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Thomas G. Olsen

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Thomas G. Olsen

Unquiet Americans: Paul Theroux's *Saint Jack* and the Re-Vision of Graham Greene

Despite being one of Paul Theroux's best early novels, and despite its direct engagement with American military and economic influence in Southeast Asia, *Saint Jack* (1973) remains largely unnoticed by critics concerned with the relation between American fiction and U.S. global expansion.¹ Theroux's only partly fictional Singapore emerges as a laboratory for reading the United States' presence in the newly decolonized Malay peninsula, and, more generally, for measuring a monumental shift in a region moving slowly and often awkwardly out of the period of the colonial *Pax Britannica* and abruptly, sometimes brutally, into the period of the Asian *Pax Americana* that the Vietnam War was to have secured.

In addition, however, *Saint Jack* raises important questions about the nature of inter-textual allusion and ideological appropriation because Theroux rewrites—and thus also re-envisions—Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) so as to posit an essentially benign American entrepreneurial capitalism that operates independently of both the European colonial and American neo-colonial abuses Greene describes in his highly influential novel. Theroux depicts a viable, even holy alternative to U.S. economic expansion and military aggression, resisting Greene's political conclusions and retreating into an apolitical vision of individual sanctification and hope for his middle-aged protagonist, 'Saint' Jack Flowers.

Greene's narrator says sardonically of Alden Pyle, the titular 'quiet American,' that he 'never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused'.² In

¹ *Saint Jack*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973. Samuel Coale accords the novel a special status among the early works (*Paul Theroux*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987, 89-90). Early reviewers, however, almost uniformly minimized the book's engagement with American expansionist policies, and with the Vietnam War in particular, instead praising it as a strong individual portrait of a nostalgic and hopeful American expatriate.

² Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York: Bantam, 1955), 53. In 1979 Professor Samuel Coale corresponded privately with Theroux. In response to Coale's question about the 'Manichean struggle' and 'pastoral impulses' of certain American writers (Letter to Paul Theroux, 19 July, 1979), Theroux responded in the following terms: I don't hold the view that fiction is "about" good