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Regimes of Reality:
Of Contemporary Indian Nonfiction and its Free Men

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, at a time when verbal, visual and aural real-time streams have altered the fabric of everyday realities, we inhabit in the astute words of Rob Nixon "a new normal that places a great creative and commercial premium on making a show of reality" (Nixon 30). As a result, we are confronted with questions such as what technologies shape a particular society's perception at any given time, of the coordinates of reality, what can be accepted as real, why reality matters and to whom, and what types of voices and institutions are legitimized as the purveyors of reality. Modeling my theorization on the inquiries that constitute Michel Foucault's "regime(s) of truth," I will argue that questions like these frame what we may call a regime of reality. Linking reality to the explicitly political notion of a "regime" means understanding the former as procedural and constructed, rather than as a passive principle, inertly waiting to be recognized and captured as in fact pure reality. This theorization of reality as an artifice rather than an objective essence located outside power foregrounds the idea that productions and circulations of reality can be, and in fact are being, changed.

It is in this context that I want to draw attention to twenty-first century nonfictional narrative forms that are invested in the relation between reality and systems of power. Several contemporary critics like Ian Jack, Walter Benn Michaels, and Henry Twidle have demonstrated their interest in the themes of this corpus of narratives, but what is of interest to me in such works is not only their thematic

orientations, but also their formal commitments, which, in my opinion, extend the conversation about the procedural and constructed nature of reality.

These nonfiction texts very often situate themselves at the crossings of cyber exchanges, smart telecommunication, reality TV, Youtube, and social media, while also embedding in these new age media "older" modes of scripting reality, such as journalistic reportage, life writing, history, archival reconstruction, and urban studies. The narratives I refer to range from the Polish non-fiction author Andrzej Stasiuk's *East* (2014) with its employment of memoir and travelogue to destabilize the very category "East," to the Belarusian investigative journalist, essayist and oral historian Svetlana Alexievich's "polyphonic writings" on the basis of which she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015. They includes documents like the British cartoonist Kate Evans' *Threads* (2017) which uses pencil sketches and verbal reportage to examine Europe's responsibility in the current refugee crisis, the American author David Shields' manifesto *Reality Hunger* (2011), a literary collage calling for and instantiating in its own stylistics the obliteration of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, and the South African poet and writer, Antjie Krog's *Change of Tongue* (2003) with its blend of fiction, poetry, and autobiography in the service of documenting struggles for truth and salvation in the South African present. It is in this context that I will be looking at the Indian journalist and writer Aman Sethi's work of narrative reportage, *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi* (2012). This work plots in a contemporary urban Indian scenario clashing regimes of reality, each struggling to dominate the other, one giving way to the other, and in the best of circumstances, coming together in inextricably entwined forms, to shape a new politics of reality.

A Free Man tells of Mohammad Ashraf, a dislocated, homeless, nomadic laborer and the journalist (Aman Sethi) who wants to write about his life. Having come upon his subject while he was working on an article concerning a 2005 Delhi government proposal to provide construction workers with medical insurance, Sethi proffers a significant account of the Indian capital city's transformation from a slow-

moving administrative-bureaucratic machine to what in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was increasingly showcased as the glistening metropolis of a rising Asian superpower. At the center of this tale of transformation is Sethi's story about Mohammad Ashraf, with whom he spends a great deal of time in an effort to know his everyday life. However, this central character of Ashraf, the eponymous "free man" of the title, is not merely a static figure on whom rides the account of a fast-changing urban formation with its quickly shifting economic, political and cultural landscapes. Indeed, actively challenging the stereotype of the immobile object of journalistic-ethnographic study, Mohammad Ashraf observes Sethi as intimately and with as much agency as the reporter observes him. In the course of the book, the journalist enters into the reality of the life of a laborer, and the laborer penetrates and thereby scripts the life-world of a privileged high-end journalist. The result is that *A Free Man* is not in fact about one man: rather, it is as a review of the book by Amar H. Abbas tells us, actually, "the story of *two* men" (Abbas 431).

What is important is not just that *A Free Man* is the story of two men rather than one, but that it is the story of two men from opposite ends of the spectrum of opportunity in Delhi. These "ends," are marked by positions of advantage and relative powerlessness, ostensibly moved further and further apart from each other as the spectrum was stretched almost to breaking point by accelerated economic, political, and socio-cultural changes. Given their progressively polarized locations in such a context, it goes without saying that Mohammad Ashraf and the journalist Sethi-persona of *A Free Man* inhabit and navigate entirely different realities and Sethi's work undoubtedly makes these schismatic realities clear. However, the strength of the text lies not simply in its awareness that the turn of the century Indian context is pockmarked by myriad perceptions of what counts as real, all crisscrossed by asymmetrical accesses to power. Instead the remarkable potency of Sethi's work unfolds when the distinct realities of Ashraf and Sethi brush up against one another, push into another, and wrap around one another, and in doing so destabilize established power differentials. Such destabilization brings up questions, the likes of which we

have encountered before: *which of these two men is authorized to speak on behalf of reality and by whom? What institutions of knowing enable them to cognize different realities? Are they empowered to understand reality as an artifice? How are their constructions of reality sustained and/changed when the technologies for recording what counts as real transformatively shape the very experiences they are committed to represent?*

The subtitle of Sethi's work—A *True* Story of Life and Death in Delhi—hones in on Truth as a category of value, and it is from this point of departure that I will propose a regime of *reality* in relation to Michel Foucault's account of regime(s) of *truth.* The will to represent and record reality, especially in journalistic discourse, has at its foundation an epistemological claim to the power of truth, that power which invites acceptance not through coercive mandates, but by its very nature as truth. Such power is perhaps nowhere better noted than when Foucault flamboyantly states in his 1979-80 lectures "On the Government of the Living": "It is true, and I submit to it. I submit to it, since it is true, and I submit inasmuch as it is true" (Foucault 2014: 96). The point of this flamboyance, I believe, is that Foucault wants to challenge his own conceptualization of a "truth regime" which he had earlier somewhat cryptically elaborated in a 1976 essay on the "political function of the intellectual." In 1979-80, three years after this essay, Foucault no longer thinks that the two notions, "truth" and "regime," can go together because as he argues "there is no need for a regime to be added, as it were, to truth itself. Truth itself determines its regime, makes the law, obliges me" (Foucault 2014: 96). However, my contention is that the idea of a truth regime which Foucault abandoned is in fact a rather more potent one than that of Truth that is sufficient unto itself. Because a regime of truth speaks more animatedly to the struggles for truth that traverse the fields of realities presented to us by science, religion, politics, cultural forms, and everyday experiences, these contestations form the very pulse of Foucault's attempt to understand truth—via Nietzschean history and genealogy—as a historical practices embedded in a continual and continuing play of dominations not unfamiliar to the political sense of "a regime."

Systems of Truth, Regimes of Reality

"Each society has its regime of truth" (Foucault 1977: 13), Michel Foucault famously tells us in "The Political Function of the Intellectual." In the somewhat different guise of a "*system* of truth," (my italics) the first chapter of *Discipline and Punish* had already introduced this idea of a *regime* of truth with regard to Foucault's study of the emergence of a new penal system in Europe and the United States of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This emergent punitive economy was based on an "increasing leniency of punishment" (Foucault 1995: 22), and imbricated in that move towards "leniency" was the formation of "a corpus of knowledge, techniques, [and] 'scientific' discourses" tied to the "practice of the power to punish" (Foucault 1995: 23). It was in and through this configuration of punitive reason that a "whole new system of truth" (Foucault 1995: 23) appeared—having to do with the emergence of novel techniques to judge, the knowledge of the modern soul as the point of application of that judgment, and the scientifico-legal discursive complex that authorized that judgment. Despite his unraveling of this system of truth, Foucault does not elaborate here what exactly a *system* of truth entails or the specific nature of the ties between a "system of truth" and the forming of a "corpus of knowledge, techniques, and scientific discourses." Readers must then wait until "The Political Function of the Intellectual" for a more involved argument claiming that a system of truth (which by now, Foucault clearly names "a regime of truth") is constituted by "the types of discourse [society] harbours and causes to function as true"; "the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements" and "the way in which each is sanctioned"; "the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth"; and "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault 1977: 13).

His move from "system" to "regime" as a qualifier of truth notwithstanding, both Foucault's formulations ("system of truth" and "regime of truth") emphasize that for him Truth is not an objective essence, a singular and definitive principle. It is either a *system*, which, by its very definition, is an organized network of intertwined parts, in this case, traversed by the effects of power, or, it is a *regime*

which according to at least one definition in the Oxford English Dictionary refers to a "method or *system* of rule, governance, or control." In other words, either as regime or system, Truth simply put, is not, for Foucault, outside instruments of power, and therefore it is possible to change our "political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" in order to constitute "a new politics of truth" (Foucault 1977: 14). This is a pivotal moment in the argument, not only because it allows for the possibility of change, but also because it takes us back to the endless play of dominations that for Foucault constitutes the politics of truth in terms of their effects, and away from normative or metaphysical inquiries about what truth is or should be.

I want to emphasize here the plural noun attached to what Foucault, in a different context, calls "truth games," not simply because in "The Political Function of the Intellectual," the concept of a truth regime is elaborated in the singular, even though Foucault does suggest a potential plurality when he says "*Each society* has its regime of truth." This plurality is integral to Foucault's understanding of truth as a historical practice that constantly brushes up against changing rules:

> With regard to these multiple games of truth, one can see that ever since the age of the Greeks our society has been marked by the lack of a precise and imperative definition of games of truth which are permitted to the exclusion of all others. In a given game of truth, it is always possible to discover something different and to more or less modify this or that rule, and sometimes even the entire game of truth. (Foucault 1997:297)

It is precisely the kind of fluidity that Foucault ascribes to the historical emergence of truth games and truth regime(s)—as also earlier, to the coming into being of systems of truth—that is of particular interest to my reading of the variegated realities we encounter in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man*. It is these realities and the queries that are enabled by them that complicates what Sethi claims will be his "true" story.

A Free Man

Early in *A Free Man*, Aman Sethi describes a scene at Sadar Bazaar, one of Delhi's oldest bazaars, where on some stairways leading to a shop front in a sheltered niche amidst the labyrinthine alleys, the journalist, along with his subject, Mohammed Ashraf, huddles in a circle with two other nomadic laborers—Rehaan and Lalloo. After a long day of work, the men share a joint and Sethi writes, "In our circle, the joint has moderated conversation; microphone-like, it singles out its holder as the speaker" (Sethi 4). The microphone here is not a literal microphone, but a hand rolled marijuana cigarette that arguably induces in its users' minds effects contrary to those associated with what we might call factual reality. Nonetheless, as Sethi tells us, the joint is indeed like a microphone, singling out its user as a speaker, allowing him for a duration to speak his mind, to illustrate his reality.

So it is that when the joint travels, distinct fields of reality come to bear on one another as one recipient of (or, one speaker into the microphone) waxes eloquent about the "virtues of ticketless train travel" and counts the "blessings of being in jail" (Sethi 3-4) and another peddles a "tale about rutting pigs, fighting mynahs and the sorrow of the Ranikhet disease, scourge of poultry farmers" (Sethi 5). Tellingly however, of the four men, it is Sethi—set apart from his fellow smokers by his class position and his professional authority—who worries that he will not be able to speak when the joint/microphone is handed to him. It might kill him, he thinks, after whiskey has already thickened his tongue and locally made cigarettes (beedis) have scorched his throat. The journalist's fears have little to do with literally being killed by whiskey and beedis topped off by a joint, but instead are representative of his apprehension when the joint singles him out— because the joint is not *really* a microphone, and the fields of reality generated by the joint are not the same kind of realities the journalist is legitimized by his profession to represent. This is why Sethi underscores his position on not wanting to smoke the joint by emphatically claiming that if he were in fact to contemplate partaking of the cannabis, it would be "for research purposes only" (Sethi 5), research being an authorized tool for accessing reality. In other words, the joint is

acceptable only for the purpose of entering into the kind of realities Rehaan, Lalloo and Ashraf inhabit, the kinds of realities at odds with Aman Sethi's own.

As he does smoke the joint in an attempt to enter such alien realities, the journalistic Sethi-persona experiences the signifiers of his scientific reality receding. The surveillance cameras propped up on a nearby street pillar, markers no doubt of a quickly technologizing metropolitan space, begin to spin, no longer available to the journalist for his reality bytes. The lights "from the street lamps…crash against [his] eyelashes and shatter into a thousand luminous fragments" (Sethi 5), generating what appears to be a psychedelic effect and therefore no longer available to render a reality accessible to the fact-finding mission of the journalist. All that remains then is the joint: smoldering "like an unanswered question" (Sethi 8).

Thus ends the first chapter of Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* and thus is set the stage for the what Sethi suggests will be the "unanswered question" his book examines. Though it seems from this expository scene that Sethi will immerse himself in the fields of reality that his subjects inhabit,one man's reality does not take over the other's: instead the two push against and warp around one another in ways that emphasize their mobility and the changeablity of their differential accesses to power. Indeed, just as surveillance cameras, microphones, and street lights retreat into the shadows, and readers expect to become immersed in the realty of the "life of the laborer," the very next chapter returns to realities more familiar to the Sethi-persona's own technologies for understanding what is real.

Sethi begins the second chapter with a historical reconstruction of Sadar Bazaar, followed soon by an urban studies type account of what the Bazaar is in the contemporary moment, and thereafter, an ethnographic evaluation of the kind of labor that is marketed at the Bazaar. Within these accounts based on modern disciplinary formations such as history, ethnography, and urban geographies—scientific tools for recording the reality of past and present—materialize the figures of the laborers, this time remarkably visualized by Sethi as "walking album[s]" (Sethi 18). Each laborer is "paneled" (Sethi 18) with the emblematic signatures of institutions involved in the reality of living within the confines of the political

economy of the modern nation state—"money, papers, phone numbers, creased photocopies of ration cards" (Sethi 18), and explaining the phenomenon, Sethi tells us that the fear of petty theft means that

> All clothes in Bara Tooti had special pockets for money and important papers: a breast pocket sewn on the inside of the shirt, rather than the outside; a pouch stitched into the waistband of a faded pair of trousers; an extra pocket-inside-a-pocket….Rehaan, for instance, always carried two tattered photocopies of his ration card (registered back home in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh), a copy of his class five mark sheet that looked like it had survived a flood, a small black telephone diary, and his entire medical history in the form of a prescription for a pain killer—all secreted in various pockets on his person. (Sethi 18)

While very much a part of a field of reality in which a hand rolled marijuana joint can function like a microphone, the laborers of Bara Tooti are also seized upon by a reality involving medical records, money, identification papers, a reality represented and sustained by scientific and quasi-scientific powers effected on the backs of doctors, lawyers, bankers, and the police.

Indeed, it is this kind of scientific emphasis that Foucault had attributed to the truth of modernity, what we might call the historical epistemology of science. However, as Lorna Weir points out, "the truth practices of contemporary societies are more heterogeneous" (Weir 368) than suggested by Foucault's emphasis on the scientific thrust of the truth regime—in their multiplicity they are more in line with what Foucault later considered co-existing truth games in Ancient Rome and Greece. The world of *A Free Man* is similarly constituted by multitudinous realities, simultaneously apprehensible, particularly in moments when the scientific reality that the journalist inhabits brushes up against the realities of the characters that he encounters in Bara Tooti. It is difficult to put a name to the latter, but suffice it to say that the kinds of realities that the people of Bara Tooti represent are very often at odds with that represented by the Sethi-persona.

Apart from Mohammad Ashraf, who is central to the narrative, another Bara Tooti regular brings to the fore the heterogeneity of co-existing realities. J.P. Singh Pagal (the word "pagal" translates into "mad" and is perhaps just a pejorative added to J.P's given name) is introduced as "a man who tells Delhi stories better than most" (Sethi 35), a man "with enormous eyes that constantly goggle, as if he were seeing the world for the first time" (Sethi 35). Presumably, it is his child-like wonder at the world that drives J.P. to tell "tales of unexplained disappearances, stories of amazing good fortune, whispers of a strange dark creature that prowls the eastern borders of the city….the half-man-half-machine-half-monkey-fully-dangerous Monkeyman" (Sethi 36). According to the journalist, this man is a "half-mad teller of half-true tales" (Sethi 45), and Sethi's understanding of J.P's talent for stories as a form of madness, tale telling, and half-truths, are all dictated by the rigid protocols of the science-truth-sanity power apparatus he is allied with, and all designed, as he puts it, to destroy his "cunning interview technique" (Sethi 36). The destruction Sethi refers to happens in the course of just one brief exchange during which J.P's ability to enter a regime of reality not his own gives him the keen ability to expose that regime's underlying assumptions. In this particular case, the exposition involves noting for the denying Sethi-persona the continuities between different instruments of governmental control, particularly the police with their sticks and guns and those tools for recording reality that structure a journalist's profession—cameras, microphones, recorders:

> And what's this? A recorder? Gathering evidence?
>
> No, no, I'm just a reporter.
>
> You say you are a reporter. I say you are a policeman. Haha, HaHa, HAHA! (Sethi 36)

Despite becoming exhausted with J.P's humoring of what he considers his professional integrity and what he designates as the man's "deep-seated paranoia" (Sethi 43) in the face of institutions of governance, the Sethi-persona recognizes that "by ferreting out [from a mass of crisscrossing realities] the absurd, the unlikely, and the almost true" (Sethi 42), a figure like J.P. "served as "the medium for Delhi's dislocation

and unease" (Sethi 42-43) under the pressure of a transformative reconfiguration in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Racked by the violent displacements and evictions of thousands of slum dwellers (which *must* be suffered in the interests of urban renewal, argued those who claimed the new Delhi for themselves), and therefore, unemployment and rampant homelessness, the city's polarized populations were always on edge, restive, Sethi's journalist persona tells us. Employing the same psychological-medical terminology he had used to diagnose J.P. Singh Pagal's condition, Aman Sethi writes that "an imperceptible *hysteria* was pulsing through" Delhi (Sethi 38). He observes that "Working class settlements were flattened by government demolition squads to make way for broader roads, bigger power stations, and the [coveted] Commonwealth Games" (Sethi 39) which were to be held in the Indian capital in 2010. Amidst the distress in the city, Bara Tooti finds a way to support displaced "former cooks, vegetable vendors, dhaba boys, farmers, [and] factory workers" (Sethi 94-95) while they attempt to regain their bearings in the new dispensation. The result is that the realities of these disempowered peoples begin to enter and attempt to make their home in the realities of the new Delhi, for otherwise they will not survive. Sethi tells of a case in which for instance the lowly vegetable vendors take on the character of powerful stock market brokers. With two cellular phones and a motorcycle a given duo of vendors starts out in business, one partner manning a vegetable market and the other roaming the outskirts of the city on a motorcycle. They are in constant touch with each other on their cellular phones, using them like the anachronistic walkie-talkies of earlier times; if the price of a particular item of produce (in one example, ironically, the hottest of chili peppers) were to rise in the market, the motorcycle rider would be asked to buy up in the outskirts, and within hours that item would reach the urban market in *hot* pursuit of the kill. With vegetable vendors doubling as money market managers, chili peppers achieving the status of expensive shares, and cellular phones functioning like walkie-talkies, different fields of reality collide *and* collude with another and the idea of a pure and untainted singular reality becomes impossible to sustain.

Just as the reality of vegetable vendors is transformed by the pressures of financial markets, so too the reality of the Delhi shaped by modern scientific discourse is bent by the realities described by "mad" J.P. Singh Pagal. Sethi tells us that at one point, in a bizarre and mysterious way, J.P Singh Pagal's "half-truth" about "the half-man-half-machine-half-monkey-fully-dangerous Monkeyman" made its way into the haloed venues of Delhi's journalistic establishment, police institutions, and medical authorities. Drawing on the testimonies of witnesses, newspaper reports began to appear about an elusive monkeyman, describing him as something between "a primitive four-foot-tall humanoid and a futuristic, if somewhat hirsute robot from outer space" (Sethi 41). The Delhi police commissioner ordered a study on the phenomenon, the Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences was called in to conduct interviews with victims and publish its report, and Dr. Desai was announced as the lead author of a scholarly study on the monkeyman. What the Sethi-persona had designated as J.P's "absurd" and "unlikely" tale (s) had thus entered a field of reality structured by the police, the medical establishment, and the scholarly world —all elements of the social structure that J.P's perception of reality is at odds with—and in doing so, had blurred the power of that field to unearth what it considers real.

The newspapers were inconsistent in their descriptions of the monkeyman, so the police were not able to categorically deny the existence of the creature, as they had hoped to be able to after their investigations, and Dr. Desai could only "surmise" and provide a "hypothesis" (Sethi 42) about the alleged victims being stressed and histrionic. Indeed, all that emerged from the confusion were a series of unanswered questions: *what is the reality of the monkeyman and who speaks on behalf of this reality—police investigators, scholars and medics, or, witnesses, victims, and tellers of stories like J.P? Who does the reality of the monkeyman matter to and why? What technologies constitute different perceptions of the monkeyman—witnessing by eye and the ability to tell stories, or investigative reports and scholarly studies?* Such questions frame a particular regime of reality and here in this moment in *A Free Man* we are able to see how when two different regimes of reality collide, the possible responses to their framing questions become murkier and murkier, until what we are

left with is the principal unanswered question of Sethi's work, one that had been announced by the smoldering joint at the end of the first chapter: *Is a new regime of reality on the cusp of emerging?*

In the face of this unanswered question, the journalist persona continues stubbornly to pursue his version of what reality should look like and what instruments should be used to capture it. For instance, when speaking with Rehaan, one of Ashraf's friends at Bara Tooti and currently employed as someone who loads and unloads goods trains at the Old Delhi Railway Station, Sethi hears that "railway work [is] perfectly attuned to the rhythms of the market place" (Sethi 107). Rehaan tells the Sethi-persona that workers at the station have the option to pick up work on a semi-permanent basis for three thousand five hundred rupees a month or on a contractual basis for a hundred and fifty rupees a day. But Sethi writes, "as a professional journalist, I obviously cannot take anything Rehaan has told me for granted without corroboration from an independent source" (Sethi 108), and so off he sets with his recording device, "giv[ing] chase" (Sethi 108) to Rehaan's supervisor who will be evidence for the reality of Rehaan's picture.

Because nothing is corroborated by the reticent supervisor, Babulal goes without mention in Sethi's narrative, but more importantly, Sethi is also unable to recognize that the reality he attempts to represent and chase after intertwines with the kind of reality that J.P. Singh Pagal had forced him to encounter. On his first introduction to Aman Bhai, J.P had suggested that from his point of view, police work and the work of the journalist were on a continuum, and ironically, Sethi here replicates that continuum (which he had earlier denied, saying to J.P. that he was a reporter *not* a policeman) when he uses the terminology of police pursuing criminals to describe his own process of hunting down sources of information. Included on the continuum of journalists-policemen who ruthlessly push to know the proverbial whole truth and/or promise to paint a picture of the whole reality is what we might call "the striving-to-know-all discourse" of the medical establishment. The journalist Sethi-persona has previously, and perhaps unwittingly, drawn upon this discourse to diagnose both J.P's understanding of reality as well as the pulse of the new dispensation in twenty-first century Delhi in psychoanalytic terms—the first as

"paranoid" and the second as "hysteric"— thus consolidating the continuum of doctors-journalists-policemen.

The pursuit of knowledge that underscores the power of modern medicine, policing, and fact-finding is precisely that which Mohammad Ashraf's observation cuts into when he is concerned because he finds Aman Bhai in an area of the city he knows to be sensitive for religious reasons. To Sethi's naïve statement about being in Kasaipara because he just wants to "see the place," Ashraf tells the journalist, "you don't always need to go everywhere and see everything" (Sethi 164). And perhaps, in the final analysis, the Sethi-persona does allow himself to become comfortable with Ashraf's way of viewing things, with not having to know everything, with not feeling he has to corroborate stories, and with not feeling compelled to chase down information. Toward the end of the book, as Sethi mulls the idea of verifying all the stories that Ashraf has told him, he thinks, "Why should I? How would that change anything between us, except convince Ashraf that I mistrust him and that his story is more important to me than he is" (Sethi 195)? The notion of trust is principal to my argument about colliding and colluding regimes of reality, for just as Ashraf will trust that Aman Bhai is not interested in authenticating the truth of his stories, so too the journalist persona comes to trust that Ashraf does not think just through his inebriated states and without facts, but with the aid of what Sethi's embrace of scientific modernity has taught him to identify as *logic*. For instance, when speaking of his "dead" mother to Aman Bhai, Ashraf clarifies his understanding of her death by saying "I don't think I will ever see her again, so she's as good as dead," and Sethi cannot help but conclude that Ashraf is thinking here in "his typically logical fashion" (198). In other words, logical thinking is not alien to Ashraf, but rather "typical" of him, and so the privileged journalist persona finds the protocols of his own scientific understanding of reality coexist in Ashraf's world alongside his propensity for avoiding verifiable answers to questions, refusing to provide an evidence-based timeline for his life, and being all around a "terrible interview subject" (Sethi 6). Indeed, what Sethi ultimately discovers is that at historical moments of transformative change, different regimes of reality

enter into dialogue with each other, and if that dialogue is underlined by mutual trust, then they allow themselves to be influenced by one another, bringing into being perhaps a changed and multidimensional politics of reality.

Against A Deterministic Reality

This multidimensional construction of reality is, however, not to be deterministic. It may be historically open, based on ad hoc practices and effects rather than rigid rules, and shaped by trust, but it is also at the same time subject to myriad violences. It is the stage upon which is played the game of who is to dominate whom, whose truth is to inherit the kingdom of human consciousness. The Sethi-persona enters the arena with a naturalized aura of the dominant subject seeking to know the reality of his object with the aid of scientific apparatuses for excavating what is real, but the power of his regime of reality is often threatened by its others, before once again, at the end of the narrative, resuming its place of authority. This authoritative position and its violence is evident in the conclusion of *A Free Man* because it is Ashraf and not Sethi who must exit the narrative. Perhaps it is telling that this exit is narrativized as Ashraf having gone "missing" after his discharge from the tuberculosis unit of a government hospital and all Sethi can do in the face of his disappearance is hope that one day he will call, "his voice thick with whiskey and laughter" (Sethi 223), asking Aman Bhai to come and see him sometime.

Perhaps at that time we will once again see that back and forth play of intertwined regimes of reality mapped not only by the content of the narrative but by the narrative form, which veers between modern knowledge formations like ethnographic studies, urban geographies, journalistic interviews and timelines of a character's life to media that resist modern taxonomies—handwritten letters on inland letter paper, mythic stories of unlikely truth, Delhi street slang that is impossible to translate, and tangential conversations between people that bring to the fore the most unlikely non sequiturs. The multilayered palimpsest of *A Free Man* can only be replicated if the Ashrafs of the world had not gone "missing" and

instead were to endure in the reality inhabited by the likes of Aman Sethi. A new politics of reality would then be on the horizon.

"Power," Foucault says in his 1980 interview with Michael Bess, "is anything that tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good" (Foucault 1988: 1), and his syntax suggests not only the privilege he accords to technologies for mobility, but also a continuity between reality and truth. The potent will to record reality has at its foundation an epistemological claim to the power of truth, just as truth has as its point of reference what is real: thus reality and truth are interwoven. This reciprocal relationship and its historical practices and effects are at no time better visible than when a society is on the cusp of transformative changes, when new systems of truth emerge and new regimes of reality, new truth games come into being. Such is the moment that the story of Aman Sethi's free man brings to the fore.

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