The Refusal of Migrant Subjectivity: Queer Times and Spaces in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Rebecca Fine Romanow

*I wasn’t a misfit; I could join the elements of myself together. It was the others, they wanted misfits, they wanted you to embody within yourself their ambivalence.*


Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1991) tells the story of a half-Indian, half-English boy, Karim Amir, coming of age in 1970s Britain.¹ The book introduces what Nahem Youssaf describes as “a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed,” who has “emerged from two old histories,” and observes a theme that is central to Kureishi’s work: in Youssaf words, the “historicized tension between the history of the colonizer and the colonized that characterizes Hanif Kureishi the author” (4, 7). In this essay, I argue that Kureishi seeks to circumscribe a perspective in which it is possible not only to raise questions that concern the neocolonization of immigrants in Britain, but also, simultaneously, to refuse to address these very questions, and hence, to provide a positionality that both describes and negates the cultural and social subjectification of the immigrant subject.

In *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Judith Halberstam defines queer life as the “(p)otentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing,” which exists against the normative timeline that centers on reproduction (2). In the character of Karim, Kureishi’s novel offers an example of an adolescent subject who, particularly through the acts of his body, pursues the unscripted life, and in many ways, an unscripted adolescence, inhabiting what Halberstam calls a “queer time and space.” Karim negotiates his passage through adolescence to create a body and a life that are outside the definitions of his place within the racist and neocolonizing constructs of 1960s England. As Berthold Schoene points out,

*Emerging from* in between the imperialist black vs. white rhetoric of racial segregation, the unprecedented ambiguity of Karim’s difference threatens to permeate the
rigid structures of psychic and ideological Anglo-British territorialism. Not only has Karim become unidentifiable within the framework of binarist discourse, his indeterminacy questions the conceptual accuracy and purpose of all epistemological attempts at ethnic identification. (qtd. in Thomas 70)

Investigating the ways in which Karim voids and avoids the strictures of this “ethnic identification,” I analyze the raciological constructs that Kureishi depicts in his novel, aligning Karim’s “escape” from the suburbs and family life with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of nomadism, Steve Pile’s theory of queer geography, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s idea of the “anthropological exodus,” through which the body becomes complicit in the movement that underscores the refusal of subjectivity. Emphasizing Karim’s role as an actor, as well as his attitude and performance of sexualities, I use Hardt and Negri’s construct of the ‘new barbarian,’ a figure who embodies corporeal resistance, and who performs Deleuze’s and Guattari’s acts of deterриториization, to show his rejection of migrant identity to be located in his inhabitance of queer time and space.

Halberstam explains that, “[i]f we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity” (1). If we do, indeed, “detach queerness from sexual identity,” the spaces that function in non-normative time patterns and across spaces that escape conventional definition can be revealed. Halberstam emphasizes that ‘queer time’ is removed from the normative timeline that is “upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” (4), and becomes a timeframe where notions of past, present, and future are ‘diminished’ (2), that is, conflated, confused, or entirely erased. Those who inhabit queer time upset or disengage themselves from the normative progression of a life that is lived in order to fulfill the “logics of labor and production . . . [and] the logic of capital accumulation” (10). If the notion of reproduction is removed from the timeline of life, if the present no longer pivots around the past and future, then the subject lives in ‘queer time,’ both freed and excluded from normative societal expectations.

Indeed, the postcolonial itself can be seen to inhabit such a queer space and time: the emphasis on lands subjected to imperialistic rule constructs a necessary binary of Us/Other, where the weight of history defines the present and the future, as well as the bodies and individualities of those who inhabit this space. The notion of a normative timeline is disrupted both by the increasing weight of the past, and by the “diminishing future [that] creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now” (Halberstam 2); where thoughts of a return to the homeland, as well as a hope for inclusion in the adopted country, are always simultaneously infusing and disengaging from concrete future plans.

In addition, the sheer vastness of the space that is named as ‘postcolonial’ defies any form of geographic normalcy. In twenty years of postcolonial theory, the