

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Un-suturing Westphalian IR via non-Western literature: *A Grey Man* (1963)

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## Abstract

This paper aims to un-suture common-sense assumptions based on Westphalian International Relations (IR) from South Korea's non-essentialist and situated perspective, in the context of decolonising IR. Towards this end, the paper methodologically investigates a South Korean novel, *A Grey Man*, published in 1963 during South Korea's early post-colonial period at the height of the Cold War. Using a non-Western novel to conduct a contrapuntal reading of Westphalian IR, this paper constructs a different type of worlding, conceptualising 'the international' through 'the cultural'. It explores the following questions: How do 'yellow negroes' (the subject race) make sense of themselves and their roles and life-modes in a world defined for them by the white West (the master race)? How do yellow negroes understand and respond to the white West, which is hegemonic in world politics and history? In what ways does the protagonist of *A Grey Man* resist, engage with, and relate to the hegemonic West, which he has already internalised? In addressing these questions, the paper attempts to access different IR words to think with, such as race, white supremacy, intimacy without equality, sarcastic empathy, and disengagement. These provide an arena in which we can think otherwise, while un-suturing dominant Westphalian IR thinking.

**Keywords:** contrapuntal reading; decolonising IR; disengagement; intimacy with equality; literature; race; sarcastic empathy; Westphalian IR; white supremacy

## Introduction: (Westphalian) IR as the white gaze in *A Grey Man* (1963)

Drawing on a particular European experience, mainstream IR studies take Westphalian IR thinking for granted. Westphalian International Relations view the state, which possesses territoriality, sovereignty, and autonomy, as the central actor in IR. With the state positioned as the critical unit/agent of analysis in IR, studies attempt to explain how the world (to be precise, a world of states) 'really' works. States are sovereign, which means that all (whether Western or non-Western) are equal. In their equality, states form an anarchical international world. This perspective is 'Westphalian common sense', which makes mainstream IR studies possible and the public's state-centric daily discussion of world politics self-evident.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Westphalian common sense originated in Europe and, although it is still a powerful IR belief, it has been questioned recently from a critical and historical view. See Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, 'The big bangs of IR: The myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39 (2011), pp. 735–58; Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648* (London; New York: Random House, 2003); Sebastian Schmidt, 'To order the minds of scholars: The discourse of the Peace of Westphalia in International Relations literature', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55 (2011), pp. 601–23; Turan Kayaoglu, 'Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations theory', *International Studies Review*, 12 (2010), pp. 193–217.

South Korean IR scholarship is no exception to the general pattern. As recently noted by Seo and Cho, contemporary South Korean IR studies are highly state-centric and instrumental in producing knowledge for South Korean national security.<sup>2</sup> This type of scholarship is a performative act of statecraft.<sup>3</sup> Even recent South Korean efforts to build a Korean school of International Relations (based on distinctively Korean-style universalist IR theory) are proxy-hegemonic, ethnocentric, and essentialist – contained within the Westphalian IR thinking box.<sup>4</sup> In criticising the persistent trend towards decolonising IR, this paper attempts to un-suture<sup>5</sup> Westphalian IR thinking and practice from the Korean perspective without essentialising a certain unique Korean-ness. It therefore pays particular attention to intellectual and cultural discourses about the modern Westphalian order during the early post-colonial periods, the 1950s and 1960s, just after the Korean War (1950–3) in South Korea. This period is significant because South Korea was in the formative transition from the colony of a non-Western imperial power (Japan) to a modern state sponsored by a hegemonic Western power (the United States of America). The present paper examines the ways in which *A Grey Man*,<sup>6</sup> a South Korean novel published in 1963, consumes, reinterprets, and engages with Westphalian IR. *Hoesaekin* [English translation: *A Grey Man*], a Korean novel written by In-hoon Choi,<sup>7</sup> was serialised in *Generation*, a South Korean literary magazine, between June 1963 and June 1964. The novel's original title was *A Chair of Grey*.<sup>8</sup> This was eventually changed to *Hoesaekin* [*A Grey Man*], as the book was revised several times following its serialised publication.<sup>9</sup> The novel was translated into English in 1988 by Kyung-ja Chun.

It is here necessary to discuss briefly the historical background of South Korea until the early 1960s, in order to understand the novel's temporal and spatial contexts. The Korean peninsula lies at

<sup>2</sup>Jungmin Seo and Young Chul Cho, 'The emergence and evolution of International Relations studies in postcolonial South Korea', *Review of International Studies*, 47 (2021), pp. 619–36.

<sup>3</sup>Young Chul Cho, 'Inadvertent reproduction of Western-centrism in South Korean IR theorization: Epistemological, teleological, and complicit Western-centrism', *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, 21 (2023), pp. 1–25.

<sup>4</sup>Young Chul Cho, 'Colonialism and imperialism in the quest for a universalist Korean-style International Relations theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28 (2015), pp. 680–700; In Tae Yoo and Young Chul Cho, 'Middle power diplomacy knowledge production in South Korea: A critical interpretation', *Asian Perspective*, 46 (2022), pp. 627–53.

<sup>5</sup>We borrow the concept of 'un-suturing' from George Yancy with one modification. In this paper, to un-suture is to create a sort of split, white hegemonic IR identity or common sense, making it possible for the white West to scrutinise the ways in which they sealed themselves off. It also helps the marginalised/oppressed to think otherwise and act differently for the better. See George Yancy, 'Introduction: Un-sutured', in George Yancy (ed.), *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-Racism* (New York: Lexington, 2015), pp. xi–xxvi.

<sup>6</sup>In-hoon Choi, *A Grey Man*, trans. Kyung-Ja Chun (Seoul: Si-sa-young-o-sa, 1988).

<sup>7</sup>He was born in 1936 in North Hamgyong Province, which is now part of North Korea, during the Japanese occupation. During the Korean War, he travelled on a US Navy ship to take refuge in South Korea with his family. He experienced the tumultuous history of modern Korea, including Japanese imperialism and colonialism, violent right-left ideological feuds, the fratricidal Korean War, a popular revolution, a military coup, authoritarianism, dictatorship, rapid economic development, and democratisation. As a novelist, In-hoon Choi was both prolific and polemic. His oeuvre consists of 15 books, with most of his novels focusing on individuals who suffer from structural, ideological conflicts that link the division of Korea to great power international politics. In-hoon Choi is considered to have launched a new age in Korean modern literature. He passed away in 2018 at the age of 84. The South Korean government posthumously decorated In-hoon Choi with the Geumgwan Order of Cultural Merit, the highest honour of its kind, for his contribution to Korean literature. In-hoon Choi's life is an example of post-colonality in South Korea.

<sup>8</sup>Mun-jung Kim, 'A study on "revolution" and "writing" in the *Grey Man*' [in Korean], *Bipyongmunhak* [*Critique Literature*], 35 (2010), p. 47–66 (p. 47).

<sup>9</sup>*A Grey Man* is an unusual novel, in the sense that it does not contain a well-organised, conventional plot, shaped around a particular event. Instead, it presents the in-depth reflections of its main protagonist, Tokko Chun, a northern-refugee-cum-university-student in South Korea, who wrestles with various topics, including love, time, imperialism, colonialism, communism, war, national division, nationalism, authoritarianism, and democratic revolution. Tokko Chun is *A Grey Man*. He undertakes an honest and intelligent act of self-questioning while talking with other characters in the novel. The content of the novel is personal, historical, and social, capturing the personal perspectives of Tokko Chun and other characters on Korean politics and society in a world of Western great powers. It is a novel of diverse ideas without a clear storyline. The temporal background of *A Grey Man* moves from autumn 1958 to summer 1959, just before the South Korean Democratic Revolution on 19 April 1960.

the crossroads between continental (China and Russia) and oceanic (Japan and the United States) great powers. Historically, Korea belonged to the Sino-centric tributary system, which was replaced by the Japanese Imperial system in the late 19th century. After Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), both of which determined which country would dominate Korea, Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910 and gained its independence in 1945, when Japan was defeated in World War II. This was not political independence, but liberation from Japan, since Korea was placed under a trusteeship, with the Soviet Union occupying the northern half of the country (North Korea) and the United States occupying the southern half (South Korea) between 1945 and 1948. This began the national division of Korea, leading up to the Korean War (1950–3). In 1948, both Koreas joined the Westphalian sovereign-state international system. Both great powers established client governments, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). War between the Koreas broke out in 1950, with a ceasefire reached in 1953. The Korean War was not merely a civil war, but an international proxy war between the 'free world' and the communist bloc.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1950s, coinciding with the temporal background of *A Grey Man*, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, far weaker than its enemy, North Korea. Its national security was ensured only through US patronage and protection against the communist North. It is widely accepted in both Koreas that modern Korean history is a history of foreign subjugation, humiliation, and suffering – and Korea's resistance against (and accommodation with) the great powers that surrounded it.<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s and early 1960s, South Korea was the weakest Westphalian state at the bottom of the Western-centric Cold War hierarchical structure.<sup>12</sup> Domestically, the first president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee (Princeton PhD; a former independent activist in the United States during the Japanese occupation of Korea), who took office in 1948, was overthrown by the April 19th Democratic Revolution in 1960, which was triggered by his autocratic rule and rigged elections. He fled into exile in Hawaii. Afterwards, South Koreans had enjoyed a moment of democracy and freedom, yet this was quickly terminated by the military coup led by General Chung-hee Park on 16 May 1961. Park became South Korean president with an iron fist. In South Korea, the 1950s and early 1960s were imbued with anti-communism, anti-North Korea and anti-Japan sentiments, pro-Americanism, authoritarianism, dictatorship, politico-social unrest, developmental statism, and poverty.

During the early 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, In-hoon Choi interpreted the Westphalian IR of that era very differently in *A Grey Man* (1963). As Tokko Chun, the novel's protagonist, laments:

We [Koreans] are a *defeated race*. The circumstances are simple. We have been *colonial denizens* for centuries. The East has been pulled before the light of world history as *the slave of the West*, not as an equal competitor.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that to Westerners we are merely *yellow negroes*. [...] We awoke to *find ourselves natives*. In the old days, when the Westerners came to Africa they haunted elephants for ivory and they shipped the natives to America in chains for use as slaves. *We are now negroes driven out to hunt in our own locale*.<sup>14</sup>

Western children are brilliant. *What potent and amazing seeds they are*. A race for which it is right to seek one's own benefit, at all costs to live well. [...] The obsession to found a thousand

<sup>10</sup>Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); The Association of Korean Teachers, *A Korean History for International Readers* (Seoul: Humanist, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>Charles K. Armstrong, *The Koreas* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>12</sup>Joonseok Yang and Young Chul Cho, 'Subaltern South Korea's anti-communist Asian cooperation in the mid-1950s', *Asian Perspective*, 44 (2020), pp. 255–70.

<sup>13</sup>Choi, *A Grey Man*, p. 11, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 228, emphasis added.

year empire on the earth is certainly a Western notion. For us no such tradition existed, that is certain.<sup>15</sup>

The novel shows that race, rather than state, is central to international politics – and more specifically, to Westphalian IR. Throughout the novel, race is not a negligible concern but one that is central to the Korean intellectual's understanding of the (Westphalian) international system. It is a principal modality, through which international life is experienced and understood. It is also a key element used to define and demarcate the powerful/coloniser and powerless/colonised in IR. Race is an important lens, which can be used to articulate the international system in different ways, both epistemologically and ethically, as recent critical IR writings have argued.<sup>16</sup> This approach reveals that the issue of race has been suppressed in IR and not just ignored, implying that 'the racialised consequences of IR' are inevitable.<sup>17</sup> In other words, there has been an active forgetting of race in Westphalian IR.

The above excerpts also reveal that, to the 'defeated race', 'colonial denizens', 'the salve of the West', 'natives', and 'yellow negroes' (in relation to 'potent and amazing seeds [of the West]'), Westphalian sovereign equality is a hypocritical mockery, which despises, silences, excludes, and/or exploits non-whites in the international system. Sovereignty and equality are for whites only.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Westphalian IR is a world of racial inequality and subjugation, based on a distinction between superior whites and inferior peoples of colour. The system is thus hierarchical, rather than anarchical. Colonialism and imperialism, as modes of white governance imposed on non-whites, have been integral to the construction and reproduction of modern-day international relations.<sup>19</sup>

In *A Grey Man*, the underlying, hidden grammar of world politics is white supremacy, 'conceived as a comprehensive condition whereby the interests and perceptions of white subjects are continually placed centre stage and assumed as "normal"' at the expense of racialised others.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Westphalian IR is underpinned by white-centred history and world-making. This scheme assumes that whites are naturally better than non-whites and thus do not have to struggle or demand equality or civil treatment in Westphalian IR, unlike colonial non-whites. As whites typically take this hierarchy for granted, they find it difficult to give up. Their attitude expresses a

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 27–8, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam, *Race and Racism in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Navnita Chadha Behera, 'Globalization, deglobalization and knowledge production', *International Affairs*, 97 (2021), pp. 1579–97; Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (eds), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (London: Routledge, 2002); Sankaran Krishna, 'Race, amnesia, and the education of International Relations', *Alternatives*, 26 (2001), pp. 401–24; Cecelia Lynch, 'The moral aporia of race in International Relations', *International Relations*, 33 (2019), pp. 267–85; Chengxin Pan, 'Racialised politics of (in)security and the Covid-19 Westfailure', *Critical Studies on Security*, 9 (2021), pp. 40–5; Randolph B. Persaud and Alina Sajed (eds), *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations: Postcolonial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2018); V. Spike Peterson, 'Critical privilege studies: Making visible the reproduction of racism in the everyday and International Relations', *Security Dialogue*, 52 (2021), pp. 17–27; Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, 'From the everyday to IR: In defence of the strategic use of the R-word', *Postcolonial Studies*, 19 (2016), pp. 191–200; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup>Ajay Parasram, 'Hunting the state of nature: Race and ethics in postcolonial International Relations', in Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 102–15 (p. 108).

<sup>18</sup>For instance, although Japan before World War II was a great power, it was treated as racially different in world politics, evoking the narrative of the 'Yellow Peril' in the West. Concerned about racial discrimination in IR, Japan demanded that a 'racial equality clause' be included in the League of Nations chapter. This request was denied, confirming Japan's belief that it would be excluded from the international society of great powers, due to racial bias. See Steven Ward, *Status and Challenge of Rising Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 100–29; Amitav Acharya, 'Race and racism in the founding of the modern world order', *International Affairs*, 98 (2022), pp. 23–43.

<sup>19</sup>John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sankaran Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

<sup>20</sup>David Gillborn, 'Rethinking white supremacy: Who counts in "whiteworld"', *Ethnicities*, 6 (2006), pp. 318–40 (p. 318).

weaponised narcissism, which should be problematised. From the perspective of *A Grey Man*, the (Westphalian) international system is the white gaze. This controlling gaze prevents us from seeing realities in the international system, including race, racism, imperialism, and colonialism. The legacies of this blindness persist in both the Global South and Global North.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, *A Grey Man* problematises states as legitimate ontology by revealing how, in practice, race is the ontology in IR instead, in accordance with the lived experiences of the yellow negroes. Perhaps race itself is falsely considered by *A Grey Man*, yet ontologically race can be seen as a shared ontological imagination of the white West who wants to forget it and the yellow negroes who become conscious of it in IR. Sovereignty is a disguise and race is the belief and practice. Therefore, by pointing out the hypocrisy of sovereignty, *A Grey Man* invites non-white subjects to strive for change.<sup>22</sup>

This short critique of Westphalian IR in *A Grey Man* reveals that, while novels and poetry may be primarily aesthetic, literature is inevitably political. It is a window onto plural understandings and worlds, each of which is sensed differently.<sup>23</sup> The power of literature gives us a different language for seeing and describing the world.<sup>24</sup> We can access fresh ‘words to think with’ through literature.<sup>25</sup> Literature offers situated perspectives, which serve as places in which we can think ‘otherwise’, while criticising the hegemonic perspective. There has been an aesthetic turn in IR studies,<sup>26</sup> based on appreciating the role played by cultural, popular texts in constructing ‘a creative space that is not filled by existing ideas and information.’<sup>27</sup> By reading *A Grey Man* as a politically acute aesthetic text, this paper contributes to this turn in critical IR studies. More specifically, this paper sees Tokko Chun (*A Grey Man*’s main protagonist) as what Michael Shapiro calls an ‘aesthetic subject’, who ‘articulate[s] and mobilize[s] thinking’, which is to not only denaturalise ‘historically contingent accepted knowledge practices’ but also craft ‘the conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds.’<sup>28</sup> It is in this sense that this paper’s interdisciplinary approach allows us to (re)think our common-sense IR critically, differently, and creatively.

This study also carries out a contrapuntal reading of the (Westphalian) international system via *A Grey Man*. In his influential book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said introduced a critical methodology of contrapuntal reading which enables us to see, interpret, and problematise given dominant discourses or texts – such as mainstream Westphalian IR’s understanding of how the world works – by the interconnections and interplay between different voices, such as the coloniser and the colonised.<sup>29</sup> For instance, recently the *New York Times Magazine*’s *1619 Project*, though controversial, provided a more nuanced and fuller understanding of American history

<sup>21</sup>David L. Blaney and Naem Inayatullah, ‘International Relations from below’, in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 663–74; L. H. M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Branwen Gruffydd Jones (ed.), *Decolonizing International Relations* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Sanjay Seth, ‘Introduction’, in Sanjay Seth (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–12.

<sup>22</sup>We the authors thank RIS’s reviewer for this valuable point.

<sup>23</sup>Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>24</sup>Roland Bleiker and David Hundt, ‘Ko Un and the poetics of postcolonial identity’, *Global Society*, 24 (2010), pp. 331–49.

<sup>25</sup>Helen M. Kinsella and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Well, what is the feminist perspective on international affairs? Theory/practice’, *International Affairs*, 95 (2019), pp. 1209–13 (p. 1213).

<sup>26</sup>Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2018); William A. Callahan, *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Shine Choi, *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Relations: Problems and Alternatives* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jason Dittmer, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Michael J. Shapiro, *Methods and Nations: Cultural Governance and the Indigenous Subject* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>27</sup>Sungju Park-Kang, ‘Fictional IR and imagination: Advancing narrative approaches’, *Review of International Studies*, 41 (2015), pp. 361–81 (p. 370).

<sup>28</sup>Shapiro, ‘Studies in trans-disciplinary method’, p. 11 and p. xv.

<sup>29</sup>Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993). See also Pinar Bilgin, ‘“Contrapuntal reading” as a method, an ethos, and a metaphor for global IR’, *International Studies Review*, 18 (2016), pp. 134–46; Geeta Chowdhry, ‘Edward Said and contrapuntal reading: Implications for critical interventions in International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 36 (2007), pp. 101–16.



within the broader context of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and racial power relations, while uncovering and challenging the underlying power dynamics, prejudices, injustices, and concealed assumptions present in mainstream white-centric American history-telling.<sup>30</sup> Informed by Said, Chowdhry argued that contrapuntal reading can ‘engender the articulation of exiled voices into IR and help us interrogate the histories and assumptions which “uphold elite privilege in IR pedagogies”’.<sup>31</sup> Through this process of contrapuntal reading, we can differently historicise, explore, and ‘world’ marginalised and colonised people and their psychological, social, and material conditions, as a way of ‘recuperating a “non-coercive and non-dominating knowledge”’.<sup>32</sup> In seeking to listen to the colonised’s voices, this study’s contrapuntal reading does not intend to stress the separateness of different entities, such as the West and the non-West and the coloniser and the colonised; rather, it equips us to have ‘an urgent sense of the interdependence between things.’<sup>33</sup> This paper sees *A Grey Man* as a non-traditional, contrapuntal site of Westphalian IR, from which we can world and theorise the international in a different way. In doing so, we also attempt to recover, celebrate, rearticulate, and reinterpret *A Grey Man* as a non-Western literary classic, reconsidering our common-sense Western(-centric) culture and becoming part of the process of democratisation and decolonisation in IR and beyond. This study allows us to imagine a different life-world, which can be more equitable and inclusive, and less unequal and violent than Westphalian IR. It adds to and is indebted to a growing body of recent post-colonial and decolonial IR scholarship.<sup>34</sup>

The structure of the paper is as follows. The following section investigates how ‘yellow negroes’ make sense of themselves, their roles, and their life-modes in a world defined by the white West. This section is followed by the yellow negro’s self-reflexive critique of himself. Next, the paper investigates how *A Grey Man* makes sense of the white West, which remains hegemonic in world politics, and how yellow negroes respond to the unequal racial world imposed on them. Finally, it explores how the ‘grey man’ resists, engages with, and relates to the hegemonic West, which he has already internalised. The concluding section recaps key arguments in the paper, along with the implications of decolonising IR.

### Yellow negroes in a world defined by the white West

As noted in the introduction, for Tokko Chun in *A Grey Man*, ‘yellow negroes’ were pulled into the light of world history (i.e. the Westphalian international system) as slaves of the West, not as equal competitors. The main question in this section is as follows: how do yellow negroes as a subject race make sense of themselves, their roles, and life-modes in world history and politics? As Tokko Chun says:

<sup>30</sup>Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jake Silverstein (eds), *The 1619 Project* (New York: Random House, 2021).

<sup>31</sup>Chowdhry, ‘Edward Said’, p. 103.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>33</sup>Edward Said quoted in Meera Sabaratnam, ‘Bring up the bodies: International order, empire, and re-thinking the great war (1914–1918) from below’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 29 (2023), pp. 553–75 (p. 558).

<sup>34</sup>Fiona B. Adamson, ‘Pushing the boundaries: Can we “decolonize” security studies?’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5 (2020), pp. 129–35; Tarak Barkawi, ‘Decolonising war’, *European Journal of International Security*, 1 (2016), pp. 199–214; Behera, ‘Globalization, deglobalization and knowledge production’; David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, ‘Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45 (2017), pp. 293–311; Zeynep Gulsah Capan, ‘Decolonising International Relations?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 38 (2017), pp. 1–15; Phillip Darby (ed.), *From International Relations to Relations International: Postcolonial Essays* (London: Routledge, 2016); Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Decolonizing global ethics: Thinking with the pluriverse’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 33 (2019), pp. 115–25; L. H. M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Olivia U. Rutazibwa, ‘Hidden in plain sight: Coloniality, capitalism and race/ism as far as the eye can see’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48 (2020), pp. 221–41; Seo and Cho, ‘The emergence’; Chih-yu Shih, *Eros of International Relations: Self-Feminizing and the Claiming of Postcolonial Chineseness* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022); Kosuke Shimizu (ed.), *Critical International Theories in East Asia: Relationality, Subjectivity, and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

Naturally, we [Koreans as yellow negroes] are natives. Our political system was not won by us through fighting. [...] Are not all of our possessions Western transplants into Korea? The West. The world of science and Christendom. [...] The West is Janus. It has two faces. Capitalism. Communism. There is no place for us. We are not main characters, merely extras.<sup>35</sup>

We [Koreans] go on living like this. Like a perverse whore waiting for another rapist, we Koreans will forever wait for a lover [...] revolution? No. Who would revolt for the sake of Koreans? [...] How could it [revolution] work out when the Western brats are sure to meddle?<sup>36</sup>

As these excerpts imply, becoming a subject race in history felt like a bolt from the blue for Koreans. It was an absurd happenstance. Korea was forced to participate in Western-led scripts, including the Westphalian state system, imperialism, colonialism, communism, capitalism, and democracy.<sup>37</sup> The nation was forced to become a 'yellow negro' when the East was called up by the West. To Korea and the East, the world was defined for them, not by them. While subject races lacked the agency to contest Western hegemony, they also lacked the ability to escape fully from that world. Subject races felt trapped, with no way out – or in. 'No choice' was the living condition of yellow negroes. An actor without freedom is a slave. In *A Grey Man*, what role and identity do yellow negroes have in a world defined by the West?

We are like laborers called out to push up a stone the Westerners had rolled down. What's more, we aren't even allowed to lay hands on the stone, we can only push Sisyphus's butt. There are some people who miscomprehended this. And so they rack their brains wondering why the stone feels mushy or why a smell of farts is in the air. A myth based on a misunderstanding. *The Westerners may be Sisyphuses, but we are not. We are something like 'Sisyphus's ass-pushers'.* So our sufferings do not find expression in the lofty ordeals of Sisyphus. Rather, we always look bewildered, awkward, embarrassed, uncertain and indecisive.<sup>38</sup>

Sisyphus's struggle seems futile and absurd, and Sisyphus is hopeless. Is his life meaningful at all? Is his life worth living? In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942, Albert Camus argued that Sisyphus could gain freedom and happiness in a meaningless world through pure awareness of his absurd, wretched condition and the inevitability of his fate (his rock):

The lucidity that was to constitute his [Sisyphus's] torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. [...] His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. [...] The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>39</sup>

It is clear that Sisyphus is 'the' protagonist, who is finding or making meanings of life; he is the one who can achieve self-realisation through his will and effort. Sisyphus is a Cartesian 'I' in the script known as 'the myth of Sisyphus' or in Greek mythology more generally, which is the white script. Sisyphus belongs to the master race, representing the white West. As Sisyphus shows, the master race strives for self-realisation, while continuing to carry out insurmountable, yet sublime, tasks given to it by God. Because they are divine, they are necessarily good.

As the above excerpts show, however, yellow negroes (subject races) are 'already there' in the white script of Sisyphus without Sisyphus recognising them. As a subject race, yellow negroes have

<sup>35</sup>Choi, *A Grey Man*, pp. 100, 111.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>37</sup>Although Tokko Chun perceived the Cold War as an intra-war within the West, seeing the Soviet Union as part of the West, there are different literatures which show that the West was constructed in relation with the Soviet Union as the other. See Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'The East' in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Simon Dalby, 'Geopolitical discourse: The Soviet Union as other', *Alternatives*, 13 (1988), pp. 415–42.

<sup>38</sup>Choi, *A Grey Man*, pp. 192–3, emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup>Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 88–9.

no choice but to participate in the script. This engagement is unwitting and forced. The yellow negroes themselves are curious about when, why, and how they were co-opted into the Sisyphus script and forced to push Sisyphus's ass. Yellow negroes have no rock (i.e. no fate) of their own. Despite this, the yellow negroes (Sisyphus's ass-pushers) have to roll a Western rock up a hill for the sake of Sisyphus. In other words, the white script of Sisyphus has been co-constructed by both the master and subject races. Indeed, subject races have always existed in international relations; they have backed the master race in creating the modern state system, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, communism, World Wars I and II, the Cold War, and global governance, all of which have been co-constructed between the West and the Rest.

Despite this, white Sisyphus is so habituated to being treated as the only sublime actor that he ceases to see the others (peoples of colour) as they really are. Sisyphus's white script reassures him (the master West) that he does not see what he sees. This refusal to see the non-West is precisely how colonial/oppressed people come to be externalised in Westphalian IR thinking. At the same time, in practice, the same script informs Sisyphus that he has the heavy burden of ruling the world as the owner of the globe, as exemplified by the White Man's Burden or the West's civilising mission towards people of colour in world politics.

Here, we can read three racialised colonial suppositions that a Sisyphus's ass-pusher (subject race) unwittingly accepts, which reveals their modes of being-in-the-world that normalise violence, exploitation, dehumanisation, and self-alienation in everyday life. First, the Sisyphus ass-pusher believes that the master race is an ontological condition for the existence of a subject race. This belief is a result of white supremacy operating within the Westphalian system. According to existentialist thinkers,<sup>40</sup> 'being is existence plus essence'. Although Koreans already exist and have always existed, their essence is defined by what they do (pushing not the stone but the ass) and thus what they are not (they are not white). Accordingly, they cannot be seen at work. Since Koreans, as yellow negroes, (un)consciously continue to push Sisyphus's ass, their being is subject to Sisyphus until they stop pushing. As a subject race, they are 'merely extras', if not slaves. As a result, yellow negroes mistakenly believed that the essence of a subject race is to serve the master race, in the same way that Sisyphus's ass-pushers serve Sisyphus. In other words, Sisyphus's ass-pusher's colonised belief of their essence predetermined by the master West precedes and makes possible the very being of the colonial East. In line of this racialised colonial thinking, there can be no Sisyphus's ass-pushers without Sisyphus. Although Sisyphus's ass-pushers – colonial peoples of colour – are 'I', that 'I' is an auxiliary 'I', which cannot come into being without the Cartesian 'I' – the white West. Sisyphus's ass-pushers are thus unable to be independent, free subjects on their own, as nothing can be articulated without Sisyphus – the white West. In Frantz Fanon's terms, 'I [subject race] am deprived of the possibility of being a man', since 'I [subject race] am overdetermined from without.'<sup>41</sup>

Under this hierarchical, dependent ontological condition shaped by colonial racism, epistemologically and practically, subject races tend to be seen as a means, rather than an end or goal, in human history by both the master and subject races. For Sisyphus, the rock is his fate and rolling the rock up the hill is his lofty aim. Within this process, Sisyphus's ass-pushers are a mere means of helping Sisyphus roll the rock; in practice, Sisyphus barely recognises their contribution. In fact, there is no need to recognise it, as Sisyphus's ass-pushers are simply a useful means of serving Sisyphus in historical terms. The master race receives the recognition from the subject races, but it feels empty and unsatisfactory, because the master race does not recognise the subject races as human in nature: 'the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.'<sup>42</sup> Indeed, 'a world of reciprocal recognitions'<sup>43</sup> is impossible in the context of racism and colonialism. Subject races are often rendered ersatz, disposable, nugatory, undifferentiated, and inferior – and regarded as subhuman, abhorrent, and vermin. This white

<sup>40</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), pp. 87, 65.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 170.



seeing is epistemological racism, in which whites hardly think of themselves as a concern of race, taking it for granted that whites are naturally better than non-whites. Whiteness is seen as a mode of racelessness. In understanding their lives in history, race should not be considered seriously, since race is often seen as something tied to people of colour. Those deemed white can forget their own racialisation because they are the norm and stand for legitimacy. This is a delusion of white supremacy, which is often laced with the colour blindness that takes on racial innocence in real life. It is the luxury of non-self-awareness as the privileged and the hegemonic.

Even George Orwell, who was critical of Western imperialism, expressed questions about coloured colonial people, arising from his own white gaze, in his essay, 'Marrakech',<sup>44</sup> based on his experience in Morocco:

The people have brown faces – besides, there are so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself [whites]? Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects?

This type of white seeing has helped the master race justify its exploitation of the racialised other in real life. People with brown faces are not just instrumental but redundant. According to Fanon,<sup>45</sup> colonial peoples of colour are not Hegelian (white) slaves, who can ultimately share reciprocity with the master, but Nietzschean (racialised) slaves, whose morality consists of a life of service to the master, self-denial, and self-sacrifice.<sup>46</sup> Here, the master's exploitation is interpreted as a blessing, as it enables the Nietzschean slave to fulfil their moral purpose. Subject races – Sisyphus's ass-pushers – are essentially lackeys.

Regarding Nietzschean slave morality, the third point involves the lived inferiority of the subject race and how they experience what it means to be yellow (negroes). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon provides a powerful indictment of the white West's racism and colonialism, showing how they ruined the physical and psychological conditions of colonised people. He argued that, 'the Negro wants to be like the master. Therefore, he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and toward the object [as the source of his liberation]. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object.'<sup>47</sup> In this explanation, the white West is the unquestionable reference point (or role model) for subject races. Members of subject races seek recognition – 'you are just like me' – from the white West. The less recognition Sisyphus's ass-pushers receive from Sisyphus, the more they want it. Thus, the lack of recognition actually drives desire for the white West. The longer this cycle continues, the more Sisyphus becomes the focus of the ass-pushers' thinking and doing. Sisyphus's ass-pushers (subject races) long for recognition so powerfully that they become fixated on Sisyphus (the master race). In so doing, the subject race becomes unable to see itself except 'through the revelation of the other world [the master race]'; what W. E. B. Du Bois calls, 'double-consciousness': Sisyphus's ass-pushers always look at themselves 'through the eyes of others [whites]'.<sup>48</sup> The subject race's sense of subjectivity and dignity does not rest on itself alone; rather, the subject race hates itself for what it is in order to gain the Western love that it longs to receive. In a racist colonial thinking circuit, subject races are enslaved to their inferiority, just as the white West is enthralled by its superiority.<sup>49</sup> This implies that decolonisation is necessary for both the white West and the coloured non-West.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> George Orwell, *Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>46</sup> Kyung-Won Lee, *Black History, White Theory: The Genealogy and Identity of Postcolonialism* [in Korean] (Paju-si: Hangilsa, 2011), pp. 197–208; Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 81–8.

<sup>47</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 172.

<sup>48</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 42.

<sup>50</sup> To unveil the traumatised psychology of the colonised for an analytical purpose, this section tactically uses a binary distinction of the white West vs. the coloured Rest. Yet the authors need to stress that the white West is not a uniformly essentialised entity but rather hybrid and post-colonial entities, though colonialism and imperialism have heavily informed

### A Yellow negro's self-reflexive critique of themself

Alongside the vexing recognition problem, yellow negroes tend to other themselves to become closer to the master race; they refer to the white West as the self that colonised itself. The positions of self and other are switched in the psychology of a yellow negro in *A Grey Man*: the self thinks that it is not the self but the other in the world. In the novel, Tokko Chun describes Korean intellectuals and their scholarship as follows:

For what our whole race is doing these days is no different from studying abroad. *What we see, what we hear, how we eat, it's all American culture*, isn't it? Why spend money to go there [the West] when you experience it sitting here? [...] our condition is hopeless. For instance, take Modernism in Korean literary circles. *Irresponsible epigones*. Without even being aware of culture currents, they are *slavish mimics*. Nonsense they didn't understand themselves. They call it 'avant-garde'. Vanguard for what? Resistance against whom? Antitheses without theses. That is the climate of our art. It's the worst of all exotic tastes.<sup>51</sup>

On the hull of that vessel is written 'USA'. Those [yellow negroes] before the television superimpose 'R.O.K.' over those letters and enjoy the illusion that we are aboard that ship.<sup>52</sup>

This critique suggests that, for Koreans as a subject race, what is Western is us [Koreans] and what was/is Korean is ignored or forgotten. In addition, yellow negroes learn unconditionally that Western ideas are universal and authentic, although Western ideas are 'simply one of many possibilities'<sup>53</sup> in human history. The flip side is that the universal application of Western ideas 'originates not from universalism, but from cultural mimicking'.<sup>54</sup> A good example of cultural mimicking is what Sisyphus's ass-pushers are doing while believing that they are pushing their rock – Sisyphus's ass – for themselves. Unbeknownst to the yellow negroes, they have been diligently following and mimicking the white West. Thus, Sisyphus's ass-pushers always feel 'bewildered, awkward, embarrassed, uncertain and indecisive'<sup>55</sup> in their very lives. As for the feelings that emerge from the cultural mimicking, Tokko Chun deplores the fact that:

We [Sisyphus's ass-pushers] are *like athletes playing a game with rules laid down by others*. How could it be possible for us to express an authenticity or beauty of our own? We are like comic actors scratching others' legs and leaving our own legs to itch. But do we scratch at all well? The audience bursts into laughter and *we grin, feeling awkward*. This is why humanism in Korean literature is not heartfelt and why the acting in modern Korean films is too painful to watch. *We watch and laugh. But once we realize it is a self-portrait, that laughter instantly freezes*.<sup>56</sup>

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what the (white) West was/is and, why and how it was/is superior. However, colonies also shaped the West in many ways, such as culture, diaspora, trade, and materials. Some in the West also suffered from Western colonising projects. Westphalian IR based on statist ontology has failed to attend to the post-coloniality of the West, and it makes believe that the West is not post-colonial at all, unlike the former coloured colonies. The ignored ontology of race has inflicted social tensions, psychological splits, and political-economic inequalities in the post-colonial West. These sufferings also cross the racial lines. Post-whiteness can replace whiteness. In this sense, Sisyphus' ass-pushers are not just coloured peoples outside the West but some whites and hybrid race in the white West. This line of relational thinking is indebted to Shih's discussion of post-Chineseness and post-Westerness. See Chih-yu Shih, 'Post-Chinese, post-Western and post-Asian relations: Engaging a pluriversal East Asia', *China Report*, 57 (2021), pp. 270–88; Chih-yu Shih, *Post-Chineseness: Cultural Politics and International Relations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2022).

<sup>51</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, pp. 186–7, emphasis added.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> Chih-yu Shih, *Civilization, Nation and Modernity in East Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 203.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>55</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, p. 193.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188, emphasis added.

In terms of ‘what we [Koreans] see, what we hear, how we eat’, which is ‘all American culture’, Sisyphus and Sisyphus’s ass-pushers can be intimate but never equal. The white West is the universal, whereas the yellow East is the parochial longing for the universal. Intimacy without equality (re)confirms that subject races (yellow negroes) are ‘irresponsible epigones’ and ‘slavish mimics’. In Homi K. Bhabha’s sense, ‘almost the same, but not quite.’<sup>57</sup> In the end, yellow negroes sense this difficult-to-articulate yet embarrassing bitterness deep down in their bodies, although they are reluctant to admit it, rationally or emotionally, since they want to believe that they too are the white West. As the excerpt above reveals, yellow negroes experience self-inflicted alienation from the white West they mimic. The alienation relegates colonial non-whites to a subordinate position, while producing feelings of despair, resignation, and self-abasement, all of which can help the colonisers to govern the colonised. This resembles what Krishna called ‘the postcolonial condition [which] produces selves that are not satisfied and sovereign, but split and rest uneasily with themselves and their milieu.’<sup>58</sup> Decolonisation begins with an attempt to thoroughly challenge the colonised’s self-inflicted alienation in their very lives in relation to the coloniser.<sup>59</sup>

### Sensing the white West: Empathy with sarcasm

So far, we have discussed a yellow negro’s understanding of himself in a world that is already and has always been worlded by the white West. This section turns to the question of how *A Grey Man* makes sense of the white West, which is hegemonic in world history and politics. Tokko Chun puts himself in the shoes of the Western coloniser in the following passage:

*It would have been grand if our nation had had colonies.* First of all, the outrageous number of college graduates now infesting the ranks of officialdom could be reduced by dispatching many to the various colonies. The anxiety and tension now current in the younger generation would thus be greatly abated and the social atmosphere in general would accordingly become far more congenial. [...] No matter how bellicose the National Assembly can be with its ins and outs, once the agenda concerns colonial rule the opposed parties will forthwith suppress their disagreements and exhibit excellent examples of how the race is a bond of common interests in spite of everything. [...] *no life is more delectable for a race than one spent applying the screws to other races. Such pastimes provide breathing space from domestic political quarrels.* A dog to kick around in case of boredom, so to speak.<sup>60</sup>

Although modern Korean history is saturated with foreign subjugation and humiliation, Tokko Chun does not show extreme hatred towards the colonisers who used Korea harshly to satisfy their own desires. Instead, he empathises with the imperial, hegemonic coloniser, rather than with disfranchised, marginalised, and colonised people. At first glance, Tokko Chun appears to regret that his country is not the white West and imply that colonised people should envy their imperial, hegemonic colonisers. Given this empathy, Tokko Chun does not urge yellow negroes to see the white West as evil. Throughout *A Grey Man*, it is difficult to find any strong aversion to the hegemonic West. Instead, Tokko Chun laments that ‘neither you nor I are evil, consequently this is an age in

<sup>57</sup> Homi Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse’, *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (1984), pp. 125–33 (p. 126).

<sup>58</sup> Sankaran Krishna, ‘IR and the postcolonial novel: Nation and subjectivity in India’, in Sanjay Seth (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 124–43 (p. 124).

<sup>59</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 2; Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3. As for a self-reflexive critique as a decolonial theory-cum-method, the literature on reverse Orientalism, self-Orientalism, reflexive Orientalism, and social dominance is particularly noteworthy. See Chih-yu Shih, *Negotiating Ethnicity in China: Citizenship as a Response to the State* (London: Routledge, 2002); Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Sharmani Patricia Gabriel and Bernard Wilson, *Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism in Literature and Film* (London: Routledge, 2021); Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, pp. 2–3, emphasis added.

which everyone is evil.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, Tokko Chun does not see Japan, with its Western technology and ideology, as evil per se, even though it colonised Korea for 35 years.

One important point here is that Tokko Chun's empathy cannot be seen as representing the colonised person's full consent or surrender to the hegemonic West, because it is twisted with sarcasm. Empathy with the master race does not mean that the subject race agrees with the white West, but simply that it needs to figure out how the master race thinks about the subject race to understand both entities better. This sarcastic form of empathy critiques the thoughts and deeds of the master race as they relate to subject races:

Lest the colony unify itself through a quest for shared spiritual traditions, we [the West] would exploit the old ruling class as our watchdogs, throwing them a few bones and instigating factional strife by segregating them along lines of locality, pedigree or astrological indices. At the same time, in order to forestall any rebellion due to *overharsh treatment* [Conquest], our policy naturally would include *some 'civilized' administrative initiatives* [Conversion].<sup>62</sup>

This excerpt penetrates imperial Western ideas about how to deal with colonised people. First, it aims to spark feuds among colonised people to make them easier to govern. Second, it imposes conquest and conversion in order to dominate colonised people. In *The Conquest of America*, Todorov argues that conquest and conversion are two complementary modalities used to dominate and colonise different others. The other is conquered under the banner of the universal superiority of the self's own identity. Conversion is launched to neutralise resistance to colonisation by knowing the culture of the other well.<sup>63</sup> In *Identity/Difference*, Connolly also argues that conquest and conversion operate:

as contending and complementary strategies that enable a superior people to maintain its self-assurance by bringing an inferior people under its domination or tutelage. These two modes function together as premises and signs of superiority.<sup>64</sup>

In fact, these modalities can be found in IR studies. In critically examining mainstream IR theoretical perspectives on ways of dealing with the rise of China, Cho and Hwang argue that Orientalism is embedded in IR theoretical perspectives, which in turn inform scholars and practitioners using the logic of conquest (the realist perspective), conversion (the liberalist perspective), and socialisation (the constructivist perspective) towards China; before they get to know China, such scholars already believe that the country is threatening and uncivilised.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Westphalian IR has been deeply complicit at a theoretical level in maintaining the global racial difference.<sup>66</sup> Tokko Chun's sarcastic empathy allows us to rethink the political, economic, and social development of the master race as it relates to a subject race:

Now that the idyllic age is forever gone in which imperialism could serve as an international policy even as democracy was invoked as the national ideology, we live now in an age in which new trumpets are blasting, calling for international aid and for betterment of living conditions in the underdeveloped states. Where on God's green earth could we [Korea] possibly seize a colony for use as an essential fertilizer for the growth of democracy? *Democracy without a colonial dominion certainly imposes great risks.*<sup>67</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 4, emphasis added.

<sup>63</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

<sup>64</sup>William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 43.

<sup>65</sup>Young Chul Cho and Yih-Jye Hwang, 'Mainstream IR theoretical perspectives and rising China vis-a-vis the West: the logic of conquest, conversion and socialisation', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 25 (2020), pp. 175–98.

<sup>66</sup>Errol A. Henderson, 'Hidden in plain sight: Racism in International Relations theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26 (2013), pp. 71–92.

<sup>67</sup>Choi, *A Grey Man*, p. 5, emphasis added.

Western humanism did exist but there never existed any humanism in general. [...] Roses never bloom in a trash can. But *Democracy blooms in the act of rape*.<sup>68</sup>

Just as British capitalism alleviated its internal social contradictions, overcame crises and regained its vitality through well-managed colonialism, Christianity, encountering a cul-de-sac in the West, has alleviated its crises through so-called missionary work.<sup>69</sup>

Western liberal democracy and capitalism claim universality and equality for all, which sounds very appealing when expressed yet turns out to mean freedom and equality for the coloniser/powerful, but not for the colonised/powerless. The excerpt above points out that, although it is sweet to be part of the West, we must question its acclaimed moral high ground (e.g. Western democracy and capitalism), for that ground has been sustained by the white West's unacknowledged exclusion, inequality, exploitation, and violence towards many racialised others for the sake of its own interests and status.<sup>70</sup>

Racism was the contradiction of capitalism manifested during the expansion of European colonialism. In this sense, the white West's capitalism is inseparable from (neo)colonial racism. The two historical processes – the West's moral and material development and the non-West's (neo)colonial experience – were inextricably intermingled.<sup>71</sup> Tokko Chun's questionings do not imply that Western liberal values should be denigrated and rejected in full, but rather, that those values are a critical human heritage that can be liberating for the colonised and marginalised. To achieve this, it is necessary to shake up settled Western liberal assumptions and think from the perspective of those who are excluded and exploited by the white West's enterprise of liberal democracy and capitalism, backed by colonialism and imperialism in practice. It is necessary not to reject but to critically appropriate Western ideas for and by colonial subalterns, while debunking the imperial practice of the ideas in human history.

### **A Grey Man's rejoinder to the hegemonic West: Neither essentialised nationalism nor colonial universalism**

This section looks at the ways in which yellow negroes in *A Grey Man* respond to the unequal racial world imposed on them. In relation to the formidable white West, Teacher Hwang in *A Grey Man* tries to empower Koreans, as yellow negroes, by saying that 'The Korean race is inferior to no other race. Neither is it superior to any other. [...] I mean that superiority and inferiority are not so easily defined. Young people nowadays are too hard on themselves.'<sup>72</sup> In this context, Teacher Hwang takes issue with a young Korean's yellow-negro mindset of despising their own native culture while admiring the white West. Put simply, Western hegemonism is problematic – and so is the psychological self-torture of Koreans.

Awakening racialised selves – both they and we are equal – is as just as important as debunking the myth of Western superiority, since subordinate selves continue to relegate themselves to an inferior position, becoming adjunct to the hegemonic West. This process of awakening is the first stepping stone on the yellow negroes' path towards becoming independent agents, who can talk to the West in an egalitarian context.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 103, emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>70</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Ha-Joon Chang, *Bad Samaritans: The Guilty Secrets of Rich Nations & the Threat to Global Prosperity* (London: Random House Business Books, 2007); Hannah-Jones, Roper, Silverman, and Silverstein, *The 1619 Project*; Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Pankaj Mishra, *Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race and Empire* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2020); Marcos S. Scauso, Garrett FitzGerald, Arlene B. Tickner, Navnita Chadha Behera, Chengxin Pan, Chih Yu Shih, and Kosuke Shimizu 'Covid-19, democracies, and (de)colonialities,' *Democratic Theory*, 7 (2020), pp. 82–93.

<sup>71</sup> Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism*.

<sup>72</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, p. 162.



With this strategy of awakening, Teacher Hwang points to Christianity as the essence of the West: ‘We may speak of the evils of Western capitalism, imperialism, mechanized civilisation and so on, but Christianity is the reason the West has never crumbled.’<sup>73</sup> In calling communism an ‘inverted Christianity’, Teacher Hwang sees the Cold War, from a non-Western point of view, as the confrontation between the Western and Eastern Roman Empires and between the positive and negative poles of Christianity. Accordingly, the Cold War, despite the active, voluntary participation of both Koreas, was not a Western fight against Eastern outsiders, but an internal war in the West, a war between one and oneself, and thus, an ‘interminable revolution’. The two Koreas were mere proxies in the Western in-fighting known as the Cold War. For Koreans across the Korean peninsula, the Cold War was not a cold war (= long peace), but a real, bloody war informed by Western ideologies. ‘Freedom, Communism, these are intrinsically Western propositions, unfinished problems of Western history’ – the proposition that both Koreas were compelled to accept without questioning its history, and to adopt as if it were a Korean mission.<sup>74</sup>

For Teacher Hwang, the dominant theme of Western history is the history of Christianity; Korean history is ‘mere a walk-on role belatedly written into a script long since finished by the leading characters [the white West].’<sup>75</sup> In other words, Korea has been objectified within a particular but dominant Western-centric historiography, which silences the Korean voice. Against this historical backdrop, Teacher Hwang argues that Koreans should refuse to accept Western tasks and rediscover their own indigenous traditions. In this way, they can find the essence of Korea in opposition to the West and ultimately build a Korean historical subjectivity on par with that of the West, as follows:

If we Orientals are to achieve anything for ourselves, we must no longer permit the historical problems of the West to be foisted upon us. This is to reject a method of framing problems itself, the method presenting ‘either-or’ choices. Our own schema, too, is to be presented as a method of framing problems, this is a matter of tradition. Tradition imports not something old, but a structure of spirit passed down from ancient times that lives on in the present. [...] Christianity did not originate in the West but after two thousand years it has become theirs. In the same way, Buddhism is ours. No, us. It is us.<sup>76</sup>

It seems clear that Teacher Hwang’s nativist method appeals to yellow negroes as a way of raising the status of their silenced, subordinate selves in the world, which in turn will enable their country to become equal to the imperial West. However, Teacher Hwang’s nativism remains boxed into Western, logocentric ‘us-against-them’ binary thinking, which essentialises Korea vis-à-vis the West. In addition, although ‘Buddhism’ is cited as a Korean essential tradition, it is meaningful only as a rejoinder to ‘Christianity’, which is seen as the essence of the West in Teacher Hwang’s method. The white West is, therefore, still the reference point for yellow negroes. It symbolises the subordinate’s desire to catch up with and become like the hegemonic West. This point contradicts Teacher Hwang’s claim to have rejected the Western way of framing intellectual problems. It is difficult for Teacher Hwang to deviate from the centre/periphery, master-race/subject-race framework of the West, as his idea of the East or Korea is a *de facto* accomplice in that framework.

Ideologically, Teacher Hwang seems to employ a Korean- (or Asian-)centric project, designed to rediscover the essence of Korean nationalism. Since it is tied to the us-against-them binary, there is a danger that he could fall into an aggressive or exclusionist approach to others, particularly the West. It is in this respect that, despite its critique of Western imperialism as an Orientalist hegemonic project, Teacher Hwang’s nativism appears to make a similar mistake, proposing an Occidentalist Korean/Asian nationalism project to oppose the West. Just as Western imperialism

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., pp. 174–6.

is a totalitarian project, so too an exclusionist nationalism based on nativistic essences constitutes a totalitarian discourse, as in the case of North Korea's *Juche* ideology. This sort of nationalism not only excludes foreigners but also silences dissents at home. Note that both Occidentalism and Orientalism function by way of exclusion, inequality, and violence towards others, both theoretically and practically. The issue at work is to refuse (re)colonising binary conceptualisations and their relation to each other, which reproduce an inhumane system of domination.

Tokko Chun does not accept the framework of Korean/Asian essentialised nationalism versus the hegemonic West. Responding to his university friend, Kim Hahk, who dreams about a revolution for the Korean nation, Tokko Chun is sceptical about the notion of a top-down, essentialised nationalist project, without providing a clear or better alternative to replace the current hierarchy:

What's more, there is not even a tradition worth going back to. No, we do have one, but that tradition in nine out of ten cases turns out to be a trap from which there is no escape.<sup>77</sup>

The epoch when race was a personal deity, a place to rely on, a mother's breast, in other words, the epoch of nationalism, is gone. From the Western standpoint, that is. Now, the race as a totalized person is gone, but it still lives in the mind of the people [yellow negroes], and this is our difficulty. It would have been nice if it, too, had been eclipsed.<sup>78</sup>

Come the Revolution, will this suffering vanish? ... A utopia of the Orient, what good would it do me then? [...] Whatever may become of Korea, in truth I don't care in my heart of hearts.<sup>79</sup>

This non-nationalist, egoistical stance reflects Tokko Chun's grim understanding of Korea's international and domestic environments. For Tokko Chun, Korean society 'is bounded by cliffs on all sides, regardless of one's goals'. At the same time, 'the Western brats are sure to meddle' with Korean matters during the revolution.<sup>80</sup> In this respect, revolutionary, elitist projects of essentialist nationalism are 'sad illusions' and 'impossible tasks'.<sup>81</sup>

At the same time, mimicking Western universalism is not an option. At one point, Tokko Chun mentions that he 'will not become a Don Quixote [essentialised nationalism against the West], I will not become a native woman aping a missionary's wife [mimicry of Western universalism]. [...] This damn world we live in is full of traps. [...] I decline to be in that script'.<sup>82</sup> By mimicking Western universalism, yellow negroes end up becoming 'irresponsible epigones' or 'slavish mimics', who can only have 'intimacy without equality' with the white West, as discussed earlier. In this colonial situation, yellow negroes are forced into a constant condition of self-induced schizophrenia (yellow skin, white masks), violence, exploitation, alienation, and dehumanisation.

This section shows that Tokko Chun appears to reject both Bhabha's concept of 'mimicry'<sup>83</sup> and Spivak's idea of 'strategic essentialism'<sup>84</sup> as a tool of resistance. As for mimicry, like Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* published in 1952, *A Grey Man* stresses the psychological suffering of the colonised, seeing mimicry as the imitation and self-alienation which remain in limited in the colonial script, rather than an element that disrupts the coloniser's assumed superiority. Yet, as mentioned, *A Grey Man* uses 'empathy with sarcasm' in the way of exposing the constructed and violent nature of colonial power. This process may render the coloniser a subject of mockery and derision which is similar to the practical effect of Bhabha's 'mimicry'. In addition, considering the time of its publication (1963), the idea of strategic essentialism as a form of resistance was

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 10–11.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 28, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 283–4.

<sup>83</sup> Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man'.

<sup>84</sup> Rosalind C. Morris and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

unavailable to *A Grey Man*. Nonetheless, *A Grey Man* seems to be sceptical of any local projects of essentialism, be it strategic or not. First, there exist no such things called essentially Korean, from which Tokko Chun can and is willing to retrieve. Purely Korean essentialism is a sort of fantasy. Second, even if it is formed, Korean local essentialism is based on the same logic of universal colonial imperialism, thereby possibly producing a vicious cycle of violence. Koreans can initiate and mobilise essentialism strategically, yet another colonial structure could be produced within them, if the deconstruction of the strategic essentialist project is failed after the successful defeat of the coloniser. Third, a strategically formed Korean essentialist project tends to be elitist and collective, while overlooking the variety and intersectionality within Korean society and overshadowing the unique ideas and experiences of colonial individuals of Korea on the ground.

### ***A Grey Man's* double alienation: Disengagement as a critical attitude for living**

Although he rejects essentialised nationalism and Western universalism, the novel's *Grey Man* faces one vexing question: how to resist, engage with, or relate to the hegemonic West, which is not just overwhelmingly powerful, but also an inalienable, if partial, part of Korea and the East.

From one to ten, all we see and hear are symbols created, spent and distributed by Westerners. [...] What once was called 'blocks of yot' is now called 'caramel' and what once as called 'tooth salt' has become 'toothpaste'. Are not all of our possessions Western transplants into Korea? The West. The world of science and Christendom.<sup>85</sup>

We in the Orient have been deluded into seeing an historical synchronicity in the aesthetic universality of Christian symbols and allegories. [...] The language of the West has conquered us. When we accepted the language of an alien bloodline (thinking of it lightly as merely a language), we had in fact unwittingly accepted the history behind that language as well.<sup>86</sup>

These thoughts show that yellow negroes are part of the colonial script that establishes the power of the white West. All of their performances, such as resistance, happen *within*, not from the outside. In this context, even things that are pre-colonial Korean/Asian are reworked through the colonial experience imposed by the West and unavailable to the subjugated in any uncontaminated form that can be neatly separated from the hegemonic West. Discovering a pure and native essence of the East against the West is out of the question. Instead, yellow negroes must reflect on the extent to which they are the products of the hegemonic West and can act against the colonial script.

As Chen argues, the West is already within Asia, existing 'as bits and fragments that intervene in local [Asian] social formation in a systematic, but never totalising, way'.<sup>87</sup> In other words, the local appropriation of modernity contains important fragmented pieces of the West, but 'it is not fully enveloped by' the West.<sup>88</sup> Thus, resistance or a new form of engagement with the West is possible, while 'recognizing the West as fragments internal to the local'.<sup>89</sup> For locals, there is no need to see the West as antithetical to the East, but rather 'as one cultural resource among many others', even though the power of the West seems overwhelming.<sup>90</sup> The colonised should not discard the agency they gain by thinking, doing, and being different in practice, despite their complicity with the coloniser.

Here, the key question is 'from where does resistance to the colonial script arise?'. *A Grey Man* notes that 'the only way to overcome our collective inferiority complex toward Westerners is for

<sup>85</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, pp. 27, 100.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>87</sup> Chen, *Asia as Method*, p. 223.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

us to do the detecting this time.<sup>91</sup> This move is bound up with a critique that intervenes in naturalised modes of thought and action enforced by the hegemonic West. To put it simply, yellow negroes should stop being thoughtless on a daily basis; they should stop being obsessed with solving assignments given by the West. It is time to think about ‘what they are doing in their lives’. In a related scene, Tokko Chun chooses to become a critical bystander in his given environment, as follows:

Dear beloved race. We are not heroes. We are not Sisyphuses. [...] I can't stand those shitasses. So I remain a spectator. Our stone. There is no such thing. It's only a delusion we have. [...] Then, what is to be done? What is to be done? There is nothing. Nothing.<sup>92</sup>

How to refuse to be a native? How not to become a giraffe? How not to be inhabitants of a reservation? What is to be done? ... To gain the whole world, for we ourselves to become Westerners without delay, is that salvation? But we cannot become Westerners, either. By the time we've become Western, the West will have become something else. [...] Instead of endlessly pursuing that illusion, let's just flop down where we are. At least. Let's think of some entirely different solutions. Let's find a way to reverse the endless race between Achilles and the Tortoises. This Tortoise, in other words, should just sit down.<sup>93</sup>

What Tokko Chun seeks to do is disengage – as an act of non-cooperation and a moment of *epoche* – from the world that has been defined for him by the white West. Disengagement can be seen as a powerless, passive, and irresponsible subordinate form of resistance. Yet here, it is worth recalling Du Bois's ‘double consciousness’, which has two aspects. First, it is ‘a deprivation’, since a yellow negro is incapable of seeing himself except through the eyes of the white West. Second and more importantly, it is ‘a gift’: the double consciousness of alienation endows the yellow negro with ‘second-sight’, which seems to ‘allow a deeper or redoubled comprehension of the complexities’ of the world in which they live.<sup>94</sup> Through second-sight, Tokko Chun's double alienation from both essentialised local nationalism and Western universalism allows him space to reflect critically on what he and his fellow yellow negroes are doing in the racially hierarchical world. Alienation challenges Tokko Chun to wrestle with questions of his own, rather than accepting imposed questions. Tokko Chun questions, searches, and struggles without really believing he can achieve victory. As he does not want to be part of either side of this East/West binary, he chooses to disengage, as an ethical, political, and personal act. It is a critical living attitude, rather than a theory. Drawing on the title of the book, disengagement is ‘grey’. According to Chun Kyung-ja, the translator of *A Grey Man*:

Grey is the colour of hypercomplexity, of an attitude that rejects black-and-white oversimplifications, a worldview prepared to recognise that history imposes insurmountable constraints but which nevertheless refuses to surrender either to quietistic resignation or to naively self-destructive heroism.<sup>95</sup>

Disengagement has revolutionary potential as an act of resistance. It implies that the colonised do not see the imperial West as the universal reference point. It disturbs the world's hegemonic pecking order. It threatens privilege and power. This is not to say that colonised people seek to reverse the existing relationship (superior West vs. interior East). Instead, disengagement helps colonised people create non-hegemonic spaces, in which different ways of thinking, doing, and

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>92</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, p. 193.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>94</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘Introduction’, in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. vii–xxiii (p. xiv).

<sup>95</sup> Choi, *A Grey Man*, no page number.

being can emerge through reflexive dialogue with others, forming a more just and equitable relationship between diverse actors in the world.<sup>96</sup> Note that, although colonised people try to detach from the imposing normative scripts of colonisation through disengagement, such disengagement is not surrender. Rather, it re-engages with another life-world register. In doing so, the disengagement approach should also consider post-colonial Western and post-white conditions in the white West. Disengagement also creates problems for the coloniser, as colonised people refuse to accept their role as the inferior other in a (neo)colonial world. The colonisers' status and order become contested unless they can co-opt the inferior colonised. In this way, the colonised can exhaust the coloniser. Disengagement resists the logic of conquest and conversion employed by the coloniser. It therefore plays a role, not only in decolonising its 'past' and 'present', but also in preventing the colonisation of its 'future'.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

Through its understanding of the state-centric Westphalian international system and its operations, *A Grey Man*, a non-Western cultural text of the 1950s and 1960s, allows us to access different IR 'words to think with', including race, white supremacy, intimacy without equality, sarcastic empathy, and disengagement. It offers the perspective of the subordinate, which provides an arena in which we can think 'otherwise', in opposition to dominant Westphalian IR thinking, which is often accepted as self-evidently truthful. Indeed, cultural-aesthetic sites – as loci of enunciation – can equip us with a novel language to see and depict the world we live in differently. Perhaps concept and theory can emerge from daily practice, a careful reading of popular texts, ordinary people, and the way in which they understand their lives.

This paper's contrapuntal reading of the Westphalian international system via *A Grey Man* reveals that IR signifies interracial relations underpinned by white supremacy, rather than international relations. In this sense, the Westphalian international system is the white (controlling) gaze, which prevents us from seeing what is really present in IR, including race, racism, colonialism, imperialism, Orientalism, exclusion, inequality, and violence. In particular, race and racism, which have been silenced in IR, should be treated as central concerns in global life.

This paper argues that Korea became a yellow negro when the East was called up by the West through the expansion of Westphalian IR. For Koreans and people in the East, the modern world was defined for them, not by them. Yet that world has been co-constituted by both the white West as the master race and people of colour as subject races. Yellow negroes seem to have certain modes of being-in-the-world that place them at risk of violence, exploitation, and dehumanisation. First,

<sup>96</sup>It might be odd or ironic to see that we, the authors, are submitting this paper to a prestigious Western IR journal – *Review of International Studies (RIS)* – in English, while calling for a disengagement from the colonial script. Nonetheless, the authors treat English, though dominant, as one of many languages which enables us to talk to plural Western and non-Western others who are not familiar with our mother tongue, Korean. Equally we see *RIS* as an efficient means of engaging with many different actors, particularly subalterns, living in the Global South as well as North. This is a critical appropriation of Western resources for the interest of connecting with others in the globe, whose vernacular languages are different. This can contribute to global solidarity for change for the better. What we reject is not the West but Western-centrism accompanied with Orientalism and racism in knowledge production and everyday lives. The West is one of multiple yet critical ideas.

<sup>97</sup>Although there might be different conceptual and normative concerns, disengagement as a personal act of politics in life can be found in Confucian advice, Mahayana Buddhist Nagarjuna's tetralemma, everyday resistance, and non-cooperation movements. See Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven, CT: London, 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Kaisa Kärki, 'Not doings as resistance', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 48 (2018), pp. 364–84; Mathew Varghese, *Nagarjuna and the Art of Negation: Discerning Subjectivity, Emptiness, Transcendental Ethics, Tetralemma Logic, Binary Logic, Self-Being and Negations* (New Delhi: Sanctum Books); Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Yagyong Chong, *Admonitions on Governing the People*, trans. Byonghyon Choi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).



subject races tend to unwittingly accept that the master race is an ontological condition for the existence of them. Yellow negroes are 'I', but that 'I' is an auxiliary 'I' that cannot come into being without the Cartesian 'I' – the white West. Second, subject races easily become seen as a means rather than an end in human history, from their own perspective, as well as that of the master race. Third, subject races lose the ability to see themselves except through the revelation of the master race. Subject races are enslaved to their own inferiority, just as the white West is enthralled by its own superiority. After all, the yellow East is essentially a lackey who wants to be (and therefore mimics) the Western master. At best, the lackey gets intimacy without equality with the white West. This implies self-inflicted alienation, despair, resignation, and self-abasement, all of which assist the coloniser in governing the colonised.

At the same time, however, *A Grey Man* captures the yellow negro's agency: detecting the hypocrisy of Westphalian IR and relating differently to the hegemonic West. Tokko Chun in *A Grey Man* uses sarcastic empathy as a method of resistance to debunk the hegemonic West's seemingly universal moral basis and violent logic of conquest/conversion towards different others, without depreciating the West or its values. The West's moral and material development and the non-West's (neo)colonial experience have been inextricably interlinked throughout history. When faced with the West's hegemonic dominance in Westphalian IR, the subordinate tend to either kowtow and mimic the West or adopt an essentialised nationalism directed against the West. Tokko Chun rejects both of these options. Instead, he opts to disengage from the colonial script of Western dominance. This stance is a critical living attitude more than a theory. Disengagement – *Grey* – expresses the individual's desire to un-suture hegemony's workings and violent superiority, thus gaining the power to participate fully in the creation of a more just, less unequal, and truly global world. At the same time, the individual is self-reflectively critical of their own resistant stance towards the hegemony in binary postulations.

In conclusion, in relation to theory/theorisation, the goal of decolonising IR appears to need two-way processes. The first process involves un-suturing hegemony and totalising IR discourses, particularly those seen from below. It enables us to examine the hegemony's invisible – yet hyper-visible – hypocrisy and violence, while at the same time it empowers the subaltern's agency and ability to detect and make critical sense of the colonial script of hegemony. This decolonial exercise is necessary but insufficient. Subaltern literatures, often cultural, which are rarely recognised by IR students with mainstream textbook training, must be excavated, celebrated, re-enunciated, and reinterpreted – not simply to correct our understanding of hegemonic culture, but also to revive a non-coercive and non-hegemonic language.

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