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Peripheral Urbanism, Imperial Maturity, and the Crisis of Development in Lao She's *Rickshaw* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

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The theory of combined and uneven development has provided a new interpretive framework for studies of the novel in recent years, opening up connections between the central premise that capitalism produces an "amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" and modernist experiments with narrative time (Trotsky, qtd. in Deckard et al., *Combined and Uneven* 11).[1] Jed Esty, building on Franco Moretti's claim that writers such as Joseph Conrad, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce interrupt the linear progression to maturity associated with the European bildungsroman, has shown how such writers often do so from uneven, semiperipheral settings, producing "antidevelopmental fictions set in colonial contact zones, where uneven development is a conspicuous fact of both personal and political life" (Esty, *Unseasonable Youth* 2). As Esty suggests, the norm of universal development associated with Lukácsian realism is predicated on the subject's entry into national subjectivity, which itself is premised on the nation's ability to mediate relations between capital and province with reference to a shared political telos. Conversely, the evocation of a colonial world-system in modernist narratives of migration and displacement—spanning locations from Ireland to the Malay Archipelago and South America—is seen to interrupt the narrative structure guiding individual and national development, initiating a shift from "self-made protagonists to environmental victims," from "narratives of (at least apparent) class mobility to narratives of racialized class stasis," and from "regional to global maps of uneven development" (Esty, "Global Lukács" 369). Implicit in this argument is the idea that colonial and semicolonial zones

function as effective laboratories for modernist experiments with the novel form, shaping its stream-of-consciousness narratives, its fictions of delayed adulthood, and its shift from "smooth biographical time" to "proleptic fits and retroactive starts" (Esty, *Unseasonable Youth* 2). In this way, what the theory of uneven development provides is new ground for a historically formalist reading of modernism as the articulation of a shift from national to global time, one that interrupts the telos of national development encoded in the structure of the nineteenth-century novel.

These antidevelopmental narrative structures can be grounded more specifically in the uneven cultures of the peripheral *city*. As Walter Benjamin, Marshall Berman, and Fredric Jameson have each shown, much of modernism's fusion of the classical and the contemporary evokes a sense of the lived coevalities and asynchronous temporalities of peripheral metropolitan lifeworlds, absorbing the amalgam of grand houses and shabby tenements, tramways and cattle lines, modern media and "mystical tradition" on display in cities from St. Petersburg to Dublin and Prague (Benjamin 141). Within self-consciously peripheral cities, the interruption of the linear progression to maturity occurs not only through aesthetic and avant-garde challenges to developmental time but also through the stalled movement of urban protagonists, who—if not trapped in bedrooms or basements—wander the streets aimlessly or find their journeys hindered by the task of transporting others. It is the latter experience that this essay identifies in two twentieth-century novels from the semiperipheral metropolis: Lao She's *Rickshaw* (1936–37) and Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936).[i] Tracing the journeys of migrant workers engaged in informal urban labor in early twentieth-century Peking (Beijing) and Bombay (Mumbai), respectively, the novels juxtapose the visual cultures of colonial modernization schemes with everyday, arresting experiences of poverty and precarity on the city

streets. The result, I will argue, is precisely the kind of modernist transition from national to global time associated with anti-developmental fiction set in underdeveloped zones.

A starting point for this essay's comparative approach is the fact that both novelists, while studying and teaching in London between 1926 and 1929, expressed an interest in "peripheral" European writers including Henrik Ibsen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Conrad, and Joyce. Both cited the latter's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a source of particular inspiration insofar as it was seen to ground the European bildungsroman in the concrete and complex specificities of a colonial setting.[2] Inspired by the anticolonial possibilities of this urban specificity, they each articulated similar projects: Anand sought to expose a side of the Indian city that he felt was absent in E. M. Forster's setting of Chandrapore, while Lao She planned to "write back" to Conrad's *Lord Jim* by unearthing the migrant histories of the urban Chinese diaspora. The novels that they produced in 1936, *Coolie* and *Rickshaw*, reveal a mutual commitment to politicizing the English canon, weaving intertextual references to Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, and Rudyard Kipling into their respective journeys of dispossessed migrant protagonists. While both novels explore prescient regional issues—including rural-to-urban migration, casual urban labor, and the social geographies of natural disasters—their intertextual references transform these experiences into a direct, protopostcolonial challenge to the universalist assumptions of the English novel, revealing the colonial mechanisms of value and visibility that determine both its scope and the interests of its metropolitan readers.

A second major point of intersection between these writers is their mutual involvement in urban planning. Anand worked for the Marg architectural magazine in Bombay and lent his voice to Nehruvian planning schemes—even interviewing Le

Corbusier and hosting exhibitions in the modernist city Chandigarh—while Lao She remained a long-standing supporter of the garden city movement and produced commissioned work celebrating Communist urban planning initiatives in Beijing. Yet although both were socialists who refused to abandon the idea of development altogether, the sudden deaths of their two rickshaw-pulling protagonists met with accusations of pessimism and fatalism. Lao She was forced to explain his novel's lack of working-class agency with a piece of self criticism, while Anand was repeatedly condemned for his protagonist's failure to act. What such critiques overlook, however, is the extent to which *Coolie* and *Rickshaw* undermine universalist narratives of emancipation, class struggle, and economic development primarily because of their attentiveness to the complexities of uneven development in colonial and semicolonial regions. Both texts draw on the visual unevenness of the peripheral city in order to stage the interruption of their protagonists' developmental trajectories, doing so simultaneously in ways that challenge the progressive telos underpinning colonial modernizing discourses of the period—from narratives of enclave modernization in semicolonial China to those of "development along native lines" (Harris 24) in British India. Central to this shared challenge is the use of the rickshaw itself as a vehicle that literally and metaphorically drags the protagonists back, bringing an untimely end to their journeys to maturity and, consequently, to the narrative arc of the novel form. The rickshaw—with its fusion of the modern and traditional, mobile and immobile, manual and mechanical—becomes not only a plot device but a suggestive historical metaphor for the unevenness of urban modernity in its global context.

"A Modern City of Tradition"

Although Lao She's *Rickshaw* is known for its intimate portrayal of early twentieth-century Peking, the novel can be seen to transform the contradictions of semicolonial modernization—witnessed visibly on the streets of the city during the interwar period—into a wider, critical engagement with developmental colonial narratives.[3] If the novel resembles an urban fairy tale whose magical gratifications fail to materialize, it is the city itself that acts a constant foil to the personal, moral, and economic aspirations of the migrant protagonist. At once "filthy, beautiful, decrepit, lively, chaotic, peaceful, and charming" (*Rickshaw Boy* 290), Peking is presented as a landscape of contradictions, echoing historical descriptions of the former capital, in the aftermath of its partial modernization during the Republican period, as a palimpsest of historical layers and a patchwork of enclaves, combining courtyards and grand palaces, craft guilds and factories, rickshaws and railway stations.[4] Of these enclaves, none was more conspicuous than the Foreign Legation Quarter, whose resident expatriates were sheltered from the seismic events taking place beyond its fortified gates and whose artificially green lawns—in contrast with the spectacles of poverty, refuse, and public executions on display in the old city—evoked a sense of coeval urban temporalities (Boyd xviii). Despite their close proximity to traditional and preindustrial districts, the city's modern factory, university, and diplomatic zones were shaped by the new intellectual methods introduced by visiting lecturers from the United States and the leaders of Britain's New Town and garden city movements, with whom China's New Intellectuals, a group of radical modernist scholars and students, sought to cultivate the public spirit observed in European cities of the period. Yet despite numerous development schemes for parks, green spaces, and street signs, urban planners faced a "challenging reality" (Dong, "Defining Beiping"

121). A case in point was the opening in 1925 of Capital Park, with its "World Garden": although intended to align the city with "the civilized countries of the world" (129), the park was deemed somber and inconvenient by the majority of residents and was subsequently occupied and looted by warlord troops (128–30). Just as plans to turn the former capital into a self-reliant, modern metropolis failed to solve the financial problems caused by the withdrawal of central government support and the departure of wealthy families and officials, so the superimposition of new social codes and behaviors did not insulate residents from the upheavals of warlord politics and the foreign-backed mercenary interventions that continued into the 1930s. Rather, half-implemented changes forced residents to navigate the double meanings of a complex and elusive urban landscape, fittingly branded a "modern city of tradition" by the municipality (132).

A second point to make regarding the city's visibly uneven development is that this reflected the wider contradictions of China's semicolonial status in the early twentieth century. As Liu Kang suggests, Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Peking saw modern production methods, technologies, and infrastructures introduced under the military and political auspices of Euro-American and Japanese powers, even as these same powers continued to prolong archaic forms of social and political organization in the interests of landowning elites, militarists and corrupt officials (Qtd. in Deckard et al., *Combined and Uneven* 11). A striking contradiction emerged between the regressive system maintained by colonial powers and their active promotion of modern "civil society" discourse through the press and university systems, which opposed "officialdom" and corruption in favor of civil participation, equality, and individual liberty. For Kang, this discourse did not describe a society containing a large and independent bourgeoisie, as in Europe, but was applied to "a

segment of civil society in a country dominated by both local imperial or military rulers and Western colonialists" (Kang 40). Consequently, the visual incongruities of the city itself came to mirror the wider discursive contradictions generated by the attempt to graft modern liberal ideas onto a semicolonial setting.

Lao She's *Rickshaw* can be seen to engage with precisely these visual incongruities and discursive contradictions. While the novel is best known and appreciated for its locational specificity, it is nevertheless telling that the opening passage begins by situating the protagonist within a semicolonial landscape divided into "several classes of rickshaw men," each confined to a specific territory according to their age, origins and linguistic abilities (*Rickshaw Boy* 1). While the migrant pullers are confined to the local areas, the young local pullers patrol the Tsinghua University district, and the superior pullers take passengers from the Foreign Legation Quarter. This latter group, the narrator writes, is privileged because its pullers possess a valuable skill: "[W]hen a British or a French soldier says he wants to go to the Summer Palace . . . or the Eight Alleys red-light district, they understand" (3). Not only does the novel begin by suggesting that it is English and French, rather than local knowledge, that function as the primary drivers of social mobility, but it also shows how the colonial enclave and its multilingual, white-shirted pullers fuel the protagonist's aspirational desire for mobility and hence drive the novel's events. Through this initial reference to the city's linguistically demarcated and socially stratified network of enclaves, as well as its foreign military presence, the novel frames its local portrayal of the metropolis within a globally uneven context.

Similarly, the motif of the rickshaw itself within Lao She's novel, as a device that fuses the imported and domestic, modern and traditional, human and mechanical, speaks to China's uneven experience of urban modernity within this context.

Imported from Japan in the 1890s, the vehicle offered a faster and more convenient alternative to the sedan chair or the horse and cart, employing modern technologies such as inflatable rubber tires, ball bearings and metal springs. For some, it was viewed as a sign of progress, functioning as a modern status symbol that displayed the wealth and prestige of those with access to the university, government, and diplomatic sectors. Yet because many rickshaw passengers were foreigners and tourists, while pullers were Chinese, the spectacle formed a catalyst for racial and ethnic tensions. To Boxer reformers, the vehicle was a symbol of domination by Japan and the West that paraded the kinds of dehumanizing labor reserved for Chinese workers; to a number of visitors and missionaries it reinforced orientalist assumptions about the barbarism and cruelty of an Eastern "rickshaw civilization" (Acton 24); and to anti-Manchu ethnonationalists, the device was a lingering remnant of a "feudal" China in decline. Elements of racial discrimination also appeared among socialists, for whom the vehicle was a symbol of the "backward" and "primitive" nature of capitalist exploitation in Asia. Despite the similarities between the rickshaw puller and the European factory worker—insofar as both appeared as cogs of the machine—the fact that the rickshaw was seen to rely more directly on the exploitation of human energy was viewed as evidence of Chinese "abnormal development" (qtd. in Strand 36). Yet the fact that such critiques failed to take into account the degree to which "normal" development in the European factory was always contingent on physical labor undertaken in the colonies—from the mineral extraction for cogs to the rubber cultivation for wheels—suggests that the rickshaw was less a symbol of Asian "abnormal development" than of the durability of physical exploitation within colonial and semicolonial regions. Indeed, given that the number of pullers in Peking rose in tandem with that of the rural migrants fleeing the countryside following

foreign-backed mercenary interventions—such that the large and fluid labor reservoir of casual, semiskilled, and seasonally employed workers numbered in the tens of thousands by the 1920s—the device became a symbol of a predominantly colonial experience of precarious and disorganized capitalism.

Because of the rickshaw's ability to crystallize a number of these social concerns, the vehicle became a subject of interest for fiction writers in 1920s China.[5] For Lao She, the figure of the lone rickshaw puller (as opposed to the bus passenger in his London novel, *Ma and Son*) attests to the mechanisms by which individuals are forced to make their own way in the semicolonial Chinese city, without the securities gained through urban planning in affluent European metropolises of the period. In *Rickshaw*, the device both articulates and frustrates the protagonist's desire for social mobility, and this operates at the formal level through the novel's two-tiered narrative structure. On the one hand, there is the omniscient narrator, who frequently interjects with direct social commentary and provides detailed descriptions of the city, many of which emphasize its economic and material limitations. On the other, there is the voice of the eighteen-year-old migrant, Camel Xiangzi, whose desire to own an imported rickshaw and to achieve economic independence forms the starting point for the novel's second mode—that of Xiangzi's self-projected developmental narrative. From the beginning, Xiangzi is depicted as an aspirational economic agent determined to be the "master of his own fate" and a modern, "high-class" man (*Rickshaw Boy* 4) who plans to "buy a rickshaw and find a wife without relying on anyone else; that's how things were done" (68–69). Adopting the mantra that hard work will eventually pay off, his identity is built around a narrative of masculine independence. After four years of hard labor and "unknown thousands of drops of sweat" (4), he manages to save the funds to purchase the vehicle, and, gazing at his

reflection in the shining metal, imagines his future as an independent and impenetrable “man of steel” (275). Though removed from his rural surroundings, Xiangzi remains “a country boy who, unlike the city folk, did not hear the wind and mistake it for rain” (16). An empiricist for whom things are not real if they cannot be seen, felt, and quantified, he internalizes the anxiety formerly reserved for rains and farmland: “Only his rickshaw mattered . . . it was a fertile field that dutifully followed him everywhere, a living piece of land, a precious possession” (16). Yet Xiangzi’s empiricism and his faith in physical immediacy prove inadequate to the complexities of the Chinese metropolis. After failing to pay attention to the rumors of forced conscriptions in the university district, he is captured by warlord soldiers and forced to work as a “coolie” laborer. Despite his meticulous bookkeeping skills, Xiangzi’s quest for economic independence and urban mobility is repeatedly undermined throughout the novel by direct forms of accumulation including warlordism, corruption, bribery, and favor (*guanxi*). Faced with the obstacles of war and corruption, malnutrition, sexually transmitted disease, road accidents, and natural disasters—each of which is mediated by his urban poverty—Xiangzi finally admits that “[e]ven for a man of steel there’s no way out of the net we’re all caught in” (275). His attempts at self-improvement through rational empiricism and Crusoean thrift prove hopelessly idealistic amid these lived complexities.

Although scholars have frequently read the novel as a critique of individualism—noting the final, obituarial descriptions of Xiangzi as “[r]espectable, ambitious, idealistic, self-serving, individualistic” and “a ghost of individualism” (300)—others have highlighted how the novel’s negative depiction of the crowd allows it to reject both individualism and collectivism (Liu 125-26). Yet by shifting the focus away from Xiangzi’s behavior and toward his environment, we see how the

city itself works to distort both individual and collective action. While the final description of Xiangzi appears to lay blame on his belief that individual endeavor will allow him to rise above structural poverty, the alternative sentence provided in James's translation and repeated in Lao She's 1951 revision describes Xiangzi as a subject "caught in Individualism's blind alley" (*Rickshaw* 249). Privileging setting over character, this metaphor casts Xiangzi as a victim of the urban environment's own logic: the blind alley, as a road to nowhere that limits peripheral vision, diverts the path to individual fulfilment to counterintuitive and self-defeating ends. We might then think of the novel not as a critique of individualism so much as its complex *staging* within a specific and inimical setting.

Read in this way, the narrative resembles a kind of reverse-Robinsonade that dramatizes its own early twentieth-century Chinese context, one in which an aspirational, diligent, and calculating protagonist tries but ultimately fails to profit by his environment. Lydia Liu argues that Lao She's novel "has much in common with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in its unprecedented emphasis on money, economic individualism, independence, [and] the dignity of labor," although she insists that Xiangzi is no Crusoe and must "be interpreted on his own ground" (117-118). Doing so need not mean overlooking Lao She's engagement with Defoe's text or the conventions of the English novel that it pioneers. *Rickshaw* is split between Xiangzi's own perspective, conveyed through free indirect discourse and use of local dialect, and that of the omniscient and less sympathetic narrator. As Xiangzi's anxiety about "corrupting" influences becomes increasingly paranoid, the narrator exposes the mental acrobatics involved in his willful attempt to graft narratives of manly independence onto an ill-fitting setting. If Xiangzi relies on certain maxims about self-driven development (aiming, for example, to progress in life "without relying on

anyone else; that's how things were done"),**{AU: This quote is cited two pages above, so no need for citation here.}** the narrator undermines many of these through the depiction of a setting radically at odds with the landscapes of English colonialism. Defoe's Crusoe is seen to serve his economic self-interest through the individual (and by implication, national) qualities of meticulous bookkeeping, prudence, and hard work, yet these very same attributes prove self-defeating within the forking paths of the Chinese city. Rooted in warlord Peking, amid the world-historical realities of dependency and foreign militarism, bribery and corruption, poverty and disease, the novel stages a series of contradictions between the conventions of self-development embraced by Xiangzi and the political and economic landscapes that continually frustrate them. While some critics have read *Rickshaw* as a kind of moral fable about a subject whose corruptibility and single-mindedness prevents him from rising above his urban circumstances, one could argue that the novel offers the precise opposite: a Brechtian story about the difficulties of acting according to a universal code within concrete historical situations. By juxtaposing Xiangzi's urban experience with the narratives that he internalizes, Lao She's rickshaw novel grounds universalizing discourses in a set of claustrophobic urban conditions.

Such an analysis intersects with Jameson's reading of *Rickshaw* as a realist novel characterized as "a superposition of two distinct narrative paradigms", in which "the inner form perpetually works upon and systematically undermines the outer form throughout the novel's progression" (67). The realist interaction of two narrative paradigms, Jameson argues, "takes a specific historical form here by virtue of the way in which one of these paradigms is marked as a Western import" (67). Juxtaposing local Chinese and "imported" Western narrative models, the novel dramatizes a tension between Xiangzi's precapitalist, agrarian attitude toward money (his fixation

on physical coins or his understanding of the rickshaw as a "fertile field"), on the one hand, and the modern commodity logics shaping the capitalist city around him, on the other. Jameson suggests that the difficulties faced by Xiangzi as an urban migrant in an emerging capitalist economy are expressed through the novel's split narrative layers, the first of which draws on the magical gratifications of the fairy tale and the Chinese "wheel of Fortune," while the second makes use of "Western" narrative modes of "critical realism" to expose the economic and political conditions upon which this fairy tale rests (69). Lao She's novel thus borrows from critical realism ("borrows" because of the Anglo-French, institutionalized genre of the novel itself) to explore the upheavals facing society under a precapitalist "Asiatic mode of production" (69). Simply stated: the novel presents a kind of Chinese fairy tale that is self-consciously subjected to the critical and desacralizing processes of "Western" realism.

Despite the fact that Jameson associates critical realism with Western literary history, the critics upon whom he relies for his definition (Lukács, Auerbach, Bakhtin) all come from ambiguously non-Western locations. With this in mind, Joe Cleary has urged us to think of peripherality (whether national or regional) as an essential precondition for the emergence of critical realism itself. In the case of Lao She's novel, although the narrator certainly does possess a critical function within the novel's fairy-tale narrative, it is Xiangzi who constantly appeals to universalized terms and truisms, while it is the narrator who draws on the local specificities of place, the seasons, and the military and historical context. Instead of viewing the narrator as the voice of Western critical realism and Xiangzi as the Chinese artisan peasant, we might then view the narrator as the force of local critique and Xiangzi as the importer of modern narratives of magical gratification. Here it is worth noting Lao

She's memory of his mother's fairy tales, in which she replaced the traditional ogres and monsters with the "foreign devils" of Eight-Nation Alliance troops ("Suppressed Furor" 269). In this anecdote, the abstract monsters of the fairy tale are given a local (colonial-military) identity (269). Similarly, the critical element of Lao She's realism stems less from the novel's "borrowed" Western format than from its ability to subject imported fairy-tale narratives to the complexities of Chinese experience.[6]

If we follow recent critics in viewing Lao She's text as modernist in its application of complexity, self-contradiction, oxymoron, and other borrowed styles (including the format of the novel itself), perhaps what Lao She registers in his "filthy, beautiful, decrepit" city is not a situation in which capitalism is exported to the periphery (nor, as Jameson suggests, one in which a rural migrant fails to cope with the complexities of urban capitalism, as in Balzac's Paris). Rather, the novel dramatizes a situation in which the discourses of urban modernity clash with the realities of economic underdevelopment, the consequence being that metropolitan subjectivities and observational methods (notably, Xiangzi's empiricism) fail to adequately "apply." Indeed, while Jameson usefully diagnoses a kind of "Marxist modernism" in Lao She that is "rooted in the specific situation of socialist construction" outside the West (77), the novel does not associate Xiangzi's failed development with his "feudal" approach to the complexities of urban capitalism so much as stage the interruption of his development by the *contemporary* causal forces of poverty, warlordism, bribery, and corruption in the semicolonial city. This shifts the terms of the argument from a temporal to a spatial register, replacing a "mode of production" narrative (in which Xiangzi represents an "older" mode) with one that emphasizes the spatial contradictions and coevalities embedded in the novel's setting. Read in this way, the narrative generates a set of obstacles that prevents the kinds of

teleological unfolding (or “stages of production”) that Jameson periodizes. Importantly, however, the fact that the novel opens by invoking the fully modern, international space of the Legation Quarter shows how these so-called local realities are by no means purely “Chinese.” From the opening scene, Lao She constructs a *world text* that explores the local effects of global processes, revealing the gap that emerges when urban discourses hit the ground of the location to which they are applied.

It should be noted here that this idea of “imported” discourses does not presume the separation of an authentic “origin” from an inauthentic “copy” but, rather, critically assesses the authority, validity and currency of a given discourse within the context of colonial power imbalances.[7] Lao She’s engagement with “imported” urban discourses is in fact deeply historical. Xiangzi’s empiricist and developmental rhetoric, for example, echoes that of Beijing’s own modernizers in the 1920s and 1930s, who, as Madeleine Yue Dong explains, borrowed from Western sociological methods and planning models to conduct “objective” studies of urban phenomena. These frequently posited the city’s social problems as the outcome of “traditional decadence and hidebound backwardness,” viewing it as an exemplar of an “oppressive tradition” that held China back (Dong, *Republican Beijing* 295). Yet the difficulties of urban modernization in the period—visualized in failed projects like the warlord-occupied Capital Park—suggest that those seeking to simply graft a “modern city of tradition” (91) onto the Chinese landscape without taking wider sociopolitical factors into account faced a challenging reality. By contrast, Lao She avoids diagnosing the characters’ problems as a result of their “traditional decadence” instead relying on an abstract, spectral agent of causality that continually impedes their progress: Xiangzi had “reached up only to be thrown back, as by a ghostly

apparition that forever eluded his grasp" (*Rickshaw Boy* 238). Read historically, the novel's abstract causal forces undermine those intellectual methods that would seek to explain the city empirically by correlating its appearance with an inner logic of feudal backwardness. The same applies to the approach embraced by Xiangzi, the "modern rickshaw man" who, like the city's own modernizers, puts faith in a colonial narrative of overcoming self-inflicted backwardness through self-driven development. Insofar as the antidevelopmental ending of *Rickshaw* reveals the flawed nature of this logic in the uneven city, it presents a challenge to both the colonial modernizing discourses of the period and the developmental structure of the novel form itself.

"Development along Native Lines"

If Lao She's novel interrupts the telos of development from the terrain of the semicolonial Chinese city, a striking parallel emerges with Mulk Raj Anand's novel of the same year, *Coolie*, which goes beyond the trope of caste segregation preoccupying his more successful first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), by engaging with the complex modernity of another semiperipheral urban setting: Bombay. Like *Rickshaw*, *Coolie* traces the process of rural-to-urban migration, moving from a village on the edge of the Himalayas to the nearest town and, via New Delhi, to Bombay and eventually Simla, where it stages the protagonist's untimely death as a rickshaw puller in what can be viewed as another example of antidevelopmental fiction from underdeveloped zones.

Echoing Lao She's description of the "filthy, beautiful" Peking, Anand highlights the visible contradictions on display in the "strange, hybrid, complex, cosmopolitan Bombay" (152), echoing a long history of cultural representations of the city, which, as a Portuguese-British port metropolis and site of the East India Company headquarters in the late seventeenth century, was imagined as a cultural

melting pot and gateway to the West. Notably, the city's architects—who waged a "Battle of the Styles" in the late nineteenth century (Scriver 32)—preferred cultural accommodation to the direct imposition of British styles, as exemplified by the mixture of Victorian neo-Gothic and Islamic-Mughal architecture that characterized the Indo-Saracenic Revival. Despite its cultural hybridity, historians have viewed this style as an exoticist idiom and a marker of "imperial maturity" (34) that aimed to showcase Britain's ability to evolve and adapt to the local environment, noting how hybridity was in fact a prominent feature of British discourse and practice, as reflected in the doctrines of urban "trusteeship" and "development along native lines" (Harris 24). The city's discursive construction as a site of imperial maturity was also echoed by writers such as Rudyard Kipling, for whom Bombay had "achieved a mental attitude several decades in advance of that of the raw and brutal India of fact" (198). For Kipling, this served to justify continued militarism across the rest of the subcontinent, yet the notion of the city's "maturity" overlooked how the British promotion of pockets of modernization went hand in hand with the active maintenance of traditional rural relations and princely states, as well as the highly unstable and cyclical nature of the city's own development following almost a century of laissez-faire urban policy, during which land and buildings became resources for capital accumulation. Faced with high levels of urban poverty and rural migration following successive food crises, it became clear to social commentators both in Britain and India that those structures promising development had exacerbated regional polarization and poverty for the Indian majority.

While it has been commonplace to celebrate hybridity against modernity's desire to erase all differences, this fails to address the tendency for uneven development to produce exactly the opposite effect. Although hybridity is

understandably celebrated for its liberatory potential, Richard Harris has questioned the assumption that "hybridisation threatens the powerful because it undermines the coherence and legitimacy of their worldview," thereby making hybridity "terrifying to colonialists" (20). Instead, he contextualizes the term within British colonialism's hybrid economic geographies, noting how culturally diverse commerce and building cultures made hybridity 'so common as to be a defining characteristic of the colonial city' (23). In Bombay, the architectural landscape was both hybrid and uneven: the grand terminus and buildings for the law courts, post office, clock tower, and Gothic university contrasted sharply with the city's *chawls*—vast tenements built specifically for mill-workers—and the slum districts such as Dharavi that were constructed following colonial land reclamations. Significantly, to those commentators with a transnational perspective, such as Anand, Bombay's situation was visibly at odds with the strides made in urban planning, sanitation, infrastructure, and municipal democracy in imperial London in the early twentieth century. The development of underdevelopment at work in Bombay's overcrowded tenements and newly created slums put into question the narratives of urban maturity espoused by the city's colonial administrators and planners, just as the divisions exacerbated by the city's racially and ethnically stratified workforce clashed with the hybrid language written into its ostentatious public buildings.

Anand's representation of Bombay as hybrid and contradictory, as with Lao She's Peking, speaks not only to the city's cultural cosmopolitanism but also to its visually striking unevenness, which is itself emblematic of the nation's colonial contradictions. Visualizing India from the train window in *Coolie*, Anand juxtaposes the landscapes of rural poverty with "ruined fortresses, castles, shrines and mausoleums" and "the prim redbrick buildings of Sir Edwin Lutyens' New Delhi,"

presenting the nation as a panoply of coexisting modernities and ruins, and a collage of time periods, architectures, and modes of production, from modern factories to subsistence farming (147). In Bombay, the symbolic value of the hybrid architecture meanwhile becomes key to the maintenance of a fragile fiction of imperial maturity that both conceals and compensates for the city's social inequalities. Emerging from Victoria Station, Munoo observes as Europeans "rubbed shoulders" with Parsis, as the saris of Parsi women "vied with" the garments of Hindu women and these "put to shame" the veils of the Muslim women (153). As the phrasal verbs suggest, Bombay is a place where hybridity is inseparable from competition, a place where different sociocultural groups mix with but also vie with, compete with, and put to shame their rivals. The same idea is reflected in the buildings, whose grand domes and minarets are "vying with each other to proclaim the self-conscious heights attained by their Gothic-Mughal architecture" (ibid.). Bombay's "massive, stately edifices," its statue of Queen Victoria and "boulevards of civilization" (155), leave Munoo "[o]ppressed and overcast" (153). He learns that "[y]ou have to pay even for the breath that you breathe" in the city, and the fact that he is frequently denied occupancy and told that he cannot sit down (in restaurants, at work, even in the hospital waiting room) suggests that the city's narratives of inclusivity and civility operate primarily on the visual level (152). For all its hybridity, the metropolis betrays an implicit racial hierarchy: Munoo is dazzled by the English signs and images plastered on the walls, observing beautiful European women on the covers of magazines and the "huge, wonderful, coloured picture of Marlene Dietrich which stared down at him" (157). Yet as he steps in to observe the "milk-white body" (ibid.), he hears "the loud bellowing of raucous motor horns, the tan-tan of tramway bells, the angry yells of phaeton drivers and shouts of 'dem fool', 'black man, where are you going?'" (158).

In such moments, the text juxtaposes the urban visual culture of hybridity with actual experiences of racialized exclusion.

In this way, a parallel emerges between Anand's representation of Bombay as a "land of cruel contrasts" (237)—in which different groups vie with their competitors in the migrant labor market—and historical accounts of the labor force of the colonial city as uniquely generative of both cultural hybridity and ethnoracial tension. Renisa Mawani has shown how ethnoracial difference was integral to the labor demands of colonial capitalism in colonial port cities, which depended on the exploitable labor of a cosmopolitan but racially differentiated and hierarchized force of competing local and migrant workers. In Anand's novel, contradictions emerge between the city's glamorous visual modernity and the privations endured by the migrant populations that form its condition of possibility. After visiting the architecturally and culturally hybrid district of Girgaum, for example, Munoo stumbles across "[t]he bodies of numberless coolies" who are "sprawled all over the pavements" and trips over "a heap of patched quilt that half enclosed the rotting flesh of a leper," hearing disembodied groans and "foul curses" (162–65). Amid decomposing fruit and flesh, he hallucinates a pavement lined with corpses, and the "glistening black bodies" appear as a living, decomposing mass (163). The scene's oppressive uncanniness is linked explicitly to the height and grandeur of the "colossal stone buildings," whose "gigantic proportions . . . shadowed the narrow bazaars [and] made the dark bodies of coolies seem out of place" (165). The image suggests a gap between the signification of the city's architecture and the misplaced bodies of the "numberless" urban workers who fill its streets, confronting the city's whitewashed architectural language with the "dark" bodies that form its excess or remainder.

This contradiction between cultural hybridity and ethnoracial differentiation reaches crisis point when the industrial workers organize a strike in the cotton factory only to have it derailed by a group in the pay of the mill owners, who spark a riot by spreading rumors about the Muslim population. As communalist violence erupts across Bombay, the city's hybridity implodes in on itself, and the "land of luxury and lazzaroni" is "engulfed in chaos" (237). The susceptibility of the workers to the kindling of factions sends a wave of violence crashing through the city, washing away its "hybrid pomp" and "pretences of decency" (ibid.). While, according to commentators such as Aldous Huxley, the solution to the city's social inequalities and violent contradictions was that the Indians should reach political maturity by cultivating a "public spirit" (23). *Coolie* suggests that the exacerbation of ethnic divisions by the city's property owners and industrialists actually prevents such a public spirit from unfolding. In this way, Anand anticipates the "dissolution" of Bombay's status as a cosmopolitan center during the riots of 1992–93, which, as Rashmi Varma points out, revealed how those critics accusing the state of "having repressed or 'denied' ethnic and religious difference" by imposing a universalist national imaginary overlooked the fact that sectarian violence had been "central to India's experience of modernity and capitalism" (66-78). In *Coolie*, the rupturing event of the riot suspends the teleological assumptions at work in narratives of urban development; as the logical outcome of colonial unevenness, it enacts the novel's symbolic destruction of the city's foundational narrative of imperial maturity.

If Anand's novel dramatizes the contradictions underlying urban development discourses from the terrain of the uneven city, it also engages with the journey to maturity associated with the structure of the bildungsroman. After fleeing the riot, Munoo is hit by the car of an Anglo-Indian lady and, while working as her personal

rickshaw-puller, contracts tuberculosis. Significantly, the novel ends at the beginning in terms of both character development (Munoo is incapacitated by a suffocating mother figure) and literary geography (he returns to the Northern Indian hills). His premature death occurs after cycles of delirium and lucidity. Mrs. Mainwaring, in her "complacent hypocrisy," assures Munoo that he will get well again, while Munoo, believing before each hemorrhage that he might recover, looks forward to "testing his powers for the journey to Bombay by a long walk" (281-282). This epic journey across the nation never comes to fruition in the novel.[8] Nor does Munoo's death, unexpected and quick as it is, lead to a state of heightened consciousness, moral epiphany, or religious conversion. Just as with Lao She's Xiangzi, rickshaw pulling leads to an untimely death, and despite Munoo's desire to be the hero of his own epic journey to maturity—as indicated by the novel's intertextual allusions to writers from Dickens to Kipling—he finds his passage to adulthood literally cut short. Thus as Jessica Berman has also suggested, Anand's novel not only subverts the developmental aspirations of its protagonist but presents a direct challenge to the developmental telos associated with the bildungsroman itself.

As with Lao She's novel, the rickshaw becomes the vehicle through which this crisis of development occurs. Yet as also in Lao She, the rickshaw is not simply a metaphor for "backwardness." For Munoo, rickshaw pulling is no Asian cultural relic but a modern alternative to predecessors such as the sedan chair. Yet unlike Anand's previous novel, *Untouchable*—which ends with the possibility of emancipation signified by the arrival of the modern flush toilet—Munoo's death as a rickshaw puller offers little possibility for development in the future. Rickshaw pulling in this way becomes emblematic of an uneven modernity marked by the persistent disadvantages of class and caste, evoking a set of social and economic mechanisms

that hold back the potential for a democratic process of modernization that might include migrant subjects like Munoo. For this reason, the trade becomes central to the sense of stasis evoked by the novel's final sequence, during which India is imagined as a bargain for colonials like Mrs. Mainwaring: "India was the one place in the world where servants still were servants. . . . One could hire a rickshaw for fourpence an hour . . . here were all the luxuries and amenities of the West at the knockdown prices of the East" (267). Combining the manual and mechanical, modern and traditional, movement and stasis, the rickshaw suggests the compatibility of technological innovations with ongoing structural poverty and precarity as it continues to make human labor cheaper than the operation of machines across parts of the global South. In this context, the antidevelopmental trajectories of migrant workers, in both Anand and Lao She, anticipate the legacies of colonial unevenness, imagining a metrocolonial setting in which freely (and forcedly) mobile individuals continue to find themselves subject to the racialized hierarchies of the global economy.

The Rickshaw Novel

In comparing the novels of Lao She and Anand and in centering the act of comparison upon the concrete historical situations to which the texts respond, this essay has shown how both writers interrupt the developmental narratives embedded in colonial urban discourses and novelistic forms. This collision is facilitated by the rickshaw itself as a vehicle that drives the characters' antidevelopmental trajectories, offering a metaphor for the unevenness and asynchrony of urban modernity when viewed in a global context. The fact that development is stalled in both novels reflects the complex intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and nationality in their respective locations, yet it is also broadly indicative of what Arindam Dutta, discussing the appropriation of unwaged labour as menial or artisanal in colonial India, terms the

"self-perpetuating asymmetry that characterizes cheap, informal labor as the hallmark of colonized and ex-colonized countries" (99). It is this global asymmetry—visually inscribed in both city and rickshaw—that the novelists transform into a powerful, protopostcolonial diagnostic.

While it is true that, as socialist urbanists, neither writer refuses to abandon the idea of development altogether, both offer less a radical antimodernization critique than a sensitivity to lived experience as well as a politicized suggestion that what colonial modernity produces is not homogenization but unevenness and anachronism. In this respect, the novels affirm the theory of uneven development's radical challenge to both Eurocentric and Euro-Marxist understandings of capitalism as a universalizing process, replacing models of global developmental stages, homogenization, or acceleration with a vision of uneven landscapes marked by cyclical patterns of destructive creation, accumulation by dispossession, and exhaustion.

Applied to studies of the novel, the theory of uneven development suggests that forms such as naturalism and modernism signify less a new "stage" in literary production than the incursion of new *space*, from which authors can negate the national and imperial biases of the nineteenth-century novel. Yet if Anand and Lao She echo other modernist writers—such as Joyce, Conrad, Kafka, Forster, or Mansfield—in their attention to peripheral urban experience, they ultimately go further than their modernist contemporaries in their attention to the global politics of immobility and forced mobility. Despite the nature of the protagonists' work in transport, both are ultimately *immobile*: Munoo never manages to go "across the black waters" (152), and it is not Xiangzi but his employer who escapes the warlord soldiers by fleeing to Shanghai. In both novels, the rickshaw functions literally and

symbolically as a weight that drags the protagonists back, transforming them into migrants of the kind defined in sociological terms as "immobile lives," or those who facilitate the mobility of others. As self-employed migrant workers, the protagonists anticipate the kind of informal, precarious and devalued labor that continues to maintain capitalist infrastructures, speaking presciently to the forced mobilities experienced by the "immense majority" of informal workers in the postcolonial periphery (Dussel xx). In transforming this experience into antidevelopmental novelistic forms, both writers engage with the uneven global histories of urban modernity while also challenging the narrative regimes that continue to structure these histories.

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[1] In contrast to radical critiques of modernization theory, the theory of combined and uneven development does not dismiss lived experiences of economic, political, or technological modernization but acknowledges capitalism's reliance upon and active generation of forms of labour, extraction, and social organization previously associated with "feudalism" or "primitive accumulation" across spatially uneven zones. For a discussion of the concept in relation to world literature see Deckard et al. *Combined and Uneven.*

[2] Anand studied for his PhD at University College London from 1925 to 1929, and Lao She taught at the School of Oriental Studies from 1924 to 1929. They visited Dublin on separate occasions in 1926 and 1928. On the influence of Joyce, see J. Berman; Witchard.

[3] The novel's title, *Luòtuo Xiángzi* in pinyin, was alternatively translated by Howard Goldblatt as *Rickshaw Boy: A Novel*, by Jean M. James as *Rickshaw*, and by Evan King as *Rickshaw Boy*. This essay cites from both Goldblatt (cited as *Rickshaw Boy*) and James (cited as *Rickshaw*).

[4] The city transformed during Lao She's lifetime from a semicolonial capital referred to as Peking in English to the secondary city of the Republic, renamed Beiping after 1928, and finally to the capital of an independent China—Beijing—in 1949. For an account of the city and its relation to China's "uneven and incomplete social transformations," see Strand 7, xiii–2.

[5] The device features in stories by Lao She, Yu Dafu, and Lu Xun, for example.

[6] While Rey Chow warns against Jameson's appropriation of Chinese literature and highlights the Chinese novelistic traditions with which the text engages (71), Zhang Longxi stresses the usefulness of Jameson's analysis in relation to "the problems of an incipient capitalism in a non-Western context" (73).

[7] It is worth comparing this to Wang Yanan's notion that "magical concepts" are problematic not because of the way they are "applied" to China but due to the coerced way in which they are "imported" or mediated and adopted (qtd. in Karl 14).

[8] The novel echoes Kipling's "The Phantom Rickshaw" (1888), also set in Simla. Anand recalls telling T. S. Eliot his plan "to rewrite Kipling's *Kim* . . . from the opposite point of view" (qtd. in Perera 28).

[i] Lao She is the pen name for Shu Qingchun.