REFLECTIONS ON STORYTELLING IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION: RANA DASGUPTA’S *TOKYO CANCELLED*

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In Rana Dasgupta’s first novel, *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005), thirteen stranded travelers share stories that demonstrate the contradictory pulls inherent in the negotiation of modernity in the globalized world economy. On the one hand there is an increasing sense of new possibilities, a shining new world of commodities and technology; on the other these stories also clearly reflect a sense of alienation as well as the reification of social relationships. In this article, I explore how Dasgupta uses conventions from folk traditions and fairy tales to map out the contours of contemporary experience. While this mode of writing serves to dramatize the forms of alienation in contemporary life, I also argue that *Tokyo Cancelled* serves as a self-conscious exploration of the possibilities of storytelling in this era of globalization and late capitalism.

Born in England in 1971, Rana Dasgupta grew up in Cambridge and studied at Oxford, the Conservatoire Darius Milhaud in Aix-en-Provence, and the University of
Wisconsin-Madison. He lived in London, Kuala Lumpur, and New York before moving to New Delhi in 2001. His first book, *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005), uses the framing device of thirteen stranded travelers sharing stories to while away time as they wait for their delayed flight. These stories show an amazing range, varying in location from Asia and Africa to South and North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Some of these stories speak of princes and kings and magical transformations, while others are more obviously contemporary in their settings with protagonists ranging from investment bankers and marketing consultants to workers in sweatshops. Far from creating an escapist fantasy world, Dasgupta uses conventions from folktales and fairy tales in this story cycle to represent the textures of experience in our globalized contemporary world. In addition to offering a critique of late capitalism through a focus on the increasing alienation that seems to characterize contemporary experience, *Tokyo Cancelled* also explores the possibility that the act of storytelling itself might be a way of resisting alienation.

Walter Benjamin’s essay on Nikolai Leskov entitled “The Storyteller” is one of the influences on Dasgupta’s work (Dasgupta, “Writing” 12-13). Benjamin points out that the storyteller “has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant” (Benjamin 83). At a basic level, storytelling implies a sharing of experience. Benjamin makes the argument that in the modern world “the communicability of experience is decreasing” (Benjamin 86). In contrast to the storyteller who through the rendering of his story makes it a part of the experience of the listener, Benjamin posits the figure of the novelist, the modern solitary individual who has
isolated himself and has no counsel to offer the reader. There is a sense of palpable nostalgia that pervades Benjamin’s account of the decay of storytelling. The storyteller is an artisan, a craftsman whose task is “to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way” (Benjamin 108). The decline of the storyteller is linked to the rise of the alienated modern individual who seems removed and distant from “the raw material of experience.”

Dasgupta sees *Tokyo Cancelled* as an experiment in “how storytelling might respond to this inconsequence of experience,” which is also one of the central concerns of Benjamin’s essay (Writing TC 16). The Marxist themes of alienation, reification, and commodity fetishism that played a significant role in the analyses of Walter Benjamin and other Frankfurt School theorists seem increasingly relevant in the era of multinational capitalism, the era described by Fredric Jameson as being characterized by the “consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (Jameson x). Bertell Ollman summarizes the Marxist idea of alienation in the following way:

Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it)—a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he makes or what becomes of it afterwards)—a break between the individual and the material world. He is also said to be separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility have rendered most forms of co-operation impossible)—a break between man and man. (133-134)
Reification is a specific form of alienation where human beings are treated like objects, while economic and social institutions are now thought to have a life of their own, independent of human agency. This is also a world where shining commodities are fetishized and take on human-like qualities while human beings are treated like things. Dasgupta’s *Tokyo Cancelled* offers a sophisticated engagement with these themes through the device of a story cycle that attempts to map the structures of modern experience in a globalized world by drawing upon conventions from folk and fairy tales.

Anthony Giddens sees the “commodification of time-space” associated with the rise of industrialization and capitalism as one of the central defining markers of modernity (Giddens 15). Industrialization results in the implementation of strategies to reorganize space and time in order to maximize production, and in addition to the commodification of space and time that this entails, labor itself is commodified. The transition to the world of commodity production leads to these categories appearing as “natural,” while obscuring the reification of social relations. In this world where commodities take on life-like attributes and humans take on thing-like attributes, folktales and similar modes of storytelling that draw on the fantastic do not merely reflect escapist tendencies or a simple nostalgia for a precapitalist past—they are an attempt to engage with the contradictions that constitute human experience under these conditions. In an interview with Sarah Crown in *The Guardian*, Dasgupta says that “*Tokyo Cancelled* isn’t about ‘updating’ old stories - it's about a search for a language to describe my own reality. In the process of this search, folktales jumped out at me”
Michael Taussig makes a strong argument for the relevance of folk and fairy tales in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Taussig’s study of the folklore of plantation workers and miners in South America leads him to make the claim that these narrative traditions reflect an attempt to understand capitalism and industrialization through the lens of precapitalist frameworks:

This is nowhere more florid than in the folk beliefs of the peasants, miners, seafarers, and artisans who are involved in the transition process. Their culture, like their work, organically connects soul with hand, and the world of enchanted beings they create seems as intensely human as the relations that enter into their material products. The new experience of commodity production challenges that organic interconnection. Yet the meaning of the mode of production and of the contradictions that it now poses is inevitably assimilated into patterns that are preestablished in the group’s culture (Taussig 11).

The pre-existing conventions and narrative structures are mobilized to engage with the transitions in economic and social structures. Taussig suggests that a careful engagement with these narratives leads to an examination and critique of what he refers to as the “phantom objectivity” of the reified structures that we take for granted in modernity (Taussig 4). Jack Zipes also points out that in the work of German Marxists like Hoernle, Bloch, and Benjamin the fairy tale is seen as representing the desire of ordinary people for justice. In their framework, fairy tales “contain elements of political protest and wish-
fulfillment that demonstrate the ways through which oppressed peoples can withstand and overcome the power of rich and exploitative rulers” (Zipes 239). In addition to drawing on this tradition by offering a critique of “phantom objectivity” and the dehumanizing tendencies of late capitalism, Dasgupta’s work also allows for brief moments of utopian possibilities, starting with the idea of sharing stories itself.

The setting of Dasgupta’s novel is an airport in a city that is not named, the location described merely as “the Middle of Nowhere in a place that was Free of Duty” (TC 1). A harried airline employee tells the stranded passengers that there is “no room at the inn” (TC 2). The slightly incongruous reference to the inn is a sly allusion to story cycles from the past, like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Bocaccio’s *The Decameron*. At the same time, the setting of *Tokyo Cancelled* is clearly contemporary; an international airport in a nameless city where world leaders are meeting and protestors and the police are engaged in running battles. The thirteen travelers who are stranded in the airport when their flight to Tokyo is cancelled also remain nameless and we are not provided with much information about them. One of the travelers is a Japanese man who comes up with the idea of sharing stories, and among the others are an American woman, an older man and a young woman with a backpack. In Benjamin’s analysis of storytelling, he points to the ways in which “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (Benjamin 92). The storyteller typically frames the story, setting up the context of the narrative that follows. Storytelling is a performance, where even small hand gestures while
narrating bear the imprint of the personality of the storyteller. The storytellers in Dasgupta’s novel remain anonymous, and the reader is left with the stories and a skeletal framing device which does not even indicate which one of the thirteen is narrating a particular story. However, the act of sharing stories itself implies a certain degree of intimacy and human connection, something that is in stark contrast to the alienation that is depicted in many of these stories.

The first story is titled “The Tailor” and is set in a nameless kingdom in what appears to be the Middle East. Prince Ibrahim, the spoilt son of King Said, wears polo shirts and designer jeans and tosses American dollar bills from his jeep on his forays into the countryside. On one of his trips, he meets a tailor named Mustafa who shows him an exquisite silk robe that he has stitched. Impressed by the quality of the workmanship, he commissions the tailor to create an even more magnificent dress, promising to cover his expenses. Mustafa studies books on ancient art and works day and night to create a truly resplendent dress, which reflects the attention to detail that seems to belong to the days of yore. This story sets up a contrast between the world of the tailor, who is a meticulous craftsman who creates a unique dress, and the world of the designer labels and mass produced commodities.

This contrast between the country and the city becomes even more stark when Mustafa journeys to the capital to deliver the dress that he has created. Mustafa’s initial response to the city is one of awe and a heightened awareness of new possibilities as he looks upon “buildings housing unheard-of forms of human pursuit, new things
being made and bought and sold, and people from all over
the world, each with their own chosen destination” (TC 13).
This story, like others in this novel, reflects both the appeal
and the pitfalls of modernity. However, it is not surprising
that this early positive impression of the city does not last
long. Mustafa is denied entrance to the palace and finds
himself facing ruin when he is unable to pay the debts he
incurred in making the dress. The city now seems to be an
inhospitable place, and as the years pass by Mustafa is
reduced to a scruffy bedraggled figure who “gazed into
shadowy shop windows where mannequins stood like
ghosts in their urban chic” (TC 15). The once shiny objects
of desire are now hollow and lusterless. There seems a
glimmer of hope when a companion of Prince Ibrahim
takes pity on him and offers to buy the dress, but when
Mustafa goes to retrieve it from its hiding place, he finds
that it has been sold to a French museum for seven million
dollars when an antique specialist identified it as belonging
to the eighteenth century. This ironic touch serves again to
underscore the point that craftsmen like Mustafa seem out
of place in the modern world, their creations fit for foreign
museums as they themselves seem relics in a world of mass
production.

On the festive occasion of the “Day of Renewal,”
citizens have an opportunity to have their grievances
addressed on a day when “gifts were given to children,
prisoners were set free, and there were public feasts” (TC
18). In this modern day kingdom, Pepsi gives away free
drinks on this day, Ford gives away a free car, and some
lucky Citibank ATM users get cash gifts, another rather
explicit reminder from Dasgupta that he is not talking about
a kingdom from the distant past. Mustafa decides to appeal
for justice to King Said, and since there is no conclusive evidence to back him up, King Said decides that the decision depends on the moral character of Mustafa and the only way to establish that is through storytelling. Mustafa narrates a story about a tailor who finds that he is unable to make a wedding dress for a groom who is cheating on his fiancée. King Said, who is impressed by this story, declares Mustafa “a man of the greatest integrity and probity” and settles all his debts (TC 21). Mustafa finds it impossible to return to his hometown, and ends up living in a seaside town where he sews clothes and spins stories. Dasgupta sets up Mustafa, the tailor and storyteller, as a symbol of the craftsman who is marginalized in the modern world and unable to find his way home.

The first story of the thirteen narrated in Tokyo Cancelled suggests that there is a moral component inherent in storytelling, that the attempt to describe experience contains with it an implicit normative component. Dasgupta forces us to think about our expectations for justice and the desire to have order restored in stories by linking up Mustafa’s fate with his ability to convey his integrity through his storytelling. However, the world seems out of joint for craftsmen for Mustafa, and even though his debts are forgiven, there seems no possibility of return to a world where his skills and labor are understood and respected. While the theme of storytelling is obviously important to Dasgupta, he takes care not to set up the storyteller as a heroic and victorious figure, ending the story with Mustafa “telling stories to masts of boats that passed each other on the horizon” (TC 21).
While the story of Mustafa seems like it could belong in an updated version of *The Arabian Nights*, it is also clear that Dasgupta is offering a commentary on a political system where the ruling elites and multinational corporations are all-powerful and where the ordinary citizen cannot truly enjoy the fruits of his labor, and that this situation is not restricted to the Middle East. In an article published in the *New Statesman* in 2006, Dasgupta suggests that “third-world” cities inspire a particular form of anxiety in tourists from the West:

Perhaps some of those tourists who look to the third world for an image of their own past are reflecting uneasily on how all the basic realities of the third-world city are already becoming more pronounced in their own cities: vast gulfs between sectors of the population across which almost no sympathetic intelligence can flow; gleaming gated communities; parallel economies and legal systems; growing numbers of people who have almost no desire or ability to participate in official systems. (40)

Dasgupta moved to New Delhi a few years before *Tokyo Cancelled* was published, and in an interview with Travis Elborough he acknowledges the influence the city has had on his writing, mentioning that “a lot of the things that are happening in the world today play themselves out in a very graphic way in this city. Competing visions of life translate into very visible battles over space and its uses”(Elborough 6). The importance of location in some of the stories (Delhi and Buenos Aires, for example) offers a sharp contrast to the space of the airport, as good an example as any of a depersonalized modern zone, along with the ubiquitous shopping malls and fast-food franchises that seem almost
identical across continents. This contrast reflects the tension between the uniformity and facelessness that seems to characterize modernity and globalization on the one hand, and the tangible nature (and specificity) of local everyday experience on the other. As Dasgupta points out, cities like Delhi reflect this tension in a very visible way. His novel is an attempt not to resolve but to bring into focus the contradictory pulls inherent in the negotiation of modernity.

The second story, “The Memory Editor”, examines the ways in which amnesia operates at the level of societies and at the individual level. The protagonist of the story, Thomas, is the youngest son of a London stockbroker. He spends his time reading about the imperial and revolutionary histories of early twentieth century Europe in a public library, where he meets an old lady who makes a prophecy about his future:

You will spend your life in the realm of the past
You will fail to keep up with the times
But your wealth will make your father seem poor
A mountain of jewels dug from mysterious mines.

(TC 28)

Dasgupta sets up a comparison between the strange prophecies of the old woman and the economic predictions of financial experts. In contrast to Thomas’s interest in the past, his father sees his own job as “predicting the future, making your living by working out how other people will be making their living tomorrow. And not only that, but making that future materialize by investing in it” (TC 29). For Thomas’s father, speculation on the stock market has a material impact and the elaborate financial system that
drives the engines of globalization seems perfectly natural and logical. This is a good example of the “phantom objectivity” that Taussig refers to in The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America, because the global financial system is far from being “natural” or stable, even when it appears to be so (4). Thomas challenges his father, saying that “sometimes the future is not just an extension of the past according to rules we all know… Look at revolutions, the collapse of empires” (TC 30-31). Thomas’s father is furious and orders him out of the house.

The story takes an interesting turn when Thomas is told that “average memory horizons—that is, the amount of time that a person can clearly remember had been shrinking for some time: people were forgetting the past more and more quickly” (TC 35). He is offered employment in a company that plans to use surveillance databases to repackage peoples’ lives for them, giving them back their memories. The company wants to make sure that these repackaged memories have all traumatic incidents erased, and Thomas’s job is to identify traumatic events so that the database can be purged of them. This story describes a world where contemporary economic rationality has erased access to alternate ways of understanding and experiencing the world, and this larger historical amnesia is reflected at the individual level with people losing their memories and becoming increasingly alienated. The system tries to respond by commodifying appropriate memories and selling them, but this attempt fails, the repackaged memories being unable to alleviate the anxiety of the amnesiacs. Thomas has a vivid dream in which memories float to the earth like leaves in a London populated increasingly by gaunt and haggard faces. The memories
that have been seared to Thomas’s soul start leaving him at the end of the story, when the old lady reappears to tell him that he was a “a packhorse… to get the memories through this ravine” (TC 51). This story seems to suggest that even though current economic rationality tries to present itself as natural, there are memories, both at the societal level and the individual level that destabilize that claim. The title of this particular story, “The Memory Editor,” highlights the fact that histories are constructed and the way that they are “edited” and put together also shapes our experience of the present and the ways in which we can imagine the future.

In “The Billionaire’s Sleep,” the alienation of the protagonist manifests itself in a case of intractable insomnia. Rajiv Malhotra, a hugely successful businessman, finds it impossible to sleep and spends his nights wandering restlessly through the rooms of his mansion in Delhi. He runs call centers that operate during the night in India, to correspond to the work day in the USA, and his sleep disorder seems to indicate that he has internalized the unnatural time cycles of his business. Rajiv is married to a film star, Mira Sardari. Their fairytale romance has only one problem—they are unable to have any children. Instead of a spell or a potion, Rajiv turns to a modern wizard, the brilliant scientist, Dr. Stephen Hall, who is able to engineer a pregnancy. Mira has twins, a perfect girl and a boy with a deformed head. Rajiv is horrified at the deformity and arranges for his son to be taken away. The boy is adopted by a kind Muslim bookseller who names him Imran. The theme of separated siblings being brought up in different religious traditions is one that is common in Hindi films, but this particular story includes an unusual twist.
In his work on folktales from South India, A.K. Ramanujan has pointed out that “the metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied” (221). Dasgupta draws upon established conventions from these folk traditions in his portrayal of Sapna, the daughter of Rajiv. In contrast to Rajiv, Sapna (whose name translates as “dream”) sleeps the sleep of the innocent, and as she sleeps, plants, branches and one day a tree itself sprouts in her bedroom. Sapna awakens one morning bleeding and this horrifies Rajiv as much as the greenery that spontaneously comes to life in the bedroom of his daughter. In addition to representing the forces of life and sexuality, Sapna also shows how music can bring one in harmony with time by applying the principles of Hindustani music to Western classical pieces. In the Hindustani system, compositions are matched to the appropriate context and time of day and this is what Sapna does to pieces by Bach, Chopin and Beethoven:

When she sat, eyes closed before her piano, waiting for the precise instant of day (about 6.02 in the evening) for which the opening bars of Beethoven’s last piano sonata were intended, when she struck out, astonishingly into its angular chords... the music seemed to draw itself in the sky, to stride across constellations and fill people’s hearts with an elation they had imagined but never felt. (TC 71)

The commodification of time that results in unnatural work days and nights is contrasted with Sapna’s reassertion of a different structuring of time and experience, one that carefully matches appropriate music to the appropriate moment. Sapna’s world is alive, organic, and a threat to
Rajiv’s carefully organized business empire. Even though Rajiv loves Sapna dearly, he keeps her virtually a prisoner in a steel tower containing absolutely no organic material.

In the meantime, Imran develops his own talents, becoming a remarkable poet, moving one of his listeners to say that “when he talks about the burden of being trapped in time while longing for the eternal we can all finally understand how truly burdensome it is to be temporal creatures” (TC 74). It is through his poems that Imran evokes a heightened sense of time and a longing for the eternal, drawing on the conventions of Farsi and Urdu poetry, which are brought to life through his performances. Imran becomes a famous television star, first appearing in advertisements and then as Ravana, the villain of the Ramayana. But in spite of his success, Imran remains an outsider, unable to fit in the world of beautiful and rich people or to return to his earlier haunts, the roadside cafes where he once mesmerized his friends with his poetry recitations.

This story sets up a stark contrast between the sterile world of commerce symbolized by Malhotra and his steel tower, and the world of life, art, music and poetry that Sapna and Imran symbolize. Unaware that they are siblings, Sapna falls in love with Imran, watching him on television in her lonely tower. The two of them are united as he tries to uncover his past and the story ends with their incestuous union. While stories of separated siblings are common in Hindi films, incest remains a taboo. However, Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes document instances of folk stories dealing with the theme of brother-sister incest in the South Indian context (“Notes to Ramanujan” 230).
The union of Sapna and Imran symbolizes the coming together of poetry and music, the forces of life and art uniting to restore the right order of things and allowing Rajiv Malhotra to finally fall asleep. Dasgupta yokes together tropes from Bollywood cinema as well as classic folktales in this story that reflects on how the experience of temporality is modified in the world of call-centers and international time zones.

In “The Store on Madison Avenue,” the main characters are Pavel (the illegitimate son of Robert De Niro) and Isabella (the daughter of Martin Scorsese and Isabella Rossellini, conceived just as their relationship was ending). The references to Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, and Isabella Rossellini in this particular story seem linked thematically to two films in particular, *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Blue Velvet* (1986). *Taxi Driver*, directed by Scorsese, is a classic study in modern alienation with De Niro playing the unforgettable protagonist, Travis Bickle. Travis drives a cab through the night in New York, trying desperately to impose some semblance of meaning and order in the sordid world of the modern city. Like Travis, Pavel ends up as a taxi-driver in New York in Dasgupta’s story. David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, which starred Rossellini, peels away the façade of the picture-perfect suburban setting to reveal a seamy underside filled with violence and strange desires. Echoes of this disturbing world reappear in the world of Pavel and Isabella.

Dasgupta yokes together these film references with an interesting twist on the tale of “The Flowering Tree,” a Kannada folktale about a woman who is able to transform herself into a tree with beautiful flowers that are in great
demand. As Ramanujan points out, this particular story reflects “complex and ambivalent feelings towards [women’s] bodies” (223). Tales of such transformations raise questions about female agency and the commodification of women. In Dasgupta’s story, Pavel and Isabella come across a box of Oreos that are magical and help Isabella transform herself into a store on Madison Avenue:

As Pavel watched, he saw her face start to flatten and become slowly grey… streaks of chrome and glass flashed through her, and as her innards became visible, he saw them harden into spiral staircases and organic chandeliers that somehow spawned space all around them, space that metastasized beyond her apartment. (TC 142)

The use of the word “metastasized” to describe this process makes it clear that this transformation is not benign; it is dangerous. While the Kannada folk story also contains the sense of transformation being dangerous, there is a striking difference between being transformed into a flowering tree that is alive and a store that is “sculpted into sharp corners” (TC 143). This transformation of a woman into a solid building where things are sold is a very literal depiction of the process of reification.

If “The Store on Madison Avenue” deals with the theme of the modern capitalist system turning people into commodities that are sold, “The Doll” shows how inanimate objects take on the allure of living beings. The protagonist of this story, Yukio, is a Japanese businessman who plans to construct a huge database of folk knowledge to exploit for commercial gain. While his business seems to
be proceeding well, his relationship with his wife deteriorates and he builds a lifelike doll, capable of speech and movement, with which he falls in love. Yukio is interested in the knowledge of indigenous people, but he has no interest in the people themselves. This story seems to suggest that this logic of seeing people in terms of the commercial potential and products they have to offer leads to a sense of loneliness and emptiness, where things are valued more than actual human beings.

“The House of the Frankfurt Mapmaker” explores the link between cartography and power by demonstrating how the urge to map is connected with the desire to own and control. The protagonist of this story, Klaus Kaufmann, is a German mapmaker extraordinaire. His maps contain all sorts of useful commercial information. On one of his visits to Turkey in order to examine shipping routes and the site of a proposed pipeline, Klaus’s car breaks down in a remote area. His life is saved by a Turkish woman who mocks him for thinking that his body is immune from the heat, and then asks him to take care of her daughter Deniz in return (TC 98). The practical knowledge of people who live off the land is devalued in favor of maps that highlight the flow of capital, mapping commodities like oil and natural gas, and yet it is this local knowledge that saves Klaus’s life.

Deniz makes her way to Frankfurt through the sewers, and even though Klaus is extremely uncomfortable at her arrival, he takes her in. This a good example of how Dasgupta uses the conventions of folk and fairy tales—here, it is the magical abilities of Deniz that allow her to travel across both natural and man-made barriers, but
Dasgupta is also alluding to the real and difficult journeys of Turkish migrant workers, as well as those from other parts of Asia and Africa who struggle to cross those same borders in search of employment.

Deniz cannot speak, but can transmit her thoughts, and she tells Klaus that “even people like me have to live. They must wish to be rich and live a good life” (TC 115). She finds that she is practically a prisoner in Klaus’s home; she has no immigration papers and therefore cannot work even though she wishes to do so. Klaus’s house has LCD screens instead of windows, showing orientalist images ranging from “a tranquil scene by the Ganges with half-naked men, perhaps a cityscape of mosques and palaces within which could be clearly seen the languorous women of the harem playing music and applying oils” (TC 103). One of the images that shocks Deniz is “an old photograph of a pygmy in a cage with an orangutan” from the 1904 St. Louis World Fair (TC 110). This disturbing reminder of the ways in which the bodies of “savages” were put on display across the US and Europe in the nineteenth century as well as the early part of the twentieth century is linked up with the objectification and commodification of women in the contemporary world, which is something Deniz has to negotiate when she starts working illegally as a maid. This story ends with Deniz committing suicide, saying to herself “What unspeakable things are piled up at the edges of civilized people’s imaginations” (TC 128). In an interview with Shakti Bhatt, Dasgupta says that “perhaps the exclusion of life-forms is never complete, and always returns as a whisper. It has to be remembered that most destructive cultures seal their destruction with nostalgia for what they have destroyed” (Bhatt 208). “The House of the
Frankfurt Mapmaker” is a scathing indictment of these forms of Orientalist nostalgia. The museum-like house with curios and artifacts from the colonial period is built on the ongoing exploitation of labor and resources, raising the question of how much has actually changed.

The final story “The Recycler of Dreams” draws on the work of filmmaker Luis Bunuel to explore the impact of the collapse of the Argentinean economy at the beginning of the 21st century. This story is about the dream of Gustavo, who falls asleep with a stomach ache probably caused by hunger. Gustavo is a film buff who is forced to shut down his video store when the economic crisis hits. In his dream, Gustavo installs equipment to record the dreams of dispossessed people, finding to his surprise that the dreams that he has recorded are about himself and the woman that he loves, Carla. In another twist, he realizes that he is one of the dispossessed and that he has been recording his own dreams, strange dreams about food and hunger. Bunuel’s film *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* (1972) is a movie about interrupted dinners and surreal dreams. One of the interruptions occurs when the guests realize that hotel manager’s dead body is in the adjoining room. Dasgupta’s story borrows from Bunuel’s surrealist style, and Gustavo’s dreams range from him and Carla vomiting after a meal and looking at people in designer clothes protesting atrocities to their being unable to ingest food.

Carla and Gustavo receive advice from a psychoanalyst who tells them that “it’s usually quite easy to see how the present derives from the past. But it’s a fallacy to believe on that basis that the future will present no surprises, no nasty turnarounds” (TC 366). This echoes the conversation
that Thomas has with his father in “The Memory Editor” and is one of the central themes is Dasgupta’s work, which is to emphasize that the permanence and stability of the economic structures and institutions that we take for granted and consider the “natural” order of things is actually quite tenuous. It then becomes the role of the artist to open up new ways of understanding what we experience in the present, and importantly, new ways of imagining the future, perhaps a world in which commodities are not fetishized to the extent they are right now. However, Dasgupta is also aware that art itself can be easily commodified and he incorporates that insight into his stories.

In one of the dreams, Carla crawls into a freezer to die, and in the next dream a delicacy from the freezer is served to horrified guests. Gustavo dreams that his film based on the dreams of the dispossessed is critically successful, and that he can finally isolate himself and his collection of early twentieth-century Argentinean films from the rest of the world. The story ends with Gustavo waking up from the dream with his stomach ache still present. Instead of deploying a realist framework, Dasgupta uses a surrealistic mode to capture the texture of experience and the feeling of hunger. He raises questions in the story itself about the nature of representation and how suffering itself can be commodified as art, with a filmmaker in the story receiving awards for capturing the dreams of the poor.

Rana Dasgupta’s *Tokyo Cancelled* is a novel about storytelling. While Dasgupta does clearly point to the importance of storytelling as a strategy for making sense of the world through the sharing of experience, he also
includes ironic touches to remind the reader that the act of storytelling itself is always a performative attempt to grasp at reality, which always seems slippery and elusive. While the contrived setting of the airport sets up a temporary kinship between the thirteen stranded travelers, one also gets a sense of other stories waiting to be told, the stories of the cleaning women with headscarves and the chess-playing security guards also populating this modern zone. One of the gun-toting guards opens a door to let a cat in, and there is also mention of a strange insect: “In the distance, an astounding, prehistoric kind of thing, a land mollusk, a half-evolved arthropod, all claws and wing cases, limped slowly from one side of the hall to the other. An insect surely, but from here it looked the size of a rat” (TC 6). The process of modernization and this capitalist economy that celebrates commodification has not completely taken over the earth, and this “prehistoric kind of thing” is still our contemporary, a part of our world.

The forces of globalization and modernity bring with them a sense of tremendous promise for the future, a celebration of human ingenuity and scientific and technological progress, along with a set of economic structures that seem natural and inevitable. At the same time, the environment and humanity itself seems under threat and there is also a sense of fear that is generated by the rapid changes taking place in the world today. The economic forces that impact the lives of individuals seem too complex to be understood or controlled, even as these forces celebrate commodities and reduce human beings to objects. Rana Dasgupta’s novel offers a thoughtful examination of these contradictory impulses in its exploration of the ways in which storytelling struggles to
Mallavarapu, “Reflections”  
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capture the textures of experience in the contemporary world. The novel ends with the nameless travelers receiving mechanical greetings as they enter the airplane, but the reader is also left with the possibility of a fragile sense of kinship created through the exchange of stories, and the possibility of imagining a world that is different from our current one.

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