

Divya Victor

Kith

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REVIEWED BY DALE ENGGASS

In the “Prologue” to *Kith*, Divya Victor relates a story about the experience of being displaced. “*You were between terminals,*” it begins, in italics, and continues in the second person and without italics, to describe an encounter with a woman lost in an airport. “You walked her to her gate, which was in the opposite direction of yours.” This is not so much a good deed as it is a recognition: “You learned, as we do, of her occupation her hometown her mother’s health and you learned something of what she was paid for washing dishes mopping floors changing the nappies chopping vegetables for a family of five that was not hers to love or live for.” The pronoun “we” links “You” and this woman, this migrant domestic laborer, who is not a stranger, but could be “Your own wife or sister or mother or daughter” carrying cans of Coke “home for her children because they had never tasted it,” and who, in token of this recognition, “pulled a warm and heavy can of Coke from her bag and offered it to you.”

Victor’s use of the second person pronoun in this introductory tale would seem to place a reader in the position of “otherness,” much as Claudia Rankine does in her retelling of microaggressions in *Citizen*. But such a move is not this prologue’s intent. After a paragraph break, the speaker continues, “And when you told this story and when you began to explain how her offering had made you feel, your trembling hands—because of habit and manner—reached toward your eyes and hid from us their misery.” The “you” here is not the reader-as-stand-in for migrant or immigrant hesitating before the departures board, but rather the speaker’s addressee: a friend or family member who is, as the speaker is, part of the “we” and the “us” referred to in the story. The “you” is *kith*, and *kith*, Victor implies, is not

you. *Kith* raises the question of who is reading; or, rather, the question of how books can be both for, and not for, particular readerships.

Kith is a book concerned with the nature of inclusion and exclusion, with all the compromises and contradictions that come with both belonging and not belonging to a culture. Consisting of ten sections that employ an array of forms and styles, the book itself follows a sort of kith-logic: a collection of “Paper People” who find themselves bound together by ties of foreignness. A book or a boat; as Victor notes, “catamaran” comes from Tamil *kattumaram*, or “tied wood”, which, incidentally, isn’t a bad description of a book. To give just a few examples of *Kith*’s range: “Dromomanie” recounts stories of “ambulatory automatism” told by friends and family during Victor’s childhood. “Paper People” creates a series of minimalist poems out of common advice for adopting appropriate cultural etiquette. “Paper Boats” conflates boat and body through a series of instructions that to my mind recall the “Body Movement Poems” in Rodrigo Toscano’s *Collapsible Poetics Theater*. “Blood” mixes a horrific journalistic account of the violently anti-immigrant “Dot Busters” with “An Unknown Length of Rope,” Victor’s close reading of John Singleton Copley’s 1778 painting *Watson and the Shark*, previously published in *Semblance: Two Essays*. “Salt” eulogizes the thousands of salt workers killed when a cyclone struck the Indian state of Gujarat in 1998.

What ties this constantly shifting ground together is, to use the title of one section, the experience of “No Man’s Land;” that is, the experience of being an immigrant. Or, more specifically, the way one is constituted as an immigrant through the stories one tells about oneself, and the stories a culture tells about its others. For instance, referencing Gandhi’s famous Dandi March in “Salt,” Victor writes: “As a metaphor, salt helped kith win independence; as a commodity, it has caused others to remain enslaved. Both these stories should be equally well known.” The repetition of such narratives not only highlights the transmission of familial and cultural lore, but also belies a kind of fatigue—the fatigue that comes from having to tell

histories of atrocity, disaster, and racism again and again and again before they even begin to be heard.

These repetitions of personal and political history bear traces of Victor's own back and forth movement between India, Singapore, and the United States, without ever implying a settled or completed trajectory. And while Victor's projects take quite different forms, *Kith's* focus on the immigrant as a person continually in transit, occupying a no man's land "*between terminals*", as it were, extends the territory covered in her previous collection, *Natural Subjects*. There, Victor *detournes* various documents pertaining to the bureaucratic component of immigration, defamiliarizing the process of "naturalization" with all of its attendant nationalist and essentialist assumptions.

Natural Subjects also contains moments of biographical and family detail, but they are presented in the factual, affectless style that bureaucracy encourages. Compare this institutional manner to *Kith's* closing section, "Foreign Terms," a private glossary compiled mainly from childhood memories and containing entries such as "B is for Buhari's Pistabar Chocobar Ice Cream," or "K is for Kerchiefs." In the latter, Victor observes: "An average eight-year-old is just four feet of sugar, snot, and dirt. I was no exception." This is the intimate narrative tone characteristic of memoir. Indeed, some passages approach the realm of nostalgia—a mode, it's worth noting, that Victor does not reject out of hand. In an epigraph, she quotes Amitava Kumar's contention that "nostalgia can be a weapon in a cultural milieu where you are expected to feel only shame for what you have left behind" and, in a note at the end of the book, she describes "nostalgia as a kind of political salvage." In the same note, Victor includes the rest of Kumar's comment on nostalgia, " 'but I do want to ask what it means to remember,'" and she elaborates, "I wanted to ask, borrowing a phrase from Arundhati Roy, how 'the checkbook and the cruise missile' were part of the affective economy of my grandmother's custards." Nostalgia, as Victor employs it, retains its doubly weaponized potential as anti-Orientalist tool

on the one hand, and cruise missile on the other. This ambivalence around the act of remembering in turn reminds readers that nostalgia literally translates as both “homesickness” and “the pain of returning home.”

Colonization and capitalism are the overlapping systems that continue to engender this pain. In the entry “I is for Innie,” for example, an innocent childhood attempt to meld an “innie” with an “outtie” belly button prompts “[a]n early discovery about the disparities of skincolour [sic].” This colorism is both perpetuated and pounced on by multinationals like Unilever, whose “ubiquitous product of skinshame—a cream called Fair and Lovely—offers kithwomen a ‘safe skin lightening technology’ while ‘empowering individuals to Re-script their Destiny.’ Because skin colour is destiny, as Unilever well knows.” Specifically, “the destiny of the thousands of Indian workers whose lives have been poisoned by mercury because of the Anglo-Dutch company’s use of Kodaikanal, and kithwomen, as its toxic dumpsites.” As a summation of this vicious circle, Victor mimics the familiar Maybelline tagline: “Maybe She’s Born With It! Maybe It’s A Profitable Biopolitical Caesura Affirmed By Imperialist Expansion!”

The ability to jump from a critique of colorism and environmental racism to a witty rewrite of advertising’s vacuous monologue is one of Victor’s many strengths as a writer. But, more than that, these jumps formally enact her view of cultures as fundamentally unstable, always already shot through with their other: “M is for Michael Jackson and Malcolm X;” “S is for Saget, Bob.” *Kith* asks, to use the language of the belly button example above, what it means to be an “innie” or an “outie” in a culture/society?

A different way to phrase the question is: who (or what) comprises one’s “kith”? Kith, of course, denotes one’s friends and acquaintances rather than blood relatives. But also, crucially, “kith” is related to “couth,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “cultured, refined, and well mannered,” and, by extension, to “uncouth,” which the OED designates as not only “lacking good manners, refinement, or grace”, but also “(of art or language)

lacking sophistication” from Old English *un* [not] and *cunnan* [to be able to know]. To be “uncouth” is to be both “unknown” and incapable of acquiring knowledge.

I rehearse this etymology because Victor repeatedly stages the question of belonging, of being in or out, as one of uncouthness. For example, in the other essay to appear in *Semblance*, “Cicadas in the Mouth,” she notes that, “For some, opening the mouth to simply say ‘I’ also means saying ‘Aye’, assenting to certain fates.” So-called “uncouth” speech—speech lacking, say, a “proper” British or American accent and correct idiomatic usage—marks one as an outsider while also drawing one into relationships of similarly uncouth kith. The postcolonial situation produces “the mouth in transit, a mouth not at home with itself.”

In *Kith*, the best demonstration of “the mouth in transit” is the eponymous section. It opens with a kind of translation exercise between Tamil, Latin, and English that recalls similar passages in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* and Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*. After an interlude in which a six-year-old Divya affirms that there are two countries in the world, “*India and Forin*,” twenty variations/mutations of the word “foreign” are printed in all caps and large font on facing pages. Some seem phonetically motivated, like PHURAYN or FAWRUN, while others indicate an associative chain that moves from FOREIGN to ORION and FORIGIN to FORAGE.

While it’s tempting to view this solely as a riff on “uncouth” speech, some basic Google searches of these terms prove instructive. For instance, the fourth word, “Firang,” is a derogatory Hindi term for a foreigner, in particular a British officer or gentleman. The top hit for “Fawrun” is the Dubai-based RAKBANKIslamic, which offers the “completely Sharia compliant” Fawrun Term Deposit (“Instant profit. Instant joy”). “Fírinne” is the Irish word for “truth” (one of the top hits on my search was the article “How to say ‘post-truth’ in Irish?”) while, in the context of *Kith*, even a familiar word (at least to ignorant western eyes, i.e., mine) like “Forbear”

recovers its double sense as a verb meaning to refrain from doing something, and a noun meaning ancestor.

Whether or not all of these allusions are intended, Victor's variations on the word "foreign" are an example of *Kith's* centrifugal movement. The reader is impelled outward, asked to contemplate the shifting entanglements of globalization. At the same time, it dramatizes the way the book both courts and resists "foreignness." Victor addresses this ambivalence in a kind of preface to the "Foreign Terms" section, as she describes her personal "brand of critique against Orientalism—a dire warning against self-exoticization, against writing as explanation," specifically, "the fine line between expressing oneself and explaining oneself to my largely white audience in the United States." To complicate Orientalist expectations, Victor writes of trying to "unitalicize" language, as "[t]o italicize was a way of explaining—it meant, *Sorry you don't understand this word I'm using even though everyone I love understands it. Here, let me help you*" (the italics here are Victor's own). Victor's point is, I think, more complex than an endorsement of the command to find one's unique voice. Rather, to unitalicize her language is "to write in an English that others had borrowed from us for centuries," a fact Victor corroborates through words like Pariah or the aforementioned Catamaran, both of which originally come from Tamil. Therefore, Victor states, "I have refused to remain foreign in a language that is as much mine as it is yours":

& so I began this manuscript. & so I made of poetry something
other than an explanation
— of an "us" you couldn't know
— of kith unitalicized.

The refusal to remain italicized is not to succumb to assimilation—adopting an appropriate transparency and legibility in one's speech and conduct—but rather to recognize that languages are always already infected by foreign influences. For Victor, to write in English is still to write in a language "borrowed from ancestors."

Victor's insistence on "an 'us' you couldn't know"—echoing the initial shift from "you" to "us" in the prologue—is, finally, a provocative challenge to the current reign of relatability that threatens to homogenize experience and reduce the act of reading to moments of mundane recognition. As one member of her "largely white audience in the United States," I find her disavowal of universal relatability to be a profound stance. At some level, in other words, *Kith* is *not for me*. And that's *okay*. The most compelling effect of poetry, and reading more generally, is not the moment of immediate understanding, but that of incomprehension. Or at least the surprising mixture of familiarity and difference that results from being in transit: "Sometimes *Kith* is just small-boned monologues held in the cradle of a road trip—an American tradition with other stories of other others."