

## KING KONG AND KUNG FU: ASIAN AND AMERICAN IMAGES IN GEORGIA SAVAGE'S GOLD COAST NOVELS

David Mesher - San Jose State University

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Tasmanian-born Georgia Savage began her career as a writer after she moved to Queensland in 1980, but she set her first two novels back in Victoria, where she has spent most of her life. *The Tournament* and *Slate and Me and Blanche McBride* were both published in 1983, are both variations on that favorite Australian archetype, the convict in flight, and are both narrated by male criminals. Not until Savage returned to live in Victoria, in 1984, did she set her next two novels--*The Estuary* (1987) and *The House Tibet* (1989)--in Queensland, a place that the narrator of *The Estuary* associates, less than fondly, with a distinctive smell, "a blend of dampness, vegetation, and cats' pee" (118). Both of these Gold Coast novels are concerned with, as it is termed in *The House Tibet*, "the more or less universal [motif] of a mother's search for her lost child" (340), and both have a female narrator recently arrived in Queensland from further south. Along with these shifts from male to female themes and narrative points of view, and not unrelated to them, in her Gold Coast novels Savage introduces images related to Asia, America, and Europe that help to create the remarkable success of *The House Tibet*, as well as to explain the direction of her latest novel, *Ceremony at Lang Nho* (1994), in which the narrator travels from her home in Victoria to Vietnam. The result is a layered discourse, in which Asian and American images suggest cultural distinctions in the post-colonial world, on one level, while representing the gendered oppositions of contemporary Australian society, on the other.

The close connection between Savage's two Gold Coast novels is perhaps made clearest by a taxi driver's description, in *The Estuary*, of picking up "two kids today walking up the coast road--a girl of twelve hauling a suitcase and a boy of eight lagging behind with blistered heels. . . . She said that her father, a schoolteacher if you please, beat her, but something on her face when she said it, made me think he did more to her than beat her" (182-3). Though in *The House Tibet* (the opening chapter of which was published separately the same year that *The Estuary* first appeared), eight-year-old J-Max never has blistered feet, his sister Morgan is thirteen, not twelve, and their father is an architect, not a teacher, the idea for Savage's next novel was apparently already germinating in her imagination while she was finishing *The Estuary*. Indeed, Morgan's characterization can be traced even further back in Savage's fiction, to the middle section of *Slate and Me and Blanche McBride*, in which the schoolgirl Blanche is one of many narrators. Blanche's age and attitude, her sexual precociousness, and especially her narrative voice all look forward to Morgan in *The House Tibet*.

If Morgan's character suggests a gradual development in Savage's art, however, her use of popular culture and cultural images in the Gold Coast novels represents a stark departure. Not surprisingly, perhaps, cultural allusions are scarce in the earlier novels, where the narrators are on the run following a murder, in *The*

*Tournament*, and a botched robbery, in *Slate and Me*. But from the opening scene of *The Estuary*, in which the narrator arrives in Brisbane for her mother's funeral, and almost laughs aloud when she recognizes the music filling the chapel as "the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey*" (4), Savage uses references to music, film, and television to shape her fictional world and her reader's response to it. In the case of the funeral, for example, it must be the film, and not the music itself, that is being invoked, because the music would have been more directly and accurately identified as Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Op. 30, 1896)--though that title, in turn, might have carried unwanted Nietzschean implications. Instead, the funeral selection, chosen by the narrator's brother, apparently strikes her as funny because of the irreverent connection between the afterlife and space travel, but the darker side of the allusion has to do with the fact that, like the malfunctioning computer in Stanley Kubrick's movie, their father was named Hal. The exact nature of the relationship between the narrator's parents, Hal and Irene, does not seem clear to her, but she knows that they "didn't sleep in the same room," that "Hal hadn't lost interest in women" (17), and that "his heart stopped at the races where he'd gone with someone else's wife" (35).

Films are important in both Gold Coast novels. In *The House Tibet*, for example, James is given the name Max because "his big hero is *Mad Max*" (69), the Mel Gibson character in the Australian science-fiction movie of the same name and others. There is also a cat and dog in the novel, both named from the American melodrama, *Bobby Dearfield*, with Al Pacino. Perhaps the most important film in *The House Tibet* is the American action movie *Blue Thunder*, "James's favourite film", which the runaways sit through twice during the layover in Sydney on their trip from Ivanhoe to Surfer's Paradise. Morgan is disturbed by a scene early in the film, in which two policemen "hover their helicopter outside an apartment where an extremely shapely woman is doing Yoga with nothing on. The two men watch her as she sort of puts one leg behind her head while she's sitting, then the other and stands up. (That's the only way I can describe what she does. You'd have to see it to understand.)" (51). When she first saw the film, Morgan found that scene funny, but there in Sydney, having been raped by her father and rejected or ignored, in turn, by her mother, grandmother, and aunt, Morgan decides "that the woman knew all along they were watching . . . so in a way she was just as bad as they were. Maybe worse" (52). Later, however, Morgan recounts trying "to work out what it all *meant*. The police officers watching her, I mean, and it being a film for kids to see and worry about and no one turning up to say the two men shouldn't have been there in the first place. It was enough to put people off films forever" (52). The *Blue Thunder* passage, then, goes to the heart of Morgan's dilemma after the rape: unreasonable feelings of guilt and responsibility, confusion about sexuality, and a desperate desire for a re-establishment of authority and moral order. The first two are among the psychological obstacles Morgan must overcome by the novel's end; the third is reiterated in her reactions when no one objects to her withdrawing money from her bank account in Ivanhoe ("they're *practically INVITING you to leave home*" [39]), when no one prevents them from boarding the train ("at the bottom of my heart I'd expected to be stopped at the ticket office" [45]), and when no one stops her from stealing margarine at a supermarket ("I kept thinking something would *intervene*" [97]).

### American Images

Interestingly, the country of origin for a film, a television show, or a song seems to make little difference. The moral wasteland Morgan discovers in *Blue Thunder*, for example, is offset by the romantic idealism of *Bobby Dearfield*, both from the United States. Except for such references to popular culture, however, associations with America and, to a lesser extent, Europe fare badly, usually carrying suggestions of abandonment, exploitation or inhumanity, if not death. In *The Estuary*, the narrator's husband, Brook, is killed while working "for an American construction company" (45), and the racist slang locals use when discussing the Aborigines is described as "a hangover from World War II when Queensland was virtually occupied by American troops" (126). In *The House Tibet*, when Marcelle goes out for the day on a boat with a photographer who has worked for the American magazine *Playboy* (149), she ends up dead; and the couple who have adopted the baby taken illegally from Allie are not only American, but "he's a bigwig in real estate and she runs one of those crappy charm schools where they teach you all about deodorants and stuff" (306). American, probably sterile, raping nature and "colonizing" women--the ironically named Greenlys represent all that is wrong on Savage's Gold Coast, and they are driven from Australia before the novel's end. Sandra, the girl that tries to rob Morgan in the cafeteria in Sydney, seems to be identified as up to no good from the moment she comes to sit with them "after buying a can of Coke" (52), and later Morgan reports, "I dreamt I was trying to shove someone, I don't know who, into a giant Coke can while someone else watched from a helicopter" (58). Even American religion is satirized, in the fight between two Mormons that Morgan witnesses while riding a bus (65). But perhaps the most memorable suggestion of the concealed dangers associated with America in Savage's fiction is one involving films, and comes near the end of *The Estuary* when Vinnie sees "the remains of a poster advertising *Mary Poppins* with part of King Kong's body showing through" (185). In both novels, it takes considerably more than a spoonful of sugar to get rid of the bitter taste left by encounters with the monster residing beneath the apparently calm and orderly veneer of society.

The Greenlys' "deodorants and stuff", America, and materialism are connected earlier in *The House Tibet*, when Morgan discusses her paternal grandfather, who "scooted off to America because of some sort of trouble in the bank where he worked. He didn't come back but stayed in the USA to make a fortune from *cosmetics*" (21). Cosmetics are associated in the novel with the "colonization of women", a phrase used by feminists both false--Morgan's Aunt Penelope (29)--as well as true--Delia from the Nin Theatre Group in Byron Bay (289)--and the images of America and Americans help to confirm the author's condemnation of a rapacious, male-dominated cultural hegemony. But Morgan's grandfather is only one of many men who abandon their wives in one form or another in Savage's Gold Coast novels. Because one of the themes of *The Estuary* is loss, the main abandonments there come through death, not desertion: as we have seen, both Hal, the narrator's father, and Brook, her husband, die young; and Vinnie, the narrator, suffers the further loss of her daughter, Clare, who goes to live with Penelope Hunt. Penelope's own husband has abandoned her, moving to Ireland where "he'd fallen in love with an Irish student of oenology and decided to

spend his life with her" (83); similarly, Beau, Vinnie's gardener-turned-martial artist, leaves his wife Charlotte in the Northern Territory and goes off "on his way to Spain and stardom" in films (66). These abandonments are not necessarily a bad thing; even Vinnie agrees in part with Marcia's claim that "most women blossom when freed from the restraints of marriage" (173). But abandonment in *The House Tibet* is more central and more devastating. Morgan's greatest bitterness about the rape is how it has removed the father she once loved:

The worst part of it was knowing my father had gone. I don't mean just out of the room. I mean for good. The person smelling of birthday aftershave who'd taught me to swim and ride a bike and tended every little cut and scratch for me was gone and in his place was a stranger who didn't give a solitary little second of his thoughts for anything that happened to me. Not only that, the stranger was still somewhere in the house and might come back some other time and force himself into the most private, private part of me (7-8).

In hoping to be stopped at the bank, the train station, and the supermarket, Morgan is really hoping to go back to that now-destroyed childhood. She finds it difficult to accept that she can never again "go home that evening to a world which had become normal again" (45). Even after she arrives in Queensland, Morgan continues to scan the newspaper to find "a word about our mother looking for us. And in spite of knowing all along there wouldn't be, when I put the paper down I had a sort of ache in my chest as if something inside there had been bruised" (64). Paradoxically, she wants her mother to be looking, but she does not want to be found and forced, powerless, back into her parent's house. And, when she is found at the end of the novel, it turns out, not only has her mother been looking all along, but Morgan, who has created a new identity, a new life, and even a new family for herself, is now the potent one, able to dictate the terms of reconciliation with her mother, if not the imprisonment of her father.

#### Asian Images

How Morgan, in *The House Tibet*, and Vinnie, in *The Estuary*, learn to accept themselves and re-establish nurturing mother-daughter relationships can best be explained, however, not in terms of the negativity associated with American images in both novels, but in terms of the affirmations associated with the pervasive Asian imagery in Savage's Gold Coast fictions. In dealing with Asian images, Savage shows none of the ambivalence that marks her treatment of some American elements as positive and others negative. Asians, and everything associated with Asia, are almost uniformly affirmative in both novels.

The Asian associations begin on the first page of *The House Tibet* when, during the rape by her father, Morgan stares at the moon. "With the upright of the window on one side, the curve of his shadow on the other and the white-faced moon in between," she thinks, "it was like looking into one of the Japanese drawings my mother's so keen about" (3). Her father's shocking violation of her body and of their personal relationship prompts Morgan to seek order in abstract spatial relationships, with Japanese drawings as her model. In an odd way, this

parallels her mother's earlier experience as a potter. "When she was younger she had a few shows of her own work and was even asked to send some pieces for exhibition in Japan. But Dad, who's an architect and knows about most things, told her that if she did, she'd make a fool of herself" (4). In this case, the invitation from Japan is a mark of high valuation undercut by the father's destructive derision. Though nothing can excuse her rejection of Morgan after the rape, this glimpse into the mother's own history of victimization suggests the possibility of her rehabilitation at the end of the novel. By then, Ingrid Frew, the social worker, tells Morgan, "Your mother's determined to have a life of her own because it seems that all these years, she's been quietly bleeding away with the need to get back to pottery at a professional level" (330). Later, her mother writes to tell Morgan that she has taken as her motif "the more or less universal one of a mother's search for her lost child" (340).

Other Asian images are used as models for emulation and aspiration. In *The Estuary*, for instance, when Vinnie takes "a series of prenatal classes at the Maryston Hospital" (31), the instructor begins "by telling the class that Asian women the size of twelve-year-olds enter the hospital, squat, give a couple of grunts and bingo, produce their baby without any further fuss" (32). And, in *The House Tibet*, Asia is the stuff even prostitutes dream of--at least those at The Rose Club, who believe "that all they had to do was wait and sooner or later one of their clients would slide an emerald the size of an acorn on their finger and whip them off to millionaire's row in Hong Kong" (241).

The most significant use of an Asian source in *The Estuary* comes in the form of a story that Vinnie repeats from *The Way of Zen* (1957) by the English-born popularizer of Zen Buddhism in the United States, Alan Watts. Watts is, himself, retelling a lesson from *Pi-yen Lu, or the Record of the Green Rock*, by Yuan-wu K'o-ch'in (1063-1135), about the relativity of time and motion as it relates to personal identity. "Man's identification with his idea of himself," according to Watt, "gives him a specious and precarious sense of permanence. For this idea is relatively fixed, being based upon carefully selected memories of his past, memories which have a preserved and fixed character. . . . But to the degree that he identifies himself with the fixed idea, he becomes aware of 'life' as something which flows past him--faster and faster as he grows older, as his idea becomes more rigid, more bolstered with memories" (122). Watt's version of the story is followed closely by Savage:

On one occasion Ma-tsu and Po-chang were out for a walk, when they saw some wild geese flying past.

"What are they?" asked Ma-tsu.

"They're wild geese," said Po-chang.

"Where are they going?" demanded Ma-tsu.

Po-chang replied, "They've already flown away."

Suddenly Ma-tsu grabbed Po-chang by the nose and twisted it so that he cried out in pain.

"How," shouted Ma-tsu, "could they ever have flown away?"

That was the moment of Po-chang's awakening (*The Way of Zen* 122).

And Savage uses the story to mark Vinnie's awakening as well. Unable to accept her husband's death, and feeling stuck caring for his German Shepherd, Billie, Vinnie waits along with the dog "for Brook to come home. . . . While we waited I sometimes thought of the story Brook used to tell me about the wild geese" (36), though Vinnie admits that, at first, "I couldn't see any meaning in it" (37). One day, however, after walking with the dog at Gooram Gooram Gong, "the Valley of Singing Birds" (39), Vinnie looks at Billie and realizes "with a shock in my chest that we loved each other. That was the moment when I understood the story about the wild geese" (41). Or so Vinnie claims at the time. But near the end of the novel, in a conversation with Marcia just before the two women become lovers, Vinnie again discusses the "Zen story about some wild geese. The point was that once you've had an experience, nothing can take it away from you. When I finally saw that, it allowed me to come to terms with the fact that he'd gone, but I still *blamed* him for it" (178). Only then, having dealt with the sense of abandonment she felt as a result of Brook's death, can Vinnie confront "the grief I *hadn't* put behind me. The grief of losing Clare, "the daughter who has gone to live with Penelope Hunt" (179).

An important Asian element in both novels is the martial arts. These are embodied, in *The Estuary*, by Beau, who applies for the job as Vinnie's gardener "wearing a tee shirt with a picture of a man in a Kendo suit on it wielding a rake instead of a staff" (57). Beau--Vinnie herself gives him the name (215)--is a black belt in karate, and he eventually leaves town "to launch a travelling show of the martial arts. . . . People are hot for it--Karate-Do, Wing Chun, Kendo, Kyudo--we'll do the lot" (62). The show breaks up, but Beau goes on to star in "a film called *Ku Fu Glory*" (66). Then, after two more films, Vinnie reads that Beau has "turned his back on the good life and gone to Korea to study and meditate" (67). His return to Australia at the end of the novel and his promise to visit Vinnie in Queensland add a romantic twist to the happy ending that also includes reconciliation with her daughter, Clare, and reunion with her friend, Hannibal.

In *The House Tibet*, Morgan's lover, Joss, is also a martial artist. Marcelle's first description of him is as "a Chinese kid who does all this Karate" (71). And when Joss first visits, he shows "J-Max bits of Kung Fu, which he called *Goong Fu*" (104). Joss has studied with Master Ho, who serves as one of the moral centers and surrogate fathers of the novel. When Joss is arrested while trying to get Allie to a hospital to have her baby, he gives Master Ho as a reference and, he tells Morgan, after that the other prisoners leave him alone: "They probably thought I was the new Bruce Lee" (195). Later, when Allie tells her that "life's perilous for girls. . . a girl's whole life is war" (220), Morgan's unspoken response is to learn to defend herself "Master Ho's way" (221). And, in fact, after their whereabouts are discovered by Penelope and Ingrid Frew, Morgan and J-Max do study Aikido with Master Ho, though she must overcome the old man's prejudice against girls; as Morgan tells it, "the funny part is that . . . it was me, not Matt, who turned out to be the one with natural ability" (342). As the novel ends, Morgan is preparing for an upcoming fight. "If I win, and Master Ho says I might," she explains, "I'll get a trip to Perth" (343)--an important achievement in a world where "a girl's whole life is war."

The other surrogate father and moral center of the novel is Xam who, though English (his name, with origins in his childhood, is simply "Max" written backwards), is closely associated with Asian images. Like Joss, for example, Xam lives in the house "on the top of the hill by itself--a daggy old joint everyone calls Tibet because all the winds hit it" (189). Lest the reader discount the importance of the name, title though it may be, when Morgan and J-Max come to live there, too, Xam suggests that to call her brother home Morgan should "face north and like a monk invoking the gods who play hide and seek in the Himalaya, bellow your brother's name" (273). More significantly, among the lessons on life that Xam and Morgan teach each other, Xam gives her a book of poetry to help explain the apparent absence of emotion in a letter she receives from Joss. Xam tells her the book is "*The Hundred Names*--a collection of ancient Chinese poetry. If you dip into it you'll find that separation plays a great part in the love literature of the Chinese people" (297). Morgan opens it to what she describes as "this poem by a bloke who lived during the time of the Han dynasty. (Actually he was the Emperor but I didn't know that then.) What I read was, 'Alas! In vain I listen for the rustle of your silks O my lady!' " And, according to Morgan, "the rest of the poem was about the Emperor looking at the fallen leaves piled against the door of this woman who was dead and stuff like that" (297).<sup>1</sup> But she does find a poem that moves her, "by this woman called Tsang Wan Sheng about the death of her little son. I don't know how to tell you about that poem. It was so simple. Just three little verses in this pain language but it made you see the dead baby being dressed for his grave. And it made you feel the mother's grief" (297).<sup>2</sup> Though Morgan's reaction is to regret having mailed a sarcastic letter to Joss, the poem has much more to do with the novel's theme of mother-child relations than with anything directly associated with Joss.

### Images in Reality

For all their affirmative qualities, however, there is something disturbing in Savage's use of these Asian associations, especially in *The House Tibet*, though perhaps this is the result of its being told through the eyes of a sheltered, thirteen-year-old, middle-class white girl. Consider "the Asian counter clerk" (43), at the Spencer Street station in Ivanhoe, for example, the first Asian encountered in the novel. Though he is kind and helpful to the children, Morgan describes him as having a "quacking Asian voice", "unreadable Hong Kong eyes" (44), and "a hand as elegant as a girl's" (45). Sing-song, inscrutable, effeminate: these are the terms of the most common European stereotypes of Asians. Later, Marcelle praises Joss to Morgan in words that suggest certain abiding prejudices: "I know he looks different from us and everything, but he's a doll" (72). And when Morgan first sees Joss, his head is backlit by the sun and all she receives is "the impression of someone so foreign beside the drab old Australian trees that he could have come from outer space" (78). Yet Joss is no alien: he was born and raised in Australia. But Morgan compares him to her Asian stereotypes and decides, "His voice was a surprise. Instead of being a quacky sing-song, it was flat and Australian and decidedly unexotic. . . . I saw that he was looser in the hips than Australian boys as if the bones there had been connected with a different fitting or something" (79). For her, his nose is "the most foreign thing about him" (103), and at one point he looks like "a statue in one of those ruined temples they have in Asian

jungles" (115). When she is also surprised to discover that, out of the sun, "Asians lose their colour . . . the way we do" (191), it is not her ignorance of the workings of melanin that is most bothersome, but the Eurocentric nature of her worldview, her exoticization of things Asian, and the automatic assumption that the reader shares her view.

Though Morgan progresses from prejudice to acceptance, at least in the case of Joss, numerous other examples suggest a continued bias even late in the novel. When J-Max is shocked out of his muteness, for example, Morgan hears what she calls "this funny little *Japanese* voice" (179). Then, "without even thinking"—a telling remark where racial and ethnic stereotypes are concerned—Morgan comes up with "Chinese" as the answer to the crossword clue, "The end of the face goes gently towards foreign people" (210). The apparent meaninglessness of the phrase implies that Morgan's prejudices are widespread, since her answer seems to fit the puzzle. And, in what is certainly one of the worst lines in the novel, after they have sex for the first time Morgan thinks of Joss's penis and decides she will call him "*Golden Rod*" (195).

While they are having sex for the first time, incidentally, there is an equally jarring passage for the novel's feminist themes, when Joss says to Morgan, "'Ease down--ease down,' the way the Emperor would say it to his favourite Arab pony with jewels and things on its bridle" (194). Indeed, some readers may find objectionable other aspects in Savage's treatment of sexuality, especially Master Ho's belief that "you should start sex early, specially girls. He says if they don't, they get self-conscious and never learn to enjoy it" (196). Savage herself may subscribe to that notion—as evidenced by the fact that Blanche McBride, Morgan, and Fiona in *Ceremony at Lang Nho* all become sexually active (and rewardingly so) in their early teens. But her treatment of sexual encounters between young girls and older boys or men, and of the misogyny of Xam and Master Ho, all suggest that Savage is more forgiving of men than might be expected.

Savage's presentation of women is equally complex. Though she finally rejects the views of Marcia, in *The Estuary*, the most extreme of her feminists, and satirizes hypocritical women like Pandora, in *The Estuary*, and Penelope, in *The House Tibet*—the two names seem intentionally drawn from the impossibly "best" and "worst" archetypes of women that Greek tradition has to offer—Savage's Gold Coast fictions argue for the empowerment of women by emphasizing a particular vulnerability. "I know all about decent men and their daughters," says Marcia in *The Estuary*. "I've had first hand experience" (184). And Marcelle, in *The House Tibet*, goes on to implicate not just individual men, but the entire power structure: "Everyone *knows* about fathers getting at their daughters but no one talks about it," she says. "I mean, how could judges and people like that send you to gaol if everyone *admitted* that they were taking off their wigs and rushing home to get into their daughters?" (75). Morgan's rape, therefore, is heinous both as an individual act and as a metaphor for the gendered, cultural "colonization" that is also represented in the novels' dichotomy between Asian and American images. Thus, the rape of women in Australian society is not seen as an isolated abuse of power, but as part of the political and cultural system,



and it is on this Australian system, rather than anything to do with Asia or America, that Savage has sharply focused her fiction. That foreign representations are, on some level, only metaphoric is suggested by examples of Asian repression of women such as, in *The House Tibet*, the way their feet were "deformed by binding" (115), and the contention that Chinese men "are big brothel users" (242). But, despite the contradictions between Asian realities and Savage's imagery, her Gold Coast novels hold out the hope that, in Australia, Kung Fu self-reliance and the Asian values she associates with it can provide an answer to the destructive, male-dominated materialism, whose rapacious King Kong nature lurks just below the surface and whose American images Savage villifies.

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#### Endnotes

1. The poem, from Henry H Hart's *The Hundred Names* (1933), is by Wu Ti of the Han dynasty (206BC - 220AD):

*"To One Who Has Passed"*

Alas! In vain I listen  
For the rustle of your silks,  
O my lady!

The dust lies thick  
In the palace courts.  
The fallen leaves are heaped  
Against your locked and bolted door,  
And your empty room  
Is silent, cold, and still.

My poor heart can find no rest,  
My lovely lady;  
For you have gone forever,  
And my longing is in vain. (41)

2. The poem is by Tsung Wan Shêng of the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD):

*"The Mother"*

His grandmother  
Grieves long and bitterly  
For her grandchild  
Who is dead.

His father  
Is worn out,  
His eyes red  
With Weeping  
For his son.

But I?  
Though my heart breaks  
And turns within me,  
No tears will come,  
Even  
When they lift my little child,  
To dress him  
For his grave.

*(The Hundred Names 207)*