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Transpacific Ecologies

“They passed a playground. A large mosaic dragon rose from a rectangular sandpit, its spine a series of rings that two boys were now climbing through, its tongue a metal slide a little girl slowly slipped down. Its tail was a hook, from which a black tire swing squeaked. The dragon’s skin was an orange mosaic tile set in gray cement, creating a geometric pelt. Elsewhere in the playground were a large rotating disk and a set of undulating monkey bars, the shiny metal grips rubbed dull gray by hundreds of little hands. Everywhere, children shrieked and ran, dug holes in the sand, clambered over concrete, and swung from metal.

Ah Huat tugged at Hia’s pants. “Can I, Pa? Can I go?”

Hia nodded and the boy took off, racing toward the scrum. Soon he was part of an elaborate catching game that involved four teams and three safe zones, required dexterous scaling of the dragon and leaping over holes. The family watched him, feeling as though it were all of them out there on the sand, climbing, jumping, dodging, narrowly avoiding being caught, emerging victorious in the end” (Heng, 380-381).

The Playground Stage

In this passage from *The Great Reclamation*, the Lee family must confront both their past lives and the foreign modernity they find themselves in. Rachel Heng carefully constructs this scene of young Ah Huat at his new schoolyard and, through her exceptional imagery, points to all the stages that led them there. In this excerpt, Heng utilizes non-human animals, a bounded sand pit, careful diction, and layered metaphors to masterfully craft a playground; one capable of encapsulating the conflicts of modernity versus nature, order versus chaos, and past versus present.

Heng's depiction of metallic animals and a rectangle sandpit in her description of a school playground exacerbates the contrast between a former, natural world and the Gah Men's modern vision. As the author illustrates the "large mosaic dragon" she takes extra care to emphasize the spine, tongue, tail, skin, and pelt that comprise this magnificent figure. Heng highlights these features to draw her readers' attention to each body part before she equates them to climbing rings, a metal slide, a black tire, or a coating of cement and mosaic. Throughout the novel, Heng's imagery centralizes the conflict between living nature and stagnant modernity. She contrasts the islands to the gleaming skyscrapers, the plantation trees to the wild mangroves, or, in this instance, the constructed, fake, cement animals to the former fishing community. Heng goes even further to demonstrate the dismal attempts of the Gah Men to create an artificial sense of movement. The "undulating monkey bars" epitomize this contrast between real environmental movement and a synthetic play space. The inclusion of "monkey" bars or a play dragon continue to showcase this disparity between the living and fabricated, as specifically animalized play structures are implemented in the school yard. Furthermore,

as Heng introduces this manufactured port of activity she describes how the “dragon rose from a rectangular sandpit”. The specific diction and choice of “rose” is reminiscent of Heng’s former islands rising from the sea, or, later, the modern Singapore rising into the skyline. While the Gah Men maintain a certain movement and growth, it is a fabrication that emerges planted and orderly, and is ultimately bounded by its own structure.

In addition, Heng underscores the relationship between the human and non-human as she further explores the contrast between order and chaos. Within her descriptions of the playground, Heng narrows in on the “geometric pelt” of the dragon, an oxymoron that encapsulates the intersection of the natural and the industrial. Moreover, Heng astutely describes the “rectangular sandpit” to create another conflict between the boundedness and the boundlessness of this critical resource. Regarding the central importance of sand, the author litters her writing with contradictions; she describes “the sand singing beneath [Siok Mei’s] feet” one moment, Uncle’s feet “planted in the shifting sand” the next moment, or “newly created land [that] would solidify and settle” in the end (422, 11, 448). Throughout the book, sand serves as a physical representation for the state of the land; its former movement becomes stagnant as it is dredged up and rooted down in the land reclamation process. The sandpit, in this passage, exemplifies sand as a symbol of control. The Gah Men have monopolized the resource for their concrete buildings, their extended coastline, and here, their source of entertainment as well. Similarly, Heng utilizes the image of young Ah Huat’s play to reassert this relationship between order and chaos. With the “scaling” and “leaping” around in a playground “scrum”, children’s innocent play is usually synonymous with

boundless freedom. However, in this example, Heng details an “elaborate catching game that involved four teams and three safe zones”; she ultimately depicts another level of control and regulation present even in schoolyard play.

Alongside her discourse on nature versus modernity or order versus chaos, Heng creates a strong meta commentary that aligns a simple playground scene to the whole epic journey of the Lee family, the kampong, and Singapore. The description of the stagnant, animal themed playground is followed by “everywhere, children shrieked and ran, dug holes in the sand”. In the context of the playground and sandpit, this image of children’s play brings a sense of vitality and joy to the scene; however, this sentence in a vacuum is an incredibly startling image of fear and destruction. As a stand alone sentence, these childrens’ shrieks of joy morph into a scattering of screams and the sand holes they dig call back to the ground disappearing beneath their kampong. Heng’s mastery of scale here applies not only to the meta commentary of “sand holes” as a perpetuation of the Land Reclamation Project, but her form and diction themselves evoke an underlying image of unsettling terror and transformation. The author’s meta commentary becomes more pronounced in the second piece of this passage as she projects the Lee family history being played out in the school yard. Heng details how “the family watched him, feeling as though it were all of them out there on the sand, climbing, jumping, dodging, narrowly avoiding being caught, emerging victorious in the end”. Again, she affirms that the sandpit here is acting as a small stage for the kids to play out a much larger history. Heng depicts the climbing, jumping, dodging, and escaping as a snapshot of what the Lee family survivors and the kampong have had to endure across the course of the novel. From waves of poverty, British rule, Uncle’s

sickness, Japanese invasion, Ah Huat's death, little Ah Huat's birth, the Gah Men, and finally the Great Reclamation and relocation, here the family sees themselves as emerging victorious, surviving Third World Singapore and escaping into the First World.

Lastly, in this excerpt and throughout the book, Heng uses incredibly poetic diction and form choices to further develop her themes of fabrication versus nature and conflicting progress. As demonstrated before, in the example of "dug holes in the sand", Heng's purposeful omission of a subject here aids her creation of a large scale, faceless, sand violence. Even though we understand here that these children, on their playground and in their sandpit, are the ones making sand holes, her omission nonetheless opens up the possibilities for ambivalence and brings another layer to the metaphor. Moreover, Heng is an incredibly poetic prose writer. "A metal slide a little girl slowly slipped down" and " its spine a series of rings" showcase her mastery of alliteration and assonance. The richness of her writing is further emphasized by her attentive imagery, astute metaphors, and rhythmic proximity. As she portrays this scene, "shrieked and ran, dug holes in the sand", Heng utilizes brief rhymes and creates a melodic momentum that gets shattered by the following lines of "clambered over concrete, and swung from metal". Here, the form itself exacerbates the division between the natural world and the monotonous world of metal and concrete. Although, with the digging sand metaphor, these contrasting sounds and ideas might actually be more similar than Heng makes them; thus, her change of pace and rhyme can indicate a marker between the past destruction and the present construction. Finally, in this passage, Heng splices in a brief moment of dialogue, "Ah Huat tugged at Hia's pants. "Can I, Pa? Can I go?". While it is certainly not unique to this excerpt of the book, the

presentation of young Ah Huat's name on the page next to the use of "Pa" is a constant and painful reminder of their lost father. Here, Heng once again harnesses her mastery of form to indicate both past and present coexisting in one moment.

Ultimately, Heng is able to centralize the conflicts between the new Singapore and the old through her incredibly detailed and attentive imagery. Throughout the book, she masterfully relates moments as simple or brief as a school playground to her much larger assertions about the drastic and transformational lives of the kampong and Lee family. Through this multi-layered stage, *The Great Reclamation* succeeds in depicting the ambivalence of progress, the painful grief of the past, and the vitality of characters along the way.