

Where the Body Parts Come From: Dis(re)membering History in *Dirty Pretty Things*

*nb: This is a very short excerpt of what is very much a work-in-progress.

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In tales of monstrous reanimation such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (or its subsequent direct and indirect literary and filmic iterations) the specific origin of the constituent parts that comprise the reanimated creatures remains somewhat unnarrated and obscure. Shelley only notes that Victor Frankenstein cobbled together the body parts for his creature from charnel houses and suggests, in part, that the creature's fatal flaw was always already a constituent part of its inalterable nature—a nature pre-determined by its debased physical origin.¹ Such suggestions lend credence to readings of the creature as a racialized figure framed within the discourses of colonialism. Additionally, critics such as Elizabeth Bohls, H.L. Malchow, Allen Lloyd Smith, and Gayatri Spivak have advanced arguments suggesting that the creature can also function as figurative metaphor for the stitched together body of the British Empire itself. In these readings even as the Empire is comprised of and maintained by materials (mineral resources and products of cheap labor) imported or smuggled into the metropolitan center of empire, so too is Frankenstein's creature constituted by body parts that have a debased and uncertain point of origin. The effacement of the creature's origins, or rather the origins of his constituent parts, allegorically mirrors the obfuscation of the means of production in colonial systems of capital. Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) suggests that the modern cosmopolitan metropolis and its global citizens, like the creature, are composed of and constituted by the coerced and dismembered bodies of its racial others.

In *Dirty Pretty Things*, the bodies of postcolonial subjects living in urban London are being literally harvested for body parts that are then sold to high market bidders. The illegal status of these immigrant postcolonials is exploited by a Senior Juan who offers

these displaced and illegal postcolonials legal and financial incentives (forged passports) to part with their kidneys. Senior Juan, or Sneaky as he is also called, employs mediocre medical personal to dismember the bodies of the postcolonials much as colonizers themselves dismembered the landscape of the former colonies. The inadequacy of these medical personal (evidenced by a variety of botched surgeries) mirrors the incompetence of colonial administrators as represented in a variety of literary texts that purport to perform a critique of imperialism (*A Passage to India*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* etc). Senior Juan discovers that one of the employees at his hotel, Okwe, used to be a physician in Nigera. He attempts to convince Okwe to participate in the body parts operation in exchange for a passport and money. Okwe refuses and Senior Juan attempts to use Okwe's nominally romantic relationship with a Turkish maid at the hotel, Senay, to coerce him. Okwe and Senay turn the tables on Senior Juan, obtain their forged papers, sell Senior Juan's kidney to the black market, and leave London for New York and Lagos, respectively.

Frears' film opens with a dramatic discovery of (as we learn later) the heart of victim of one of these botched surgeries. [clip 1] Significantly, the heart is discovered clogging the toilet by the protagonist of the film, Okwe, a displaced Nigerian doctor. The removal of the heart and the subsequent restoration of the natural flow of sewage metaphorically mirrors the whole narrative of the film. Even as he removes this unnatural stoppage from the sewage disposal system of the hotel, Okwe, along with Senay, enacts over the course of the film a libratory fantasy of escape and redemption from the toils of the impoverished existence of the undocumented postcolonial. Even as the heart is pulled from the toilet, Okwe and Senay are able to escape their

subterranean existence. However, as I'll argue throughout this paper, this symbolic element is both fitting and problematic. It suggests that Okwe and Senay are already and absolutely interpolated as subjects within the discursive realm of a scatological underground. They are literally the shit of the metropolis. However, the possibility that their identities might exceed this overdetermined metaphor is already closed down within the narrative with this opening sequence. Even as Frears' film offers a narrative critique of the vulnerabilities of this underground of impoverished transnational postcolonials, it consigns them to haunted margins of this society, to the underground.

ⁱ "I collected bones from charnel houses...I kept my workshop of filthy creation...The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials" (Shelly 82).