Sang Nyai:
Modern Ghost and Indonesian Femme Fatale

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Introduction

[The nyai] is a figure that keeps on arriving. This is a characteristic of ghosts... they are, in that sense, messages that stay in place and that, instead of moving on, reappear. (James Siegel, Fetish, Recognition, Revolution, 1997, pp. 36-37)

In a mesmerizing fashion, Pramoedya positioned his nyai...as mother goddess and prototype of the modern subject. (J. J. Rizal, “Reading Two Dasimas,” 2013, p. xix)

In Garin Nugroho’s 2016 film, simply entitled Nyai, the colonial-era figure of the native mistress, or nyai, returns to her role as a medium in which is reflected—and refracted through the cracks and splits in her personhood—the history of Indonesian nationalism and modernity. As Stanley Widianto writes in his review for Rolling Stone, around the midpoint of the film, the “nyai gives a monologue detailing her life as Asih: a concubine sold by her father to ensure his promotion; a heathen; a prostitute; the wife of a Dutch man; a Javanese woman. In other words, as a nyai” (2017). Building on the symbolic complexity that Widanto and numerous others attach to her, this essay revisits the politically and theoretically saturated figure of the nyai in literature and film. Reading across genres and times, I argue for an expansion of the aesthetic and historical grounds from which the roots of the nyai draw their magnetic, and at times repulsive, force. The basic qualities underlying the category of the nyai, I suggest, can be found not only in modern writing, but in Javanese court literature and folk legends that long predate the local adaptation of the novel form in the late colonial period, from whence the literary use of the term is generally seen as originating. Across historical contexts, the narratives woven around the nyai describe a woman placed—and often forced by political circumstance—into a fraught, yet potentially influential position as a mediator between disparate interests, groups, or classes. Seen not simply as the product of colonialism, but as a localized agent of transition who returned to haunt relations between the Dutch and Javanese aristocracy, and who has continued to appear in various forms and guises into the present, the nyai leads us toward an opening in the concept of modernity itself.
What’s a Nyai?

In Indonesian, *nyai* is often defined as a “term of reference and address for [a native] concubine of a European or Chinese in [the] colonial period” (Echols & Shadily, 1992, p. 392). Due to the broad social and legal proscriptions against marriages between colonizers and colonized that helped define it, this sense of the term is arguably rooted in what Ann Stoler sees as “the dominant domestic arrangement in colonial cultures through the early twentieth century” (2002, p. 48). The *nyai* thus potentially points to an aspect of the experience of European colonization that is shared across Indonesia’s and other postcolonial countries’ processes of modernization and national development in the context of Western imperialism.

As Widianto’s review begins to suggest above, however, there is far more to the term, and to the experience attributed to being a *nyai*, than the all-too-familiar sociopolitical and economic subordination evoked by the context of colonialism. For Christopher GoGwilt, “there is clearly a multiplicity of social and linguistic perspectives at work” (2007, p. 412) in the meaning and significance of a *nyai*: someone who exists between, and thus inevitably serves to connect the spheres of, natives and colonizers, however tenuously. The result, argues GoGwilt, is the transformation of a local term into “an international coinage… caught, as the *nyai* herself is, between the world of native Javanese family values and the multiracial, international economy of colonial domestic affairs” (p. 412).

For the purposes of this essay, I will endeavor to read the term multidirectionally, as both the internationalization of a local concept emphasized by GoGwilt, and especially as a *localization* of the meaning and effects of colonization—indicating a process that occurs on the linguistic and literary grounds of the colonized. There, in the linguistic register alone, *nyai* stretches far beyond the values associated with concubines (generally called *silir*), themselves a historically complex group in Indonesia. Preexisting and continuing after the end of Dutch control over the archipelago into the present, the term also exceeds the historical scope of colonialism. While the additional meanings it acquired during that period are very important to the way we currently understand the word, its extant meanings were by no means erased, or even fully displaced, in the process. The term *nyai* originated as a respectful way to address an older woman, or a far more general “term for a woman who is not yet, or is already married,” and can still be understood in that context (KBBI online). In East Java, furthermore, a *nyai* is a woman who is married to a *kiai*, an Islamic teacher and intellectual figure who is often the head of a *pesantren*, or so-called Muslim dormitory school. Beyond these and other linguistic variations, the rich and ongoing literary life of the term began not in the context of nationalist proto/novels, but in precolonial Javanese writing.

Nyai Roro Kidul

In the register of Javanese historiography and cultural politics, the colonial-era perception of the *nyai* as “lowly” is eminently complicated by the ubiquitous figure of Nyai Roro Kidul, the popular/colloquial name for Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, the mythical Queen of the South Java Sea. Said to be immortal, the legendary Spirit Queen has certainly had an epic run in the public imagination. The modern subject of numerous films, books and paintings, she is thought to have been conceived in the late sixteenth century as part of an important historiographic text, the *Babad Tanah Jawi* (*The History of the Land of Java*).

1 The most current Indonesian translation I know of is the 2014 edition of W. L. Olthoff’s 1941 abridged compilation of the *Babad tanah Jawi*. As C. C. Berg (1965, pp. 109-117) and others discuss, the *Babad*, which combines myths,
by Sultan Agung (r. 1613-1645) during the political heyday of the Mataram Dynasty (which has ruled in various capacities from the late fifteenth century- to the present), Nyai Roro Kidul is given the outsize role of lover, advisor, judge, and spiritual mother of the so-called “Kings of the last age” (Florida, 1992, p. 22): the potenates of Mataram and their descendants. As such, she is positioned as the source of Mataram’s philosophy of statecraft, and of its rulers’ power and legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled.3

In her lasting association with the dynasty, which still exercises significant political influence in central Java, Nyai Roro Kidul has seen the island through colonialism and, in light of its position at the political center of the vast Indonesian archipelago, into modern nationhood. While her role in the Babad lends an air of finality or even eternity to her relationship with the regime and its successive rulers—inscribing her into its ongoing history—she is described and generally understood as a conscious entity whose support should never be taken for granted. If not properly respected, she can suddenly transform into a fearsome enemy, potentially spelling the end of a dynasty. As Nancy Florida (1992) and many others argue, the Queen’s power is produced precisely by her structural lack of commitment to men. Not unlike colonial nyais, the Queen by definition remains outside of the legal, cultural and patriarchal norms that limit, but are also understood as protecting, the rights of other women. Citing the Babad, Florida thus

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2 The central Java-based Mataram Dynasty (also called the Mataram Sultanate) was the most powerful independent Javanese kingdom from 1587-1755. It came under increasing influence from the Dutch East Indies Corporation (V.O.C.) during the 17th century. On paper, it became a vassal state of the V.O.C. in 1749, and was subsequently split into the Yogyakarta and Surakarta kingdoms in 1755 (after this the Mataram Dynasty ended as such, but the courts of both Yogyakarta and Surakarta are seen as continuing its lineage of power, and have ongoing ritual relations with Nyai Roro Kidul). However, the position of the Sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwana I, was strengthened by the events surrounding the split, and this affected the fates of both kingdoms. As M. C. Ricklefs writes, for the next four decades, despite the official vassalage, the “Dutch relations with the Javanese Courts in fact took the form of an alliance” (2008, p. 134), with the V.O.C. ceding authority over inland areas to Yogyakarta and Surakarta, and paying a heavy lease to them for the coastal areas it controlled. When the Dutch government annexed the territories of the bankrupt V.O.C. in 1800, things began to change, and Dutch claims of sovereignty were more aggressively asserted, often with military force. Only after the Java War (1825-30), however, was a fuller Dutch hegemony established, and even then, the kingdoms of Surakarta and Yogyakarta were considered the rulers of their own limited territories, although they “ruled” under more-or-less direct Dutch control (ibid, p. 152). Both courts have continued to function into the present, with the Sultans of Yogyakarta serving as unelected governors of the Special Region of Yogyakarta (including many areas outside of the city itself) since shortly after national independence in 1949.

3 As Nancy Florida (1992, p. 24) shows, the current relationship between Nyai Roro Kidul and the Mataram-descended courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta is expressed, among other ways, through performance of dances like the Bedhaya Ketawang in Surakarta, or in Yogyakarta via a yearly delivering of special offerings into the ocean at Parangkusumo, a nearby village on the Southern coast that the Babad lists as the gateway to the Queen’s underwater kingdom. Parangkusumo, also recorded as the initial meeting place of Ratu Kidul and Panembahan Senapat, the first king of Mataram, is the ongoing site of lively rituals, held every few weeks, in which pilgrims come to seek the Queen’s blessings in hopes of achieving greater success in life, and particularly in business.
describes Nyai Roro Kidul’s relations with Mataram rulers as “a profound spiritual and sexual union which was never, however, to be subsumed under the codified laws of mortals” (1992, p. 22, footnote 7).

**Ontosoroh: Nyai as Spy and Revolutionary**

For mortal, historical nyais, the experience of being outside the law was of course very different—among other things, when the official wives of their foreign “masters” suddenly appeared, nyais were often forcibly returned to their families, or were made to surrender their children, over whom they had no legal claim. Literary representations of these nyais have nonetheless regularly focused on certain “advantages” resulting from the lack of a clear status under either the native or colonial socio-legal systems. Whether they wanted to or not, colonial-era nyais were made to straddle the lines that divided powerful groups, and could thus lay claim to a place that, while “lowly”—as an outsider to any group in particular—could also be seen as invested with a certain authority. Since it is not conferred or guaranteed by birth or rank, the authority is fleeting and “special,” but can be effective nonetheless. It is based on the potential structurally invested in nyais to see beyond the limits of a singular, normative perspective or vested interest, and thus possibly to negotiate between multiple interests.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s Nyai Ontosoroh, the political nucleus of his *Buru Quartet*, a novelized history of Indonesian nationalism first published in the 1980s, is one of the best-known examples of this special kind of authority. Like most other nyais of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ontosoroh is an indentured servant and “concubine” whose status is unrecognized under the Indies’ system of governance. At age fourteen, she was sold by her father as a housekeeper and mistress to a powerful Dutchman: Herman Mellema, the owner of a sugar factory in Sidoarjo, East Java. Possessed of a strong intelligence and a burning desire to avenge what has been done to her, Ontosoroh begins to use her proximity to Mellema, his possessions, and his associates to usurp his position of authority. After mastering Dutch and English, she is eventually entrusted to manage and execute most of her Tuan’s business affairs. Operating from the books—and between the sheets—of her oppressor, Ontosoroh thus becomes intimate not just with Mellema, but with the inner workings, and the various weaknesses, of the colonial political economic system that supports him. For most other Javanese, who, like Ontosoroh herself, do not hail from a small, elite cluster of co-opted upper-echelon native administrators, this level of access would almost certainly be impossible.

Using her special entrée to the system of power surrounding her, Nyai Ontosoroh eventually reestablishes her legal status, and is able to speak forcefully in court, repeatedly using her knowledge of the laws and customs of the Dutch East Indies to fight for control of Mellema’s business and estate after he dies. Other than this, however, the crux of Ontosoroh’s position is not that of a public agitator: her main function in the *Buru Quartet* is something closer to that of a spy. In the broader terms of the development of nationalism in the Dutch East Indies, Ontosoroh uses her embeddedness in an “enemy” system of power to extract information. The role she finds herself in is thus not based on direct action, but on using what she knows to manipulate events around her to her own advantage. As someone who has not only been enslaved by the Dutch, but also become an outcaste in the eyes of many Javanese (and has formally severed ties with her family), Ontosoroh does not simply work towards a reversal of the colonial status quo that would potentially result in the reclamation of Javanese sovereignty. For whom or what, then, is she ultimately spying? As Peter Hitchcock argues, in Pramoedya’s literary analysis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nyai Ontosoroh acts as a
“punctum” through which is revealed the secretive and “fateful imbrication of two ideologies: Dutch colonial distinction, and a desire on the part of an otherwise effete Javanese elite to maintain a semblance of status by any means necessary” (2010, p. 153).

Ostensibly serving her own purposes, Nyai Ontosoroh works paradoxically between and within, yet ultimately against, and thus outside of, both the Dutch and the native Javanese/pribumi authorities, each of which refuse to recognize her as their own. In so doing, she begins, perhaps almost inadvertently at first, to sketch the outlines of something new and potentially dangerous to all parties: an emergent nation that her protégé, Minke, an impressionable, aspiring Javanese journalist to whom she slowly imparts the enabling burden of all she has learned, will fight to establish. As she sternly recounts, those few natives who, like Minke, are lucky enough to have been educated in local Dutch school systems, are merely indoctrinated into the reigning “law of wolves that obtains among them, but also among us” (Pramoedya 1981, p. 343). Ultimately indoctrinated by Ontosoroh, Minke’s youthful idealism is severely tempered, then sharpened into a powerful weapon. Like Ontosoroh herself, he must simultaneously deploy and struggle against all that he has previously been taught is powerful and good: “the best educated,” she insists, much to Minke’s initial horror, “are precisely the most abject” (p. 343).

As with the positioning of Nyai Roro Kidul vis-à-vis Mataram’s founding in the Babad Tanah Jawi, in Pramoedya’s literary historiography of modern Indonesia, the figure of Nyai Ontosoroh is inseparable from the birth of the nation, and from the archive on which it is based: the collected, intimate knowledge of politics, economics, and law—or “statecraft”—to which the non/status of nyai has provided illicit access. The wisdom of the nyai’s experience, which, in the case of the Queen of the South Sea stretches into the political netherworld of spirits, is argued by both Pramoedya and the various pujangga (court poets) responsible for the Babad to be the most critical element of a viable rise against the “fateful imbrication” of forces that make up the status quo. While Ontosoroh, unlike Nyai Roro Kidul, does not command an army of frightening ghouls, she is equipped with a formidable bodyguard: the Madurese Darsam, who will attack or kill on her orders, and is suspected by many to possess mysterious powers. Both Ontosoroh and Roro Kidul are hence depicted as women around whom allies and enemies alike step with great caution.

The Infectious Agency of the Sick Princess

As I am beginning to suggest, the idea and literary figure of an outsider Javanese woman wielding a mysterious, politically-saturated, and potentially regime-shifting power was likely not the result of a single historical break in thought or writing, whether produced by the efforts of Pramoedya or previous authors of colonial nyai narratives, or by the rise of modern literary forms like the novel in the Dutch East Indies. Rather, the similarities between the story of Nyai Roro Kidul and later nyai narratives are particularly indicative of an elongated process of development. As I would argue in regards to colonial-era nyai, furthermore, the Queen of the South Sea is herself also viewed by scholars as composed of a conglomeration of qualities and powers drawn from extant legends and literary-historiographic figures (including the Buddhist goddess Tara and the Hindu Kali [Jordaan, 1997]), and tailored to fit the political needs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many of these qualities, spread across a dense network of written, oral, and performed narratives, would thus appear to have worked their way from the Babad and other sources into the conception of the modern nyai, who, like Roro Kidul, appeared in response to an impending political transition.
As Moertono (1968, p. 133) and Jordaan & de Josselin de Jong (1985, pp. 270-271) point out, one of the more potentially surprising aspects of the Queen and her narrative/aesthetic genealogy is the role of a serious illness. In texts related to the Babad Tanah Jawi, the Queen of the South is claimed to be the reincarnation of a beautiful Javanese princess who suffered from a severe skin disease. To end her suffering, as the stories go, the princess commits suicide, throwing herself into the ocean off the island’s South coast. There, however, she is rejuvenated and transformed by the special powers of the sea into the underwater, underworld Spirit Queen. It is only then—as the result of a chain of events beginning with her sickness—that she becomes a nyai in the sense of acquiring access to emergent rebels and Kings, and gaining the ability to mediate in ongoing political conflicts between spirits, nature, and various groups of humans. In the Babad the Queen provides Panembahan Senapati, at the time a vassal of the declining, but still-preeminent Pajang kingdom, with a “secret weapon”—an alliance with the forces of nature and armies of spirits she commands—that allows him and his followers to prevail against Pajang’s military. The result of the politico-sexual alliance between the vassal and Nyai Roro Kidul is the founding of the Mataram regime in the late sixteenth century, with Senapati as its first king.

As the Babad relates, Senapati was also descended from a king, Brawijaya (r. 1468-1478), among the last rulers of Majapahit, who suffered from venereal disease. He was cured only after following the orders of a divine voice to sleep with a woman of foreign origin, in this case from Papua. Senapati’s father, Bondan Kajawan, is the unintended result of this union (see Jordaan & de Josselin de Jong, 1985, p. 257). Disease in the Babad thus often appears as an indication of a “special,” yet unwanted fate that potentially brings both outcaste status and power. Moving closer to the context of colonialism, the Serat Kanda, an eighteenth century Mataram Javanese text produced during the reign of Sultan Agung (1613-1645), provides a further, potentially instructive example of a sick, yet mysteriously influential princess. In this case, the disease is Leprosy, and the princess is married off to the King of Holland. Although a seriously ill, and likely contagious partner might seem an unattractive option for a king, as a result of the union, the Dutch ruler in the Serat Kanda is finally able to lay claim to an important region of Java. Oddly, the king does not appear to come down with Leprosy (see Jordaan, 1997, p. 304); perhaps in this case, such a plot twist was simply unnecessary, or would have called undue attention to the manipulation of biographical facts (such as those of the lives of European kings) that were well documented elsewhere. In the context of the Serat Kanda as a retelling and reprocessing of the political shifts of its time, it would seem to have been not the king, but an event associated with his presence—the Dutch occupation of West Java—that was primarily targeted for “infection” through the fabrication of his literary union with a Javanese woman. Assigning causal status for an important colonial victory to a shadowy, native feminine figure, the hard-won spectacle of European agency on the rise appears deflated to some extent. The discursive marriage of a historically overdetermined legend to an actual historical figure is thus a potential ideological victory for Mataram.

The two examples above elicit a connection between gender and the special, yet still potentially horrific, effects of certain kinds of illness in the literary processing of historical events. As Jordaan (1997) and Jordaan & de Josselin de Jong (1985) argue, in the discourse of proto-Indonesian legends, myths, and dynastic historiographies, women who are able to overcome and transcend skin disease in particular—as if shedding their skin—are often connected to snakes, and thus to the “serpent of the underworld,” a potent, potentially
threatening figure that is the source of rice and other important crops, and therefore ultimately of the power of land and of the people who live on it. In Jordaan’s reading, then, it is through his willingness to engage in a risky, otherwise unappealing union with a representative of this power—the sick princess—that the Dutch King above “as a matter of course came into possession of the land and the people” (1997, p. 304).4

At a different stage of the relationship between the Netherlands, Java, and the rest of the Dutch East Indies, as it came to be known, a suggestively similar arrangement of illness, sex, and power also re/appears, with the effects and benefits distributed differently. The story in question is Nyai Paina, which was originally published in 1900 by Herman Kommer. Indicative of its importance as a political intervention, Pramoedya adapted the main thrust of its narrative, folding it into Anak Semua Bangsa (Child of All Nations, 1981, pp. 137-171), the second book in the Buru tetralogy, and renaming Paina as Surati (GoGwilt, 2007; Pramoedya, 1985b), a character with a similar history to Paina who is Ontosoroh’s niece. In Pramoedya’s rendering of the story, Surati catches the eye of a Dutch sugar factory manager who is particularly despised by his Javanese subordinates and the other villagers who live near the factory. Aware of his status in this regard and rightly expecting some resistance in his quest for Surati, the manager entraps her father, a well-positioned paymaster of the same factory, accusing him of stealing money. If Surati’s father is willing to give her up as a nyai, however, his alleged crimes will be forgiven. Quickly grasping what is at stake, Surati feigns interest in the manager, sacrificing herself in order to save her father’s position and her family’s livelihood. Just before her new status as a nyai is to be consummated, however, Surati secretly infects herself with smallpox. After sharing her bed, the manager contracts the disease and soon dies. While Surati is “victorious,” overcoming smallpox and living to recount the tale, she has nonetheless become an unsavory and potentially untrustworthy nyai in the eyes of her community, and is furthermore left severely disfigured by scars.

Whether wittingly or otherwise on the part of Kommer and Pramoedya, the intersection of disease, power, and women who are positioned as “oddly” effective facilitators and go-betweens in larger political struggles, can be seen as another, deeply embedded local pattern of representation that re-emerges, with changes in response to the shifting politics of its time, in the literary figure of the colonial nyai. Kommer’s intervention, rediscovered by Pramoedya during his research on early nationalist literature conducted in the 1960s, and then repeated in the Buru tetralogy, further reveals modern Indonesian writing to be shot through with echoes of past literary tactics.

Victimized, Proto-Feminist, and Disappearing Nyais

If these long-historical patterns are an important source of the excess of meaning that envelops the term nyai in its novelistic association with native concubinage, it must be acknowledged that the possibility of agency inherited from these earlier legends is unevenly distributed among modern literary nyais. It is most conspicuously scarce, as many observers have commented, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century narratives, of which G. Francis’ Nyai Dasima is

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4 Jordaan & de Josselin de Jong (1985) argue that skin and/or venereal disease (and the ability to recover from it) was frequently associated by the Babad and other related texts with the power of Kings, and often with the process of a King ascending to the throne and thus becoming “united” with land and people.
among the most prominent examples. In that work, and in the many subsequent adaptations of it, the central figure of the *nyai* is presented as an easily-manipulated target of murderous desire and greed, and thus ends up both dead, and, as Maya Sutedja-Liem argues, a “victim of cruel masculine power” (2008, p. 278). While Sutedja-Liem sees in this at least a sympathetic, and hence potentially positive, portrayal of a native character mishandled by fate and men alike, Christopher Woodrich takes an explicitly negative view, arguing that ostensible sympathy for colonial-era *nyais* does nothing to erase that fact that they “generally remained subservient, reacting instead of acting… [Even if] they were not condemned, they were also not empowered” (2016, p. 2203).

As in the *Serat Kanda*, and to some extent the *Babad*, the illusive influence wielded by the colonial *nyai* is due precisely to the lack of clarity, and thus of an easily discernable logic of action, that shrouds her operations in a veil of ill-fated submission and victimization. While some of her incarnations, like Francis’ Nyai Dasima, are mere shadows of the legends that loom from the pages of history, one detects in Nyai Paina, at least, a movement toward fulfilment of those earlier figures’ political promise, with an added element of class consciousness as Kommer exchanges a sick, but privileged princess for a potentially proletarian village girl. In a similar vein, around 1912, as the nationalist movement was gaining greater momentum, a far more overtly progressive representation of a *nyai* also appeared, penned by Tirto Adhi Suryo, the historical model for Minke, Pramoedya’s nationalist agitator. Drawing on Pramoedya’s (1985b) scholarly analysis of Tirto’s writing, Christopher GoGwilt argues that in the work in question, called *Nyai Permana* and published serially in Tirto’s Malay-language paper *Medan Prijaji*, the *nyai’s* special access to the wealth of colonizers is deployed as a modernist device to promote the “legal rights of women… telling the story of a *nyai*’s free choice to leave her *tuan*” and hence pushing, as Pramoedya’s own Ontosoroh later did, for “domestic partner rights acknowledged neither by the European legal system nor by the traditional Javanese family structure” (2007, p. 421).

Instead of setting a new benchmark for proto-feminist writing, however, this particular iteration of feminine literary resistance is shown by GoGwilt to have helped bring about the suppression and disappearance of the *nyai* from local literature more broadly. Shortly after the publication of *Nyai Permana*, Tirto and his newspaper were attacked and discredited by the Dutch authorities, who had come to view the paper’s (and Tirto’s) strong nationalist leanings as a threat to colonial order. Following these events, what GoGwilt calls the “genre of the *nyai* narrative” is argued to have gradually vanished from the Indonesian literary scene, becoming almost completely effaced by the early 1920s. This was due in large part to the concurrent rise of the Dutch-controlled publisher Balai Pustaka and its agenda of “appropriate” native literature, which excluded the *nyai*, among other things, from its heavily redacted purview. The result, argues GoGwilt, was the notable absence of the formerly ubiquitous and promising figure of the *nyai* from pre-independence and early Indonesian literature until the mid 1960s, and then again until appearance of Pramoedya’s Buru tetralogy in the 1980s, which was almost immediately banned until the fall of president Suharto in 1998. As GoGwilt puts it, the “vanishing… genre of the *nyai* narrative becomes the literary form of an interrupted reading process: an unresolved problem of social modernity,” and an “effect of the foreclosure on subaltern perspectives” (2007, p. 422) beginning during colonialism and stretching through at least the first half-century of independence.

**The Nyai as Femme Fatale?**
Outside of the context of her modern, literary/novelistic incarnation (and possibly simply outside of the literary sphere of Balai Pustaka), however, various other iterations of the *nyai* continued to saturate the discourse and media-landscapes of the Dutch East Indies during and after the period of transformation into the independent republic of Indonesia. Even after the dissipation of direct references to *nyais* in much of the officially sanctioned literature of the time (GoGwilt 2007, p. 411), G. Francis’ *Nyai Dasima* was continually adapted into theatrical productions as well as several films (1929, 1930, 1932, 1940, and 1970). Following Pramoedya’s research and presentations on Tirto’s *Nyai Permana* and other iterations of the *nyai* in the early 1960s, S.M. Ardan also adapted and published *Nyai Dasima* in 1965.

As these instances suggest, the clever, unruly figure of the *nyai* was perhaps not so easily banished. Known to move between disparate classes and ethnic and political groups, she now appeared capable of drifting between distinct media, inhabiting them, as James Siegel asserts in the epigraph, to haunting effect, refusing to die or be relegated to the past, and thus continually re-appearing across time. Since the task at hand is precisely to investigate the excess of meaning and political-symbolic potential accrued over hundreds of years and across the various literary, legendary, and other narrative and semantic conjurings of the *nyai*, I will circumvent the much-lamented facts of her literary disappearances and of her general lack of a positivist, self-defining agency. I will conclude the essay, then, by searching for the basic pattern of qualities and features that I have argued are common to most colonial and pre-modern *nyais*, in figures that are not, or are no longer, directly categorized as such. In the terms of Mikhail Bakhtin, I would be looking for the repetition, in various figures and forms, of a “specific ethical attitude toward reality” (1973, p. 137)—one here especially shaped by the role of women therein—that connects the otherwise distinct works of a number of different eras in the Indonesian archipelago.

The most obvious twentieth century inheritor of this attitude or pattern—one who also provides a strong potential connection to the *femme fatale*—is the prostitute. As I have shown elsewhere (Yngvesson, 2014, pp. 76-81), many prominent Indonesian nationalist writers and artists of the 1930s and 40s (poet Chairil Anwar and painter Sudjojono are two of the best known) took a notable interest in the figure of the urban prostitute. Recalling the attraction of earlier novelists and court poets to the *nyai*, of particular significance to these artists was the dynamic access afforded to prostitutes by the very fact of their apparent vulnerability: the lack of social or legal clarity in their position and source of livelihood, and their related capacity—one particularly critical for the nationalist agenda—for capturing the public’s imagination while moving across upper and lower classes, and between metropolitan and rural populations.

The apex of prostitutes’ appearance in the body of works associated with the nationalist movement was arguably the famous motivational poster with the tagline “*Boeng, Ayo Boeng!*” (*Brother, Let’s go Brother!*). Created in 1945 by a group of artists working under the painter Affandi, the poster depicts an Indonesian man breaking the chains of colonial bondage. The motivational tagline, however, while seeming to convey a direct, obvious and simultaneous relationship to the image, had separate, and far more chequered origins: it came from the poet Chairil Anwar, who happened to be visiting the studio where Affandi and others were working at the time. Anwar was known, among other things, for his deep corporeal and literary engagement with the brothels of Batavia (now Jakarta), the capital city, and elsewhere. Asked where he got the line, Anwar replied that it was borrowed from the calls of prostitutes seeking customers, to which end the sex workers had presciently appropriated the self-consciously...
egalitarian nationalist appellation “Boeng” (now spelled Bung) (Sembiring, 2010; Yngvesson, 2014, p. 93, note 37).

Like the nyai, furthermore, the participation of sex workers in the nationalist struggle was not merely symbolic. During the years of armed conflict against the Dutch (1945-1949), soon-to-be president Sukarno boasted of hiring nearly 700 prostitutes as spies, deploying them to serve Dutch and British officers, from whom they surreptitiously gathered and relayed sensitive information. Sex workers were also reportedly used in weapon smuggling operations (Cribb, 2009, pp. 77, 112; Khalid, 2013). Also similar to the nyais before her, the figure of the prostitute in the 1930s and 40s was aligned with neither the colonial/European nor the native/Javanese authorities who controlled the Dutch East Indies. While native born, through fate or by choice she had become an outcaste from both sides, yet one who was often party to the most intimate secrets of each. Unable to fully trust anyone and thus not completely “trustworthy” herself, in the work of emergent modernist writers and other artists, and in the public imagination (and the reality of nationalist struggle), sex workers were invested with the status of a “secret weapon” deployed in the service of a major political transition.

In light of the historical depth I am assigning to this role, and to the attitude, pattern of qualities, and experiences of suffering that follow and haunt it, the comparison with a Western-derived femme fatale may appear risky and potentially reductive. I hope, however, that something may be gained from a cautious assessment of the similarities, and perhaps as well as the distinctions, between the two figures. The femme fatale is known mainly as a figment of the “hard-boiled” detective novels that arose in the United States during prohibition in the 1920s, when actual detectives were simultaneously faced with increased mob violence and tasked with “righting wrongs in a fallen urban world in which the traditional institutions and guardians of the law, whether out of incompetence, cynicism or corruption, are no longer up to the task” (Porter, 2003, p. 97). In both the cheap, “pulpy” novels and serials that characterized the hard-boiled genre and in the postwar American films noirs that modelled themselves on it, the impulse was to convey a “specific malaise”—one that reflected the contemporary atmosphere of “moral ambivalence…and the contradictory complexity of situations and motives [that] combine[d] to give the audience a genuine sense of anxiety or insecurity” (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p. 15). Most often depicted as prostitutes or women otherwise fallen into the amoral labyrinths undergirding urban socio-economic experience, like the Indonesian nyai, femmes fatales located a source of power and profit in the lack of clarity, and of straightforward trustworthiness, that characterized their positions.

If this meant they were figured in negative terms as “openly sexual—and often powerful, independent, and treacherous—female characters” (Neale, 2000, p. 151), as Julie Grossman writes, it was the femme fatale’s “commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be (sexual, capitalist, maternal), at any cost, that makes her the...compelling point of interest for men and women” (2009, p. 3). Comparable in particular to the vengeful, yet politically timely desire driving the colonial nyai and drawing the interest of her readers, the most salient link between the two figures would thus appear to arise from the “powerful treachery” with which Grossman and others characterize the femme fatale. It is precisely the “dialog between their perversity and their power,” Grossman argues, that signals the status of femmes fatales not simply as tragic “bad girls” but as archetypal modern women, or “femmes modernes,” a quality that lies at the root their magnetism for readers and viewers (p. 3). As noted in the epigraph above, Indonesian critic J. J. Rizal refers to the nyai in similar terms as a “prototype of the
modern woman” (2013, p. xix), signaling the continuing relevance of the questions she raises as a critical element of the ongoing discourse and process of national development.

Yet the nyai fascinates, I would argue, precisely because she is not simply a fatally modern, and thus easily fungible, figuration of an Indonesian woman. While she attends, and is influenced by, the “arrival” of modernity and of the novel, she is produced by neither. Arising again at the birth of the modern, “both unfit for the world and invulnerable to being displaced” (Siegel, 1997, p. 76), she reprises her role as ostensibly self-interested mediator and translator. Not quite Javanese at heart, but attached, as Siegel argues such “ghosts” to be, to the land she haunts, she works to process the changes afoot, and becomes a source of their manifestation. This is the case not only with the nyai’s close association with the local emergence of the novel, of which Nyai Dasima is often argued to be the “first,” but appropriately with detective narratives as well. As Doris Jedamski argues, late 19th and early 20th century nyai literature “play[ed] a key role... [as what] might be considered the actual predecessor...of the crime novel in the Netherlands East Indies” (1995, p. 178).

In a way both similar to, and essentially distinct from, hard-boiled fiction in the United States, nyai novels reflected the mounting tensions of their place and time, as the collusion of Dutch and Javanese authorities created its own “specific malaise,” filled with anxiety and moral ambivalence. The contested, “conflict-burdened interracial relationships” into which nyai were drawn, writes Jedamski, were positioned by writers at the front and center of this malaise. The problems in which these relationships embroiled nyais, their lovers, and their children were thus “often—and by no means only fictitiously—solved by violence” (p. 178). Nyai narratives hence “bear many crime elements, including murder” (p. 178). While the appearance of these indigenous crime narratives in novelistic form was an unprecedented development, Jedamski also argues that in a broader sense, “crime fiction [in the Indies/Indonesia] was no overnight sensation”: “elements of detection had been quite common in Malay and Javanese literary traditions such as the hikayat, babad, and pandji texts, as well as in parts of the wayang” (p. 177).

Seen in this context, the nyai as indigenous femme fatale-cum-femme moderne reveals her ghostly ruse, opening a hole in the modern through which her roots in early “transnational” forms—and political economic shifts—long predating the novel, the newspaper, or the film are bared. The role of nyai narratives not only as unruly harbingers of women’s rights, but as contagious local sources for the continuing development of local aesthetics, thus sheds further light on the eagerness of Dutch authorities to banish the nyai, along with the detective stories she helped foster, from the canon of modern native writing they had created and sought to tightly control.

New Order Nyais

As argued above, in the emergent spheres of modernist-nationalist art and writing in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, urban prostitutes came to occupy a symbolic position similar to that of the nyai, frequently placed front and center in the nation-defining conflicts of economy, mobility, gender, and class. In the distinctly non-canonical, but wildly popular “pocket bedroom literature” of the 1960s and beyond, a set of genre-defining femmes modernes continued to unsettle and reshape public mores and contemporary gender politics. These literary post-nyais consisted of hostesses, bargirls, and, perhaps most notably, “ecstatic aunties” who appropriated their corrupt husbands’ money. Among other things, the funds they syphoned were used to create
proto boy-bands for their own, and ultimately the public’s, edification and pleasure.\(^5\) More important, perhaps, was the adaptation of many of these ideas to the big screen in the early 1970s, mirroring the earlier success of movies based on books like *Nyai Dasima*. The result was a series of blockbuster films following the lives of prostitutes, positioned as the central focus of both imagery and narrative structure, as they negotiated the sociopolitically disastrous malaise following the rise of Suharto’s authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998).\(^6\) In this way, their function was also to “point out” the structurally oppressive nature of contemporary authority to audiences who, like readers of earlier *nyai* narratives, came to sympathize, and perhaps also to identify with them (Yngvesson, 2014; Sen, 1993, 1994). Not unlike Ontosoroh, whose emergence they predated, these “fallen” women occupied the roles of both *femme fatale* and what Fredric Jameson (1992) calls the postmodern “social detective.”\(^7\)

Even while hostesses and wealthy aunts arose to populate and redefine the mediascape of independent Indonesia, however, the literary-filmic *nyai* writ large has neither become an anachronistic concept nor simply faded into the annals of local media history. To be certain, texts such as the *Serat Kanda* have for the most part disappeared from popular reading lists. While abridged Indonesian translations of the *Babad Tanah Jawi* have continued to appear in popular bookstores like Gramedia until the present, it is not clear if this represents a significant influence on contemporary readers. But since shortly after independence, when painter Basuki Abdullah’s 1955 rendering of her entered the personal collection of President Sukarno, the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul has rarely been absent from the public imagination. As Karen Strassler argues, via widely disseminated photographic reproductions of paintings made by Abdullah and others in the 1950s and 60s, Ratu Kidul, as she is also known, was “nationalized” and popularized in the discourse of postcolonial Indonesia. Thus transformed from a strictly literary and legendary figure that, according to some accounts, only kings were privileged to actually glimpse, the Queen of the South Sea “became a national public ‘icon’” (Strassler, 2014, p. 100). As if to underscore this sentiment, in early 1966, during the inauguration of the new, international Samudra Beach Hotel in West Java (and in the midst of the fraught and bloody transition from Sukarno’s to Suharto’s rule), a huge wave appeared out of nowhere, smashing the beachside dining area and soaking the various officials and other exalted guests. As it was soon discovered, despite the hotel’s proximity to the South Java Sea, no offerings had been made to placate Ratu Kidul before the opening ceremony. As per instructions of then-Sultan Hamengkubuono IX of Yogyakarta, who was in attendance during the disaster, room 308 was fitted with several paintings of Ratu Kidul, as well as two of President Sukarno, and then specially set aside for the Queen. Save for ritual purposes, it was kept locked and empty thereafter in hopes of placating Ratu Kidul and preventing any further such occurrences (ibid, p. 111).

\(^5\) There are literally hundreds, perhaps thousands, of examples of these books, often published serially in popular magazines like *Varia* and/or released as standalone paperback novels printed on typically cheap, “pulpy” media. Two classic examples are Ali Shahab’s 1967 *Tante Girang (Ecstatic Auntie)*, which appears to have helped popularize the term used above, and Zainal Abdi’s 1970 *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur (Breathing in Mud)*, which was published both serially and as a novel, and adapted into a famous film of the same name (dir. Turino Djunaidy, 1970).

\(^6\) *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur (Breathing in Mud)*, *Ananda* (dir. Usmar Ismail, 1970), and *Bumi Makin Panas (The Earth is Getting Hotter)*, (dir. Ali Shahab, 1973) are three prominent examples of these films.

\(^7\) Of the social detective Jameson writes: “While the classical or generic detective may be thought to be disinterested, in at least a limited way, and his or her reconstruction of the crime-event personally and ideologically unmotivated, such neutrality and ideology-free objectivity can never obtain in the realm of social knowledge, where every position...implies the taking of a political stance and the making of a social judgment” (1992, pp. 36-37).
Not long after Pramoedya’s Nyai Ontosoroh was released (and then quickly banned) in the Buru tetralogy, the Queen of the South Sea would become further embedded in the visual iconography of modern Indonesia, making her second big-screen appearance in the hit film Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul (The Awakening of Nyai Roro Kidul, dir. Gautama, 1985). Played by Suzanna, a veteran of the local prostitution genre and among the brightest stars of the time, the Queen reprised and updated her role in the Babad: awakening and reemerging from the waves off the south coast of Java, she offers herself as a secret weapon in the fight against rampant government corruption and criminal gangs under Suharto. She also works to train and educate a potential rebel “prince”—the male lead—who will continue to fight for change, and, implicitly, for potential regime-change (perhaps the paintings hung in room 308 next to her own as detailed above indicated a preference for Indonesia’s first president over its second). Although in the film, the Queen has undergone a number of changes in her character—she struts the catwalk of a modern fashion show in Jakarta, for example, and dances to 1980s pop music at a nightclub—she remains true to form in her previous position at the vanguard of gender politics, using her “ancient” superpowers to take the lives of several lecherous, overconfident men. Before vanishing again into the waves, she also explains to her brooding mortal male counterpart that not all love must end in marriage, and that it is not her “destiny” (kodrat) to marry him, or anyone else for that matter.

Precisely like a ghostly message that contains the specter of eternally unresolved problems, from her inception in the precolonial era, the Queen has never married, nor has she vanished. In recent times, she has continued to appear regularly on screen and in increasing numbers of paintings (try an online image search). Copies of many of the latter are on display in the short-time hotels flanking the packed and infamously immoderate rituals held every few weeks at Parangkusumo, on the South coast of Java near Yogyakarta. These gatherings, where pilgrims seek the Queen’s blessings at the “gateway” to her underwater palace, are another way in which Nyai Roro Kidul is continually inserted into the consciousness of the present, revealing a hole in the modern that leads to various pasts. Appropriately, particularly in light of the Queen’s role in the implicit, on-screen critique of Suharto-era corruption above, a few weeks before Indonesia’s first democratic election after the fall of Suharto in 1998, Islamic scholar and opposition leader Abdurrahman Wahid, who would be voted in as President, made a pilgrimage to Parangkusumo to ask for the Queen’s blessing for his candidacy (Strassler, 2014, p. 104). During the current Reformasi era that Wahid’s presidency ushered in, rituals at Parangkusumo have continued unabated, and also served as the backdrop for the Queen’s latest literary appearance, in Budi Sardjono’s 2011 novel Sang Nyai (The Nyai), where she aptly appears disguised as one of the prostitutes who frequent the rituals. After seducing a Jakarta reporter in search of a story, she enlightens and broadens his perspective about Javanese spirit beliefs,

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9 During fieldwork at Parangkusumo in 2012-2016, local informants said that these public rituals have been held regularly since at least colonial times (I have yet to find written documentation of this assertion, however). The site, owned by the Yogyakarta palace, one of the extant branches of the Mataram regime, is the same one where reigning Sultans send a procession with special offerings each year to the Queen of the South, whose structural relationship to the legitimacy of each ruler continues, on at least a formal level, to be acknowledged.
which he mistakenly assumed to be outdated, in the process boosting his career (a sequel, "Sang Nyai 2", was published in 2015\(^\text{10}\)).

Returning to the ongoing filmic, readerly and critical interest in Pramoedya’s and other colonial literary nyais with which this essay began,\(^\text{11}\) it is as if the stubborn reappearances of these figures, and of others like the Queen of the South Sea, are working to sustain an earlier page in the chronicle of the nyai that can always be folded and held up against whatever version or incarnation happens to emerge in the present. The effect, bringing us back to the theme of detection, is like clue: it points the close reader-investigator to the thick, ghostly historicity in which the emergence of a new category, figure, or genre is always embedded. Perhaps it was a heightened sense of this historical thickness that helped inspire the positioning of on-screen Indonesian prostitutes in the 1970s as central, narrative-driving characters, instead of intriguing, yet mainly oversexualized sidekicks to aspiring male detectives—like the majority of Western "femmes fatales." To compare the nyai to the "femme fatale" hence finally raises more questions about the latter than it adds to our understanding of the former. Held up to the nyai, the image of problematic Euro-American modernization that is broadly argued to obtain in the "femme fatale" is outshined by a figure who has both suffered and presciently fanned the flames of critique, rebellion and regime change since at least the sixteenth century.

References


\(^{10}\) Thanks to Yoshi Fajar Kresno Murti for gifting me a copy of *Sang Nyai*, and to Mundi Rahayu for kindly sending me a copy of Yusi Avianto Pareanom’s 2016 Novel *Raden Mandasia*, which also features a prominent nyai character and served as a further reference for this article.

\(^{11}\) See, for example, the 2013 reissue of *Nyai Dasima*, putting G. Francis’ and S.M Ardan’s versions side by side for comparison, accompanied by critic J.J. Rizal’s foreword, which I quoted in the epigraph. Garin Nugroho’s 2016 film, mentioned in the intro, is also said to layer its central character with various iterations and conceptions of nyais and what they have been sent to represent across time.


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