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THE WHITE FRAUD:
WHITE ELEPHANTS, VALUE, AND EXCHANGE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

(Spine title: The White Fraud)

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by

Ross Daniel Bullen

Graduate Program
in
English

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of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

My dissertation examines the literary and cultural history of the term "white elephant" – a phrase that refers to a costly and burdensome object that is impossible to sell or give away – by tracing its origin in the American lexicon to the United States' diplomatic relations with Siam in the 1850s. Although a certain kind of albino elephant was historically regarded as auspicious in Siam, these animals were not white, nor were they given away as gifts by the king of Siam in order to "ruin" his rivals, as virtually every text that seeks to explain the significance of the phrase suggests. Rather, I argue, the white elephant's reputation as a "fatal gift" emerged from a cross-cultural situation in Bangkok in which American capitalism was placed in uneasy proximity to Siamese diplomacy, which placed a strong emphasis on gift exchange. As a figure that – for American writers – represented a point of absolute difference between the East and the West, the white elephant came to embody American anxieties about Southeast Asian economic and social practices, including so-called "oriental despotism" and what Marx termed the "Asiatic mode of production."

I begin by looking at the ways in which contemporary American writing about white elephants remains vexed about the value and importance of these animals, and still casts them as figures of irresolvable cultural difference. In order to establish the significance of the white elephant for antebellum America, I examine the roles white elephants play in the Enlightenment-era writing that preceded America's first contact with Siam, including travel narratives by early European explorers and philosophical texts by Voltaire, Hegel, and Marx. I accompany this analysis of what I call the "general

theory of the white elephant" with a reading of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which offers a sustained meditation on both the conceptual significance of white elephants and America's political and economic presence in Southeast Asia. Finally, I examine several first-hand accounts written in the wake of America's 1856 embassy to Siam in order to show how this diplomatic encounter contributed to the white elephant's pejorative reputation as a fatal gift.

Keywords: American literature, white elephants, Siam, gift exchange, economic criticism, race studies, Melville, Marx.

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Sometimes gifts turn out to be white elephants and come – as Marcel Mauss writes – "with a burden attached." It is with great pleasure, then, that I can say the intellectual gifts I have received from the following people have only been offered in the spirit of generosity. Even though I will always be in their debt, it is no burden to me knowing that they have given me more than I can ever repay.

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INTRODUCTION

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What do we talk about when we talk about white elephants? A review of recent American news headlines suggests that we are talking about them all the time, as projects as diverse as President Barack Obama's proposed health care reforms, the recently-cancelled U.S. missile defence shield in Eastern Europe, and former President George W. Bush's presidential library have all been described as potential "white elephants."[1] And yet, while this phrase has been a standard part of the American lexicon since the late-nineteenth century, it is an ambiguous term, with an unclear referent. Although most people recognize that calling something a white elephant is to suggest that it is a costly, useless, burdensome, or unsaleable possession, the reason this word means what it does is decidedly less clear. Perhaps one would conclude that the term is related to "white elephant sales," where useless or tacky objects, that normally have no market value, are sold in order to raise money for a charity or institution. Or perhaps it has something to do with the "white elephant gift exchange," a holiday party game in which each participant brings an undesirable present and has the opportunity to steal similar gifts from other players, all while trying to avoid getting stuck with the "worst" of the gag gifts. Looking up the phrase in the dictionary, or typing it into an internet search engine, will likely yield some version of the following explanation, in this instance from the *OED*:

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[1] Some examples of these arguments can be found in Stubel, Baxter, and Cirincione, respectively, although a quick web search will reveal many more, particularly in less formal contexts, such as blog entries or message board comments.

> *white elephant.* a. A rare albino variety of elephant which is highly venerated in some Asian countries. b. *fig.* A burdensome or costly possession (from the story that the kings of Siam were accustomed to make a present of one of these animals to courtiers who had rendered themselves obnoxious, in order to ruin the recipient by the cost of its maintenance). Also, an object, scheme, etc., considered to be without use or value.

Presumably, then, white elephant sales and gift exchanges are contemporary iterations of this earlier phenomenon. Calling something a white elephant, it seems, is to align it with an account of a despotic Siamese monarch giving away a gift that will ruin its recipient, and also with the idea of a possession that is both expensive to keep and impossible to get rid of. Although these "white elephant" possessions are not exclusive to Siam,[2] the *meaning* of such valueless objects is always determined by a series of stereotypes that are indissociable from Western representations of so-called "Asiatic" societies.

In America the pejorative use of the word "white elephant" did not become widespread until the postbellum period. And while the cultural and literary representations of white elephants during this era are fascinating, there is an equally compelling antebellum literary tradition of writing about white elephants that helped to establish many of the so-called truths about these animals that would inform later accounts.[3] In this dissertation, I will examine this earlier group of texts in order to

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[2] The name of Thailand before 1939.

[3] My use of the terms "antebellum" and "postbellum" requires a degree of flexibility. Although most of the primary texts I examine were written before 1861, a few notable exceptions were written later, in the decades that followed the Civil War. I am still describing such texts as "antebellum," however, because they either a) are accounts of an

illuminate the literary, cultural, political, and economic precepts upon which our current understanding of the term "white elephant" rests. These texts consistently represent the white elephant as the central problem of Siamese society, a catch-all metaphor for wasted wealth, despotic tyrants, and social stagnation. In fact, by encompassing so many of the major stereotypes about Asiatic society, the white elephant often becomes a metonymic figure for all of "Asia" or "the Far East" on the whole. And yet, despite the fact that it is aligned with what – from a Western perspective – is the inescapable alterity of the East, the idea of the white elephant has proved to be very useful for American writers. After all, there is no other word in the English language that so succinctly describes a costly, useless, burdensome, or unsaleable object. Such objects, of course, are ubiquitous in a market-based society: the by-products of capitalism have always included waste matter in the form of useless and unwanted commodities that do little more than gather dust in a warehouse, a shop window, or some elderly relative's mantelpiece. However, the term "white elephant" allows these objects to appear not as the wasteful remainders of the capitalist mode of production, but rather as somehow related to a series of Western stereotypes about Asia that include cruel and capricious "oriental despots," the wasting of wealth in the form of gold and silver, the stagnation of sprit or progress in societies with limited personal freedoms, and the distribution of gifts in diplomatic and ceremonial contexts.

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author's earlier experiences during the antebellum period (for example, George B. Bacon's *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, As It Was and Is*) or b) serve (for our purposes, at least) largely as commentaries on earlier texts about white elephants and Siam (Frank Vincent's *The Land of the White Elephant*). Likewise, while the widespread pejorative usage of "white elephant" is indeed a postbellum phenomenon, this was not the case until the 1880s.

Although my overall concern is with the cultural and literary representations of white elephants in America, such a cross-cultural figure is the product of multiple national discourses written in multiple languages. Accordingly, my approach here is necessarily transnational, as I consider texts in English written by both American and British authors, and also texts (in translation) written in Thai, Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. The texts I examine by Thai writers offer radically different accounts of white elephants than those by Western authors, as they explain the significance of these animals in Southeast Asian political and religious cultures. Meanwhile, the British and European authors I read contribute significantly to the American understanding of the white elephant as a symbol of waste. There is, however, something unique about America's relationship with white elephants. As I argue in Chapters One and Four, this is in no small part due to America's ambivalent attitude toward Siam. As the only nation in Southeast Asia to elude colonization, despite its proximity to British and French colonial interests, Siam could not help but remind the Americans who travelled there of their country's own struggle for independence. And yet these same writers also saw in Siam a backward and stagnant country, presided over by a despotic king, and – most important of all – obsessed with white elephants. These animals, which were revered by the Siamese and viewed as an auspicious sign for a reigning monarch, were identified by American writers as the most significant point of difference between Siam and America, a distinction which was often expanded to encapsulate the differences between despotism and democracy, between the so-called Asiatic mode of production and capitalism, between stagnation and progress, between East and West.

As an analysis of the ways in which a Siamese figure was interpreted through the lens of received European wisdom about "Asia" and subsequently taken up by antebellum American writers, I would like to situate my dissertation within an emerging field of scholarship that examines nineteenth-century America's engagement with Asia as a corollary to coeval discourses on racial form and economic policy. The past ten years have seen the publication of numerous critical studies that take up these issues.[4] In *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945*, Colleen Lye presents a compelling reading of "the history of a particular, paradoxical racial form" – that is, the American understanding of Asian society in terms of racial difference (5). Bearing in mind the "difficulties of unthinking Eurocentrism," Lye does not seek to "replace racism's projections with the 'truth' of Asian or Asian American reality" but rather seeks to explore the "predominant ideological uses" of "America's Asia" in American literature from the late-nineteenth century onward. One of the most intriguing claims Lye makes about this period is that "the closing of the frontier entwined the emergence of Asiatic racial form with the intensification of commodity relations and capital's global expansion," which suggests that the American understanding of Asia was marked by observations of both racial and economic difference (9). While I am persuaded by Lye's argument that "American naturalism represents a failed critique of capitalism" and that the "evidence of this lies in its tendency toward racialization, or the reification of social relations into physiological forms, or types" (8), by tying her claims about America's Asia to Turner's frontier thesis and the advent of literary naturalism, she seems to

[4] Among those I have consulted for this dissertation, aside from Lye and Huang, are John R. Eperjesi's *The Imperialist Imaginary*, Malini Johar Schueller's *U.S. Orientalisms*, and Josephine Nock-Hee Park's *Apparitions of Asia*.

foreclose the possible significance of American interaction with Asia before the 1890s. And while the years covered by Lye's study indeed coincide with the height of "yellow peril" discourse, it is not the only (or the first) period in which American fantasies about Asia yoked ideologies of racial difference with anxieties about Asian economic practices. Moreover, by focussing almost exclusively on representations of Japan and China, Lye ignores the admittedly smaller, but nonetheless significant, role that Southeast Asian nations – particularly Siam – played in shaping the vision of America's Asia. An even more recent text, Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics*, considers American views about "the Pacific as the 'final frontier' of Universal History [and] as the future of the American economy" during the antebellum period, most notably through a sustained reading of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. As a "profound meditation" – I would say antebellum America's *most* profound meditation – "on the destiny of the Pacific in the context of U.S. imperial history" (1), along with its obvious canonical centrality, *Moby Dick* warrants a privileged place in Huang's analysis. Indeed, taking up Huang's claims that Melville's novel is a "work of literature that unsettles the kind of transpacific interests expressed variously in nineteenth-century American economic and historical imaginations" (53), I turn to *Moby Dick* in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation in order to demonstrate the ways in which earlier European texts about white elephants and Siam influenced Melville's view of Asian economic, religious, and political structures. However, despite the compelling critical rewards of presenting the novel as an example of "Pacific" literature, Huang's reading of *Moby Dick* does not address the specific Southeast Asian nations and symbols that Melville cites, including Siam, Burma, and the white elephant. And yet these figures

seem to be of some importance for Melville, as they were for other, less-renowned writers in the antebellum period, since they provided a novel way of thinking about waste, value, and exchange that spoke to the heart of America's anxieties about its economic destiny during this era of incipient globalization, all the while suggesting that these risks inherent to capitalism could best be understood as the by-product of Asiatic stagnation. The white elephant was a recurrent point of both fascination and revulsion for antebellum writers trying to come to terms with America's economic and political confrontation with Southeast Asia. Accordingly, I view my project as an intervention not only in the field of nineteenth-century Asian American studies, but also as critical contribution to the understanding of American historiography about Thailand, the construction of the category of "Asia" in Enlightenment-era intellectual discourse, and the significance of waste, value, and exchange in critical theory.

The So-Called "White" Elephant

Before proceeding, however, I would like to return briefly to the question – what we talk about when we talk about white elephants – with which I began. Although, in America, a white elephant is a kind of burdensome possession, in Thailand it is a highly revered and venerated figure, as it is viewed as a sign of divine fortune and approbation. This gap between the Thai and the Western view of white elephants has long been noted in texts that describe these animals. Here is how one nineteenth-century British writer, Ernest Young, explains this paradox of the white elephant: "To give a European a useless or troublesome present is known as giving him a 'white elephant'," Young writes, "but to give a Buddhist a present of a white elephant would be to give him possession of a

creature which, kindly treated, would cause blessings and good fortune to fall in showers around him in this and future existences" (388). What accounts for this paradox? How is it that one person's trash can be another's sacred treasure? One reason is that, from a Thai perspective, talking about "white elephants" is like talking about nothing at all. Although European and American writers have always mentioned "white elephants" (or their equivalent, e.g. *éléphants blancs*) in their texts about Siam and Southeast Asia, the Thai word for this creature – *chang pheuak* – suggests an "albino" or "strangely coloured" elephant (*chang*, in the Thai language) instead of a literally white animal.[5] Indeed, the process of successfully identifying and classifying a *chang pheuak* is a highly complicated procedure. "To the Thai," Rita Ringis writes, "encompassed in the term is an immediate recognition of the various subtle characteristics that differentiate the white elephant from its more common grey cousins, ranging from the unusual number, colour, and shape of the elephant's toe-nails to the varying degrees of paleness of its eyes and skin" (94). As a signifier that points to a real world object, the word "white elephant" is misleading, the product of centuries of mistranslation and cultural misunderstanding. Western writing about these animals has always picked up on the fact that they aren't really white and has suggested that they are therefore fraudulent or deceitful, a slanderous characterization that undoubtedly contributed to their pejorative figurative definition. And yet, the fact that the word "white elephant" is inaccurate and does not reflect the Thai term for these animals is no secret to these writers; rather, they often make a note of it, only to dismiss or ignore it. For the West, the truth about the non-whiteness of the white elephant is nothing less than an elephant in the room: everybody can see it, and

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[5] See Ringis' chapter "The White Elephant" (93-120); also see Scigliano (99).

everybody knows that it is there, but they choose to ignore it anyway. Let us consider only a few brief examples of this curious Western tendency. In his 1693 text *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam*, Simon de la Loubère, who had visited the court at Ayudhya as an ambassador of Louis XIV, describes white elephants as "not altogether White, but of a flesh colour" and that "the Siamese do call this colour *Peuak*" (98). In *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, Anna Leonowens characterises white elephants as "rarely true albinos – salmon or flesh-colour being the nearest approach to white" (138). Young himself writes that, "for the sake of convenience we [...] refer to it as the 'white elephant,' though there is no such name for it in the native language, and though its colour is very much more like that of a dirty bath-brick" (389). And finally, Frank Vincent, in his 1874 travelogue *The Land of the White Elephant*, notes that the body of "the so-called 'white' elephant" has "the peculiar flesh-coloured appearance termed 'white'" (160). All of these descriptions concede that the white elephant isn't really white, and yet all of them also appear in texts that view the white elephant with at least some degree of suspicion. Young, for example, describes the worship of white elephants as "misdirected" (390). La Loubère believed the white elephant to be a deliberate and persuasive impostor, and Frank Vincent argued that it was costly and dangerous.[6]

Vincent's description – "the so called 'white' elephant" – is worth further consideration. In what way is the white elephant "so-called"? Which is to say, who is it that calls it "white"? It is clearly not the Thai, who describe these animals as *pheuak*, instead of the Thai word for white, which Ringis notes is "different entirely" (94).

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[6] I examine La Loubère's views on white elephants at some length in Chapter Two, and address Vincent's claims in Chapter Four.

Vincent, and every other Western writes since (at least) La Loubère, knows this, and yet he chooses to ignore it, suggesting that the white elephant is "so-called" because it is a fraud that fails to live up to its name. Of course, the only people for whom the white elephant is actually so-called, the only people who mistakenly call it "white," are European and American writers themselves. In a series of texts that span from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, these writers created and continued to use the word "white elephant," while noting that the *chang pheuak* did not match this (imaginary) description, and then – partially as a result of this non-correspondence between word and thing – drew a series of conclusions about the supposedly deceitful, useless, and destructive character of these animals, conclusions which were eventually adapted for figurative uses in the English language. There is an additional way, however, in which we can interpret the phrase "the so-called 'white' elephant." As we can see in the descriptions above, although the white elephant was not literally white, its colour was, at least according to these writers, very much like the colour of (so-called) white people. Vincent, for example, claims that the white elephant has no right to the label "white," but then goes on to say that it has "the peculiar flesh-coloured appearance termed 'white'." Although the flesh colour of white people can be "termed" white, when this same colour is observed in elephants it is suddenly "peculiar." This peculiarity about the white elephant, this uncanny vision of European and American whiteness embodied in the form of Asiatic alterity, is a recurrent theme in Western writing about Siam and white elephants. As I will discuss in my second chapter, for La Loubère in particular, this "peculiar" feature of the white elephant was perhaps the most difficult thing for him to accept about these animals, as it represented a potential point of instability in the

Eurocentric racial hierarchy he espoused. In Chapter Three I also address the curious colour of the *chang pheuak*, this time in the context of Ishmael's speculations in *Moby Dick* on the whiteness of the white whale. Throughout my dissertation, however, the idea that the white elephant is a kind of "white fraud" appears again and again in European and American texts that attempt to explain aspects of Siamese society. Even though it is a term that circulates exclusively among Western writers, the word "white elephant," and all of its attendant associations, is a persistent and seemingly irresolvable problem in European and American writing about Siam. It is presented as a point of absolute difference between the East and the West, a figure that represents all of the West's anxieties about the risks of economic interaction with Asia.

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In Chapter One I begin by considering the role white elephants have played in Thai history, particularly in the period that predates the first extended contact between European travellers and merchants and the Siamese. These early Thai writings on white elephants provide an explanation as to why these animals were revered by Siamese monarchs, and why many of the Western prejudices against *chang pheuak* are misinformed and misdirected. At the same time, however, this chapter also considers the ways in which representing white elephants can be either a blessing or a burden for historiography itself, depending on the national interests of specific historians. While royalist Thai historiographers deliberately foreground the significance of white elephants in their texts, American historians often dismiss or entirely ignore them. For these American writers, the white elephant as the subject of history is itself a kind of textual

burden that can neither be simply dismissed nor reconciled with the methods of modern, Western historiography. I introduce this idea of the white elephant as a textual burden through a brief discussion of several contemporary American texts that attempt to explain (or explain away) the significance of white elephants in modern Thailand.

In Chapters Two and Three I present a sustained argument for what I term the "general theory of the white elephant." Chapter Two begins with an explanation of what I mean by this "general theory," and this explanation serves as a kind of general Introduction for both chapters. In short, I claim that the general theory of the white elephant refers to a pattern of Western thought, that derives its authority from first-hand European accounts about Siam and Siamese white elephants, and which argues that Eastern despotism and stagnation causes certain values (either spiritual or economic) to become stuck in cumbersome and costly material vessels. Although this pattern of thought is rooted in specific cross-cultural textual encounters, it has nevertheless become an abstract, general theory that can be applied without necessarily knowing anything about these earlier interactions (which happens all the time, of course, when people describe useless objects as white elephants). However, unlike other general theories with a similarly intercultural origin, such as fetishism, the general theory of the white elephant has never been fully or coherently developed into a critical concept that can be easily transposed from one discursive field to another. Therefore, in order to track the development of the general theory of the white elephant, it is necessary to look for signs of its presence in texts that perhaps only mention these animals in passing. Accordingly, in these chapters I also turn to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* – a novel in which the word "white elephant" is mentioned only twice, but which nevertheless shows the influence of

the general theory of the white elephant throughout its one-hundred and thirty-five chapters. Moreover, as antebellum America's most sustained treatment of the significance of Asia and Asian commerce, *Moby Dick* is an invaluable archive of the attitudes that Americans held toward Asia, and is an archetype of the kind of ambivalent attraction toward the East that many of the later writers I examine also display.

The specific focus of Chapter Two is the figure of the "oriental despot." I examine the role of despotic monarchs in a series of European texts about Siam from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, arguing that the despot is often held responsible for wasting wealth on white elephants, and is therefore implicated in the general theory of the white elephant. I expand on this thesis in my reading of *Moby Dick*, as I show that Ahab himself is represented as an oriental despot, and that his tyrannical devotion toward destroying Moby Dick wastes the wealth that the *Pequod* could have earned if it had stuck to its original mission.

While Chapter Two suggests that the white whale is like a kind of white elephant that fascinates a despotic ruler, Chapter Three takes a more detailed look at both Moby Dick and various other white elephants in the novel, including the whales described in "The Grand Armada" and Ahab's gold doubloon. In order to explain the significance of these burdensome objects within the context of the *Pequod*'s capitalist mandate, I turn to the foremost nineteenth-century theorist of capital – Karl Marx – and explore the ways in which the influence of the general theory of the white elephant can be detected in his writings about the circulation of commodities. I argue that there is an affinity between Marx's white elephants and Melville's, and considering them alongside each other enables insights into the ways in which the kind of received stereotypes about Asian

monarchs and social stagnation that Marx picked up on also affected antebellum American attitudes toward both useless commodities and the Far East.

Finally, Chapter Four considers a late development in the general theory of the white elephant – namely, the incorporation of the "logic of the gift" into the theory. The definition of "white elephant" from the *OED*, cited above, refers to the king of Siam giving away white elephants in order to ruin obnoxious courtiers. This story, however, has no basis in Siamese history, and does not appear anywhere before the mid-1850s, which coincides with renewed British and American trade interest with the Siamese court at Bangkok. I argue that in the wake of these new trade agreements, American writers in particular viewed the gift – which played a prominent role in Siamese diplomacy – as a problem as equally troubling as the white elephant, and that the two figures were subtly but unmistakably conflated in texts of this period. I begin by examining critical theory that addresses the question of the gift, especially the "fatal gift," before turning to British and American travel narratives that attempt to understand the emphasis that Siamese monarchs placed on gift exchange, and – of course – the significance of white elephants in Siam. The chapter concludes by looking at the uniquely American response to this cross-cultural encounter, as American writers viewed their own involvement with Siam as a kind of gift that could be returned to them as a burdensome white elephant. Although these Americans could see what they took to be the best of themselves in the Siamese, this attraction was always an ambivalent one, and the textual gift of American identity was always represented as potentially fatal and dangerous, as it could come back to America as a "deformed" parody of American values that could burden the United States

with the expense of maintaining economic ties with Siam and the despotic and stagnant East.

CHAPTER ONE

"Adding Miracles to Facts": White Elephants in American and Thai Historiography

Historiography, a science in the West, was until not long ago an art in the East, an art where the reality had to be recreated by adding miracles to facts.
Dirk Van der Cruysse, *Siam and the West 1500-1700*

Introduction

In his book *The Fate of the Elephant*, a paean *cum* lament for the world's dwindling elephant population, Douglass H. Chadwick describes his visit to the white elephant quarters at the royal palace in Bangkok. Among the white elephants he observes is a large "bull called Pra Barom Nakkot" who is "one of the highest-ranking white elephants ever captured" (351). Entering Pra Barom Nakkot's pavilion, after his "eyes had adjusted," Chadwick spots the elephant's "figure looming in the pavilion's darkness" and is "transfixed by its entire presence" which "seemed to throw off a faint, pale aura" (352). For Chadwick, this ethereal and ephemeral "presence" is shrouded in a haze of ambiguous signification: Pra Barom Nakkot is both difficult to see and difficult to interpret. His official name and title is "four full lines long and written in old-style Sanskrit" (351). Consequently, Chadwick's translator "had a difficult time putting the meaning in English," eventually lamenting, "Oh, this is very complicated" (351). The translator's "look of bewilderment mingled with frustration" (351) while attempting to decipher Pra Barom Nakkot's name seems to mirror Chadwick's own attitude toward the white elephant, whose "most startling feature," his eyes, held "some unsettling message" (352). Whatever the white elephant might mean to his Thai keepers – and Chadwick

describes at some length how his guides explain the proper way to "read" Pra Barom Nakkot's body in order to prove that he is a *chang pheuak*[7] – from Chadwick's Western, conservationist viewpoint (his text was authored under the auspices of the Sierra Club) the mysterious presence before him only signifies "a captured god but now an obsolete one, something out of a distant time and kingdom, his purpose all but forgotten" (352-3). "Swaying, surging, alone in his dark, golden-spired pavilion," Pra Barom Nakkot is, "Forever alone. Colossal. And very likely insane. That was the message in those eyes: madness" (353). This surprising passage exemplifies the perplexed attitude that attends much Western writing about white elephants: the significance, or "purpose," of the *chang pheuak* is "all but forgotten," as this "captured" god is reduced, for Chadwick, to a signifier of obsolescence and madness. A few pages later his lament continues, writing, "Unwanted, unused, and costly to maintain the giants [i.e., the royal white elephants] had become figurative white elephants" (355). This irony is replicated on the textual level: the role of white elephants in Chadwick's own writing becomes increasingly burdensome as he attempts to reconcile the worship of elephants as gods or nobility with his own preference to respect or care for them as mere animals. Observing a shrine dedicated to Erawan,[8] Chadwick writes, "I kept wondering: What do all these people praying think about live elephants and jungles and the miraculous natural world out there somewhere?" (366). For Chadwick, the true significance of the white elephant is simply *as an elephant*, as one animal among thousands that could be helped if "these people" could get their

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[7] For example, Chadwick is told that Pra Barom Nakkot has "perfectly white" cuticles and toenails, a mark of auspiciousness, and that he has two extra toes. According to his guides, "twenty-toed elephants are one in a thousand. The chances of one also being a white elephant are nigh miraculous" (352).

[8] Chadwick mistakenly claims Erawan is "the Thai version of Ganesh" (365); as I discuss below, Erawan is in fact the Thai name for Indra's flying white elephants Airavata.

heads out of the shrine and into "the natural world." The worship of white elephants, then, is a burden for Western science, and an impediment to Chadwick's attempt to raise awareness about the "fate" of elephants on the whole.

In this chapter, I will show how American writers such as Chadwick and Eric Scigliano suggest that the significance of white elephants for Thai religious and political life is like a kind of lost or forgotten memory ("something out of a different time and kingdom," as Chadwick puts it) that should be passed over in order to concentrate on the plight of Asian elephants in the present. This disavowal, however, does not simply repress these figures by pushing them into the page's margins. Rather, it signals a moment of textual ambivalence: these writers cannot simply dismiss white elephants as a primitive superstition nor can they accept them as divine, and so they are, in so many words, stuck with them. Caught in a cross-cultural contact zone, writers like Chadwick and Scigliano struggle to adequately represent white elephants in their texts: attempting to be respectful of non-Western societies but unable to shake Western prejudices about white elephants, the authors I examine find the white elephant to be a burden that they can only address through an ambivalent rhetoric of faded memories and forgotten pasts. However, these writers aren't the only ones with a white elephant on their hands – Thai historians seem equally ambivalent about the role of *chang pheuak* in their texts. Reading histories by David K. Wyatt, Rita Ringis, Rong Syamananda, Jit Poumisak, and Thongchai Winichakul, I examine the significance of white elephants in American and Thai accounts of the Ayudhya era. My concern is primarily with the history of Ayudhya before Siam's extensive contact with Northern European merchants in the seventeenth

century, a period for which there are almost no primary Siamese sources,[9] and (compared with the seventeenth century) relatively few European accounts.[10] This dearth of information means that what each historian does or does not include in their text is indicative of their own willingness to accept popular stories about the relevance of white elephants for Siamese political and social history. As is the case for Chadwick and Scigliano, white elephants seem to be something of a burden for Thai historiography, which is forced to decide whether faded folk stories about these animals should "count" as part of Thailand's history.

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[9] Dirk Van der Cruysse, in his Preface to *Siam and the West 1500-1700*, comments on the paucity of primary Thai sources: "The historian of the period comes up against a formidable problem: the virtual absence of authentic Siamese documents going back to the seventeenth century, which is in such contrast to the wealth of Dutch and French documents, and to a lesser extent Portuguese and English ones" (xvi). Although there are certain historical reasons for this – notably the "revolution" of 1688 and the Burmese invasion of Ayudhya in 1767 – Van der Cruysse also explains that "a European historian in the tradition of Herodotus is confronted with a totally different historiography in Asia" (xvi). "Political disturbances and the ravages of the climate do not explain everything," he writes, "the Orient, with its cyclical (and metempsychotic) viewpoint of history, is far from attaching the same value to events. Historiography, a science in the West, was until not long ago an art in the East, an art where the reality had to be recreated by adding miracles to facts" (xvi). This emphasis on a distinction between Western science and Eastern art (or religion) is also present in both contemporary Western writing (for example, Chadwick's observation about Erawan's shrine) and in the Thai historiography I discuss below.

[10] Although there are several sixteenth-century (and earlier) European texts on Siam and greater Southeast Asia, they rarely offer a detailed description of these countries as they are often included in travelogues that describe the entire "East Indies" or – sometimes – the "New World" and Africa as well. At any rate, none of these texts provide anything like the kind of thorough overview that can be found in seventeenth-century texts like those by Van Vliet or La Loubère. For pre-1600 narratives that mention white elephants, see Balbi; di Conti; Fedrici; Fitch; Galvano; Linschoten; Pinto. I will discuss some of these authors in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Elephant Metaphysics

Chadwick's two guides at the royal palace embody the tension he establishes between a Western, scientific view of white elephants and a traditional Buddhist one. The royal veterinarian, Dr. ML Phiphatanchatr Diskul (nicknamed "Pony"), seems "vaguely embarrassed by all the trappings of the ancient white elephant" and "thought the best course for the future might be to release the animals back into the forest in a reserve" (355).[11] Sanet Thanapradit, on the other hand, an eighty-four year old "overseer of royal ceremonies and a long-time official connoisseur of white elephants" (349) is a difficult character for Chadwick to grasp. Although he attempts to be respectful of Sanet Thanapradit, he also cannot help representing him as a figure for the faded and distant past. While Chadwick believes white elephants are "captured" and "obsolete" gods, Sanet Thanapradit has spent sixty-six years as a "*gajajeeva*," who are "men who specialize in determining grades, or degrees, of elephant whiteness" (348). Although Chadwick notes that the word *gajajeeva* is a Hindi term denoting an "elephant expert" he derisively suggests that, in Sanet Thanapradit's case, "perhaps elephant metaphysician would be more appropriate" (348). While Dr. "Pony" shares Chadwick's scientific and environmentalist concern with progress, the "metaphysician" Sanet Thanapradit is firmly aligned with obscure, esoteric knowledge and ancient tradition. Indeed, Chadwick claims that Sanet Thanapradit "sometimes tended to overlook differences between the present and the past, as if the current difficulties with endangered species and bans on any capture of wild Asian elephants might blow over and things return to normal" (349).

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[11] According to Eric Scigliano in *Love, War, and Circuses: The Age-Old Relationship Between Elephants and Humans*, almost all of the royal elephants were relocated to forest camps in 1996.

Hints of senility aside, what this passage suggests is that the past is both dangerous and ephemeral. Although the past threatens to injure the present by overshadowing the plight of endangered species with "elephant metaphysics," this connection to the past is nevertheless embodied only in one elderly man. After all, "[s]uch men [as Sanet Thanapradit]," Chadwick writes, "have always been scarcer than white elephants [themselves]" (348), suggesting that the old elephant expert, although undoubtedly charming, is the last of a dying breed, and that the troublesome customs of the past and the history of Thailand's white elephants will inevitably expire with him.

In his 2002 text *Love, War, and Circuses: The Age-Old Relationship Between Elephants and Humans*, Eric Scigliano recounts his visit to Bangkok's royal palace six years after Chadwick's. He also visits with Dr. Pony and Sanet Thanapradit, and although he is slightly more charitable than Chadwick,[12] he nevertheless perpetuates his predecessor's characterization of Sanet Thanapradit as the last link to a mysterious and fading past. Ninety years old at the time of Scigliano's visit, Sanet Thanapradit is "frail, almost ethereal," however – and in this respect Scigliano's account differs from

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[12] Chadwick has a more explicitly environmentalist approach than Scigliano. In the introduction to *The Fate of the Elephant*, Chadwick – foreshadowing his later concern with white elephants – explains that, before he wrote his book, he was worried that he "was a half-step away from becoming a professional mourner" (7). His overriding concern is the possible near-extinction of the elephant, which he hopes will not have to survive merely "as a sort of precious artifact in some shard of its former range," as such a reduction would be a harbinger of the "end of natural history" (7), a discipline that he will later be at pains to differentiate from what he perceives as superstitious "elephant metaphysics." Scigliano, on the other hand, notes in his introduction that "[m]any books have [already] recounted the baleful effects of humankind on elephants" and that his text will instead "explore the ways humankind has been affected, even shaped and defined, by its millennia-long relationship with elephants – how we reveal ourselves through that relationship, and how it has helped, in biological as well as cultural ways, to make us what we are" (1). Nevertheless, Scigliano often makes moral judgments about these relationships; see, for example, his discussion of the Royal Elephant Nation Museum in Bangkok (100-1).

Chadwick's – "his mind was undimmed: like the fabled elephant, he never forgets" (102). This mental acuity, though, is best used in service of mourning, Scigliano claims, writing that Sanet Thanapradit's "recall is especially useful at state funerals" (102). Scigliano's description of Sanet Thanapradit's workplace also adds to the overall impression that the business of maintaining white elephants belongs in the past, as the author makes his way past "dark teakwood cases piled high with mysterious memorabilia and faded documents" (102). An even more striking example of Scigliano's interest in the faded, mysterious, and mournful aspects of the white elephant can be found in his description of Bangkok's Royal Elephant National Museum. For Scigliano, "Thailand is a nation ardently [...] dedicated to preserving its heritage" but it is "weirdly ambivalent about the large share of that heritage that is tied up with elephants" (101), and the elephant museum attests to this tension. Located in a "small hall" that nevertheless "packs a large load of incongruity" (100) the Royal Elephant National Museum features displays on both white elephants and on the practice of capturing and breaking wild elephants for use in human industry. Although Scigliano believes the museum's "incongruity" reflects a kind of national ambivalence about white elephants, it is apparent to his readers that this sense of unease emanates entirely from Scigliano's own ambivalence about the worship of white elephants and the neglect of Thailand's other, non-sacred elephants. "One can't help thinking," Scigliano writes, "that heady and poetic as all this exaltation of the sacred elephant is, it has little to do with real elephants trying to live their elephant lives, who couldn't care less about royal iconography" (100). This passage recalls both Chadwick's impatience at the Erawan shrine and his distinction between "the natural world" (which is presumably where "real elephants" try "to live their elephant lives") and "elephant

metaphysics" ("exaltation" and "royal iconography"). Although the very existence and maintenance of the Royal Elephant National Museum would seem to suggest otherwise, Scigliano speculates whether "the ambivalence [he] felt there ha[d] also infected the museum's overseers," who "seem at once to cherish this rare gallery and hide it from public view" (100). The museum – "accessible only to the lucky and persistent" (101), Scigliano claims – is difficult for tourists to find, at least compared to the other attractions at Dusit Palace. This may well have been Scigliano's experience there (perhaps he isn't good with directions), although it is difficult to believe his assertion that neither the information clerks nor the palace guards had heard of the museum before (101). Nevertheless, his contention that the "exquisitely appointed and maintained" museum is "almost like a private shrine – or maybe a guilty secret" (101) is a compelling formulation that warrants some consideration. How is the museum like a "private shrine"? Although white elephants in Thailand are associated with shrines (such as the Erawan shrine), these are not particularly "private" places. That such a shrine is also like a "guilty secret" suggests that it names a kind of psychic space within Thailand's national consciousness, and that the empty museum is a symptom of this repression. While both Chadwick and Scigliano have described at length how the white elephant is like a faded memory, Scigliano's formulation suggests that this fading is less like a form of mourning, in which the lost object eventually fades away completely, than it is like a kind of haunting melancholia. Of course, for Scigliano, this haunting that he locates in Thailand's national consciousness is more like an uncanny projection of his own ambivalent feelings about white elephants and his struggle over how to represent them in his writing. Despite Chadwick's and Scigliano's wishes, the white elephant has not simply dropped out of the

Thai consciousness, nor can it simply be explained away in their texts – rather, it persists, like a private shrine that cannot be destroyed, as an ambiguous figure that embodies a series of binary oppositions that can never be adequately reconciled: A sacred god or a regular elephant? A sign of auspiciousness or madness? A national symbol or a guilty secret? As long as these questions remain unanswered the white elephant will continue to haunt Western writers concerned with Thailand's elephants.

But why ask such questions in the first place? An interesting contrast to Chadwick's and Scigliano's accounts can be found in Rita Ringis' *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality*. Although Ringis does emphasize the antiquity of many of the traditions she encounters at Bangkok's royal palace, she does not share Chadwick's and Scigliano's dismissive and ambivalent attitude. Rather, Ringis notes the significance of the history of Thailand's white elephants and the ways in which this history affects contemporary cultural and scientific discourse. The royal veterinarian, Dr. ML Phiphatanchatr Diskul (whom Ringis does not refer to as "Pony"), "as a scientist [...] makes use of the latest techniques to ensure the well-being of his charges" while also being "very much aware of the usefulness [...] and [...] the reliability of information available in the ancient Thai treatises on distinguishing characteristics, for good or ill, of elephants" (114). Since "these writings in their beautifully illustrated manuscript form may appear superficially to be merely poetic," Ringis explains, they are "thus thought by some [to be] superstitious and quaint" (114). Although these texts are often mistaken for "mere" art concerned solely with the kind of "elephant metaphysics" Chadwick and Scigliano excoriate, they are also very much concerned with the "natural world" and can be considered part of a scientific discourse on the maintenance and upkeep of white

elephants. The treatises are "based on centuries of traditional observation and intimate knowledge and understanding of elephants" and, according to Dr. Phiphatanchatr, "modern scientific observations about elephants frequently confirm the validity of the keepers' folk wisdom" (114). Rather than struggling with the tension between science and tradition as Chadwick and Scigliano do, Ringis accepts that the discourses and cultural practices surrounding the white elephant cannot be comfortably divided according to these Western distinctions. For Ringis, the questions that haunt other Western texts about white elephants need not be posed in the first place. The "paradox" of the white elephant in contemporary Thailand – that is, the paradox of a figure torn between Western science and Eastern art and religion – is a projection of Western anxieties about the role of conservationist activities in non-Western societies. The Thai view, exemplified by Dr. Phiphatanchatr's attitude toward "folk wisdom," maintains that the scientific and the traditional are part of the same continuous discourse on white elephants that encompasses centuries of cultural, political, and religious practices. Neither Chadwick nor Scigliano demonstrate a nuanced knowledge of Thai history or of the significance of white elephants for the Siamese kingdoms of Sukhothai, Ayudhya, and Bangkok. Ringis' text, on the other hand, includes a long and detailed history of Siam and of the ways in which white elephants were used in Siamese politics. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine several other histories of Thailand (which, unlike Ringis', are not primarily concerned with the role of elephants) in order to emphasize the significance white elephants held in Siam leading up to the seventeenth century. This historiography, however, is no less ambivalent about white elephants than Chadwick and Scigliano. The importance of white elephants for Thai history is torn

between a Western view that regards them as insignificant superstitions and a Thai royalist view that affirms the *chang pheuak* as a signifier of both Thai independence and the validity of Thailand's monarchy. Once again, the white elephant emerges as a paradox: a textual burden that cannot be easily explained away or adequately resolved. This time, however, the problem is not simply the result of a Western imposition – both American and Thai sources contribute to the paradoxical role white elephants play in Thai historiography, and it is as such a cross-cultural figure that the textual-historical *chang pheuak* takes on the characteristics of a figurative "white elephant."

White Elephants and *Cakravartin* in Early Thai Literature

Dirk Van der Cruysse's assertion that historiography is a "science" in the West and "was until not long ago an art" in the East elides the complex tradition of Thai historiography by suggesting that Thai writers simply "add[ed] miracles to facts" in order to recreate historical reality. In fact, leading up to the twentieth century, Thai historiography passed through three distinct phases, each of which presented Thai history through the lens of a significantly different worldview. Charnvit Kasetsiri outlines these three different approaches in "Thai Historiography from Ancient Times to the Modern Period." Noting that the "writing of history is probably among the oldest tasks of the Thai intellectual class," Charnvit Kasetsiri contextualizes Thai historiography as having typically been the purview of the Siamese elite, and the three "historical concepts" that have guided this historiography have often served the interests of this group (156). Charnvit Kasetsiri explains these three concepts as follows: "The first, *tamnan*, is concerned with history as it relates to Buddhism; the second, *phongsawadan*, is mainly

the history of dynasties; and the last, *prawatsat*, is modern history writing, emphasizing the concept of the nation state" (156). *Tamnan* history is said to begin "at the point when the Gotama Buddha made a vow to reach enlightenment" (156). Although this kind of historiography necessarily includes details from Indian and Sri Lankan history, it is only when Buddhism reaches Thailand that the "real history" of Thailand is said to begin (157). Although "[v]arious kings and kingdoms are portrayed" in *tamnan* history, such depictions focus on these kingdoms' "role in supporting the religion" (157). Religion, then, is clearly the "main theme" of *tamnan* history, and "it is the Gotoma Buddha who is the moving force in it" (157). Such writing imagines the role of Siam and Siamese history as part of the larger Buddhist world and worldview. "It is the Buddhist tradition," Charnvit Kasetsiri writes, "not race or territory or period" that structures this kind of Thai historiography (157). *Phongsawadan* historiography, on the other hand, "primarily emphasize[s] the activities of kings and kingdoms" (159). "It is probably not an exaggeration," Charnvit Kasetsiri claims, "to say that *phongsawadan* history is the history of the state, as compared to *tamnan* history, the history of religion" (159). This new kind of historiography emerged during the Ayudhya era, when "kingship had developed into a powerful autonomous institution which had increasingly taken the cultural initiative from religious leadership" (159). One of the most notable effects of this transfer of power from religious to monarchical institutions is the fact that "the language of the new type of history was Thai, a secular and ethnic language, rather than Pali, a religious and international language of the Buddhist world" (159). *Phongsawadan* history is the history of Siam as told through its dynasties and kings: it is a political and secular – as opposed to exclusively religious – historical worldview, but it is limited to expressing

the validation and veneration of the monarchy and the Siamese elite. The third kind of Thai historiography Charnvit Kasetsiri mentions, *prawatsat* history, is roughly analogous to "modern" historiography, in that it represents a stylistic change "from the descriptive to the analytical" (162). This kind of historiography no longer "described the 'birth' of Ayudhya by associating it with myths and external forces beyond human control," but rather sought "tangible historical fact[s]" that could explain the changes in Siam's social and political spheres. Nevertheless, many of the most notable practitioners of *prawatsat* history retained the same emphasis on the monarchy that could be seen in *phongsawadan* writing. Although these historiographers drew on novel "methods of using sources and 'scientific' analyses" they still "wrote histor[ies] where the monarchy remained the prime moving force" (166). After the overthrow of Thailand's absolute monarchy in 1932, the emphasis in mainstream Thai historiography shifted toward nationalism rather than monarchism, but it still represented the interests of Thailand's elite classes (166-8). The tensions between these three kinds of historical writing are evident in the Thai and American sources I discuss below. While American writers struggle to accept the significance of earlier forms of Thai historiography in their own understanding of Thailand's history, Thai writers acknowledge the significance of *tamnan* and *phongsawadan* writing in their *prawatsat* histories, but the stories they end up telling often only serve to validate the interests of the Thai ruling classes.

The first mention of white elephants in Thai literature is on the stone obelisk known as the Ramkhamhaeng Stele or Inscription No. 1, composed in 1292 by Ramkhamhaeng, ruler of the burgeoning Thai kingdom at Sukhothai, and generally accepted to be the first document written using a kind of Thai script. This obelisk was

"discovered at Sukhodaya [Sukhothai] in 1833 by Prince Mahāmankuta, the future King Rāma IV [i.e., Mongkut], when he was still a monk" (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 181), and, as Ringis puts it, the narrative inscribed on the stone has "a deep hold on the Thai imagination, rather like the vision of Camelot, another golden age in another world" (61-2). The inscription describes the ancestry and early life of Ramkhamhaeng; provides a description of the city of Sukhothai; and, finally, offers a eulogy for Ramkhamhaeng, although this concluding part of the text might well have been composed during the king's lifetime (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 191-2; 218). The early passages of Ramkhamhaeng's narrative are replete with references to elephants, including accounts of his own exploits both riding a war elephant in a successful military campaign and capturing wild elephants to bring to his father; however, the majority of Ramkhamhaeng's references to elephants emphasize their importance as a form of wealth. "In the time of King Rāma Gamhen [Ramkhamhaeng] this land of Sukhodai [Sukhothai] is thriving," the inscription reads,

> The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for travelling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell; whoever wants to trade in elephants, does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver and gold, does so. When any commoner or man of rank dies, his estate – his elephants, wives, children, granaries, rice, retainers and groves of areca and betel – is left in its entirety to his son. (205-7)

Although this passage describes regular elephants rather than *chang pheuak*, it is still significant that – in this foundational text of Thai literature – elephants are considered

alongside silver and gold as a measure of wealth, and, instead of depicting them as cumbersome or difficult to exchange, the inscription notes that they are freely circulated without being subjected to tolls. In her commentary on this passage, Ringis notes that "the value accorded to elephant ownership" is corroborated by the "telling order of precedence recording the laws of inheritance," pointing out that the list of possessions inherited by the son of a deceased commoner or man of rank places elephants first and – presumably – foremost (62).

Although ordinary elephants played a significant role during the Sukhothai era, as beasts of burden, assets in warfare, and stores of wealth, and are accordingly given a prominent place in Ramkhamhaeng's text, the inscription's most extravagant praise is reserved for the king's white elephant: "On the day of the new moon and the day of the full moon, when the white elephant named Rūcaśri has been decked out with howdah and tasselled head cloth, and always with gold on both tusks, King Rāma Gamhen mounts him, rides away [...] and then returns" (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 214-5). The name of Ramkhamhaeng's white elephant – Rūcaśri – is a Sanskrit word that signifies "radiant fortune" (214), which seems consistent with its elaborate costume and golden adornments. For Ringis, this passage confirms, even in the thirteenth century, the white elephant's "long-accepted status as sacred" (94).

Although the translation of Ramkhamhaeng's inscription by A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, published in 1971 in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, has long been regarded as the standard text by Thai scholars, an examination of at least one earlier, nineteenth-century translation reveals that Western ideas about white elephants affected the reception of this story for European and American audiences. According to Griswold

and Prasert na Nagara's introduction, the first person to attempt to translate the inscription into a Western language was Adolf Bastian, a German, who visited Bangkok in 1863, and published the results of his efforts in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 185-6). Although Griswold and Prasert na Nagara are highly critical of Bastian's work, they nevertheless include some passages from it in an appendix to their own translation, including his rendition of the description of Ramkhamhaeng's white elephant:

> On the first and last day of the dark moon, on the extinguished moon, and at the full moon, the white elephant was adorned in its trappings of costly gold, as it has always been the custom to do. Its name is Ruchasi. The father-benefactor Ramkhamheng, having mounted on its back, proceeds to worship the image of Phra-Phuth in the jungle. (224)

Neither Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, nor any earlier translators of this passage,[13] described Rūcaśri's golden ornamentation as "costly," which indicates that the adjective is not suggested in the original Thai script. This in turn emphasizes the extent to which, for nineteenth-century Western observers, white elephants were regarded as "always" having been expensive and burdensome due to the wealth the Siamese devoted toward their upkeep and posterity. Although there is no way to know precisely how many subsequent writers were familiar with Bastian's translation, it is important to note it as an example of the fact that the European understanding of white elephants as a form of

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[13] See, for example, Cornelius Beach Bradley's 1909 translation, also included in Griswold and Prasert na Nagara's appendix: "On the days of the new and full moon, he had the white elephant named Ruchasi arrayed with trappings and housings all of gold and ivory.....right.....and Prince Khŭn Ram Khămhaeng mounted and rode forth to worship the Buddha" (225).

sumptuous waste was rooted not only in contemporary accounts of Siam, but also in the Western interpretation of known Thai history.

Even though today, as in the nineteenth century, white elephants seem inextricably bound to Thailand and Thai history, the worship of these animals has its basis in Hindu and Buddhist religious practices that are native to India. By the thirteenth century Buddhism was established as the predominant religion in the region now known as Thailand, but – as Ringis puts it, "to suit local preferences and conditions" (13) – this version of Buddhism readily incorporated aspects of Hinduism into its cosmology. "[T]he Hindu gods and their frequently rather lively companions," Ringis writes, "were not rejected, but incorporated into a sort of pantheon of guardians" (96). The white elephant was one such cross-cultural figure, originating in Hindu stories about the god Indra travelling around the universe on a flying, three-headed (although sometimes thirty-three headed) white elephant named Airavata, or Erawan in Thailand.[14] The primary source in Thai literature for the account of Erawan, and many other beliefs about white elephants drawn from Hindu traditions, is the *Traibhumikatha* or *The Story of the Three Planes of Existence*, originally composed in the mid-fourteenth century by Lüthai (also known as Mahathammaracha I), who was king of Sukhothai from 1346/47 – 1368/74.[15] This cosmography – which is a notable example of *tamnan* history – describes the division of the universe into three "worlds" or planes of existence (the sensual, the corporeal, and the

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[14] According to Charnvit Kasetsiri, these kinds of episodes – in which an Indian figure visits Thailand, or Siam is imagined as an extension of India – "can be seen as an ancient way of trying to establish continuity with the original home of Buddhist tradition" (157).
[15] As is the case with all the Thai monarchs mentioned in this chapter, in the interest of consistency I have adopted the spelling and reign of Lüthai as it is listed in the appendix of David K. Wyatt's *Thailand: A Short History*.

incorporeal), which are in turn subdivided into thirty-one domains,[16] of which the human domain is the fifth highest, situated between the domain of demons and "[t]he realm of the Four Great Guardian Kings" (*Traibhumikatha* 494). In a chapter on "The Animal Kingdom" the *Traibhumikatha* text lists "supreme elephants" as the only animals swifter than the "Most Excellent Lion," identifying ten distinct "tribes" of these creatures, and noting "[a]ll these elephants have caves of gold where they live. They are big and beautiful creatures and wear much ornament" (83). While this passage underscores the connection between elephants and wealth, in a manner similar to the text of the Ramkhamhaeng Stele, the *Traibhumikatha*'s section on "The Universal King" or *Cakravartin* highlights the religious significance of white elephants in Buddhism and makes explicit the connection between Thai white elephants and Indra's elephant Airavata. The *Traibhumikatha* text explains the significance of this ruler:

> Those who have performed meritorious deeds in their previous lives [...] [s]ometimes [...] are reborn as great lords and nobles of the human domain, with dignity and honor, surrounded by an almost infinite number of attendants. They conquer the entire universe. When they speak words or utter commands they do it in accordance with Dharma. Such a person in entitled to be called a Universal King, the *Cakravartiraja.* (159)

One of the ways to identify such a Universal King is through his possessions. A true *Cakravartin* will spontaneously acquire "Seven Precious Attributes" or "Treasures" (219), foremost of which is "The Noblest of Elephants" (199). This elephant, which is

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[16] Some sources, such as Ringis, mention thirty-three divisions (99), which would seem consistent with depictions of Erawan's varying number of heads, but most Thai sources list thirty-one and I have followed that practice here.

"white of color, like the glow of the moon in its full glory," is dressed in "fineries and trappings of great worth, ornaments of gold and silver, and gems and jewels of priceless fabrice and cloth" before the Universal King mounts it and commands it to "take him up into the sky and circle the extent of his empire" (201). The description of this journey draws attention to the similarities between the monarch and the god Indra: "How glorious the *Cakravarti King* seemed amidst his host of retinue; how like the Lord Indra mounted on *Aiyaravana* elephant surrounded by the devyata. The King and his retinue circled Mount Sumeruraj and followed the wall of the Universe around in a full circle" (203). While Ringis rightly notes that this passage "reiterated and reaffirmed the importance of much older and originally Hindu concepts of Mount Meru as the axis of the universe, and the ancient supremacy there of the god Indra and his white elephant," she also presents it as a refutation of the Eurocentric perception of the Siamese veneration of white elephants as a "frivolous waste of resources," since the acquisition of white elephants by Siamese monarchs striving to model themselves after the *Cakravartin* had very real and tangible effects on both the king's perceived "merit" as a ruler and, ultimately, on the political fate of the kingdom (100).[17]

Since Ringis' text is concerned principally with the role of elephants in Thai society, it is not surprising that she foregrounds the significance of both elephants and *chang pheuak* in her overview of Thai history and religious practices. An interesting counterpoint to Ringis' account, by another Western scholar, can be found in David K.

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[17] For a thorough examination of the relationship between kingship, religion, and Thai social formations during the Sukhothai, Ayudhya, and Bangkok eras, see Tamiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer.* Sunait Chutintaranond's dissertation, "*Cakravartin*: The Ideology of Traditional Warfare in Siam and Burma, 1548-1605," which I discuss in greater detail below, explains the significance of the *Cakravartin* for sixteenth-century Siam and Burma.

Wyatt's *Thailand: A Short History*, which is generally regarded as the standard work on Thai history in English. Although Wyatt cites the Ramkhamhaeng Stele he makes no mention of the passage about the king's white elephant, and his discussion of Lüthai passes over the king's significant role in Thai literary history as the author of the *Traibhumikatha* (and its numerous passages about white elephants). In contrast to Wyatt's history, Rong Syamananda's *A History of Thailand*, one of the most influential recent Thai histories written in English by a Thai scholar, emphasizes Lüthai's place as an author and religious scholar and ties these roles to the broader literary and political history of the Sukhothai period. While this difference between Wyatt and Rong Syamananda may seem insignificant at first, it in fact foreshadows a more notable divergence in their treatment of white elephants in their histories of the later Ayudhya period. This divergence, which is articulated in Wyatt's and Rong Syamananda's accounts of two violent incidents in sixteenth-century Ayudhya, lays bare the ideological and historiographical differences between American and Thai scholars (through two of their most popular historians) regarding the significance of white elephants in Thai history.

God or Fraud? White Elephants in American and Thai Historiography

The first of these violent incidents occurred in 1548 during a dispute over Ayudhya's throne. When Ayudhya's king, Chairacha (r. 1534 – 47), died he left two sons and a younger half-brother. The mother of the king's sons, a concubine named Si Sudachan, installed the eldest boy, Prince Yot Fan, on the throne, while the king's half-brother, Prince Thianracha, joined a Buddhist monastery. Si Sudachan, acting as queen

regent, quickly conspired to poison her son and to raise her new lover, a minor palace official named Pun Butsritep, to the throne with the new title Khun Worawongsa. This usurpation – not an uncommon phenomenon in Thai history (Chairacha, for one, was also a usurper) – greatly upset the other nobles at Ayudhya's court who plotted to kill the new king and Si Sudachan. Ringis offers the following account of the courtiers' plot:[18]

> [A] group of princely conspirators spread a (false) rumour that a white elephant had been seen in the forest, near the capital. White elephants were said to signify divine approval of a monarch. Thus, eager to secure it, for this would augur well and imply legitimacy of his reign, the usurper-king and the lady, by now his queen, set out to search for the animal, and were promptly dispatched by the conspirators. (67-8)

After Khun Worawongsa and Si Sudachan were assassinated the "princely conspirators" summoned Prince Thianracha from his monastery and installed him on Ayudhya's throne as King Chakkraphat (r. 1548 – 1569).

The second notable incident involving white elephants that I want to highlight happened during Chakkraphat's reign. Almost as soon as the king had assumed the throne he found himself caught up in a military struggle with the Burmese kingdom of Pegu, which invaded Siam in 1549 and would be a source of constant antagonism for Chakkraphat during the 1550s and 60s. In 1563, while fortifying Ayudhya against any future attacks, the king captured several hundred elephants to be trained for use in battle,

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[18] I am citing Ringis' account of this incident, and her account of Siam's 1563-4 war with Burma, because her text deliberately foregrounds the role of elephants in Thai history, whereas Wyatt and Rong Syamananda offer more conventional histories in which, as I have already mentioned, the emphasis placed on white elephants reflects broader differences between American and Thai historiography.

including seven white elephants. "Naturally," Ringis writes, "these augured well and enhanced the king's power in the eyes of his people" (69). Unfortunately, it also stirred the envy of Pegu's king, Bayinnaung, who demanded that Chakkraphat give him two of his seven *chang pheuak*. "This request was no doubt prompted by the Burmese king's desire for such symbols of legitimacy," Ringis argues, "to enhance his own claim to be recognized as a Chakravartin, or World Emperor [...] who is the possessor of such auspicious elephants" (69). Since there could only be one *Cakravartin* at any given time, and since being recognized as such added greatly to a monarch's auspiciousness and political power, it is unsurprising that both Bayinnaung and Chakkraphat coveted these elephants and that Chakkraphat refused to comply with his Burmese rival's request. In 1564 Pegu's army laid siege to Ayudhya and, forced to sue for peace, Chakkraphat had to consent to give four of his white elephants to Bayinnaung. Ayudhya was severely weakened after this attack and, after Chakkraphat's death in 1569, Bayinnaung quickly forced the Thai city into becoming a tributary and vassal state of Burma.

In *Thailand: A Short History*, David K. Wyatt devotes a detailed paragraph to Khun Worawongsa's 1548 usurpation of Ayudhya's throne, but he glosses over the role of white elephants in the usurper's downfall, simply writing, "A conspiracy of the leading nobles assassinated the new king and recalled from a monastery Prince Thianracha, who became king of Ayudhya in late July 1548" (91). Similarly, his account of Ayudhya's war with Burma in 1564 covers almost two pages, but makes no mention of Bayinnaung's request for two of Chakkraphat's white elephants nor of the four *chang pheuak* the Burmese king eventually received after sacking Ayudhya. "Having suddenly lost his northern provinces to the Burmese and faced with a vastly superior force," Wyatt

writes, "King Chakkraphat had meekly to capitulate to Bayinnaung's demand that he swear royal friendship and deliver up his son Ramesuan as a hostage" (94). Wyatt does not elaborate on what he means by Bayinnaung's demand for "royal friendship," although if he is alluding to the Burmese king's request for Ayudhya's white elephants this raises the question of why he does not do so explicitly. Wyatt's concern in his text – which is commendable – is to present a balanced history of Thailand that emphasizes the cultural and political influences that shaped Thai history alongside the more popular "heroic" figures that are often emphasized in less critical histories. For example, his discussion of Naresuan, the king of Ayudhya from 1590 to 1605 who is revered in Thailand for freeing Ayudhya from the yoke of the Burmese, downplays the significance of his military campaigns and presents a ruler who understood Ayudhya's role within a greater social framework:

> The Ayudhya chronicles of this period, filled as they are with epic tales of military campaigns, lead naturally to the conclusion that Naresuan almost single-handedly revived Ayudhya on the battlefield. Surely his leadership was built upon broader foundations. Naresuan was a scion of the ancient Sukhothai ruling house, yet he appears consistently to have conceived of the unity of Siam within a broader ethnic, cultural, and political framework, maintaining the pre-eminence of Ayudhya over provincial identities, just as he also saw Siam as part of a much larger international order. (105)

Although he apologizes in his introduction for what he is concerned might be construed as a "royal bias" (xiv) because of his emphasis on Siam's monarchs (at the expense of

"the lowly Thai peasant farmer" whose history "emerges from the shadows only here and there" (xiv) throughout the text), Wyatt nevertheless acknowledges that control of Ayudhya's throne was "more personal than institutional" since "[k]ings lacked the power to name their own successors, and blood was less effective a claim to the throne than strength" (107). Just as Naresuan's reign should not be reduced to his military conquests, and should instead be considered as part of a larger social milieu, the succession of Ayudhya's throne must be read as a political, cultural, and economic struggle in which contenders would attempt to gain any tangible advantage over his or her (in the case of Si Sudachan, at least) rivals. As we have seen above, the acquisition of one or more white elephants would significantly strengthen a claimant's legitimacy by drawing parallels between that ruler and the prototype of the *Cakravartin*.[19] When Wyatt mentions white elephants, however, his tone is frankly dismissive, as he presents them as examples of the kind of mystical or ideologically-charged historical figures that should be overcome in the course of true scholarship and historiography. Discussing the dynastic chronicles of the late Ayudhya period, he writes,

> We encounter persons with colorful names – "King Tiger," for example – and are meant to be awed by reports of the capture of white elephants or of

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[19] This is a point that historian Yoneo Ishii emphasizes in his essay "Religious Patterns and Economic Change in Siam in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries." Ishii writes that:

> In Ayutthaya, Buddhism played by far the most important role in sustaining the established social order. Thus the Siamese king continuously used Buddhist symbols to enhance his political authority. Conspicuous expenditure for the construction of religious edifices and luxurious royal processions to centers of pilgrimage both served this purpose. (193)

Although Ishii does not specifically mention white elephants, as we have already seen they would undoubtedly be an ideal form of "conspicuous expenditure" for any Siamese monarch seeking to "sustain" the "established social order."

> a king's pious donations and constructions. Recent scholarship on the period, however, has begun to outline more profound developments that were taking place below the surface of the chronicles. (125)

If "profound" history, the history that counts, happens "below the surface," what are we to make of those figures, like the white elephant, that Wyatt categorizes as "colorful" and "meant to [...] awe" us? It seems clear that Wyatt's idea of "profound" history has quite a bit in common with the Thai concept of *prawatsat* historiography, especially considering his admitted "royal bias." However, Thai practitioners of *prawatsat* writing – such as Rong Syamananda – do not wholly discount "colorful" *tamnan* and *phongsawadan* sources as Wyatt tends to do. Although Wyatt is likely correct that many accounts of white elephants in Thai history have been exaggerated, certain events – such as the ones in 1548 and 1564 discussed above – are inarguably part of the historical record. Moreover, by making no mention anywhere in his text of the significance of white elephants for a monarch's claim to be the *Cakravartin*, which despite being rooted in religious practices nevertheless had very real political consequences, Wyatt ignores a major facet of Siamese history seemingly just to avoid lending credence to a figure he suspiciously views as not profound enough to warrant serious historical consideration. By characterizing the white elephant as an object of suspicion, superstition, and – ultimately – derision, Wyatt replicates the logic of earlier European and American texts about Siam, which unfailingly treated white elephants as frauds.

It is interesting to note that Wyatt's interpretation of Thai history, and his exclusion of white elephants from that history, is in some ways rooted in his own subject position as an American. Wyatt claims that the "presentation of the history of Thailand to

the Western reader began in the 1840s" thanks to the efforts of "American missionaries" who "contributed a series of articles on the history of Siam to a Hong Kong newspaper" (xiii). This claim boldly disregards the histories of Siam that earlier European writers would often include in their travel narratives, or even whole texts devoted to Siamese history, such as the seventeenth-century Dutch merchant Jeremias Van Vliet's "The Short History of the Kings of Siam." And while it is possible that Wyatt ignores these earlier texts because they do not meet his standards of modern historiography, it is also conceivable that he imagines a kind of affinity between America and Siam that gives them something of a shared sense of history. On the first page of his *History*, for example, Wyatt suggests that Thailand is worth studying because of its "long history as the only country of Southeast Asia to escape colonial rule" and that its "long history of independence and development provides a useful case study to compare with the history of its neighbors" (xiii). America too, of course, emerged from a struggle against colonial rule, and has – since its inception – regarded its own "independence and development" to be among its defining characteristics. In a way, then, it seems that Wyatt almost extends the purview of American exceptionalism to include Siam. In doing so, he would not be the first to point out some of the similarities between the two nations. In *The Eagle and the Elephant: Thai-American Relations Since 1833*, Vimol Bhongbhibhat et al. argue that it was nineteenth-century American missionaries who gave Siam a greater sense of its place in world politics, and informed the Siamese of the steps it would be necessary to take in order to avoid European colonization (31). When America sent an embassy to Siam in 1856, the leader of the diplomatic mission, Townsend Harris, noted that the Siamese were anxious about the threat of colonial powers, and sought reassurance that

the U.S. would protect them (*Journal* 121). In his *Journal* of his stay in Siam, Harris reproduces a letter that he read to the Siamese court in order to assure them that America was fundamentally different from the other Western nations Siam had encountered: "The United States does not hold any possessions in the East, nor does it desire any. The form of its government forbids the holding of colonies. The United States therefore cannot be any object of jealousy to any Eastern power" (135-6). Written fewer than forty years before the expansion of U.S. imperialism into the Pacific, Harris' claim may not have stood the test of time, but it does suggest that he could sympathize with Siam as a nation that sought its independence from colonialism. But Harris' sympathy would only go so far. As I explain in Chapter Four, as much as Harris may have seen America in Siam, he also saw a series of stereotypes about Eastern stagnation and superstition. Likewise, although Wyatt gestures toward the ways in which Siam is like America, he only does so by ignoring or dismissing those aspects of Siamese history that he believes are incompatible with modern American historiography, including – of course – the white elephant.

Wyatt's attitude toward the white elephant as a legitimate object of historical study also suggests a kind of continuity between his writing and certain schools of antebellum American historiography that insisted on a distinction between the "natural" course of America's westward expansion and the stagnant "culture" of the Old World that America had left behind. In *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* Jenny Franchot describes this Protestant school of "romantic historiography" (37) as preoccupied with the idea of history "flow[ing] from the Old into the New World and then, quickly enough, from the eastern seaboard to the 'Adamic'

western frontier, in harmony with the imperialist notion of empire's westward course" (11). One of the key tenets underlying this providential vision was that the term "*history*" enjoyed what Franchot describes as "the redemptive power of a language close to 'nature' and hence divorced from the contaminants of culture" (11). The artifice and decadence of both Old and New World Catholicism necessarily excluded Catholics and Catholic culture from this narrative of America's "true" historical destiny. The real subject of history was the natural progression of a Protestant identity from east to west unencumbered by the trappings of Old World customs and traditions. This desire for natural historiography combined with a disdain for outmoded or archaic cultural practices can be located, Franchot argues, in the antebellum historiography of W.H. Prescott and Francis Parkman; I would like to suggest that a similar impulse can be detected in Wyatt's *History*. Although the cultural and religious practices Wyatt wants to exclude from his "profound" history are Thai and Buddhist rather than European and Catholic, the logic that guides this exclusion holds much common ground with the intellectual roots of antebellum romantic historiography. To be sure, Wyatt does not imagine that Protestantism or providence is the guiding principle behind his historical analysis. Rather, Wyatt seems to believe that modern scholarship is the only way to explain the past, and that the "colorful" anecdotes found in the Ayudhya chronicles should be ignored. This distinction between a Western, scientific analysis and an Eastern emphasis on culture and religion assumes that *prawatsat* historiography is the only legitimate discourse on history. It also recalls the Western hubris Ringis decries in her text when she points out that the royal palace's ancient treatises on *chang pheuak* – which are dismissed by Westerners as "merely poetic" – also have a significant impact on modern science and medicine. The

true value of such texts is lost if they are subjected to the Western distinction between nature and culture. Likewise, the real significance of the Ayudhya chronicles is obscured if they are viewed strictly as "colourful" cultural artefacts, rather than real contributions to *phongsawadan* historiography.

Wyatt mentions the Ayudhya chronicles several times in *Thailand: A Short History* but he does not address the significant role of white elephants in these texts. This omission is particularly curious in light of Wyatt's role as editor of Richard D. Cushman's synoptic translation of the chronicles, published by the Siam Society as *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya.* Although Wyatt's *History* was published thirteen years before he edited Cushman's translation, he is clear in his Introduction that he was familiar with Cushman's project from the mid-1970s onward and that he helped him attain funding for his research at Cornell University (xviii).[20] Moreover, given the scarcity of Siamese documents relating to the Ayudhya period, it is highly unlikely that a scholar of Wyatt's reputation would not be familiar with such important primary sources. Nevertheless, Wyatt only mentions these chronicles in his *History* as examples of the kind of "colorful" *phongsawadan* historiography that, in Dirk Van der Cruysse's formulation, "add[s] miracles to facts." Cushman's translation collates the chronicles of eight different authors (marked in the text as A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and K), noting all of the variations between the texts. Only one of these versions (A, or the Luang Prasœt version)

[20] Wyatt's Introduction to the *Royal Chronicles* is dated "March 1995," although the text was not published by the Siam Society until 2000. In his Introduction, Wyatt writes that Cushman proposed his synoptic translation "[j]ust over twenty years ago" and the he worked on it until his death in 1991, at which point Wyatt took over the editing of the (unfinished) translation.

dates from the Ayudhya era;[21] the rest were written, according to Wyatt, during "the first few decades of the Bangkok period, after 1782" (xviii). Even though the Luang Prasœt chronicle is much shorter than the later texts, it still mentions the four white elephants that Bayinnaung took from Chakkraphat in 1564: "In 925, a year of the boar, King Niphat [Bayinnaung] of Hongsa [Pegu] descended with his soldiers in the twelfth month" and "the King of Hongsa asked to be given Prince Ramesuan and four white elephants to take to Hongsa" (44). The later chronicles (in this case, B, C, D, E, F, and, to a lesser extent, G) examine the "War of the White Elephants" (50) in much greater detail, offering a nuanced narrative of the mounting tension, and subsequent conflict, between the kings of Siam and Burma.[22] Part of the reason for this increased focus on the conflict with Burma in the later chronicles is, as Sunait Chutintaranond argues in his PhD dissertation, a Siamese revaluation of Burma as an enemy of Siam after the Burmese destruction of Ayudhya:

> The discrepancies between the Thai chronicles written during the two different periods sheds light on the fact that Ayudhya chroniclers, unlike Bangkok's, did not seriously consider war conducted against the Burmese as being more important that other historical events [...] It was not until the fall of Ayudhya in 1767 that Siam's political and intellectual leaders started to recognize the unbridled violence and the perils of the Burmese

[21] This chronicle "is thought to have been written by a court scribe or astrologer named *Luang* Horathibòdi around 1680" (xviii).

[22] I examine the contents of the Bangkok-era chronicles, and the relationship between white elephants and the "logic of the gift" that they describe, in Chapter Four. For now, I simply want to indicate that Wyatt deliberately ignores them in his *History* as a significant historical source.

> and showed more concern for investigating and reconstructing the past of their hostilities with this neighbour. (14-5)

Even though the later chronicles offer a more elaborate dramatization of Siam's sixteenth-century war with Burma because of Bangkok-era Siam's anxiety about its bellicose Burmese neighbours, it is significant that among the few details of this conflict that are represented in the Ayudhya-era Luang Prasœt chronicle is Bayinnaung's request for Chakkraphat's white elephants. This suggests that the role of white elephants in this war transcends the historically-contingent Siamese concerns over Burmese aggression. Among the few other details of Chakkraphat's reign included in the Luang Prasœt chronicle are several passages that mention the gender, size, and names of some of the white elephants he acquired and eventually ceded to his rival (28; 30-1). It would have been self-evident to a Siamese reader of the Luang Prasœt chronicle that these white elephants were essential for both Chakkraphat's and Bayinnaung's claims to be the *Cakravartin*. Nevertheless, despite his familiarity with these texts, Wyatt chooses to exclude this detail from his *History*, mentioning neither white elephants nor the concept of the *Cakravartin*.[23]

In his doctoral dissertation "*Cakravartin*: The Ideology of Traditional Warfare in Siam and Burma, 1548-1605," Sunait Chutintaranond offers an account of Siam's war with Burma that differs significantly from Wyatt's. While noting that "the connections between the cakravartin concept and traditional Siamese-Burmese warfare have never

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[23] Wyatt does mention the idea of the "universal monarch" once in his text, noting that when prince Thianracha ascended to the throne he chose the name "Chakkraphat" because it suggested such a concept. He does not, however, pursue the significance of the universal monarch during the rest of Chakkraphat's reign, including the Burmese war of 1563-4.

been absent from scholarly observation," Sunait Chutintaranond argues that the topic has never received serious scholarly attention and that his thesis will examine both "the origins and the development of the cakravartin concept" and "its function in the politics of warfare between Siam and Burma in the sixteenth century" and how this "serve[d] the sovereigns' own ends" and "had a substantial impact on their conception of kingship and the idea of political expansion" (8). For Sunait Chutintaranond, the idea of the *Cakravartin* – although hardly the "only motive force behind the Siamese-Burmese wars" (198) – was a politically useful ideology that emerged as the result of both certain religious practices and specific historical circumstances that allowed Siam and Burma to engage in such large-scale warfare.[24] One of the most salient features of this ideology was the significance of possessing white elephants. "[T]he white elephant was more than just [an] ornament of the universal king," Sunait Chutintaranond writes, "it was [also] an indispensable repository of his power" (214). The importance of the white elephant, then, was a key factor in the war between Siam and Burma, and was the primary reason Bayinnaung attacked Ayudhya (215). Reading Sunait Chutintaranond's thesis, it is clear that his account of the Siam-Burma conflict is unthinkable without a strong understanding of both the *Cakravartin* and the white elephant, and in this respect his work seems to mark a serious departure from Wyatt's influential *Thailand: A Short History*. There is, however, something of a catch: Wyatt was Sunait Chutintaranond's doctoral supervisor at Cornell, and therefore presumably had the expertise necessary to read and supervise the research Sunait Chutintaranond was doing. Indeed, on his

[24] Sunait Chutintaranond explains these historical circumstances – among them the conquest of smaller rival kingdoms and the influx of European firearms – in his chapter "The Origins of Siamese-Burmese Warfare: Historical Origins" (136-97).

"Acknowledgments" page, Sunait Chutintaranond is effusive with his praise for Professor Wyatt. Wyatt's familiarity with the ideas Sunait Chutintaranond was writing on – like his familiarity with the Ayudhya chronicles – only complicates the question of why he downplays the significance of white elephants in his own text. By insisting on a distinction between "profound" and "colorful" history, and by placing white elephants in the latter category, Wyatt mimics Chadwick's dichotomy between "the natural world" and "elephant metaphysics." This Western distinction between what "counts" as history and what should be considered superstition, ignores the Siamese conception of the white elephant as both religiously and politically significant. Although Wyatt tries to get rid of the white elephants in his *History* by not mentioning them or writing them off as mere superstitions, they prove difficult to do away with completely, as they seem to return to haunt Wyatt in other texts that bear his name.

In contrast to Wyatt, Rong Syamananda mentions white elephants on the first page of his *A History of Thailand*.[25] Here he explains the history of Thailand's flag, which during the nineteenth century featured a white elephant against a red backdrop. This flag was established during the reign of Phra Phutthaloetla (r. 1809 – 1824), also known as Rama II, the second king of the Bangkok era, and lasted until 1917 when Siam joined the Allies in the First World War (1-2). Although Rong Syamananda is effusive in his praise for the current tri-colour Thai flag – claiming that "it is well known everywhere" and that "in design and colour" it is "on a par with any other national flag" (2) – he still devotes a long paragraph to explaining the significance of white elephants for Siam and Siamese monarchs and Rama II's motivation for putting an image of one on

[25] A text that Wyatt himself describes in his own *History* as "quite brief and uncritical" (322).

Siam's flag. "Good fortune favoured Rama II with three white elephants," Rong Syamananda writes, "The possession of these white elephants constituted a glorious reflection of his reign and gave him much delight. In order to celebrate this auspicious event, he caused the symbol of a white elephant surrounded by a chakra or wheel to be put in the middle of [a] red flag" (1).[26] This discussion of Siam's flag – although fairly

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[26] Siam's "white elephant flag" is an ambiguous symbol, especially in the context of Siam's interactions with Western nations, since the white elephant represented on the flag was, in fact, white, instead of the pink-albino colour of a *chang pheuak*. Although European commentators had noted, long before the reign of Rama II, that white elephants aren't really white, it was during the nineteenth century that Siam became known in the West as "The Land of the White Elephant." It is not unreasonable to suggest that the prominence of white elephants in nineteenth-century texts about Siam was, at least to some extent, related to the animal's place on Siam's flag, especially during a century in which, for European writers, discourses on nationalism and its signifiers, of which the flag is a notable example, were both charged and ubiquitous. Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, in his text *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, suggests that the flag and its metonymic relationship to the nation is inherently a site of ambiguous signification. "A core or a symbol, like the word 'border' or the map of a nation, does not necessarily signify the original signified," he writes,

> It can be generative, producing many more related meanings. In other words, each symbol has the inherent potential for multiple signification. The struggle to take control over the signification of symbol is therefore a serious battle – a contest to destabilize and eliminate certain meanings while asserting another [...] The symbolism of nationhood is normally the conjugation of several discourses, each of which is effective in itself. That makes the symbol of nationhood a rich and potent icon. It has power. One of the best examples is the national flag. (171)

The national flag is a "rich," "potent," and "power[ful]" symbol because, as a site of contesting discourses, it is an overdetermined signifier. Its excessive signification means that the flag's "original signified" can be displaced, much in the same way that a changing border or boundary alters the "original" limits of a national body. Discussing Siam's white elephant flag, Thongchai Winichakul presents a compelling anecdote about the dangers of ambiguous signification (albeit one that he does not pursue): "It has been said that King Vajiravudh's [r. 1910 – 1925] decision to take the white elephant out of the flag's design was the result of an accident in which the white elephant flag was raised upside down" (171). In this story at least, the flag fails to correspond to the nation in the same way that the image of the white elephant on the flag fails to correspond to a *chang pheuak*. In the English language, this ambiguity is replicated on the level of the signifier, as the word "white elephant" does not adequately correspond with the Thai definition of *chang pheuak*.

trivial in the grand scheme of Thai history – foregrounds the significance of white elephants for Thai monarchs, and establishes, from the outset of Rong Syamananda's text, the important role these animals and the concept of the *Cakravartin* played in the political, military, and cultural landscapes of the Siamese kingdoms at Sukhothai, Ayudhya, and Bangkok. Accordingly, his treatment of Ayudhya's royal history – particularly the events of 1548 and 1564 – differs significantly from Wyatt's. Writing about an earlier king of Ayudhya, Borommatrailokanat (r. 1448 – 1463), also known as Trailok, Rong Syamananda notes, "The first white elephant caught in the Ayutthaya period was presented to him, which was considered a good omen for his prosperous reign, being so far the longest in Ayutthaya" (40). It is important that Rong Syamananda include this detail in his life of Trailok, even if only as a passing comment, because it signifies to his readers, who have already been apprised of the importance of white elephants for Thai monarchs, that Trailok's reign was perceived as being more prosperous than those of earlier monarchs and – more importantly – that his claim to the throne was viewed as more legitimate than that of any other contender (or that, at least, Trailok himself would be entitled to claim this). Similarly, in his description of Khun Worawongsa and Si Sudachan's 1548 usurpation, Rong Syamananda mentions the role of a white elephant in the conspirators' plot, and emphasizes why this would be an appealing lure for a monarch desperate to legitimate his reign: "[T]hey spread a rumour about a white elephant roaming near the capital. Khun Worawongsatirat and Queen Srisudachan went in search of the animal at once, which, if caught would augur well for his reign" (47). His account of Ayudhya's 1563-4 conflict with King Bayinnaung of Pegu also foregrounds the significance of white elephants:

> Before the second war with Burma in 1563, Mahachakrapat [Chakkraphat] undertook the task of strengthening the defences of the Kingdom in general and of the capital in particular [...] Many river warships were added to the fleet and nearly three hundred elephants were caught and trained for warfare. Out of this number, seven were white elephants which were considered a good augury for Mahachakrapat's reign. The Thai people humbly called him "Lord of the White Elephants." (49)

Following Chakkraphat's refusal to give two of his white elephants to Bayinnaung, a gesture which would undermine his title as "Lord of the White Elephants" and *Cakravartin*, Rong Syamananda reports that Bayinnaung "declared war on Siam in November 1563 [...] Basing as his pretext Mahachakrapat's refusal to give him the two white elephants" (49). By acknowledging that Bayinnaung's demand was a "pretext" for launching a war that reflected broader political conflicts between Ayudhya and Pegu, Rong Syamananda pays attention to the "more profound developments that were taking place below the surface" that Wyatt emphasizes and avoids collapsing Thai history into a kind of mythology. At the same time, however, he does not downplay the significance of white elephants in Thai history by ignoring them or dismissing them, as Wyatt tends to do. Rather, he treats white elephants as figures that, although rooted in religious beliefs and practices, were politically useful and valuable for Siamese monarchs at Sukhothai and Ayudhya. By foregrounding white elephants in his text's introduction, and by emphasizing their role in the events of 1548 and 1564, Rong Syamananda acknowledges what scores of Western writers (including, in this instance, David K. Wyatt) refuse to accept: that the Siamese veneration of white elephants, and the amount of wealth devoted

to this worship and upkeep, had a positive and productive political effect for Siam's monarchs.[27]

Of course, this is simply one way of understanding Thai history. As is the case with texts in general, the historical record, and Thai historiography, allows for, or cannot occlude, multiple interpretations. It is not difficult to imagine, for example, a European observer unfamiliar with the significance of white elephants in Siam interpreting the events of 1563-4 as a fable about the dangers of gift-giving and generosity, as Chakkraphat's refusal to give Bayinnaung two white elephants ultimately led to his ruin. I will return to the question of the gift in Chapter Four when I discuss American relations with the Siamese court at Bangkok. For now, however, I would like to examine a fourth perspective on Thai historiography (following Ringis, Wyatt, and Rong Syamananda) that questions the implicit nationalist assumptions in Wyatt's and Rong Syamananda's texts. While Wyatt, to his credit, acknowledges his "royal bias," Rong Syamananda writes his *prawatsat* history so that it always valorizes the Thai monarchy and ruling elite. Although Rong Syamananda does acknowledge the role white elephants play in earlier *tamnan* and *phongsawadan* texts, he only discusses them in order to emphasize how they were useful to various monarchs. While this treatment of white elephants may be more helpful than simply ignoring them (as Wyatt does), it is still part of a history of Thailand that excludes the vast majority of the country's inhabitants. What significance might white elephants have for –as Wyatt puts it – the "lowly Thai peasant farmer," or the servants who attended to *chang pheuak* and worked in their stables and pavilions? Or

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[27] Rita Ringis notes at least one of the ironies of this Western perception of the white elephant: "[I]t may be pertinent to note that over the centuries, many of the European observers who turned up their collective noses at such curious symbols were themselves descendants of societies in which the Divine Right of Kings had been enshrined" (101).

the slaves who king Prasat Thong of Ayudhya executed when two young white elephants left in their care unexpectedly died?[28] Unfortunately, the historical record provides us with few satisfactory answers. Nevertheless, new strands of Thai historiography that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, which demonstrate Marxist or anti-nationalist sympathies, have attempted to understand Thai history from a non-elitist viewpoint that has been heretofore excluded from the *tamnan*, *phongsawadan*, and *prawatsat* perspectives.

Addressing the question of Thai nationalism, Thongchai Winichakul explains that, because Siam was the only country in Southeast Asia never colonized by a European nation,

> Siam has been regarded as a traditional state which transformed itself into a modern nation, thanks to the intelligence of the monarchs who responded wisely and timely to the threats of European powers by modernizing the country in the right direction at the right time. Thus continuity, homogeneity, and the persistence of traditions, especially Thai Buddhism and Thai monarchy, have been the distinct characteristics, or even the unique features, of modern Siam. (13)

This "established view of Thai history," which explains modern Thai nationalism as the direct consequence of the Thai monarchy's deft resistance to European colonialism, was "questioned by the Thai Marxist historiography of the 1950s and 1970s," which understood the "advent of modern Siam [...] in terms of class struggle and socioeconomic change" resulting from Siam's "entry into the global market, symbolically

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[28] I discuss this incident – as reported by the seventeenth-century Dutch merchant Jeremias Van Vliet – in the following chapter.

marked by the formal treaty with Britain in 1855" (13). Despite this strain in Thai historiography, Craig J. Reynolds, in *Thai Radical Discourse*, notes that "Thailand is represented in most histories written by English speakers as a country without radical politics and without radical writing" (9). Because Thailand was never colonized, no "group or class or party rose up to demand, and ultimately to wrest, sovereignty from foreign masters" (9). In mainstream Thai historiography, Thailand's ability to resist colonization is always attributed to the shrewd leadership of the Thai elite, especially King Mongkut. Historians like Prince Damrong (Mongkut's son) perpetuated this version of historiography, in which the monarchy was history's driving force; after the absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932, the "new ruling elite" were put forth as the "prime mover[s] of history" in the new, strongly nationalist historiography of Luang Wichit Watthakan (11). Since the late 1950s, however, the Thai military regimes "have restored monarchical prestige and placed the Crown at the center of official nationalist ideology" (12). More recent Thai nationalist writers, then, like Rong Syamananda freely mention the role Siam's monarchs played in creating the modern Thai nation-state. Texts like Rong Syamananda's contribute to the idea that the "legitimacy of the Thai state rests on a web of meanings that are articulated in law, in public ceremony, and in symbolism" and that "these meanings inextricably associate the military, the monarchy, and the Buddhist monkhood as the triad that stands for 'Thailand'" (13). Historically speaking, this triad constitutes the Thai elite that mainstream Thai and much Western historiography have understood to be the real subject of Thai history.

The aim of Reynolds' text, however, is to present a different perspective on Thai history by offering a translation of, and commentary on, one of the key texts of "Thai

Marxist historiography of the 1950s" that Thongchai Winichakul alludes to: Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today.*[29] Born in 1930, Jit Poumisak was a student leader whose seditious activities and writings saw him banned from his university for eighteen months, imprisoned for six years, and shot dead in 1966 after joining the Communist Party of Thailand as an insurgent fighter. Published in 1957 (and subsequently banned by the Thai government), *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* offers a Marxist[30] reading of Thai history, emphasizing in particular the relationship between the land-owning classes (the *saktina*) and the people who worked this land for them (the *phrai*).[31] Against historians like Prince Damrong who argued that there was no history of slavery in Thailand, Jit Poumisak claims that the Thai people are gradually becoming aware of the legacy of *saktina* exploitation: "The Thai people are now fully awake," he writes, "They have been able to identify clearly the enemies who plunder them and skin them alive and suck the very marrow from their bones" (43). This graphic

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[29] Although this is the title that Reynolds refers to in his commentary and in his biography of Jit Poumisak, the translation itself is titled "The Real Face of Thai Saktina Today," and is credited to Jit Poumisak's pseudonym, Somsamai Srisudravarna. Reynolds retains the Thai word "Saktina" instead of "Feudalism" for reasons that he explains in Chapter Three of his text (149-70). Although I have listed his translation under the name Somsamai Srisudravarna and with Reynolds' modified title in my Works Cited, I will refer to the more well-known title and author name in the rest of this chapter.

[30] Wyatt dismissively calls it a "somewhat naïve Marxist critique" (271).

[31] Reynolds explains that this terminology originated in the earlier work of the Marxist historian Udom Sisuwan, who argued that Thai society before 1855 (the year of the Bowring treaty with Great Britain) was essentially feudal and "characterized by a subsistence agricultural economy" (153). Reynolds describes the class system Udom Sisuwan identified as follows:

> The ruling class of saktina society consisted of the monarch, royalty, and nobility, and all land was owned by the monarch or kshatriya. The ruled class consisted of *phrai* (agricultural slaves/serfs), who were bound individually to the members of the ruling class, who were bought and sold at whim, and who were forced to labor three to six months of the year for their masters in cultivating the fields. (153)

description – on the first page of his text – sets the tone for Jit Poumisak's tirade against the exploitative acts of the *saktina* throughout Thai history. For Jit Poumisak, the *saktina* system came about as the result of collusion between monarchical and religious institutions. With the rise of Thai kingdoms, religious leaders and institutions had to cede power and authority over people to the monarch and "accept the kshatriya [king] as 'chosen to be a god,' 'a god on earth,' 'the incarnation of god,' 'the Enlightened One reborn,' and finally 'the patron and upholder of religion'" (60). In return for this ideological support, "the saktina distributed land to religious institutions, donated slaves to the *wat*, and honored the ordained as ranked nobility with insignia of rank and annual allowances" (60). The consolidation of monarchical power, in Jit Poumisak's analysis, came about through the support of the religious superstructure. This account of ideology – indeed, one is tempted to say Ideological State Apparatuses – is quite prescient, as Reynolds notes when he writes that "For all of its historical materialism and scientific concern for 'proof'," *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* is "a Gramscian study before Gramsci, an attempt to understand how hegemony operates. It is an attempt to understand how allegiance to the throne and the Buddhist Sangha help to maintain the subservience of the peasantry and working classes" (173). The true aim of Jit Poumisak's text is to understand how "real socio-economic relations are hidden or codified in the language of allegiance and dependence" (173), and this is evident in his discussion of the obeisance that the *phrai* were required to make before the *saktina*. "In the saktina age," Jit Poumisak writes, "the practice of honoring and respecting human beings on the grounds of birth reached its fullest development. Those in the Land-Lord class were honored – rather, forced People to honor them – as 'deities,' 'lords of heaven,' 'gods,'

'Enlightened Ones,' 'Sons of Heaven,' and so forth" (56). Although Jit Poumisak does not feel it necessary to list all the terms of honor the *saktina* would demand the *phrai* bestow upon them, it is well known that any Siamese monarch who wanted to fully consolidate his power as a *Cakravartin* would also insist upon being called "Lord of the White Elephants." Although Jit Poumisak does not mention *chang pheuak* in his text, his account of the ideological purposes of royal titles and iconography necessarily implicates the white elephant (arguably the most famous emblem of the Thai royalty) as a symbol that justifies the wholesale exploitation of the *phrai* by the *saktina* classes.

Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* represented a radical break from the reactionary and nationalist attitudes that had attended the vast majority of earlier Thai historiography. Consequently, some more recent Thai historians have drawn on Marxian or anti-nationalist theory in order to counteract the effects of a national history that has hitherto largely been told from the *saktina* point of view. In *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Thongchai Winichakul presents what he describes as a "questioning [of] the identity of the Thai nation through the eyes of one of its own nationals" or "a supposedly 'inside' view instead of an Orientalist one, as Edward Said might call it" (x). Although Rong Syamananda is also a Thai national his "inside view" differs significantly from Thongchai Winichakul's, a prominent left-leaning student leader in the 1970s who was arrested and charged with being a communist and with the murder of a police officer in the aftermath of the right-wing Thai government's crackdown on student protesters (culminating in the massacre of student demonstrators at Thammasat University in Bangkok on October 6th 1976) (xv; 229). Consequently, Thongchai Winichakul's approach is similar in spirit to David K. Wyatt's disdain for

"royal bias" – that is, the understanding of Thai history as little more than the history of Thailand's monarchs – but he offers a more nuanced interpretation of Thai cultural practices, including the significance of white elephants and the *Cakravartin*.[32] He also shares Jit Poumisak's scepticism toward *saktina* society, but his analysis is more explicitly concerned with the construction of Thai nationalism on a discursive level. Accordingly, he is not as concerned with changing the course of Thai nationalism as he is interested in exposing how any nationalist myth – be it royalist or communist – is a product of discourse. "[I]nstead of discussing the process of nation building," Thongchai Winichakul writes, "[*Siam Mapped*] will show that Siam was a discursive construct" (12). While Marxist historiographies, like Jit Poumisak's, might adequately "counter the exaggerated credit given to the ability of monarchs" (13), this kind of "socioeconomic approach" still "must presuppose an archetype or a number of criteria constituting the notion of a nation state and then compare Siam, a given socioeconomic entity, to that model" (14). For Thongchai Winichakul, this approach is inadequate because it presupposes that Siam exists as a nation prior to the discourses that describe it as such. Rather, the idea of the nation is created by discourse, as an "imagined community" (14), a phrase that Thongchai Winichakul borrows from Benedict Anderson. The Siam that Thongchai Winichakul describes is a site of competing discourses, and hence there is no one nation that the word "Siam" describes. There is the Siam of *tamnan* history and of *phongsawadan* history, the Siam of the Ramkhamhaeng Stele and the *Traibhumikatha*, the Siam of David K. Wyatt and Rong Syamananda and Jit Poumisak: each one explains what Siam is, and yet each tells a different story.

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[32] For Thongchai Winichakul's discussion of white elephants and kingship, see 23-4; for his account of the *Cakravartin*, see 83-4.

As Thongchai Winichakul explains it, Thai nationalism is a contested site, in which Thai identity was established by either resisting European colonial powers or cooperating with them, either through the adroitness of justly-celebrated Thai monarchs or despite an antiquated monarchy that maintained an absolutist state in Siam well into the twentieth century. While he clearly believes that Rong Syamananda is too sympathetic with the Thai monarchy,[33] he also think that Western scholars, desperate to avoid replicating the colonial and orientalist logic of earlier European writers, often wind up validating the monarchy and thereby tacitly supporting the power relations present in such an absolutist state.[34] While generally supportive of "the awareness of Eurocentrism and its prejudice against others [...] among Western scholars" and their subsequent efforts to "recognize indigenous perspective[s]," Thongchai Winichakul nevertheless cautions that "this opposite direction sometimes goes too far":

> Unlike the cases of other colonial countries, the fact that there was no struggle between colonial and anticolonial scholarship in Thai studies has sometimes led to uncritical intellectual cooperation by pro-indigenous Western scholars who have tended to accept the established views of the Siamese elite as *the* legitimate discourse about Thailand. (7)

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[33] While "an indigenous view," such as Rong Syamananda's, "is a good antidote to the power relations of [...] Orientalist discourse" it is important to remember that "the discourse of Thainess has its own sphere of power relations as well" (9).

[34] In his analysis of an incident that falls outside the scope of this chapter – the French blockade of the Chao Phraya River in 1893 – Thongchai Winichakul places Rong Syamananda and David K. Wyatt beside one another, demonstrating that, despite their methodological differences, both historians unfailingly depict Siam and the Siamese monarchy as victims of French greed and aggression during the dispute over the left bank of the Mekhong river. See "Chapter Eight: Geo-Body and History" in *Siam Mapped*, especially pages 143-4.

Bearing this criticism of Thai historiography in mind, it is important when analyzing a figure such as the white elephant, from a Western perspective, to resist "go[ing] too far" and uncritically accepting the role these animals played in the "established" history of the "Siamese elite" while, at the same time, acknowledging that they do occupy a significant place in both Thai history and the history of Siam's interaction with the West. There is no one perspective that can adequately capture an animal that signifies so many different things for so many different people. Give this difficulty, it is perhaps unsurprising that so many Western writers prefer to do away with white elephants in their texts about Thailand – to simply try and explain them away as either mere superstitions or faded relics of the past. But white elephants are not that easy to get rid of: as we have seen, they always seem to resurface in these writers' texts, stubbornly resisting Chadwick's and Scigliano's attempts to write them off as regular elephants driven mad by human interference, and following David K. Wyatt through the other texts that fall outside the purview of his "profound" *History*. Like Thai nationalism, which Thongchai Winichakul depicts as a concept torn between contradictory definitions, the white elephant – ultimately – is a figure that must be understood as a kind of cross-cultural paradox. Just as every history of Siam creates the nation it seeks to describe, so too does each account of the white elephant find itself expressing one half of a discursive paradox: either a *chang pheuak* or a white elephant, either a revered religious figure or a primitive superstition, either a worthwhile investment or a waste of resources, either a national treasure or a royalist ploy, either a god or a fraud.

CHAPTER TWO

The General Theory of the White Elephant I: Oriental Despotism

This King in his title is called the King of the white Elephants. If any other King have one, and will not send it him, hee will make warre with him for it: for hee had rather lose a great part of his Kingdome, then not to conquer him.

Ralph Fitch, "An Account of Pegu in 1586-1587"

Introduction

In his entry for "Unsound Mind" ("*Esprit Faux*") in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire inquires as to why "we often meet minds, in other respects tolerably sound, that are absolutely unsound in important matters" (253). He notes that while some people may have difficulty seeing clearly, it is nevertheless very rare for one's vision to be wholly erroneous. What is the cause of an unsound mind for someone with otherwise sound senses? "Why does the same Siamese who will never allow himself to be deceived when it is a question of paying him three rupees," Voltaire asks, "believe firmly in the metamorphoses of Sammonocodom [i.e., Siddhārtha Gautama]" (253)? For Voltaire, even Don Quixote "had more excuse" (253) for his unsound mind than the Siamese have for their belief in the reincarnation of Buddha. "Don Quixote, smitten with the notion that he must combat giants, might have imagined that a giant must have a body as big as a windmill," he explains, "but on what supposition can a sensible man persuade himself that [...] Sammonocodom descended from heaven to fly kites in Siam, cut down a forest, and do all kind of hocus-pocus" (253)? It is clear that Voltaire believes this kind of supposition can only be supported and developed through tyrannical religious

indoctrination, and the creation of religious idols, which he explains in terms of a hypothetical fakir's lesson to his pupil about a white elephant:

> All that certain tyrants over souls wish for the men they teach is that they should have unsound minds. A fakir trains an extremely promising child; he employs five or six years to drive into his head that the god Fo [i.e., Buddha] appeared to men in the shape of a white elephant, and he persuades the child that he will be whipped for five hundred thousand years after his death if he doesn't believe in such metamorphoses [...] The child studies and becomes a prodigy; he bases his arguments on the lessons of his master; he finds that Fo could have changed himself into a white elephant only because that is the most beautiful of animals. 'The kings of Siam and of Pegu,' he says, 'made war on each over a white elephant; surely if Fo had not been hidden in that elephant, these kings would not have been so mad as to fight for the possession of a mere animal.' [...] This is how the fakir's learned pupil argues at a mature age, and he becomes one of the lights of India; the subtler his mind, the more unsound; and later he will shape minds as unsound as his own. (254)

Although Voltaire's tone in this passage reflects his more general interest in Deism and Enlightenment rationality, his specific reference to white elephants – particularly his allusion to the 1563-4 war between Ayudhya and Pegu – indicates that he was familiar with earlier European writings about Siam. By 1764 (the year the *Philosophical Dictionary* was published) European contact with Siam had been severely limited for more than seventy years (since Phra Petracha's usurpation of Ayudhya's throne in 1688).

However, Voltaire's use of the white elephant as a figure for mounting an "enlightened" critique of religious idolatry reflects the attitude of seventeenth-century European writers toward both white elephants and Thai Buddhism. Seventeenth-century commentators were preoccupied with the "unsound minds" of their Siamese hosts, especially as expressed through the prevalence of so-called "oriental despotism" in Siamese kingship and the worship of white elephants as "gods." With Voltaire, these writers would agree that, in this instance, the exotic was more absurd than the Quixotic, since Cervantes' hero could at least make some connection between reality and his fantasy, whereas the "white elephant" bore no relation to any clear religious or political principle.

During the Enlightenment the white elephant was rivaled only by the "fetish" and the discourse on "fetishism" as an example of "unsound mind." Both the fetish and the white elephant were terms that implied some kind of misunderstanding about the value of objects or possessions. Despite their similarities, however, the fetish and the white elephant are distinct concepts. The fetish emerged from a cross-cultural situation between Europeans and Africans on the West coast of Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was developed into a "general theory" of fetishism during the Enlightenment by thinkers such as Charles de Brosses and David Hume. When an object is referred to as a "fetish" it is generally understood that some person or group believes that object to have a kind of value or power that it does not in fact possess. This value could be a kind of religious or spiritual power, but fetishism can refer to other values as well: sexual fetishes, for example, or Marx's commodity fetishism.[35] Like the fetish, the white elephant is also regarded as a sign of misplaced religious sentiment and spiritual

[35] I discuss Marx and commodity fetishism in some detail in Chapter Three.

value, but it also has an additional, figurative reputation as a costly, burdensome, and unsaleable object. The term developed from a different cross-cultural space – in cosmopolitan sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ayudhya – and subsequently had a very different fate than the fetish in Enlightenment thought. Although, like the fetish, a "general theory" about the white elephant emerged during the Enlightenment and in the post-Enlightenment period, which allowed (and still allows) people to describe all manner of things as "white elephants," this general theory of the white elephant was never fully or coherently articulated and offered up as a mode of thought (white elephantism?) that could be usefully transferred from one discursive field to another. Instead, the general theory of the white elephant has always existed in an inchoate form, under the surface of a host of discourses that address the relationship of objects to categories of value.

Published eighty-six years after Voltaire's dictionary, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* recalls these two Enlightenment concepts of fetishism and the general theory of the white elephant, recasting them in the context of antebellum America's expansion into the Pacific and the nation's nascent role in the incipient global markets that have come to characterize late capitalism. Melville's novel is replete with fetishized objects, from Queequeg's "Congo idol" (20) to Ahab's doubloon. But not every object in *Moby Dick* is described exclusively in terms of misguided belief and fetishistic projection; indeed, much of the novel is given over to describing objects that become costly burdens, or white elephants, not least of which is the white whale that is the object of Ahab's monomaniacal devotion. The crew of the *Pequod* give up on their lucrative commercial venture in order to pursue Moby Dick, and ultimately this quest costs them not only their

profits but also, save for Ishmael, their lives. In *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics*, Yunte Huang describes the juxtaposition between capitalism and collecting in *Moby Dick*, and presents Ahab's quest for the white whale as a rejection of valuable commodities in favour of a valueless white elephant: "Ahab [...] instead of acting as a cool-headed industrial manager who steers the ship toward the pursuit of commodities – ordinary whales – for their exchange values, becomes a monomaniac collector who is obsessed with a single collectible item – Moby Dick – for the sake of its non-exchangeable aura" (7-8). Although it is tempting to conceive of Ahab's relationship to this "single item" with a "non-exchangeable aura" in terms of fetishism, I argue that Melville draws upon the logic of the general theory of the white elephant in his description of Moby Dick in order to allegorize the potential risks of economic interaction with Asian nations. One result of this, which I will explore in greater detail below, is that Ahab can be seen as an oriental despot, rather than an African fetishist.

In the chapter "The Grand Armada" the similarities between the white whale and the white elephant are made explicit. As the *Pequod* sails in the seas "Southeastward from the territories of Birmah" (339) it encounters an "immense caravan" of sperm whales (342). Spotting this "grand armada" of whales, Ishmael wonders if the white whale might be among them, speculating "whether, in that congregated caravan, Moby Dick might himself not temporarily be swimming, like the worshipped white-elephant in the coronation procession of the Siamese!" (342-3). The white whale and the white elephant come together in this passage as the destructive power of Moby Dick is paired with the threat of financial ruin. Although Ishmael anticipates that the *Pequod* will "witness the capture of not a few" of the mass of whales in the "Oriental seas" (342), the

hunt does not go well. The number of whales in the water makes it difficult for the *Pequod*'s boats to single out individual targets, and many of the whales are simply wounded or escape. At the end of the chapter, Ishmael sums up this expedition in a way that suggests that the result of excess can sometimes be economic loss or peril: "The result of this lowering was somewhat illustrative of that sagacious saying in the Fishery – the more whales the less fish. Of all the drugged whales only one was captured" (350). The vast wealth of the oceans near Asia promise splendid returns, yet they yield almost nothing the *Pequod* can use. The whales the *Pequod* encounters are like white elephants because their sheer number and value is so excessive that they actually become a burden for those who might want to possess and profit from them – for all the *Pequod*'s efforts, including both a lengthy hunt and being chased by Malaysian pirates, the hunt yields only one whale. Similarly, Moby Dick is like a white elephant not simply because Ishmael makes a chance comparison, but because Ahab's quest to destroy him leads to financial ruin for both the crew of the *Pequod* and its investors.

But Ishmael's comparison of Moby Dick to the white elephant is not limited to this one encounter between the *Pequod* and the grand armada. By underscoring that the Siamese use white elephants in their coronation processions, Ishmael also emphasizes the connection between white elephants and Southeast Asian kingship, specifically what was regarded in the West as the decadence of Siamese monarchs and the prevalence of so-called "oriental despotism." Accordingly, the white elephant and the general theory of the white elephant can be read as key figures in Melville's text for understanding the ways in which nineteenth-century America was anxious about Asian economic practices and the potential dangers of interaction with "socially stagnant" economies. In *U.S. Orientalsims:*

Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890 Malini Johar Schueller argues that the "construction of the Asian Orient as decrepit, old, and tied down by superstition and outdated belief systems" was "the distinctive feature of Far-Eastern Oriental discourse in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century" (154). This "distinctive feature" of antebellum American discourse on Asia is a persistent and salient feature of the Pacific world of *Moby Dick.* For everything else it might be, the world of the white whale is a world of white elephants: a free-floating marketplace in which the forces of American capitalism are thrown into stark relief against the static and unchanging world of the Far East.

In the following two chapters I will trace the history of the general theory of the white elephant from the earliest European writings about Siam, through the Enlightenment, to antebellum America and the social and economic milieu in which Melville was writing. Throughout this analysis I will also make reference to the history of the theory of fetishism in order to emphasize the ways in which an historical encounter (between European merchants and African fetishes in "Guinea") can be abstracted into a "[d]iscursively promiscuous and theoretically suggestive" (Pietz "Fetish I," 5) general concept. Both the white elephant and the fetish name a relationship between a material object and a measure of value (exchange-value, in Marxian terms, but also religious, political, and social values). From the Enlightenment onward, the relationship between objects and values suggested by the fetish was indissociable from Western interpretations of African society; although, on the one hand, fetishism was a general theory that could be used in any number of Western discourses, it was also regarded as the key to understanding African culture and was part of the reason why Africa was, in Hegel's

formulation, "no historical part of the World" (99). Likewise, the relationship between objects and values suggested by the word "white elephant" can be read as a corollary to Western theories about Asian society, in particular the concepts of social stagnation and oriental despotism. This pattern of thought was established in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European writing about white elephants and Siam, which consistently represented these animals as both symptoms of oriental decadence and despotism, and as sure signs of the "unsound minds" of the Siamese who, according to these writers, believed noble souls had become "stuck" in the bodies of these elephants. It was from this historical encounter that the general theory of the white elephant emerged, although – and in this way the story of the white elephant diverges sharply from that of the fetish – this theory was never fully articulated by a figure like de Brosses (who coined the term "fetishism"). Nevertheless, this paradigm of something valuable (such as a king's soul) becoming "stuck," "lodged," or "stagnant" in a burdensome material vessel (like an elephant) can be detected in a variety of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment texts that attempt to explain Asiatic society, including Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, and Marx's writings on the "Asiatic mode of production" and *Capital*. It was in nineteenth-century America, however, that the figurative definition of "white elephant" entered popular usage, for reasons that are closely connected to the American anxieties about Asian economic practices that Melville addresses. While *Moby Dick* represents fetishism and idolatry in a way that reflects and interrogates nineteenth-century American attitudes towards Africa, Melville's text also pays attention to prevailing perceptions of Asia, inviting us to read the white whale as a white elephant,

and Ahab's quest as a dangerous detour into the realm of social stagnation and oriental despotism.

I begin in this chapter by examining accounts of white elephants and oriental despotism in texts by two authors who are responsible for the most detailed European accounts of Siam in the seventeenth century: the Dutch merchant Jeremias Van Vliet and the French emissary Simon de la Loubère. These writers offer detailed descriptions of both oriental despotism and white elephants in their texts, and together they establish many of the "facts" about white elephants that later thinkers – such as Voltaire – would draw on in their more theoretical treatments of Asiatic society. These attitudes about oriental despotism were equally relevant for antebellum America, which relied heavily on trade with Asia (and in the Pacific) to support its largely mercantile economy. Accordingly, I examine the ways in which Melville represents Ahab as an oriental despot and the consequences this has for the *Pequod*'s mission.

Jeremias Van Vliet and Oriental Despotism

According to historian Dirk Van der Cruysse, the first European to visit Siam was the Venetian merchant Nicolo di Conti who, during a twenty-five year peregrination in Southeast Asia, arrived in the Siam of king Borommaracha II (r. 1424 – 1444) sometime between 1425 and 1430 (3). Di Conti survived this journey through predominately Muslim countries by abjuring Christianity. There is a popular, though apocryphal, story – reported by Van der Cruysse and others – that di Conti was so guilt-stricken upon his return to Italy that he begged forgiveness from Pope Eugenius IV, who granted it provided the Venetian related his adventures to the papal secretary, the noted Florentine

humanist Gianfrancesco Poggio Bracciolini (3). Although di Conti did tell Bracciolini about his travels in 1439, and they were published in Latin in 1492, the story of his confession seems to be the creation of the translator of a 1502 Portuguese-language edition of Bracciolini's narrative (Breazeale 104-5).[36] This error, which marred the reception of di Conti's story in all its subsequent editions and translations, paints di Conti as a repentant sinner rather than a savvy merchant who could speak Arabic and Persian (101), and who thus – in many ways – foreshadowed the later European experience in Siam, especially in the religiously tolerant and cosmopolitan climate at Ayudhya during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[37] It is significant to note, as Van der Cruysse does, that di Conti "remarked chiefly on elephants" (4), including a long description of an elephant hunt, and of the king of Burma's white elephant: "the King rideth upon a white Elephant, which hath a chayne of golde about his necke, being long unto his feete, set full of many precious stones" (Conti 114). "Elephants were to continue to fascinate European

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[36] For a detailed publication history of Bracciolini's text of di Conti's story see Breazeale (104-8). For a different account of di Conti's narrative, which he related to a Spanish nobleman while traveling from Mount Sinai to Cairo in 1437, see Tafur.

[37] Descriptions of cosmopolitan and religiously tolerant Ayudhya can be found in Van der Cruysse, Wyatt's *History* (105-18), Rong Syamananda (62-83), and Ringis, who offers the following summary:

> Already from the early sixteenth century onwards, Ayutthaya had seen the gradual advent of the Europeans, seeking new territories, trade, spices, and converts to Christianity. Trade treaties with the first Europeans there, the Portuguese, had been conducted to mutual satisfaction. The Portuguese, like subsequent European arrivals, were given not only rights to reside and trade in the region, but also to practice their religion [...] The Portuguese had been followed by Spaniards, the Dutch, the English [and] the Danes. Arabic, Moorish, Persian, and Indian communities also contributed to the vitality of this trading city. (74-5)

In addition to the nationalities listed above, seventeenth-century Ayudhya was also home to large Chinese and Japanese communities, and also – by the 1680s – had strong ties with France.

travelers," Van der Cruysse writes, "who devote many enthusiastic and sometimes unbelievable passages to this animal both real and mythical" (4).

During the sixteenth century, the foremost of these European travelers (and merchants) in Siam were the Portuguese; however, by the time of Portugal's forced union with Spain in 1580, their influence was on the wane.[38] By the seventeenth century Western foreigners in Siam were predominately from Northern European nations, often under the auspices of one of the newly-formed companies that came to dominate international commerce, such as the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East-India Company) or VOC. One of the earliest English language texts from this period is that of Ralph Fitch, a London merchant who traveled extensively in Burma and Siam in the late-sixteenth century. His account of Burma in 1586-7, only twenty-two years after the "white elephant war" with Siam, reflects Bayinnaung's victory over Ayudhya and also suggests that the specific circumstances of that war were understood by (or presented to) Fitch as something closer to a universal principle:

> [The King] hath foure white Elephants, which are very strange and rare: for there is none other King that hath them but hee; if any other King hath one, hee will send unto him for it [...] This King in his title is called the King of the white Elephants. If any other King have one, and will not send

[38] The most notable Portuguese account of sixteenth-century Burma and Siam is the *Perigrinaçao* (*Travels*) of Fernão Mendes Pinto. Published in 1614, Pinto's text is a long, sprawling narrative that was both incredibly popular (rivaling Cervantes' readership) in the seventeenth century and widely regarded as a gross exaggeration; for a thorough history of Pinto's text and an explanation of his satiric purpose, see Rebecca D. Catz's Introduction to her 1989 translation of the *Travels* (xv-xliv). In Chapter Four, I discuss Pinto's account of Siam's white elephants and the gift-giving he associates with them.

> it him, hee will make warre with him for it: for hee had rather lose a great part of his Kingdome, then not to conquer him. (170)

Of course, by "King" Fitch might simply be referring to the rulers of less-powerful Burmese cities who were forced to pay tribute to Pegu. However, the number of white elephants he mentions (four, i.e., the same number Bayinnaung took from Chakkraphat) and his claim that "warre" is a legitimate means of acquiring these animals, suggests that he is alluding to the 1563-4 war with Siam, and that – from the Burmese point of view – this action was justified because of Bayinnaung's desire to be known as a *Cakravartin* and "King of the white Elephants."[39] For Fitch's contemporary readers, unfamiliar with the significance of *chang pheuak* in Thai Buddhism, this passage explains the Burmese monarch's desire for white elephants as an example of "oriental despotism," suggesting that the king's absolute power leads to irrational and risky decisions, such as his willingness to "lose a great part of his Kingdome" to acquire an elephant.[40]

It is likely that Fitch's readers would also have been familiar with the 1598 English translation of the Dutch explorer Jan Huyghen van Linschoten's *Itinerario*.[41]

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[39] I discuss the 1563-4 war and the concept of the *Cakravartin* in Chapter One.

[40] As Michael W. Charney notes in his Introduction to Fitch's text, much of Fitch's narrative – including his account of the white elephant – was taken almost verbatim from Cesar Fedrici's earlier "Account of Pegu"; see Fedrici (141-2). Both Fitch's and Fedrici's texts were first made widely available to an English-reading public in 1625 when they were included (albeit, in Fedrici's case, in a corrupted and abridged manner) in Samuel Purchas' popular anthology of travel narratives, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. Although I have consulted the corrected versions of these texts published in the *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, the 1625 narratives can be found in Purchas (88-142; 165-204).

[41] The full title of Linschoten's narrative is *Itinerario: Voyage ofte schipvaert van Jan Huyghen van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien, 1579-1592*, which was translated into English as *Iohn Huighen van Linschoten his Discours of Voyages into ye Easte & West Indies*, and published by John Wolfe in London in 1598. A version of Linschoten's text is also included in *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (222-317), but the portions of his text concerned with Siam and Burma – and also white elephants – are omitted. The

Although Linschoten himself did not visit Siam or Burma, he nevertheless included in his text extensive notes on these countries, including several descriptions of white elephants. Linschoten writes that he has heard reports that "affirme that the king of Pegu hath a white Elephant, which hee prayeth unto, and holdeth it to bee holy" (1: 98). He later reports that the "kingdome of Sion [Siam]" also has a white elephant and that the Burmese and Siamese pray to it and call it the "king of Elephantes" because it is "like a God" (2: 2). Aside from its idolatrous value as a "God," the white elephant is also of interest for Linschoten as a signifier of oriental despotism, as his description of Burma and Siam's 1563-4 war attests:

> The cause of this [...] bloody battaile was, that the King of Sian had a white Elephant, which the King of Pegu understanding, and because hee thought the Elephant to bee holy, and prayed unto it as I said before, hee sent his Ambassadour to the King of Sian, offering him whatsoever he woulde desire, if he would send the Elephant unto him, which the King of Sian neyther for friendshippe, giftes, nor money woulde [...] consent unto: whereupon the King of Pegu moved with wrath, made all the power hee coulde to invade the King of Sian, and thereby not onely got the white Elephant, but made the King of Sian tributarie. (1: 102)

The details of Linschoten's account make it clear that he had no first-hand account of the "white elephant war" since he gets the number of elephants Bayinnaung requested (and received) wrong and he conflates the Burmese invasions of 1563-4 with the more

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version I have consulted, a modern reprint of the 1885 edition published by the Hakluyt Society, uses the 1598 translation and includes all of Linschoten's remarks on Southeast Asia.

decisive battle of 1569. However, by emphasising that it was a "bloody battaile," inspired by the "wrath" of a king that thought an "Elephant to bee holy," Linschoten assures that his readers will view the actions of Bayinnaung as those of an oriental despot inspired by the worship of a white elephant.

Although Fitch and Linschoten both make a connection between the worship of the white elephant and oriental despotism, the idea is developed in much greater detail in the writings of Jeremias Van Vliet, a Dutch merchant stationed at the VOC factory in Ayudhya from 1633 – 1640. The VOC had been established in Ayudhya since 1607, but its factory there did not prove to be profitable at first, and was closed several times during its first few decades.[42] By the 1630s, however, changes to Japan's foreign policy by the Tokugawa Shougunate meant that the Dutch were in a highly advantageous position. "In the early 1630s, Japan lifted a ban on foreign trade and then in 1636 forbade its own nationals from participating," Chris Baker et al. explain, "This so-called exclusion (*sakoku*) policy meant only the Dutch and Chinese were allowed to trade directly with

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[42] Van der Cruysse (33-75) describes in great detail the establishment of both the VOC and the British East India Company at Ayudhya in the first half of the seventeenth century. For a comprehensive overview of the rise of merchant capitalism in the region see Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells' essay "Restrains on the Development of Merchant Capitalism in Southeast Asia before c. 1800." One of the most detailed accounts of Southeast Asia during this period, however, is undoubtedly Anthony Reid's two-volume *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*. In the preface to *Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds*, Reid states that his ambition was to write a total history of the region (xiv), arguing that the paucity of primary sources for each individual Southeast Asian nation necessitates taking a broader perspective. This approach, however, means that Reid does not pay as much attention to Siam as other historians such as Wyatt and Van der Cruysse. Consequently, I have not relied as heavily on his text, even though it has been an invaluable resource for understanding the social, political, and economic milieu that was Southeast Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An equally ambitious and helpful text has been *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, edited by Nicholas Tarling, which also presents a comprehensive history of the entire region. Again, although I have often consulted this text, I have not cited it directly, as it rarely offers the same kind of detail as texts that deal exclusively with Siam.

Japan" (20-1). The elimination of their Japanese and Siamese trading rivals in Ayudhya meant that their factory was suddenly quite profitable and important for the VOC, and it was during this period that Van Vliet was stationed there, working as a Junior Merchant under Senior Merchant Joost Schouten, Director of the VOC's interests in Siam (Baker et al. 25-6). Van Vliet's first text about Ayudhya was a collection of entries in his journal about what was known as the "Picnic Incident" which he was ordered to send to Anthonio van Diemen, the VOC's Governor-General of the Indies, and which were subsequently published in Holland in 1647. In December 1636 Van Vliet was Acting Director of the VOC in Ayudhya since Schouten had been recalled to Batavia. Alfons Van der Kraan summarizes the incident that would trouble Van Vliet and the VOC as follows: "On December 10, 1636, a party of about twelve Dutchman went for a boat ride on the Chaophraya River, became intoxicated, made a nuisance of themselves in one of Ayutthaya's holiest Buddhist temples, got into an altercation with some of the temple's monks, and were arrested" (37). When this news reached the king of Ayudhya, Prasat Thong (r. 1629 – 1656), he ordered the Dutchmen to be trampled to death by elephants and imposed restrictions on the VOC's activities in Siam (37). Van Vliet's text describes his efforts to secure the release of the prisoners and to appease Prasat Thong, which he succeeds in doing, but not without humbling himself before the Siamese king by "touching [his] head reverently to the ground" and promising that he "shall set an example for [his] people by leading a regular, orderly life" (87). Although this may have satisfied Prasat Thong, it only served to infuriate Van Diemen, who, in a letter to Van Vliet, expressed his outrage at the damage he felt his merchant's actions had caused to the VOC's reputation:

> Having read your diary about the entirely iniquitous procedures that were instituted in Siam against the Company's people and its trade [...] I must confess that I am extremely upset, and all the more when I consider the unreasonableness of the Siamese and your cowardice. I cannot comprehend what kind of blood runs through your veins when I read how you tolerated all these prejudicial and shameful affronts; how, on top of everything, you humbled yourself, and crawled along the floor like a delinquent, begging forgiveness for your crimes, which you then accepted gratefully as if it came from God Himself [...] Many valuable gifts have you carelessly thrown away, gifts which, instead of bearing fruit, will only give rise to contempt. (qtd. in Van der Kraan 40)

Van Diemen's anger seems to be primarily driven by his impression that Van Vliet's contrition somehow justified Prasat Thong's authority as an absolute monarch and oriental despot. By "humbling" himself and acting as though the Siamese king were "God Himself," Van Vliet threw away "many valuable gifts." These gifts, presumably, were the advantages the Dutch held in their economic relationship with Siam, as they were the only Western merchants who could facilitate trade between Siam and Japan; however, by acknowledging Prasat Thong's right to impose arbitrary and despotic judgements against the Dutch, these gifts – instead of "bearing the fruit" of a trade relationship in which the VOC held the upper hand – "will only give rise to contempt," as the Dutch will now have to submit to the Siamese king's will. In a different letter, the Governor-General tells Van Vliet that he "should have reminded the Siamese that their country is easier to reduce than just about any other in the Indies" (qtd. in Van der Krann 40), suggesting that in

order to regain their upper hand the VOC should resort to the same threats of violence and intimidation that Prasat Thong used on them. Van Diemen's letters suggest that a "gift," in the context of Holland's modern mercantile economy is productive and "bears fruit," but in the hands of an oriental despot it becomes dangerous and threatens to stagnate the VOC's economic interests in Ayudhya. Van Vliet's "Diary of the Picnic Incident" unfailingly depicts Prasat Thong as a despotic tyrant, a figure that was particularly distasteful in Holland, which was "already a republic in which power was in the hands of an oligarchy of merchants" (Van der Kraan 42). Accounts of the "tyranny and despotism of Asian kings" were especially popular for the Dutch (and, for similar reasons, the English), since these accounts "provided the rising bourgeois classes [...] with one more weapon in their ideological struggle against Europe's traditional monarchical order" (42). So, while Van Vliet's text (or, rather, the actions he describes in his text) may have, in Van Diemen's opinion, hurt the VOC's reputation in Ayudhya, it also reinforced the legitimacy of such companies and the social status of the nascent bourgeois classes that profited from their activities.

Van Vliet extends this concern with the "tyranny and despotism of Asian kings" in his second text about Siam, 1638's "Description of the Kingdom of Siam." Van Vliet's motivation for writing this text, as Chris Baker explains, was "to save his career" by placating Van Diemen and his concerns about the "Picnic Incident" and – more ambitiously – "hustling (successfully) for a promotion [to Senior Merchant]" by "offer[ing] his boss a vision of what the Dutch might achieve in Siam with a little ambition" (91). In other words, Van Vliet's text is a "proposal for colonization" (97) in which the merchant makes his case by "portray[ing] Siam as an abundant land under an

absolute ruler which subjects its citizens to arbitrary tyranny, and which is militarily vulnerable because of its poor capabilities and lack of allies" (94). The first and longest part of Van Vliet's text is given over to a lengthy description of the political system in Siam, which includes a sustained critique of Prasat Thong, characterizing the king as an oriental despot who, according to Van Vliet, is "inconsiderate and rash in his judgement" (112), "very fond of [...] arrogant titles" (113), and "is usually under the influence of drink at least three times a day" (116). One of Van Vliet's most intriguing and – for a seventeenth-century audience – incredible examples of Prasat Thong's despotism appears in a section in his text on white elephants. After briefly describing that in Siam the white elephant is "honoured as a prince of the elephants" and that it is "well lodged, ornamented, well treated [and] fed from plates of pure gold" (175), Van Vliet relates a story about a white elephant at the court of Prasat Thong:

> In the commencement of the reign of the present king, a young white elephant was caught, which suddenly died in 1633. His Majesty was so upset by this that all the slaves who had guarded and assisted the animal were executed. Besides this, the king paid reverence to the dead animal, ordered it to be buried near one of the more famous temples, and a small house of pyramidical shape was built over the grave. But after it had been buried a short time, it was dug up and was burned with a splendor even greater than that which ever has been displayed for the most famous mandarins. All remains which had not been consumed by the fire were collected in a box, buried at the temple, and a beautiful pyramid was

> erected over it. The Siamese pretend that besides royal dignity there is also something divine in these animals. (175-6)

Here the arbitrary and violent power of Siam's absolute monarch is plainly displayed: Prasat Thong, upset at the death of his new white elephant, executes the "slaves" in charge of the animal's upkeep. Unlike Prasat Thong's violent reaction toward the Dutch during the "Picnic Incident," which was at least occasioned by some kind of indiscretion, the execution of his white elephant's servants would have been incomprehensible to Van Vliet's readers. For Van Vliet, the Siamese "pretend" that the white elephant has "divine" qualities, but his description of the animal's funeral suggests that the complex rites are nothing more than another example of Prasat Thong's decadence and extravagance.[43] In this passage, Van Vliet's argument against "oriental despotism," his critique of Thai Buddhism, and his own career and colonial ambitions, are all organized under the figure of the white elephant. In this way, as we can see, as early as the 1630s European conceptions of white elephants already differed significantly from Thai literary and historical sources, reflecting instead Western attitudes about oriental despotism, which – as Van Vliet demonstrates in both his "Diary" and "Description" – is an obstacle to

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[43] Given Van Vliet's own troubled past with the king, and his own ambitions for the Dutch in Siam, it is perhaps unsurprising that his account of despotism in the "Description" is so closely tied to Prasat Thong, rather than the institution of Siamese kingship in general. Two years later, in another text – "The Short History of the Kings of Siam" – Van Vliet further emphasizes the difference between Prasat Thong and earlier rulers of Ayudhya through his description of white elephants. Writing about Chakkraphat, Van Vliet reports that he "was liberal, experienced a very fruitful time, and during his lifetime possessed seven beautiful white elephants" (217). By mentioning these "beautiful" white elephants in the same sentence as the "fruitful," "liberal" reign of Chakkraphat, Van Vliet is almost acknowledging the relationship between *chang pheuak* and the idea of the *Cakravartin*. However, when he writes about a white elephant that died during Prasat Thong's reign, Van Vliet complains that although there "are many stories told about the death of the white elephant [...] these are but heathen fables" and "therefore, [he] beg[s] to be excused from relating them" (242).

successful trade relations and to the kind of national progress that Holland's bourgeois oligarchy represented. Although Van Vliet also criticizes Siam's religion, his critique is fairly tame, even acknowledging the "beauty" of the pyramid erected over the grave of Prasat Thong's dead white elephant. While the Dutch may have been more concerned with the financial success of their factory and the despotism of Prasat Thong than with the religious practices of the Siamese, the same cannot be said of the French Catholic missions to Ayudhya in the 1680s, which aimed explicitly at converting Siam's king, Narai (r. 1656 – 1688), to Christianity.

"Ridiculous Metempsychosis": White Elephants and Despotism in Simon de la Loubère's *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam*

While the "reign of Prasat Thong was marked by considerable Dutch involvement in Ayudhya," during the first years of Narai's reign the "somewhat uncomfortable but workable Dutch-Ayudhya relationship broadened to include many other powers" (Wyatt, *History* 111). The Dutch had refused to help Narai during his struggle to the succession of Ayudhya's throne, which strained the VOC's position in Siam, and in 1662 Narai imposed "a royal monopoly on all trade, which meant that goods destined for export had first to be sold to the crown" (111).[44] Thanks to the royal monopoly, the following decades saw an increase in Siam's own trading activities as well as an increase in private traders, many of whom were "interlopers" – company men who broke from the VOC or British East India Company (EIC) in order to seek their own personal fortunes. "This was

[44] For a comprehensive account of the role of Ayudhya in international trade during this period, see Anthony Reid's chapter "Documenting the Rise and Fall of Ayudhya as a Regional Trade Centre" in *Creating the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia* (85-99).

an economic situation in which the large European trading companies, with their heavy overhead expenses and need for large profit margins [...] could not successfully compete," Wyatt writes, noting that "[u]nder these circumstances, none of the European companies was flourishing by the 1680s" (112). The failure of these companies, the success of private traders, and the diplomatic relationship between the courts of Narai and Louis XIV of France during the 1680s can largely be attributed to the actions and influence of a Greek adventurer, and one-time employee of the EIC, named Constantine Phaulkon, who arrived in Ayudhya in 1678. Upon his arrival in Siam, Phaulkon "immediately launched into high risk and high profit interloping activities" (Van der Cruysse 220). Quickly becoming a favourite of Narai, and eventually rising to the positions of *phrakhlang* (Minister of Finance and Foreign Affairs) and *samuhanāiyok* (Minister of Civil Administaration), Phaulkon relished his outsider status by constantly "antagoniz[ing] the Dutch and English companies by favoring private traders and failing to promote company interests" (Wyatt, *History* 112-3). Phaulkon recognized, however, that without any European backing he was vulnerable in Ayudhya, since many of the Siamese courtiers there were "irritated by the rise of this *farang* with unscrupulous ambition" (Van der Cruysse 224-5). Having alienated the English and the Dutch, Phaulkon concentrated on the French, who had already sent ambassadors to Narai in 1680 (an embassy from Ayudhya to Versailles was lost near the Cape of Good Hope in 1681). In 1682 he converted to Catholicism (raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, he had become an Anglican during his tenure with the EIC) and subsequently "pushed [Narai] for a closer relationship with France, even an alliance" (Wyatt, *History* 113). Phaulkon believed that such a close relationship with France would help persuade Narai to convert

to Christianity (113). Although Phaulkon could not openly share this hope with Narai or the Siamese, the French could be more bold, and the 1685-1686 embassy from France "had as its primary purpose the conversion of Narai" (114). A letter sent from Louis XIV to Narai with this embassy makes the French king's intentions quite clear:

> We shall be very pleased to demonstrate the gratitude with which we have learnt that you continue the protection of the bishops and other apostolic missionaries who work for the instruction of your subjects in the Christian religion; and our particular esteem for you makes us ardently desire that you would wish yourself to listen to them, and learn from them the true maxims and sacred mysteries of such a holy religion in which one had the knowledge of the True God [...] Written in our royal château of Versailles, the twenty-first day of January 1685. Your very dear and good friend, LOUIS. (qtd. in Van der Cruysse 333)

Despite the enthusiasm of Louis XIV and Phaulkon, such a conversion, as Wyatt points out, "was [an] enormously difficult [...] accomplishment, especially given the close identification of the king and kingdom with Buddhism" (113). Francois Martin, the Director of the French trading post at Pondichéry (in India), wrote in his diary that although Louis XIV's letter demonstrated that the "great monarch, zealous for the conversion of infidels and heretics, seized every occasion for the salvation of these idolaters and lost sheep," the French embassy "did not find in the King of Siam this disposition which had been hopefully proclaimed" (qtd. in Smithies 37). After Narai had been presented with the French king's letter, Phaulkon himself admitted to the Abbé de Choisy, a member of the French embassy, that it was impossible for Narai to convert to

Christianity, and that even if he were to do so it would undoubtedly anger the rest of Siam and compromise France's interests in the country, especially since Narai was elderly and could be easily deposed (Van der Cruysse 334).[45] As was often the case, Phaulkon displayed remarkable prescience here, but not enough to save his own life. In 1688, when Narai fell ill, the head of Ayudhya'a Elephant Department and Phaulkon's greatest rival at court, Phra Petracha, rode a wave of xenophobic fear and usurped the throne, executing Narai's heirs and Phaulkon in the process. "Antiforeign and anti-French sentiment had been growing," Wyatt writes, "As people saw it, the king's most powerful minister was a Greek [...] surrounded by French priests and English merchants. Phaulkon seemed more solicitous of foreign, Christian interests that those of his king" (*History* 116-7). Before the "revolution" of 1688, which would largely mark the end of European

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[45] The French were not the only foreign diplomats competing for Narai's soul. Wyatt reports, "[A] mission from Shah Sulaiman the Safavid (1666 – 1694) of Persia was in Ayudhya at the same time, trying to gain the king's conversion to Isalm" (*History* 114). The scribe for this Persian mission, Muhammad Rabi ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, recorded his impressions of the voyage in his *The Ship of Sulaimān*. Toward the beginning of the text he describes Narai as "the possessor of the white elephant and the throne of solid gold," adding his hope that "Allah [will] bless him and guide him into the fold of Islam" (19). Muhammad Rabi ibn Muhammad Ibrahim would be disappointed, however, since Narai refused to convert from Buddhism:

> The king was diligent in his studies and neglected no points of education however subtle [...] He delved into the precepts on the natural disposition and lusts of man but when it came to beholding the beauty of the true Beloved and mastering the Perfect Subject, which consists in knowing the one God, his inner eye of understanding remained limited to the bare exterior of the world. Despite the breadth of his studies, the king held firmly to the path of ingratitude before his Maker and to this day he continues on the road of ignorance. (98-9)

Dirk Van der Cruysse argues that this passage is striking because it shows that French and Persian efforts to convert Narai were both frustrated in a similar way. "Carried forward by unsatiated intellectual curiosity [...] the king continued to explore foreign metaphysics," he writes, but "this curiosity could not bring him to change his religion [...] It was just as unthinkable for Phra Narai to become a Christian as for the pope to convert to Islam" (282-3).

intercourse with Siam until the nineteenth century, there was, however, one more French embassy to Ayudhya. Arriving with this mission in September of 1687, Simon de la Loubère would stay in Siam for only a few months, but when he returned to France he would write "probably the best account of seventeenth-century Siam" (116), *Du royaume de Siam*, which would be translated into English as *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* in 1693. It is important to remember that the Siam La Loubère described was, from his perspective, ruled by a Greek charlatan and an oriental despot, whose conversion to Christianity – though Louis XIV still sought it – seemed increasingly unlikely, and whose country was simmering with anti-European and protectionist sentiments.

In his Introduction to La Loubère's text, David K. Wyatt notes that the French mission of 1687 included a significant military presence, which was there to "add force to French designs for the conversion of the kingdom [...] and to gain an ascendancy over the Kingdom of Siam" (vii). Infighting amongst the French, however, and the manipulations of Phaulkon, meant that by the time La Loubère left in January 1688 the treaty between Siam and France was "almost exclusively commercial" (vii), but it is significant that La Loubère's mission was, at first, at least partially colonial in its ambitions. While Van Vliet, in the "Description of the Kingdom of Siam," presents a proposal for colonization that corresponds to the VOC's secular capitalist mandate (the Siamese are poor fighters, they have no navy, etc.), La Loubère's text – in keeping with Louis XIV's quickly deteriorating plans for the conversion of Siam – emphasizes the religious and racial differences between the French and the Siamese. Although La Loubère is more tolerant than most of his contemporary commentators in his treatment of

Siam and the Siamese, his descriptions of white elephants, and his comments on whiteness in general, suggest that his systematic description of the kingdom of Siam in fact belies a critique of Siamese religious practices, especially the worship of *chang pheuak*, and that this critique is supported by a logic of racial difference. In other words, the Siamese fail to convert to Catholicism *not* because the French cannot persuade them to, but because their "unsound minds" are incapable of understanding the merits of doing so.

La Loubère cautions his readers that most "Relations of Foreign Countries" are "Phantasies of the Author of the Relation," and "because it would not be just to contemn every thing, that resembles not what we now see in the Court of *France*" he has "endeavour'd to express nothing in ambiguous Terms" (36). He explains that he hopes to avoid confusing his readers by presenting a broad picture of Siamese life, unlike other authors who "describe things only in one Particular" (37). The reader of such a narrative, La Loubère writes,

> conceives that in every thing else the Nation whereof he is inform'd resembles his, and that in this only it is either extravagant or admirable. Thus if it be simply said, that the King of *Siam* puts his Shirt over his Vest, this would appear ridiculous to us; but when the whole is understood, it is found, that, tho' all Nations act almost on different Principles, the whole amounts almost to the same; and that there is not in any place any thing marvellous or extravagant. (37)

By focussing on one specific practice, in this case the Siamese king wearing his shirt over his vest, La Loubère suggests that the author of such a text would fool his readers into

believing that this practice is highly anomalous – "extravagant or admirable" – instead of simply being part of a larger culture in which it is accepted and even considered logical. La Loubère does indeed go on to provide an exhaustive description of Siam, expressing, as far as he is concerned, "nothing in ambiguous Terms," and eschewing the more personal style of other seventeenth-century narratives which might run the risk of sensationalizing his subject matter. This principle, however, begins to unravel when La Loubère attempts to explain the significance of white elephants for the Siamese. Although La Loubère believes that all nations are largely the same, and that no country has any features that are unusually "marvellous or extravagant," the white elephant troubles this principle, as it becomes clear that La Loubère does not believe that the white elephant resembles anything that can be seen "in the Court of *France*." Noting that the Siamese have a high opinion of elephants in general, La Loubère writes that "they have yet a much higher Idea of the White Elephants. These Animals are rare, and are found, so they say, only in the Woods of *Siam*. They are not altogether White, but of a flesh colour" (98). Sensible to "the danger of being deceived by the Translations of [...] Foreign words" (36) La Loubère notes that

> The *Siameses* do call this colour *Peuak*, and I doubt not that it is this colour inclining to White and moreover so rare in this Animal, which has procur'd it the Veneration of those People to such a degree, as to perswade them what they report thereof, that a Soul of some Prince is always lodged in the body of a White Elephant [...] whence soever this respect is for the White colour, as well in Men as in Beasts, I could discover no other reason

> at *Siam*, than that of the veneration which the *Siameses* have for the White Elephants. (98)

In this passage La Loubère displays a kind of circular reasoning that establishes a logic of racial difference in which the category of whiteness is defined as naturally superior and worthy of admiration. At first, La Loubère argues that it is because white elephants are white – that is, "of a flesh colour" – that the Siamese venerate them, and that this whiteness helps to persuade the Siamese of the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation (i.e., that "the Soul of some Prince is always lodged in the body of a White Elephant"). However, he goes on to argue that the only reason he can find in Siam for the "respect [...] for the White colour" in both "Men" and "Beasts" is the worship of *chang pheuak*. It is unclear, then, whether La Loubère believes the worship of whiteness itself precedes the worship of white elephants, or vice versa. What is clear, however, is that La Loubère is incapable of explaining the significance of white elephants without invoking the concept of whiteness. By focussing on the similarities between the flesh colour of white people and that of the white elephant, La Loubère contextualizes the white elephant as a racially marked figure, and transposes it from the field of religion to that of cultural and racial difference. This transposition ensures that La Loubère's readers will think of Siamese religious practices as being driven by something like a naturally occurring desire for whiteness: while, for La Loubère, the veneration of whiteness is acceptable in and of itself, when it is misapplied to a figure like an elephant it only shows the inability of the Siamese to live up to the white, European standard that they ostensibly hold in such high regard.

La Loubère makes no secret of the fact that he personally views his own whiteness as qualitatively superior to the "Complexion" of the Siamese, which he describes as "a brown mix'd with red, unto which the continual Sun-burning contributes as much as the Birth" (27). "As these People have their Body of another Colour than ours," La Loubère writes, "it seems that our Eyes do not think them Naked, at least their Nakedness has nothing which surprized me; whereas a Naked White Man, when I met one, always appear'd a new Object unto me" (27). Although a naked white man never fails to capture La Loubère's attention, the nakedness of the Siamese is unremarkable for him because they are not white and "have their Body of another Colour." Clearly, for La Loubère, there is an ontological difference between whiteness and "brown mix'd with red," and this difference is best expressed in the physical distinctions between Europeans and the Siamese. The Siamese, however, fail to adequately recognize the aesthetic superiority of European beauty (or the ways in which whiteness determines such beauty), although La Loubère does indicate that they have a sense that there is *something* that distinguishes one race from the other: "[T]he *Siameses* that had been in *France* acknowledg'd, that tho' they were not at first very much struck either with the whiteness, or with the features of the *French* Women, yet they presently apprehended that they alone were handsom, and that the *Siameses* were not" (28). The Siamese, then, do acknowledge the aesthetic qualities of French women, although they fail to attribute this beauty to the whiteness of these women. Although this may have shocked La Loubère, it is in keeping with Southeast Asian attitudes toward Europeans at the time. In *Creating the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia*, Anthony Reid writes that while "Europeans were often astonished at what they found in Southeast Asia," including "fabulous wealth, mysterious

herbs and potions, and strange sexual customs," the "surprise was not reciprocated" (159). "In a region of enormous diversity," Reid writes, "Europeans represented just another element" (159). Thus, even though many early European writers who visited Southeast Asia – such as the Italian Ludovico di Varthema and the Russian Athanasius Niskin – reported that their white skin was a source of fascination for the people they encountered, Reid claims that "European skin colour was not seen as novel" by Southeast Asians (161). For La Loubère, however, the beauty of the French women is inextricable from their whiteness, as he has already made clear that white skin is aesthetically superior and more interesting than the red and brown skin of the Siamese. Judging by his comments on white elephants, it seems likely that La Loubère believes that the root cause of this scene of misrecognition between the Siamese and the portraits of the French women is the fascination in Siam with the colour of *chang pheuak*. Because of this fascination, what La Loubère believes to be the "value" of whiteness becomes – for the unsound Siamese mind – stuck in the body of an elephant, and cannot be fully appreciated in its "proper" place, i.e., in white people.

Although La Loubère "doubt[s] not" that it is the whiteness of the white elephant that "has procur'd it the Veneration of th[e]se People" (98), he is equally certain that this specific embodiment of whiteness is invalid, and only exists because the Siamese are mystified by lies and religious superstitions about elephants. La Loubère is frank about his belief that the Siamese fascination with elephants is deceitful and dishonest. "Vanity always inclines these People to Lying," he writes, "and they are more vain in the matter of Elephants, than in any thing else" (89). This vanity, and the lies that support it, cause the Siamese to make unusual claims about these animals, which La Loubère cannot help

but pass on to his readers: "They speak of an Elephant as of a Man," he reports, "they believe him perfectly rational, and they relate such rational things of him, that he only wants Speech," adding derisively, "This is one, for Example, to which you may give what Credit you please" (45). Seemingly forgetting his earlier disdain for writers who "describe things only in one Particular" (37), La Loubère does not contextualize this anecdote within the larger sphere of Siamese history and religious practices, electing instead to sensationalize and mock Siamese views on elephants. La Loubère's motive for establishing the dishonesty of the Siamese regarding elephants is directly related to his critique of the white elephant, which – in turn – supports his argument against Buddhism and his belief that the Siamese are incapable of recognizing and valuing true religion because of their fascination with these animals. For La Loubère, the white elephant, aided by its fortuitous and naturally-venerated skin colour, has "perswade[d]" the Siamese that "a Soul of some Prince is always lodged in [its] body" (98).[46] It is curious that La Loubère, who is quick to mock Siamese arguments that elephants have some kind of agency, argues that the white elephant itself persuades the Siamese of its divinity. La Loubère wants to demonstrate that the Siamese are mistaken in their belief that this "body" has a "Soul" lodged in it, and that this mistake comes about because of the deceptive and fraudulent character of the body in question. Although the body of a white

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[46] La Loubère expresses a similar version of this argument earlier in his text, when he explains why the king does not ride his white elephant:

> *Ferdinand Mendez Pinto*, relates that in his time the King of *Siam* used to shew himself one day in a year upon his white Elephant, to ride through nine streets of the City, and to extend great Liberalities to the People. This Ceremony, if it has been in use, is now abolished. The King of *Siam* never mounts the white Elephant, and the reason they give is, that the white Elephant is as great a Lord himself, because he has a King's soul like him. (43)

I discuss this abolished "Ceremony" in my analysis of Pinto's *Travels* in Chapter Four.

elephant is "of a flesh colour" it is not worthy of the same veneration as other such coloured bodies (i.e., white people) because it is an animal, yet it still fools the Siamese into misrecognizing its value. "[T]heir History of Animals must not easily be credited," La Loubère warns, since "they understand not Bodies better than Souls" (16) and they "all have some Quadruped, which they prefer before all others" (135). The white elephant is the figure that, for La Loubère, embodies the unsound minds of the Siamese concerning both bodies and souls. The body of the white elephant represents a displacement of the value of whiteness from its proper place (white people), so that it becomes stuck in a material vessel (an elephant) that is unworthy of the same kind of aesthetic veneration as, say, portraits of French women. This misplaced aesthetic value in turn "perswade[s]" the Siamese that a king's or prince's soul has become "lodged" in the white elephant. Although, for La Loubère, the idea of a king's soul is valuable in-and-of itself, the idea that something so noble could be understood to be stuck in an elephant was a sure sign that the Siamese misunderstood the value and significance of souls.

The Siamese belief in reincarnation – which La Loubère dismisses as "ridiculous *Metempsychoses*" (136) – implies that a soul can be reincarnated in any body whatsoever. For La Loubère the worship of the white elephant is the clearest sign of this doctrine's falsehood: the greatest souls are "lodged" in the bodies of animals – elephants – that he has already indicated the Siamese constantly lie about and believe have all manner of incredible qualities. Moreover, the whiteness of the white elephant suggests that the Siamese are capable of recognizing the value of white flesh, but that their fascination with elephants prevents them from fully recognizing the (aesthetic and otherwise) superiority of white people. This misrecognition serves as an indictment of Buddhism

because it demonstrates, for La Loubère, that the Siamese are incapable of seeing past their "Idolatry" (140). "From what I have said concerning the Opinions of the Orientals," La Loubère writes, "it is easie to comprehend how difficult an enterprize it is to bring them over to the Christian Religion" (140). This difficulty is directly related to the "Idols" the Siamese insist on keeping. Noting this, La Loubère laments: "For what probability is there to begin with by perswading the *Siameses* to remove *Sammon-Codom*, *Pra Mogla*, and *Pra Saribout* from the Altars, to set up Jesus Christ, St. *Peter* and St. *Paul*, in their stead?" (140). Although La Loubère does not include the *chang pheuak* among the Idols on the Siamese Altar, by the time Voltaire criticizes Buddhism the white elephant has achieved a prominent place as his pre-eminent example of the workings of the kind of "unsound minds" that would worship such Idols.

Voltaire's entry for "Unsound Mind" reflects many of the claims made about white elephants in both Van Vliet's and La Loubère's texts. Van Vliet's connection between white elephants and the capricious cruelty of Prasat Thong is reflected in the fakir's threat that his apprentice will be whipped for five-hundred thousand years if he does not believe that Fo has taken the shape of a white elephant, and this in turn reflects La Loubère's claims about the "ridiculous" Siamese belief that the soul of a king or prince is lodged in the body of a white elephant. Van Vliet's and La Loubère's texts established certain "truths" about white elephants that are foundational for the general theory of the white elephant. Their shared emphasis on oriental despotism and on certain values becoming "stuck" in white elephants is a precursor to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theories of Asian social and economic stagnation. Although neither of these authors uses the word "white elephant" in a way that suggests that it has passed

from being a simple noun to a signifier of a kind of general discourse, Voltaire's text does make this leap, as his discussion of white elephants is essentially abstracted from earlier historical encounters and transposed to a different discursive field for the purpose of enabling a theoretical critique. Unlike the white elephants Van Vliet and La Loubère describe, Voltaire's white elephant is a purely theoretical conceit, based on an amalgamation of anecdotes (the scenario he describes takes place in India, yet he draws on Siamese history and religious history), and used in order to make a claim about an entirely different discursive field (the Enlightenment critique of natural religion) from the discourses Van Vliet and La Loubère were concerned with (ethnography, history, etc.). Voltaire's text, then, marks the point where the white elephant makes the leap from history to discourse, from practice to theory, from white elephant to white elephant*ism*. Founded on seventeenth-century accounts of oriental despotism and misplaced values becoming "lodged" in white elephants, the general theory of the white elephant was an invention of the Enlightenment, a discourse that sought to explain how certain objects that were – from a rational perspective – clearly cumbersome, even dangerous, burdens could be viewed as valuable and venerated by unsound minds.

"The old man's despot eye was on them": Ahab as Oriental Despot

The figure of the oriental despot is present in virtually every early European text that deals with white elephants. Because any white elephant discovered in Siam or Burma was automatically considered the king's property,[47] the significance of these animals was indissociable from Western attitudes about Asian kingship. As I will show in the next

[47] This idea is evident in as early a text as Fitch's "Account of Pegu," and is still the case in modern Thailand; see Ringis (176).

chapter, in my discussion of Hegel and Marx, for Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought it is the tyranny of the oriental despot that causes stagnation in Asian societies. It is one of the key assertions of that chapter that Hegel's and Marx's texts participate in the same discourse (white elephantism) as earlier texts – such as Van Vliet's, La Loubère's, and Voltaire's – that are more explicit about the role of white elephants in their theories of Asiatic society, and which help establish certain "truths" about the East that Hegel and Marx take at face value. These same truths, however, were equally relevant in antebellum America, and the oriental despot remained an important figure for American writers who were attempting to understand and explain Asiatic society.[48] In Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, Ahab, the captain of the ill-fated whaling ship the *Pequod*, embodies many of the traits of such an absolute monarch. As the *Pequod* sails from Nantucket to the Asian Pacific Melville's descriptions of Ahab and Ahab's actions become increasingly despotic, just as the *Pequod*'s original commercial mission is set aside in favour of Ahab's destructive and monomaniacal plan to hunt Moby Dick. As Yunte Huang puts it, while "[w]haling may be a capitalist industry in the Pacific [...] Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick [...] create[s] a rupture inside capitalism and brings the [*Pequod*'s] transpacific enterprise to ruin" (60). For Huang, Ahab's quest is completely antithetical to the *Pequod*'s capitalist mandate, as the pursuit of Moby Dick has no potential for profit. As a despotic figure, Ahab is thus responsible for "rupturing" and "ruining" the *Pequod*'s mission, and stagnating what should be the smooth flow of capital from the Pacific back

[48] Although my focus in this chapter is on *Moby Dick*, the orient and oriental despotism were popular topics for a variety of authors in antebellum America, particularly during the "American Renaissance" and in the writings of the Transcendentalists. For more on the orient and Whitman, see Park (3-22) and Schueller (175-98); on Hawthorne, see Eperjesi (41-3); on Irving, see Schueller (45-75) and Eperjesi (32-4); and for Emerson, see Schueller (157-74).

to Nantucket and the *Pequod*'s investors, Peleg and Bildad. By emphasising Ahab's tyrannical character, Melville establishes a connection between his text and the general theory of the white elephant: Ahab's despotism threatens to ruin the *Pequod*'s mission as the captain sacrifices the ship's original profitable purpose in order to pursue a whale that has minimal economic value and threatens to destroy those who would possess it. Put this way, Ahab's monomaniacal plot echoes earlier European accounts of Siamese and Burmese kings going to great ends to acquire white elephants. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to examine the ways in which Melville picks up on earlier accounts of oriental despotism in his description of Ahab, and the consequences the captain's tyranny has for the *Pequod*'s profit-driven journey.

While some accounts of America's interactions with Asia begin in the post-bellum period with the massive influx of Asian immigrants that, by the turn of the century, was known as the "Yellow Peril,"[49] it would be a mistake to downplay the significance of Asia for the antebellum United States. John R. Eperjesi writes that, during the antebellum period, Asia "possess[ed] a strong hold on the nation's literary and economic imagination" (26). The reason for this strong hold on the nation's economic imagination, at least, was the potential for massive profits through trading with the Far East, particularly with China. Yunte Huang explains that at the beginning of the nineteenth century "Americans ranked second only to the British" in terms of "volume of trade" with China (55). Although the capital American merchants exported to China was originally "native products of the American continent" (55), this arrangement fell apart when the Chinese became sceptical of the products these merchants offered them

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[49] See, for example, Colleen Lye's excellent *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1894-1945*.

(especially the American ginseng that bore no resemblance to the herb the Chinese were accustomed to using). Instead, American traders adapted their mercantile scheme and focussed on forms of capital that could be acquired in the Pacific and would "cater to the demand of East Asian markets as well as their home markets" (56).[50] One of the most profitable forms of capital these traders' ships could acquire, especially for the home market, was whales, which were used in the manufacture of candles and lubricants. A whaling ship like the *Pequod*, then, was "engaged in a capitalist industry that [was] controlled by the logic of commodity" (56). The investors in such a ship were, as Ishmael puts it in the chapter "Moby Dick," "bent on profitable cruises" in the Pacific – the *Pequod*'s mission was to kill as many whales as possible, extract oil from them, and return to Nantucket so that "the profit" could be "counted down in dollars from the mint" (167). Ahab's monomania, however, disrupts the *Pequod*'s legitimate purpose, as Ishmael explains on the same page that the "grey-headed, ungodly old man" was only "intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge" (167). This revenge is a direct affront to the *Pequod*'s capitalist mandate, as Starbuck reminds Ahab when he upbraids him in "The Quarter-Deck": "How many barrels will thy vengeance yield even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market" (145). Accordingly, Ahab represents an affront to antebellum America's expectations about trade in the Far East, and – in his rejection of mercantile capitalism – he begins to resemble the very kind of oriental despot who earlier writers, such as Van Vliet, saw as hostile to successful trade and social progress.

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[50] The forms of capital that could be gathered in the Pacific were seemingly endless. Huang lists the following: "furs, whales, bêches-de-mer, tortoiseshell, pearls, shark fins, bird nests, grain, fish, salt, coal, sandalwood, lumber, copra, copper, cowhide, tallow, arrowroot, vanilla, spices, guano, human heads, and human beings" (56).

Toward the end of the novel, as the crew of the *Pequod* anticipate their coming encounter with the white whale, having just been informed by the captain of the *Rachel* that Moby Dick is only a day's journey away, Ahab's grip on the crew begins to tighten. "Like machines," Ishmael reports, the crew "moved about the deck, ever conscious that the old man's despot eye was on them" (473). Ahab's gaze "fixedly gleamed down upon the constant midnight of the gloomy crew," so that all of the sailors and officers – including the normally-outspoken Stubb and Starbuck – are rendered mute and mutable to "Ahab's purpose" (473). "Alike, joy and sorrow, hope and fear," Ishmael writes, "seemed ground to finest dust, and powdered, for the time, in the clamped mortar of Ahab's iron soul" (473). Although the members of the *Pequod*'s decidedly diverse crew embody a variety of opinions, thoughts, emotions, and so forth, all of these differences are erased under Ahab's despotic watch, as they are ground together in a mortar and locked away in an "iron soul." After Ahab's failed assault on Moby Dick in the chapter "The Chase – First Day," the captain lashes out at both Stubb and Starbuck, arguing that the obvious differences between the two men are merely superficial, erasing their identities and elevating his own above the rest of the crew, even the rest of humankind: "Begone! Ye two are the opposite poles of the same thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbours!" (489). The fiery Stubb and the calm Quaker Starbuck are subsumed in Ahab's dialectic as the first and second mates of the *Pequod* are described as mere manifestations of "all mankind" – it does not matter, for Ahab, which officer is which as they are simply "opposite poles of the same thing." Only Ahab himself stands apart from "the millions of the peopled earth," much in

the same way as a sovereign is thought to stand apart from his subjects. Ahab's subjects become part of an undifferentiated mass, in which "all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear [...] were welded into oneness" and "were all directed toward that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to" (492). Lord Ahab, however, does not imagine himself as a progressive or constitutional sovereign, who might be tied to ideals of change and innovation – rather Ahab presents himself as a timeless and unchanging figure, as he tells Starbuck on the second day of the chase: "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders. Look thou, underling! that thou obeyest mine" (497). Ahab's mission – and Starbuck's subservience to him – has remained unchanged for countless millennia, and the power struggle aboard the *Pequod* was dictated by fate so that neither Starbuck, nor Ishmael, nor Peleg and Bildad, nor anyone but Ahab himself can change its course. In this way, the fate of the *Pequod* resembles the Western idea of an Asiatic society: ancient, timeless, unchanging, and resistant to progress because of a despotic ruler. This teleological stagnation aboard the ship in turn affects the success of the *Pequod*'s commercial mission, as the progressive discourse of modern capitalism is set aside for Ahab's "supernatural revenge."

Before Ahab's speech in "The Quarter-Deck" the captain's plan to derail the *Pequod*'s mission and pursue Moby Dick remains unknown to the ship's officers and crew. Nevertheless, Ishmael makes it clear that Ahab's despotism was present from the beginning of the voyage. In "The Pipe," for example, Ahab is described as "a Khan of the Plank," a "king of the sea," and a "great lord of the Leviathans" (113). A few chapters

later, in "The Specksynder," Ishmael tells us that the "only homage" Ahab "ever exacted, was implicit, instantaneous obedience," and that the captain possessed a "certain sultanism of the brain" which "became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship" (129). In this chapter Ishmael also explains that "in the old Dutch Fishery" the ship's chief harpooner, or Specksynder, shared the command of the boat with the captain, whereas in the present day this command is "wholly lodged" in "the person now called captain" (128). Ishmael's formulation is compelling because it recalls La Loubère's claim that the Siamese believe a king's soul is "lodged" in the body of a white elephant, suggesting that the same kind of authority that both marks and is prized by oriental despotism is similar to Ahab's authority as captain of the *Pequod*. The kingship of Ahab, and his absolute control over his crew, even before his speech announcing his desire to kill Moby Dick, is most explicitly presented in the next chapter, "The Cabin-Table," when Ishmael describes "hilarious little Flask" entering "King Ahab's presence, in the character of Abjectus, of the Slave" (131). Here Flask is wholly subservient to Ahab, and their relationship is explained in terms that are much closer to those used by Van Vliet, in his description of Prasat Thong, than the discourse of modern capitalism.

One of the most startling features for writers like Van Vliet and La Loubère about Siamese kingship was the power of the monarch to impose seemingly arbitrary and often brutal judgments over his subjects. Although Ahab maintains a "dictatorship" over his crew, he is still held somewhat accountable for his actions, as Starbuck openly questions – even if he does not really *challenge* – his plan to pursue Moby Dick. This is not the case, however, for Ahab's "second" crew, led by the "Parsee" harpooner Fedallah. This "tiger-yellow" crew is clearly Asian – Ishmael speculates that the rowers are possibly

"aboriginal natives of the Manillas" – and, as such, are fully subject to Ahab's oriental despotism (195). Yunte Huang writes that "[u]nlike the regular crew on the *Pequod*, whose relation to Ahab is one of worker versus manager, subordinate versus superior in a capitalist enterprise, these five are virtually slaves owned by Ahab" (68). Huang suggests that Ahab's relationship to his secret crew needs to be conceived of outside the terms of Western capitalism: indeed Ahab only calls upon his "yellow boys" (197) when he wants to chase Moby Dick, and never uses them when the *Pequod* stops to hunt regular whales. "The nominal purpose of the ship's voyage is a capitalist pursuit of unlimited profit and production, and its fulfillment depends on the *productive* labour of the regular crew," Huang writes, "[b]ut Ahab's private goal runs in the opposite direction, and its success relies on the *destructive* power of his secret crew" (70-1). Thus, Ahab's Asian crew allow the captain to fully realize his tyrannical destiny as both pliant subjects over whom he has complete control and as agents who help him to pursue an object whose value cannot be reckoned within the cinctures of capitalist logic. The extent to which Ahab's "destructive [...] private goal" relies on his despotic control over his private crew is evident in the final day of the *Pequod*'s chase of Moby Dick, as he tells his oarsmen: "Ye are not other men, but my arms and legs; and so obey me" (503). Here the "great lord of the Leviathans" recalls another kind of Leviathan in his sovereign demands, as the bodies of his enslaved crew are incorporated into his own tyrannical body (and body politic). The one member of Ahab's crew over whom he does not appear to have *complete* control is Fedallah. While Ahab's "despot eye" watches over his crew in "The Hat," Ishmael cannot help but observe that "even as Ahab's eyes awed the crew's, the Parsee's glance awed his" (473). The reason for this is Ahab's interest in Fedallah's prophecy, which is

ultimately fulfilled when Moby Dick destroys the *Pequod* – the "second hearse" the Zoroastrian foresaw, the wood of which "could only be American" (506). In a sense, Fedallah has a kind of grip on Ahab's psyche, even if he has to die in order to maintain this grip and advance his prophecy. Nevertheless, despite the power Fedallah seems to sometimes have over Ahab, and the terror he inspires in Ishmael and the rest of the crew, ultimately Ishmael concludes that Ahab maintains his mastery over the harpooner: "Ahab seemed an independent lord," Ishmael writes, and "the Parsee but his slave" (474). Although Fedallah stands apart from the nameless "yellow boys" who row Ahab's boat, he is ultimately figured as another of Ahab's slaves, and – in keeping with the rest of Ahab's secret crew – it is implied that his passage from India to the Pequod has passed through Asia, since Ishmael describes his "rumpled Chinese jacket of black cotton" and "wide black trowsers of the same dark stuff" (194-5).[51] Fedallah, then, is very much under the watch of Ahab's despotic eye, and – despite his hold on the captain – he is for Ahab little more than a slave or a limb to be used in his quest for Moby Dick.

If Ahab's tyranny can be read as analogous to the kind of oriental despotism earlier European writers reported in their texts on Siam, what then are we to make of the object – Moby Dick – that he risks his ship, crew, and own life to find and destroy? Does

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[51] Although Fedallah himself is not from the Far East, he is – in some ways – presented as the most "Asian" member of Ahab's secret crew, and the one most closely associated with stagnation and Ahab's oriental despotism. Ishmael describes the Zoroastrian as "such a creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams," and that he

> glide[s] among the unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent – those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghastly aboriginalness of earth's primal generations. (208)

Fedallah's Asia is unchanging, immemorial, and unalterable, and therefore shares the same sense of timelessness that Ahab imagines attends his own despotic quest.

Ahab's despotism compel him to take great risks to acquire a "white elephant," sacrificing significant profits in the same way that Siamese kings sacrificed huge amounts of gold and silver to adorn the quarters of their *chang pheuak*? Can we think of the white whale as a white elephant, or should we think of Moby Dick as Ahab's fetish? What, if anything, is the difference between a "fetish" and a "white elephant," and their respective general theories of value?

CHAPTER THREE

The General Theory of the White Elephant II: Fetishism and Value

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ETYMOLOGY

CHANG PHEUAK	*Thai*
ELEFANTE BRANCO	*Portuguese*
WITTE OLIFANT	*Dutch*
ÉLÉPHANT BLANC	*French*
WHITE ELEPHANT	*English*
LADENHÜTER	*German*

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EXTRACTS

The Siamese pretend that besides royal dignity there is also something divine in these animals.

Jeremias Van Vliet, "Description of the Kingdom of Siam"

The white elephant was the fetish of a hundred tribes.

Edward Tebbutt, "Abducting a White Elephant"

Moby Dick *is American literature's pseudo-founding father, its false prophet in fake biblical prose, its Reproduction Antique ancient monument. American literature is now old enough and good enough to sell off the great white elephant.*

Brigid Brophy, Michael Levey, and Charles Osborne,
Fifty Works of English (and American) Literature We Could Do Without

Introduction

In order to comprehensively track the general theory of the white elephant in both *Moby Dick* and several key theoretical texts I consider in this chapter the differences

between this general theory and another discourse – fetishism – that emerged at roughly the same time: I begin by examining William Pietz's account of the origin of the fetish, and go on to compare the Western idea of the white elephant with the Enlightenment discourse on both fetishes and idols. Following this, I explore the significance of fetishism and Africa for both Hegel and Marx, while also tracing their parallel concerns with Asia and their engagement with the general theory of the white elephant as a logical corollary to their attitudes about Asian society. Finally, I offer a reading of fetishism and the general theory of the white elephant in *Moby Dick*, concluding with an analysis of money – which is essential for both fetishism and white elephantism – in the novel and the larger economic milieu of antebellum America.

Fetishism and the General Theory of the White Elephant

Although the word "fetish" is used in a number of critical and popular discourses to signify an object that some person or group regard as having a kind of power that it does not in fact possess, the term's "[d]iscursively promiscuous and theoretically suggestive" (Pietz, "Problem I" 5) potency is founded on a specific history of material and cultural relations. Like the word "white elephant" (as opposed to the culturally discrete "*chang pheuak*"), "fetish" emerged from a cross-cultural space, or what postcolonial critic Mary Louise Pratt (drawing on a concept introduced by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz) would refer to as a "contact zone."[52] In a series of three

[52] Pratt uses the term "contact zone" to "refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). The significance of this perspective, Pratt claims, is that it "emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to

essays published in the 1980s in the journal *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, William Pietz traces the history of the idea of "fetishism" and the word "fetish," arguing that "the fetish, as an idea and a problem, and as a novel object not proper to any prior discrete society, originated in the cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" ("Problem I" 5).[53] Although the idea of the fetish originated in this contact zone through the "development of the pidgin word *Fetisso*," Pietz argues that this term has a "linguistic and accompanying conceptual lineage that may be traced" (5). In "Problem II" Pietz tracks *Fetisso* back to its Latin root *facticius* (or *factitius*), an adjective formed from the past participle of the verb *facere* (to make), which – in its "original commercial usage" – had "three distinct but related senses": "manufactured" (as opposed to "naturally formed"), "artificial," and "fraudulent" (25). Within the context of an early Christian worldview, especially, as Pietz shows, in the writings of Tertullian and Augustine, *facticius* came to signify "idolatry," which in this sense meant "the humanly willed manufacture and worship of artificial varieties of sacramental objects whose true essence was spiritual fraud" (27). This practice was understood to stand in opposition to the manufacture of "proper" sacramental objects (crosses, rings, images of saints, wafers, etc.), which – though materially manufactured – were also endowed with sacred power "through the intercessory agency of the church" (30). In late medieval Europe a considerable number of words etymologically derived

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each other" (7). Apropos of my argument about white elephants, and Pietz's claims about the fetish, I would add that such a situation also contributes to the mutual constitution of material and object relations for cultures with different and mutually incomprehensible economies and modes of production.

[53] Although Pietz's three essays in *Res* present his most detailed argument about the fetish, he also offers shorter accounts in his Afterword to the edited collection *Border Fetishisms* ("How To Buy Oranges in Norway") and in his entry for "Fetishism" in *Critical Terms for Art History*.

from *facticius* were used to designate "witchcraft" and any other "magical practices aimed at achieving a concrete result" (34). Among these was the Portuguese *feitiço*, the term that would eventually spread to the Guinea coast and evolve into the pidgin notion of the *Fetisso*. However, as Pietz notes, "the basic components of the idea of the fetish were not present in the medieval notion of the *feitiço*" because the objects used for such witchcraft were simply "passive medium[s]" for "effecting relations between spiritual agents according to a principle of resemblance" (35). The *feitiço* was simply an image that evoked some spiritual force; the idea of the fetish, on the other hand, is rooted in "the social and personal value of material objects" and the "fetish-object's unique origin, that is, [...] the historical process of its production" (35). Moreover, the significance and purpose of *feitiços* and other such magical objects was widely accepted and tolerated in medieval Portugal, and in no way carried the same negative connotations that "fetish" did for later Enlightenment-era thinkers (34-6). It would take the Portuguese encounter with the people living on the coast of "Guinea"[54] for the "fundamental change" in "the conception of the natural powers of the material object" to occur (36).

The first Portuguese who arrived in Africa in the fifteenth century drew a distinction between idols (*idolos*) and fetishes (*feitiços*). The first term "suggested a freestanding statue representing a spiritual entity (a "false god")" whereas the second "referred to an object worn about the body which itself embodied an actual power resulting from the correct ritual combination of materials" (36). While an idol, in this context, is simply a sign for some transcendent spiritual force, the *feitiço*'s power is

[54] For medieval and Enlightenment Europe, "Guinea" was a catch-all phrase designating black Africa, rather than a pre-existing African nation or social formation (Pietz, "Problem IIIa" 105).

rooted in its non-transcendent materiality. Although these terms were not strictly distinguished at first, over the course of the Portuguese (and, later, Dutch) experience in Guinea, *feitiço* became *Fetisso* and it was well-known that African religion consisted of the worship of arbitrarily-chosen material objects. *Fetissos*, then, "were not false gods in the traditional sense, but rather were quasi-personal divine powers associated more closely with the materiality of the sacramental object than would be an independent demonic spirit" (38). European merchants, interested in trading for gold, were shocked that the Africans they encountered would accept "trifles" or "trinkets" in exchange for precious metals, which, as Pietz argues, points to the radically heterogeneous systems of measuring value present in Guinea, and also persuaded the Europeans that because "blacks seemed to overestimate the economic value of trifles" they were also "perceived to attribute religious values to trifling objects" (41). It was the African's supposed "superstitious misunderstanding of *causality*" that explained his "false estimation of the *value* of material objects," and as "Europeans became more familiar with African societies, they increasingly viewed fetish-worship as the principle underlying the paradox of these societies, which seemed to exist and endure without any law or true rule of social order" (42). The fetish, set apart from the Christian idea of the idol, "posed a double problem, a double perversion [...] for the European merchant," in that the status of certain "commercially valuable objects" as *Fetissos* "complicated his ability to acquire them as commodities and seemed to distort their relative exchange value" and the African insistence on "swearing oaths upon Fetissos" represented a "perversion of the natural processes of economic negotiation and legal contract" (45). The fetish was a "novel idea" that imagined the material object as a "radically novel production associating things and

purposes momentarily conjoined in a random event," and was thus "utterly alien to the Christian theory of idolatry" (45). Pietz argues that it was this new distinction between *Fetissos* and idols, between "'fetishes' and 'gods'," that led Charles de Brosses in 1757 to "coin the term *fétichisme* [fetishism] by way of contrast to the term 'polytheism'" (40).

By comparing this history of the fetish with European accounts of the white elephant, it seems that the white elephant – which, in La Loubère's words, "has a King's soul [...] lodged" in its body – belongs more to the field of idolatry or polytheism rather than that of fetishism. Indeed, *chang pheuak* were worshiped for their supposed transcendent divine powers and were prized by Siamese kings because they suggested that the same divine qualities were present in the monarch who possessed them. At the same time, however, much of the rhetoric about white elephants in Western accounts of Siam and Burma – not content to simply dismiss them as simply "passive mediums" – emphasize the "materiality" of these animals. For example, contemporary writers like Chadwick, Scigliano, and Ringis make note of the complicated procedures for identifying an elephant as a *chang pheuak*, showing how the *gajajeeva* reads the body of the white elephants by looking for certain distinguishing features. These signs – such as extra toes, the colour and number of hairs, and so forth – are not simply "representations" of the divine principle the white elephant stands for (that is, they do not "resemble" what is spiritually significant about *chang pheuak*); rather, they seem to be marks of something like the elephant's divine manufacture. Earlier European writers were also concerned with the material conditions of white elephants, as virtually every account that mentions them emphasizes the enormous amount of wealth expended on them, detailing – often with dramatic incredulity – the gold and silver platters from which the *chang pheuak*

were fed and the lavish ornamentation of their pavilions. As a concept that emerged from a contact zone, the "white elephant" described by Portuguese, British, Dutch, and French merchants in Ayudhya could not be comfortably described as either a fetish or an idol because it does not belong to either the Euro-African or Christian traditions in which those terms are rooted. Just as, for Pietz, the "history of the usage of 'fetish'" is "a field of exemplary instances that exemplify no model or truth prior to or outside this very 'archive' itself" ("Problem I" 7), I would argue that the meaning of the word "white elephant" cannot be located outside of the archive of the instances of its articulation, or as a prior discrete concept present in either Siamese or European culture.

Thanks to de Brosses' *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne Religion de l'Egypte avec la Religion actuelle de Nigritie*, the word "fetishism" allowed the idea of a general theory of the fetish to develop in Enlightenment thought and, later, in the social sciences (Marx, Comte, Binet, etc.). There is, however, no coherently articulated general theory of the white elephant; no word that alludes to both a historical encounter (i.e., that between the Siamese and various European nations in Ayudhya) and a theory of materiality and exchange (i.e., being stuck with useless objects that one cannot dispose of) in the same way that "fetishism" does. Nevertheless, such a theory does exist in Western discourse – all manner of useless, costly, burdensome, and unsaleable objects are referred to as white elephants, and it is generally understood what the term implies. As I have already argued, this theory first emerged during the Enlightenment – particularly in Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* – although it was rooted in earlier European accounts of oriental despotism and the Siamese reverence for *chang pheuak*. I have also already shown how – by the 1850s – Herman Melville could

draw on such descriptions of oriental despotism in his portrayal of *Moby Dick*'s Ahab, and how this depiction of the captain as an Asian tyrant is closely tied to the destruction of the *Pequod*'s original productive, capitalist mandate.

There is, however, one more key component to the general theory of the white elephant that emerged in the eighty-six years between Voltaire's text and Melville's: the consensus in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theory that oriental despotism caused social, spiritual, and economic stagnation in Asian countries. This belief was rooted in earlier European texts about the Far East (recall, for example, Van Vliet's concerns about Prasat Thong's despotism threatening the VOC's interests in Ayudhya), and was still common wisdom in Melville's time, but it was in the interim period that it was consolidated in social theory. "The idea that the Orient [...] was antithetical to modernity," John R. Eperjesi writes, "was voiced by the major figures of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual history – Voltaire, Smith, Herder, Hegel, Marx – who all represented the Orient in metaphors of sleep and stagnation" (43). We have already seen how Voltaire, the first thinker Eperjesi lists, uses the example of a white elephant to make this argument. The last two theorists on the list, Hegel and Marx, do not do this, although they both contribute to the same general theory or discourse as Voltaire. Hegel's and Marx's texts discuss the components of the general theory of the white elephant (although they do not name it as such) alongside descriptions of African fetishism – for Hegel, the fetish explains why Africa has no place in world history, whereas for Marx the fetish can be used to satirize the "enlightened" discourse of political economy which believes it is free from such superstition. By reading Hegel's and Marx's accounts of fetishism it is possible to see how specific historical descriptions of African fetishes are

transformed for these writers into general theory. By also looking at their descriptions of Asiatic society, it is possible to see how the general theory of the white elephant both informed their analyses, and was ultimately transformed by their conclusions.

Fetishism and Stagnation in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*

In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel famously considers the "History of the world" to be "none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom" (19). This process of becoming, of mankind's self-conscious recognition of freedom as a universal ideal, culminating in "the shape which the perfect embodiment of Spirit assumes [i.e.] the State" (17), is not a democratic, synchronic, and worldwide phenomenon. Rather, it is the result of the diachronic, teleological movement of Spirit as it travels throughout history from East to West: "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning" (103).[55] The consequence of this teleological and geographical account of history is that "in the History of the World, the Idea of Spirit appears in its actual embodiment as a series of external forms, each one of which declares itself as an actually existing people" (79). Human societies, then, are the "external forms" in which the movement of Spirit is realized, and this can be observed in the ideals of freedom evident in those societies. This "progress of the consciousness of Freedom" corresponds with the movement of Spirit from East to West. "The East," Hegel writes, "knew and to the present day knows that *One* is Free; the Greek and Roman

[55] America, meanwhile, is "the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself" (86).

world, that *some* are free; the German world knows that *All* are free" (104).[56] Africa, however, is excluded from this account of Spirit and the becoming-conscious of freedom. "Africa proper," Hegel writes, "as far as History goes back, has remained [...] the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (91). Accordingly, Africa is "no historical part of the World," since "it has no movement or developments to exhibit" (99). For Hegel, the African's lack of historical self-consciousness is because "in Negro life [...] consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example God, or Law" (93) and, as such, is "capable of no development or culture" (98). One of the most telling symptoms of the African's exclusion from the grand teleological course of history is his worship of the "*Fetich*" (94), which is a manifestation of his inability to recognize "the category of Universality" (93). "Such a Fetich," Hegel writes, "has no independence as an object of religious worship; still less has it aesthetic independence as a work of art; it is merely a creation that expresses the arbitrary choice of its maker" (94). It is the arbitrariness of the fetish that strikes Hegel as troubling, and justifies his exclusion of Africa from world history: "[I]f arbitrary choice is the absolute, the only sustainable objectivity that is realized, the mind cannot in such be conscious of any Universality" (95), and without such awareness the ideals of freedom, morality and law cannot be realized. If, for Hegel, Africa's role in world history can be represented as a corollary to the views African societies have toward the power of material objects, then I believe a similar phenomenon can be seen in his assessment of Asia's role in world history, in

[56] Several interesting papers – which largely fall outside the purview of this chapter – on the Western concept that in Asia only "*One* is free" can be found in David Kelly and Anthony Reid's edited collection *Asian Freedoms: The Idea of Freedom in East and Southeast Asia.*

which the unspoken logic of the general theory of the white elephant underwrites his description of Asian societies as despotic and stagnant.

For Hegel, in "Asia arose the Light of Spirit, and therefore the History of the World" (99), but this light has been – if not extinguished – then permanently suspended in an inchoate form. Asian nations "remain stationary, and perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time" (173). The reason Spirit is stuck in this stationary and vegetative state is because of the limited notions of freedom in Asian countries, which is the direct result of oriental despotism. Hegel writes that,

> The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit – Man *as such* – is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free. They only know that *one is free*. But on this very account, the freedom of that one is only caprice; ferocity – brutal recklessness of passion, or a mildness and tameness of the desires, which is itself only an accident of Nature – mere caprice like the former. –That *one* is therefore only a Despot; not a *free man*. (18)

The despotism of Asian societies hinders the movement of Spirit and history by restricting freedom to one individual (the sovereign). Because, according to Hegel, this freedom is bestowed on the sovereign arbitrarily, or through "an accident of Nature," this freedom is something of an illusion, and does not "advance[e] to *subjective* freedom" (105). Under this despotic system, in which the sovereign is "that substantial being to which all belongs," no other person "has a separate existence" or "models himself in [the sovereign's] subjective freedom" (105). The consequences of this absolutist and despotic political system are reflected in the religious practices of Asian societies. In his

discussion of China, Hegel notes that "the religion of Fo [Buddha] is widely diffused" (131).[57] This religion "regards as the Highest and Absolute – as God – *pure Nothing*; which sets up contempt for individuality, for personal existence, as the highest perfection" (131). Hegel's description of what he perceives as Buddhism's contempt for the individual and personal experience therefore reflects the lack of subjective freedom in Asian societies, in which the despotism of a single tyrant prevents the development of individual and personal freedoms. There is, then, a sense in both Buddhism and Asian society that Spirit is trapped in a stagnant form because of the despotism of Asian kingship. This sense is similar to the sentiment in Voltaire that reason is stagnant in Asia (leading to "unsound mind") because of despotic threats about a white elephant. The idea that the dialectical progress of Spirit, or Mind, or reason is arrested and stagnant in Asia because of oriental despotism is the theoretical heir to earlier historical descriptions of king's or prince's souls being stuck in white elephants. These earlier accounts were simply descriptions, or impressions, of Siamese society, but they nevertheless implicitly offered their readers a theory of Asiatic life, in which oriental despotism fostered false ideas about the significance of elephants and squandered both wealth and human lives in order to assure these animals' upkeep. For Voltaire, these impressions could be theoretically abstracted to make a point about reason and natural religion. Hegel also makes this theoretical leap, but – writing well after Voltaire – he does not feel the need to

[57] Hegel does not discuss Siam or Southeast Asia in any real detail in his *Philosophy of History*; however, he does list Siam among the nations that are known to practice Buddhism (167-8).

trace this theory all the way back to the discourse in which it originated.[58] This is not to say that Hegel's ideas about Asia are necessarily indebted to earlier texts about white elephants; indeed, he may not even have been fully aware of them. Although Hegel's views on Asia were based on received accounts, not all of these accounts mention white elephants, and many of them were not concerned with Siam or Southeast Asia at all. But some of them did describe white elephants, and these texts did make an impact on the Enlightenment idea of Asia. The general theory of the white elephant is part of this idea, and although it may not be the only theory underwriting it, white elephantism has produced a theoretical legacy that can be detected in Hegel, *Moby Dick*, and in contemporary colloquial usage ("white elephant sales" and the like). This legacy can also be traced in the writings of Karl Marx, particularly in what Matthew Rowlinson refers to as the "unresolved problematic of materiality [...] in Marx's account of capital" (347). While Marx famously uses the idea of the fetish to critique and satirize the "enlightened" discourses of *lasses-faire* capitalism and political economy, he also concerns himself with objects that resist and disrupt the circulation of capital because of their persistent materiality. The general theory of the white elephant is evident in Marx's discussion of such objects, drawn out in his writings on use and exchange values, the costs of circulation, and also – as one might expect, given his relationship to Hegel – in his theories about Asian society and the so-called Asiatic mode of production.

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[58] The same phenomenon can be observed in contemporary critics who freely use the term "fetishism" without necessarily being aware of the term's historical and cross-cultural origins.

"Grotesque Ideas": Marx and Commodity Fetishism

For Marx, the significance of the commodity in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought is deeply connected to the problem of fetishism. The same rational discourse that disparaged the fetish as a sign of religious superstition, faulty reasoning, and misunderstood causality also provided the theoretical basis for a political economy that was under the spell of the "mystical character of the commodity," abounding, as it is, in "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (*Capital: Volume One* 164; 163). Marx begins *Capital: Volume One* by explaining the "dual character" (131) of the commodity, namely, the distinction between a commodity's use-value and its exchange-value.[59] Use-value is nothing more than the "usefulness of a thing" (126). The physical properties of a commodity are what make it useful, and use-value is indissociable from the specific material facts of the commodity in question. Use-value alone, however, is not sufficient to transform an object into a commodity. Things, or objects, can be useful without being the product of human labour (air, water, etc.), and some use-values (i.e., those which solely satisfy the needs of their creator) can be the product of human labour without becoming commodities (131). Marx also notes that a useless object cannot be a commodity, even if it contains human labour and was intended for the marketplace: "If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no [exchange] value" (131). In order to become a commodity, an object must have both a use and a value. Marx is not overly concerned with use-value in *Capital* (or elsewhere), as the main focus of his critique of political economy is his analysis of the role of exchange-value. Nevertheless, the

[59] Marx often uses the term "value" instead of "exchange-value."

significance of use-value for both the process of commodification and the theory of the white elephant as a useless, burdensome, and unsaleable object is considerable, and will be a recurrent concern in my discussion of Marx.

If use-value receives only cursory treatment from Marx, the opposite can be said about exchange-value, which is the subject of the first chapter of *Capital* and underpins Marx's entire argument about the circulation of commodities and the general formula for capital. For Marx, exchange-value "appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind" (126). Some quantity of one commodity is always being exchanged for some quantity of another, and Marx argues that there must be some "common element of identical magnitude" that "exists in [these] two different things" that allows this exchange to occur. Whatever this "common element" might be, it definitely is not related to the "natural propert[ies]" (127) of commodities, as such properties only come into play when a commodity is regarded as useful (i.e., as a use-value) rather than valuable (i.e., as an exchange-value). For Marx, the "exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values" (127). When commodities become objects of exchange, their physical properties and material usefulness are stripped away, and do not return until the object is removed from circulation and used by the person who (now) possesses it.[60] The source of this common element, then, cannot be found in the

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[60] In an interesting article – "Marx's Coat" – that explores the dual character of the commodity, Peter Stallybrass suggests that Marx's own overcoat can be read as the prototype for the coat Marx uses as an example of an exchanged commodity in *Capital*'s first chapter. This exemplary coat, Stallybrass explains, "makes its appearance not as the object that is made and worn but as the commodity that is exchanged" (183). The material property of the coat – its use-value as a garment – is left behind when it is exchanged as a commodity. As Stallybrass points out, this example parallels Marx's own

use-values of commodities. Rather, the source is located in the process of the commodities' manufacture: "If we disregard the use-value of commodities," Marx writes, "only one property remains, that of being products of labour" (128). For Marx, exchange is made possible because all commodities are products of human labour, and the exchange-value of a specific commodity is determined by the amount of "[s]ocially necessary labour-time" (129) required to produce it.[61] The fluctuation of a commodity's value over time is the direct result of "variation[s] in the productivity of labour," such as technological innovations, which increase productivity, or poor growing seasons, which decrease it: "If man succeeded, without much labour, in transforming carbon into diamonds," Marx writes, "their value might fall below that of bricks" (130-1). The exchange of commodities, though, is not possible without a special category of commodity that serves as a "universal equivalent" (184) for all others. Although one can theoretically exchange a commodity for its particular equivalent – to use one of Marx's examples, 20 yards of linen for 1 quarter of corn – "social custom" designates one commodity that can act as a "form of value in general," i.e., as a money-form (162). For Marx, gold "confronts [...] other commodities as money only because it previously confronted them as a commodity" (162). Gold was initially exchanged as a particular

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experience with his overcoat, which he was frequently forced to pawn in order to survive, but without which he was unable to enter the British Library to undertake his research for *Capital*. The status of Marx's coat as either a use-value or an exchange-value affected what kind of work he could perform, since when his coat was in pawn he turned to journalism in order to pay the bills and reclaim the coat that would allow him to return to his (unprofitable) research. When Marx had to pawn his clothing, Stallybrass writes, "[i]n the place of a coat, there was a transcendental value that erased both the making and the wearing of the coat. *Capital* was Marx's attempt to give back the coat to its owner" (187).

[61] "Socially necessary labour-time," Marx writes, "is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society" (129).

equivalent to other commodities, but its physical suitability as a money-form,[62] and social custom, gradually transformed it into the universal equivalent of all other commodities and, hence, the money-form of commodities. This money-form, Marx claims, "is merely the reflection thrown upon a single commodity [i.e., gold or silver] by the relations between all other commodities" (184). Although a certain quantity of linen may not see its equivalent value in a different quantity of corn, both commodities can express their value in terms of money. It is important to note that Marx does not claim to have discovered either the labour-theory of value or that money is a commodity; these are truths that have been known for some time by bourgeois political economy. Instead, Marx's concern in *Capital* is explaining why political economy forgets these facts, and proceeds as if exchange-value were an inherent feature of the commodity rather than an expression of human labour. It is in order to address this problem that Marx raises the question of "commodity fetishism."

In a section of *Capital* titled "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," Marx claims that although the commodity "appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing," closer analysis reveals that it is in fact "a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (163). This "strange" character of the

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[62] Theoretically, any commodity could serve as a universal equivalent and the money-form, but the physical unsuitability of most commodities for the task (once again, consider linen and corn) disqualify them. Precious metals, however, are ideal:

> Only a material whose every sample possesses the same uniform quality can be an adequate form of appearance of value, that is a material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour. On the other hand, since the difference between the magnitudes of value is purely quantitative, the money commodity must be capable of purely quantitative differentiation, it must therefore be divisible at will, and it must be also be possible to assemble it again from its component parts. Gold and silver possess these properties by nature. (184)

commodity is not related to its use-value, as there is nothing mysterious about the transformation of the "materials of nature" (163) into objects that are useful for their maker. "The form of wood," Marx writes, "is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing" (163). But, when the table becomes a commodity,

> it changes into a thing that transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (163-4)

This remarkable passage not only recalls Marx's famous attempt to stand German Idealist philosophy on its head, but also suggests that commodities confront other commodities in an inverted "relation." As a useful thing, the table stands, as it should, with its feet on the ground. But as an exchange-value, the table is turned upside down, and harbors grotesque ideas in its wooden brain, precisely because of how it relates to other commodities, which is to say, somewhat differently, because it is caught up in a scene of misrecognition. The source of this misrecognition is not "the nature of the determinants of value" (164), i.e., the labour-theory of value, since there is nothing particularly "mysterious" about this process. The "mysterious character" (164) of the commodity, therefore, has not been resolved by the "belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them" (167). Rather, Marx claims, the "enigmatic character" of the commodity form "arises from this form itself" (164). For Marx, one of the defining features of commodity-

oriented life is that "social relations between men themselves" assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). Although the exchange-value of a commodity actually expresses a social relation between men, it appears as if it is a natural property of the commodity itself: "The mysterious character of the commodity form," Marx writes, "consists [...] simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (164-5). It is this act of misrecognition that Marx finds an analogy for in the "misty realm of religion" and that he calls "the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities" (165). Just as religious fetishes "appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own" (165), so too do fetishized commodities appear to contain their exchange-value as a kind of natural or objective property. The commodity form that allows this to happen, as I have already suggested, is the "finished form of the world of commodities" or "money form," which, Marx writes,

> Conceals the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between objects, instead of revealing them plainly. If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver (and this makes no difference here), as the universal equivalent, the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form. (168-9)

In other words, if the producers of coats or boots were to treat linen as if it were a natural universal equivalent form of value, which is to say as if it were money, nobody would doubt the absurdity of such an act. But, for Marx, these producers do make this absurd leap when they act as if the value of gold or silver exists as a natural property of these metals, of money itself, and not simply as a reflection of other commodities and social relations between men.[63] Although the act of commodity exchange does involve men "equat[ing] their different kinds of labour as human labour," Marx claims that "[t]hey do this without being aware of it" (166-7). The commodity form, particularly the money form, obscures the equation of labour with human labour, and conceals the true source of value, so that men misrecognize it as being a quality inherent to the commodity itself.[64]

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[63] In his essay on commodity fetishism in the collection *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Pietz explains the significance of the universal money form for fetishism as follows: "The magical moment of fetish formation [...] is the transition from the general form into a *universal* form, it modal shift from existence and possibility to necessity – the mysterious transubstantiation of common social practices into custom or law sanctioned by the community as a whole" ("Fetishism and Materialism" 146-7).

[64] Although Marx writes that men are not aware of commodity fetishism, it would perhaps be more correct to claim that they act as if they are not aware of it. After all, the secret that the source of value is human labour and that money was originally a commodity that was chosen to function as a universal equivalent simply because of its physical properties and social custom is well known to political economists. Nevertheless, because it is in the interest of capitalist accumulation to obscure the true source of value (and therefore appropriate surplus value), the fetishistic illusion is sustained. This is a topic Slavoj Žižek addresses in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. "When individuals use money," Žižek writes,

> they know very well there is nothing magical about it – that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations. The everyday spontaneous ideology reduces money to a simple sign giving the individual possessing it a right to a certain part of the social product. So, on an everyday level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. (31)

This state of confusion is the reason why Marx personifies commodities in *Capital* (such as the table with its grotesque wooden brain), and also why he imagines these commodities to be caught up in a dialectic of misrecognition. Besides the wooden table, the most notable instance of this personification occurs toward the end of the section on "commodity fetishism," when Marx speculates as to what commodities might say if they could speak for themselves:

> If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values. Now listen how these commodities speak through the mouth of the economist:
>
> 'Value (i.e. exchange-value) is a property of things, riches (i.e. use-value) of man. Value, in this sense, necessarily implies exchange, riches do not.'
>
> 'Riches (use-value) are the attribute of man, value is the attribute of commodities. A man or community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable... A pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or diamond.'
>
> So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. (176-7)

For Žižek, belief is indeed rooted in practice rather than theory, and the necessity of illusions such as the one he describes above is central to his theory of the social-as-Symbolic. The value of his observations here is simply to clarify what could be perceived as a flaw in Marx's argument about the illusory power of the fetish. Although commodity fetishism is a powerful phenomenon, it is not immune to analysis, and it exists only in service of a certain kind of capitalist social system.

Toward the end of this passage Marx cites two economists who both believe that exchange-value is a natural property of commodities, a belief that he derides by noting that no chemist has ever discovered this supposed natural property in either pearls or diamonds. This discourse of bourgeois political economy acts as a kind of mirror that, when held up to the world of commodities, sets the stage for the scene of misrecognition with which Marx begins this passage. In this scene, commodities are personified and speak, which is a reflection of what political economists tell them – namely, that the network of human social relations that produced them is, in fact, one of their natural properties. What they say also reflects this misrecognition, as they claim that their own material properties do not belong to them, but that their exchange-value does. In order to make sense of what these commodities are saying, we have to read Marx's passage backward and reverse all the claims both political economists and the commodities themselves have made. In other words, we must set the table right-side up again, so that it stands as a use-value, and so that it loses both its "wooden brain" and the "grotesque ideas" that "evolve" in it.

That Marx calls this act of misrecognition commodity "fetishism" is, as Peter Stallybrass notes, "one of Marx's least understood jokes" since it "reverse[s] the whole field of fetishism" (184). The power of the fetish, as it was conceived by Enlightenment thinkers, was rooted in its material properties. What is fetishized in commodity fetishism is defined precisely by its abstraction from an object's physical and sensuous characteristics. "In attributing the notion of the fetish to the commodity," Stallybrass writes, "Marx ridiculed the society that thought it had surpassed the 'mere' worship of objects supposedly characteristic of 'primitive religions.' For Marx, the fetishism of the

commodity was a regression from the materialism (however distorted) that fetishized the object" (186). Although Enlightenment rationality believed it had rid itself of the "primitive" religious superstitions that fetishized mere objects, Marx believed that the fetish had merely been transferred from the field of religion to that of political economy, and that the fetishization of an abstraction (value) was more absurd than the fetishization of material objects.[65] In fact, in Marx's earlier writings, the idea of the material fetish has a kind of efficacy that is useful for resisting both Hegelian idealism and the commodity-oriented world of capitalism. In a newspaper article in 1842, the young Marx described fetishism as "the *religion of sensuous desire*" (qtd. in Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism" 133). According to Pietz – in his essay "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx" – this sensuous character of the fetish offered "subversively materialist implications" for Marx's critique of Hegel (140). For Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought, sensuousness was the "primordial mode of experience" (139), which was rooted in a kind of primitive materialism and was not capable of attaining the "categorical universality" that, for Hegel, was "the only proper object of devotion or allegiance" (140). Because, for Hegel, the fetish – and indeed all of Africa – could not represent a universal principle, it represented a way of thinking outside a Hegelian system that Marx regarded as "the cult of the government's will" (qtd. in Pietz 141). For Hegel, civil society - which Pietz describes as "the social region of the self-interested economic activities of individuals" (140) – is like the fetish in that it is concerned only with the finite, i.e., with a series of general economic and social interactions that do not point

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[65] As Pietz puts it, "Marx took advantage of the radically historical, materialist problematic implicit in the Enlightenment discourse about fetishism to travesty the idealist and, at best, abstractly materialist social philosophies of his time by means of their own deepest preconceptions" ("Fetishism and Materialism" 130).

toward any greater universal principle. In order to attain his[66] desire for the infinite and universal, man must look outside civil society toward the transcendent realms of the family, religion, and – ultimately – the state (141). For Marx, who was interested in establishing a materialist refutation of Hegel's idealist dialectic, civil society represented a mode of thinking about the political, economic, and social in strictly materialist terms. Since, for Marx, the truth of history resided not in the ideal but the actual, not in the movement of spirit but in the conflict of classes, his goal was to "locate a universal class and principle of identity *within* the realm of human particularity, the realm of theology conceived as belonging to cults of terrestrial objects and political economics conceived as belonging to the economic activities of civil society" (Pietz 141). From the perspective of both the "primitive fetishist" and the "industrial proletarian" the "bourgeois capitalist" is

> a fetishist, one whose fetish, capital, is believed by its deluded cultists to embody *(super)natural causal powers of value formation*, but which is recognized by the savage, expropriated through 'primitive accumulation,' and by the worker, exploited through the capitalist accumulation process proper, as having no real power outside its *social power to command* the labour activity of real individuals. (141)

Because both the "savage" and the "worker" are excluded from the realm of the universal, and are instead concerned with the finite and material, they do not suffer the same delusions as the bourgeois cultists who believe that the value of commodities, and the value of the universal money-form, are natural properties of those objects. Instead, materialist analysis reveals that "fetishism and political economy are closer to the true

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[66] As Pietz notes, "civil society is conceived by Hegel as a realm of male individuals" (141).

world than monotheism and statism" (142). The true value of the fetish, for Marx, is that it offers

> a (potentially theoretical) viewpoint *outside* capitalism capable of recognizing proletarians in their *objective social identity* as the economic class owning no marketable private property other than their embodied being and 'its' capacity for concrete productive activity, and therefore as the one identity *within* civil society in which true human being (that is, sensuous, embodied, living being) appears. (143)

The African worship of fetishes, in all of their sensuous materiality, offers an outside view of capitalism that simultaneously identifies the capitalist's misrecognition of value as a fetishistic delusion and presents a model for understanding how the proletarian worker, by being "forced to the physical margin of existence" (143), is closer to the conditions of true human existence than either the bourgeois capitalist or the idealist philosopher. By drawing on the Enlightenment theory of fetishism, Marx was able to use the idea of the fetish against the same "rational" institutions that sought to denounce it.

Marx's recognition that the fetish could represent both a theoretical model for understanding the epistemological problem of misplaced causality *and* a kind of social practice that offers a viewpoint outside of capitalism, anticipates recent critical interventions in the field of fetishism that question the distinction between "facts" and "fetishes." In his essay "The Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, Factishes" from the collection *Pandora's Hope*, Bruno Latour claims that "the most painful aspect of anti-fetishism" is that "it is always an *accusation*" (270). For Enlightenment-era thinkers this accusation is leveled against African culture and natural religion, as they presuppose that

that the worship of fetishes or idols arises from misunderstandings about physical causality and an inability to recognize the "facts" of either market exchange or true religion. Marx also uses the discourse on fetishism as a kind of accusation, albeit one that is ironically directed against the very enlightened rational institutions that ostensibly believe they can see through such fetishistic illusions. However, Marx's early commentaries on the political efficacy of the fetish (as a kind of analogue to civil society) point toward the unity between facts and fetishes that Latour describes. Latour notes that "'[f]etish' and 'fact' can be traced back to the same root" (272). Despite this "joint etymology," Latour argues that we only "use these words *after* the hammer has broken them in two: the fetish has become nothing but an empty stone onto which meaning is mistakenly projected; the fact has become an absolute certainty which can be used as a hammer to break away the delusions of belief" (272). It is the aim of Latour's essay to "glue the two broken symbols together again" (272), and to try to rediscover what came before the Western distinction between facts (truth) and fetishes (illusions). The result of this inquiry is Latour's coining of the neologism "factish," which acknowledges that the significant thing about the common root of "fact" and "fetish" is that both terms suggest something that is fabricated or manufactured (275). The factish antecedes the Western impulse to separate facts from fetishes and to use the former to attack and denigrate the latter. For Latour, the idea that the fact is an "absolute certainty" fails to recognize the ways in which facts are themselves always manufactured: they are always produced (or "discovered") by a particular discourse and within a particular cultural context. Likewise, the belief that the fetish is simply an illusion (in other words, the belief that the fetish is merely belief) is only possible if it is separated from the fact by the hammer-blow of the

fact itself; in other words, the fetish is dismissed as a manufactured illusion through a kind of circular reasoning that enables the fact (which is also manufactured) to appear to be a natural and objective category of knowledge. But what is a factish? "What did the factish do," Latour asks, "before it was broken by the anti-fetishist's blow?" (288). In short, factishes are "types of action that do not fall into the comminatory choice between fact and belief" (306). "Action," Latour explains, "is not what people do, but is instead the '*fait-faire*,' the making-do, accomplished along with others in an event, with the specific opportunities provided by the circumstances" (288). The action associated with the factish, then, does not rely on the distinction between facts and beliefs, truth and illusion, or the modern and the primitive. Rather, it functions as a kind of making-do, which is to say that it has a kind of efficacy in which the roles of truth and illusion cannot be separated or even necessarily identified. What matters about the factish is that it *works*. It does what it does, even if this working and doing cannot be reconciled with Western reasoning, which is always looking to sort out useful theory from mere practice.

In *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804*, Srinivas Arvamudan takes up the term factish and situates it within a literary and colonial context through a reading of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. Arvamudan argues that "Equiano perceives factishes early in the narrative" but that "[t]hese factishes are later, retroactively and narratively, converted into fetishes" (278). The "unfamiliar objects" that Arvamudan singles out in Equiano's text – a watch, a portrait, and a "talking book" – are all personified and appear as "undifferentiated factishes" to the "young boy" (278). Although these catachreses "are 'mistakes' of agency from a realist perspective" they nevertheless demonstrate the pragmatic efficacy of the factish since, as personified

possessions of Equiano's master, "they identify the fear of surveillance that dominates the life of a slave" (279). It is only through the "retroactive power" of the older Equiano's narration that the factishes perceived by the young boy are converted into fetishes, although Arvamudan argues that the "agency of the portrait or watch 'belongs' properly neither to diegetic master and slave nor to the emancipated, extradiegetic narrator" (279). Indeed, as a factish, this agency cannot be divided between the young Equiano's belief and the older narrator's enlightened and factual critique of slave society. In order to have this critique accepted by his readership, Equiano must concede to the Western distinction between primitive error and modern knowledge, disavowing the efficacy of these earlier factishes and re-imagining them as misguided fetishes. "Displaying a fetishistic logic of subject construction," Arvamudan writes, "the older Equiano looks back toward factishes felt by the boy, such as watch, portrait, and book, and separates magic from market and fetish from commodity" (280). Nevertheless, Arvamudan claims, Equiano does still find a use for factishes in his text, particularly in his strategic deployment of the book as a metaphor for literacy. As such, the book is valuable for Equiano neither as a misguided fetish (one of the "unfamiliar objects" he encounters) nor as a repository of facts; rather, the symbolism of the book grants him access to the colonizing culture that he wants to address. "The appeal to a culture of bibliolatry makes for a symbolic transition that Equiano fashions between an Igbo mode of knowing and a British literacy," Arvamudan writes, "the book is embraced as a prerequisite for becoming a representative 'voice' in British culture" (281). It is important to remember that it is not "literacy itself that makes the difference" here, but rather Equiano's "operation and deployment of that specific 'technology' [i.e., the book] which [...] obtains a performative power on its wearer and

creates action-at-a-distance" (281). Of course, as Arvamudan points out, this kind of technology that has a performative power on its wearer is very much like the "fetishes" valued by West African people (such as Equiano). As Pietz demonstrates, these fetishes had no lack of practical and pragmatic uses within African society, but these uses were imperceptible to European merchants who could only regard them as useless trinkets or misused and misplaced commodities. Within the context of West African society, the fetish was itself a factish before – to return to Latour's terminology – this unity was shattered by the hammer of Western modernity, which insisted on distinguishing between fetishistic error and mercantilist fact.

Drawing on Arvamudan's and Latour's theories it is possible to see how their meditations on the factish and the necessity of undoing the Western distinction between fact and fetish can be useful for understanding the roles white elephants have played in both Thai society and in Western theory. When both Douglass Chadwick and Eric Scigliano observe *chang pheuak* in Thailand, they insist on drawing a line between the facts about white elephants (natural science and conservationist issues) and the ways in which the Thai fetishize these animals (so-called elephant metaphysics). Rita Ringis, however, in her account of the same animals and keepers, does not draw this line, and instead acknowledges the ways in which both scientific and religious texts participate in the same continuous discourse on *chang pheuak*, a discourse which demonstrates the practical efficacy of these animals for Thai monarchs. For Ringis, in other words, the Thai worship of white elephants is not a superstitious fetish (as it is for Chadwick and Scigliano), nor is it reducible to scientific facts, but is rather a sign that *chang pheuak* served as a factish for these kings – a kind of pragmatic tool that drew on religious,

social, and cultural traditions in order to negotiate the often perilous *realpolitik* of Southeast Asia. A similar Western impulse to sort fact from fetish is also evident in David K. Wyatt's *Thailand: A Short History*, in which Wyatt dismisses the significance of white elephants for Thai history, despite their important role in several conflicts during the Ayudhya era. However, this role is acknowledged by Thai historians, who note the ways in which *chang pheuak* served as factishes for Siam's monarchs (even though, as I note in Chapter One, the story of the white elephant as monarchical factish tends to elide class distinctions in Thai society). Although *chang pheuak* can be described as factishes, it would not be entirely accurate to say that the Enlightenment-era thinkers who provided the theoretical framework for the general theory of the white elephant distinguished between the white elephant's facts and its fetishes. The fetish, after all, describes a kind of causal misunderstanding that is deeply related to the supposed childishness of the African imagination. On the other hand, the epistemological problem of the white elephant, both for earlier writers like Van Vliet and La Loubère and for a later writer like Voltaire (who discuses the white elephant in a more theoretical manner), is said to come about because of the ancient, unchanging, and despotic stagnation of Asian society. Likewise, for these writers the "facts" about white elephants were not related to these animals' unrealized potential as commodities (which was the case with fetishes), but rather to the ways in which their fraudulent colour tricked the Siamese into wasting money, in the form of gold and silver, on their upkeep. In other words, although for Siam's monarchs a *chang pheuak* was a factish, for Western writers white elephants are simply *like* fetishes, but are not identical to them, because the term "white elephant"

suggests certain problems about Asian society that have always been seen as distinct from those associated with Africa.

We have already seen how Marx uses the language of fetishism as an accusation against the ostensibly enlightened discourse of political economy, and how he notes the ways in which the fetish can be thought of as a factish that allows for a kind of viewpoint outside of capitalism. What role, however, did the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment discourse about Asiatic society that I have described as the "general theory of the white elephant" play in shaping Marx's thinking about materialism and commodities? Certainly Marx shared Voltaire's interest in critiquing certain social institutions that were antithetical to rational thought, and he also was engaged with Hegel's account of world history, albeit from a materialist, rather than an idealist, perspective. Marx explicitly deals with Asia in several of his texts – but he also implicitly draws on the general theory of the white elephant. While Marx's writings on Asia provide him with a theoretical background for discussing concepts like oriental despotism and social stagnation, it is in his writings on the commodity that the general theory of the white elephant appears, as Marx attempts to explain what happens to capital when it becomes lodged in a useless and costly material object.

Marx's *Ladenhüter* and the Asiatic Mode of Production

The significance of "Asia" for Marx is most salient in his writings on the so-called "Asiatic mode of production." For Marx, Western history follows a teleological course, in which different modes of production change over time, for example, in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The force that drives this change is class conflict

(Marx's materialist alternative to Hegel's *Geist*), which will reach its *telos* with the achievement of a classless society. In his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes that "[a]t a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production" which leads to "an era of social revolution" (21). In that it is at least in part an ideological struggle, this social revolution only occurs once the economic base to support the new mode of production is already in place. "Mankind," Marx notes, "inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it will be able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation" (21). In a sense, then, social change is always lagging slightly behind changing economic conditions, and the re-ordering of society is an "inevitable" consequence of economic progress. Although this theory provided Marx with a satisfactory model for explaining European history, it could not account for what Marx termed "the riddle of the unchangeability of Asiatic societies" (*Capital: Volume One* 479). Despite "the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic states" and "their never-ceasing changes of dynasty" (479), Asian society was perceived by Marx, as it was by Hegel, as stagnant and unchanging. In the *Grundrisse* Marx writes about Asian society in which "oriental despotism and [...] propertylessness [...] seems legally to exist" (473) because the despot appropriates all of the surplus labour in his society. "[S]urplus product," Marx writes, "automatically belongs to this higher unity [...] and this surplus labour takes the form of tribute, etc., as well as of common labour for the exaltation of the unity, partly of the real despot, partly of the imagined clan-being, the god" (473). This system of tribute and forced labour, which assures that all of a

society's surplus labour is appropriated by a single individual, both parallels Hegel's account of the restriction of freedom in Asian countries, and prohibits the possibility of class conflict in those countries since the means of production never change hands (or only change hands from despot to despot). In his entry on "Asiatic Society" in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Bryan S. Turner offers a succinct account of the significance of the Asiatic mode of production for Marxism.[67] "In Asiatic society," Turner writes, "those social arrangements which were closely associated with the rise of a bourgeois class [...] were absent because the centralized state dominated civil society. The absence of private property ruled out the development of social classes as agents of social change" (37). For Marx, this absence of private property was, according to Turner, the "basic cause of social stagnation" in Asiatic society, which meant that the "teleological assumptions of the conventional list of historical transitions (slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist)" had to be set aside (36). The question of social stagnation in Asian societies is one that Marx inherited from Hegel and earlier Enlightenment thinkers, and is also – as I have argued above – an expression of an untheorized and inchoate general theory of the white elephant that took shape in European thought from the seventeenth century onward.

Both Hegel and Marx describe Asian society as stagnant because of oriental despotism. For Hegel, this stagnation is a question of freedom; for Marx, it is a question of property. Although neither thinker explicitly discusses earlier European travel writing about Siam and Southeast Asia, there is a notable similarity between their theories of stagnation and the descriptions of white elephants in travel narratives, in which these

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[67] For more detailed accounts of the Asiatic mode of production, see Godelier; Krader; O'Leary; and Sawer.

animals were often castigated as signs of decadent oriental despotism and of the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. One can trace a lineage of the general theory of the white elephant through this series of texts that describe something valuable becoming "stuck" or "stagnant" because of oriental despotism: the soul of a king is stuck in a white elephant; human freedom is stuck in the figure of the despot; social change is stuck in Asian societies that are devoid of class conflict. Of course, in contemporary usage, the phrase "white elephant" differs significantly from these earlier connotations, and refers to a burdensome object or possession that someone becomes stuck with. However, this contemporary instantiation of the general theory of the white elephant can also be traced to Marx, particularly his writings on the circulation of capital and on the materiality of the objects that capitalism transforms into commodities.

In his article "Reading Capital with Little Nell," Matthew Rowlinson investigates the relationship between materiality and the circulation of capital through a reading of Marx's *Capital* and Charles Dickens' novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Rowlinson argues that "material objects pose a kind of resistance to the incessant changes of shape that characterize capital" (347). For Rowlinson, the "initial sign of this resistance [is] that objects wear away under capital's touch, so that it runs the risk of appearing, not as a theoretically limitless hoard of abstract exchange value, but as an accumulation of worn out things" (347). As objects circulate as commodities under capitalism, as they change hands and transform from use-values to exchange-values, their material properties tend to wear away. Eventually, this wear and tear will render these objects useless, and – according to Marx – this loss of use-value is accompanied by a loss of exchange-value, so that former commodities and potentially profitable capital become little more than

worthless burdens. Marx addresses the effects of this wear and tear on commodities in Chapter Six ("The Costs of Circulation") of *Capital: Volume Two*. In this chapter, Marx emphasizes that the "metamorphoses" of capital are at the same time "business transactions between buyer and seller [...] in which each side seeks to get the better of the other" (207). One of the sites where this struggle between buyer and seller is contested is in the storeroom, as each party will try to wait for the value of commodities held in stock to fluctuate to their advantage. For Marx, the creation of commodity stock is necessary for the capitalist mode of production and the circulation of capital – as he puts it, "without the commodity stock, no commodity circulation" (223). Although storage costs "make commodities dearer without increasing their use-value" they can nevertheless "constitute sources of enrichment [...] for the individual capitalist" (214). This capitalist could be the seller, who holds back a commodity in high demand in order to drive up the price, but he could also be the buyer, who can exploit a situation in which the seller's goods have both cost him storage expenses and suffered the wear and tear that affects all material objects. It is significant to note that when Marx discusses those commodities that have become burdensome and worn out, his English-language translator, David Fernbach, renders his word for such an object – *Ladenhüter* – as "white elephant":

> If the capitalist has transformed the capital he advanced in means of production and labour-power into products [...] and these remain in store unsold, then [...] [t]he expenditures that the conservation of this stock requires in buildings, additional labour, etc. form a positive loss. The eventual purchaser would laugh at the capitalist if he said: "I could not sell

> my commodity for six months, and it not only cost me so and so much in idle capital to maintain it for these six months, but also caused expenses *x*." "So much the worse for you," the buyer will say, "for next to you is another seller whose commodity was finished only yesterday. Your commodity is evidently a white elephant [*Ladenhüter*], and probably more or less damaged by the ravages of time. You must therefore sell cheaper than your rival." (222)

If *Capital: Volume One* tells the story of a commodity that is "a born leveler and cynic [...] always ready to exchange not only soul, but body, with each and every other commodity" (179) and, always seeking to generate surplus value, is "in love with money" (202), then the story of the shopkeeper's commodity from *Volume Two* offers a stark counterpoise. This commodity – this white elephant – cannot be exchanged for other commodities, at least not in a way that will generate more capital, and rather than loving money it destroys it, the cost of its maintenance and upkeep representing a "positive loss" for the unfortunate capitalist who owns it. White elephants are commodities that "fail to make room for the incoming wave of production" so that "the commodity stock expands as a result of the stagnation of circulation" (*Capital: Volume Two* 225). Although commodity stock in the capitalist mode of production functions in a "condition of uninterrupted sale," when a capitalist's commodities are really white elephants these items "form deductions" for the capitalist – "a loss of value in the realization of value" (225). It is important to note that Marx describes this kind of burdensome stock in terms of "stagnation," since this establishes an isomorphic relationship between what he terms "*ein Ladenhüter*," the Asiatic mode of production, and other earlier discourses that

comprise the general theory of the white elephant. Exchange-value becomes stuck, or stagnant, in objects that we might call "white elephants," because they have been "damaged by the ravages of time" and ceased to be useful. Moreover, these white elephants represent a further financial burden to their owners who have already had to pay overhead expenses to keep them in stock. Given the similarity between this phenomenon and European travelers' accounts of kings' souls becoming lodged in cumbersome and costly elephants, it is not difficult to see why Marx would describe such objects as white elephants.

But, of course, Marx *didn't* describe these objects as "white elephants," at least not in a literal sense. His word – *Ladenhüter* – is frequently translated into English as either "soiled goods," "dead stock," or "shelf warmer" (in different contexts it also translated as "shopkeepers"). It does not refer to the animal that in English is called a white elephant, accounts of which – as I have argued above – are so closely related to Marx's account of both the Asiatic mode of production and of burdensome and costly possessions. So why, then, does David Fernbach translate "*Ladenhüter*" as "white elephant"? There are several potential explanations. On the one hand, it is quite possible that Fernbach was simply looking for an idiomatic English expression that would carry the same meaning as "*Ladenhüter*," and "white elephant" was the first word that came to mind and struck him as having an equivalent connotation. On the other hand, it is also possible that Fernbach chose the word "white elephant" because he thought it was what Marx would have used if the term had been available to him. Because there was no German colonial or mercantile experience in Siam and Southeast Asia, the word "white elephant" does not have the same historical connotations in that language as it does in

English, French, or Portuguese. Although Marx was aware of some Asian history (hence his opinions about the Asiatic mode of production) it is unlikely that he was directly familiar with any of the travelogues I have cited here. But, as I have argued above, it is quite possible that the idea of Asia Marx was familiar with – the Asia Hegel regarded as stagnant and despotic – was at least partially formed over the course of the seventeen and eighteenth centuries by writers who were familiar with these travelogues and their descriptions of white elephants. In other words, although Marx may have contributed to the general theory of the white elephant, he was not necessarily aware that he was doing so. Indeed, this theory can be characterized by the fact that it has never been fully theorized, and has only functioned "beneath the surface," in an inchoate but nevertheless influential manner. By translating "*Ladenhüter*" as "white elephant," however, Fernbach is acknowledging that Marx's writings on useless and unsaleable objects belong to the same rhetorical field as Van Vliet, La Loubère, and Voltaire – all authors of texts that examine how some kind of value comes to be lodged in a cumbersome and seemingly useless material vessel. By opting for such a decidedly non-literal translation, Fernbach suggests that "white elephant" is the term that Marx would have used, or that it is what Marx "really meant." Although this might seem presumptuous, there is – as I have mentioned above – an isomorphic relationship between Marx's "*Ladenhüter*" and the other elements of the general theory of the white elephant because of their shared concern with the concept of stagnation.[68] While Marx used the discourse on African fetishism to

[68] Fernbach's translation is not the only instance of a critic or translator suggesting that "white elephant" is what an earlier writer "really meant" when they used the word "Ladenhüter." In his text on Kafka, *Lambent Traces*, Stanley Corngold takes to task the American translators of Adorno's "Notes on Kafka" for translating "Ladenhüter" as "shopkeepers":

explain capitalism's misrecognition of exchange-value as a "natural" property of the commodity, he also used received ideas about Asian despotism and stagnation to inform his analysis of useless, costly, and unsaleable objects, and thus contributed to the modern definition of the term "white elephant."

> The American translation of this essay by Sam and Shierry Weber is competent, often admirable, up to the late point where it translates "Ladenhüter" [...] as "shopkeepers" [...], aiming for sensuous similarity with Kafka's word "Türhüter" (doorkeeper or doorkeepers), who – in the episode in *The Trial* "Before the Law" – guard the door that opens toward the Law. The word "Ladenhüter" actually means, however, not "shopkeepers" but "white elephants," unsalable things that lie about gathering dust in abandoned shop windows or in the back; and this mistake does grievously misread Adorno's thought, for Adorno has written: "As in the 'Natural Theater of Oklahoma,' Kafka's world of ideas resembles a world of white elephants" [...] This is a very different idea from saying that Kafka's world is like the world of petty shopkeepers. (159-60)

Although white elephants and shopkeepers *are* very different ideas, it does not follow that Adorno's term "actually means [...] 'white elephants'" and definitely does not mean "shopkeepers"; for example, Marx himself used "Ladenhüter" is this latter sense in *Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848 bis 1850* (38). While Corngold may have been correct in his assumption that Adorno meant to describe a world of "useless things that lie about gathering dust in abandoned shop windows" instead of a world of "petty shopkeepers," his statement that Adorno's "Ladenhüter" should be naturally and unproblematically translated as "white elephants" elides the historical significance of this term, and unwittingly and uncomfortably implicates Adorno's essay and Kafka's writing in the rhetorical field of the general theory of the white elephant, a fact that Corngold himself seems to concede: "Think of the lawyer-horse Bucephalus, Josephine the singing mouse, or even Gregor Samsa the giant vermin, none of whom are shopkeepers, though perhaps one does not want to think of them too insistently as white elephants either" (160). Corngold goes on to suggest that Odradek – that odd, mysterious object in Kafka's "The Cares of a Family Man" – better fits the bill, but he does not pursue this suggestion, preferring instead to analyze the "unexpected tutelary value" (160) of the Webers' mistake in order to upbraid Adorno for "press[ing] all of Kafka's stories and parables into the service of a vast fable, told in Freudian and demonic terms, of the capitalist reification of human consciousness" (160).

"A dumb blankness, full of meaning": The White Whale and the White Elephant

I have already argued that Ahab's relationship to his crew and Moby Dick has more in common with the Western idea of oriental despotism than with either capitalism or African fetish worship. Although *Moby Dick* does feature practitioners of both fetishism and white elephantism, these two topics are treated rather differently by Ishmael: Moby Dick, as the object of Ahab's despotic quest, is a serious and dangerous threat, whereas the worship of fetishes – especially by Queequeg – is mostly a harmless, superstitious practice, which gives Ishmael occasion to speculate on the nature of religious belief. When Ishmael first meets Queequeg – while they are sharing a room, and a bed, at the Spouter-Inn – he is taken aback by his unusual appearance and tattooed skin. In their darkened room, Ishmael initially mistakes Queequeg's tattoos for bruises, but soon realizes that they are in fact the marks of "some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaleman in the South Seas" (20). Terrified at first, and fearful that the "savage" might "take a fancy" to his own head, Ishmael considers fleeing, until, that is, Queequeg begins "going about something that completely fascinated [Ishmael's] attention" and convinces him that the stranger in his room "must indeed be a heathen" (20). Fumbling through his belongings, Queequeg "produced [...] a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the color of a three days' old Congo baby" (20). Because of Queequeg's penchant for trading in preserved heads, Ishmael thinks at first that the "black manikin was a real baby," but soon changes his mind:

> [S]eeing that it was not at all limber, and that it glistened a good deal like polished ebony, I concluded that it must be nothing but a wooden idol,

> which indeed it proved to be. For now the savage goes up to the empty fire-place, and removing the papered fire-board, sets up this little hunch-backed image, like a tenpin, between the andirons. The chimney jabs and all the bricks inside were very sooty, so that I thought this fire-place made a very appropriate little shrine or chapel for his Congo idol. (20)

It is curious that Ishmael – who already suspects the stranger in his room is from the South Seas – would describe Queequeq's "curious little deformed image" in explicitly African terms by calling it a "Congo idol." Ishmael later confirms that Queequeg is indeed from the South Seas, a native of the (fictional)[69] island of Kokovoko, but he still refers to the idol – named "Yojo" – as a "black little god" (60). Ishmael's liberal use of the supposed language of African religious practices to describe the beliefs of someone born on a Pacific island and currently residing in Nantucket reflects the extent to which – by the mid-nineteenth century – the discourse on fetishism had become abstracted from the specific history that had laid the foundation for the term's "discursively promiscuous and theoretically suggestive" character.[70] Ishmael seems to imagine that Queequeg's religion incorporates all manner of non-Christian practices: fetishism and idolatry, yes, but he also refers to Queequeg's day of fasting as his "Lent" or "Ramadan" (60).

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[69] "It is not down on any map," Ishmael writes, "true places never are" (49).

[70] Pietz comments on this odd usage of Ishmael's in "Problem II," noting the ubiquity of the "Congo idol" in discourses that were not necessarily related to Africa or African religion (87). In "Problem IIIa" Pietz notes a similar development in the history of the usage of the word "Guinea," which designated both a place and the coin minted from the gold taken from that place, and then came to designate "almost a new field of consciousness," as "all natural objects with commodity value appeared in a new, exotic light," and many of these new objects/commodities were described so that "the adjective 'Guinea' came to stand for any far-off land, not just black Africa" (88). Examples Pietz lists include: Guinea fowl, Guinea hens, Guinea corn, Guinea pigs (which are from South America), and – "the greatest and most profitable of contemporary abominations" – the Guinea ship (slave ship) and Guinea trader (88).

Although it should be obvious that Queequeg's religious practices have little in common with Catholicism or Islam, it is worth asking whether or not Yojo should be considered an idol or a fetish. After all, as Pietz has shown, the idol and the fetish presented very different problems for European thought. Is the Congo idol simply an image representing some transcendent divine power (a "false god"), or is Yojo's power personal for Queequeg, rooted somehow in the little statue's material properties and history? Ishmael describes Yojo as a "rather good sort of god" (60), but he does not explain what god the statue is supposed to represent. Rather, it seems that Yojo's religious value is not in what he might point to, but in the power – that of clairvoyance – that he possesses. Ishmael reports that Yojo himself has told Queequeg "two or three times over" (60) that Ishmael alone should decide which ship they will sail on. Although Queequeg prizes Yojo for his "excellence of [...] judgment and surprising forecast of things" (60), he also values the physical properties and proximity of the statue, keeping it on his head during his "Ramadan" (75), and holding it close when he believes he is dying (427). Thus, while the statue has a role in various rituals and is used to achieve certain ends, it does not represent a specific god. Ishmael may refer to Yojo as a Congo "idol," but it seems clear that the African prototype he has in mind for Queegueg's "black little god" is the *feitiço* rather than the *idolo*.

Yet, confronted with a fetishist (and a cannibal), Ishmael is surprisingly tolerant about Queequeg's religious beliefs. "I have no objection to any person's religion," Ishmael claims, "so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also" (76). Although he berates Queequeg's "Ramadan" as "bad for the health" and "useless for the soul," he is primarily concerned with the

dangers of fasting and "dyspepsia" rather than false religion (77). Because Ishmael can make a connection between "the rise and progress of the primitive religions" and the "various religions of the present time" (77), he always qualifies his occasional complaints about Queequeg's fetish worship by pointing out the similarities between fetishism and Christianity. Ishmael considers himself to be a "good Christian [...] born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (46), but he nevertheless is able to sympathize with Queequeg's religious beliefs by engaging in some free speculation on the nature of faith and worship:

> How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? thought I. Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth – pagans and all included – can possibly be jealous of an insignificant piece of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship? – to do the will of God? – *that* is worship. And what is the will of God? – to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me – *that* is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must unite with his in his; ergo, I must turn idolator. (46-7)

Using the Golden Rule to help guide his logic, Ishmael suggests that the only way to bring Queequeg to true religion is to practice false religion first and engage with him in "prop[ing] up the innocent little idol" (47). God would never be jealous of a piece of wood, and surely He would appreciate Ishmael's efforts to reach out to "pagans" who might not be aware of the merits of Presbyterianism. A little idolatry is a trifling matter: a

superstitious practice, to be sure, but ultimately a harmless undertaking, pointing to poor reasoning on the part of the idolator, perhaps, but surely not to something more sinister.

Given Ishmael's occasionally cynical, but for the most part insouciant, attitude toward fetishes and the kind of "idolatry" found in African natural religion, it seems unlikely that he would conceive of Ahab's relationship toward Moby Dick as a simple case of fetishism. Unlike the harmless black idol, the white whale produces a "nameless terror" (168) in Ishmael; even after Moby Dick is stripped of the "supernatural surmisings" of sailors – who speculate as to the whale's ubiquity and immortality – he is still able to "strike the imagination with unwonted power" (163). Whereas a fetish, stripped of its religious significance, is revealed as a mere material object, the white whale retains some terrifying power in his very bodily presence. Ishmael famously ascribes this terror to the "whiteness of the whale" (168), and it is during this chapter that he first explicitly compares Moby Dick to the white elephant.

Although Ahab's quest to hunt and destroy Moby Dick is based on his desire for revenge, which is clear to the crew of the *Pequod* and Ishmael's readers, Ishmael ultimately claims that to truly know Ahab's motivation "would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go" (167). Ishmael can sympathize with Queequeg and experiment with "turning idolator," but he cannot imagine himself in Ahab's position – he cannot sympathetically place himself, and his own interests, on the despot's throne. Just as earlier European writers struggled to understand the motivation of Siamese kings who pursued white elephants, Ishmael unsuccessfully attempts to fully comprehend Ahab's desire for the white whale. When Ahab does try to explain his desire for Moby Dick to Starbuck – who believes that the whale "simply smote [Ahab] from blindest instinct"

(145) – his answer, while enigmatic, does suggest that he believes there is "something divine," or perhaps sublime, in the white whale, though in a Westernized reversal or parody of Siamese culture he seeks to destroy rather than venerate this mysterious "something":

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (145)

If, for Ahab, Moby Dick is no more than a fetish, his desire would be for the mask alone – for the whale as a "visual object." If Moby Dick is a kind of idol, what lies beyond the mask would be clear to him, rather than an "unknown but still reasoning thing." If the white whale is a white elephant, however, Ahab's stated desire to "strike through the mask" and destroy this "inscrutable thing" seems like a re-writing of earlier texts about Siamese monarchs taking great risks to acquire whatever divine principle was lodged in *chang pheuak.* Although this "something divine" was perfectly clear to these kings, for Western writers it was every bit as unknowable as what lies beyond the "wall" of Moby Dick. That Ahab wants to destroy rather than venerate this unknown thing suggests that

despotism is a purely destructive practice, motivated by hate and capriciousness, rather than the political and religious incentives actual Southeast Asian monarchs had to acquire white elephants. For Starbuck, and Ishmael, Ahab's despotic desires and urges cannot be adequately explained, even by the despot himself.

Interestingly, both Ishmael and earlier writers like La Loubère focus their attempts to understand these despotic urges by concentrating on the whiteness of the animals in question. For La Loubère the whiteness of *chang pheuak* suggested that the Siamese were capable of recognizing the "natural" superiority of white flesh, even if their unsound minds were so preoccupied with elephants that they failed to adequately acknowledge the superiority of white people. Ishmael also notes that the "pre-eminence" of whiteness "applies to the human race" and therefore "gives the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe" (168). Although the whiteness of the whale "appalled" him, Ishmael begins his treatise on whiteness by noting some of the "natural objects" in which "whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own" (168). He notes that "various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal preeminence in this hue" including the "barbaric, grand old kings of Pegu placing the title 'Lord of the White Elephants' above all their other magniloquent ascriptions of domain" and "the modern kings of Siam unfurling the same snow-white quadruped in the royal standard" (168). The whiteness of the white elephant, then, is the same whiteness that justifies colonialism and racism, but is not cut from the same sublime and terrifying cloth as Moby Dick. Or, at least, this is what Ishmael wants to claim. After all, by the time the *Pequod* has sailed around the world, and is in the waters near Pegu ("Birmah") and Siam, Ishmael explicitly compares the white whale to "the

worshipped white-elephant in the coronation procession of the Siamese" (343). This suggests that as Ishmael nears the realm of the "Lord of the White Elephants," and as Ahab grows increasingly despotic in his quest, the "royal preeminence" of the white elephant begins to fade away, and the whiteness of the white elephant begins to take on a "nameless terror" of its own.

One possible reason for this change is the connection Ishmael makes between whiteness and atheism. In the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" Ishmael writes that "in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors" and that it is "for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink" (175). Thinking about whiteness leads Ishmael to contemplate a dialectic between nothingness and being ("a dumb blankness, full of meaning"; "a colorless, all-color") that he ultimately classifies as "atheism." There is a connection between Ishmael's account of whiteness and the Western idea of Buddhism as a form of atheism. For Hegel, as I have shown above, Buddhism is the worship of "*pure Nothing*," and the idea that Buddhism is the same thing as atheism is widespread in European writing about Southeast Asia. In Thai Buddhism, the relationship between the worship of "nothing" and the role of whiteness is concentrated in the figure of the white elephant. From a Western perspective, that is, the white elephant is little more than a "dumb blankness" that the Siamese are nevertheless convinced is "full of meaning." Moreover, the colour of the white elephant is related to doubts about its authenticity, as its white flesh deceives the Siamese into worshipping it. Ishmael also comments on the relationship between whiteness, empirical knowledge, and visual authenticity when he

notes that it is "the great principle of light," which "remains white or colorless in itself," that is responsible for the phenomenon of visibility (175). Considered this way, "all other earthly hues [...] are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without" (175). Whiteness, in the form of light, creates a world of appearances or "subtle deceits," in which the true value "inherent in substances" cannot be detected by visual inspection alone. Although some object may appear a certain way, this is merely an illusion "laid on from without." Only an enlightened mind can know whether a substance is a "dumb blankness" or actually "full of meaning," but an unsound mind is bound to be fooled by the "blank tinge" (175) of light. For Ishmael, this terrifying ambiguity, inherent in Moby Dick's white flesh, adds to the horror of the white whale. For La Loubère, and others, this tendency for the significance of whiteness to be misrecognized in certain material forms points to the difference between enlightened and unsound minds, between Western reason and Eastern religion. La Loubère, after all, was convinced that the Siamese could not be converted to Christianity because they could not get past their own idolatry, and their obsession with worshiping whiteness in all the wrong ways. Maintaining that the white elephant had a king's soul was tantamount to atheism because it was ultimately the worship of "*pure Nothing*." This prospect was unsettling to white European writers, and this anxiety about whiteness becoming dislodged from its "rightful" place in the natural order of things is among the nameless terrors that Ishmael hints at when he describes Moby Dick. For Ishmael, the white whale belongs alongside the white elephant, as he believes that "had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient world, he would have been deified by their child-magian

thoughts" (311). In other words, the same unsound minds that regarded the white elephant as a god would have been inclined to view the white whale in a similar light.

In my discussion of Ahab as an oriental despot I have already hinted at the ways in which – on a basic narrative level – Moby Dick can be read as a kind of white elephant.[71] Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod* give up on their productive and profitable capitalist mission in order to pursue, and ultimately possess, an object – the white whale – that inflicts both financial and physical destruction. This reading of Moby Dick as a white elephant is bolstered in both "The Whiteness of the Whale" and "The Grand Armada" when Ishmael explicitly compares the white whale to the white elephant. However, these are not the only instances in *Moby Dick* in which Ishmael places whales and elephants alongside each other.[72] Elephants are mentioned in no fewer than fourteen

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[71] The ways in which *Moby Dick*, as a text, can be read as a white elephant are also worth noting, even if only for the odd omissions regarding the significance of the term "white elephant" by the critics who have described Melville's novel in such a way. The deliberately provocative claim by Brigid Brophy, Michael Levey, and Charles Osborne that I have included as an epigraph to this chapter is presumably at least somewhat tongue-in-cheek, given that the entire purpose of their book is to list the major works of British and American literature that they feel need to be "demot[ed]" (viii), including more-or-less the entire canon of American literature (*Moby Dick*, yes, but also *The Scarlet Letter*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Sound and the Fury*). Other critics, though, comfortably describe *Moby Dick* as a white elephant without even acknowledging that white elephants are discussed in the text itself. For example, Julian Markel's "The *Moby Dick* White Elephant" has surprisingly little to say about either *Moby Dick* or white elephants, as its title refers to Markel's disapproval of the size and cost of Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle's 1988 critical edition of the novel. Although this is an interesting example of the usage of the phrase "white elephant," it does seem odd that Markel could use the term so casually, especially since Melville's novel itself hints at some of the cultural history behind the expression.

[72] The most important critical antecedent for any discussion of elephants in *Moby Dick* is Perry Miller's *The Raven and the Whale*. Miller makes the argument that Melville may have drawn on Cornelius Mathews' 1839 novel *Behemoth: A Legend of the Mound-Builders* for at least some of his descriptions of Moby Dick. *Behemoth* – which Miller notoriously dismisses as "about as ridiculous a fanfaronade as the age produced" (82) – tells the story of a group of pre-historic Americans (the mound builders) who are

of the novel's one-hundred and thirty-five chapters,[73] often in ways that contribute to the novel's engagement with the general theory of the white elephant. Although, as I have argued above, the whales the *Pequod* pursue in "The Grand Armada" can be read as white elephants, this reading is foreshadowed in the preceding chapter – "The Tail" – in which Ishmael makes a "chance comparison" between an elephant's trunk and the destructive power of the whale's tail. Ishmael grants that there "are not wanting some points of curious similitude" between elephants and whales, even if he qualifies this comparison by reminding his readers that "the mightiest elephant is but a terrier to Leviathan" and that any "comparison in the way of general bulk" is "preposterous" (339). Questions of bulk and magnitude of strength aside, Ishmael does see enough common ground between the trunk and the tail to make a comparison. There is a "delicacy" in the tail's "sense of touch" that is "only equalled by the daintiness of the elephant's trunk" (337). In the whale's tail, Ishmael claims, the "confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point," so that "[c]ould annihilation occur to matter, [the tail] were the thing to do it" (336). Even though the "most direful blow from an elephant's trunk were as the playful tap of a fan, compared with the measureless crush

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terrorized by a gigantic mastodon, and the passage Miller cites does bear some resemblance to Melville's language in *Moby Dick*. For the relevant discussion in Miller, see pages 82-3, and also see Stein (41-2). For more detailed discussions of *Behemoth* and Mathews' career, see Yannella and Stein. For an engaging account of the significance of the mastodon in antebellum America, see Semonin's *American Monster*.

[73] Some examples include Ishmael's description of icicles on the *Pequod*'s deck looking "like the white ivory tusks of some huge elephant" (92); Daggoo "making the low cabin framework to shake, as when an African elephant goes passenger in a ship" (134); a breaching whale creating "an enormous wallowing sound as of fifty elephants stirring in their litter" (202); and Ishmael, who claims that it is "[n]atural [...] to be somewhat incredulous concerning the populousness of the more enormous creatures of the globe," citing the historian Harto's story that "at one hunting the King of Siam took 4,000 elephants" and that "in those regions elephants are numerous as droves of cattle in the temperate climes" (412).

and crash of the sperm whale's ponderous flukes" (339), Ishmael nevertheless cannot seem to resist making this comparison, as elephants are mentioned at least six times in "The Tail" alone. Why does Ishmael keep returning to this comparison if he thinks that any substantive connection between the whale and the elephant is "preposterous"? Perhaps he is preparing his readers for the comparison he will make in the next chapter between the mightiest of whales, Moby Dick, and the "worshipped white-elephant." The white whale and the white elephant already share the same "colorless, all-color of atheism"; after reading "The Tail" Ishmael's readers will also be aware of the similarities between the tail and the elephant's trunk. When Ishmael explicitly compares the white whale to the white elephant, then, his readers have already been prepared to accept this analogy, which is then played out when the whales the *Pequod* pursue become white elephants themselves.

What does it mean to say that these whales are white elephants? We have seen some of the ways in which one whale – Moby Dick – is like a white elephant, but how is this true for whales in general in *Moby Dick*? It was the *Pequod*'s original mission to hunt whales and extract oil from them. In such a scheme, whales would be valuable natural resources transformed through labour into commodities, and would be completely in keeping with Peleg and Bildad's original mandate. When these whales cannot be captured, however, as in "The Grand Armada," they cause the crew of the *Pequod* to waste their time and resources, and thus the massive armada can be seen as costly, burdensome, and useless – in short, a white elephant. However, this is not the only instance in the novel where the possession of whales is represented as a threat to profitable enterprise. In the chapter "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" Ishmael explains that the

laws and customs that deal with the possession of property are often associated with economic loss and ruin. While the "white elephant" whales of "The Grand Armada" are closely – and deliberately – associated with Southeast Asia, this chapter reveal that the general theory of the white elephant can also be detected in Western institutions such as the common law. Thus, this chapter shows that even though the general theory of the white elephant is presented as one of the dangerous side effects of stagnant Asiatic society, it is in fact one of the inevitable results of capitalism and commodity-oriented life. No capitalist can avoid getting stuck with a white elephant or two; in fact, the stagnation of capital in the form of a *Ladenhüter* is simply the unfortunate result of the otherwise healthy circulation of capital – it is, in other words, the cost of doing business. Although this is borne out in "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," the fact that this chapter is presented by Ishmael as a gloss on the scenes of economic loss in the Southeast Asian seas he depicts in "The Grand Armada," suggests that such losses are understood primarily as an Asian problem, as a problem somehow foreign to capitalism, brought on by the wasteful worship of white elephants rather than the machinery of the modern marketplace.

After Flask has "killed and waifed" the sole whale the crew captures in "The Grand Armada," Ishmael explains that the "waif is a pennoned pole" which is "inserted upright into the floating body of a dead whale" in order to act as a "token of prior possession, should the boats of any other ship draw near" (350). Two chapters later, in "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," Ishmael states that this "allusion to waifs and waif-poles [...] necessitates some accounts of the laws and regulations of the whale fishery" (353-4). These laws, as Ishmael explains them, have rarely been legislated, but rather are based on

custom and common law tradition, with the one essential factor being that "possession is the whole of the law" (356). In terms of the right of possession, whales fall into either of two categories: Fast-Fish or Loose-Fish. A whale is a Fast-Fish when it is attached to a ship or a boat "by any medium at all controllable by the occupant or occupants" or when it "bears a waif, or any other recognized symbol of possession" (354). Conversely, a Loose-Fish is a whale that has not been claimed and is not "connected" to any vessel. In order to explain the legal distinction between Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish, Ishmael offers the following "curious case":

> [T]he plaintiffs set forth that after a hard chase of a whale in the Northern seas; and when indeed they (the plaintiffs) had succeeded in harpooning the fish; they were at last, through peril of their lives, obliged to forsake not only their lines, but the boat itself. Ultimately the defendants (the crew of another ship) came upon the whale, struck, killed, seized, and appropriated it before the very eyes of the plaintiffs. And when those defendants were remonstrated with, their captain snapped his fingers in the plaintiffs' teeth, and assured them that by way of doxology to the deed he had done, he would now retain their line, harpoons, and boat, which had remained attached to the whale at the time of seizure. (355)

In response to this seizure, the plaintiffs sued "for the recovery of the value of their whale, line, harpoons, and boat" (355). The decision of the judge who heard this case was that the plaintiffs should recover the boat – "since they had merely abandoned it to save their lives" (355) – but that the whale belonged to the defendants because it "was a Loose-Fish at the time of the final capture" (356). Moreover, the harpoons and line were

also ruled to be property of the defendants because "when the fish made off with them, it (the fish) acquired a property in those articles" and "hence anybody who afterwards took the fish had a right to them" (356).

Although, as Ishmael claims, a "common man" might object to this decision, it is well-rooted in both whaling custom and in the common law. In fact, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. cites three similar cases in his chapter on "Possession" in *The Common Law.* Although Holmes does not mention *Moby Dick* (unsurprising in a text from 1881), Ishmael's "curious case" is interesting for the ways in which it both converges with and diverges from the three examples Holmes provides. The first example, which is closest in spirit to Ishmael's, states that "In the Greenland whale-fishery, by the English custom, if the first striker lost his hold on the fish, and it was then killed by another, the first had no claim; but he had the whole if he kept fast to the whale until it was struck by the other, although it then broke from the first harpoon" (167-8). This scenario suggests the same logic of possession as Ishmael's case, although it does not suggest that a harpoon lost in a whale becomes that whale's property (it does not discount this possibility either). Holmes' second case, drawn from "custom in the Gallipagos," but also upheld in an English court, suggests that such a contested whale should be split between the two claimants. A third possibility Holmes mentions is a decision made by "Judge Lowell" that "gives the whale to the vessel whose iron first remains in it, provided claim be made before cutting in" (168). By citing three cases with such significantly different outcomes, Holmes is suggesting that although there is no *one* custom that logically establishes the possession of property, *some* such custom must always be in place or else there would be a "sort of warfare perpetually subsisting between the adventurers" (168). Given that these

various customs offer several possible solutions to his "curious case," it is interesting that Ishmael only mentions the first of Holmes' scenarios, in which the possession of property (the whale, by the plaintiffs) results in a pure loss (of both the whale itself and the plaintiffs' line and harpoons). Theodore Steinberg, in the Introduction to his book *Slide Mountain* (entitled "Fast Fish in America"), claims that the history of American property law often supports Ishmael's view that possession can be a dangerous undertaking: "[I]f one pushes property law to its limits," he writes, "what appears on the surface to be commonsensical is absurd, contradictory, at times even arrogant and destructive" (18). The aim of a capitalist enterprise is to turn an initial monetary investment into commodities (in this case whaling equipment and, ultimately, whales) that can in turn be exchanged for more money – i.e., profit. The scenario Ishmael describes, however, interrupts this scene of profitable exchange by suggesting that the plaintiff's initial investment cannot be recovered (let alone increased) because it becomes stuck in the commodity form. What was once a Fast-Fish very quickly becomes a Loose-Fish, swimming away with both the overhead expenses and the potential profit of those who were first fast to it.[74]

In *Capital: Volume One* Marx describes the transformation of money into commodities and subsequently into (more) money in his chapter on "The General Formula for Capital." While the "path C-M-C [Commodity-Money-Commodity]" has "consumption, the satisfaction of needs, in short use-value" as its "final goal," the "driving and motivating force" of the "path M-C-M [Money-Commodity-Money]" is

[74] Steinberg offers the following amusing take on this phenomenon: "Melville's satire on the lust for property can be pushed one step further. As Mark Twain might have said, Show me a fast fish and I'll show you a fish that is a lot looser than you think" (19).

"exchange-value" rather than utility (250). In C-M-C, money is converted into a commodity that the purchaser wants for its use-value, and therefore that money has "been spent once and for all" (249). The initial monetary investment in the general formula for capital (M-C-M), however, is released "only with the cunning intention of getting it back again" (249). Of course, the capitalist intends to "get back" more money than he originally invested – otherwise, as Marx points out, the formula M-C-M "appears to lack any content" and is "tautological" (250-1). "More money is finally withdrawn from circulation than was thrown in at the beginning," Marx writes, "The complete form of this process is therefore M-C-M′, where $M' = M + \Delta M$, i.e., the original sum advanced plus an increment. This increment or excess over the original value I call 'surplus value'" (251). Take for example the plaintiffs from Ishmael's curious case: before they set sail a certain amount of money (M) needed to be released in order to purchase supplies and – ultimately – capture whales. This was done with the "cunning intention" that the sum total of these commodities (C), i.e., the supplies and the whales, could ultimately be exchanged for the original sum advanced plus an increment (M′). Of course, the initial investment here might include some materials like harpoons or the ship itself that might not be sold right away, but as a capitalist enterprise the mission would be successful because the value represented by the initial investment would increase (and continue to increase with each subsequent productive voyage). Marx claims that in M-C-M′ "both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value [i.e., exchange-value] itself" (255). Value, then, "by virtue of being value [...] has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth live offspring, or at least lays golden eggs" (255). In capitalism, value is always "value in process" (256), which –

moving between money and commodity forms – constantly acquires surplus value and hence increases its own magnitude, increment by increment.[75]

However, in the scenario Ishmael describes, the formula M-C-M´ is interrupted because "value" becomes stuck in the commodity form (quite literally, actually, as the plaintiff's harpoons and lines become lodged in the whale that they are forced to release). The perils of releasing money by investing in commodities are dramatized here as these commodities are either lost, destroyed, or taken by others. After the judge's decision, the plaintiffs could not complete the circuit M-C-M´ because they would be unable to recover the original sum "plus an increment." Nor could they even hope for the "tautological" formula M-C-M since much of the capital they invested in supplies was lost at sea and to the defendants. Instead, the plaintiffs' initial investment can only be returned minus a decrement, if at all, representing a significant financial loss. In this case, money (M) is invested in commodities (C) that prove to be dangerous and unprofitable and can only be exchanged for a decreased amount of money (↓M). If the general formula for capital (M-C-M´) allows value to add value to itself and "lay golden eggs," then the general formula discernable in Ishmael's curious case (M-C-↓M) describes how value can become stuck in a white elephant. What, after all, is the term C in the formula M-C-

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[75] Marx famously turns to the Nicene Creed to explain this point:

> [I]n the circulation M-C-M, value suddenly presents itself as a self-moving substance which passes through a process of its own, and for which commodities and money are both mere forms. But there is more to come: instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it now enters into a private relationship with itself, as it were. It differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value, just as God the Father differentiates himself from God the Son, although both are of the same age and form, in fact one single person; for only by the surplus-value of £10 does the £100 originally advanced become capital, and as soon as this has happened, as soon as the son has been created and, through the son, the father, their difference vanishes again, and both become one, £110. (256)

↓M other than the *Ladenhüter* Marx will go on to describe in *Capital: Volume Two*? The general formula for capital is countered by the "general formula for white elephants," which runs against the grain of ever-accumulating value and profit, and proposes that value can become stuck in certain commodities so that it is diminished or even completely destroyed. Although, as I have argued elsewhere in this chapter, it has often been suggested that the "original" form of this kind of economic loss can be located in the wasteful worship of *chang pheuak*, Ishmael's account, read alongside Marx, makes it clear that the general formula for white elephants is deeply embedded in both Western law and capitalism. In other words, the general formula for white elephants is an unavoidable (if unpleasant) feature of key Western institutions such as the common law and merchant capitalism, however it is frequently explained away by a general theory (the general theory of the white elephant) that associates the ideas of stagnation and loss with Asiatic society, thereby creating an artificial distinction between the productive West and the archaic and underdeveloped East. This distinction is brought into sharp focus in "The Grand Armada" when the *Pequod*'s attempt to make capital out of the whales they encounter, which should result in the profitable formula M-C-M′, actually produces a financial loss, M-C-↓M, a fact that Ishmael foreshadows by suggesting that a "worshipped white-elephant" might be among the whales in the Armada. All of the *Pequod*'s losses are attributed to either such white elephants or to Ahab's despotism: no matter what it is always some aspect of Asiatic society that is to blame for the ship's failures. Capitalism itself is never really at fault for the losses it produces, despite the fact that – as Marx demonstrates – such losses are an inevitable part of the capitalist mode of production.

"A sort of watery white elephant": Ahab's Doubloon

In "Heads or Tails," the chapter following "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," Ishmael explains that it is still technically the law in England that "of all whales captured by anybody on the coast of that land, the King, as Honorary Grand Harpooner, must have the head, and the Queen be respectfully presented with the tail" (357). Ishmael is quick to remind his readers that this is a "division which, in the whale, is much like halving an apple; there is no intermediate remainder" (357). In other words, the entire whale is automatically the property of the sovereign. This is similar, of course, to the tradition in Siam which states that any white elephants discovered in the wild must be given to the king.[76] While Ishmael offers a detailed legal history explaining why the English sovereign has a right to these whales, no such explanation is offered in *Moby Dick* as to why the white elephant is "worshiped" or has a "certain royal preeminence." Clearly, the rights of some monarchs are easier to establish than those of others, especially so-called oriental despots. We can see this by turning from one scene of sovereign rights ("Heads or Tails") to another, roughly contemporaneous account: that of the British traveler Frederick Arthur Neale, from his 1852 *Narrative of a Residence in Siam.* In the passage that follows, Neale recounts for his readers his first impression of the quarters of one of Siam's royal white elephants:

> The floor was covered with mat-work, wrought *of pure chased gold*, each interwoven seam being about half an inch wide, and about the thickness of a half sovereign!!! If this was not *sin to the snakes*, as the Yankees say, I

[76] According to Ringis, it is still the case under Thai law that any white elephant discovered in Thailand "must be presented to the Crown" (176).

> don't know what was. The idea of a great unwieldy brute, like the elephant, trampling under foot and wearing out more gold in one year than many hard-working people gain in ten! [...] [I]t made our eyes water to see such infamous waste. (99-100)

A sovereign: A coin named after a king, indissociable from the British pound, and minted from the same "*pure chased gold*" as the white elephant's mat-work. Oriental decadence and despotism, in the form of a "great unwieldy brute," is figured here as a threat to both the British sovereign (i.e., the coin and the authority of the monarch whose title it bears) and the economy of Great Britain itself, as Neale laments that the white elephant "wears out" more gold "in one year than many hard-working people gain in ten!" In the West, the sovereign rewards hard work and productive labour with an honest salary, with a proper gold coin that bears the monarch's name and image. In Siam, however, gold is wasted on an unwieldy brute, used for no productive purpose by a despotic tyrant, who keeps the rest of the country stagnant under his royal thumb. In Neale's passage, the white elephant (who was understood to have a "king's soul") stands in for the Siamese king himself, dramatizing the arbitrary and destructive power of oriental despotism by literally destroying the one commodity – gold – that above all others signified productivity for the West. By comparing this gold mat-work to the coins the British would mint with it, Neale emphasizes the disastrous financial consequences of Asian stagnation for his readers – it is not mere gold that is "stuck" in the white elephant's quarters, but half-sovereigns, which – at ten shillings per coin – would represent thousands of wasted pounds.

I would like to conclude this chapter by examining a specific kind of white elephant – money – that is related to both the discourse of fetishism and the "stagnation of circulation" that characterizes Marx's *Ladenhüter*. I have already explained above how the emergence of the money form was necessary for the development of commodity fetishism. But there are also instances where money ceases to appear as the natural embodiment of wealth and its status as a commodity – as both a use-value and an exchange-value – is jeopardized by its material properties. In *Capital: Volume Two* Marx considers the need to replace money among the costs of circulation:

> [T]he wear and tear of money requires its steady replacement, or the transformation of more social labour – in the product form – into more gold and silver. These replacement costs are significant in nations where there is developed capitalism, because the part of wealth that is confined to the form of money is considerable. Gold and silver, as the money commodities, constitute for society costs of circulation that arise simply from the social form of production [...] This is a part of the social wealth which has to be sacrificed to the circulation process. (213-4)

In a capitalist society whose economy relies on metal-backed currency rather than fiat money, a considerable amount of social wealth must be "sacrificed" in order to ensure that there is a large enough money supply to permit the circulation of commodities.[77] If the "wear and tear" of the money commodity is not attended to the "very materiality that [money's] function requires will always threaten to disrupt that function and transform the scene of exchange into a scene of misrecognition" (Rowlinson 376). This scene of

[77] Fiat money also requires a sacrifice of social wealth, albeit a lesser one, as worn out bills must be withdrawn from circulation and new ones minted.

misrecognition, in which a commodity that is "in love with money" fails to recognize the tattered and worn appearance of its beloved, is the polar opposite of the dialectic Marx describes in *Capital: Volume One* when he asks what commodities would say if they could speak for themselves. Here money does not seem to be the natural embodiment of wealth; rather it seems like a kind of worthless debris. As the only commodity whose use is to be exchanged, the materiality of money occupies a paradoxical position. Since the exchange-value of a commodity is abstracted from its material properties, and since money is always being exchanged, the material characteristics of money – its use-value – should be irrelevant. But since the use-value of money is to be exchanged, and since this process gradually erodes the usefulness of money, its materiality remains, as Rowlinson puts it, "insistently present" (374). Money, which allows for the process of circulation, also contributes to the stagnation of circulation because its insistent materiality requires that society sacrifice some of its wealth in order to replace it.

If for Neale money is sacrificed to appease a despotic tyrant and an unwieldy brute, and for Marx the very process of circulation that money permits requires that some of it be sacrificed, then for Ahab money must be sacrificed in order to break free from the cinctures of capitalist productivity and allow him to pursue his destructive vendetta against Moby Dick. When Starbuck reminds Ahab that his vengeance "will not fetch [...] much in our Nantucket market," the captain responds by describing the world in a way that is not dissimilar from Neale's account of the white elephant's quarters: "If money's to be the measurer, man, and the accountants have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas, one to every three parts of an inch; then let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium *here*" (145). Ahab punctuates this

proclamation by striking his chest, which "rings," Stubb reports, "most vast, but hollow" (145) like a kind of cipher – or a false coin. If the world that Ahab excoriates, and that Starbuck insists is the world that the *Pequod* should be concerned with, is gilded with golden guineas, then it is perhaps unsurprising that Ahab himself would be struck from a different die. Like the half-sovereigns Neale imagines the white elephant trampling and wasting, the guinea was a golden coin that – in its time (it was replaced by the sovereign in 1816) – was recognized internationally as a measure of value and was therefore of great importance for mercantile trade. The coin was originally named, of course, after the region of Africa from which the gold with which it was minted was taken – the same gold that was regarded by West African people as "fetishes" was recast as a coin that signified the supposedly rational realm of modern economic exchange. Ahab's derision of a world gilded with these coins suggests that he knows that this world, Starbuck's world, is just as susceptible to fetishistic illusion as any "savage" land or people. In a world where money is "the measurer," people believe that money is a natural embodiment of wealth and that exchange value is lodged within it. Ahab, as a false coin, rings hollow because he is empty – neither inherent value nor the belief in inherent value are lodged within him. Rather, Ahab acknowledges that money has a kind of pragmatic efficacy that can help him achieve his tyrannical purpose. In other words, money is a kind of factish for Ahab, which cannot be reduced to either economic fact or fetishistic illusion, but can be employed to get the crew of the *Pequod* to do his despotic bidding.

After declaring his intention to hunt Moby Dick, Ahab speculates about how to obviate any mutinous sentiments that could be stirred up aboard the *Pequod*. In the chapter "Surmises" Ishmael describes this pragmatic side to Ahab's otherwise "hot fire of

[...] purpose" (189). "To accomplish his object," Ishmael writes, "Ahab must use tools; and of all tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order" (190). Although the crew members of the *Pequod* are tools that Ahab requires in order to pursue his revenge, he also requires other tools in order to assure the obedience of his men. One of these tools – or, given their pragmatic efficacy, factishes – that Ahab employs is money, or at least the promise or hope of acquiring money. Recognizing that although the crew presently support his plan to pursue Moby Dick they will eventually succumb to their own economic self-interest, Ahab proposes to keep the promise of cash afloat aboard the *Pequod*: "I will not strip these men, thought Ahab, of all hopes of cash – aye cash. They may scorn cash now; but let some months go by, and no perspective promise of it to them, and then this same quiescent cash all at once mutinying in them, this same cash would soon cashier Ahab" (191). Although the crew may be able to forget about money in the short term, they will ultimately remain motivated by the prospect of payment – a fact that Ishmael himself discloses in the novel's first chapter: "[T]here is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid," Ishmael says, "The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But *being paid*, – what will compare with it?" (4). Ahab knows that his quest will ultimately yield no cash for his crew, as he considers his vendetta to lie outside the purview of Starbuck's guinea-gilded world. Nevertheless, he is aware of the pragmatic value of using money as a factish to achieve his goal: "Ahab plainly saw that he must still in a good degree continue true to the natural, nominal purpose of the Pequod's voyage," Ishamel reports, "[He must] observe all customary usages; and not only that, but force himself to evince all his well known passionate interest in the general pursuit of his

profession" (191-2). This deception – and the promise of profits that attends it – is one of the "tools" Ahab uses to control his crew and satisfy the "hot fire of his purpose."

While the *Pequod*'s pursuit of regular whales, even after Ahab's declaration to destroy Moby Dick, is one of the ways in which the captain uses cash as a factish, the most notable instance of Ahab using money to enable and effectuate his personal mission is his promise of a golden doubloon to the crew member who first spots the white whale. When Ahab first presents the doubloon to the crew in "The Quarter-Deck" he tells them it is a "Spanish ounce of gold" worth "sixteen dollar[s]" (143). Ahab then nails the coin to the ship's main mast and promises "whosoever of ye raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce" (143). This produces an enthusiastic response from the crew (save Starbuck), and helps to convince them to go along with Ahab's plan to abandon the ship's original mission (which would be profitable for all) in order to hunt Moby Dick (which could yield $16 for only *one* member of the crew). Clearly, the gold coin fascinates the crew in a way that the promise of future capital gains does not. One of the reasons for this fascination is the suggestion that the doubloon represents a different world or worldview than the globe gilded with guineas that Ahab deplores. While the world of Starbuck's Nantucket market only prizes value that can be "counted down in dollars from the mint" (167), Ahab's coin points to a world in which the idiosyncratic and capricious whims of individuals are the true determinants of value. Indeed, the description of this coin in "The Doubloon" is one of the novel's most sustained investigations into the question of the origin of value and the role both religious belief and economic practice play in determining what something is worth. Clearly the doubloon's presence is not simply an economic "fact" for the crew of the *Pequod*, which

is to say that it does not promise the same easy profits that could be attained by sticking with the ship's original mission. Nor is it simply a fetish, a repository of misguided beliefs. Although each crew member reflects on his own desires in the presence of the coin, these desires are often quite pragmatic and are based on the value that is lodged within the doubloon's golden body. As neither fact nor fetish the coin is a factish for Ahab – but what happens to a factish when it falls into the hands of a despot? The coin is a tool that helps Ahab attain a certain kind of hegemony over his crew: he convinces them that his quest is in their best interests by dazzling them with an object that they believe has various values (some religious, some economic) lodged within it. The doubloon, then, becomes the white elephant to Ahab's oriental despot: a signifier of his sublime sovereign authority but also a symptom of his stagnant and destructive decadence. It is like a white elephant because the members of the *Pequod*'s crew are each willing to take a great risk in order to acquire it, seemingly ignoring the potential profit they could have received if they had stuck with the ship's original whaling mission. This is a point that Charles R. Lewis makes in his text *A Coincidence of Wants: The Novel and Neoclassical Economics*. "In the whaling world of *Moby Dick*," Lewis writes,

> the fetishized desire for both the doubloon *and* the white whale, which are both commodified and monetized, distracts the errant mercantilist ship from focusing on the real commodity production of whale oil (Starbuck's Nantucket market), hence its inability to realize economic wealth. Gold is, in this view, a sort of watery white elephant. (101)

Because it distracts the *Pequod* from its mission, and because it is valorized by a despotic captain, the doubloon is like a white elephant for the ship's crew. Pursuing a prize that,

ultimately, none of them could ever live to claim, the members of *Pequod*'s crew are mesmerized by the watery white elephant and each of them attempts, however vainly, to understand its significance and somehow take hold of its considerable value.

For Ahab the "round gold" of the doubloon "is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self" (385). Minted in Ecuador – "a country planted in the middle of the world, and beneath the great equator" – Ahab's "equatorial coin" is figured as a globe itself (385). Unlike the guinea-gilded world of mercantile trade and commerce, the world signified by Ahab's coin is neither rational nor driven by the desire for profit. While the world of trade can, like a balanced ledger, be "measure[d]" by "accountants" and easily understood, the doubloon is repeatedly described as a kind of enigmatic and confounding text – as Stubb puts it, there are several "rendering[s]" of only "one text" (388). The Ecuadorian coin is marked with the "usual cabalistics," Ishmael writes, "you saw the likeness of three Andes' summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock" (385). Ahab reads these "three peaks as proud as Lucifer" as representations of himself, proclaiming that "all are Ahab" in a manner that recalls his despotic claim that the entire crew of the *Pequod* are mere extensions of his will and body (385). Starbuck, on the other hand, sees the three peaks as a sign for the Trinity, and views it as "a beacon and a hope" (386). Flask has a decidedly baser interpretation of the coin, seeing in it economic rather than spiritual value, in the form of "nine hundred and sixty cigars [...] at two cents the cigar" (387). It is Stubb, however, who offers the most sophisticated reading of the coin. Although the second mate is quick to acknowledge the value of the coin as an economic fact, stating that he would "not look at it very long ere

spending it" (386), he is also drawn to its "cabalistic" markings and attempts to interpret the coin as a textual fetish. While Stubb eventually settles on an interpretation of the coin's markings, "read[ing] off" the coin's "zodiac" as "one round chapter [...] straight out of the book," his remarks when he first gathers his "almanack" to examine the doubloon suggest that a text's ambiguous signification can undermine the value of such writing, and – in the case of the coin – the material object that bears these uncertain inscriptions. Stubb's almanack ultimately provides him with a satisfying reading of the doubloon, but this interpretation is not immediately obvious to him, causing him to lament both the almancak and the epistemological dangers of texts in general: "Book! you lie there," Stubb commands, "the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts" (386). For Stubb, texts are facts, and it is up to the reader to provide his or her own fetishistic interpretation. Like the African's fetish, this interpretation is necessarily related to the material properties of the text ("bare words and facts"), but is nevertheless caused by the imaginative work ("supply[ing] the thoughts") of the interpreter. The fact that this model of interpretation could be considered arbitrary or could be subject to misplaced judgment does not seem to bother Stubb, just as Ishmael is not particularly bothered by Queequeg's fetishistic devotion to Yojo. In the world of *Moby Dick* – for both readers of the novel and within the novel's diegesis itself – multiple and sometimes arbitrary interpretations are actively encouraged, as any reader should be able to locate some fetishized significance within the text's bare words and facts, just as Stubb (and everyone else aboard the *Pequod*) eventually settles on his own idiosyncratic reading of the doubloon.

What is decidedly less comfortable for both Stubb and Ishmael is the possibility that the coin cannot be interpreted by splitting it into fact and fetish, that its significance is not reducible to either its material properties or its metaphysical meaning, and that its value is neither as a coin nor a text but as a factish that – in Ahab's hands – has become a dangerous white elephant. A white elephant, after all, is *said* to have something valuable lodged inside of it, but this should be regarded as trick designed to fool "unsound minds" and to approbate the destructive and despotic indulgences of an oriental tyrant. While the value of the fetish, for the fetishist, is derived from a kind of misunderstanding, the value of the white elephant has always been regarded as a lie and a fraud, as the elephant's spectacular white appearance causes both the despot and the despot's subjects to believe that something valuable is lodged inside it and then to trap further resources "in" it by providing it with expensive lodgings and adornments. The possibility that a text with as much exchange value lodged in it as the doubloon cannot be interpreted is disquieting for Stubb: "Signs and wonders, eh?" he says, "Pity if there's nothing wonderful in signs, and significant in wonders!" (386). This statement encapsulates the consensus aboard the *Pequod* that if the coin can have significance as both a material sign (a $16 coin) and a "wonder" (a fetishistic interpretation) then it can be recuperated within the world of Starbuck's Nantucket market (think, for example, of Flask's interpretation of the coin). But, if this distinction between fact and fetish cannot be maintained, then the doubloon ominously points toward Ahab's private world, in which both the coin and the white whale are associated with the purely destructive and wasteful idea of the white elephant. This is an anxiety expressed by Ishmael toward the beginning of the chapter when he notes that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth,

and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (384). A few paragraphs later Ahab likens the "round world" to the "round coin," and if either lacks inherent value then they are empty ciphers that – like Ahab himself – will ring hollow like a false coin. If the doubloon – which in Ahab's reading, is not so much significant as merely a reflection of the "vast, but hollow" captain himself – is a false coin, then it truly has no value for the *Pequod*'s crew, and has merely deceived them into doing Ahab's despotic bidding. While Ahab's interpretation of the coin supports this reading, we can obtain an even greater sense that the doubloon is a white elephant in the chapter's final interpretation of the gold piece, this time offered by the mad cabin boy, Pip. For Pip, the doubloon is "the ship's navel" and all the crew are "on fire to unscrew it," although they may not have considered the "consequence" of this action (389). The implication here is that unscrewing the ship's navel will cause the *Pequod* to fall apart, a joke that both proves prophetic and underscores the identification of the doubloon with Ahab's destructive mission. Pip predicts that the exchange value lodged in the coin, rather than eventually being freed to circulate within the productive economy, will instead become inaccessibly lodged in the sea: "Oh, the gold! the precious, precious gold! – the green miser'll hoard ye soon" (389)! Since the doubloon will eventually become lost in the sea it is understandable that Pip might view the ocean as a miser out to hoard treasure – in this way, the sea stands for Ahab, who offers the coin only to eventually keep it himself (483). Ahab, who sees himself in the doubloon, offers it only to persuade his crew to do his bidding. When he spots Moby Dick he proudly claims that "the doubloon is [his]" and that "fate reserved the doubloon for [him]" (483), miserly pocketing instead of spending his own reward. Of course, as Marx points out, the capitalist and the miser share a similar

motivation, and so while Ahab's quest may be represented as the backward actions of a tyrannical sovereign, the kind of financial destruction that his mission engenders is also an inevitable side effect of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism produces losses, just like oriental despotism does, but capitalism explains away these losses through a rhetorical strategy that aligns economic stagnation with Asiatic society – in short, through the general theory of the white elephant. Would the *Pequod* have been destroyed without Ahab's monomaniacal obsession? Perhaps not, but there is no guarantee that its voyage would have been profitable or successful if the crew had followed Starbuck's lead instead. By imagining the coin lodged in the sea, however, Pip associates the *Pequod*'s fate with the idea of Asiatic stagnation – the sea in question is the Pacific ocean, long associated with the idea of Asia as a slumbering power, and described by Ishmael, on the novel's last page, as a "great shroud" that – ever unchanging – "rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (508). In this way both the coin and the sea can be read as watery white elephants, and it seems reasonable to extend this appellation to Moby Dick as well. After all, in "The Grand Armada" Ishmael has already imagined the two white animals swimming alongside each other, sharing an intimate view of the *Pequod*'s spectacular economic failure in the waters near Burma. Moreover, as the object of Ahab's despotic quest, the white whale is like a white elephant because no matter how much money, how many resources, how much time, or how many lives Ahab wastes trying to acquire him the true "value" of Moby Dick never becomes any clearer to either the mad captain or the novel's readers. Just as the value of *chang pheuak* was always lost of Western writers who tried to describe them, the value of Moby Dick – what the white whale *means* – is always obscured by the destruction, loss, and waste that the great "Leviathan" causes.

Ahab's inability to discover this value lodged within Moby Dick is, perhaps more than anything else, the primary motivation for his "fiery hunt" (175) of the white whale: "I see in him outrageous strength," Ahab tells Starbuck, "with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (145). It is the inscrutability of Moby Dick that fuels Ahab's hatred of the white whale – he cannot *know* the facts about the whale, nor can the whale be for him a source of fetishistic belief. Rather, the whale is an event, a series of actions, and the cause of a series of Ahab's actions, the end result of which is the purely destructive loss of the *Pequod*, its crew, and the profits that it was supposed to carry back to the Nantucket market. The white elephant shares this inscrutability with Moby Dick: although white elephants served as factishes for Siam's kings, they could not simply be described as facts or fetishes by Western writers. The problem with white elephants isn't that they should be used for something else (like fetishes which should be used as commodities) or that they should be explained away by some more rational belief. Rather, the problem with white elephants is that one has to "make do" with them (Latour's *fait-faire*). One has to accept that they are "stuck" with them. Although this makes perfect sense for a Siamese monarch, it is an inscrutable point of difference for Western writers. It was inconceivable for such writers why anyone would make do by wasting so much wealth on a mere animal, just as it was inconceivable for the capitalists Marx wrote about to make do with the fact that they would get stuck with a *Ladenhüter* or two in their storerooms. Yes, there were reasons why these white elephants existed – be it the *realpolitik* of Southeast Asia or the necessary costs of capitalist circulation – but rather than accepting these reasons, the general theory of the

white elephant has for centuries provided a satisfactory myth about stagnation and despotism in Asian countries that serves to conceal the blind spots in the supposedly enlightened Western interpretations of both natural religion and political economy. Could the fate of the *Pequod* been different if Ahab had learned to "make do" with the existence of Moby Dick? Answering this would be to dive deeper than we (or Ishmael) can go. What we can know, is that by confronting the inscrutability of the white whale, Ahab sent his ship on a quest which could only result in its absolute destruction, and that the slow stagnant sea which eventually swallowed the *Pequod* and all its hopes of profit, the same sea near Southeast Asia that carried Jeremias Van Vliet and Simon de la Loubère to the court of the king of Siam, stands for an idea of Asia – a stagnant, wasteful, destructive Asia – that since the seventeenth-century has ineluctably been marked by the "dumb blankness, full of meaning" of the "worshiped white-elephant."

CHAPTER FOUR

"This Alarming Generosity": White Elephants and the Logic of the Gift

In Thailand, the prevailing custom of offering delicacies such as bananas or sugar-cane to passing elephants (and they do pass, frequently) usually satisfies this mysterious human urge. The elephant grasps the offering (and thankfully not the hand), and coils it upward into his mouth. But woe betide him who changes his mind about yielding the proffered delicacy. In extreme cases, this could, and has led to rage in the elephant, picking up the teaser, and dashing him to the ground. Most usually, however, it results in a friendly tug of war, with the elephant always winning. The Thai proverb 'Ooy khaw paak chang' (The sugar-cane is already in the elephant's mouth) warns such a giver, both literally and metaphorically, that once something has been given away, it is impossible to retrieve it.

White elephants (with few exceptions) are invariably born and captured in the jungle. Thus they come from utmost simplicity to utmost regal stature and 'wealth' and all that this implies. The proverb 'Chang pheuak kert nai paa' wisely warns men who have acquired wealth and influence not to forget their roots as 'even the white elephant was born in the jungle'.

Rita Ringis, *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality*

[H]is majesty of Siam proposed to send to us not one, but many pairs of elephants, and those not stuffed, but dreadfully alive. Two motives seem to have prompted him to this alarming generosity.

George B. Bacon, *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, As It Was and Is*

Introduction

Under the heading "White Elephants," an article in the May 28 1873 edition of the *New York Times* describes the criminal case of a Mr. George Francis Train who had been brought to trial for "issuing obscene publications" (4). The anonymous author of the article complains that the court has taken too long in determining the sanity of the defendant and that Train and his trial have become a significant burden on the judiciary

system: "For months the Courts have been trying to get rid of this dreadful person, but in vain [...] In the meantime he is in the public hands, a white elephant of prodigious expensiveness in judicial time, patience and dignity" (4). In nineteenth-century America, the term "white elephant" was a common expression for a burdensome possession that one could become stuck with. Although certain white elephants – like Mr. Train – were not necessarily financial burdens, the expression always carried connotations of economic risk and loss because of a popular anecdote which purported to tell the real story behind the metaphor. The author of the *New York Times* piece opens his article with a detailed version of this story:

> When a Siamese despot takes a grudge against one of his poorer subjects, and determines on his ruin, he does not cut off the delinquent's head and confiscate his property. On the contrary, he makes him a present – he sends him the handsomest and healthiest white elephant he can find. The luckless recipient knows at once that his fate is sealed. He knows that the beast will eat him out of house and home without the possibility, on his part, of resistance. He cannot sell or give away the fatal gift, for no one would accept it, and the attempt to get rid of it even would be direct treason and sacrilege. He sits down with Oriental resignation to submit to the inevitable, and the white elephant devours his substance. (4)

This story of the white elephant as a "fatal gift" was often cited in the nineteenth century as an historical fact; indeed, its explanatory force is still invoked in contemporary

discussions about what the phrase "white elephant" means.[78] Although, tellingly, there is no original source for this anecdote, it does not appear before the mid-1850s and the height of renewed British and American trade interests with Siam, culminating with the 1855 Bowring treaty between Siam and the United Kingdom and Siam's 1856 treaty with the United States. In the vast series of travelogues written by Europeans and Americans in the wake of these treaties, there are numerous passages about white elephants and the Siamese reverence for these animals. None of these texts, however, make the claim that white elephants were ever given as gifts. According to Thai historian Rita Ringis, the Anglo-American conception of the white elephant as a fatal gift has no basis in Thai

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[78] See, for example, the 1989 2nd edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for "white elephant," which reads:

> *white elephant*. a. A rare albino variety of elephant which is highly venerated in some Asian countries. b. *fig*. A burdensome or costly possession (from the story that the kings of Siam were accustomed to make a present of one of these animals to courtiers who had rendered themselves obnoxious, in order to ruin the recipient by the cost of its maintenance). Also, an object, scheme, etc., considered to be without use or value.

As is always the case with such explanations, no source for this story is offered. Similarly, in *The Fate of the Elephant*, Douglas H. Chadwick – before dismissing a white elephant currently held at the Royal Palace in Bangkok as "a captured god but now an obsolete one [...] [a]nd very likely insane" (352-3) – simply credits "the stories" as a source for a version of the same anecdote that explains "how the term *white elephant* came to stand for something large and costly that you find yourself stuck with" (347). Literary critics are not immune to making the same mistake either, which often happens whenever they attempt to explain what a particular author means when they describe something as a metaphorical white elephant. No less distinguished a scholar than Harold Bloom has been fooled by this false anecdote, as evidenced by his discussion of Ernest Hemingway's famous short story "Hills Like White Elephants": "White elephants, proverbial Siamese royal gifts to courtiers who would be ruined by the expense of their upkeep, become a larger metaphor for unwanted babies, and even more for erotic relationships too spiritually costly when a man is inadequate" (47). In fairness to Bloom, however, it is entirely possible that Hemingway himself had this story in mind when he was writing "Hills Like White Elephants"; at the very least, it seems likely that he was drawing on some account of the white elephant as a valueless and burdensome object, although – as we have seen – this need not necessarily make recourse to the "logic of the gift."

history: "[N]o Siamese monarch ever considered white elephants 'burdensome' nor gave them away, for according to ancient tradition, possession of one or many of these symbolized a king's virtue or *barami*." (96). Instead of being a burden that would ruin its owner, a white elephant actually served the opposite function: it was considered a sign of virtue, a meritorious possession that lent authority and legitimacy to a monarch's reign. "[W]hile in the West a white elephant was perceived as just a highly indulged mere elephant or pale pachyderm," Ringis writes, "in realms that differed from those of the West, specifically, in Siam, the possession of a white elephant was perceived as a sacred sign of celestial approval of the earthly state and its ruler" (101).

Although there is no historical basis for the story of the white elephant as a fatal gift, the fact that it gained cultural currency during a period of renewed interest in Anglo-American economic relations with Siam suggests that the origin of the story might be located in certain Western prejudices about gift exchange rather than in any kind of Siamese cultural practice. That the idea of a fatal gift is well-rooted in European literary, cultural, and legal practices has been long-noted by anthropologists and linguists. In a famous essay from *Problems in General Linguistics*, Emile Benveniste noted that the ancient Indo-European root of the verb "to give" signified both "giving" and "taking." Although each modern Indo-European language "made one of these acceptations prevail at the expense of the other in order to construct the antithetical and distinct expressions for 'giving' and 'taking'," the root itself "was marked by a curious semantic ambivalence" wherein the notions of giving and taking "were organically linked by their polarity" (272), which suggests that – etymologically – a gift could signify a kind of loss as well as a gain. Marcel Mauss, in *The Gift* (*Essai sur le don*), also turns to etymology in

his discussion of "the danger of the thing given or handed on" in ancient Germanic languages and law, noting "the double meaning of the word *Gift* in all these languages – on the one hand, a gift, on the other, poison" (62-3). While "[t]his theme of the fatal gift" is "fundamental in Germanic folklore" (63), Mauss' overall argument is broadly comparative, noting instances of fatal gift giving across an array of cultures. For Mauss, the study of gifts in "so-called primitive societies" or "those that have immediately preceded our own," reveals that gift giving is in fact an archaic form of economic exchange that assures the circulation of wealth without "money proper" (3-4). The "satisfactory basic explanation for this form of contract" is the "three obligations" that Mauss identifies throughout the archaic societies he examines: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate (13). These three obligations assure that gifts will continue to be given and that wealth will circulate without the aid of money. Perhaps more controversially, Mauss claims that this "general theory of obligation" (12) is "one of the human foundations on which our societies are built" and that it "still function[s] in our own societies, in unchanging fashion and, so to speak, hidden, below the surface" (4). Despite any appearances to the contrary, the circulation of wealth in Western societies is simply a manifestation of these three "hidden" obligations. To give a gift, then, is never a simple act of unmotivated generosity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, in an essay Mauss himself describes as "curious" (65), "It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. [...] We do not quite forgive a giver. [...] Some violence, I think, is done, some degradation borne, when I rejoice or grieve at a gift" (26). A gift produces a sense of debt and obligation for its recipient, and it is for this reason that gifts

are associated – etymologically and otherwise – with the "fatal" concepts of poison and loss.

In this chapter I will examine the ways in which "the logic of the gift" (Schrift 19) was introduced into the Anglo-American discourse on white elephants in the mid-nineteenth century. Although the "general theory of the white elephant" I describe in Chapters Two and Three is something of a pan-European phenomenon (with sources in – at least – English, French, Dutch, and German), the idea of the white elephant as a fatal gift seems to be largely confined to the English language. British and American texts, in particular, contribute to this idea, which is – as I will argue below – a direct result of those countries' mid-century experiences at the court of King Mongkut (Rama IV) in Bangkok. Nineteenth-century American writing on Siam, gifts, and white elephants is especially illuminating, because the term "white elephant" seems to have taken on a host of colloquial significances that are not equally present in the British literary and cultural texts of the time. Accordingly, although I will consider both British and American writing in this chapter, American texts will be given a more prominent place in my analysis. This analysis will proceed along two lines of inquiry, both of which will contribute to an overall understanding of the white elephant's apocryphal reputation as a fatal gift. First I will provide an overview of some of the key texts in both anthropology and critical theory that address the question of the gift. Beginning with Mauss' *The Gift*, I will pay particular attention to the idea of the fatal gift in these texts – offering an analysis of what Mauss terms "*total services of an agonistic type*" (7) and the cultural practice of "potlatch." Alongside Mauss, I will trace the question of the fatal gift in texts by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, and Christopher Bracken. After this reading of

the literature on the logic of the gift, I will examine the ways in which this logic was presented in Anglo-American writing about Siam, arguing that the story of the white elephant as a fatal gift originated in the cross-cultural spaces established by the British and American diplomatic presence in Bangkok in the 1850s. Although there was an earlier tradition (which I will examine) of describing white elephants in the context of gift giving in both European and Siamese texts before the mid-nineteenth century, the story from the *New York Times* – which has become the canonical "explanation" for why the term "white elephant" refers to a useless, costly, burdensome, and unsaleable object – is a distinctly nineteenth-century development. By reading British and American texts published in the decades that followed the Bowring treaty (1855) and the Harris treaty (1856) I will argue that the Siamese practice of diplomatic gift-giving and the veneration of white elephants were identified as the primary points of difference between Siam and its Western partners. In texts by Americans in particular, this insistence on the gift and the white elephant as the central problems of Siamese society is frequently brought to the foreground, as these writers found themselves ambivalently attracted to this Southeast Asian country that reminded them uneasily of home: as the only nation in the region to never be colonized, despite being wedged between two major colonial powers (the British in Burma and French Indochina), Siam could not help but recall America's own revolutionary origins. Accordingly, American writing on Siam fluctuates between passages praising the modern, American aspects of the country and passages that temper this praise with bitter criticisms of the stagnant and archaic aspects of Siamese life. This ambivalent desire for what Homi Bhabha describes as "*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (122) produced as one of its effects a discourse about

white elephants that established them as a point of absolute difference between the East and the West. Building upon the centrality of the general theory of the white elephant for Western ideas about materiality and value, this ambivalent discourse about Siam and Siamese diplomacy firmly established the idea of the white elephant as a fatal gift in the literature and culture of nineteenth-century America.

The Gift That Keeps On Living: White Elephants, Marcel Mauss, and the Fatal Gift

In *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality* Rita Ringis cites two Thai proverbs – included here as epigraphs to this chapter – that are useful for understanding the theory of the gift as developed by Marcel Mauss. The first proverb – "Ooy khaw paak chang" or "The sugar-cane is already in the elephant's mouth" (45) – suggests that once a gift has been given away it is irretrievable, and that any attempt to get it back will bring serious misfortune to the original giver. Once a gift has been given it can only be "returned" if the gift's recipient chooses to reciprocate, but even in this case the object that is returned will be different from the first gift. The second proverb, "Chang pheuak kert nai paa," which means "even the white elephant was born in the jungle" (108), presents an account of wealth that differs from Marx's account of capital as impersonal,[79] and instead argues that the economic is deeply connected to the personal, the familial, and the social. Wealth remembers where it came from, and where it goes is determined by a range of social phenomena that – on first glance – seem to be unrelated to economic considerations. It is, as we shall see in Mauss' discussion of *hau*, "[i]nvested with life"

[79] Perhaps the best example of this is Marx's allusion to Vespasian's reply "*pecunia non olet*" to his son Titus' complaint about the Emperor collecting money through his taxation of Rome's public lavatories (*Capital: Volume One* 205).

(13). Although neither of these proverbs seems to be directly related to the story of the white elephant as a fatal gift, they do establish a view of wealth that is in many ways compatible with Mauss' description of gift exchange in *The Gift*. Although Mauss does not discuss Siam specifically in his text, he suggests that the archaic forms of exchange he witnesses in Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest (British Columbia and Alaska), and that he describes in Roman, Ancient Germanic, and Hindu law, all point toward certain universal truths about the practice of gift exchange, and that the logic of the gift underwrites the treatment of wealth even in contemporary capitalist society.

I have already discussed, albeit briefly, Mauss' claim that three obligations – to give, to receive, and to reciprocate – structure the practice of gift exchange, and that this system of obligation is foundational for human society. I now want to explain how Mauss arrives at this claim, through a reading of his characterization of the gift as part of a "*system of total services*" (5-6), his description of the Maori word *hau*, and his discussion of potlatch in the American Northwest. The phrase "*system of total services*" suggests for Mauss that "it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other" (5). Although the logic of the gift, and the three obligations that support this logic, are part of this system, they are not its only component; indeed the system is "total" because the "contracting parties" exchange "not solely property and wealth, moveable and immovable goods, and things economically useful" (5). Rather, "such exchanges are acts of politeness," Mauss writes, "banquets, rituals, military service, women, children, dances, festivals and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract" (5). The system of total services, then, is a "general

and enduring" social contract, in which economic exchange represents only one component of a larger structure that also houses religious, political, military, familial, and social obligations, among others. The structuralist implications of this argument are not lost on one of Mauss' most famous commentators, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, in his *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, writes that "[w]hat happened in [*The Gift*], for the first time in the history of ethnological thinking, was that an effort was made to transcend empirical observation and to reach deeper realities. For the first time, the social ceases to belong to the domain of pure quality [...] and becomes a system" (38). By reading the social as a system, Mauss approaches the "deeper realities" that can supposedly be grasped by structuralist analysis. For Lévi-Strauss, this approach differentiates Mauss from his contemporaries, such as Bronisław Malinowski, who considers social phenomena only in their particularity: "Whereas Mauss had in mind *constant relation* between phenomena, which would be the site of their explanation, Malinowski merely wonders *what they are useful for*, to seek a justification for them" (43). Since Mauss recognizes that the "site of explanation" for social phenomena lies not in the phenomena themselves but rather in the relation between them, Lévi-Strauss is able to make the bold claim that "[t]he *Essai sur le don* therefore inaugurates a new era for the social sciences, just as phonology did for linguistics" (41). Of course, Mauss was not necessarily aware that he was inaugurating anything, and – for Lévi-Strauss – his discoveries stop short of true structuralist analysis. Just as Saussure's thought required later thinkers like Jakobson and Lacan to adapt his ideas for the structuralist project, Lévi-Strauss seems to think that Mauss requires his own intervention and interpretation.

Indeed, however close to structuralism it might be, Mauss' thought "remained," as Lévi-Strauss puts it, "at the outline stage" (41).

Lévi-Strauss begins the third section of his *Introduction* by posing a question: "Why did Mauss halt at the edge of those immense possibilities [i.e., of structuralism], like Moses conducting his people all the way to a promised land whose splendour he would never behold" (45)? Clearly casting himself as Joshua to Mauss' Moses, Lévi-Strauss offers in his *Introduction* not simply a primer on Mauss' works, but a corrective polemic on the mistakes Mauss made and the ways in which his proto-structuralism can be redeemed by Lévi-Strauss' own more rigorous approach to anthropology. Beginning with the assumption that there "must be some crucial move, somewhere, that Mauss missed out" (45), Lévi-Strauss focuses his critique on Mauss' treatment of the phenomenon of exchange and his use of the Maori term "*hau*." As Lévi-Strauss notes, "exchange is not something [Mauss] can perceive on the level of facts. Empirical observation finds not exchange, but only, as Mauss himself says, 'three obligations: giving, receiving, returning'" (46). So how does Mauss explain exchange in relation to these three obligations? For Lévi-Strauss the answer is *hau*. Mauss introduces *hau* early in the first chapter of *The Gift* under the heading "The Spirit of the Thing Given (Maori)" (10). Mauss presents *hau* as "the key to the problem" of exchange, and explains that it was revealed "completely by chance" to Eldon Best by "one of [his] best Maori informants," Tamati Ranaipiri (11). What follows is Mauss version of Ranaipiri's account:

> I will speak to you about the *hau*... The *hau* is not the wind that blows – not at all. Let us suppose that you possess a certain article (*taonga*) and

> that you give me this article. You give it me without setting a price on it. We strike no bargain about it. Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decided to give me something as payment in return (*utu*). He makes a present to me of something (*taonga*). Now, this *taonga* that he gives me is the spirit (*hau*) of the *taonga* that I had received from you and that I had given to *him*. The *taonga* that I received for these *taonga* (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (*tika*) on my part to keep these *taonga* for myself, whether they were desirable (*rawe*) or undesirable (*kino*). I must give them to you because they are a *hau* of the *taonga* you gave me. If I kept this other *taonga* for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the *hau*, the *hau* of personal property, the *hau* of the *taonga*, the *hau* of the forest. *Kati ena* (But enough on this subject). (11)

For Mauss the key lesson in this story is that "in Maori law, the legal tie, a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul, is of the soul. Hence it follows that to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself" (12). Because things that are given retain the spirit of the person who gave them away, this spirit wants to return home to this original giver, even though it will return in the form of a different object (the second *taonga*). Since it would be "dangerous and mortal" to retain something that is, essentially, a piece of another person's soul, this "chain of users" is caught up in a "general theory of obligation" that assures the constant circulation of wealth even though these "users" are not necessarily aware of their role in this "chain" (for example, in Ranaipiri's story, the third person who

gives the second *taonga* back to the second person is unaware that the *taonga* he himself received was originally given to the second person by the first giver) (12). *Hau*, then, explains for Mauss why the "three obligations" command the phenomenon of exchange, as part of a system of total services, in which the circulation of spirit (and the need for spirit to ultimately return to its rightful place) plays a key role. In making this argument, Mauss is implicitly claiming that economics and natural religion are basically the same thing, in that both emerge from a dialectic between matter and spirit. The belief that the exchange-value of economic matter (commodities) is determined by something like spirit (instead of human labour) was ridiculed by Marx as a kind of "fetishism."[80] And this is essentially the same charge that Lévi-Strauss levels against Mauss. According to Lévi-Strauss, Mauss' search for a "property" (46) that would explain the empirical facts (the three obligations) necessarily leads to a "dilemma" that could only have been resolved if he had "perceive[d] that the primary, fundamental phenomenon is exchange itself, which gets split up into discrete operations in social life" (47). Treating exchange itself as the "fundamental phenomenon" would necessarily lead to a structuralist analysis since exchange cannot be detected "on the level of facts" (46) and only appears in seemingly discrete operations. Mauss, on the other hand, begins on the level of facts and attempts to "reconstruct a whole out of parts," and, as Lévi-Strauss argues, "as that is manifestly not possible, he has to add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of squaring his account. This quantity is *hau*" (47). What *hau* does, according to Lévi-Strauss, is provide an explanation for the process of exchange without really explaining how it works. It is simply a theory that Mauss had the misfortune to take too seriously,

[80] I discuss Marx's writings on commodity fetishism in some detail in Chapter Three.

and although Lévi-Strauss applauds Mauss for being open-minded enough to accept an indigenous theory at face value, he nevertheless is quick to remind his readers that "indigenous or Western, theory is only ever a theory" (48). Theory, in other words, is valueless unless it can be verified by scientific (i.e., structuralist) investigation and evidence. Because Mauss does not do this, at least not to Lévi-Strauss' liking, Lévi-Strauss finds himself compelled to ask if Mauss' interest in *hau* is a kind of "mystification, an effect quite often produced in the minds of ethnographers by indigenous people?" (47). In other words, does Mauss fetishize *hau*? Does he make of it a false idol, which explains the phenomenon of exchange by simply making recourse to a "mystifying" tale told to him by one group of indigenous people? Although, for Lévi-Strauss, Mauss may have been a visionary like Moses, in this analysis does he not seem more like the Israelites Moses left behind when he climbed Sinai, who fashioned a golden calf and foolishly worshiped its false promise? By pursuing this line of argument about Mauss' mystification, Lévi-Strauss is emphasizing his own belief in the importance of distinguishing between facts (which can be understood within a structuralist framework) and fetishes (theories which merely present the illusion of a satisfactory explanation). Because in *The Gift* Mauss never takes the time to step back from his material and offer a thesis about it, as Lévi-Strauss clearly wishes he would, he still uses concepts such as *hau* as factishes – as terms that are pragmatically useful for exploring the material he wants to discuss, but which would dissolve when subjected to a more rigorous structuralist analysis that would demand Mauss draw a line between Western science and primitive superstitions.

By explaining gift exchange in terms of *hau* and the three obligations, Mauss presents two problems that are useful for understanding the significance of the *New York Times*' story about the white elephant as a fatal gift. The first such problem is one that Mauss himself foregrounds in his Introduction when he argues that gift exchange is an archaic form of modern economic practice. Indeed, when one reads the story of the *hau* in his text, it is difficult not to perceive it as an explanation of how credit is extended and debt enforced in Maori culture. This begs the question: what exactly is the difference between gift and economic exchange? If gift exchange is merely a debt economy passing under an assumed name, is it not valid to ask whether there is such a thing as a true gift in the first place? In order to address these questions I will turn to Jacques Derrida's reading of Mauss in his text *Give Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*. The second problem I want to address arises from Mauss' description of *hau* as emerging from the dialectic between matter and spirit, in which the spirit of the thing given transmigrates from one material vessel to another. This formula suggests an affinity with the general theory of the white elephant, which holds that certain values (souls, spirit, but also exchange-value) become lodged in cumbersome material forms because of the despotism and superstition that supposedly govern so-called Asiatic societies. At what point, then, if at all, does Mauss' theory address the problem of the general theory of the white elephant? That is to say – how does Mauss theorize the point at which *hau* cannot return to its owner, the point when wealth ceases to circulate? I will examine this problem in Mauss through his writing on fatal gifts, particularly his theorization of the potlatch, and also in Christopher Bracken's book *The Potlatch Papers*, which questions the ease with which Mauss

borrows seemingly discrete and coherent concepts from one indigenous culture and applies them freely to others.

Toward the beginning of *Given Time*, Derrida makes the surprising claim that "a work as monumental as Mauss' *The Gift* speaks of everything but the gift" (24). Indeed, as Derrida notes, Mauss' text "deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift *and* countergift" (24). It is this last pairing – gift and countergift – that provides the basis for Derrida's claim that *The Gift* does not really address the question of the gift itself. For Derrida, in order for a gift to really be a gift, "there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt" (12). Any such repayment – be it material (another gift) or symbolic (gratitude) – annuls the original gift and places this scene of generosity within the realm of economic exchange and the circulation of wealth. Consequently, a true gift is only possible through a kind of radical forgetting in which both the gift's giver and its recipient do not acknowledge or recognize the gift as such. "*At the limit*," Derrida writes, "*the gift as gift* ought *not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor.* It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift" (14). Of course, practically speaking, this radical forgetting is very much like saying that there is no such thing as a gift at all – how can there be a gift if nobody knows about it? "[T]he gift is the impossible," Derrida writes, "a consistent discourse on the gift is impossible: It misses its object and always speaks, finally, of something else" (7; 24). This impossibility associated with the radical forgetting that would be required for a "gift as gift" to exist is the driving force behind Derrida's critique of Mauss, whose discourse

on the gift ultimately, and necessarily, speaks of something else.[81] What Mauss' *The Gift* does give to the discourse on the gift, however, is the discovery that the idea of the gift is indissociable from the concept of time. That is to say that unlike in economic exchange – in which items are exchanged at the same time – in gift exchange there is always a "term" or a time limit that must be observed, an "interval that separates reception from restitution" (39). For example, in Mauss' story of the *hau*, Ranaipiri notes that "a certain lapse of time" is required before the third person introduces the second *taonga* into the scene of exchange. There will always be an interval – "a delimited time," Derrida writes, "neither an instant nor an infinite time" (41) – during which it will be unclear whether the gift will be reciprocated. It is only once the countergift is made that the original gift retroactively becomes the first object in the "circular exchange" (6) that, for Derrida, characterizes economic activity. This interval – in which the meaning of the first gift is marked by a radical indeterminacy – is for Derrida inextricable from the workings of narrative. "The gift gives, demands, and takes time," Derrida writes, "That is one of the reasons this thing of the gift will be linked to the – internal – necessity of a certain narrative [*récit*] or of a certain poetics of narrative" (41). Because the gift is characterized by a certain unknowingness, and because the "real story" of the gift can only be identified retroactively, the event of the gift, and the time of the gift, also mark the beginning of a narrative about the gift that is opened up with the first act of giving and closed off when the gift is reciprocated. This closing off, or squaring of accounts, is another way of saying

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[81] As Christopher Bracken points out in *The Potlatch Papers*, this criticism of Derrida's somewhat misses the mark since "Mauss makes it clear from the outset that his aim is to learn why in certain premodern and non-Western societies total services are exchanged not *as* gifts, but *as if* they were gifts" (155). In this analysis, *hau* appears not as a magical force that impels gifts to be returned to their donors, but as an ideological category that obscures the circulation of wealth with a theory about the gift.

that the gift ultimately leaves a mark or a trace, so that Derrida can claim that there is "a certain relation [...] between writing or its substitute [...] and the process of the gift" (43). The gift, then, is the inauguration of a kind of writing, but what that writing means, and how the story it tells will end, cannot be known from the outset.[82] This is an argument that Derrida develops in great detail in the second half of *Given Time* through a close reading of Charles Baudelaire's short story "Counterfeit Money." Although a detailed analysis of Derrida's reading would lead us a little too far astray, it is worth emphasizing that for Derrida the counterfeit coin the narrator's friend gives to the beggar initiates the story itself. The narrator cannot know whether the coin his friend gave away really was a counterfeit, and this indeterminacy occasions all manner of speculations about his friend's possible motives, the beggar's response, and so on. The friend's gift gives the narrator the possibility of narrative, but only so long as the gift remains unreturned, during that interval that is characterized by forgetting and unknowing. That the gift in this story is a piece of counterfeit money is particularly apt, since counterfeit money shares with the gift the fact that it cannot be named as such: "counterfeit money is only counterfeit on the condition of not giving its title," Derrida writes (87). To say that a coin is counterfeit money is to destroy the effectiveness of that counterfeit coin, just as to say that a gift is a gift draws it back into the circle of economic exchange and annuls the possibility of the "gift as gift." The diegetic indeterminacy caused by the friend's gift is, for Derrida, replicated on a formal level, as the title of Baudelaire's story presents the same paradox about whether or not it can be taken at face value – is the story itself a

[82] "Derrida argues that the term is what makes narrative possible," Chirstopher Bracken writes in *The Potlatch Papers*, "for narration occurs as a process of delay that holds together the past, present, and future of a story by keeping them apart" (157).

counterfeit? But if it is, how can it call itself a counterfeit without spoiling the illusion? Derrida's larger point seems to be that literature itself can be likened to both the gift and the counterfeit coin through the relationship of indeterminacy and time. The gift inaugurates an interval that is marked by unknowing, as does the counterfeit coin. Literature, arriving in the form of a narrative that is initiated by some event, cannot be explained during the interval of the narration – that is to say, in Baudelaire's case, that the true motivation of the narrator's friend, which is the subject of the text's narrative, cannot be determined within the text itself, and must necessarily make an appeal outside of the text and outside of the frame of the narrative. If such an explanation existed, if we knew, for example, whether the coin really was a counterfeit, the narrative would be closed off, its meaning entirely encompassed within a perfect circle. But literature does not provide such explanations, as the intention of the author, or of characters, or of gifts cannot be taken at face value, and to make recourse to them is to reach beyond the limits of the text. Therefore literature is characterized by the same unknowing (and radical forgetting) that accompanies the gift.

Derrida's analysis of the relationship between the gift, time, and narrative provides a useful point of departure for a close reading of the story of the white elephant as a fatal gift in the *New York Times*. It is a narrative about giving, but the kind of gift it describes, and what the story gives to its readers, is marked by a kind of hostility that, at first glance, seems incommensurate with the idea of generosity. The story is undoubtedly rooted in certain prejudices about both white elephants (as objects of religious veneration) and so-called oriental despots, which I have already described in my discussion of the general theory of the white elephant. The idea of the white elephant as a

fatal gift, however, is a novel development in the history of Western writing about these animals. Although there are historical reasons why the white elephant became associated with the idea of the fatal gift in the mid-nineteenth century, which I will discuss below, for now I would like to examine the effect that the logic of the gift has on this narrative. In many ways, the *New York Times*' story resembles earlier accounts of white elephants by Van Vliet or La Loubère: it describes a white elephant that is held to be valuable by an oriental despot even though it destroys or consumes a great deal of wealth. The most significant difference between these earlier stories and the *New York Times*' version is clearly the idea that white elephants were given as deliberately destructive gifts, a development that has no basis in Siamese history. So what is the significance of gifts and giving in this story? As is the case in Baudelaire's "Counterfeit Money," the narrative begins with an act of giving and is sustained because of an interval of time that this gift creates. However, whereas most gifts are supposed to be reciprocated, thereby closing off this interval, in this story the interval is theoretically interminable, ending not when the gift is returned but when the recipient dies, "eat[en] out of house and home without the possibility, on his part, of resistance." When Mauss described the gift as "invested with life" he was suggesting that *hau* was like a living force, a kind of spirit that would cause the gift to want to return to its original owner. In this formulation, life is a positive force that assures the proper circulation of wealth. The gift in the *New York Times*' story is also invested with life, but its life force is the very thing that ruins its recipient, "devour[ing] his substance" and assuring that, rather than being circulated or exchanged, wealth becomes stagnant as it is destroyed or wasted in maintaining the life of the white elephant. The white elephant, then, gives death to its recipient through the devastating

power of its own life. It is a gift that keeps on living, destroying wealth and never returning to its proper place.

The white elephant's status as a living gift is one of its unique features and warrants some discussion about what it means for a gift to also be an animal. Mauss frequently mentions animals among the kinds of goods that were exchanged in archaic societies, suggesting that animal life was one of the earliest and most widespread forms of wealth.[83] Recent contributions to the field of animal studies have made significant strides toward a greater critical understanding of the role that animals and animal life have played – as both signs and substance – in economic discourse. In particular, Nicole Shukin's book *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* offers a nuanced reading of the circulation of animals as both signs and forms of capital by striking a

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[83] In his discussion of ancient Roman law, for example, Mauss notes that "things were of two kinds. A distinction was made between *familia* and *pecunia*, between the things of the household (slaves, horses, mules, donkeys) and the cattle subsisting in the fields, far from the stables" (49). Although this nomenclature suggests a difference between wealth that is part of the family, which is therefore more likely to be inherited (like a family heirloom) or sold selectively, and wealth that is excluded from the family and destined for the market, either of these kinds of wealth could exist in the form of living matter. That the etymology of "pecuniary" is rooted in the trade in animals suggests a significant connection between the origins of wealth and animal life. In his "Moral Conclusions," Mauss notes that this connection still continues in modern society, albeit in a somewhat modified form:

> At Cornimont, in a valley of the Vosges, the following custom was common not so long ago and perhaps continues to live on in certain families: so that animals that had been bought should forget their former master and were not tempted to return 'home,' a cross was traced on the lintel of the stable door, and the halter belonging to the seller was kept on the animals, and salt was fed to them. At Raon-aux-Bois the animals were given a slice of bread and butter than had been carried three times around the dairy and was held out to them with the right hand. It is true that this was only for larger livestock that, since the stable was part of the house, were part of the family. But a number of French customs denote that the thing sold must first be detached from the seller, by, for example, striking the thing that is sold, or by whipping the sheep that is sold, etc. (66)

balance between (typically rhetorical/idealist) "animal theory" and biopolitical criticism that addresses the concept of "bare life" (to use Giorgio Agamben's influential formulation) as the primary object of power in modern societies. Shukin is right to note that much of the theory that is identified as belonging to the field of animal studies is (perhaps problematically) overwhelmingly idealist. Texts such as Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" and Akira Mizuta Lippit's *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* address the animal as a word (Derrida's *l'animot*), as a metaphor (Lippit's "animetaphor"), and – generally speaking – as a problem for language and representation, rather than materialist critique. Indeed, in his Introduction to the collection *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, Cary Wolfe writes that the animal is "perhaps the central problematic for contemporary culture and theory, particularly if *theory* is understood as centrally engaged in addressing a social, technological, and cultural context that is now in some inescapable sense posthuman" (ix). Cultural theory here is limited to a posthuman critical context that, although certainly not *a priori* resistant to materialist considerations, is nevertheless largely situated within theoretical and philosophical fields that – as the title of Wolfe's collection suggests – are often more concerned with abstract concepts rather than material conditions.

Shukin warns against the danger posed by the "draining of historical materiality out of the sign of animal life" (36) in the work of Derrida, Lippit, and others by re-situating the question of "the animal" under her own rubric of "rendering." "Rendering," in this context, is supposed to signify "both the mimetic act of making a copy [...] *and* the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains" (20). For Shukin, this "double entendre" is useful for "tracking the production of animal capital [...] across the

spaces of [both] culture and economy" (20). In other words, the term "rendering" indicates complicity between the circulation of animals as immaterial signs and as material commodities, implicating both "culture" and "economy" – despite what often appear to be contradictions between these two fields – in the production of capital in a historical moment determined by biopolitics and transnational corporate interests. Shukin's analysis, then, does not abandon idealist animal theory for a strictly materialist approach, as she writes that "resisting the spectralization of animal life does not mean reverting to an equally perilous empiricism that would fixate on animals as carnal proof of presence" (39). Rather than "fixating" on one pole (either the semiotic or the material) of the critical continuum evoked by "rendering," Shukin astutely demonstrates that reading the two poles together allows for a deeper understanding of the production and circulation of animal capital. "[T]he rendering of animal figures and animal flesh can result in profoundly contradictory semiotic and material currencies," Shukin writes,

> Yet, rather than undercutting the hegemony of market life, the contradictions of animal rendering are productive so long as they are discursively managed under the separate domains of culture and economy. That said, the productive contradiction of animal capital's metaphorical and material currencies is constantly at risk of igniting into "real" social antagonism should their separate logics brush too closely up against one another. This is the volatile potential latent in the rubric of rendering. (21)

It is in the best interests of capitalist hegemony to maintain a discursive distinction between animals that function as signs and animals whose "life" is taken up as the biopolitical object of capitalist production. The possibility of social antagonism – of a

zone of contradiction that cannot be incorporated into a given society's symbolic order – is persistently obviated by proposing and maintaining a difference between the cultural and the economic, the semiotic and the material.

Let us take the case of the white elephant: we have already seen the ways in which Western writers feel compelled to distinguish between the semiotic ("elephant metaphysics") and material ("the natural world") significance of these animals in Thai society, despite the fact that this distinction does not reflect Thai views on *chang pheuak*.[84] Even though the Thai view both the semiotic and material aspects of white elephants to be part of the same continuous discourse, this "brushing up" of the two domains does not necessarily lead to social antagonism (although it certainly can lead to social upheaval, particularly given the role of *chang pheuak* in the ideological and political struggles of monarchs who claim the title *Cakravartin*). From the perspective of most Western writers, however, the white elephant does appear to signal a kind of social antagonism, as the worship of *chang pheuak* is often put forth as the central problem of Siamese life, a paradox that cannot be resolved or reconciled with Western standards, and therefore acts as a kind of guarantor for the fundamental alterity of the Siamese. Of course, in the West the white elephant is also understood to be a metaphor for an expensive and burdensome possession (Marx's *Ladenhüter*), a form of capital that reveals the waste and stagnation at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. By insisting, then, that the cultural and economic importance of white elephants should be separated, writers like Douglas H. Chadwick and Eric Scigliano ensure that any potential antagonism that may come about if these two measures of value should happen to "brush

[84] See, for example, my discussion of Scigliano and Chadwick in Chapter One.

up" against one another can be blamed entirely on the Thai, who do not segregate the semiotic and material significance of white elephants. In this way, then, the contemporary conservationist efforts to address the "problem" of the white elephant in Thai society operates with a kind of sinister symmetry to the general theory of the white elephant, which reads the proximity of cultural and economic values in the historical treatment of *chang pheuak* as both a source of, and a synecdoche for, the phenomenon of stagnation in Asian societies, and in turn offers up this orientalist "explanation" of waste in order to conceal the contradictions and losses inherent in market-based societies.

While Shukin's rubric of "rendering" does provide a useful model for understanding the relationship between the white elephant's semiotic and material values, it nevertheless only goes part of the way. After all, the animals that Shukin describes as being rendered into the commodity form are not sacred animals that cannot be harmed, as is the case with white elephants. Rather, they are livestock – animals raised and slaughtered exclusively for human industry. Both Chadwick and Scigliano note that one of the "problems" of the white elephant is that it draws attention away from other elephants that are exploited by human labour as beasts of burden and tourist attractions. White elephants, on the other hand, are not used for any productive purpose, and – from a Western perspective, at least – destroy rather than produce wealth. There is a need, then, for a distinction between animals, like regular elephants, that belong to a "restricted economy" of productive labour and animals like the white elephant that belong to a "general economy" that is characterized by excess, waste, and loss.[85] In his recent book

[85] The terms "restricted" and "general" economy are Georges Bataille's. The "restricted" economy refers to the realm of "productive" economic activity which Bataille defines – in "The Notion of Expenditure" – as "relations [that] immediately present themselves as

The Work and the Gift, Scott Cutler Shershow notes that the relationship between "working" and "giving" is a source of significant critical anxiety in Western writing about labour and exchange. Working and giving "present themselves as the most familiar practices of everyday life and as the most vexed of theoretical questions [...] they confront one another in a pattern of convergence and contradiction, each one figuring the other's aspiration and limit" Shershow writes (1). We have already seen how, for Derrida, the gift finds its limit in work, as a reciprocated gift is necessarily annulled *qua* gift and passes over to the realm of economic exchange. In what ways, however, is the gift the "aspiration and limit" of work? Although Shershow offers several compelling readings of this "convergence," I would like to examine how Shershow's intriguing formulation can be extended to the question of the white elephant. Within the productive economy, the term "white elephant" has been used to describe something like the limit of work, as it names a stagnant and burdensome commodity that seemingly upsets the theoretically unlimited circulation of capital and creation of surplus value. That this limit is in any way related to (or derived from) the work of the productive economy has been historically obscured through the use of the label "white elephant" and its attendant theoretical and cultural connotations. The story from the *New York Times* repeats this logic but with a crucial difference: here the limit of work is figured not only as a white elephant, but as a white elephant that is given as a fatal gift. The "luckless recipient" of this present gives

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those of an *end* with *utility*" (120). This restricted economy, however, is framed by a general economy that is defined by "so-called unproductive expenditure: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity" and so on (118). For Bataille, the desire to acquire wealth is superceded by the desire to lose it, so that "[a]t no time does a fortune serve to *shelter its owner from need*. On the contrary, it functionally remains – as does its possessor – *at the mercy of a need for limitless loss*" (123).

up on work, and simply "sits down with Oriental resignation" while the white elephant destroys his wealth. Although this recipient is typically understood to be one of the king's courtiers, and therefore a member of the Siamese elite, he is described in this story as one of the king's "poorer subjects," reflecting both his misfortune and the poverty that accompanies the absence of work and withdrawal from the world of productive labour. Although, following Derrida, working can be said to be the limit of the gift, the fatal gift in the *New York Times*' story seems to mark a different kind of limit, in which the gift is not returned to the restricted economy of work, but rather gives itself over to a destructive and wasteful general economy. White elephants have always been described as being somehow related to the wasteful decadence of oriental despots, but the association of this waste with the logic of the gift is a much more recent development. This development is rooted in the British and American experience in Bangkok in the mid-nineteenth century, but its subsequent canonization as an explanation for the figurative definition of "white elephant" owes much to the prominence of fatal gifts in Western writing about gift exchange.

Although Mauss considers *hau* to be a principle that invests the gift with life and ensures its spirit will return to its owner, he still notes that there are certain gifts that cannot be returned and that give loss and destruction rather than life and prosperity. For Mauss, the paradigmatic example – the "purest type" (6), as he puts it – of this kind of gift is the "potlatch," which he identifies with "[t]he Tlingit and the Haïda, two tribes of the American Northwest" (6).[86] Like many of the other societies Mauss examines in *The*

[86] Mauss claims to gets the word "potlatch" from "American authors using the Chinook term, which has become part of the everyday language of Whites and Indians from Vancouver to Alaska" (6).

Gift, these two tribes participate in a system of total services that includes gift exchange. However, "what is noteworthy about these tribes," Mauss writes, "is the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in all these practices [...] they even go as far as the purely sumptuary destruction of wealth that has been accumulated in order to outdo the rival chief as well as his associate" (6). The potlatch, then, is a competitive gift exchange in which the giver gives a gift that is so extravagant that it cannot be reciprocated, or even – as Mauss notes – in which the donor destroys his or her own wealth in a way that cannot be matched by an opponent. Such destruction is used "in order to put down and to 'flatten' one's rival" (37). Mauss proposes to use "the term potlatch" to describe any "kind of institution that [...] we might describe as: *total services of an agonistic type*" (7). Like *hau*, potlatch is a term from a specific culture that Mauss makes into a general theory to help explain certain phenomena related to the process of exchange. Among the general principles Mauss supports with the example of the potlatch is the "*obligation to accept*," as Mauss notes that just as "one has no right to refuse a gift" it is also forbidden to "refuse to attend the potlatch" (41). Although it is well known that the purpose of giving gifts at a potlatch is to "flatten" one's enemies, "in principle every gift is always accepted and even praised" (41). "One must voice one's appreciation of the food that has been prepared for one," Mauss writes, "But, by accepting it one knows that one is committing oneself. A gift is received 'with a burden attached'" (41). In what ways is a gift received in a potlatch a burden? Because the gift is so overwhelming that it cannot be returned, the recipient is forced to keep it and therefore – to use Mauss' terminology – the *hau* of that gift cannot return to its rightful place, which according to Tamati Ranaipiri is to risk "serious harm" or "even death." The spirit of the gift becomes stuck in a material

form that is so costly and extravagant that it becomes a dangerous burden. Put this way, we can see that Mauss' account of the potlatch has much in common with both the general theory of the white elephant *and* the story of the white elephant as a fatal gift. Of course, both of these accounts pre-date the first significant European reports about the potlatch by several years. This suggests that the idea of the fatal gift is (and has for some time been) a widespread trope in Western writing that seeks to distinguish between Eastern and Western concepts of value, and that the potlatch is less an authentic source for Mauss' theory than it is an object onto which he projects his own beliefs about the nature and origins of agonistic gift exchange.

This thesis about the potlatch is largely confirmed in Christopher Bracken's book *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History*. Like the fetish, the potlatch has been taken up by a significant number of theories and discourses (including Mauss' anthropology and Bataille's philosophy of excess), and like Pietz's analysis of the origin of the fetish, Bracken's text offers a subversive history of this equally "[d]iscursively promiscuous and theoretically suggestive" term. Bracken offers a detailed history of the difficulties nineteenth-century Canadian officials in British Columbia had identifying what constituted a potlatch, as it seemed to refer to "two contrary practices": giving gifts which must be reciprocated with gifts of even greater value ("profit") or the destruction of wealth ("loss") (88). The "potlatch" that these colonial texts refer to "belongs to a discourse white observers exchange[d] back and forth exclusively among themselves," so that the European Canadian impulse to define, understand, and – ultimately – control the potlatch "stubbornly ignores the stories of the First Nations" (87). Bracken also unpacks the series of Canadian laws that were passed in order to eliminate potlatches, even though

there was never a precise understanding of what the term entailed. "To get at the potlatch," Bracken writes, "Parliament had to ban all forms of distribution. It had no choice [...] Since white administrators had long defined potlatching as at once an act of gift giving and a moment in the reciprocal exchange of property, both the gift and countergift had to be outlawed" (119-20). Later legal circulars would emphasize that the destruction of property was also prohibited, making the "ban on the circulation of property" additionally "a ban on gifts that do not return to sender" (136). Because these lawmakers did not have a clear idea of what the potlatch was, the law that banned it did not refer to a prior First Nations cultural practice, but in fact created the act it was ostensibly legislating against:

> Since a law cannot be enforced until it has been written, its performative function lags behind its cognitive function in time. First the law states what it bans, and only later does it ban what it states. The moments of cognition and action cannot be so neatly spaced, however, because the law does not know what it bans until the moment the ban is enforced. No one can be convicted for potlatching until a potlatch is known to have occurred, but a potlatch cannot be known to have occurred until someone is convicted of potlatching [...] As grammar is a machine, so the law is a machine that produces what it forbids. It does not just enact a ban. It bans what it enacts. Between the moment it is formulated and the moment it is applied, the legal machine gives itself something to refer to. (126)

Although Canadian lawmakers didn't just make up the idea of the potlatch out of thin air, the object ultimately named by these laws was a novel creation that circulated exclusively

among European Canadian writers and represented a fundamental incompatibility between European and First Nations measures of exchange and value. As a signifier, "potlatch" does not point to a pre-existing signified, nor does it simply create a new signified that it clearly refers to. On the contrary, it "name[s] without referring" and "give[s] things to the world" but "do[es] not point them out" (94). Words like "potlatch" do not "participate in the agreement between thoughts and things. Rather, they give things to thought and allow them to be put into writing" (94). The word "potlatch," then, allows a certain kind of thought and writing to be possible, but is not itself a thing in the world.[87] Although there certainly are First Nations practices that involve the exchange of wealth, there are no "potlatches," at least not in the sense described by (which is also to say created by) Canadian law.

In the same way, we can say that although there are *chang pheuak*, there are no "white elephants," since the signified suggested by this signifier (i.e., a completely white elephant) does not correspond with an object in the world, and only came about because of a long history of misunderstanding and mistranslation. At the same time, however, the

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[87] Bracken ultimately suggests that – as a gift that gives something to the world, but is not itself of the world – the word "potlatch" reveals not an archaic practice, but the uncanny realization of the limit of Western metaphysics. Following Heidegger and Derrida, Bracken argues that while Being gives beings to the world it nevertheless "burns itself up, giving the gift of ownness to things while setting fire to its own presence" (164). This "inquiry into the truth of Being brings Western metaphysics to an end by returning it to what it has forgotten since its beginning: the thought of Being" (164). For Bracken, this return is made possible by the colonial encounter between European Canadians and the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest:

> Metaphysics reaches its outermost limit, finding its beginning in its end, on the northwest coast of North America. When it can go no farther west without giving way to the East, the West finds its truth reflected back to itself from a site that is said to be neither Western nor Eastern. On this its westernmost rim, the West rediscovers the true meaning of its Being. The truth is that Being, which cannot be thought apart from the gift, is a fiery potlatch. (164-5)

word "white elephant" *does* give something to the world: a new way of thinking and writing about value that obscures the limitations of Western capitalism by associating them with stereotypes about Eastern stagnation and despotism. As a gift, though, doesn't this word also come, as Mauss warns, with "a burden attached"? In the *New York Times*' story, the gift of a white elephant is a burden not just because – like a fatal gift given in a potlatch – it cannot be given away or sold, but also because it continues to live and continues to consume the wealth of its recipient over and over again. The potlatch may go up in flames, but the white elephant remains: delivering destruction with each passing day. So what is the burden attached to the gift of the word "white elephant" to the West? Although the word gives the West a metaphor for waste, it nevertheless burdens the West with an ongoing blindness toward its own deficiencies. By giving Western capitalism an excuse that conceals its own mistakes and contradictions, the word "white elephant" also condemns it to repeat them, and to be stuck with the consequences of its own shortcomings. The gift, then, is central to Western thinking about white elephants. Although the general theory of the white elephant developed over the course of several centuries, the figurative definition of "white elephant" did not become a widespread cultural phenomenon in the English-speaking world until after the logic of the gift was folded into this general theory. By turning to the earliest references of white elephants and gifts, in both European and Thai writing, we can gain a greater sense of the ways in which the gift and the white elephant would later become eerily synonymous.

"Royal Friendship": White Elephants and Fatal Gifts Before 1800

Although I have claimed that the story of the white elephant as a fatal gift is a nineteenth-century development, there are a few antecedents to this idea in both Thai and European writing from before 1800. One of the earliest such sources is Ralph Fitch's "An Account of Pegu in 1587-87," in which Fitch's description of the tribute Burmese merchants were forced to pay the king whenever a new white elephant was discovered or claimed from a rival king, explains the costliness associated with white elephants as a form of forced gift-giving:

> When any of these white Elephants are brought unto the King, all the Merchants of the Citie are commanded to see them, and to give him a present of halfe a Ducat, which doth come to a great summe: for that there are many Merchants in the Citie. After that you have give your present you may come and see them at your pleasure, although they stand in the Kings house. (170)

The idea that giving a "present" is a kind of "commanded" tribute, instead of an act of unmotivated generosity, is deeply embedded in Western anthropology's understanding of gift exchange. Although Fitch's passage is about Burma and does not mention the king giving white elephants as gifts, it does suggest – for the first time in the English language – that white elephants were exchanged as gifts (when the king of Burma demanded them from other kings) and that white elephants were a kind of financial burden, specifically in the context of a gift economy (the merchants' forced tribute).

A more detailed, and more bizarre, account of white elephants and gift-giving can be found in the roughly contemporaneous *Perigrinaçao* (*Travels*) of Fernão Mendes

Pinto. In Chapter 183 of his *Travels* – titled "The Good King of Siam" – Pinto describes how, in 1545, the king of Siam (presumably Chairacha) demonstrated a great deal of generosity toward some Portuguese merchants who had lost their cargo and been imprisoned by a lesser ruler. Pinto reports that a "certain Luis de Montarroyo" was sailing from China to Patani when he was shipwrecked and all of his cargo washed ashore, where it was promptly claimed by "the local *shahbandar*" in accordance with "an ancient custom of the kingdom" (405). When the Portuguese living in Malacca heard about the problems that had befallen Montarroyo and his crew, they came up with a plan to free their imprisoned countrymen. "[T]hey got together and decided to buy an *odiá* – which is a gift – of some expensive items [...] to present to the king on the Day of the White Elephant, only ten days away," Pinto reports, "for on that solemn day the king customarily distributed a great deal of charity to all petitioners" (405). The Portuguese intended to ask the king to order the release of the prisoners, but did not plan on asking for the return of the confiscated cargo since they "did not dare go that far" and did not think "it would be appropriate to do so" (405). When they finally confront the king, however, he notes the "tears being shed by some of them" and, after "order[ing] the white elephant he was riding brought to a halt" (405), he exceeds the expectations of the Portuguese by delivering the following generous proclamation:

> 'As for the gifts you bring me,' he said to them, 'you may consider them accepted and I thank you for them. However, on this day I am not permitted to receive gifts, only to bestow them. Therefore, I pray you, for love of your God, whose humble servant I am and always will be, to distribute those gifts to the neediest among you, for it is far better to

> receive the divine reward that awaits you for giving charity in his name, than to receive whatever I – who am but an insignificant creature in his eyes – can give you for them. As for the prisoners, I am happy to grant your request for their liberty as an act of charity, so that they may freely depart for Malacca; and further, I command that all the goods which they say have been taken from them be restored to them, for the things which are done for the sake of God ought to be accomplished with far greater liberality than that which is sought by the poor, especially when requested in his name.' (406)

It is obvious to any contemporary reader that this speech is a bold fabrication, not least of all because the king of Siam repeatedly affirms that he believes in, and is inferior to, the Christian God, a point which he emphasizes by spouting Christian dogma about the benefits of charity and God's grace.[88] Of course, as a fabrication the speech is nevertheless a fascinating account of the relationship Pinto imagines to exist between the king of Siam, white elephants, and gift-exchange. In this case, the white elephant seems to be the occasion for this scene of generosity, as it takes place on a day devoted to this animal (also of dubious historical accuracy, it should be noted), and while the king is riding one about the city. One of the most interesting things about this scenario is that possessing a white elephant seems to shield the king from being burdened with gifts he might not want. He tells the Portuguese that because it is the "Day of the White

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[88] Pinto enjoys imagining the Christian motivations behind the king's kindness to the Portuguese, noting later in the same chapter that the king gave the Portuguese permission "to build churches in any part of his kingdom where the name of the Portuguese God could be worshipped, for it was obvious that He was much better than all the others" (407).

Elephant" he can accept their gift but he cannot receive it, which basically entails him turning down their gift and telling them to give it to someone else (the "neediest among them"). The white elephant, it seems, offers the king a kind of immunity against the obligation to accept. The king can give gifts of his own, however, and because they cannot be reciprocated they theoretically have the power to "flatten" the person who receives them. As if to underscore that some gifts can be burdensome, or even fatal, Pinto concludes this chapter with another anecdote about this king and one of his "colonels" who made the mistake of taking a gift that he should not have accepted. When the king was trying to raise an army, he sent this colonel to "the district of *Banchá*, where most of the men are very rich" in order to recruit all the able-bodied men in the region to fight for him (405). These men bribed the colonel, so that he forced the "sick, crippled, poor, and aged" men to return with him to Ayudyah instead, while the rich remained at home. When the king figured out this obvious deception, he admonished the colonel, "had him bound hand and foot" and then had "five *turmas*" of melted silver poured down his throat, "which resulted in his immediate death" (407). Standing over the colonel's dead body, the king posed the following (obviously rhetorical) question: "If five *turmas* of silver were enough to kill thee, how couldst thou imagine that the five thousand that thou tookest as a bribe for exempting the cowards on *Banchá* would not kill thee? May God forgive thee for thy greed and me for not punishing thee sufficiently for it!" (407). By accepting a bribe of five thousand silver coins the colonel was also accepting a fatal burden, as his scheme had no real chance of fooling the king, who dramatized the fatal power of that gift by forcing the colonel to receive a similar gift of silver coins in a way that would be in no way ambiguous about the dangers of taking bribes. Pinto's chapter,

then, paints a detailed picture of the possible risks and burdens of accepting a gift, and does so alongside a representation of a king whose unlikely Christian charity nevertheless gives way to despotic cruelty and a white elephant whose divine presence allows for the distribution of gifts in the first place.

A significant Thai source for the connection between white elephants and fatal gifts can be found in the royal chronicles of the Ayudhya era. Although only one of these chronicles – the Luang Prasœt version – was written during the Ayudhya period, almost all of the later chronicles, which were written during the early years of the Bangkok era (i.e., the late eighteenth century), offer a detailed analysis of the ways in which the logic of the gift contributed to the 1563-4 conflict between king Bayinnaung of Pegu and king Chakkraphat of Ayudhya. All the chronicles note that Bayinnaung was envious of the seven white elephants Chakkraphat possessed, and that he sent a letter to the Siamese king asking that he give two of these elephants to him. Bayinnaung requested that his "royal elder brother" send him the two *chang pheuak* "for the sake of his younger brother's royal friendship," warning that if Chakkraphat "should stubbornly hold to arrogant views and love the two white elephants more than royal friendship" the two nations would find themselves at war (43). Chakkraphat consulted his chief ministers, who suggested that he should give in to Bayinnaung's demands, but his son, Prince Ramesuan, and other officials disagreed, arguing that an earlier incident with Bayinnaung gave Chakkraphat reason enough to refuse. This occurred when Bayinnaung had requested two regular elephants from Chakkraphat that had performed particularly well in combat. Chakkraphat gave the elephants to Bayinnaung, but these elephants "seeing mahouts with strange voices [...] caused trouble" and "could not be restrained from

chasing and tusking elephants and men," and were accordingly returned to Ayudhya (40). Following the logic of this earlier incident, Ramesuan argues that "[t]o give [the white elephants] away is inappropriate" because when Bayinnaung asked for elephants before he had to give them back: "The King [Chakkraphat] having given them, he [Bayinnaung] was, however, unable to take them" (43). After receiving reassurance from his counsellors that Ayudhya could defend itself against an army from Pegu, Chakkraphat sent a letter to Bayinnaung denying his request. The chronicles then go on to describe the subsequent conflict between Ayudhya and Pegu, culminating with Bayinnaung taking four rather than two white elephants after laying siege to the Siamese capital. Although I have already explained in Chapter One why neither Chakkraphat nor Bayinnaung would willingly give away white elephants to a rival king, it is worth exploring some of the implications of the logic of the gift in this narrative. On the one hand, it is clear that it is permissible to make a present of regular elephants, as Chakkraphat is willing to do this to appease Bayinnaung. However, this gift – and the chain of obligations it is a part of – is annulled if it cannot be accepted. This annulment, in turn, is a sufficient pretext for refusing to give away future gifts. By refusing to do this, however, Chakkraphat also removes himself from a system of obligations and tribute that involves "royal friendship" and political peace and stability. Even though within the context of the Thai worldview Chakkraphat had every reason to keep all seven of his white elephants, one of the implications of this story is that by doing so he also loses his royal friendship with Bayinnaung. By maintaining possession of his white elephants, in other words, Chakkraphat takes on the burden of confronting a hostile Burmese neighbour. At the same time, however, giving the white elephants away was never really an option for the

Siamese king, since to do so would be tantamount to admitting that he did not have a legitimate claim to the title *Cakravartin*. The royal chronicles seem to suggest that while regular elephants can be exchanged, it is impossible to actually give away white elephants, even though keeping them entails the burdens of hostility and warfare.

Clearly the story of the 1563-4 war between Siam and Burma has many thematic similarities with the *New York Times*' story of the white elephant as a fatal gift; the same can be said for the stories reported by Fitch and Pinto. However, in none of these stories are white elephants actually given as gifts – sometimes they are taken, and sometimes they are present during a scene of gift exchange, but they are never given away themselves. And yet, as I have argued above, the theme of the fatal gift would eventually become largely synonymous with the general theory of the white elephant. To understand why the gift became an important (arguably the *most* important) feature of white elephantism, I would like now to turn to the British and American writing that – in the wake of the Bowring and Harris treaties in the mid-1850s – established the white elephant's reputation as a fatal gift, and that – ultimately – gave the West a new way of writing about waste, albeit one that carried with it a dangerous burden.

The Land of the White Elephant: Gifts and Diplomacy in Nineteenth-Century Siam

After the so-called revolution of 1688, which greatly limited the extent of European contact with Siam, the kingdom of Ayudhya persisted until 1767 when it was sacked and destroyed by Burmese armies. Following this destruction, as David K. Wyatt points out in his *Thailand: A Short History*, "one might have expected a long period of slow recovery and reconstruction during which the Tai world would be fragmented into

numerous weak principalities" (139). And yet, "[q]uite the opposite happened" since "[w]ithin a decade or so, a new Siam already had succeeded where Naresuan and his Ayudhya predecessors had failed in creating a vast new Siamese empire" (139). This new empire exerted control over many of the smaller city-states and disputed regions (such as Cambodia and the Malay peninsula) that had long eluded Ayudhya's grasp, which – for Wyatt – was the result of "a new Siamese vision of their place in the world" (139). By the early 1820s, this new Siam had also fallen within the vision of "European powers" which were no longer preoccupied with the Napoleonic wars and sought to increase their economic and colonial presence in Southeast Asia (164). Little in the way of trade had changed since the seventeenth-century heyday of Siamese-European relations, and "in the eyes of Europeans, Siam's international trade was conducted in a monopolistic, anti-commercial, almost medieval fashion" (165). Indeed, at the time Siam's international trade was characterized by a "myriad of fees, taxes, and gratuities" alongside "royal monopolies on various commodities" (169). Meanwhile the British and the English East India Company (EIC) were looking to strengthen their hold in Southeast Asia after "found[ing] Singapore as a free port in 1819" (165). The British would eventually establish a commercial agreement with Siam in 1826 (the "Burney treaty"), which entailed significant economic sacrifices from the Siamese, but assured them a measure of "political security" from their new British neighbours in Burma (169). It also introduced a "constructive pattern for the conduct of Siam's relations with the West" and led to a "substantial increase in Siam's international trade" (169-70), both of which paved the way for the more extensive British and American treaties with Mongkut's Siam in the 1850s.

The most extensive British records about Siam from the 1820s do not come from Burney's expedition, but rather from the unsuccessful embassy of the EIC's John Crawfurd in 1821. The Siamese court obviously had much to gain from maintaining the old system of heavy taxes and royal monopolies, and were unwilling to make any significant concessions to the British (who had yet to establish a foothold in Burma). While Crawfurd noted his frustration with his experience at Bangkok in his private papers (published in 1915 as *The Crawfurd Papers*), his 1828 *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* offers a detailed account of Siamese society in the tradition of La Loubère alongside the story of his failed negotiations. Among the details Crawfurd records are, of course, his impressions of the king's white elephants. Crawfurd's account is notable because it clearly shows the influence of earlier accounts like La Loubère's (although without his zeal for religious conversion), yet it does not express the same anxieties about white elephants that can be seen in later texts, after Siam had been opened up to foreign trade. Crawfurd's first mention of white elephants indicates the extent to which the basic precepts of the general theory of the white elephant had become widespread by the early-nineteenth century, as he notes that white elephants are "well known in Europe to be objects of veneration, if not of worship, in all the countries where the religion of Buddha prevails" (96). Although he does argue that it is "the doctrine of the metempsychosis" that leads the Siamese to venerate these animals, he nevertheless considers this to be a "natural" error in judgment (97). Indeed Crawfurd's harshest words are reserved not for the white elephants, but for their keepers, who are represented as cruel, capricious, and miserly: "A keeper pricked the foot of one [white elephant], in our presence, with a sharp iron until blood came, although his majesty's

only offence was stealing a bunch of bananas; or rather snatching it before he had received permission!" (97). Here the white elephant gives Crawfurd an occasion to reflect on his own frustrations with the Siamese: the keepers stand in for the Siamese court, who – in the face of what Crawfurd undoubtedly believed were the good intentions of the EIC – stubbornly refused to allow the British free access to Siam's ports. The suggestion that "his majesty" was punished for taking something that he would eventually be granted anyway, aligns the king of the elephants with the king of Great Britain, who – as a metonymic figure for the British Empire – is unjustly rebuked in his attempt to "snatch" the Far-Eastern treasures that he believes he has a right to.[89]

In fact, the question of giving and taking was to vex many of Great Britain's dealings with Siam and the Malay peninsula during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. In 1785, the British had acquired the island of Penang from the Malaysian raja of Kedah, followed by the mainland Province of Wellesley in 1800 (Wyatt, *History* 164). However, the British were confused by the *realpolitik* of the relationships between weaker and stronger states in Southeast Asia, particularly the significance of tributary relationships and the gifts that sustained them. According to Thongchai Winichakul, "[i]n premodern polities the relationship between political

[89] Crawfurd was not the only member of his embassy to project his own interests onto these white elephants. Describing the same visit, the expedition's naturalist and physician, George Finlayson, comments chiefly on the physiological features of the white elephants, noting that "they are, correctly speaking, Albinos, and are possessed of all the peculiarities of that abnormal production" (152). Although he repeats a few of the standard facts about the cultural importance of white elephants for the Siamese, his most detailed passages focus on specific physical characteristics of the *chang pheuak*, such as the condition of their skin and hair follicles, and the quality of their vision (which is often diminished in albino animals): "[I]t was remarkable that their organ of sight was to all appearance natural and sound, in no way intolerant of light, readily accommodating itself to different degrees of light and shade, and capable of being steadily directed objects at the will of the animal" (152).

powers was hierarchical. A ruler whose authority prevailed over several local rulers or chiefs of tiny townships, mostly in nearby areas, was submissive to another lord" (81). "This pattern," Thongchai Winichakul writes, "applied also to the relationship between several kingdoms, including the one between a regional major kingdom like Siam or Burma and its tributary kingdoms such as Lanna, Lan Sang, and the Malay states" (81). Sometimes more than one major kingdom would lay claim to the same weaker region, as was the case with Cambodia, which was forced to pay tribute to both Siam and Vietnam. Although the lesser kingdoms in these tributary relationships "were generally regarded as having their own sovereignty" they nevertheless "had to submit [...] to the supreme overlord" (82).[90] This "ritual of submission" was sustained through the giving of gifts to the "supreme overlord" (82). The most important of these gifts were the *Bunga mas* – "small trees fashioned from gold and silver leaves" (82). In return, the lesser kingdoms would receive "gifts of greater value," including protection from other powerful rulers.[91] Kedah had been largely independent until the 1650s when the threat of Dutch hostility forced the ruler of Kedah to send the *Bunga mas* to Ayudhya, after which point it "was regarded by Siam as a tributary" (86). After the fall of Ayudhya, Kedah also sent the *Bunga mas* to the Burmese kingdom of Ava for protection, but when Siam quickly recovered and established a kingdom at Bangkok, Kedah found itself tributary to both

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[90] Thongchai Winichakul notes that this act of submission was important for kings who sought to be recognized as *Cakravartin*: "In the Theravada Buddhist polity of the region, the righteous kingship, the universal monarch or *cakravartin*, was obliged to protect the region from decline. Protecting the region and the quest for supremacy were one and the same mission [...] The acquisition of tributaries itself became a sign of supremacy" (83-4).

[91] Siam itself would traditionally send "tribute missions to the Chinese emperor," which the Siamese did not view as submission, but rather as a "profit-making enterprise [...] since the Chinese emperor always rewarded the Siamese with commodities of greater value that were salable in the market" (87).

powerful states (86). Hence the agreements with the British over Penang and Wellesley "were regarded by Kedah as contractual obligations whereby the British would provide protection to Kedah in case of threats from Siam or Burma" (86).

That the British did not see it this way indicates for Thongchai Winichakul the "misunderstanding caused by confrontations between the indigenous tributary relationship and the rationalistic European view of modern international relations" (91). The British required a strict definition of national boundaries and were "confused by the ambiguity of the tributary relationship" (89). "[I]t had to be decided whether a particular tributary was independent or was an integral part or a colony of another kingdom," Thongchai Winichakul writes, "not somewhere between independent and dependent nor somehow possessed by more than one kingdom at the same time" (88). In the case of Kedah, when the Siamese invaded in 1821 the British refused to aid the raja, "who then accused the British of breaking the[ir] obligation" (89). In Thongchai Winichakul's analysis of these events, the primary point of confusion for the British is not simply the political structure of Southeast Asia, but rather "the implied obligation of gifts" (91). While making reference to Mauss' claim in *The Gift* that the gift is both voluntary and involuntary, Thongchai Winichakul proposes that "[i]n premodern Southeast Asia, various gifts were perhaps codes which could be decoded according to the rules of interstate relations. This may explain why the documents of relations among these kingdoms and with the West always recorded the details of gifts given and received" (87). The confusion over "whether the *Bunga mas* was compulsory or voluntary" created a great deal of anxiety among the British about what obligations they might become burdened with if they were to accept gifts from Southeast Asian rulers (89). Did a gift

from Kedah (Penang) obligate the British to protect it? Didn't Kedah already "belong" to Siam because of the gifts those two states exchanged? The "implications of gift exchange [...] in indigenous custom" (89) was a significant problem for British policy and trade in Southeast Asia, as the British could accept neither the ambiguous logic of possession inherent in tributary relationships nor the possible dangers of royal gifts that could "come with a burden attached."

This concern over gifts from the Siamese monarch would be exacerbated during the 1850s when Great Britain sought to renew its trade agreement with Bangkok. As Wyatt notes in his *History*, by 1850 "Western powers were beginning to urge on the Siamese court radical changes in its foreign and commercial policies" (178). Following the "Opium War" with China, British "aggressiveness" increased in the region and "Western powers were less willing than they had been a decade or two earlier to deal with Asian states on Asian terms" (178). Accordingly, the British sent a mission to Bangkok in 1850 in order to demand "an end to all restrictions on trade" and other major concessions (178). This embassy, however, was met with hostility by the Siamese, who were "unyielding on every point at issue," undoubtedly – as Wyatt argues – because of a looming succession struggle, that would result in Mongkut (Rama IV) being crowned king in 1851 (179). Mongkut differed from his predecessors in that he could speak, read, and write English, and because he was willing to risk major social, economic, and political changes in order to maintain Siam's independence from the British (or any other colonial power). Indeed, he is almost universally praised in Thai historiography for his leadership and foresight. Recognizing the need to appease Great Britain, Mongkut maintained a correspondence with the British authorities in Singapore and with the

governor of Hong Kong, Sir John Bowring (183). Bowring would eventually be chosen as the British envoy to Bangkok, where he arrived to negotiate a treaty in 1855, "with both impressive pomp and the threat of force behind him" (183). The treaty he negotiated with Mongkut "met London's chief conditions" and with "the stroke of a pen, old Siam faced the thrust of a surging economic and political power with which they were unprepared to contend of compete" (183). Nevertheless, Mongkut was willing to "make the best of a situation [he] could not change," and although "state revenues dipped slightly" during the year after the treaty was signed, they subsequently "returned to their pretreaty levels" (184). Moreover, by establishing similar treaties with other nations – such as the United States and France – Mongkut was able to ensure that Siam avoided the kind of "suffocatingly close bilateral relationship" that plagued other Southeast Asian nations, such as Burma (with the British) and Vietnam (with the French). Bowring was pleased, of course, with the treaty he negotiated with Bangkok, and in its wake he left a series of texts (the most notable of which is his two-volume *The Kingdom and People of Siam*) that greatly contributed to the popular understanding in the West of both Siamese gifts and Siamese white elephants.

Even before Bowring arrived in Bangkok he knew there would be a white elephant waiting for him. In a letter dated December 27th, 1854, the king of Siam (writing in English), informs the governor that "we have a whitest she Elephant just apprehended at Eastern state of our tributary country" and that Bowring "will witness the white animal personally if Your Excellency would arrive here in March or April" (*A King of Siam Speaks* 104). In *The Kingdom and People of Siam* Bowring reports many of the standard facts that appear in most Western texts about white elephants, and then goes on to

describe his encounter with the *chang pheuak* Mongkut had told him about. "Immediately after the Royal reception at the palace," Bowring writes, "we were conducted to the domicile of the white elephant, the possession of which formed a frequent topic of self-congratulation in the conversation of the king" (1: 475). The Siamese provided a "superabundance of delicacies for [the white elephant's] repast" (1: 472), and – in a later article published in *The Times* – Bowring describes the white elephant's stable as "painted like a Parisian drawing-room" (10). Although Bowring's description of this white elephant, her quarters, and the king's pride in possessing her displays an indulgent curiosity coupled with a somewhat sarcastic dismissiveness that is typical of nineteenth-century British writing about Siam, the most remarkable thing about his encounter with this white elephant is the exchange of gifts that it engendered. Bowing reports that among the gifts Mongkut gave him to bring to Queen Victoria "was a tuft of the white elephant's hairs," and that the king gave Bowring himself "a few hairs from the tail" as a personal keepsake (1: 475). After Bowring left Siam, another gift from this white elephant followed, as Mongkut wrote to him on November 3rd, 1855 informing him that the "white She elephant which [Bowring] had seen" was stricken with "the disease of animal fever [...] by which disease she could not eat & drink any provision two days & nights" and that she eventually died "on the 8th September 4 P.M." (*The Writings of King Mongkut to Sir John Bowring, A.D. 1855-1868* 24). Although Mongkut was obviously upset "for being lost or lossing [*sic*] of this curious & beautiful animal," he nevertheless decided to offer Bowring "a portion of her white skin with beautiful body-hairs preserved in spirit" as an "article of curiosity" (24). In *The Kingdom and People of Siam* Bowring notes that he received this "mark of Royal favour" and that he "transferred [it] to the museum of the

Zoological Society of London" (1: 476). Following the perceived success of Bowring's mission, the British returned to Siam in 1856 in order to ratify and amend the 1855 treaty, and also to offer countergifts for Mongkut's white elephant relics. In his *History of Anglo-Thai Relations*, ML Manich Jumsai states that Harry Parkes, the British representative, was also the "bearer of Queen Victoria's letters and presents," although many of these gifts "were lost or damaged by the storms encountered at Singapore" (60). While the *Dynastic Chronicles* of Mongkut's reign pay little attention to the actual terms of the treaty, they do make a point of listing as many of these gifts as possible, including "a picture of Queen Victoria taken at her royal coronation" and "another picture of Queen Victoria with her eight royal children" (1: 131). Although both royal presents were representations of their respective monarchs, there was a significant difference between an image of Victoria and an actual physical sample from Mongkut's white elephant. However, this difference would soon be effaced when, in 1857, Siam sent an embassy to London to meet Queen Victoria in person. In *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, Anna Leonowens (of *The King and I* fame), writes that upon his return to Bangkok the chief ambassador "published a quaint pamphlet" that contained the following description of the British monarch: "One cannot but be struck with the aspect of the august Queen of England, or fail to observe that she must be of pure descent from a race of goodly and warlike kings and rulers of the earth, in that her eyes, complexion, and above all her bearing, are those of a beautiful and majestic white elephant" (140). As Leonowens describes it, then, in the eyes of the Siamese ambassador the two royal gifts – the skin of the white elephant and the image of Victoria – are conflated as the queen of England begins to look very much like the recently-deceased female white elephant of

the king of Siam. Of course, from the Siamese perspective, this description was supposed to be highly flattering. Meanwhile, the popular British response seems to be one of insouciant bemusement rather than outrage. Nevertheless, this sovereign exchange did contribute to the idea that if the king of Siam gave someone a white elephant (or, in this case, part of a white elephant), they would become stuck with it, as the British now discovered that their monarch had been transformed into a figure that had heretofore been synonymous with oriental despotism and waste.

While the receipt of Mongkut's white elephant gifts, and the subsequent suggestion that Victoria herself was like a white elephant, were met with relatively good humour by the British press and public, the same cannot be said of the American response to their own experiences at Bangkok in the 1850s. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the American diplomatic presence in Siam largely followed on the heels of the British. In the wake of the Burney treaty in 1826, Andrew Jackson sent an embassy – led by Edmund Roberts – to Bangkok to negotiate a trade agreement with the Siamese (Vimol Bhongbhibhat et al. 34). The terms of the treaty were similar to the earlier one with Great Britain, although – also like the British – the Americans would eventually grow dissatisfied with the agreement and unsuccessfully tried to negotiate a new pact in 1850 (Wyatt, *History* 178-9). However, in 1856, following the success of the Bowring treaty, Franklin Pierce ordered the U.S. Consul to Japan, Townsend Harris, to travel to Bangkok and establish a new trade agreement. Although the resulting "Harris treaty" was similar in spirit to the earlier Bowring agreement (184), Harris differed from his British counterpart and was "not favorably impressed with Siam" (Vimol Bhongbhibhat et al. 41). Toward the end of the negotiations in Bangkok, Harris writes in

his *Journal* that he "hope[s] this is the end of my troubles with these false, base and cowardly people [...] I have never met a people like them, and hope I may never be sent here again," adding that "[t]he proper way to negotiate with the Siamese is to send two or three men-of-war of not more than sixteen feet draft of water. Let them arrive in October and at once proceed up to Bangkok and fire their salutes. In such a case the Treaty would not require more days than I have consumed weeks" (153). Harris' text is remarkably hostile compared to his British contemporaries, sounding more like Van Vliet – writing two hundred years earlier – than Bowring or Crawfurd. This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that both Van Vliet and Harris were citizens of republics, in which the institution of the monarchy had been abolished. Although Victoria and Mongkut were very different rulers, they were still both monarchs, and imagined that this created a kind of familial affinity between them, referring to themselves in their correspondence as "affectionate sister" and "affectionate brother," respectively (Manich Jumsai 69).

The Americans and the Siamese, however, shared no such imaginary bond, and there was considerable confusion on both sides about the other nation's form of government. For Harris, Mongkut was the very embodiment of the problem of Asian stagnation. His journal entry for May 31st, 1856 – the day he was supposed to leave Siam – records a series of delays and frustrations that represent the king as an obstacle to modern speed and efficiency. Harris goes to see the king and is "kept waiting for nearly two hours before [he] was admitted" even though "the King knew that this delay would probably prevent [him] from reaching the *San Jacinto* [Harris' ship] to-night" (159). In Harris' mind, this delay is a deliberate affront by an oriental despot against his own American impulse for progress and punctuality. Harris' frustrations mount when he is

finally admitted to Mongkut's quarters, expressing incredulity at the king's "regret" over "not having time ! to write to the President" and then giving Harris a paper that offered an "apology" for not writing such a letter (161). This "document," Harris writes, "must have taken twice as long as would have sufficed for writing to the President direct," and gives Harris occasion to severely criticize the Siamese king:

> So much for his excuse of 'want of time.' I was now delayed over an hour by the most frivolous and pedantic conversation I ever listened to, and satisfied me he was quite as weak-minded as pedantic. He enumerated all the languages he could speak – the various sciences he has a small smattering of – the learned societies of which he was a member, and the various individuals he corresponded with in various parts of the world, and honored me by asking me to correspond with him from Japan. It was now half-past twelve and I was most anxious to get away. But no – I must wait while he wrote a gossiping letter to Sir John Bowring [...] At last, as there must be an end to all things, I got away a little past one o'clock. (161-2)

In this passage the king of Siam seems like little more than a tiresome elderly relative, boring Harris half to death with unnecessary stories, gossip, and formalities. Behind this crude caricature, however, is the long-established idea that despotic rulers were the cause of social stagnation in Asian countries, and although the only thing that is stagnated here is Harris' travel plans, his journal entry makes it quite clear that he views Mongkut as an impediment to progress and modernity, despite the king's erudition and interest in Western science.

The Siamese were equally confused by the American system of government. In the seventeenth century the Dutch had struggled to explain their own republic to the Siamese (Van der Cruysse 45), and by the nineteenth century there was still a very limited understanding of non-monarchical government in Siam. The *Dynastic Chronicles* of Mongkut's reign, for example, describes Harris as a "royal envoy," and the rest of his party as a group of "American noblemen," who had been sent to Bangkok by "The President, the sovereign of America" (132). It seems that Mongkut himself, however, largely understood the differences between the Siamese and American systems, although in his correspondence with Presidents Pierce and Buchanan he would often ask questions in order to clarify his understanding of the role of the President. Among the issues he raised was that of giving and accepting royal gifts. In a letter to Pierce, Mongkut thanks the President for the gifts that Harris brought with him, and assures him that "these honoured presents will be preserved in the Divine City with the greatest care and attention so that they may serve as a constant reminder of Your Excellency's kindness as well as the friendship existing between the Siamese Kingdom and the United States of America" (*A King of Siam Speaks* 117-8). Mongkut goes on to tell Pierce that he has "gathered together a collection of such gifts for presentation to Your excellency" which he has entrusted to the new American Consul in Siam (121). However, by the time his letter reached Washington, Pierce was no longer President, and James Buchanan held the office instead. Buchanan responded to Mogkut's letter and sent the Siamese king some books and pamphlets. In his response to Buchanan, Mongkut displays an understanding of the Presidential system, although he seems skeptical that such a democratic system could actually succeed. He addresses Buchanan with the somewhat verbose, although

accurate, title of "one who has by popular election been elevated to the high office of Chief Executive of the United States of America for a term of years, namely His Excellency President Buchanan" (153). In this letter Mongkut notes that while conditions may vary between nations that are "still wild or semi-wild" and those that are "semi-tame or absolutely tame" it is nevertheless that case that "once elevated to his high office and while possessed of sufficient health and strength to carry on the duties of his office, a ruler of state will in all probability continue to rule the state until the end of his days" because the "people whom he governs" are "unable, either through fear of his power or of remorse of their own conscience, to do aught else but keep him in power" (154). Accordingly, Mongkut explains, when "gifts are exchanged between heads of states, it is customary to address them to the ruler of the state for the time being" (154). Such gifts should be "deemed to belong absolutely to be had for his own use and enjoyment" and "will devolve on his heir or successor at his death" (154). Despite the effectiveness of this gift giving system in Southeast Asia, Mongkut writes that he has "gathered" that this tradition will be ineffective in his relations with American Presidents because "under a custom long established since the time of President George Washington the people of the United States of America hold a election at fixed intervals to choose their President and Chief Executive whom they put into office for a term of 4 years of [*sic*] 8 years" (155). Mongkut describes this system as both "strange" and "highly commendable," and seems surprised that "such a custom remains in effective use to this day without throwing the whole of the United States into a turmoil of internal strife on every occasion of changing the head of state as usually happens in other countries" (155). Despite his understanding of this "custom," Mongkut tells Buchanan that "international courtesy as well as the

Siamese custom" dictated that he respond to Pierce's last letter personally, even though he was no longer President. The tradition of sovereign gift exchange, then, runs too deep for Mongkut to entirely abandon it, although he is pleased to learn that the gifts he gave to President Pierce – which he could not personally accept – have been "preserved as State property for the benefit of a great number of people who may view them in honour both of our country and your own" (155). As for the gifts that accompanied his present letter, Mongkut writes that "[w]hether these things are to become the private property of His Excellency President Buchanan [...] or whether they are to become State property [...] shall be at the entire discretion of the President and the Senate of the United States to decide in accordance with the customs and practice of their own great country" (155). In this letter Mongkut demonstrates a willingness to accept the differences between the President of the United States, who cannot accept personal gifts, and other heads of state who, like himself, view gifts from other nations as their personal property. Although Mongkut doesn't seem to care whether his gifts are accepted by the President or by the State, he definitely does want his gifts to be accepted by *someone* in America, since – in keeping with the tributary structure in place in Southeast Asia – he believes such gifts will buy him some measure of protection. In his earlier letter to Pierce, he expressed this belief, writing that if "an occasion should arise [...] in which force or duress is exercised [...] by [...] some powerful nation on a [...] powerless country like Siam" he hopes "that the occasion will not escape the interest and attention of the United States of America" (121). It was clear, then, to the Americans that a gift from the king of Siam still carried a burden of obligation. After Mongkut's letter to Buchanan, however, what became additionally clear was that – in the eyes of the Siamese king – such a burdensome gift

would fall not only at the feet of the American President, but at the feet of the American people as a whole. In America, it seemed, anybody could be given a white elephant, and this anxiety was exacerbated by Mongkut's next letter to Buchanan and by the gifts he proposed to send.

In a letter dated February 14th, 1861 Mongkut wrote to Buchanan expressing his surprise that there are no elephants wandering freely on the American continent, despite his belief that "people [will] come by thousands" to see such an animal (Vimol Bhongbhibhat et al. 224). "Having heard this," he writes,

> it has occurred to us that, if on the continent of America there should be several pairs of young male and female elephants turned loose in forests where there was abundance of water and grass in any region under the sun's declination both North and South, called by the English the Torrid Zone – and all were forbidden to molest them, to attempt to raise them would be well, and if the climate there should prove favorable to elephants, we are of the opinion that after a while they will increase till there be large herds as there are here in the continent of Asia until the inhabitants of America will be able to catch them and tame and use them as beasts of burden making them of benefit to the country. (225)

Mongkut goes on to explain that there is a long tradition of "this business of transporting elephants" in Asia, and expresses his wish to make a gift of several breeding pairs of elephants to America: "[W]e desire to procure and send elephants to be let loose and multiply in the continent of America" (225). Although Mongkut concedes that Siam is not "able to convey elephants to America" because the "distance is too great," and that

therefore the Americans will have to send a ship to pick up these elephants themselves, he promises that the Siamese "will procure young male and female elephants and forward them one or two pairs at a time" (225). As is the case with the gifts he offered, Mongkut's letter would never arrive at its intended destination, since Abraham Lincoln had replaced Buchanan as President by the time the letter made it to Washington. Lincoln's reply, dated almost a year later on February 3rd, 1862, politely declines Mongkut's "tender of good offices in forwarding to this Government a stock from which a supply of elephants might be raised on our own soil," giving as an excuse the fact that America's "political jurisdiction [...] does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant," but adding that the American government "would not hesitate to avail itself of so generous an offer if the object were one which could be made practically useful in the present condition of the United States" (229). For Lincoln, then, the primary reason why America cannot accept the king of Siam's gift is because these animals could not "be made practically useful." These elephants would be, in other words, figurative white elephants that would burden the United States with the cost and difficulty of their upkeep while serving no useful or practical purpose. Although stories about oriental despots and their white elephants had long been known in America, this incident marked the first time that a *real* elephant – in the form of a gift from the king of Siam – threatened to take on the pejorative figurative characteristics associated with white elephants. While the British response to their own similar experience with a white elephant gift from Mongkut had been fairly tame, the American response to the king's letter was one of stark incredulity,

as American writers sought to make explicit the perceived connection between Mongkut's offer and the wastefulness of the white elephant.[92]

In his 1873 text *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, As It Was and Is*, George B. Bacon recalls that Mongkut's proposed gift "provoked some amusement when the correspondence containing it was laid before Congress and published in the newspapers" (113). Bacon goes on to summarize Mongkut's offer for his readers, freely speculating on the possible consequences if it had been accepted:

> [H]is majesty of Siam proposed to send us not one, but many pairs of elephants, and those not stuffed but dreadfully alive. Two motives seem to have prompted him to this alarming generosity. He had heard that elephants were 'regarded as the most remarkable of the large quadrupeds,' and were exhibited for a price to throngs of wandering spectators. So to multiply them that they might be seen for nothing, would be an act for which generations of unborn Americans might bless the name (if they could pronounce it) of Somdetch Phra Paramendr Maha Mongkut. The oppressive monopoly of menageries would be broken down; and to 'see

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[92] This tendency is not limited to nineteenth-century authors. A recent interesting example, which suggests that Mongkut's elephants and white elephants have been conflated in the popular American imagination, can be found on the back cover copy of Anita Hibler and William Strobridge's 2006 book *Elephants for Mr. Lincoln: American Civil War Diplomacy in Southeast Asia*. This copy erroneously boasts that the book will tell the story of "the King of Siam's letter to President Lincoln offering white elephants to aid the Union (which didn't arrive until after the war had ended)." It is worth noting that this copy is erroneous not only because it gets practically every detail of Mongkut's letter to Lincoln wrong, but also because Hibler and Strobridge's book does not actually address white elephants or Mongkut's offer to Lincoln. While, on the one hand, this may point to nothing more insidious than lousy copy editing, on the other hand it does hint at an American tradition of describing Mongkut's proposed gifts as metaphorical (if not literal) white elephants.

> the elephant' would no longer be a phrase available for the figurative uses to which it has long been applied. Had the good king been permitted to carry out his plan, wild beasts might have become a drug in the market, and showmen might have been driven in despair to Congress, before their time. But there was another motive for the proposal. The king had heard that camels had been introduced as beasts of burden on the Western plains. But if there were Western plains that needed camels, there were also, he argued, Southern jungles in America that needed elephants. And whence could the supply so fitly come as from the land of the White Elephant, and from the king who had placed that serene quadruped upon his banner? (114)

As this last sentence makes clear, Bacon wants to explicitly connect Mongkut's gift with the idea of the white elephant, referring to Siam here, and in his book's title, as "the land of the White Elephant"[93] and suggesting that – because he created Siam's white elephant flag[94] – Mongkut himself is a kind of source of white elephants. Bacon's claim that Mongkut's "alarming generosity" is "dreadful" because it is "alive," is entirely consistent with the *New York Times*' story of the white elephant as a fatal gift that will eat its recipient "out of house and home." And the hypothetical elephants Bacon describes, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner, do become burdensome, flooding the "wild beast" market, driving menageries out of business, and forcing on Congress more dishonest men

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[93] This is a fairly common development in nineteenth-century American writing about Siam; c.f. Frank Vincent's *The Land of the White Elephant: Sights and Scenes in South-Eastern Asia.*

[94] According to Rong Syamananda it was Phra Phutthaloetla (Rama II) who created the white elephant flag (1), although Thongchai Winichakul claims it was in fact Mongkut (171).

than even they can handle. Perhaps the most interesting suggestion Bacon makes, however, is that the presence of these elephants would curtail the effectiveness of figurative language. Bacon suggests that, with so many elephants running about, the expression "to see the elephant" would be drained of its figurative significance. According to Peter Messent, "to see the elephant," or "seeing the elephant," originated as an American "frontier expression" based on experiencing "the practical joke that the mining frontier amounted to" (98). "'To see the Elephant,' in this mining context," Messent explains, "was to be aware of this joke, to see through the hoax, for behind western illusions of wealth and success lay mainly the Elephant of gross self-deception and inevitable failure" (98). Of course, the irony here is that even though Mongkut's gift would change the meaning of "seeing the elephant" from a figurative to a quotidian (and hence literal) expression, in Bacon's view this gift is itself a perfect example of the kind of "gross self-deception and inevitable failure" that the figurative expression was supposed to satirize in the first place. To see the elephant is to see that Mongkut's "scheme" is destined to fail, but one cannot "see the elephant" anymore because the sheer number of real elephants that one has to see on a daily basis have seemingly devoured this figurative expression. Since Bacon extends the figurative meaning of Mongkut's elephants to include the idea of the white elephant as well, it stands to reason that the presence of so many elephants might also affect the figurative definition of "white elephant." These elephants, after all, would be figurative white elephants for the American people, but because they would not be literally white, it would perhaps seem nonsensical for everyone to continue to refer to them as "white" elephants, which in turn could eliminate the phrase from the American lexicon. Then again, by Bacon's time it

was well known that Siamese white elephants weren't really white (a fact that Bacon himself acknowledges), so perhaps it wouldn't prove to be a problem after all. It might not have made a difference, from a strictly physiological standpoint, if Mongkut had sent regular elephants or *chang pheuak*. Regardless, though, by suggesting that these real non-white elephants would be figurative white elephants, Bacon (perhaps unwittingly) alludes to the paradox that lies at the heart of the word "white elephant." As a signifier it does not correspond to a real world object, but it does signify a certain kind of gift because it gives the West a new way of thinking about waste and value, albeit one that burdens the West with a certain blindness toward its own deficiencies. In Bacon's passage this non-correspondence between signifier and object is reified in the form of these real elephants that are not themselves white, but are inarguably white elephants. What Mongkut's fatal gift gives, then, is a white elephant that delivers the truth about the phrase "white elephant" but simultaneously burdens its recipients by devouring the very kind of figurative language that allowed them to describe burdensome objects as white elephants to begin with. The semiotic circle, constantly cycling between "white elephant," "*chang pheuak*," and "burdensome possession" is disrupted by the "dreadful" power of life. What Bacon's passage makes abundantly clear is that a white elephant is a "fatal" gift because it is a material object that necessarily consumes or destroys other material resources. This is a point that American writers, in the wake of Mongkut's offer to President Lincoln, underscored repeatedly in their texts about Siam and its white elephants.

In his 1874 travel narrative *The Land of the White Elephant: Sights and Scenes in South-Eastern Asia*, Frank Vincent frequently emphasizes the costs and dangers associated with white elephants. He describes a white elephant that he sees in Burma as a

"vicious brute," despite the fact that it is "surrounded with the 'adjuncts of royalty'" (65). In Siam he also visits the "so-called 'white' elephants," but he mostly leaves the explanation of the significance of these animals to John Bowring, from whom he cites a lengthy passage. Even though Vincent shows that he respects Bowring's opinions on white elephants by claiming that "he is about the only person who has written at length on this subject," he nevertheless feels the need to supplement Bowring's account with some details of his own devising (161). "In the money market a white elephant is almost beyond price," Vincent writes, "Ten thousand sovereigns ($50,000) would hardly represent its pecuniary value; a hair from its tail is worth a Jew's ransom" (161). In this passage, Vincent clearly takes a detail from Bowring's text – the gift of a hair from the white elephant's tail – and suggests not only that it is tremendously expensive, but also that – as a kind of "ransom" – it carries with it the burden of obligation. Moreover, by putting a price (and, in his opinion, a rather low one) on the white elephant, in American dollars, Vincent ensures that his readers will have a real sense of the amount of wealth that the white elephant represents, instead of an abstract description like "a great fortune" or some similar phrase. It seems likely that Vincent's anxiety about the cost of white elephants is rooted in the same concerns that Lincoln expressed when he told Mongkut that he could not accept a gift that was not "practically useful." Indeed, the question of the "practical" and "useful" aspects of the white elephant is a popular topic in much post-Harris treaty writing about Siam. Bacon, for example, expresses hope that "[a]dvancing civilization" will "make it evident, even to the Siamese, that there are other things more admirable and worthy of reverence" (333). Similarly, Harriet M. House, an American missionary in Siam, writes about her own "hope" that "the day will soon come when

Christianity will supplant Buddhism, and the Siamese will be wise enough to prize the elephant only for what it can do in the service of man" (137). For both Bacon and House, the advancing forces of either civilization or true religion should rid the Siamese of their habit of wasting wealth on white elephants, and should encourage them to view *all* elephants as potentially useful and productive, rather than decadent and destructive, possessions. And yet, despite these hopes that – as Bacon puts it – "the condition of the white elephant is not at present quite so luxurious as it used to be" (333), it is plain to see that the Siamese did still view these animals as both practical and useful. In an 1863 letter to Prince Mahamala, Mongkut states his approval of the prince's plan to hunt a recently-spotted white elephant, adding that if "the elephant should not be found in this hunt" then he is "also in agreement with [the prince's] plans for further hunts to be made for it in Dong Nakon forests and other places" (*A King of Siam Speaks* 169). Mongkut is clearly willing to spend his own resources on this hunt, telling the prince that if he "should lack supplies or [...] require anything else" he should let him know and that he "will see that they are despatched [*sic*] [...] with all possible speed" (169). To emphasize the importance of this hunt, Mongkut cautions Prince Mahamala against "be[ing] led into too much gaiety" while he is away, since "[i]t is far, far more beneficial to acquire white elephants for the State" (170). For Mongkut, it is worth spending resources to capture a white elephant, because such an animal would be beneficial for the state by increasing his own virtue as that state's monarch. The pursuit of white elephants, then, is not the antiquated superstition that Bacon and House make it out to be, but a savvy political strategy. In a different letter to Prince Mahamala, Monkgut explains his motivations for seeking out *chang pheuak*:

> I have received your two letters and noted their contents. To try to find an elephant of such excellence in the forest, as you are now doing, is as difficult as to dive for fish in deep water. Glowing reports of elephants of good qualities often reach me, but as soon as I start to hunt for them, the animals seem to disappear. There has been one exception, however, when a white elephant was actually found and captured in the year of the Rat last. I admit that that success has spurred me on to further hopes. Whenever I hear of a new white elephant, I cannot help but organize a hunt for it. This, I think, is better than to remain inactive. (193)

In admitting his own Ahab-like monomaniacal devotion toward hunting *chang pheuak*, Mongkut reveals a telling detail about his motivations. Against virtually every Western representation of the oriental tyrant's despotic desire for white elephants (including Melville's depiction of Ahab), Mongkut states that the pursuit these animals, rather than causing social stagnation, is actually a way of resisting it. It is better to hunt white elephants "than to remain inactive," Mongkut claims, thereby proposing a radically different measure of value than the one held by Bangkok's American visitors, who viewed the white elephant as a costly relic, and the king of Siam as a stagnating affront to the smooth progress of America's nascent international modernity.

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What did Americans see when they looked at the Land of the White Elephant? On the one hand, as we have noted, they saw a land of differences, characterized by oriental despotism, social stagnation, and the backward and wasteful worship of white elephants.

Yet, on the other hand, they could not help but see themselves as well. Like the Americans, the Siamese had deftly resisted British colonial rule, and this seemed to produce a kind of curious bond between the two nations. What America saw in Siam was its own reflection, an Eastern mirror of its own best and worst attributes: an uneasy double, or an uncanny Siamese twin.[95]

When the American embassy led by Townsend Harris arrived in Bangkok in 1856 they were already seeing double. Unlike any other nation the Americans had encountered, it seemed that Siam had two kings. As David K. Wyatt explains in his *History*, when Mongkut became king in 1851 his brother, Phra Pin Klao, was also crowned as the "Second King" who would "reign jointly" with Mongkut (182). According to Wyatt, this was a "stratagem" devised by Mongkut "to neutralize his powerful brother (and his small army) by holding open the possibility of immediate power as well as an enhanced chance at the succession to the throne should he outlive Mongkut" (182). The title of "Second King," then, was a political compromise on Mongkut's part, and although as "First King" he was the head of the Siamese state, it was nevertheless customary for diplomats to visit with both kings of Siam, and for foreign leaders to offer both monarchs letters and gifts. It seems that for the Americans, however, all was not equal between either countries or kings, as the series of texts they left in the wake of the Harris treaty almost universally praise the modern, progressive, and American appeal of the Second King at the expense of the supposed archaic, Eastern despotism of Mongkut. Harris himself, whose scathing opinion of Mongkut we have already examined, seemed positively charmed by the

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[95] As Vimol Bhongbhibhat et al. point out, the American public's first real exposure to Siam came with the arrival of Chang and Eng, the original "Siamese Twins" (who, incidentally, were half-Chinese), in America in 1828 (2-3)

Second King, with whom he had a personal audience the day before his frustrating visit with Mongkut. He reports that he was "most kindly received by the King" who "speaks most excellent English" and entertained Harris by showing him "a great many books, prints, arms, chemicals, etc., etc., all of European and American origin" (158). Phra Pin Klao demonstrates his knowledge of America by instigating "a good deal of conversation about the United States, the Presidents, and the officers of the *Peacock* who were here in 1833" (158). This glowing review of the Second King is matched by Anna Leonowens, who claims that Siam "[n]ever had [...] a more popular prince," and that Phra Pin Klao was nothing less than "the embodiment of the most hopeful qualities, moral and intellectual, of his nation," especially when contrasted with the "jealous and tyrannical temper of Maha Mongkut" (222). Even Wyatt describes Phra Pin Klao as an "Americophile" (191).

This bifurcated vision of the Siamese monarchy, seeing in the First King foolishness and tyranny and in the Second King only the most "hopeful" (read: Western) qualities, is picked up on and discussed at some length by George B. Bacon. Bacon attempts to explain the monarchical system in Siam to his readers, writing that when he "was in the Land of the White Elephant [...] there was a kind of Siamese-twin arrangement in the kingdom" (94). Although he grants that both kings "were men of noteworthy ability" (94), we have already seen that his impression of Mongkut was tarnished by the First King's offer to send elephants as gifts to the American people. The Second King, however, "spoke good English, and spoke it fluently" and also "knew how to put his visitor straightway at his ease" (100). "It was hard to believe that I was in a remote and almost unknown corner of the old world, and not in the new," Bacon writes,

since "[t]he conversation was such as might take place between two gentlemen in a New York parlor" (100). As an American gentleman, Phra Pin Klao shares Bacon's American taste, showing off his copy of Webster's dictionary and stating that he prefers it to its British counterparts: "I like it very much; I think it the best dictionary, better than any English" (101). The Second King's patriotic display continues, as he has his "band of Siamese musicians" play "Yankee Doodle" and "Hail Columbia" for Bacon's benefit (101-2). "[I]f I enjoyed it," Bacon writes, "it was rather with a patriotic than with a musical enthusiasm," adding that when the Siamese "played their own rude music" the results were "vastly better" (102). Nevertheless, Bacon adds that "the imperfections of the band were of small importance, compared with the good will which had prompted the king to make them learn the American national airs" (102). Because Phra Pin Klao has "words of intelligent and appreciative cheer for us [i.e., America]" and has sedulously "observed the course of our history, the growth of our nation, [and] the principles of our government," Bacon is willing to accept that the Second King's reflection of American values may not be perfect (102). In fact, for all the praise Bacon heaps on the Second King, he seems to understand that no matter how much Phra Pin Klao might look like an American gentleman, he will still always bear certain marks of unmistakable difference. After all, Bacon notes, "this gentlemanly and well-informed man was black" and, he is quick to add, "he wore no trousers" (103). The king, then, is marked by racial and sartorial differences that make it impossible for Bacon to *completely* believe he could be a true American. His manner of dress, as Bacon presents it, offers an apt metaphor for what the American traveler perceives as the Second King's Siamese-American hybridity: "Half European, half Oriental in his dress, he had combined the two styles with more

good taste than one could have expected. It was characteristic of that transition from barbarism to civilization, upon which his kingdom is just entering" (104). The Second King deftly balances the East and the West, presenting an ideal model for the rest of his people to follow out of "barbarism" and toward the kind of "civilization" that his deeply American tastes seem to necessitate. But no matter how closely the king approaches this American ideal, he can never reach it, as his title and appearance are incommensurate with Bacon's vision of America. What if, however, the king was even *more* American? What if he had an American name? Would this make him truly American, or would it be too close for comfort?

Among the gifts Franklin Pierce sent to Siam were two portraits of George Washington, one for Mongkut and one for the Second King (Harris 566-70). Although both monarchs gladly accepted these gifts, there was something of a catch, at least for Phra Pin Klao. There was already a "George Washington" in the Second King's family, as he had bestowed that name upon his son Prince Wichaichan (Wyatt 191). Vincent notes that this prince "was generally known among the European residents of Bangkok as 'Prince George'" (150).[96] In *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, As It Was and Is*, Bacon is taken aback by this young prince, describing him as a "tall, manly, handsome youth" who possesses "the physical endowments which should fit him for the dignity to which he was born," and even distinguishes himself from the rest of his countrymen by being "the only man [Bacon] saw in Siam whose teeth were not blackened nor his mouth distorted by the chewing of the betel-nut" (96). Bacon goes on to tell his readers that this

[96] At the time of Vincent's visit to Siam, Prince Wichaichan had succeeded his father as Second King, and shared his monarchical duties with Mongkut's son Chulalongkorn (Wyatt 191).

handsome young prince also "has a kingly name – a more than kingly name," explaining that "the second king, seeking a significant name for his son, chose one which had been borne, not by an Asiatic, not by a European, but by the greatest of Americans" (97). Does it not stand to reason, then, that this prince – the progeny of an "Americophile" father who Bacon clearly admires – by virtue of his handsome appearance and American name, both of which distinguish him from his Siamese peers, could represent for Bacon the transition from barbarism to American civilization that his father presaged but could never ultimately realize? Could Prince George Washington be truly American? Bacon admits that "it moved [him] with something more than merely patriotic pride to hear the name of Washington honored in the remotest corner of the old world," but the longer he dwells on General Washington's Siamese namesake, the more vociferously his "patriotic pride" works to establish the difference between America's first President and his Siamese twin, between the United States and the old world of Asian despotism and stagnation. As Wichaichan takes Bacon "through a pleasant, shady court" (97) that leads to his father's house, Bacon is shocked by a sudden "transformation" that comes over Prince George Washington:

> I suddenly missed the young man from my side, and turned to look for him. What change had come over him! The man had been transformed into a reptile. The tall and graceful youth, princely in look and bearing, was down on all his marrow-bones, bending his head until it almost touched the pavement of the portico, and, crawling slowly toward the door, conducted me with reverent signs and whispers toward the king, his father, whom I saw coming to meet us.

> This was the other side of the picture. And I draw out this incident in detail because it is characteristic of the strange conflict between the old barbarism and the new enlightenment which one meets at every turn, in the Land of the White Elephant. There are two tides – one is going out, the ebb-tide of ignorance, of darkness, of despotic power; and one is coming in – the flood-tide of knowledge and liberty and Christian grace. And, as in the whirl of waters when two currents meet, one never knows which way his boat may head, so sometimes the drift of things is backward toward the Orient, and sometimes forward, westward, as the 'star of empire' moves. (98)

In this passage, Prince George Washington, who initially strikes Bacon as perhaps being capable of moving fully "forward" and "westward" with the American "flood-tide" of "knowledge and liberty and Christian grace," reverts "backward toward the Orient." The "despotic power" of the Siamese monarch still holds sway over the young prince, which instantly distinguishes him from his American namesake, and causes him to devolve into a "reptile." In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael comments that "Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed" (44); for George B. Bacon, Prince Wichaichan is George Washington despotically developed – or, perhaps more accurately, despotically devolved. As much as the Second King and his son may seem like Americans on first glance, Bacon knows that this is merely an illusion, a false reflection of America's virtues in a people who are still struggling with the legacy of Eastern stagnation and oriental tyranny. The truth behind this illusion is, as he says, "the other side of the picture."

It worth considering, for a moment, what "picture" Bacon is talking about. Could it be that he is referring to the very portrait of George Washington that President Pierce had given to the Second King? The prototype, as it were, for the failed copy that Wichaichan turned out to be? During his conversation with Phra Pin Klao, Bacon finds himself distracted by the presence of the young prince, and other members of the Second King's family, who "lay prostrate with obsequious reverence on the floor" (105). "To see men and women degraded literally to a level with the beasts that perish, was all the more strange and sad by contrast with the civilization which was shown in the conversation and manners of the king," Bacon writes, adding, "I half expected to see the portrait of the real George Washington on the wall blush with shame and indignation as it looked down on the reptile attitude of his namesake" (105). This portrait was a gift, and like all gifts it remembers where it came from, blushing in shame at the contrast between the American values represented by its subject, and the Siamese values it "looked down" upon on the floor. It was a gift from America, and it was a gift *of* America – a representation of a man who was, in Bacon's words, "the greatest of Americans." And yet when this present returned to America, in the form of Siam's own "George Washington," it came with a burden attached: the legacy of despotism and stagnation that was seemingly inextricable from the Southeast Asian country that America viewed as its Far Eastern mirror. And by what name does Bacon refer to this country? In the passage cited above, and throughout his chapter on the Second King, it is not simply "Siam," but rather the "Land of the White Elephant." It is under the sign of the white elephant, then, that we should understand the bizarre exchange of the "real" George Washington for a depraved and debased Siamese copy. The picture of George Washington returns to America burdened

with an uncanny and unwelcome Siamese twin, a devolved version of the great nation America imagines itself to be, and it is the legacy of the white elephant that has caused this grotesque transformation. As Bacon makes abundantly clear in his discussion of Mongkut's letter to Lincoln, to accept a gift from the Siamese is to accept a white elephant. By initiating diplomatic and economic relations with Siam, and by giving Siam a present that is in fact a piece of itself, America runs the risk of being obliged to accept whatever countergift the Siamese might offer, even if it distorts that original American gift beyond recognition, and threatens to burden America with the cost of doing business with the stagnant and despotic land that has, for centuries, been brandished in Western writing as the land of the white elephant.

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