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EATING THE OTHER, PREYING ON THE ORIENT, LOVING THE EXOTIC

NEOCOLONIAL TRAVEL IN ELIZABETH GILBERT'S *EAT, PRAY, LOVE*

Eat, Pray, Love follows Liz Gilbert as she divorces her husband and embarks on a journey of self-discovery and rejuvenation in Italy, India, and Bali.[1] Gilbert's autobiographical novel and film adaptation received widespread acclaim, all of which overlooks the stereotypes and objectification of the "East" that feature in Gilbert's engagement with India and Indonesia. This essay highlights the stereotypes of India and Indonesia represented in the film that allow Liz to redefine and restore the virtuous white womanhood that she renounces upon divorcing her husband. Ultimately, by representing India, Indonesia, and their peoples as "backwards," Liz (re)assumes a role that hearkens back to colonial notions of proper femininity.[2]

Let us begin by considering the role of white women in French and English colonies. As Adele Perry's "Fair Ones of a Purer Caste" explains, "white women [. . .] served as potent symbols of civilization" (502). As such, white women in the colonies were held to rigid standards of morality and sexual purity, serving as models of white supremacy (which, presumably, would deteriorate without the civilizing, domesticating force of these women). In British Columbia, for example, white men indulged in "a rough homosocial culture" and engaged sexually with Indigenous women (Perry 509). As Anne Stoler writes, these intimate relationships between colonized and colonizer threatened the European standards of "respectability and sexual 'normalcy'" that

[1] My title takes inspiration from bell hooks' essay "Eating the Other" from *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992).

[2] All quotations from *Eat, Pray, Love* are taken from Murphy's 2010 film.

legitimized and perpetuated imperialism (38).White women were thus sent to British Columbia to discourage this homosocial behaviour and the resulting "miscegenation" that undermined white purity. In turn, white women upheld domestic norms and the reproduction of the white race (the basis of white supremacy).

Britain was not the only imperial power that used white women to strengthen its empire. As Penny Edwards describes in "Womanizing Indochina: Colonial Cambodia," France also sent white women to Cambodia to discourage miscegenation and to encourage domesticity. As symbols of civilization, these women were border guards to white supremacy and, by extension, to imperialism. Edwards explains that the French woman was "destined to civilize and police, to inspire and purify, to ennoble and augment all that confronts her" (112). Here, we find that white women in Cambodia were assigned a role similar to those in British Columbia. Importantly, however, the women sent to Cambodia were strictly bourgeois, because "poor-whitism was feared and condemned across the global colonial map as a serious detriment to imperial prestige" (Edwards 113). In French colonies, the virtuous white woman was expected to have money or to endorse its production, all the while cultivating a domestic space and the proliferation of the white race.

When the viewer first encounters Liz Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love*, she seems to satisfy the requirements of virtuous white womanhood: she is married, is considering having children, and occupies bourgeois status as a successful writer. However, Liz quickly expresses discontent with this lifestyle. Unlike her friend Delia, who has been filling a box with baby clothing, "waiting until [her husband] was ready to be a father," Liz has a box filled with "*National Geographics* and *The Times* travel section, all the places I want to see before I die." Liz does not crave motherhood as her friend does and her interests are independent of her husband. Moreover, her interest in travel represents a kind of nomadism that rejects European values of settlement and domesticity.

In considering Liz's early virtuous white womanhood (or lack thereof), it is interesting to note the moment when she prays to God, requesting guidance. On the one hand, this scene confirms Liz's lack of virtuous white femininity: her improvised prayer acknowledges her religious disconnect, and she rejects domesticity when she tells her husband that she does not want to be married. On the other hand, her prayer suggests a return to the religion that she had hitherto failed to embrace. The voice that encourages Liz to return to bed apparently catalyzes her decision to divorce her husband, which leads to her eventual decision to travel to Italy, India, and Bali. This moment of prayer ultimately sanctions the events that unfold throughout the film,

including Liz's problematic journey across the globe.

Of course, Liz's decision to travel is not an explicit articulation of her virtuous white femininity. In a conversation with Delia, Liz states that she wants to travel because "she need[s] to change." While Liz expresses interest in all three places to which she decides to travel, she notes an appreciation for Italian culture only: "I just want to go someplace where I can marvel at something. Language, gelato, spaghetti." She then decides to travel to India and Bali, but fails to qualify her interest in these two places. As we track her travels to India and Indonesia, however, we find that Liz is not interested in their respective cultures. Rather, she is interested in consuming and assuming the spirituality of each country on her own. These two countries thus provide a venue for her to redefine and reassert her virtuous white womanhood.

As Rachmi Larasati explains, "[t]ravel was mostly created to fulfill the blank spot within the nation and mark the situated self through difference" (90). This colonial effort to "fulfill" through travel may be seen in Liz's own efforts towards self-fulfillment through travel. Specifically, Liz seeks to reclaim her virtuous white womanhood by engaging the (stereotypical) differences between herself and the women of Indian and Indonesia. Such differences are especially evident in how the film depicts her travels to Italy versus India. She leaves Italy after a dinner with friends, thriving in a warm atmosphere of laughter and nourishment, with Neil Young's "Heart of Gold" playing in the background. This picture of bliss, however, is immediately interrupted by a wailing car horn, which cues that she has arrived in India. This cinematography immediately establishes the country as chaotic and impoverished, as her first moments in India are marked by loud, fast-paced, vaguely Indian music (the soundtrack is "Boyz" by Sri-Lankan-American M.I.A) and melancholic lighting. Liz is clearly uncomfortable as she endures a bumpy car-ride, while children seem to "claw" at her window, asking for money. Liz pats the (dark-skinned) hands of these children in a gesture of apology: "I don't have anything," she mouths, evidently regretting that she cannot bestow her wealth upon these impoverished children. By depicting India and its people in such negative terms, the film situates Liz in a comparatively positive position, wrought with the imperative to help. Her clean, wealthy, white body gains power and authority in juxtaposition to these unclean, impoverished bodies of colour.

The film reinforces the implications of Liz's initial moments in India in depicting Liz's relationship with Tulsi, an Indian woman who faces what Liz deems as the grand injustice of forced marriage. While Liz interacts with very few Indian people in the movie, the Indian people with whom she does interact are presented as objects of Liz's

virtuous white womanhood. Tulsi opens her conversation with Liz by asking if there is "anything in this world skinnier than an Indian teenage boy?" Tulsi then describes how she is being forced into an arranged marriage and denied an education because that is "the custom." Immediately, the film casts its one Indian woman as helpless and at the mercy of India's "backward" tradition of arranged marriage, which deeply contrasts Liz's own desire to escape from marriage by travelling to India.

Liz becomes a confidante for Tulsi, supporting and encouraging Tulsi as she prepares for marriage; in doing so, Liz assumes a savior role in her relationship with Tulsi. She once again gains power through this dynamic (although, notably, she does not prevent Tulsi's marriage from taking place). Indeed, Liz's relationship with Tulsi invokes Mary Procida's consideration of white women in India during the Raj. In "Guns, Gender, and Imperialism," Procida explains that white women in India often sported guns as both a material rendering of the violent authority of the British Empire as well as a tool for the colonized peoples. According to Anglo-Indians, the colonized people "would have been at the mercy of rampaging elephants and voracious tigers without the beneficent protection of well-armed male and female imperialists" (477). Liz's presence in India parallels the role of such "savior" imperialists. Instead of using arms to protect Tulsi from India's animals, however, Liz offers sympathy to a young woman who is at the mercy of a (stereotypical) Indian custom. Just as female imperialists asserted their authority and, more broadly, white supremacy by offering protection, Liz asserts the liberal and therefore evolved traditions of the West in her sympathy for Tulsi. Once again, in her sympathetic interactions with a body of colour, Liz engages in a process of redefining her white self as virtuous and liberated and, likewise, superior.

This redefinition and reassertion of Liz's virtuous white womanhood culminates during her time in Bali. Like her interactions with Indian people, Liz's interactions with Balinese people are limited. As was the case with Tulsi, the film infantilizes and objectifies Wayan, the one Balinese woman with whom Liz engages. While Wayan treats Liz's bladder infection (which Wayan suggests is caused by "too much sexy-time," a phrase that undermines Wayan's sexual maturity and thereby infantilizes her), Wayan relates some details of her own marital life, noting that she is a survivor of domestic abuse. Instead of commending Wayan for her courage and her strength or expressing thanks for her wisdom, Liz treats Wayan as a victim in order to fulfill her own imperative to help, resolving, without Wayan's consent, to raise money to build the medicine woman a house.

And yet, Liz never acknowledges her own motive in helping Wayan, which, I

argue, is to redefine and reclaim her virtuous white womanhood. Instead, she claims that Wayan and her daughter have become "family" to Liz, thus embracing the domestic potential she rejected when divorcing her husband. Moreover, Liz completes an email to her friends by suggesting that "[w]hen you set out in the world to help yourself, sometimes you end up helping [. . .] Tutti." Tutti, the name of Wayan's daughter, is polyvalent for Liz. "Tutti," as Liz explains during her travels in Italy means "everybody" in Italian. Liz not only imposes her white perspective on Tutti's name, but she encourages the white imperative to help and, in turn, reasserts her own virtuous white womanhood. By raising money for Wayan, she reclaims her productivity as a virtuous white woman. Her trip to Bali is no longer indulgent, but assumes the qualities of a philanthropic expedition.

By the end of the film, Liz fully reasserts her virtuous white domesticity. Not only are Wayan and Tutti her family, but Katut, Liz's "spiritual guide" whom she had met in an earlier trip to Bali, states the Liz is "like daughter" to him. She also agrees to making a life with her recently acquired beau, Felipe. In spite of the wisdom she consumes from Wayan and Katut, Liz decides at the end of the film that her word is "attraversiamo" (i.e., "let's cross over"), thus veiling the wisdom she receives from the Balinese people in a (white) term. Furthermore, we might say that Liz's identification with "attraversiamo" equates to her "crossing over" to the virtuous white womanhood that she had earlier rejected.

Edwards notes that, "[w]hile colonized cultures were routinely held up as emblems of degeneration, the colonies themselves ironically were seen as sites of regeneration for the French race" (112). Indeed, Liz's travels are especially reminiscent of French imperialism. Where the French race found regeneration through (white) reproduction in the degenerate colonies, Liz finds personal regeneration and a replenished virtuous white femininity in her travels to Bali and India, both of which are portrayed in degenerate terms. She does not visit these places with the intention of appreciating (or "marveling," as in her visit to Italy). Rather, Liz visits India and Indonesia in an effort to exploit these countries for personal gain and to highlight their "inferiority" in order to emphasize her own supremacy.

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