Lo Kwai Cheung argues that not only does “Asia” not exist, but never has, except as the ideological instrument of projections from elsewhere (Lo 2005a). Lo’s approach is significant because it moves beyond the East-West binary of Said’s Orientalism, arguing that “transnational cultural interflows and resonance within Asia are primarily founded... by the success of capitalist modernity” (134). The emptiness of the signifier “Asia,” Lo further argues, supplies the energy, produced via lack, for the globalized flows of particularly recognizable forms of Chineseness.
that the agents of globalized modernity can capitalize upon.\footnote{1} Put simply, Lo argues that Hollywood cinema can profit capably from emptiness of globalized signifiers possessing no original source in any identifiable, material context. Because “Asia” does not exist, we nevertheless create proxies and place-markers in the imagination of culture as if it did.

Today, I am looking at a particular literary precursor of Lo’s contemporary “Asia,” the “Asia” that is not one, from the perspective of the World War Two era. I argue that John Hersey’s late-modernist classic *Hiroshima* (1946) created a foundational and particularly “modernist” instance of the Western demand for “Asia” to exist in the literary imagination, whereby the effects of the atomic bomb empirically (and bleakly) endorse not only the epitaph of a failed Japanese imperialist narrative, but over time, signal the advent of a newly globalized version of literary modernity with the United States as its custodian. This newly globalized, Asian-Pacific modernity, as Alan Nadel (1995) has argued, provoked anxiously within mainstream American culture about globalization of American power and authority—likely a precursor to postmodernism—that artists and thinkers since Hersey have struggled to contain. The paradox of cold war containment was that it sought to trammel overseas threats in the name of a common humanity—one thinks of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts justified on the same basis some sixty years later—even as it sustained fantasies about American exceptionalism.\footnote{2}

The perceived inability to contain external threats to the United States was, in turn, directly connected to a crisis in late-modernist representation which conventionally, as Gikandi (1996) and others have noted, involved borrowing—appropriating—indigenous materiel from colonies and their cultures (in the case of Japan, a defeated enemy rapidly transformed into a neo-colony).\footnote{3} The advent of the atomic age required writers like Hersey to reconsider their existing tools and stock in the modernist trade by the grotesque half-light of Japan’s atomic dawn, and Hersey was among the very first on the scene to put such materiel to modernist use.

What emerges in *Hiroshima* as a consequence is an anxious hybrid, the tools of modernism melting, if you like, by the white heat of a newer, heretofore unfathomable global reality no longer measurable by the warm, ideological heat of amor patria. Patrick Sharp (2000) situates *Hiroshima* effectively in this transitional context, sitting as it does astride two very different literary traditions, one popular, the other elite. On the one hand, *Hiroshima* would use the popularizing voice of
the liberal-humanist subject to redirect a far older pulp and popular tradition of racialist "yellow peril" discourse about "Asia"; on the other hand, in so doing, Hersey also has recourse primarily to precedents at hand from the tradition of elite modernism; notably, Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and T. S. Eliot's use of rain as redemption in the Wasteland. (Sharp 8; 10-12).

A brief summary of my literature review—that "Asia" does not actually exist except as a conflicted, literary artifact of late-modernism whose anxieties overlapped with the larger, mainstream project of containment—allows my argument to come into clearer focus. Specifically, I argue that Hersey's text constitutes a seminal instance whereby the Western ideological demand that "Asia" exist cohabited a new literary form, the non-fiction novel, as its best articulation. *Hiroshima* serves the purpose admirably, not merely as a journalistic expose of devastation-cum-domination. More importantly, in the context of an emerging postwar narrative of American neocolonialism, *Hiroshima* enabled the domestication of sympathy as that (always belated) affect best suited to narrating de facto American power. For all its superb craftsmanship and timeliness, Hersey's book ensures such a belatedness, if not the outright irrelevance, of Eliotic, high Anglo-European modernism in the aftermath of the radioactive dawning of a new, "Asian," theatre. In writing the non-fiction fiction that is *Hiroshima*, Hersey's explosive deconstruction of genre has as its material equivalent the atomic bomb itself which, as the fetish incorporating the Western demand for "Asia," shatters any pre-emptive understanding of the origins of modernist culture as strictly national. In order to save Japan, and subsequently "Asia," for American-sponsored global capitalism we must first destroy them.

* * *

Peculiarly, the Western demand for "Asia" which emerged with the fissioning of a single atom on 8th August 1945 not only bracketed Anglo-European modernism and signalled entry into a vexing and anxious cold war postmodernity for the West by the light of a new and globalized dawn's emerging half-life. It also finally secured to "Asia" and its heterogeneous subjects a belated entry into modernity proper, with the postwar, global superpower, the United States, as postmodern steward.

This uneven relationship, that of a reconstructed "Asian" ward of modernity with
a postmodern American guardian, is doubly paradoxical because, as Hersey's *Hiroshima* depicts, being nothing in and of itself, "Asian" literary modernism could only, at least in the beginning, reflect the censorship and control of its American sponsors who hurried, via the Pacific Marshall Plan and Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Tokyo censorship office, to fill every "Asian" cultural void (or crater) with American cultural capital, engineering know-how, and public works projects imported, so to speak, from American actors versed in a prior modernist-colonial history elsewhere, from places like Hawaii, Cuba and the Philippines. Its own palpable sympathy and liberal conscience notwithstanding, Hersey's project was equally in the vanguard of this domesticating project, of re-building, declaring, translating, and then disseminating this new "Asia" along various routes directed by the new, comptrollers of a global (and largely Americanized) culture.[4]

But this was all as yet to come. As Pacific theatre correspondent for Henry Luce's *Time-Life Magazine*, Hersey had been filing reports during the US Marine assault on Japanese-held Guadalcanal in 1942 and elsewhere. Now, after the signing of the unconditional surrender in Tokyo Bay in August 1945, Hersey set to work rapidly. He was eager to document the still largely unknown effects of the atomic bombing. Interestingly, his novel would go a long way in actually creating popular discourses about the atomic bombing as an event requiring a recalibration of the modernist sensorium.

In his reconstruction of his interviewee's respective "eye witness" narratives, for example, Hersey's text tries to depict sounds and sensations precisely, but studiously avoids the depersonalizing tone adopted by the US government. After the morning of 8th August, US government press releases sought to avoid the philosophical debate around disproportionate use of force by focusing on inanimate sites and contours of physical devastation rather than the impact on individual bodies or families (Sharp 2000, 5). Hersey himself stated "I felt I would like to write about what happened not to buildings but to human beings... and I cast about for a way to find a form for that" (qtd. in Lifton and Mitchell 87-88).

Hersey's text accordingly depicts individuals by name, recording their perceptions and feelings. He also accentuates the attempts by survivors to overcome the anomie of devastation by recalling pre-bombing narratives of family, connection, and tradition. Specifically, as Sharp relates, the US military proscribed photographic or cinematographic reproductions of bombing sites (7). Hersey strove to reproduce
graphically, via writing, many of the same effects of film and photographic technology (along the lines of John dos Passos' *USA Trilogy*) but this time to "undermine the official narrative of the Hiroshima bombing" (Sharp 8).

*A Noiseless Flash*

Hersey introduces, for the first time, the collapse of time and meaning into a now, neo-colonial reconfiguring of global space. This shift of paradigm is eerily silent.

In *Hiroshima*, the sound the advent of postmodernity makes is "a noiseless flash" (3), which also titles Hersey's first chapter. The absence of noise obliterates the radio silences and phonographic scratches of an analogic, modernist consciousness. One of Hersey's interviewees, Tanimoto, "heard no roar" (9). In fact, the narrator makes a remarkable generalization early on in the narrative: "Almost no one in Hiroshima recalls hearing any noise of the bomb." (9) If the atomic bomb would impose a reversion to silence, it would also stop the mouth of modernism proper.

As both an inscription and a reconstruction of others' memory, Hersey's writing is doubly belated, having recourse only to posterior trace-events which are the scratching, clicking sounds detectable using modernist technologies. Hersey reports that Japanese physicists were aware of what had happened by 11th August, when they came to Hiroshima armed with "Lauritsen electroscopes and Neher electrometers" (83). These electric emissions, like the scratching of the Geiger counter, are merely traces of an unforeseeable and barely imaginable event. (Indeed Hersey's narrative recounts time and time again that those who have lived through the event, cannot entirely reconstruct it) That Hersey, unlike his individual interviewees, nevertheless attempts to reconstruct the narrative of the noiseless atomic bomb into a pastiche of still faintly discernible trace-events—with *Hiroshima* as his monument to a journalistic faith in the recovery of meaning—offers evidence for why Hiroshima, if it belongs anywhere, still belongs to modernism.

The atomic birth of "Asia" required the deafening obliteration of competing versions of the future, equally colonial and imperial, that Japan's "Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" had envisioned. America's political gain occurred, however, only at the cost of the devastating epistemological anxiety with which atomic weapons have burdened our species ever since: as Nadel puts it, "By universalizing *loss*... the atomic bomb rendered *sacrifice* [of individuals and societies] impossible." (59) [5] In an astute analysis, Giamo concurs: "In an instant, [the
Japanese understanding of honorable death, the meaning of gyokusai, turned into a meaningless death, nanshi, for hundreds of thousands.” (704) From this perspective, then, the bomb was not only powerfully destructive, but powerfully creative—capturing for the United States the sole right and claim to make their version of “Asian” meaning universal. But before the American meaning of “Asia” could be creatively universalized, the Japanese meaning of sacrifice had itself to be obliterated and America’s sole sacrifices, as victor, superimposed.

Yet as an artifact inside time Hersey’s project must inhabit writing—as Derrida reminds us, writing is itself the inscription of an absence—and must paradoxically attempt to hear the noise of noiselessness. Hence we encounter Hersey’s willingness to write the discourse of transition beyond modernism which importantly retains the the latter’s properties as remembered: “There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being [Miss Sasaki] was crushed by books.” (23) Here we have not the direct impact of the bomb but the indirect, yet crushing weight of books: both figures emerge, the modern book and indirect postmodern event, in the same rendering with a hardly satisfactory whiff of irony and in an age where the writer readily concedes irony is no longer appropriate.

Another significant instance of the juxtaposition of modernist totality with postmodern event occurs when one of Hersey’s interviewee’s recounts, via a letter, the events of 15th August when the divine representative on earth, the Emperor Hirohito, broadcast to the Japanese people his intention to surrender to the United States. It was the first time in history that the voice of emperor had been so broadcast; that a god had, so to speak, permitted his voice to be mediated and delivered via radio waves:

So I went to Hiroshima railway station. There set a loud-speaker in the ruins of the station. Many civilians, all of them were in boundage, some being helped by shoulder of their daughters, some sustaining their injured feet by sticks, they listened to the broadcast and when they came to realize the fact that it was the Emperor, they cried with full tears in their eyes, ‘What a wonderful blessing it is that Tenno himself [can] call on us and we can hear his own voice in person. We are thoroughly satisfied in such a great sacrifice.’ (85)

This scene is remarkable for the effect of modernist magic—broadcast radio—it would sustain in the reader’s imagination against the backdrop of postmodern devastation. Surrounded by a devastated postmodern landscape, where the gamma rays where as yet lively and irradiating all present. Tenno’s voice on the radio
waves seems at once noble and feeble, evocative equally of the joy of continuity and of joy's utter irrelevance.

The broadcasting of the emperor's voice via radio has the further impact of seeming to re-imposing the discourse of national sacrifice that, as Nadel and Giamo noted, the atomic bomb made irrelevant. By way of a substitution for such an alienation of national sacrifice, a new figure, that of belated modernist witness, emerges powerfully in Hersey's writing.

Beyond elegy, what is the role of such belated modernist witness—we recall Auden's 1938 sonnet linking Nanjing to Dachau; we recall the search for civility in modernist art alongside what Adorno rightly termed the barbaric? It is as if the postmodern suture rent by the bomb could be stitched up using modernist discourses and technologies. Of course it can't, but the sense of irony that could have emerged at the eerie scene Hersey uses the letter to convey—of the maimed and radiated agape at the radio broadcast of their embodied god in the destroyed Hiroshima railway terminus—also fails utterly. The foreground and background cannot cohabit here; there is no dialectic that will emerge to introduce a new synthesis onto the scene. Here a modernist technology, radio, speaking with the voice of the emperor against the backdrop of postmodern noiselessness succeeds only in defamiliarizing both. Now and here, the radio voice of modernism, too, is alien. Yet Hersey still takes pains to include it.

The power of Hersey's effort in the depiction of a radically displaced modernist witness, alongside his utter disappearance before the trace images of the "Asian" holocaust he would nevertheless project outward, are a kind of testament to the wilfullness underlying his liberal humanism: the consistent refusal to be seen, the lack of full disclosure about how sympathy can itself disguise subsequent forms of mastery. This is not to say that liberal humanists are uniquely indicted as such, but only that they may better understand, being more cognizant of their own authority, how ambivalently to deploy the oxymoron of writing. (Writing cannot be conceived of apart from its necessary lapsus that requires further mastery. We cannot write at all but as fantasists of control over the meaning we encode)

To summarize the inter-relation between Hersey's methods, his witness and his will: Hersey's methods of documentation remain modernist; the world he cannot envision beyond what he is documenting represents the birth of the postmodern. The uneasy relationship between the recognizably modern document and the unknowable post-modern event is at all times fused together by the wilfull
sympathy of Hersey’s liberal humanism, which mourns the universalizing of loss the advent of the atomic age required.

**Spatial Amplitude**

In another vignette, one of Hersey’s interviewees, Tanimoto, noted that the atomic bomb did not drop, as such, but moved sideways, “it travelled from east to west, from the city toward the hills. It seemed a sheet of the sun” (8). Here representing the atomic bomb achieves meaning, not by inverting noiselessness into the activity of light, but by traversing space with what I call the spatial amplitude of proliferating meanings. These meanings oscillate forcefully outward in time and space from the center of the atomic bomb’s detonation. At the very center of this oscillating amplitude, whose waves first began emanating ever outward at ground zero on that Hiroshima morning, is the promise of American-sponsored globalization, which will dictate—for the next sixty years or so—where the nodes of capitalism’s control system will be located. From every bomb and crater in the homelands of the vanquished the blossoming of capital and its formations will emerge, in turn creating their own subsequent spatial amplitude in eerie and atavistic lockmarch with their ancestor, so aptly misnamed Little Boy.

Such spatial amplitude necessarily exceeds any ideology of containment and signals the apocalyptic end of even a well-intentioned and liberal literary-modernist establishment seeking to comprehend the unfathomable. As Nadel correctly asserts, *Hiroshima’s* “attempts to comprehend the bombing... will not substantially undermine the ideological assumptions of the book’s American audience” (6).

However sympathetic, Hersey’s text failed to contain its purported subject—that of the globalized modernity atomic weaponry at once created and forever condemns. Yet if, as Nadel suggests, John Hersey’s “attempts [in *Hiroshima*] at containment—manifest in its genre and rhetoric—appropriate the [Japanese] victims’ experience as a special, non-fiction form of fiction” (5), then the novel is also significant to the study of literary modernism, because its “special” and “new” modernist technique cannot fully contain the “Asia” it would narrate as a function of the new, American hegemonic power.

The “Asia” newly extrapolated from Japan’s particular experiences at the dawn of the atomic age, will invoke Pound’s injunction and then cancel it. Japan will be “made new” as Hersey witnessed it at ground zero, by inverting the even then somewhat clichéd notion of art being able to re-imagine the social totality (in Japan
techne was used to destroy not create). The modernist injunction is canceled (if not entirely effaced) because of the potential irrelevance of art in any form whatsoever in the atomic age: Auschwitz and Hiroshima are forced to share the same word in the English language, holocaust. (Nadel suggests powerfully how the shadows of incinerated Japanese seared into Hiroshima’s sidewalks remains the postmodern riposte to the body-shaped lava molds of Pompeii. The image-texts of the first rebuke the three-dimensional concavities of the second) The birth of “Asia” in the Anglo-European modernist imagination renders the latter if not liminal as such, then abruptly marginalized along the greater routes and flows of a global, rather than national, scale.

Accordingly, the spatial amplitude the atomic bomb achieved was uniquely American; it was also uniquely “Asian,” because as I argue, it was on that day that “Asia” was finally achieved as an instrumentalized, ideological project of Western ideological design—including clearing the necessary ground, both literal and discursive, needed for neocolonialism. The paragon of postmodern architectural works that are Fredric Jameson’s Taipei, Tokyo Disney, the collapsing of time and space in the nostalgia project of Wong Kar-Wai’s Hong Kong cinema, even the triumphal excesses of the Beijing Olympic opening ceremonies of 2008—all that we recognize as the “Asian” mastery of Western discourses of culture may be said to begin with the leveling of cultural difference the atomic era at once promised and required. America has never had a long history of civilization; in August 1945 it declared to the world that civilization was not a necessary incident attending rule; even worse, its atomic weaponry affirmed the principle that competing civilizations cannot co-exist as competitors in imaginary global spaces.

Hersey’s text goes as far as modernism possibly can in gathering traces of the event. But he cannot capture, beyond a pastiche of futility, the events of total war. Unlike the fire-bombings of conventional weaponry—the fire-bombings of Guernica, Dresden, and Tokyo were as devastating as Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the sound an atomic bomb makes is not that provided by Anglo-European modernism but may be heard first via an act of translation into a postmodern register, a translation first imposed upon the Japanese civilian population, and subsequently, across the over twenty or more atomic tests occurring between 1946 and 1958 on Bikini Atoll (home of the Malayo-Polenesian speaking indigenous peoples who bore the brunt of the radioactivity.) Whether conventional or postmodern, the content of the form of total war required the consumption of human bodies, now
rendered meaningless beyond sacrifice, as its victims.

* * *

At the dawn of the atomic transition from modern to postmodern writing, Hersey’s *Hiroshima* is difficult to classify; its modernist center cannot hold, in it, what we feel about the heat of a sundering canon, the end of a peculiarly American, and American modernist’s, way of looking at the world. This sense of modernist futility in face of the advent of the atomic age, alongside the general American indifference to the implications of what the doctrine of total nuclearized war might mean, was hardly of Hersey’s own doing, even if he was well-placed to document the paradox of American hegemony at its “Asian” margins. Born and raised in China, Hersey was never content as the subject of the American ideology of national containment; hence his role as, I argue, among the best modernist commentators of the belated subject of American globalization.

Thus the de-centering of my paper as it stands, anomalous if not unloved, on this conference program of Space Between. The “Asia” (which is not one) does not only inhabit the abattoir of Anglo-European modernity—although unleashing weapons of mass destruction on the elderly, women, and children probably ought not to go down as our nation’s most glorious moment—yet also occupies a lacuna of its own within literary modernist discourse as it is traditionally defined by Europe and the United States. This lacuna was created by an atomic blast on the margins of modernism which, over time, came to impinge on the modernist center via globalization. As such, the modernist artifact “Asia,” occupies only liminally then the “space between” the world wars—it is neither strictly modern nor postmodern, neither the Asia we experience, nor the one of our dreams. The “Asian” ward, like Hersey’s text itself, is a supremely reconstructed and finely crafted modernist artifact of the American consciousness of what “Asia” can now come to mean. Its joins and seams seldom show. But “Asia,” alas, is never, and can never be, itself. As Lo Kwai Cheung reminds us, “Asia” does not exist. So, too, borne of the silence a bomb makes, “Asia” speaks to us in the West with a voice of our own devising—Hersey first gave this history a text, a sound, a narrative—but never for itself. It has never been.
Notes:

[1] In his analysis of contemporary Hong Kong popular culture, Lo balances carefully, securing to the Hong Kong subject the experiences of modernity—rather than as mere victims of colonialism or mere reflections of the latter’s processes—as well as the salutary reminder that Hong Kong’s much-touted uniqueness is also a value, like that of a “floating city,” which may be all-too-readily assimilated back into master narratives of nation (the mother-country, China) and globalization (worldwide capitalization with supra-national corporations as its clients) (Lo 2005b).

Like the empty signifier, Asia, Hong Kong “floats” along routes of culture and capital, determined by both, and yet, interestingly, remains irreducible, Lo suggests—not irreducibly pluralist, but heterogeneous of the Chineseness, at once constitutive and yet also subverting, that drives it forward into the future (Lo 2005a 135).

[2] See George Kennan’s containment essay, which is “steeped in the conventions of psychological realism” (Nadel, 15). Hersey’s speed in data-collection and interviewing as early as April 1946 was remarkable. As it was, however, historical events moved even more quickly than he. The narratives about the atomic arsenal which he had hoped to influence through the writing of the work were, even as he was writing, rapidly being incorporated into another, now more pressing narrative which quickly distracted most Americans from the reality of the Japanese devastation: the containment of Communism.

[3] Newly arrived in defeated Japan in the spring of 1946, Hersey was therefore simply trying to document (hence recover) for the American imagination whatever remnant of Japanese culture could or might have remained once the Japanese version of modernity had been vaporized. Hersey’s project is therefore investigative, and insofar as it relies on native informants, is a precursor in the Western anthropological tradition and its salvage ethnography methodology. See Gikandi, Maps of Englishness.

[4] While certainly beyond the scope of this essay, the nature of such hemispherically displaced modernist experiments deserves further study—particularly, those redevelopment projects which occurred under the auspices of Western planning and finance. For example, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) surveyed Japan, ostensibly to assess wartime damage, and released its final report on 30th June 1946 (Sharp 2000, 7). The “capture” of conquered Japan’s territory was achieved via survey; released in the same summer in a number of The New Yorker dedicated to the purpose, Hersey’s Hiroshima stands capably as a paratext, in human terms and costs, of that representational capture. It bears repeating, however, that both the USSBS report and Hersey’s classic of liberal after-thought, are servants of the same process of capturing “Asia.” Cf. Postcolonial cultural geographer, Nihal Perera, citing instances of local re-articulations and re-directions of Western redevelopment projects at the hands of sovereign, local artists and engineers.

[5] Nadel suggests that the atomic bomb rendered the rhetoric of sacrifice null in a new globalization of state-sponsored violence that indicted all—rather than merely regional—historical actors, and most particularly the founding, and as yet sole member of the nuclear club. Giamo reminds us that long before the atomic holocaust of Hiroshima, Japan and Germany were making their own versions of modernity barbaric in their own respective spheres of control (705).
[6] The observation may be attributable to Lionel Trilling who first applied the term “relaxed will” to E. M. Forster in 1942, four years prior to the publication of Hiroshima.

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