In the culminating chapter of Shyam Selvadurai’s novel, *Funny Boy*, are all the necessary ingredients for a possible rescue fantasy: a principal asks a student to read two British poems about the golden days of yesteryear at a school recital. One poem, “The Best School of All,” is meant to help the audience reminisce about their own school days and to rouse sufficient sentiment to back a rescue of the school from government restructuring. The function of the child, as such, is to perform nostalgia. At first glance, Selvadurai’s protagonist, Arjie, seems equipped for this task. An expressive boy, prone to melodrama, Arjie acts out fantasies with his siblings, performs in a community production of *The King and I*, and basks in any hint of admiration granted him. Indeed, he is singled out as a candidate for the performance due to his effusive reading of the poem in class. Yet the poem bears a troubling logic for Arjie. It is by dint of an oppressive disciplinary code that the principal (nicknamed Black Tie) keeps his vision of “The Best School” intact, and those who fall short of this vision are grouped together and punished as the “future ills and burdens of Sri Lanka” (224). A queer youth whose school experiences are vastly different from those expressed in the poem, Arjie struggles mightily to relate to the poem’s speaker.
It is this tenuous relationship between Arji’s singularity and the exemplary literary youth he is meant to emulate that I take up in this paper. Not only is Arjie’s character overshadowed by the British speaker of the poem he is meant to read, but *Funny Boy* is haunted by, and written in response to, the very structure of the coming-of-age genre. In an attempt to negotiate an alliance between individual desires and the collective public body, the coming-of-age novel fuses these two realms—singular youth and the cultural moment—so fully that youth becomes valued for its referential function: its ability to index the storm, stress, and putative resolution of social progress. Selvadurai, who includes both Western and postcolonial coming-of-age novels in his account of texts that have inspired him, notes an undeniable interconnection between the personal and the political in *Funny Boy* (Marks 7). However, Arjie’s coming of age is set against the backdrop of a particularly unstable moment in Sri Lankan History. His growing awareness of how his homosexuality marginalizes him mirrors his growing awareness of the precarious future of Tamil Sri Lankans within the Sinhalese population. Arjie tries to make sense of the feuds in his upper-middle-class Tamil family, which erupt over issues of Tamil disloyalty, terrorism, violence, death, and ultimately, before he flees to Canada, the burning of his house in the 1983 Tamil riots. In narrating the difficulties of finding a space of belonging or aligning his ambitions with those of his socio-political environs, Arjie indexes a vulnerability to, and subverts, the allegorical platform of the genre.

Critics have noted the various sites of Arjie’s identity that claim difference. Daniel Coleman pays attention to how Arjie’s identity development impinges on many axes of difference, including “gay and straight, Tamil and Sinhalese, upward and downward mobility [and] colonial subject and postcolonial agent” (10). Sharanya Jayawickrama adds that the concerns Selvadurai shows in the novel for the relationships between sex, gender, and class are analogous to the techniques of queer theory but share theo-

1 Selvadurai cites Anita Desai’s early work, Alice Munro’s *The Lives of Girls and Women*, and the work of Naguib Mahfouz as key influences in his work (Marks 6–7).

2 The conflict between Sinhala and Tamil Sri Lankans was noticeable when the state gained independence in 1948, but Sharika Thiranagama notes that tension escalated and was experienced as an “everyday reality” in the mid-1980s. This war, officially ending with a victory over the Tamil Tigers in 2009, “has involved the destruction of physical and human infrastructures, the permanent displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, the pitting of majority against minority ethnic groups, and the rise of insurrectionary groups, who have turned from ‘heroes’ to oppressors” (Thiranagama xv).
retical energy with the project of minority discourse, which, according to Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd “dra[ws] out solidarities in the form of similarities between modes of repression and struggle that all minorities experience separately but experience precisely as minorities” (quoted in Jayawickrama 125). Indeed, most scholarly approaches to Funny Boy touch on one or more of these sites of difference and place sexuality within multiple discourses. While I engage with these sites of difference, my focus is grounded in children’s studies. In analyzing the strained child-adult relations in Funny Boy, I delineate the ways in which childhood has traditionally been constructed as both an instrument for change and a space for personal and collective return to a gentler past, and I explore how the past to which one returns is emptied and re-inscribed with new meaning in Arjie’s shifting postcolonial environment. I see Funny Boy as a testament both to the cost of belonging to the type of ideal childhood that adults often seem to want for children as well as the joy and anguish of being released from such borders into an estranged freedom.

The Route to Bildung

When Arjie reads with great expression in class, his drama teacher sends him to the principal, who informs him that he will recite two poems at a public prize-giving ceremony for the school community. One poem, Henry Newbolt’s “The Best School of All,” features a student revisiting his school in adulthood. The speaker opens with the declaration that “It’s good to see the school we knew / The land of youth and dream” (235). The poem ends:

We’ll honour yet the school we knew
The best school of all
We’ll honour yet the rule we knew
Till the last bell call
For working days or holidays
And glad or melancholy days
They were great days and jolly days
At the best school of all. (226)

The principal draws on this poem as a plea to keep with the school’s colonial and secular curriculum and traditions and to dissuade people from the possibility of change. His opponent, Lokubandara, supports the possibility of turning the academy into a Buddhist institution. Lokubandara is a political appointee with a cabinet minister for a cousin; he has great power over Black Tie. His desire to restructure the academy is partly a response to the growing tension between Tamil and Sinhala students in
the school. The new institution would exclude, among others, Tamil students like Arjie. To this end, Black Tie’s use of nostalgia here is not simply regressive; his secular ideals are important. Arjie is meant to represent and embody these ideals at the prize-giving ceremony, in front of the minister of education and the entire board of education. He is told outright that “the student who recites these poems will have the honour of helping our beloved principal save the school” (246).

As Srilal Perera notes in his study of the text, it is not only syllabus content or books in libraries and on classroom shelves that generate ideology. Recitations of poems, national anthems and creeds also reproduce ideology, and recitation is a common practice of neocolonial education (Perera 84). Interestingly, as Perera notes, one of the verses in “Vitae Lampada,” a poem Arjie is asked to recite, draws a parallel between a schoolboy playing cricket and a crisis in an outpost of the Empire, where, in spite of their dead captain, soldiers must continue to battle. The students are asked, by valorizing this poem, to identify with the soldiers and not the “Natives” (Perera 82).

The parallel between cricket and battle is of great significance, and we can align it with another moment earlier in the text when Arjie is banished from his grandparent’s house, where, in the privacy of their backyard, he is free to engage in pretend play and dress up with his female cousins. Arjie is forced to make an appearance on the cricket field, where his male cousins gather, and he likens his movement there to that of a soldier on a ship that “leaves port for the vast expanse of sea” (5). This discourse of adventure has a gendered history—one that Neloufer de Mel examines in her study of gender relations in Sri Lanka. De Mel reads the cricket field as an apt metaphor for the exclusion of women from a “male dominated political arena and a masculinist discourse of the nation” (21). Women’s cricket receives little sponsorship, and the field is a space invested with national pride. It is a space where subjects are groomed in the hopes that they will excel and become venerated by “a public weary of its nation as a failed utopia” (21). Upon his exile from the girl’s play area, Arjie looks back longingly on the space of childhood, from which he is now separated:

Those spend-the-days, the remembered innocence of childhood, are now coloured by the loss of all that was associated with them.... Those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved. Like a ship that leaves a port for the vast expanse of sea, those much looked forward to days took me away from the safe harbour of childhood towards the precarious waters of adult life. (5)
In the poem Arjie is asked to recite, in his parent’s insistence on his presence on the cricket field (and, soon, at an all-boys school), and even in the discourse Arjie borrows to mark a monumental moment in his coming of age, growth is the adoption of a decidedly public identity. Furthermore, Arjie assumes this public identity only through temporal and spatial dislocation.

It is this notion of growth as a movement out of and beyond the private space of childhood that the Bildungsroman indexes. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the Bildungsroman arises in response to new notions of time in modernity; within this genre, the theme of the ages of man “loses its cyclical nature and begins to prepare for the phenomenon of historical perspectives” (26). In the classic Bildungsroman that Bakhtin surveys, the emergence of youth is yoked to, and represents, the emergence of the nation, and so “the image of the emerging man begins to surmount its private nature (within certain limits, of course) and enters into a completely new, spatial sphere of historical existence” (24). Bildung philosophy emerges from Johann Gottfried von Herder’s notion that “the development of the forces of our soul is the purpose of our existence on earth” (quoted in Pascal 134); to come of age means to work on inner development so that Vernunft—the spirit of the private self—might fuse with the evolving socio-political body. By way of the Bildungsroman, the notion that this fusion is the highest form of personal fulfilment is instilled, in Franco Moretti’s words, “with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equaled again” (16). Furthermore, as Martin Swales notes, education in its broadest sense is meant to link the Bildungsheld to “the generality of a culture, the clustering of values by which the individual grows and evolves” (14). The value of the youth lies in representability: as youths resolve storm and stress and settle into the modern world, they mark ways of managing and humanizing social progress.

The progression of time is often marked in spatial terms by the geographical relocation of the child or young adolescent from a provincial world to a modern, capitalist one where the coming of age takes place: for example, from a village in Essex to bustling Christminster in Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure or from Nogent-sur-Seine to Paris in Gustave Flaubert’s Sentimental Education. Svetlana Boym notes that when the notion of progress is increasingly centralized in Western Europe, nostalgia exceeds its early status as a curable disease, first documented by Johannes Hofer in 1688 in relation to homesick Swiss mercenaries, and is seen, rather, as collective condition of modernity, “a rebellion against the modern idea of time” (xv). Home, the land of childhood, arises here
as a beginning but also as a teleological endpoint—an ultimate retreat from the progress that takes the sailor, the soldier, the schoolboy, away from plenitude. Because nostalgia is a by-product of spatial dislocation, as well as temporal dislocation, Caren Kaplan notes that nostalgia is first narrated and documented as a romance of a “social power and privilege of a gendered class” (45). To some extent, Arjie is afforded this privilege. His parents and teachers attempt to groom him into a proper, public subject, and he looks back longingly as he moves from his grandmother’s house to the cricket field and, later, to Victoria Academy. As Andrew Lesk notes, many critics overlook the agency Arjie’s gender actually affords him in spite of his emerging queer identity and Tamil status (33). Indeed, even if he looks back longingly to the past, his very movement into the public sphere is not one that is granted to everyone.

Yet while the plentitude of the home from which the national subject moves away has always been slippery and elusive, Arjie is a postcolonial subject and the past from which he is dislocated is more obviously so. As the Bildungsroman adapts to new contexts, Jed Esty notes that the movement between different chronotopes shifts in scale from rural/modern to homeland/colony and colonial/postcolonial. Rudyard Kipling’s Kim, for example, takes the development of youth to India and disrupts the allegory of progress that casts the youth’s soul and the nation as co-subjects. Instead of an “organic nation pegged to teleological time,” Kipling’s India presents us with an “endlessly morphing multicultural state with no clear or final political form,” which poses a challenge for the youth who, in order to belong in the Bildungsroman, is meant to affix his finite development and final purpose to that of the confines of the nation (Esty 17). The organic logic that sees self-formation as the move from private to public—from interiority to the publically scrutinizable self—looms large and, as Esty notes, the progressive concept of national destiny haunts texts like Schreiner’s Story of an African Farm and Rhys’s Voyage in the Dark, in which female characters “meditate on the implausibility of conceiving the individual self as some kind of avatar for national destiny” (24).

However, the soul-nation allegory is problematic from its very inception; as Krishna Sankaran notes, the lack of a stable, finite narrative of national identity in South Asia is hardly “an aberration from hermetically sealed and authentic narrative of modernization found elsewhere. Indeed, the crisis of sovereignty in South Asia is the most prominent sign of the specific form of modernity in that space at this point in time” (210). Yet because the soul-nation allegory begins as decidedly masculine, it is no surprise that the most poignant challenges to this allegory come from
those on the margin, even as those subjects continue to be measured and affected by the terms of that very masculinity. Gayatri Gopinath reads *Funny Boy* alongside other Sri Lankan texts and notes how home is a contradictory site of desire, violence, exile, and mourning (270). Arjie’s sexuality, in particular, makes him what Gopinath calls an “impossible subject” of the nation (275).

**Romancing the (Public) Private Space of Childhood**

Selvadurai retains the nostalgic mode of the traditional coming-of-age text, but he does so critically, queering the notion of plenitude for which the youth yearns, and shows how, as Susan Stewart notes, authenticity “can only ever be achieved through narrative” (23). According to Arjie’s elders, successful growth hinges on the invocation of a gendered public identity but one that is not necessarily deeply rooted in Sri Lanka. De Mel notes that in order to stave off challenges to its dominance by colonialism, and to stave off insecurities of a postcolonial nation, nationalism was “largely derivative of European thought, history and manners” and “reinforced middle-class respectability” as a signifier of patriotism and stability (104). When asked in an interview why Arjie’s family reacts to his sexuality in the same manner that American families might, Selvadurai notes that, in pre-twentieth-century Sri Lanka, matrimonial ties were less firm and there was polygamy and polyandry, but “a lot of Western ideas—bourgeois respectability, Victorian morality—have become incorporated into the society” (Marks 7). Selvadurai is quick to note that pre-twentieth-century Sri Lanka was “not the paradise” (Marks 7) one might imagine it to be in terms of gender relations, and de Mel points to ancient Sinhala Buddhist codes of conduct to note that injunctions to cultivate gendered notions of “respectability” predated colonialism (105). Selvadurai insists that Arjie’s struggle with his gender is “one that could have taken place in London or Connecticut: Arjie’s school is after all British, and has all the norms of a British public school” (quoted in Marks 7).

The demands placed upon him by his family unsettle Arjie, and he romanticizes the territory at the back of his grandparents’ house as well as their bedroom as a joyous realm of childhood uninhabited by adults. However, authenticity will not be found in Arjie’s invocation of the past, either. Here the very space often thought to be sequestered from the public sphere is fully steeped in it:

The primary attraction of the girls’ territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagi-
nation, I was selected as leader. Whatever the game, be it the imitation of adult domestic fictions or the enactment of some well-loved fairy story, it was I who discovered some new way to enliven it, some new twist to the plot of a familiar tale. (4)

The free play of fantasy is actually a pastiche of narratives, and in this space Arjie imitates the marriage ritual with which he is so fascinated, changing the name to bride-bride and reveling in the coveted role of the bride and successfully displacing it from “the scene of heterosexuality” (Gopinath 268). Arjie recounts the “transfiguration” that takes place when the sari is wrapped around his body and his face made up with rouge, lipstick, and kohl. He describes this moment lovingly as one where he is “able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend to another more brilliant, more beautiful self” (4).

The child is often depicted as the seed of one’s essence, meant to reconnect the wayward souls who lose their way on their developmental paths, but Arjie’s own version of his best self is his bride-bride role, which, to his mind, is the “goddess of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life” (5). Here we have a kohl-and-lipstick-wearing boy in a yellow-tinged sari—a perversion at the centre of Bildung’s ontology. Fulfilment in Funny Boy is not found in the nature of the private world Arjie leaves behind; instead, it is found in pure spectacle. Arjie sits atop Radha Aunty’s bed while she paints his nails and feels “ecstatic” (52) when scheming up the decor and fashion of her entire bridal party. Watching his mother dress herself for special occasions “was an experience I considered almost religious” (15), but Arjie’s exclamation that she “should have been a film star” (16) in his heightened moment of admiration fuses a love for religion with a love for display and ceremony. Indeed, reverence abounds in his description of her sari, when she shakes open “the yards of material, which, like a Chinese banner caught by the wind, would linger in the air for a moment before drifting gently to the floor” (15), and when Arjie walks solemnly toward his bedsheets-adorned sisters and cousins waiting at the pretend marriage ceremony.

Judith Butler notes that gender is fundamentally imitative in structure, and it is in the miming of an ideal—an attempt to replicate it—that we expose its very impossibility; drag, in particular, underscores this miming (138). The children’s excessive quibbling over roles and their physical fights over the old, worn sari that ultimately tears help to parody the ceremony and expose gender as an effect of reiterated acting. The sustained effort in planning weeks in advance for the ceremony only heightens the blow when adults behold the ceremony and Arjie, with his itchy hairpins and
makeup, feels like he “ha[s] suddenly made myself visible” (13), revealing the depthlessness of their treasured ordeal. Butler locates the very “giddiness of performance” in the recognition of the contingent relation between sex and gender “in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (138). The adults are quick to check this giddiness and turn it on its head the moment their gaze befalls the marriage scene. Arjie is quickly exiled from the backyard. When he longs for an explanation to back up his parents’ insistence that he now play with boys only, he is met with inane logic that only makes the nature of gender seem all the more fallacious: “‘Why?’ Amma said. ‘Because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly, that’s why’” (19).

The referent for Arjie’s own nostalgic longing is singular and curious. At the heart of Arjie’s childhood we find a pastiche of romance genres, a spectacle, and a fully embodied cross-dress fantasy. Arjie is exiled from the “safe harbour” of childhood, but in this safe harbour lies a joyous subversion and perversion of the marriage ceremony—a ceremony often found at the end the Bildung plot, meant to demarcate maturity, or even self-actualization for many nineteenth-century heroines. The only marriage ceremony performed for the reader is in the first chapter, and it fails to secure any real happiness in the remainder of the text. When Arjie expresses his curiosity about why Radha Aunty cannot date a Sinhalese man she has grown to love, he is again met with compulsory logic. Amma tells him simply that most people marry their own kind, and her tone “warned me not to ask further questions” (23). The biggest personal blow comes toward the end of the text when Arjie learns that his growing feelings toward Shehan will never be recognized or validated by his family and community. Of course, this feeling is only ever registered by others as funniness, which is a euphemism for something that nobody at his school, in his home, in the books he reads, actually addresses. In Arjie’s world, indeed in the world of many others, education refuses to speak its prohibitions. Moreover, except for a few people on the margins of his life, such as Jegan and Radha Aunty, adults do not see Arjie’s funniness as a subject of public discourse. As such, it is difficult for Arjie to navigate the unsettling socialization process.

Nostalgia and the (Dis)articulation of the Past

The coming-of-age trajectory is instrumental in evoking nostalgia for another time and place because it registers growth as an entrance into a public realm. Now that I have noted the ways in which Arjie employs and queers the discourse of nostalgia, I will foreground the figuring of child-
hood in relation to the past through narratives of development and will also explore how the past is figured by Arjie’s principal in his attempt to manage the future well-being of Arjie’s school. In linking personal development to social development, the Bildungsroman leaves the child back there, with traditional deep-rooted and elementary values. In spatializing growth, we may map the notion of depth as “a domain which reaches farther than we can ever articulate, which still stretches beyond our furthest point of clear expression” (Taylor 389). The yoking of childhood to a different space—a space that slowly began to be seen as hidden within the grown, adult self—turns childhood what James Kincaid refers to as a sort of “affective tableau” (67). Somewhere in the wake of our development, the child “always is fixed … but always is beyond reach. Change is thus arrested, made an object for contemplation, for tender regret, for sexual arousal” (Kincaaid 67). Carolyn Steedman finds a personification of this depth, or interiority, in Mignon, the small androgynous child acrobat who lingers in the background of Johann von Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. Long after leaving his homeland and seeking adventure in the public sphere, Wilhelm finds and rescues Mignon from a cruel circus master and takes her into his care. Deformed by her acrobatic training and history, Mignon only has vague recollections of her homeland and sings melancholic songs, which have a powerful effect on Wilhelm and, as Steedman notes, on readers and viewers of stage performances of Meister for years to come. Friedrich Schiller received instalments of the novel while he was revising his influential treatise on education and observed in one of his letters: “I am restless and appeased; longing and peace are wonderfully mingled. Out of the mass of impressions that I receive, the figure of Mignon looms at the moment most strongly before me” (quoted in Redfield 19). After awakening in Wilhelm memories of his own childhood, Mignon dies. Her character becomes an uncanny admittance of the loss that progress requires.

In chronicling the various dramatic, musical, and visual representations of Mignon, Steedman notes an impulse to elide the loss that haunts Meister with new narratives that find Mignon a home by the narrative’s end or have her marry Wilhelm, returning to him a sense of his own lost beginnings and bestowing on her a home she never had. Mignon is posited here as a problem to be overcome with the gift of a cozy abode. If she is to remember our past for us, Mignon must be accessible. In order for this to happen there can be no distance, no singularity. Mignon and her strange musings must be brought to light and made familiar, or she must move aside. Mignon shows us that something excessive is set into motion by developmental theory. To use James Kincaid’s language, the “false child” is
one who shows us this excess, who insists on singularity and resists moving aside so that the “true child” can belong to the dreamer. Kincaid notes that the “true child” of so many of our narratives—particularly our narrative beginnings—is like a moving conveyor belt of sorts, an avenue for us to explore our personal and collective pasts (196). Perry Nodelman, similarly, speaks of a double consciousness that arises during encounters with literary children. The child who is interchangeable with the soul or seed of life is narrativized into the world so often, from the nineteenth century onward, that literary childhood eludes even the child reader who, although still in childhood, might be made to feel somehow “beyond it, outside it” (“Pleasures and Genre” 13). The child possesses enough “adult” knowledge “to know why the childhood lack of knowledge they have moved beyond is desirable” (The Hidden Adult 46).

What is back there, with the past that Black Tie wants Arjie to signify? In his theorization of postcolonial nostalgia, Dennis Walder describes what he refers to as “the phenomenon of over-reach”: a two-way hyper-extension toward “home” reaching backward to a precolonial time when the subject might feel a sense of belonging to the land, and farther into the future because only there can postcolonial insecurities be resolved for the postcolonial subject—particularly the migrant who is exiled from his or her nation (233). Yet in some cases, as Walder notes, the reach does not extend back so far, and nostalgia parallels the colonial longing “for a mythic homeland of order, hierarchy and a happy peasantry” (940). In this case, as we have already seen with Arjie’s own imagining of the past, there are ironic discursive links between nostalgia and colonial exile. Sankaran Krishna notes what is common in narratives of national identity in postcolonial South Asia:

- a desire to escape the politics of our time and place, and to seek refuge in the transcendence of immaculate conceptions, pure belongings and unambiguated identity. These narratives are premised on the illusion that “there is a there there”—a space of homogeneous citizenship either where everyone is the same or where difference has been ordered along an accepted hierarchy of authenticity, the majority is accorded its due, the various minorities know their place, and sovereignty is either-or. (228)

The “there” Sankaran refers to is a conjuring of Western nation-states, “historical originals that are ersatz to begin with,” and as state elites attempt to replicate these arbiters of progress and prove that supremely unworthy maxim “We are as good as ...,” the past and the future begin to look hope-
lessly mimetic (xix). Sankaran adds that for those who see politics as an endless negotiation of difference in search of fairness, nostalgic narratives of the past allow for a sort of stasis, even if that stasis rests on a problematic political stance or an “apolitical dead end” (228).

Managing the Myth of Origins

Black Tie certainly finds comfort in the sort of neocolonial stasis Sankaran describes, but in deploying Arjie’s body as a vessel for the adult speaker’s nostalgia, he is essentially requesting that Arjie belie the very difference he is living. The jolly days of youth in the poem, “The Best School of All,” signal an adult’s dream and crush the real child’s reality. Arjie is sent to Victoria Academy because of its trenchantly enforced masculine environment. Subject to teleological rhetoric, Arjie’s father strongly believes and hopes that the school will “force [Arjie] to become a man” (210), guiding him away from his “funniness,” signaled so far by his desire to dress up in saris, play bride-bride, stare at beautiful men, and read *Little Women* on the front porch instead of playing cricket with his male cousins. His father’s logic is cruelly enforced by Black Tie, whose nostalgic vision is enforced only through obsessive vigilance. He struts the hall looking for any inkling of insubordination. As Arjie’s brother informs him: “‘One of the boys had hair that was too long and he wore his top two shirt buttons open. The other blinked too hard and Black Tie thought he was winking at him. Never blink too hard near him, and most of all, don’t lick your lips. If you do that, for sure he’ll think that you are trying to mock him!’” (211). The punishments for such actions are violent, absurd, and vastly in excess of the “crime.” One boy has his teeth broken when he is hit by the principal, and another kneels in the sun until he faints.

When Arjie studies the poems Black Tie wants him to recite, he “[f]inds them hard to memorize … and even harder to recite with any conviction. There were many expressions and words I wasn’t familiar with, and the precise meaning of the poems eluded me. They spoke of a reality I didn’t understand” (233). One of the poems aligns the playing of cricket with the nourishment of honesty, bravery, and patriotism. For Arjie, cricket at the academy is about cheating or fawning over the cricket master and it is “puzzling that one would be nostalgic for something one had longed to escape” (233). Unable to perform when he is meant to embody the poem, he also cannot grasp the imposition of a narrative line that makes more of the past than Arjie can tolerate.

Black Tie depends on Arjie’s ability to intoxicate the school’s community with his invocation of the school’s glory days so that the school will
stay the same and his job will remain secure. Black Tie is so disinclined to release Arjie from his role as saviour that he goes to great lengths to ensure Arjie memorizes the words to the poem, placing a cane on his desk, beating the back of Arjie’s legs, and making Arjie kneel in the sun until he learns the poem. For Black Tie, the body that refuses to signify, or signifies the wrong things, is meant to be beaten. The admissions fee for nostalgia is a heavy, violent one. Yet his solution holds hands with the problem, and his treatment of Arjie only hinders Arjie’s ability to perform. Even though he has memorized the poems, Arjie’s words remain “like a shattered reflection on a pond” (235).

Black Tie’s desire to force a perfect poem out of his difficult pupil, the desire of Arjie’s grandmother to “master what she considered to be [his] devil’s temperament” (43), his father’s wish that the Victoria Academy “force [Arjie] to become a man” (210)—all respond to a stubborn persistence of a sort of “childishness” these adults see in Arjie, which is coeval with a resistance to discipline. *Funny Boy* is an interlocking critique of neocolonialism and patriarchy, and Selvadurai problematizes the hyper-vigilance that arises in the face of colonial insecurity by outlining, with disturbing clarity, how excessively paternal and colonial authority must be enforced and what is at stake with this excess. National discourse, Sankaran notes, works from the premise that territory and identity are aligned, and identity must, therefore, be well demarcated and stable (207). Even though Sri Lanka is home to violent insurgencies that control swathes of territory, postcolonial elites are enticed by the narrative of what once happened “out there,” and “attempt to remake the recalcitrant clay of plural civilizations into lean, uniform, hypermasculine, and disciplined nation-states” (xix). Within this logical paradigm, which renders males as national subjects, de Mel notes that any form of emasculation or transgression produces confusion and threatens to compromise national stability (3). A number of students at Victoria Academy persist as “ills and burdens” (224), continuously punished for threatening the decorum and propriety of the school and undermining colonially derived, gendered models of childhood.

Unruly students at Victoria Academy are “ills and burdens” precisely because they queer the model of upward moral progress by making clear the fissures in power structures and by showing the ways in which security and insecurity must always hold hands. As Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers note, the constructed child is always also constructive—constructing his/her identity out of whatever is culturally available (84). Arjie’s friend Shehan wears his hair long but hides it under pins. Even in the most austere school, rebellion rears its head. Arjie is imaginative and alert; his
alacrity exposes, to use the words of German sociologist Norbert Elias, the frailty of the barrier between the putatively powerless and the powerfully civilized: “Youth,” he writes, “skirt and cross the adult shame frontier and penetrate emotional danger zones that the adult can only control with difficulty” (quoted in Rudd 21). Throughout the text, there are moments when Arjie clearly enjoys “the thrill of doing something forbidden” (63), particularly when he is united with Shehan. When he engages in an analysis of the poems with Shehan, they try to imagine the source of the speaker’s nostalgia for school. Together, they render the speaker as a veritable superhero who must have been teacher’s favourite, cricket captain, rugger captain, and tennis captain in his senior year, during which he also led the debate team and chaired the English Literary Association. Otherwise, Shehan cunningly argues, “how else could he know such big words?” (241). Arjie finds “relief and pleasure … in holding Victoria Academy to ridicule” (242), and in these moments, he is led to question, “Was it not possible for people like me and Shehan to be powerful too?” (274).

Yet that thrill is thwarted by the burden of memorizing the poems, which keeps Arjie in frequent contact with the ideal youth he is meant to emulate. The true child is publically scrutable, the poem—about our school, our dreams, our youth—is powerfully communal. The identity and values of the speaker reflect those of the school in the community. Arjie, however, has had his first intensely private, messy sexual encounter with Shehan in a garage, in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek, and feels forbidden to discuss the feelings he has for Shehan with anyone. Certainly many first sexual encounters might be described as awkward and messy, but the constant juxtaposition of the poem with Arjie’s embodied experiences that lie outside of its frame works to invalidate such experiences and stirs in Arjie a sense that he is betraying himself and his family. He remains troubled by the publically legible, literary child that casts a shadow on him.

An Ethical Crux: To be or not to be the True Child

To return to the ethical crux that frames this paper: if Arjie’s fulfills his duty as a fantasy child who orients his audience toward a different ontological paradigm and prevents the school from changing hands, he will continue to be punished by the teachers and students for living on as a reminder of the very difference the school means to elide. Further, Black Tie will continue to treat obvious homosexuals like Shehan as “ills and burdens.” However, if Arjie refuses to recite the poems and enliven nostalgia in the audience, there is a chance that they will not resist the vice-principal’s plans for a Sinhala-based institution. Furthermore, Arjie fears disappoint-
ing his parents and his audience. The reader waits in anticipation alongside his family on the day of the ceremony, where “the murmur of voices and the rustling of saris created an air of expectancy and excitement” (278). A chair is reserved for Arjie not far from the board of directors. The ceremony begins with the national anthem and then a dramatic interpretation of a famous Sinhalese tale. Arjie takes the public stage, his parents looking at him “proudly” (280). Their situation is grave. Arjie’s family is beginning to face severe repercussions for being Tamil, and we might well imagine their longing to forget about such things for a moment with the help of their son.

The relationship between Black Tie and Arjie shows us the curious hold an oppressed subject might have over the oppressor, but this hold is manifest with clarity now that Black Tie can no longer discipline Arjie. He must give the stage over to Arjie and observe offstage. Arjie has been given very little agency—very little room to differentiate himself from his massive. Yet he still resists with what he has been given. He purposely mixes up the two poems he was meant to recite in front of an entire audience, lifting entire stanzas and placing them in the other “until the poems were rendered senseless” (277). Instead of pointing his elders to a fictional past, he reduces the past to “disjointed nonsense” (281). Here, Arjie stands for the epithet of the very funniness that was perceived as too perverse for inclusion in the curriculum. Such funniness is performed in front of an entire school board. Black Tie is left to promptly pick up the pieces. He begins, breaks off, goes silent, and finally continues with his own planned performance, fumbling through a speech expanding on the ideals and values of the poems—a speech that, now incommensurate with Arjie’s performance, reduces the audience to hysterics.

This prize-giving ceremony, like all school performances, is dependent on a trajectory of linear time. Children’s performances and awards showcase and celebrate successful advances through temporal hoops. Arjie must paradoxically function as a referent for both the fictional past—the “land of youth and dream” (235)—and the future—the traditional security to which the school might again return. He embodies what Bakhtin refers to as the “fullness of time” (34). Yet Arjie does not lead the audience anywhere. His mash-up of the two poems blocks their temporal flow, disrupts the sense of communal time, and leaves confusion in how to proceed. Black Tie’s attempt to discuss the “longstanding values” of the school and to paper over the performance comes across as contrived now, as does his statement that the poems “reminded me of my own youth as a student” and his musing on “if those poems reminded you of your youth too” (282).
Arjie’s singular act denies his audience the literary/theatrical pleasure of interchanging the individual with the collective, the subject with the object, the idea with the affect.

When Arjie first reads the poems, they remind him of the prayers learned in early childhood: “senseless incantations we repeated to ourselves every night” (235). Such incantations are echoed throughout the text, when he is told simply that “pigs can’t fly” (23), that “people marry their own kind” (54), and that he needs to “take it like a man” (211) from the moment he arrives at Victoria Academy. Given a kind of education that conceals and withholds truth, he gives back what he has received, so that when adults are propelled into the “land of youth and dream” (235) that the child offers, what they find there is tactical obfuscation. Arjie over-identifies with the child saying a senseless prayer, illuminating and ironizing for the audience the affects of their dogmatic authority, showing them the disjointed opacity that lies in the place of meaning. He enacts objectification but shows us its emptiness.

Education rests on the seamless conflation of a personal and societal progress, but, as Deborah Britzman so aptly puts it, “education forgets the conflict it requires” (51). In Graham Swift’s Waterland, a novel that deconstructs the intertwined grand narratives of personal and public history, Tom Crick urges the students in his history class to realize that “for each protagonist who once stepped onto the stage of so-called historical events, there were thousands, millions, who never entered the theatre—who never knew that the show was running—who got on with the donkey-work of coping with reality” (34). When on a bike ride, before his grand performance at the prize-giving ceremony, Arjie glances at Victoria Academy from afar. With the sun setting behind it and boys cavorting in its fields, Arjie momentarily understands the lure of nostalgia and wonders if he will think of his youth differently when he is older, just as the poem’s speaker does. Then, Shehan comes to his mind, as do the other “ills and burdens,” and he resolves to remember them in order to resist nostalgia: “I knew there must have been many. They were the ones no one spoke of, the ones past pupils pretended never existed” (273).

Arjie’s performed activations of character tropes—bride, child-as-redeemer—show us the fragility of identity categories and the disjunction between typified performative identities and resistant, lived bodies. Here, coming of age does not mean leaving the provincial realm behind and navigating on one’s own but, rather, lifting the blinders to say such a place never existed. This is not a coming-out story, nor is it a coming-home story. There is hardly anything triumphant or celebratory about Arjie’s performance on
stage. He feels a “sudden sadness” (284) when looking at his parents after the performance. At the novel’s end, we find only uncertainty, with Arjie’s house burning down in the riots and the family facing a move to Canada and leaving behind their home, their belongings, “The Best School of All,” and Shehan. Instead of reaching any form of self-actualization or settling into community, Arjie feels his singularity acutely, noting that his father’s mission to cure Arjie’s funniness has “failed” and that Arjie had “moved beyond his hand” (262). Arjie carries disappointments instead of the hopes and dreams he was meant to. In his postcolonial Sri Lanka, not long before his family flees to Canada, the weight of this burden is surely momentous.

Many children’s studies scholars and educational theorists note that this burden is placed continually on many children. Perera recounts Afdhel Aziz’s interview with Selvadurai, in which the author claims that Black Tie is a compilation of many masters he had at school and that Victoria Academy is a conflation of several prestigious boys school in Sri Lanka (71). Perera is careful not to make any generalizations or claim that the relationship between Black Tie and Arjie is typical of Sri Lankan neocolonial education. Yet there is something in the power dynamics of this relationship that may be disturbingly recognizable. Deborah Britzman’s text, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*, asks educators to reflect on the difference and alterity that has been foreclosed in the institutionalization of *Bildung* philosophy. She engages with Maxine Greene’s account of the history of education in North America and notes that in her text, and in many histories of education, we find

> collective efforts to keep the lid on the radical anxieties and uncertainties of education and nation, all in the name of progress…. We read of these efforts in our own time, when education is thought to place a nation at risk, when new identity categories deposit deviancy into the bodies of adolescents, when the histories of inequalities are viewed as interruptions to the real business of curriculum. (51)

She then argues that attempts to correct generations of bad faith are often met with resistance, much to the surprise of many who are outside the system (325). Arjie publically bows out of this system, even if only momentarily, in front of a room packed with its advocates.

I have noted the ways in which the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* joins the singular protagonist to the collective cultural moment. Sharanya Jayawickrama investigates this linkage in her response to *Funny Boy*, focusing on Selvadurai’s use of space as a gendered and racialized terrain and...
I am compelled to stress that, although the playing field is certainly not equal, any child would be harmed by the demand that he stand in for lost time and for dreams of others at the expense of singularity.

reading the domestic and social spaces of the novel “as parallel to the state of the nation” (124). Similarly, Lesk examines Arjie’s representability; he argues that Arjie is emboldened by his male status and although he might trouble normativity he does not effectively queer a viable nationhood (32). Lesk argues that Arjie has “done little, in the end, to change the political state of things” (43). While Lesk’s compelling essay raises important points, I wonder if his question—“Can [Arjie] in any way serve as a template upon which to redraw the emerging nation state?” (34)—might hold hands with one of the problems that concerns me. Often, the notion of the child as template that the very tradition of the Bildungsroman sets up carries over into scholarly approaches to the genre. However, even if Arjie’s tenuous self-development might mirror that of the nation-state, what would it mean to read meaning into Arjie’s experiences—not only, and always—in light of their relation to the final events of the plot or the state of the nation? Certainly, this is tricky territory. Deborah Britzman addresses in her consideration of the text how one might reconcile exemplarity and singularity. She wonders how we might treat students in a way that seeks to fashion “both a community and an open world” and to make communities “from an inessential commonality” (51). Claudia Ruitenberg has recently held education to the responsibility of hospitality, which is concerned with welcoming the alterity of the other, but she is careful to separate alterity from difference: “the Other in Derrida’s and Levinas’ work is not other as a result of ‘othering’ or marginalization. Rather, each is fundamentally other to each” (139). To this end, I am compelled to stress that, although the playing field is certainly not equal, any child would be harmed by the demand that he stand in for lost time and for dreams of others at the expense of singularity. So long as we remain held to interchangeable childhoods, meant to show us to a better future, regardless of how progressive that future might be, or how well-intended we might be, this burden will be too heavy for some youth to shoulder.

If we continue to think of Arjie in terms of a national project then, yes, he may continue to fail us. Yet Arjie’s singular act of refusing to perform, in and of itself, is important. When Arjie refuses to be a temporal and emotive signifier and publically bows out of the literary encounter to which he had been subjected, he leaves generative space for dialogue. His reading might be made more meaningful by way of Julia Kristeva’s notion of the kind of revolt that, instead of imposing new values, questions and displaces the past by bringing to light its conflictuality. Here we hang suspended, detached from our teleological rhetoric and finding in the place of the progression upon which our developmental theories so readily depend,
instead “the permanence of contradiction, the temporalities of reconciliation, the bringing to the fore of every thing that puts the very possibility of unitary meaning to the test” (10). Arjie’s revolt, even if it takes place on a singular level, is intrinsically engaged with public life. In his discussion of the efficacy of queerness, Lee Edelman locates its value in “its resistance to a symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself” (19). Arjie effectively undoes the identity grafted on youth whose realities are, all too often, only seen in relation to that which lies beyond them. In the unresolved differences that are never reconciled in *Funny Boy*—in the inconclusive ending that finds Arjie between homes and continents—provisionality is the very point. *Funny Boy* should not be seen as a failure of traditional *Bildung* philosophy but, rather, an opening for and insistence upon a more pluralist ethos.

**Works Cited**


