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Vinh Nguyen

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Perspectives

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Abstract: This essay reconsiders the queer interracial relationship in Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears' seminal film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). Rather than analyze the romance between the main protagonists as a national and personal union that resolves complex racial issues, I argue that Omar and Johnny's relationship makes room for the possibility of connection and contact, however fraught and tenuous, without denying histories of racial violence or flattening out forms of difference. As an "impasse" (Berlant), their queer relationship suggests the potential for coexistence that does not offer reconciliation between the nation and racialized subjects. Through a reading of the film, I suggest that intimacy is not broken by the accommodation of past and present racial injury within its plane of desire. Instead, queer desire defers interracial resolution but does not deny the possibility of intimacy, of something yet to come.

Keywords: Black British cinema, South Asian diaspora, queer sexuality, interracial relations, affect

Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) concludes with a scene of queer sensuality in which Omar lathers soap on Johnny's bare chest before the two playfully splash each other with water in the back room of the laundrette they operate together. The distinctive bubbling music of the movie's soundtrack is heard before a door closes to conceal the lovers from our prying eyes. While critics initially praised the film for its groundbreaking depiction of race and sexuality, scholars have subsequently interpreted this final note of queer

pleasure and presumed coupling as a foreclosure of the film's transgressive potential. The gay interracial relationship between Omar, a British-born Pakistani entrepreneur, and Johnny, a white working-class punk, has been read predominantly as a relationship that unites, as a "clean" romance of racial and national union. Commenting on this relationship generally and the final scene specifically, Gayatri Spivak writes that the queer potential is "kept in one place: the development of the solution to interracial problems" (83). While recognizing the lyricism of the gay relationship, Spivak finds it to be more "overtly didactic" than Kureishi and Frears' later film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987): "So the protagonist says he doesn't want to fight and gets beaten up. And then at the end you have all the splashing-water ablution with the music welling up as dirt is erased, so they are cleansed" (83). Spivak's dismissal of the film's ending identifies the moment of intimacy as one in which a sense of resolution is achieved, as if the cleansing of dirt and blood from queer bodies is symbolic of or tantamount to the erasure of a history of racism, contemporary racial and class tensions, and other forms of difference.

The kind of reading that ascribes a reconciliatory politics or amnesic historicity to the queer interracial romance in the film fails to consider the complex ways in which queer desire and race intersect; it fails, in effect, to consider the potentialities of queerness. In her analysis of the film, Gayatri Gopinath argues that "the barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism erupt into the present at the very moment when queer sexuality is being articulated. Queer desire does not transcend or remain peripheral to these histories but instead it becomes central to their telling and remembering" (2). Rather than producing a sense of closure or a healing of the wounds inflicted by colonialism and racism, the queer desire shared between the two main protagonists creates space—a kind of corporeal, sensorial opening—for painful pasts to be acknowledged and remembered. It is a space in which such pasts may have bearing on (but not prevent) present intimacies. Queer desire, then, enables a melancholic relation to the past that does not "let go" of the injury of racism so that everyone involved can "move on." Yet how do melancholic attachments to, or "eruptions" of, racist histories and

racial grief affect the development of interpersonal, romantic intimacy? In framing this crucial problem raised by the film, Alexandra Barron writes that it explores "how individuals, and by extension communities, can connect in spite of the violence, resentments, and past wrongs which threaten to divide them" (15).

I argue that Omar and Johnny's "union" does not bring about an uncomplicated reconciliation—personal, national, or otherwise. Instead, it makes room for the possibility of connection and contact, however fraught and tenuous, without denying or flattening out the messiness—overlapping violent collisions, tender moments, past grief, present pain, and future feelings—of an encounter. Their queer relationship suggests the potential of coexistence (and, perhaps, even love) that does not offer solutions to racial issues. Intimacy is not broken by the accommodation of past and present racial injury within its plane of desire. Rather, queer desire defers interracial resolution but does not deny the possibility of intimate propinquity. It resembles what Lauren Berlant calls an "impasse," where lived temporality has no "narrative genre" or predetermined ways of articulating/being-in the present. She writes: "[A]n impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading" (199). As a "temporary housing" (Berlant 5), the impasse is a site of pause (but not stagnation) that does not guarantee what is or will be. In thinking through Omar and Johnny's relationship as an impasse, I suggest that ordinary interactions of affection and quarrel, love and struggle, and allegiance and betrayal between two individuals do not aggregate to produce forms of ontological certainty or narrative teleology. The two men coming together can be seen as a temporary but not insubstantial relation, an attachment that is always in negotiation. Omar and Johnny occupy a queer impasse in which there is a holding out for something as yet undetermined, where pleasure does not cancel violence and "together" does not mean "one."

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed argues that heterosexuality

> promises to overcome the injury or damage of racism. The acceptance of interracial heterosexual love is a conventional narrative of reconciliation, as if love can overcome past antagonism and create what I would call hybrid familiarity: white with color, white with another. Such fantasies of proximity as premised on the following belief: if only we could be closer, we would be as one. (145)

Heterosexual interracial union can thus come to symbolize the easing of racial tensions and the promise of multicultural happiness—the fantasy of a harmonious nation. Racialized (and often feminized) subjects, and by extension their communities, gain access to and share in prescribed national ideals through proximity to and romantic intimacy with "proper" white national subjects.[1] It is presumably the reproduction of this heterosexual narrative of national union, albeit in the guise of a homosexual relationship, that some view as a weakness in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Spivak's critique of the film, for example, claims that "the gay love had all the kind of erotic furniture that one associates with romantic heterosexual love" (82). Echoing Spivak, Rahul K. Gairola writes that "the young mens' [sic] desires, in some ways, invoke the ending of a heteronormative 'happily-ever-after' ending" (46). This prevalent line of interpretation, which reads Omar and Johnny's homosexual relationship as replicating the structures and characteristics of heterosexuality, understands their relationship as one in which the imperial nation and the postcolonial subject come together in a sort of conjugal relation that reconciles the racist past with an enlightened, multicultural present. The relationship's queer or transgressive potential is consequently limited by its resemblance to a kind of heteronormativity (or homonormativity) that underlies the concept of legitimate nationhood.

However, arguments regarding the homonormativity of the film's interracial romance, or what Jasbir Puar calls "homonationalism," are too quick to make the link between the lyrical ending, with its promise of capitalist success and romantic pleasure, and forms of normativity without taking into account the fact that Omar's desire is directed specifically at Johnny, a queer, punk, working-class subject marginalized by

the emerging forces of neoliberalism that shaped discourses of belonging and national citizenship in Thatcher-era Britain. In other words, the postcolonial Pakistani subject does not pledge allegiance to an ideal neoliberal British subject. To come close to Johnny is not to be "one" with the British nation of the 1980s. Johnny cannot guarantee Omar social belonging because he himself does not possess such an unmitigated privilege. To read Johnny as a stand-in for the nation and the dominant white group elides the implications of his class and sexual positioning and how they might complicate the alignment of white subjects with the nation-state. Indeed, the film opens by underscoring the precarity that marks Johnny's material condition: Salim, a business associate of Omar's uncle, and his black henchmen drive Johnny and his friend Genghis out of an unoccupied tenement building. Johnny's material circumstances—his homelessness, unemployment, association with a delinquent skinhead gang, punk aesthetics, and queer sexuality—disrupt any uncomplicated attempt to figure him as representative of British whiteness in relation to Omar's postcolonial otherness. It bears remembering that whiteness is not discrete, but works in conjunction with other identity categories such as class, gender, and sexuality to acquire its purchase.

Furthermore, Johnny eventually rejects the white supremacist ideologies and claims to the nation that his skinhead friends assert against racial others as a way of ameliorating their economic and social marginalization. In one scene, the gang confronts Johnny and questions him about his economic (but not romantic) involvement with Omar. Genghis, one of the gang members, asks him: "Why are you working for them? For these people? You were with us once. For England . . . I don't like to see one of our men groveling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That's why we brought them over. OK? . . . Don't cut yourself off from your own people" (Kureishi 38). Genghis' comments reveal how Johnny had once subscribed to notions of white domination and believed that he unproblematically belonged in England because of the whiteness of his skin. However, such an understanding of citizenship is no longer tenable for Johnny as he realizes that his class alterity precludes full participation within the economic and socio-political

economy of Thatcherite Britain. Johnny replies to Genghis: "It's work. I want to work. I'm fed up of hanging about" (Kureishi 38). Interestingly, his association with Omar and the opportunity for wage labour that it provides brings Johnny, the white subject, closer to the neoliberal nation. Interracial romance in the film demonstrates how whiteness is not the only or primary force of national affiliation; rather, proximity to capital can be an important means of moving toward (and fulfilling) the "happiness" imperative of national belonging (Ahmed).

The economic dimension of Johnny's decision to enter into a partnership with Omar, and, according to his friends, "switch sides," points not only to the class privilege Omar possesses but also to the complicated power dynamics that mark their relationship. Just as Johnny cannot be neatly made to represent the white nation, Omar cannot stand in for the marginalized black population in Britain. Omar's subscription to neoliberal tenets—like his uncle Nasser and Salim, who are good entrepreneurial subjects—makes him a more desirable capitalist citizen and brings him closer to the nation proper. While this closeness does not guarantee unconditional belonging, it is different from Johnny's working-class positioning. Omar tells Johnny: "I want big money. I'm not gonna be beat down by this country" (Kureishi 51). His capitalist aspiration suggests that one way for racialized subjects to avoid being "beat down" by England is to partake in and profit from the nation's quickly privatizing economy. The film suggests that class and economic success can mitigate the forces of racial control and racism that structure British colonial and national governance. The racial power dynamic is reconfigured as Johnny becomes dependent on Omar for economic survival—Johnny is less a partner than a paid employee in the laundrette venture. In the same scene in which Omar describes his economic ambition to Johnny, after Johnny had left the laundrette on its opening day to go drinking with his "old mates," he also says: "When we were at school, you and your lot kicked me all around the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That's how I like it. Now get to work I said. Or you're fired!" (Kureishi 51). In response, Johnny silently acquiesces to Omar's command and returns to work.

This telling scene conjures up past moments of racial injury that Omar continues to carry with him. It thus illuminates another aspect of Omar's entrepreneurship: economic success as a way to address experiences of racial grief. For Omar, the power accrued through the possession of capital in the present moment becomes a way of correcting the inequality of the past. Capital affords Omar the possibility of seeking "revenge" on those who once "kicked him around." In the role of business owner, Omar sees an opportunity to upturn the colonial relationship of white master and colored servant, a desire that Franz Fanon describes as marking the psyche of colonized subjects. In the same scene, Omar forcefully grabs Johnny while ordering him to get dressed for work. The violence of Omar's action is fueled by a history of hurt and made possible by money. Johnny's silent compliance with Omar's vengeful command is a complex response to racial resentment. Johnny must follow Omar's orders because he is economically dependent on Omar, but I suggest that his acquiescence is also a recognition of the painful and long-lasting effects of racism. Johnny's wordless compliance displays a perception of how racism can harm racialized subjects like Omar, similar to how neoliberalism renders Johnny and his working-class friends economically precarious. His compliance can be read as an acknowledgement of his racist actions and their detrimental impact on Omar. Johnny's response is not to defend himself or deny his racist past but to reach out for physical intimacy. The close-up shot, immediately after the exchange, of Omar's face in profile and Johnny's approaching body from behind (at one point their heads seem to merge) visualizes the queer intimacy that Johnny seeks to establish in a moment of tension and pain. Intimacy becomes a response, a way of addressing but not resolving racial violence and grief.

In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, moments of racial violence and recollections of the pain that this violence produces precede moments of queer intimacy and physical touch. A pivotal scene in the film dramatizes the function of queer intimacy in the midst of grief. On the opening day of the newly renovated laundrette, Omar and Johnny are excited to reveal the space to the public as well as to members of Omar's family. As a crowd of customers gathers outside to await the grand opening, the two

men retreat to the back room, where a two-way mirror allows them to see into the laundrette while concealed from view. Johnny wants to let the customers in, but Omar refuses to do so until his Papa arrives. The conversation then takes a turn to the past and Omar recounts how racist events, in which Johnny is implicated, have impacted his family. Omar walks away from Johnny, stares into the distance, and asks:

> What were they [Omar's white friends] doing on marches through Lewisham? It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People we knew. And it was you. He [Papa] saw you marching. You saw his face, watching you. Don't deny it. We were there when you went past. Papa hated himself and his job. He was afraid on the street for me. And he took it out on her [Omar's mother]. And she couldn't bear it. Oh, such failure, such emptiness. (Kureishi 43)

While Omar is talking, Johnny slowly walks over to him, rests his face against Omar's shoulder, and wraps his arm around him. He takes off Omar's jacket, inserts his hand underneath Omar's button-up shirt, and gently caresses his chest. Omar sighs, closes his eyes, and leans his head backwards. The camera lingers for a few seconds before cutting away.

As Omar articulates the psychic pain that haunts him and his family, Johnny, who had a hand in causing it, employs physical touch as a response (but not a solution) to that pain. The scene suggests that the psychic pain of others can be addressed not through verbalization but through a corporeal intimacy that makes room for such pains to be articulated, felt, and received. Johnny does not apologize to Omar or respond with words to explain away and relegate his racism to the past. As the two make love, Johnny whispers to Omar: "Nothing I can say to make it up to you. There's only things I can do to show that I am . . . with you" (Kureishi 44). Physical intimacy does not absolve Johnny's guilt or shame. It does not, as do many personal and national apology narratives, imply that he is a changed man free of prejudice and racism. Rather, Johnny's touch attempts to create space for (sexual) pleasure alongside the pain of racial grief, as if intimacy might somehow ameliorate the intensity of that pain but not erase it completely from memory.

In this scene, touch is a form of "being *with*" that does not require or demand progress(ion)—a moving on and away from history—but allows for a moment of recognition and understanding in which something else might be made possible.

Indeed, after the lovemaking scene in the laundrette, Omar's painful past erupts again in the scene (mentioned previously) in which he forces Johnny to return to work. As noted, Johnny once again responds by seeking closeness and physical touch. In this way, queer intimacy is not an equivalent to heterosexual union or a form of proximity that heals and submerges the past. Instead, its contingency opens up the possibility for a type of propinquity and contact that allows for complex histories, power dynamics, and desires to be negotiated rather than simply explicated or dramatized for us on screen. *My Beautiful Laundrette* is conscious of this difference between heterosexual and homosexual relations. In contrast to the heterosexual, interracial romance that Nasser and his white mistress, Rachel, represent, Omar and Johnny's queer intimacy does not provide any sort of visible or visual reconciliation. While Omar and Johnny make love and, I argue, negotiate history, unseen in the back room on opening day, Nasser and Rachel waltz and kiss in the front of the laundrette, on display for all to see. In this moment of parallel interracial romances, the heterosexual one makes visible, for the national public, a narrative of happy union between white and other. While their affair is complicated by Nasser's marriage and Rachel's class position, and cannot be viewed as fully "legitimate" in the eyes of the nation, the heterosexual aspect of their relationship allows it to be displayed as a kind of unification. On the other hand, Omar and Johnny's private (but not closeted) act of queer intimacy resists public display and the narration of national union—they prefer to see rather than be seen.

Instead of functioning as "an allegory through which communities in conflict are united in the figure of a romantic union" (Barron 9), Omar and Johnny's queer intimacy is a fraught negotiation of multiple identificatory positions, allegiances, and histories that does not foreclose the possibility of coexistence and intimacy despite difference. In the scenes directly preceding the final one in which the two men wash each other,

Johnny is badly beaten by the gang of skinheads as he comes to Salim's rescue. Omar returns to the laundrette to pull him away from the brawl. In the back room, Omar tends to the bloody wounds on Johnny's face, and they have the following exchange:

> Johnny: I better go. I think I had, yeah.
>
> Omar: You were always going, at school. Always running about, you. Your hand is bad. I couldn't pin you down then.
>
> Johnny: And now I'm going again. Give me back my hand.
>
> Omar: You're dirty. You're beautiful.
>
> Johnny: I'm serious. Don't keep touching me. (Kureishi 68)

In one of the film's many reversals, Johnny becomes the injured victim in a situation of racial violence. It is Omar's turn to seek intimacy and touch as a response to Johnny's physical pain. It is also in this moment that Omar recalls another memory of Johnny—not one of racial grief, but of youth, joy, and playfulness. Omar remembers Johnny as a dynamic, "hard to pin down" young man whose magnetism continues to draw him in. The memory does not cancel out the one of Johnny marching in anti-immigrant protests, but it does provide a more complex account of a man who is, in Omar's eyes, both "dirty" and "beautiful." It demonstrates how queer intimacy accommodates complicated, often divergent moments and memories and enables the critical remembrance and entangling of painful and joyous pasts, racism and desire, and hurt and empathy.

Before the final scene, Johnny walks into the laundrette, which is scattered with broken glass, and stares out the window. Omar comes up behind him, holds him, and gently kisses his neck. The tableau visually recalls an earlier moment in the same location, but this time the figures are reversed. The gesture again illustrates how Omar also employs touch as a way of "being *with*" the pain that Johnny experiences. The final spoken words of the film—"Don't keep touching me"—reject physical intimacy, while the final visual frames reassert its possibility. Erin Manning reminds us that touching is "not simply the laying of hands" (xiv). Rather, touch "is the act of reaching toward, of creating space-time through the worlding that occurs when bodies move" (xiv). For

her, touch is a relational sense, creating the processual body as it forms that which is being touched and makes present a field of becoming and possibility. Omar and Johnny's act of touching can be seen as a building of "space-time" for co-dwelling. This "worlding" of "being *with*" is both intensely private, between two men, and capaciously social, seeking to accommodate the histories that tear them apart, bind them together, and make possible the conditions of their togetherness. Touch does not simply occur in the impasse; rather, it creates the very temporality and spatiality of the impasse. The playful splashing of water marks the final scene as a site of erotic potentiality, where touching is a temporary home that does not demand immediate answers to complicated personal and socio-historical questions.

Queer intimacy in *My Beautiful Laundrette* cannot be easily assimilated into the narrative of "happy" national union, but it also does not foreclose the possibility of togetherness and coexistence. Instead, the film presents a "being *with*" that can account for contradictions and contingencies—its "happy ending" holds tensions, and its intimacy is temporary and without guarantees. In his assessment of the film, Stuart Hall praises *My Beautiful Laundrette*'s nuanced representations of blackness:

> *My Beautiful Laundrette* is one of the most riveting and important films produced by a black writer in recent years and precisely for the reason that made it so controversial: its refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always 'right-on'—in a word, always and only 'positive', or what Hanif Kureishi has called, 'cheering fictions.' (449)

While this assessment was written just a few years after the film's release, it is worth invoking because Hall articulates the need for a different critical lens through which to view a film like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a lens that does not seek easy conclusions but instead sits with the difficulties of race and sexuality. Hall's praise of the film reminds us to keep reconsidering the details and impasses embedded in the film that might destabilize our impulse to read for closure and certainty. It challenges

us to see, in retrospect and differently, the queer potential in Omar and Johnny's relationship.

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Notes

1 "Proper" in this instance signifies that whiteness is not the only criterion for national belonging, but that it requires intersections with the "right" kind of sexuality, class, and politics to stand in for the nation.

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