The interviewed reader of Li, who is not familiar with the Malay language, once said that Li's denial of his readers' access to the Malay words he transcribed suggests his cultural sensitivity, uniqueness, and pride as a Sarawakian Chinese.[30] Nonetheless, this confidence is not sustainable when the author reaches the interior of the island in the second volume, of where his limited cultural and linguistic experience forced him to fall back to the more conventional Chinese "pseudo-translation" in representing dialogues with and between indigenous peoples.[31] Here he discharged his main characters from the burden of *aporia* as a Dayak youth fluent in English

[30] Pan Zhaoxuan, Transcription from interview on Nov. 5, 2019
[31] Li, *Source of the Great River*, vol. 1, pp. 276

appeared as a mediator between the outsiders and the indigenous, contradicting the fact that Dayak itself encompasses many, many linguistic groups that are not at all mutually intelligible, and thus, no interpreter could fill the role(s) throughout the expansive journey.[32] At one point, Li eventually gives in to the linguistic *aporia* on the task of rationalizing the languages of narration: a profound conversation between Yong and a Dayak Kenyah chief (whose language is not Malayic) near the end of the novel is written entirely in Chinese, with no attempt made to denote in which language it *actually* takes place.[33]

The same language barrier permeates the writing of *Borneo from South to North.* Although the novel involves mostly indirect narration of conversations with and among the indigenous, Perelaer's demonstration of his linguistic potency is constant throughout the novel and regardless of the location or linguistic contexts his characters are situated in. Conspicuous about his ethnographic, knowledge-producing intentions, Perelaer peppered his novel proportionately with indigenous terms and pedantic footnotes explaining them to the audience in detail. On the surface, he seems to have succeeded in breaking the linguistic *aporia*. Taking a closer look at the circumstances of the novel's writing, however, generates other conclusions. Written more than two decades after the author's departure from his station of service in Borneo, the novel's factual information could mostly be traced to an earlier book by Perelaer, *Ethnographic Descriptions of the Dayaks* (D: *Ethnographische beschrijving der Dajaks*), published in 1870. In its preface (D: *Voorrede*) we could find some very scant traces of the the ethnographer's personal life:

> From November 1859 to November 1863, I spent four full years in the land of the Dayaks, where I was, in addition to the military command, also charged with the observation of civilian authority. So, I had plenty of opportunity to study that people very closely. In 1863 I was instructed by the Resident of the South- and East-Borneo

[32] Li, "Preface", in *Source of the Great River,* p. 35
[33] Li, *Source of the Great River*, vol. 1, pp. 272-276

> Division to compile an ethnographic description of the Dayaks. But before I could even finish with a small part of that work, I was sent back to Java at the disposal of the Military Department…
>
> But apart from my own observations - everyone who knows about our Colonies knows how difficult it is for us Westerners to penetrate into the inner life of the Colonial subjects - I have found one first and foremost help with the district head of Koeala-Kapuas in the Dajak Kecil Department, the keen Tommonggong Nikodemus Djaja Nagara. I confess that without him, nothing would have come of my labor. He has been my source of information; he always gave me the thread again when I thought I was lost in the maze of legends and traditions. He was able to do that sooner, since he has visited a large part of Borneo, and combines sound intellectual capacities with a fine spirit of observation……But also invaluable notes I have drawn from Hardeland's "Versuch einer Dayackschen Grammatik" and his "Dayacksch-Deutsches Wörterbuch" while my successor, the Lieutenant L.J.F.E. von Ende, 4th class Knight of the William's Military Order, has provided me with valuable contributions…[34]

From these paragraphs it becomes clear that the author's actual living and ethnographic experience was limited to the Dayak Kecil regency of South- and East-Borneo Division, which was close to Bandjermasin, the Dutch administrative center in the area, and home to speakers of mostly Malayic Dayak languages.[35] Living there for four years gave Perelaer sufficient linguistic preparedness for writing about peoples living in the lower Kapuas and Kahayan water basins. But his knowledge of the upriver communities would be at best superficial, exemplified by his admittance of dependence on the Dayak-German dictionaries he mentioned, which in fact was concerned only with the Ngaju Pulopetak language amid the far more diverse pool of languages of Borneo.[36] The novel protrudes into British Sarawak, but the author's understanding about the Ibanic communities there is even more questionable. Hence, one could say that the confidence and legitimacy in Perelaer's ethnographic knowledge-production in *Borneo from South to North* might largely be part of the fiction. The *aporia* of language stands unchallenged, as the author

[34] Perelaer, Michael T. H., *Ethnographische beschrijving der Dajaks*, Zalt-Bommel: J. Noman, 1870, pp. xi-xii
[35] Ibidem p. 4
[36] Low, Hugh Brooke and Roth, Henry Ling, *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo: Based Chiefly on the Mss. of the Late H. B. Low, Sarawak Government Service*, Truslove & Hanson, 1896, pp. 40-41

himself admits in saying that "everyone who knows about our Colonies knows how difficult it is for us Westerners to penetrate into the inner life of the Colonial subjects."

Going a step further, this brief recount of Perelaer's career unveils more information about the psychological factors behind colonial fiction writing. The author's expression of an unfinished inquiry in his ethnographic work in Dayak Kecil, and his distressful statement about the difficulty in knowing indigenous allude to a second interpretation of the term *aporia.* Laurie Sears in her *Situated Testimonies* proposes that *aporia* also exists in writers' recounting of past memories about the colonies across vast spans of time and space. As Sears writes, "the time differential……produce aporias, sources of hesitation or doubt, which arise in the temporal and spatial gaps between life in Indies colonial modernity and life in the metropole."[37] As mentioned previously, Sears draws the connection between the psychoanalysts' idea of a postponed and introjecting psychological effect of traumatic, haunting memories and the reminiscing nature of colonial accounts and fictions. The meaning of *aporia* here becomes entangled with the "disturbances", "secrets", "encrypting", and "incoherence" of memories.[38] Just like the linguistic barrier that kept travel writers obsessed with translation, this psychological barrier haunted the colonial writers with magnified phantoms of regrets, dissatisfactions, and melancholia that they struggled to come to terms with. The fact that during his later career in the metropole Perelaer continued to write two more subsequent novels, in six thick volumes, about adventures in Borneo despite negative public responses to *Borneo from South to North* illustrates the obsession with which he treated the regret that he left in the colonies.[39] In other words, the deserters' fictive

[37] Sears, *Situated Testimonies,* p. 22
[38] Sears, Ibid, pp. 1, 32, 58, 173
[39] See also Perelaer, Michael T. H., *Een Kwart Eeuw tusschen de Keerkringen* (A Quarter Century between the Tropics), vol. 1-4, Elsevier, 1885; and Perelaer, Michael T. H., *Uit de Oude Doos: Sprokkelingen over Neêrlandsch Indië* (From an Old Box, Recollecting the Dutch East Indies), Elsevier, 1882

success to "penetrate into the inner life of the Colonial subjects" was itself a fruit born by the author's mourning over his failure to do so in reality two decades earlier.

The theme of phantoms and haunting is far more prevalent in Li's work, owing partially to his expressive literary style, but also to the author's exposure to the much more complicated living experience as an ethnic Chinese in the age of decolonization and postcolonialism. A particularly significant text that helps us disentangle his life was Li's first publication after his arrival in Taiwan, a short story titled *The Savage Wife* (拉子妇, *Lazifu,* 1972). The simple plot revolves around the sufferings of the Dayak Iban aunt of the Chinese-Sarawakian narrator, both for her gender and for her race. The aunt was married to the uncle of the narrator. Due to strict patriarchal hierarchies within the extended family, the marriage was banished to a distant trading post in rural Sarawak where the couple made a difficult living, and were not allowed to be seen in the family's urban residence in Kuching. When the patriarch eventually died, the narrator and some of his young peers tried to search for the now ageing couple, only to find that the "savage aunty" (拉子婶, *"Lazishen"*) along with her mixed-blood children were brutally abused by the man she was married to, who considered her the source of his miseries.[40] Aside the important revelations this piece sheds on the racist cosmologies previously only known within the circles of Chinese residents in Borneo, the author's emphasis on inaction and apathy on the protagonists' part is equally worth our attention. The narrator, although witnessing all the sufferings of *Lazishen* and at best not agreeing with the racist traditions plaguing the family, did nothing but sighed throughout the story. Within the text of the short story, the author repeatedly condemned and regretted this probably autobiographic, past self of him as cowardice and impotent of

[40] Li, Yongping, 拉子妇 ("Lazifu"), in *Wenxue Zazhi* (文學雜誌), Taiwan, 1972

standing up against the abusive system.[41] Now exiled to Taiwan, his relationship with his past experience living as a Bornean youth involves a noticeable *aporia* of colonial memory by Sears' definition. With Li practically unable to make amendments to his regretful past, the phantom of an abused native woman and the inerasable memories of a powerless Chinese youth haunted his literary life, manifesting in a volatile manner in the grotesque depictions of abuses against the indigenous people and environment in *Source of the Great River.*

Melancholia, Fantasy, and Mimicry of Race

If the barrier of untranslatable languages and the sea of time and space between one and one's memories constitute two central obstacles or obsessions that our authors strived to process in their fiction-writing, the barrier of race signifies an unreachable limit of their effort. In Freudian terms, these *aporias* of languages and memories are sites of mourning: where one makes the effort to identify and process one's loss, and in our case, lack, with the long-term objective being to forget and dispose of the grief from the consciousness.[42] According to Anne Cheng's interpretation of mourning, it consists of "re-killing an object that is already lost."[43] This again alludes to the quotes at the beginning of this article, where the protagonists of both novels *succeed* in making the contact and breaking the *aporia*s with the natives: no matter how superficially, the mourning is done and the obsession resolved. Meanwhile, melancholia is a state that arises when the grief, loss, and disturbances are too difficult to grasp and given up on, so they linger and stay and internalize and haunt. In discerning the psycho-pathological experience of the racial subaltern in United States, Cheng characterizes the state of melancholia with an active agency, as "the cannibalistic melancholic murderously assimilates the other's identity,

[41] Ibidem
[42] Freud, Sigmund, "Trauer und Melancholie" (Mourning and Melancholia). *Internationale Zeitschrift für Ärztliche*, Leipzig and Vienna: Hugo Heller. 4 (6): 288–301, 1917
[43] Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 104

thereby saving and fulfilling the self, even if self-denigration is part of that fulfillment."[44] Facing with the ingrained racial barriers and power structures of racism in the colonies, both our authors, one White and the other not, could be seen engaging in active melancholy of their inability to overcome them. In Li's highly spiritual and metaphoric language, this melancholy manifests in the form of racial fantasies. In Perelaer's more phlegmatic narration, it lives in a reverse case of the colonial *mimicry*, as argued by the Indian postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha.

Making sense of the racial melancholia of being Chinese in a White-dominated, neo-liberal colonial world is a crucial theme in Li's novel. A scene where the author achieves this is when the protagonist Yong unknowingly came across Bapak Aussie (C: 岑爸澳西, literally "Aussie dad") raping a nine-year-old Dayak Iban girl. Aussie is an international lawyer in his 80s and respected for aiding indigenous people in their legal dealings with foreign corporations, who was also loved by the Dayak children for his magic tricks previously in the book. Unsurprisingly he is a White man from Australia.

> 'Bapak, Bapak Aussie, *sakit* (C: 萨唧), it hurts.'
>
> 'Iman, Iman, my little Iban beauty, Bapak loves you. Bapak is going to begin his magic show for just you. His wand is about to enter your little house. Voila! Have you seen anything this big, this thick, this white, this perfect all your life? Hm?'
>
> Uncle Aussie chuckles. Iman ignored him and was only heard shrieking about her pain with her frail, childish throat.
>
> 'Bapak Aussie, *darah* (C: 达拉), blood.'
>
> 'No need to be afraid, Iman, a drop of blood is good for you'
>
> 'Bapak please don't lie to me.'
>
> 'Bapak tricks everybody, but he'll never lie to Iman. After one waving of my wand, and one dropping of Iman's blood, Iman is going to become a great beauty in the next morning. This will be the most exciting and romantic magic show in the whole world. Once Iman turns into a great beauty, Bapak will take her to Australia, and over there she will spend her days like a barbie doll.'
>
> 'Really?…No, please don't Bapak……*darah, sakit*……'
>
> I sat outside the longhouse listening, motionless and unmoved. It finally proceeded to a point that sends my scalp numbing and my back sweating. Abruptly I stood up and darted away from the scene, ignoring the morning moon in the sky, the shadowy ghosts

[44] Ibidem, p. 104

> under the papaya trees, and the pulsing sound of Iman's cries of '*darah*' and '*sakit*' thrown at me like the headhunting daggers of the Dayak drunken with blood. They surrounded me, teased me as if I was a kid, and chased me out of the orchard.[45]

This scene of pedophilic rape and the blatant lying of Aussie, parallels of which to the colonial promise of *mission civilisatrice* is apparent, could indeed by itself viscerally traumatize any spectators. But it is more intimately tied with the author's identities and views about race as the depiction of a spectating Chinese youth metaphorizes the awkward position of the Chinese in the colonial society as a third wheel, disrupting the patriarchal, binary racial relationship between the hegemonic and the subaltern. The disruption and awkwardness made Yong, rather than the perpetrator Bapak Aussie, insecure and uncomfortable. The author's anti-imperialist posture makes a 180-degree turn from that of confident and condescending, as exemplified earlier in the caricature of Donny, etc., to the extremity of self-consciousness and inferiority. In Cheng's terms, the constant grief of the indigenous female, as have been exemplified also in my earlier passage about his short story *The Savage Wife*, had become "internalized" in Li's own system of discerning race and thus stopped him from conducting the "mourning" with success. What is more, Yong's inaction, silence, and desertion lead to a later scene where the theme of melancholia becomes more heavily involved. Here Li laments the suffering of the little girl and condemns himself grimly for not holding up his responsibilities, a haunting and melancholic memory. In visible parallel to the *Lazifu*, this scene could be seen as a strong metaphor for the position of the Chinese within the past and ongoing imperialist projects in Southeast Asia: the sympathetic but sedentary spectator of a raping of the powerless by the powerful.

> These native girls of Borneo passed me by. Without the *yuanfen*, I couldn't know either their happiness or bitterness. But up and down the great river, the colorful womanizing stories of Bapak Aussie were source of much jealousy……

[45] Li, Yongping, *Source of the Great River, vol. 1,* p. 272

> "The four simple syllables of *darah, sakit* gushing from the throat of the nine-year-old Iman, as if the words of a newborn baby, permeated the warm dusk air. Some *yuanfen* by chance made those shrieks reach my ears. It was so terrible, so unfortunate. Those two words had since become a most ghostly curse, whispering now and then next to my ears. I couldn't get rid of it, and it was only a whole month after I returned to Kuching had the frightening nightmares stopped……
>
> Many years later I live like a snail on the island of Taiwan……trying to reminisce, reorganize, and reexplore these absurdities during my youth in the wilderness beyond the South Sea, deluding myself with the possibility of washing my sins away. That night outside the longhouse why did I not break straight into the room as soon as I heard the cries of Iman?..... I don't dare to find excuses for that night. I was a little sucker that night. By listening to them I was an accomplice rapist to Bapak Aussies, and I did enjoy the evil bliss as being that accomplice.[46]

Sympathy for the subaltern and resentment against White dominance, nonetheless, cannot capture the entire racial picture in Li's work. An equally important, if not more prevalent melancholia revolves around the ultimate inability to *become* White. In *The Melancholy of Race,* Anne Cheng argues that in the American society, the racial minorities are charged with the unequal expectation to conform and assimilate not only to the demands and disciplining by hegemonic White culture, but more crucially, to the calls from their own fantasies to become equal with the White and become White, which is in turn consequential to the mechanism of melancholia.[47] In other words, the internalization of the yearn to be part of the ruling race was not solely because of the latter's indoctrination, but also cognate to the subaltern ego's acceptance, consumption, and introjection of that very trauma which had never been and will never be atoned in a racist world. In *Source of the Great* River, the writer does not hide his desire for becoming White. A notable scene that illustrate this desire, or fantasy, takes place when the travelers' ship, *Moduo Xiangshun* (C: 摩多祥顺, possible Indonesian spelling: *Motor Sjangsjoen*) ran aground amid the Kapuas river. Immobilized, the White passengers began to

[46] Li, Yongping, *Source of the Great River, vol. 1,* p. 282-290
[47] Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 106

hold a spontaneous dancing party to kill time. They were mimicking the indigenous Iban dancing style, like Donny did in a passage I previously quoted, and were spectated by an unimpressed Dayak crowd. The Chinese protagonist was stuck between his eagerness to join the party and the fear of embarrassment.

> "Stooping in a corner, I watched them astounded. Suddenly I realized that I was the lonely one there. I yearned to strip down my cloths as well, to join my friends with whom I had the special *yuanfen* to share a whole journey on the river.[48] It could be so much fun! But nobody is inviting me, and I didn't have the courage to join in. I was pitying myself when my jealous eyes made contact with those of the amicable Anita, a member of an American NGO for peaceful causes. Click! She stopped her steps for a second to turn to look at me, revealing a beautiful smile on her sweaty cheeks, and hailed me over…
>
> 'Yong, today we are a family, aren't we?'…
>
> 'Yong, don't be shy. You are gonna have some real fun with your big sisters tonight.'
>
> My dancing was awkward, and my skinny body and my little patterned underpants made me feel like an idiot among the White-skins. But when I raised up my head among these naked brothers and sisters, feeling the attention from thirty pupils of blue, azure, green, scarlet, and coffee colors my heart was pumping with excitement, because finally I was accepted as one of them, like a family. Tonight, we are going to have a crazy bash together, a thrilling one, one that I have dreamt of since so long ago.[49]

This brief episode of intimacy with the White is awkward, just as the author himself says. The desire of a smooth, natural integration into the dancing party is hampered by Yong's own self-consciousness, so that desire lingers further on into the anticipation of more parties, more episodes of intimacy. Plunging excitedly into the dancing crowd, he knows it was not the dancing moves themselves or any other things that deny his assimilation, but the difference in their bodies and skin colors. Even though the whole endeavor to be fully accepted into the party eventually falls apart, as the evening event was also not held, Yong was still filled with contentment as he recites to himself the White

[48] 缘分 (*Yuanfen*) is a Chinese Buddhist concept roughly denoting a "fateful coincidence" or a "romantic karma". See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuanfen, accessed Nov. 26, 2019

[49] Li, Yongping, *Source of the Great River,* vol. 1, p. 300-302

man's words "today we are a family." Meanwhile, proximate interactions with White women and perhaps exaggerating their sexual innuendos also satisfy the boy's fantasies of that race. Against the norm of resentful depictions of the White in the novel, here the author exposes unapologetically his sincere desire and fantasy about becoming part of them before admitting that it was never to be successful. Against an utterly impassable *aporia* of race, the subaltern is denied all other options but to internalize and encrypt one's agony, eventually resulting in a melancholic state seen here: instead of making attempts against memories of racism, the narrator chooses to savor and fantasize about it. This latter action, under Cheng's framework, could be understood as an agency of the subaltern's ego to make sense of her/his racial melancholia: the hegemonic are not the only one fantasize about the subaltern.[50]

Another framework useful in unpacking this fantasizing is what Homi Bhabha terms "colonial mimicry." The subaltern's psychological desire to be accepted into the ruling race was compromised by the very nature of racism, so that effort of mimicking becomes ironically symbolic of the impossibility and mockery of this ambition. However, just as the racial fantasy discussed above, mimicry of the hegemonic also symbolizes agency of the subaltern. To quote from Bhabha, "the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of the partial representation/ recognition of the colonial object." [51] In Perelaer's work, there is a very interesting alternative situation to this concept of colonial mimicry. The events themselves seem to be an absolute reversal of the parties involved in Bhabha's theory: the Whites are mimicking

[50] Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 105
[51] Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," in *The Location of Culture*, London; New York: Routledge, 1994. pp.85-92

the indigenous, not for caricature or fun, but rather for their survival. The power situation here is, of course, not generalizable for colonialism, but it does demonstrate how the author made the effort to work a racial dynamic that was unimaginably unorthodox into his fiction.

> An hour later our Europeans were beautifully bronzed and, dressed in their "ewah", stepped as if they were born Dajaks. Only La Cueille was found to be less accurate in representing the Dajak race. With his sharply carved face, sparkling eyes, beautiful ring-beard and curly hair, he showed so clearly the type of the Arab after being dyed brown, that he was unanimously named "*Sjech*" (Arabic for predicate) and called him Mohamed Al Mansoor……In addition, Dalim, either involuntarily or intentionally, had darkened him more than his fellow sufferers, thus completing the resemblance to a real Sjech.
>
> It was agreed that, when meeting with natives, only the true Dajaks and Johannes, who was fluent with that language, should speak. The two Swiss would have to keep a deep silence like "*djipen*" (*pandelingen*) (English: debt slaves), while "Sjech" Mohamed Al Mansur only had to babble Malay, and to pepper it with Arabian spells and Quranic verses, which Johannes soon taught him.[52]

Deserting from the colonial government, these Whites *had* to become natives in order to escape their "obligations" of being White in the colonial structure. With military police pursuing them closely, the protagonists led the fugitive life and had to assimilate with the subaltern, and did so quite willingly. But the *aporia* permeating the White relationship with Dayaks determined that this integration was deemed to be compromised, or in Bhabha's famous phrase "almost the same but not quite."[53] For Wienersdorf and Schlickeisen, who had no command on the Dayak language nor physical resemblance to that race, they were forcefully sentenced to aphasia: literally muted. In the case of La Cueille becoming as a *sjech* there is the element of comedy and exoticism, but this compromise also manifests the vulnerability and fragility of such a project of reverse mimicry by the Whites. I see the reverse mimicry not as synonymous to the more common motif of unequal cultural appropriation by the hegemonic because Perelaer depicted his

[52] Perelaer*, Borneo from South to North,, p. 148,*
[53] Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," p. 79

character's transition into the new identity as in fact a challenging feat. In this motif of almost reversed racial power structure that permeates the book, one could see the difficulties with which Perelaer maneuvered between his critical stance against colonialism and the disciplining of a racist normality at his time. These difficulties are representative of a racial melancholia that haunts Perelaer: his inability to penetrate the meaning of Dayak eventually led to his depiction of characters' becoming Dayak, or in the word of psychoanalysis, "introjection" of Dayak identities.

In the introduction to a later book about Borneo, *Uit de Oude Doos*, Perelaer responded to the fierce public attacks on the "truthfulness" (D: *gewaardigheid*) of his *Borneo from South to North,* stating that the stories are drawn from real events that he only masked minimally with fiction, essentially a *roman à clef*. Yet able to confirm this statement with any historical evidence, my impression of the adventure of his characters, however, is that their experiences are highly imaginative. The author's emotional defense and obsessive effort to keep cranking out novels about his Borneo sojourn in part confirms our speculation about the aspects of *mourning and melancholia* in his unwillingly suspended pursuit of imperial knowledge.[54]

Conclusion

Examining Li and Perelaer's novels, as "situated testimonies" of the affective contexts of their writing, sheds some initial light on their value in understanding Borneo as a colonial and racialized space. Written under seemingly distant circumstances, the juxtaposition of these two texts productive as under the surface they in fact share many themes. One is the obsession of knowledge of the Dayak peoples, an almost totem-ized symbol of imperial knowledge production in Borneo. Halted by the double *aporia*s of language barrier and troublesome

[54] Perelaer, *Uit de oude doos*, p. v.

memories, both authors resorted to fiction writing as a therapeutic device. Another shared theme lies in haunting and melancholia. Closely related to the idea of aporia, the melancholia involves a more profound way to deal with undesirable memories and failed pursuits: these disturbances are internalized and consumed by the ego and often times manifest in the form of fantasies. Race is the site of melancholia in these two novels. Under the normativity of racism in 1880s colonial Borneo and 1960s neo-colonial Borneo, the barrier of race was an even more ingrained and unsurmountable one than the previous two types of *aporia*. The juxtaposition of these two novels reveal painful truths that underlie the surfaces of Perelaer's and Li's much overlooked literature. On a broader level, this project confirms the value of analyzing literature as the historical archive itself, especially under the lenses of postcolonialism, as advocated by the earlier scholars of Ann Stoler and Laurie Sears.

Part Two: Continuation of Resistance and Contemporary Dayak Subjectivity in *Riska*

> "Once……we were taking small groups to Tanjung Puting National Park and there was this guide from Bali and an American tour leader, Mr. Hans……He was complaining all the time about the service. I said to him that this was Kalimantan, not Bali, and that was the way people lived here. We did not offer big fake smiles, but we shared our lives……
>
> We are family and unfortunately most people from outside Kalimantan expect the way we live, our socialization, to be modern. But they do not understand us. We are happy with our way. And I hope it will stay the same."[55] *Riska, Memories of a Dayak Childhood*, Riska Orpa Sari, 1999

Three decades after Li's compromised and problematic attempt to peek into the heart of Borneo, and a century after a similar failure by Perelaer, a conversation between two women was taking place in Kudangan, a Central Kalimantan village. Riska Orpa Sari, a Dayak woman with mixed ancestry from Dayak Tumon and Dayak Delang tribes, just made the journey up the Delang river to visit her place of birth. She was bringing her returning Canadian guest along upon her request: after all, Riska's job was a forest guide to mostly foreign tourists. They met a few years ago when the guest was first travelling to Borneo, and ever since they had been in close correspondence. Their friendship developed, however, in a way that was different from what the two male writers we discussed imagined in their works. Their interactions involved no intention by the foreigner to sleep with Riska, or to symbolize conquest by claiming that they are the most benevolent party to the indigenous people. A worldly woman, Riska shared her adventures within and without the rural Dayak society. The Canadian woman Linda Spalding happened to be a professional editor and writer, so she offered to help Riska publish her work in English, resulting in the 1999 book *Riska, Memories of a Dayak Childhood*. Such book opens up the world of Borneo to English-speaking readers from the inside like no anthropologist had ever achieved before. One gets to see from the returning gaze by a Dayak at the "imperial eyes."

[55] Riska, Orpa Sari, Spalding, Linda, ed. *Riska, Memories of a Dayak Girlhood*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000, p. 166

At the first glance, Riska and Spalding's same-gender relationship and its culmination in Riska's act to voice out about what it means to be Dayak seems to symbolize the eventual resolving of the aporic, incommunicable state between the outside intruders and the indigenous we observe in Li and Perelaer's narratives. Riska's embrace of the English language, and the trust she put in her Canadian publisher somehow also allude to either a relaxation of tension between the indigenous and the eagerly curious outsider, or a complete surrender of the former's agency to the latter in a world of more rapid globalization than ever. The nature of the book as a classic example of auto-ethnography per Pratt's definition may also lead one to imagine it as result of an eventually successful neoliberal project that recruited the "native" to confess herself.[56] Nevertheless, if one takes a closer look at both the content of Riska's memoir and the contexts under which it was accomplished, one sees the labyrinth of power dynamics that is more continuous from the worlds of Li and Perelaer than the reverse. The constant attempts of penetration from outsiders both literal and allegorical, the Dayaks' counter to them, and the resulting aporia had never been given up. What Riska's book and the studying of it tells us is that the aporia of enigmatic, inaccessible knowledge of the whole of Borneo and its peoples Li and Perelaer encountered was perhaps not only a reflection of their own experience and "melancholia" about the island, but also something that had been sites of the Dayaks's conscious efforts and agency to resist.

The themes that deserve serious discussions coming up in *Riska* and its contexts can be a myriad, ranging from gender studies to religious studies, to forestry and primatology in the anthropocene, and including all aspects of them in one chapter cannot be feasible. In fact, I would like to see my writing as an encouragement or prologue to more research conducted about

[56] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes,* p. 23

the conditions of Dayak peoples and Borneo from other disciplinary perspectives. What I wish to accomplish in this chapter is to invite voices from the traditionally voiceless and culturally appropriated indigenous party into the tri-lateral conversation with the other two writers, who cannot be generalized as colonialists but subscribe to colonialist mindsets. In order to do so I will be focusing on an important site where the three authors could be engaged in most direct and fictions, sex and metaphors of penetration with the indigenous women constitutes an essential part to their aporic, obsessive, and melancholic experiences of Borneo. Combining the inherent masculinity of imperialist conquest and the victory of obtaining otherwise enigmatic knowledge from the exotic, favor from the indigenous woman is a stock motif constantly featured in colonial travelogues, as per discussed by Frantz Fanon, Peter Dunwoodie, and Harry Harootunian's works.[57] In the case of Li and Perelaer, the female characters that from time to time become their love interests are not only oriental fantasies, but also psychological devices that mirror their inability to fully possess or penetrate the depth of Borneo in real life. In *Riska,* nonetheless, the autobiographer recounts actual events of encounters with people, places, and thoughts that appear in Li and Perelaer's fictions. While her observations and memories should still be taken critically, the fact that Riska usually emerged as the victor in her often-times contentious sexual relationships, and the fact that she was not writing to entertain an exoticism-seeking audience makes her accounts less subject to Li and Perelaer's extensive fabrications. All these factors add to the value of *Riska* as a mirror to look for assertive answers to many of the doubts, unclarities, curiosities, and fantasies in the two aforementioned fictions. After all, Riska's home in the

[57] See Dunwoodie, "Writing the (In)Visible", pp. 12, 27; Harootunian, Harry, "Postcoloniality's unconscious/area studies' desire", *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy*, 2:2, 1999, p. 136; also in Stoler, Ann, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power, Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, University of California Press, 2010

Lamandau river drain was right in the middle between Li's West Kalimantan and Perelaer's South Kalimantan. The memories of her earlier life were full of interactions with foreign intruders as tense as they appear in Li's journey; and by the end of the book, the tensions culminated in the violence of 1998, a crisis of both political stability and identity integrity in Borneo comparable to the *Perang Banjar* which Perelaer's novel was situated in.

Throughout the book there are many cases where Riska's storytelling makes hardly any special regard to the foreign companions of her. As a guide she most often expresses her powerfulness and easy access to the insider's knowledges, contrasted by the dependence of those outsiders she was helping. These moments almost reflect immediately to the lack of confidence in their ability to access such knowledge we have demonstrated in Li and Perelaer's narratives. In addition, Riska's assertive and highly active engagement with both her own community and outsiders largely negate the depiction of passive, static, landlocked, and inward-looking image of Dayak tribesmen by Li and Perelaer. At many a moment in Riska's memoir she almost found herself in contexts almost identical to what Li and Perelaer wrote in their novels, especially Li, but she demonstrates the level of agency and consciousness that completely escaped the two male writers. In this passage I will be focusing mostly on these moments, with hope that they help reconstruct the indigenous Dayaks' psychological experience and subjectivity analogous to those of the colonials, which had been disproportionately better documented. Riska's experiences and words are not only primary source to researchers interested in the Dayak perspective, but also are themselves "situated testimonies" challenging the monopolies and hegemonies of Western and Chinese literature about the subject of Borneo.

Writing *Riska*

Riska begins with the editor Linda Spalding's preface narrating the stories behind the composition of the book, which is later to be echoed and reiterated by Riska herself in the body of the work. Spalding explains that her interest about Borneo initiated after she read intriguing stories of Birutė Galdikas, a Lithuanian American primatologist who enjoyed enormous fame as a naturalist who "lived among orangutans in Borneo" and as one of Louis Leakey's "Trimates" along with Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey. Spalding never clarified whether she was critical about the renown and aura of Birutė from the beginning, or whether she only treated the trip to Borneo as a vacation with her family (she brought her two teenage daughters with her) that also served a side purpose for seeking inspiration. Nevertheless, she flew from Toronto to Jakarta to Pangkalan Bun, a small town in Indonesia's Central Kalimantan Province. In 1995, she found there Suharto's regime still intact in place, the Indonesian government's intrusive policies such as the *transmigrasi* still accepted by locals as a norm, and the racial dynamics between indigenous Dayaks and Muslim immigrants still in *status quo ante bellum*.[58] Pangkalan Bun was a provincial town so remote and unremarkable that is almost unknown to Indonesians living out of Kalimantan, but due to the existence of Birutė Galdikas's activities there and the presence of her "Leakey's Camp", a base built just for observing and nurturing orangutans, the town had its reputation among primate specialists around the world. This was also the reason why such a small town had a rather incompatibly thriving touring business for foreign and domestic visitors,

[58] Transmigrasi is a migration program sponsored by the Dutch East Indies government and its successor, the Indonesian government, to assist the relocation of settlers from the crowded Java, Madura, and Bali islands to the less populated islands such as Borneo and Papua. The program had been criticized as culturally hegemonic, Java-centric, and insensitive to the conflicts it provoked between the settlers and the indigenous populations. See Anata, Aris, *The Indonesian Crisis: A Human Development Perspective*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003, pp. 229–230

in which Riska the autobiographer worked. She had worked for many visitors like Spalding who traced the footsteps of Birutė, but for them guides like Riska were often their first introduction to the world of the jungle-clad interior world of Borneo. And in Spalding's case, Riska introduced her to an alternative Indonesia even before she met with the conventional one because of Spalding's decision to prioritize Borneo over the normal tourist options like Bali, Yogyakarta, and Bandung, where the Suharto-led government offered "better"-prepared attraction packages catering to Western visitors.

The four women spent ten days together in the jungle, where they lived in a rangers' hut specially prepared for outside visitors to observe orangutans, that Riska was accustomed to living in but the three Canadian women made their share of efforts to adjust to. During this time, the original focus of Spalding's trip, which were a Lithuanian primatologist and "her" primates gradually shifted to the worlds of Borneo and the peoples living on it. Before Spalding's departure, she found out that Riska had been keeping track of her life in a notebook in English. Spalding was surprised, a reaction that perhaps made them both slightly uncomfortable, but she soon offered Riska that her willingness to read them. What Spalding had yet to know was that Riska had already started typing stories of her life on a laptop computer during her earlier days in Bali, a second-hand luxury item that she obtained from a Western friend. Before Riska could respond, Spalding's plane departure was announced.[59] They kept their correspondence and both women expressed their awareness of some kind of bond forming. But what made Spalding decide to go to Borneo again was the need for more research in her book about the white woman Birutė Galdikas.

[59] Riska, *Riska,* p. 211

The partings between Riska and Spalding, and the longing that called Spalding back to Kalimantan again and again, could be seen as contemporary counterparts to the colonial melancholia of Li and Perelaer. Even though they spent years and perhaps decades in the colonies, there was the feeling of their curiosities never being fulfilled that kept calling them back to the island. For Perelaer it was his age and the comfort of his job at Leiden University that stopped him going back, and for Li it was the bleak Cold War, but in year 1998, nothing could prevent Spalding from achieving what the other two failed. She did, nevertheless, return to a Borneo under the shroud of political turmoil and ethnic tensions. When she arrived at Pangkalan Bun again in 1998, Indonesian possessions of the island were in a state of emergency after the anti-Muslim violence by Dayak peoples culminated in the bloodsheds of the Sampit Incident.[60] According to Riska herself, that year the mysterious "Red Bowl" was passed to her native village from West Kalimantan. It was brought from one Dayak tribe to another as a symbol to mobilize the entire nation for a violent push against Muslim immigrants, who under the Suharto regimes' biased policies took away much political and economic privilege from the Dayak peoples and pushed them further inland.[61] Spalding travelled with Riska up the Lamandau river to her native village of Kudangan, which the latter also saw as an opportunity of homecoming after five years. They came to a village heavily guarded by Indonesian troops, with the Dayak inhabitants as the primary subjects of suspicion and surveillance. Riska's family had long been in feud with their native village, and Spalding's presence only made the subtle yet brittle situations in Kudangan even more complicated.[62] And lucky for Spalding, she had a local guide whose worldly lived

[60] see Davidson, Jamie, *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2008
[61] Peluso, Nancy, "A political ecology of violence and territory in West Kalimantan", Asia Pacific Viewpoint, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2008), pp. 48-50
[62] Riska, *Riska*, pp. 235-236

experience made her critical enough to show her the parts of Dayak life that was not Edenic or idyllic as it had been portrayed before. The two women witnessed sharp downturns in the topography, ecology, and societies of Kalimantan in a few years, and that was the context under which the memoir was composed.

In her own foreword to the body of the book Riska tells a Dayak lore about the harm that could be brought about when secrets are forcefully revealed. A human made a secret pact with a snake, that he changes into the shape of snake during the evening in exchange for infinite life, unless the pact was revealed. His careful concealment nevertheless could not match the curiosity of his family and kin, which could not help but ventured into his secluded living spaces. The person morphed fully into a snake and bit all who saw him dead. The moral of the story, according to Riska, "shows us how unkind it is to know someone's secret. To want to destroy the secret parts of life."[63] Intentional or not, such an ominous opening statement highlights the weight of the preservation of "secrets" and defiance to "knowing" in Riska's Dayak consciousness when interacting with both the Dayak world and the world external to it. In the various examples I am to take from the book, I would like to argue that the "secrets" take the form of the inextinguishable subjectivity and autonomy of an indigenous woman, and had never been successfully taken nor known, again in direct contrast with the emphasis on conquest and surrender of the similar attributes in the fictions we discussed earlier.

Dayak Visions of Affective Resistance

The first "intruder" in Riska's life came as a love crush during her teen age in 1984, which appear twice in her book and both times in close conjunction with descriptions of her bodily experiences of puberty. After moving from her native village to the estuary town of

[63] Riska, *Riska*, p.4

Pangkalan Bun where Dayak lifestyles no longer dominated, Riska's family had been enduring hardship. The hegemonic position of the Muslims, and the unfamiliar urban environment put Dayak populations in the city in constant positions of economic precarity. Her father worked as a laborer in a factory owned by a local ethnic-Chinese family. Nevertheless, her family did not hide their racial resentment about the economic privileges and superiority enjoyed by these Sino-Borneans and their aloofness from the indigenous, despite the fact that they were given permission to lodge in the owners' properties for free.[64] It was a subtle matter that at this time Riska encountered Ahwa, an ethnic-Chinese young adult coming from West Kalimantan, where the island's Hakka-Chinese communities thrive. Ahwa lived across the river from Riska's home, "taking care of the machines".[65] It took months before they started to converse, initially only by recognizing each other's towels near the river when taking bathes. Shyness and indirectness doted their entire relationship, as Riska recalled "we could see each other across the wide river, from a distance."[66] Even when their romantic feelings built up, their interactions remained at a level of very reserved mutual confirmation that they had special care for each other. Knowing that Ahwa and his friends were participants of the *Porkas* (Pekan Olahraga dan Ketangkasan) weekly sport lottery, Riska would stand in front of the lottery shop just for exchanging glances with her love interest when his group passed by. Her reservations towards being more expressive in their relationship were not because her culture denounced love practices at teen age, but rather out of fear of the racial barriers minded by her parents.[67] After learning about Riska's secret meetings with Ahwa at one of Riska's friend's house, her parents began following her out and blocking further advances them, eventually leading to Ahwa's giving up on any possibility of

[64] Riska, *Riska*, p. 80
[65] Ibid, p. 95
[66] Ibid, p. 95
[67] Ibid, p. 96

their future together. Disappointed, he left his job and returned to his families in West Kalimantan, and their forfeited relationship became a source of regret in Riska's memories of her youth.

The scene of sharing of shy gazes with each other across the river almost resembles a stock motif of Sino-Dayak romances in Li Yongping's novels, exemplified in the beginning quote of the first chapter involving a shy glance saturated with suppressed desires between the Dayak girl and the roman-a-clef version of the author's self. In juxtaposition with the mournful and regretful depictions of interracial relationships with Dayaks in the Sino-Bornean literature scene, such as by Li, Chang Kwei Hsing and Ng Kim Chew, Riska's narrative offers a rather confirmative reflection.[68] While these authors mainly talk of the Sino-Dayak racial barriers under the context of British, or White hegemony, the case of Central Kalimantan replaces the British with the hegemony of Muslim Indonesians. Despite a common grudge against the said hegemon, and despite mundane collaborations between the Dayaks and the Chinese to circumvent the various hindrances they encounter in a Muslim-dominated locality such as efforts to market pigs without being censored by local Muslims, a sexual aporia is still maintained between these two communities.

Riska and Ahwa's inability to consummate their mutual feelings embodied the racial barrier and frustration experienced by both the Chinese and the Dayak populations of Kalimantan. An easy interpretation of the decision by Riska's parents to object her relationship with a Sino-Bornean could be that it is a habit of resistance as the Dayaks are the economically vulnerable and precarious party when interacting with the Chinese in Central Kalimantan, a

[68] About Ng and Chang's depictions of Sino-Dayak romantic relationships, see: Ng, Kim Chew, *Slow boat to China and Other Stories*, New York : Columbia University Press, 2016;

common reason behind many threads of anti-Chinese xenophobia in Southeast Asia.[69] A closer look will show the romantic affliction between Riska and Ahwa entailing more complicated racial relationships than that. In West Kalimantan and Sarawak, where Chinese presence predated and overshadowed that in Central Kalimantan, the likes of Ahwa and Li Yongping enjoy social statuses as roughly part of the indigenous, and in Li's novels he emphasizes his entitlement to such a notion. Compared to Li in *Source of the Big River*, however, the reserved man Ahwa in Riska's words lacked the aggressiveness to interfere with the racial status-quo there at Pangkalan Bun, nor did he take advantage of his economic superiority like Li's uncle did in *Lazifu.*[70] The outright rejection by Riska's parents nevertheless made him the foreigner again, as the contention between the power of indigeneity and foreignness *had to* be displaced because of his race, even though his home was only three hundred kilometers away and they spoke the same language. Eventually Ahwa had to pack up and return to his origin in West Kalimantan, fulfilling the ironic fate of the ethnic Chinese being reduced to a sojourner within his own country and own island.[71] The racial melancholia of the Sino-Borneans hence boasts a further stratum of being identified as part of the indigenous but denied certain experiences of being one, that of having to make a sojourn despite having no viable "origin" to return to.

Another representative encounter with an outside intruder took place more than a decade later, when Riska was working as a guide in the national park near Pangkalan Bun, employed by a tour agency. During the meantime, she had married a Dayak man, given birth to her daughter

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[69] Leo Suriadinata ed., *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*, ISEAS Institute, 2008, pp. 10-12
[70] See Li, Yongping, "Lazifu"
[71] About the significance of sojourning among the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, see Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000
the lack of an "origin" is a significant theme in many of Li Yongping's works, see Wang, Derwei, "原乡想象，浪子文学——李永平论";

Karina, divorced, and had begun living in union with a Javanese sailor who took interest in her. Riska parried his advances, but her objections were nullified by her daughters' special fond of him, despite the sailor's callous exhibition of superiority in his race and his religion. Soon the relationship became abusive and Riska, being a divorced Dayak woman with a child in a closed and patriarchal community, was in no position to resist a Muslim man, who she figured out have numerous mistresses throughout the Outer Islands.[72] Therefore, she would have to look for intervention out of her comfort zone of living. She met Werner the German traveler, who was willing to buy her plane tickets to travel with him around Indonesia, at the obvious cost of her sexual accompaniment.[73] Riska felt almost like eloping, and made all kinds of efforts to conceal her plan to run away and to minimalize the impact of the news of her disappearance in the small society of Pangkalan Bun.[74]

Her involvement with, and dependence on a European man under the said circumstances seems almost metaphorical to the narratives alluded to by the Dutch colonial regime since their earliest days in the East Indies: the White Man comes in only to break the feminine indigenes from the shackles of her previous hegemon.[75] When Michael Theophil Perelael wrote his fiction *Borneo from South to North* about the Dutch war with the Banjar Sultanate, the principle of freeing non-Muslim peoples from the control of Islamic states had already become so ingrained in the Dutch reasoning that it went unquestioned in an otherwise critical book. While opposing the war with Muslims and brutalities committed by the Europeans in it, the book entails overwhelmingly praising words about the "purity" of the Dayak indigenes "unpolluted" by

[72] Riska, *Riska,* p. 140
[73] Ibid, 146
[74] Ibid, 143
[75] See Stoler, Ann, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power, Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, University of California Press, 2010, p. 34

Islamic influences. [76] Islamophobia in the form of preventing conversion and "indoctrination" among non-Muslim populations and heterogenous groups like the Javanese was also a consistent doctrine of governance in the realities of 19th and 20th century Dutch East Indies.[77]

The sight of a Dayak woman running away from her abusive and religiously chauvinistic Javanese partner, seeking refuge in a European's visitors' embrace and setting off to "discover" the rest of her home island would probably sentence many a colonialist of the same century to jealousy. As discussed in previous sections of this article, being able to "know" the island and to receive the willingly submission of its women is some of the most central trophies in Li and Perelaer's fictions, and also central in their own personal struggles in realities. Their incompetence to realize such fantasies, or the inherent impossibility of achieving them under the colonial power structure rendered the fictive representations of those fantasies in their reflective romans-a-clef sites of reminiscence and melancholia. Arriving at Pontianak with Werner, Riska began tracing up the Kapuas river along almost identical routes as Li describes in *Source of the Great River* albeit three decades later than the latter story was set. The two hopped among Dayak villages whose people share her skin color but not her language, where Riska played the multiple roles of an interpreter, a female companion to a European foreigner, and an active observer of an unknown environment herself.[78] They even visited a Western anthropologist stationed in one of them, an event when Riska for the first time realized that there were a different feather of White man who could be culturally sensitive and appreciative compared to her chauvinistic and dismissive German boyfriend.[79] All progressions of the story seem to be shockingly coinciding

[76] See in Perelaer, Michael T., *Borneo van zuid naar noord: ethnografische roman*, pp. 15-20
[77] Sears, *Situated Testimonies,* pp. 28-32; also see Dermout, Marie, *De Tien Duizend Dingen*, Querido's Uitgeversmij, Amsterdam, 1960
[78] Riska, *Riska,* p. 145
[79] Ibid, p. 147

with what had been imagined in the plots of Li and Perelaer's fictions. Neither of the "Self" characters of these two books, which are the Sino-Bornean and the Dutch military anthropologist, could be complete without a figure like Riska, the model "Other" and keen self-ethnographer to show the intruders around.

To dismiss Riska as a Malinche-like figure that submitted to the imperialist projects for knowledge, or to the racial hierarchies centered around White saviors, would be a misread of both the historical circumstances of Riska and her own judgements. At many points in the book Riska admits her awareness that her access to knowledge about the environment and society of inner Borneo put her in an advantageous position when dealing with Westerners, much more so than cases when she had to face patriarchal and chauvinistic locals. The fact that the Indonesian government promoted a anti-colonialist history curriculum in schools and the sheer reality of skin color politics in her everyday life also made Riska clearly aware of the structural injustices embodied in her interactions with white foreigners. The following thoughts offer a clear example of Riska's take on the race-labor relationship of Indonesia, and they occurred after a conversation between Riska and her white boyfriend from US, another sojourner subsequent to her relationship with Werner.

> "When we were in the jungle he said to me: 'Riska, I like you. You are very special and you are very to live next to the jungle.'
>
> For me it was funny because I thought he was the lucky one to live in a Western prosperous country where there is no starving and stupidity……The white people working with us here, they would get a tremendous payment because they speak English and come from Europe even though they know nothing. But our workers who have better knowledge are willing to work hard and are more qualified than those white workers, only get payment which amounts to the cost of one dinner for those white people……Very sad."[80]

[80] Riska, *Riska,* p. 165

Thus, Riska's reaching out to Werner may better be seen as a sign of empowerment and agency, a move actually in sharp contrast with the passivity one sees in Li and Perelaer's depictions of the Dayak female or generally the Dayak subjectivity. Her travelling in West Kalimantan resembled more of Yong, the protagonist of the Li's novel than the exotified and unrealistic Dayak figures in that book such like Dalus Bihai. Comparable with Yong's dramatic journey with his white group-mates up the Kapuas, one saturated with repeated confrontations with uncomfortableness and grim realities about race and identity for a Sino-Bornean, Riska's travelling with Werner along the very river also furthered her own critical understanding of what means to be a Dayak in Kalimantan. In other words, their experiences of travelling in Borneo with foreigners involved more inward-looking contemplations on their selves rather than interests in the white outsiders. In Lanjak, a village bordering Malaysia, Riska and Werner had sex for the first time and there is a detailed description of how she made up her mind to accept the man's advances. Riska stated that what made her forget the pain of sex was repeating to herself the thought that her previous partner, the Javanese sailor, could never own her body, and that her body is subject to her own decision. "He never owned me and my body was only mine," so declared Riska a second time when her feelings for Werner faded away.[81] Such a powerful statement could be interpreted as not only rejecting the physical and cultural intrusion attempted by the Javanese sailor, but also setting the rule that no one else has the right to do the same. (Gender studies framework needed here?) If read in conjunction with the chapter's opening quote that expresses the firmness with which Riska believes in the autonomy of Dayaks, her alertness about the sovereignty of her body also metaphorizes the resistant stance she takes for her community and ways of life.

[81] Riska, *Riska* p. 146, 155

Over the years of interactions with the outside world, Riska also consciously formulated her understanding of the necessity to preserve the access to the imperialist knowledge of her island from intruders. On the border with Malaysian Sarawak Riska and Werner visited many a Dayak Iban village, where the simple language she uses to describe the flora and the tribal customs could not hide the deep affective connections she shared with the land. She makes keen observations of the differences between her tribe's features and those of the Ibans'. A fellow Dayak with the Ibans despite the divides in linguistics and looks, Riska held the natural keys through the locals' defense of aporia. These scattered ethnographic observations did not take much space in her book, but they outshine the equivalents attempted by the likes of Li Yongping and Michael Perelaer.[82] Western anthropologists and naturalists did play significant roles in her life, as they were her clients and sources of income, but at many moments Riska deemed that their monopoly of the voice to express and explain rendered them the unjust appropriators of knowledge of her island, and that it does them justice for the locals put up such resistances in the form of what we understand as aporia. She provides a highly critical account about the controversial primatologist Birute Galdikas' endeavors in Kalimantan towards the end of the book, boldly accusing her problematic methods of conducting research and preserving wild orangutans. These words were not only those of Riska's, but are representative of widespread indigenous apprehension towards the exploitive and hypocritic power relationships of those foreign projects aiming for knowledge extraction:

> "He told me that Birute never went to the forest to 'follow' orang utans. Her staff did that for her and collected all the reports…… the work was hard and the payment was little. 'Sometimes we get bored and write whatever we want so we can have something to report', he said.
> 'Did Birute ever find out?'
> 'I don't think she cares,' replied my friend.

[82] Riska, *Riska* pp. 149-152

> Birute was probably busy then, typing all the reports and claiming them as her own. 'I think you are the one who should be called professor, not her.' I laughed at him. 'You are the people of the forest and you know much more than Birute knows about it, but you do not have any degree and you are only a little people, that's the problem.'
>
> Maybe the camp was named after Birute's late mentor Louis Leakey to respect him, but nobody seems to care about it now……
>
> Even now, her organization is selling tours. Pak Herry, a massive, friendly and warm smiling middle-aged man, and head of the park once frowned over my guest's questions about this. 'Birute is powerful and the world believes blindly in her,' he said with his soft, well-spoken English……
>
> I wonder why the world laid its hope on Birute to help the orang utans here in Kalimantan. Those poor orang utans suffer from diseases without enough medicine while Birute is zooming by in her nice boat along with numerous tourists telling the world with her soft motherly voice that she feels sorry for all that death in the park……"[83]

Riska ends with the autobiographer's concerned remarks about the ongoing ethnic bloodshed in Borneo between the Dayaks and the Madura immigrants as well as pessimistic vision of a Borneo deprived of its traditional Dayak ways of life that she forsees in the future of Karina, her daughter. Yet Riska concludes her thirty years of life as fulfilling and accomplished, one that she has little to complain about in spite of the many hardships she went through.[84] Meanwhile, *The Follow* (of the orangutans) eventually became the title of Linda Spalding's acclaimed non-fiction published in 1998 that brought the controversies of Birute Galdikas to the public's attention for a while.[85] The knowledge of the indigenous thus circulated inevitably to the consumers of the English-speaking metropole again. Nevertheless, the cooperation and solidarity between the two women in publishing their respective books did indeed present the potentials of a postcolonial and globalizing world to

[83] Riska, *Riska*, p. 193-195
[84] Riska, *Riska*, p. 237
[85] See Spalding *The follow: A true story*, Key Porter Books, 1998, see also Nyman, Jopi, "Ethical Encounters with Animal Others in Travel Writing", in *Travel and Ethics: Theory and Practice,* ed. Fowler, Connie et al., Routledge, 2014

alter the power structure between the traditional role of takers of ethnographic knowledge and those who had it taken from them.

Conclusion

In several Harry Harootunian's critique of the "discipline" of area studies he warns against the danger of essentializing a region or locality with one moment of it in history, reducing the richness and diversity of lived experiences accumulated from time to moments of "ideal types" or in my contemporary interpretation, "screenshots". He argues that the fact that researchers of "areas" tend to enter "an a-temporal and ana-historical zone—anytime, no time in particular" ripped the natives of the agency of time—the moment—whether present or past.[86] This is of course also a situated critique against the very specific academic practices of late 20th century United States universities, but it is a valid challenge to the obviously anachronistic and ana-historical structuring of this article. Nevertheless, rather than illustrating the experiences of Dayak people, Chinese people, and Dutch people in Borneo as continuous or static, the intention of this article lies more in the analysis of the contending forces that resulted in such a continuation. And these forces had always been dynamic.

Ironically, the only force of such that remains a-temporally continuous and "essentialize-able" in my analysis of Bornean literature is the equivalent to Harootunian's area-studies itself: the imperialistically curious gaze cast upon an island's native inhabitants. In Dunwoodie's article about French colonial travel literature, he makes the point that both the authors and readers of such works are seeking a *tempus fugit*, an escape from time and

[86] Harootunian, "Postcoloniality's unconscious/area studies' desire", p. 140; Harootunian, Harry, "Some Thoughts on Comparability and Space-Time Problem", *Boundary* 2 32:2, Duke University Press (2005), p. 29

memories of it.[87] In Perelaer's novel, the soldiers' desertion from a war into the thickness of the jungle is a clear manifestation of such an escape from time, while Li Yongping's fantasy-ridden journey of a 15-year-old-self is a more representative example of his own escape from the painful melancholia of exile. On the other hand, Riska lives in reality and in contention, and she felt and tried to make sense of modernity instead of seeking fugitive from it like the two male writers did. Having her as the third author in this comparative work seems to provide what Harootunian asks for: an indigenous-powered consciousness of temporality, one that "claims" Borneo back from colonial writers who once reduced Borneo to their sanctuaries of mind, and one that confirms that if continuity exists, it would be in the form of continuous struggle by the Dayaks to resist foreign intrusions to their sovereignty on the "knowledge" about their island.

[87] Dunwoodie, ""Writing the (In)Visible", p. 4

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