Revolution(s)

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New York: Syracuse University Press. 336 p. 9 7808 1563 6380. $35. 2019
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Revolution(s) Introduction
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1 In 2018, the theme for the annual conference of the SAES (Société des Anglisci­stes de l’Enseignem­ent Supérieur), held at Nanterre University, itself a site of student revolution in the past, was “Revolution(s),” a notion which has particular resonance for the New Literatures panel which provided the genesis of many of the articles included in this issue. Previously colonised countries, as diverse and geographically disparate as India, South Africa, Nigeria, Canada, and Australia (to name but these), have all experienced revolutions in various forms, both during the colonial period and after independence. These revolutions, among which the Canadian rebellions of 1837 and 1838, the 1857-8 uprising in India, the New Zealand wars between 1845 and 1872, the first chimurenga (“uprising” in the Shona language) in Zimbabwe (1894-97), the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), and the Biafran war (1967-70) in some cases paved the way for later twentieth-century rebellions which led to independence and, in some cases, to further revolutions.

2 Hannah Arendt states in her essay On Revolution, that “even if one resists this temptation to equate revolution with the struggle for liberation, instead of identifying revolution with the foundation of freedom, there remains the additional, and in our case more serious, difficulty that there is very little in form or content of the new revolutionary constitutions which was even new, let alone revolutionary” (1990, 142–43). Arendt is referring here to the American and French Revolutions which are often perceived as archetypal, but George Lawson, writing fifty years after Arendt, makes a compelling case against a perception of revolutions as “an attenuated force, a once radical project that has now been domesticated, made safe for a world of communicative capitalism and low-intensity democracy” (2019, x). As he explains it, “political revolutions feature a turnover in state leadership and institutions; social revolutions embrace political, economic, and symbolic fields of action” (2019, 3). He goes on to point out that

[i]n their most basic sense, revolutions can be understood as the reorganization of everyday life – they seek permanent shifts rather than temporary changes to the texture of social relations. In this way, revolutions consist of several dimensions simultaneously: a symbolic revolution that seeks to destroy pre-revolutionary tropes and reforge new forms of symbolic order; a political revolution that aims to
overthrow the old regime and reconstruct systems of governance; and an economic revolution that intends to re-cast relations of production, value, and exchange. (5)

However, wary of the pitfalls of homogenising definitions of revolutions, Lawson also cautions that they are “not a single thing, but shapeshifters that modify their form according to the context in which they take place” (249). This is an especially important point in this volume which embraces geographical areas as diverse as South Africa, Nigeria, India, Sri Lanka, and the Caribbean, and which investigates potentially revolutionary aesthetics in various texts. The New Literatures panel in Nanterre invited contributions on the ways in which various revolutions and rebellions have been represented in contemporary postcolonial literature, but especially encouraged papers on the diverse aesthetics deployed from within the vast postcolonial world which have actively destabilised, undermined, and reconfigured genres and canons previously dominated by British literature, and which continue to do so, thereby provoking revolutions within publishing and academic institutions. Many of the articles in this issue analyse literary representations of various uprisings and revolutions and the political agendas at stake, while others focus more on aesthetic innovations and how these contribute to changing the coordinates of local and global postcolonial literatures.

In the first article, “The Crisis of Postcolonial Modernity: Queer Adolescence in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* and P. Parivaraj’s *Shiva and Arun,*” Sandeep Bakshi explores the interconnection between queer adolescence, revolutions, and postcoloniality. Taking as a point of departure Walter Mignolo’s development of the concept of the “coloniality of power,” originally coined and conceptualised by Aníbal Quijano, Bakshi investigates two South Asian novels in English published in the 1990s and set in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and India in the 1980s. He analyses the ways in which both authors use queer South Asian adolescence as a means of disrupting Eurocentric conceptions of tradition and modernity. Heteropatriarchy, and its attendant lieutenants, homophobia and heteronormativity are, Bakshi shows, undermined in these novels which foreground queer alliances and queering potential in unexpected sites (the family unit and educational institutions). As Bakshi pinpoints, established ethnic, religious and class hierarchies are also unsettled as the protagonists’ homosexual desire and relationships unfold in these narratives, as is the very possibility of defining queerness in the South Asian context which is presented as complicating the colonial version of the binary opposition of tradition and modernity.

Inès Bigot’s article, “Dance and Dissidence in Wole Soyinka’s Plays: From Status Quo to Revolution,” investigates the dancing body in the Nigerian writer’s dramaturgy and presents it as a means of expressing a subversive message undermining dominant ideological constructs of power and authority. Bigot reads dancing in Soyinka’s plays as a potentially revolutionary force, conveying through bodies in movement what cannot quite be articulated through language. Rhythm, intensity, and choreography are, Bigot shows, invested with powerful meaning and constitute an effective means of transcending hierarchies of age, gender, social standing, and political power. Dancing and moving bodies then are invested with the power to re-create personal and communal identity and to become potent weapons against the powers that be.

Jayne Chemmachery’s article provides an overview of various mutations in the “Mutiny novel” and charts its shift from historical fiction, which borrows variously from the codes of Romance or Gothic fiction, adventure novels, melodrama or the chivalric
tradition, to historical metafiction. Contextualising the 1857 Mutiny of the Bengal Army as a catalyst for the transfer of power from the East India Company to Britain and for the shift from economic to political dominion, Chemmachery then unpacks the implications of the very term “Mutiny,” which positions the event from the point of view of the British, presenting a revolutionary moment of resistance as an act of disobedience. The “Mutiny novel” then emerged as a specifically British genre, replete with hackneyed colonialist stereotypes, whose political function was to justify British presence in India. Chemmachery then identifies two main trends in late twentieth-century “Mutiny novels,” parodic and nostalgic, linking the latter in particular to cultural anxieties about Britain’s status in the world. Chemmachery notes that although more contemporary novels in this genre appear to grant increased agency to Indian characters and expose British violence, they nevertheless continue to promote a particular idea of Englishness. Therefore, there has been no real revolution in terms of the genre itself.

7 Shifting the focus from India to the Caribbean, Léo Courbot tackles the works of Fred D’Aguiar through a philosophical lens, looking specifically at some of the poetry of this American writer of Anglo-Guyanese origin. Reading Wilson Harris’s concept of “infinite rehearsal” as a revisionary interaction with Nietzsche’s concept of perpetual return, and incorporating Jacques Derrida’s notion of différence, Courbot analyses d’Aguiar’s “imaginative responses to Western-Metaphysical perceptions of time” in two poems published twenty years apart. Revolution in this instance has less to do with rebellion and war, and more to do with literary and philosophical transmutation, and the endless possibilities in literature for shaping the present and reshaping the past. The close personal and literary relationship between D’Aguiar and Harris, transcribed in the poems under scrutiny (and indeed elsewhere in D’Aguiar’s œuvre) is, Courbot shows, employed by the younger poet as a means of examining the power of the imagination to provoke temporal slippage.

8 In his analysis of Chigozie Obioma’s 2015 novel The Fishermen, Cédric Courtois focuses on the Nigerian author’s appropriation of the Bildungsroman genre against the historical backdrop of the 1993 elections and (ultimately) failed transition from military rule to democracy. Courtois suggests that far from being used to promote a conservative agenda, as Bildungsromane have often traditionally done, Obioma’s toying with the genre here serves to emphasise a revolutionary politics and aesthetics which exposes the ongoing legacies of colonialism. The Bildungsroman is deployed in The Fisherman, Courtois argues, in an allegorical fashion, and the individual’s and the nation’s destinies are intricately intertwined. Far from offering closure, as one might expect in a traditional Bildungsroman, Obioma presents the reader with an open-endedness which, although expressing some post-Independence disillusionment, also gestures towards a less chaotic future.

9 Fanny Monnier’s article also focuses on Nigerian literature, specifically on Ben Okri’s Booker Prize-winning The Famished Road. Set three decades earlier than Obioma’s The Fishermen, Okri’s novel takes place on the cusp of Nigerian independence and Monnier’s analysis discusses revolution as both violent upheaval and the completion of a circular movement, thus investigating both the politics and the stylistics of this text. Monnier shows how Okri presents the revolutionary potential in political terms and undermines it, privileging a circular, spiralling aesthetics which mirrors the permanently unstable political situation. Monnier ultimately reads the novel as a project by Okri to provoke a
“revolution of the mind,” using techniques borrowed from mindfulness and meditation.

In her article “A Quiet Revolution: Writing the Indian City on a Minor Mode,” Marianne Hillion reads the Indian city against the grain of its common literary representation as monstrous sprawling globalised entity, analysing Siddharth Chowdhury’s representation of New Delhi as an ordinary city in a celebration of the vernacular which also includes transcultural elements of hard-boiled and coming-of-age fiction. Hillion shows that this focus on the local and the everyday is no less critical of the negative effects of globalisation and neo-liberal economics and posits this “anti-spectacular” prism as nothing less than a powerful imaginative revolution. Chowdury’s unsentimental, vernacular exploration of the urban space of Delhi, along with the incorporation of Dickensian and popular culture references and a debunking of the epic, Hillion affirms, all contribute to his “quiet revolution” in terms of representing Delhi and enable the author to proffer a fascinating alternative to dominant depictions of the Indian city.

Sandra Saayman’s article also deals with revolutionary aesthetics and offers a retrospective analysis of South African writer and artist Breyten Breytenbach’s work. Saayman argues that Breytenbach’s prison writing in particular is arresting less in terms of its content and more in terms of the very texture and grammar of his poetry and prose, and she analyses in particular the overlap of text and image, notably the ways in which the author writes in artistic brush strokes, painting with words. Saayman also emphasises the ways in which Breytenbach engages with the beauty of the ordinary, “the textures and small pleasures of ‘everyday lovemaking life,’” and points out that although this writer’s work was once considered so revolutionary by the apartheid government that it was banned, its revolutionary essence is more embedded in the plasticity of language and its hermeneutic resistance than in its critical content.

The above articles are all essays whose point of origin can be traced to the fruitful interaction and discussions which took place at Nanterre University in 2018, and yet the two articles included in the Varia section of this issue engage in their own ways with the notion of revolution, whether political or aesthetic. Ellen Turner and Alexandra Poulain turn respectively to Tasmanian historical fiction and South African photography and engage with the politics of representation. Turner looks at two historical romances published by writers Kathleen Graves and Isabelle Dick in the mid-twentieth century but which are set in the nineteenth century in Tasmania (Van Diemen’s Land) and interrogates the ways in which these novels both recreate a certain past and reveal much about the present in so doing. Through the prism of Georgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” Turner contextualises both the nineteenth-century setting and the mid-twentieth-century context of the authors, particularly the exclusion and genocide of Indigenous people, before examining the representation of Tasmania as a prison camp in the two novels. Turner shows that both novelists engage with the codes of the Gothic romance and set the violence and savagery (as they perceive it) of Van Diemen’s Land at a safe distance from their 1940s viewpoint and thereby avoid any engagement with their contemporary era which nevertheless informs their work.

Alexandra Poulain’s article moves us away from literature and into the realm of photography, and offers an analysis of the politics and aesthetics of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi’s project “Faces and Phases.” Poulain unpacks the ways in
which Muholi’s portraits of black lesbians and transmen reclaim agency for an invisible community which is often the target of extreme violence by positioning the participants as subjects rather than objects of the gaze. Reading Muholi’s project from a decolonial perspective, Poulain considers the political impact of the photographer-activist’s reclaiming of space and agency, promoting a “counter-visual distribution of space.” Positing the project as a performative intervention in the political sphere, Poulain asserts the affirmative dimension of these photographs which render visible a largely disenfranchised and vulnerable group, and do so in the space of the museum from which the subjects are potentially excluded. Poulain analyses the manner in which the aesthetics of the photographs queer the national narrative and, in the forthright gaze of the participants, reject the asymmetrical one-way gaze so closely associated with colonialist ethnography. Poulain concludes that Muholi’s project opens up new perspectives, particularly in its insistence on “inclusion within the visual archive of the emerging nation.”

These articles all contribute to extending and rendering more complex familiar debates within postcolonial studies, particularly as regards the politics of literature and the potential for stylistic or aesthetic revolutions to stake new political claims, to render visible vulnerable, marginalised subjects, and to reclaim agency for them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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The Crisis of Postcolonial Modernity: Queer Adolescence in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* and P. Parivaraj’s *Shiva and Arun*

Sandeep Bakshi

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1 The decolonial concept of “coloniality of power” expounded by Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo appears particularly apposite in relation to postcolonial social formations whereby discursive legacies of colonisation, such as modernity, rationality and progress, continue their operations of “management and control” (Mignolo 2018, 143). As Mignolo suggests, “surrounding the idea of modernity is a discourse that promises happiness and salvation through conversion, progress, civilization, modernization, development, and market democracy” (142). Coloniality of power connects colonial to postcolonial societies such that formal decolonisation or independence from European imperial powers does not necessarily translate into dismantling structures of power in postcolonial societies. The following essay therefore focuses on those continuities of power held over subaltern subjects, such as women, queers and ethnic/caste subalterns for whom the coloniality of power – a fully functioning legacy of colonisation – is the most manifest in South Asia. Holding on to the usefulness of notions such as “revolution as evolution” in terms of independence from European powers and the temporal marker “post” of the postcolonial, i.e., the revolution that would encompass an evolution in time, I scrutinise the inability of this evolution to transform colonial into postcolonial modernity. Through a reading of queer adolescent fiction from South Asia, this essay analyses the contours of the promise of decolonisation from imperial powers, which materialises as a series of muted revolutions or revolutions-in-waiting.

2 In terms of staging the vexed encounter between queer adolescence, adulthood and postcolonial modernity, Shyam Selvadurai’s first novel *Funny Boy* (1994) and P. Parivaraj’s sole novel *Shiva and Arun* (1998) provide a generative ground for critical investigation. Selvadurai’s work engages with the narrative of unconventional
childhood and adolescence, and Parivaraj’s story addresses the question of queer adolescence and its continuation as well as disruption in adulthood. Set in Sri Lanka in the 1970s, *Funny Boy* recounts the gay childhood and adolescence of Arjie Chelvaratnam, the son of an affluent Tamil family. The narrative comprises six stories focusing on Arjie’s relationship with one particular character represented as “subaltern in terms of race, sexuality or gender” (Rao 1997, 118). Documenting the Tamil/Sinhala interethnic rifts, the novel culminates in the 1983 riots when Arjie’s family flee to Canada. Parivaraj’s work narrates the queer experience of two adolescent boys, Shiva and Arun, in a small South-Indian town and captures the differing trajectories of the boys. Whilst Shiva’s homosexuality leads to his eventual suicide, Arun faces the patriarchal ire to defend his queer identity. I suggest that the two narratives are significant in the manifold ways in which the materialisation of queer subjectivity in South Asia forms a fraught relationship to the category of the modern. In this regard, without implicating queerness in homonationalist tropes, my analysis signals how gay adolescence problematises the “queer” coming of age of postcolonial South Asian fiction.

**Eurocentric modernity**

3 Modernity, in decolonial thought, refers to the privilege of the Western world-system through its stake in modern forms of knowledge production, the idealisation of the French revolution as the originating point of human resistance and the secularisation of Christianity. These three key events mark the suturing of modernity to the West even though it remains an unfinished project. Further, as Enrique Dussel argues, it “appears when Europe affirms itself as the “center” of a World History that it inaugurates; the periphery that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition” (1993, 65). In this regard, Mignolo prefers the conceptualisation of the “rhetoric of modernity” which articulates itself through “modernity/coloniality” (2018, 230). The embedded binaries of tradition/modernity, old/new and nonmodern/modern acquire renewed sustenance through an assumed linear notion of time and history, which configures Europe/the West at the centre of time and modernity. The nonmodern in this configuration “is a flexible concept – not always mentioned – but presupposed and necessary for the invention, in the present, of underdeveloped uncivilized people: all that has to catch up to become modern” (Mignolo 2018, 117). Such universalising assumptions of Europe as the originary social, institutional and economic formation simultaneously imbricate the postcolonial worlds in teleological narratives of development and progress.

4 Considered in relation to global queer paradigms, decoloniality’s challenge to Euro-American modernity bears critical significance in terms of temporal distinctions that delineate the global North as a progressive/modern site of homosexual emancipation because of its visible queer movements. In such readings, the global South embodies, as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan observe, “a premodern, pre-political, non-Euro-American queerness” that must follow Western identity categories “in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity, and global modernity” (2002, 5–6). In addition, the deployment of queerness as a marker of Western modernity and US exceptionalism is the focus of Jasbir Puar’s theorisation of homonationalism. She

A growing cohort of queer scholars has been re-examining and disputing the Western narrative of historical time as organised around the principle of linearity. Gayatri Gopinath, for example, develops the notion of a queer South Asian diaspora “as a conceptual apparatus that poses a critique of modernity and its various narratives of progress,” thus unsettling the colonial construction of Third-World sexualities as “antior, pre-modern and in need of Western political development” (2005, 12). Similarly, Heather Love explains that since queer identities often appear as “a backward race” and “modernity’s backward children,” queer theorists must “take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphantist view of history” (2007, 3–7). Finally, Kathryn Bond Stockton’s analysis of childhood and “its intimate relations with queerness” interrupts “the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up” in twentieth-century literature (2009, 11). Borrowing from these sophisticated queer readings, I suggest that the novels provide a complex terrain of non-normative representation whereby same-sex desire in adolescence in the South Asian context prompts an interrogation of the category of modernity in postcolonial geography.

The queer nonmodern

Given the persistence of the discourse whereby non-Western discursive formations appear nonmodern, the displacement of the Eurocentric stagist conception of historical time as uncritical linear movement becomes particularly apposite to comprehend the emerging queer discourse in South Asia that does not necessarily emanate from Euro-American queerness. I contend that Selvadurai and Parivaraj utilise queer South Asian adolescence as a focal point to disrupt eurcentred formulations of tradition and modernity. The protagonists of Funny Boy and Shiva and Arun appear as sexual subjects and thus challenge the conventional view of “oriental” boys as available objects of desire. Louis Lo suggests that Arjie in Funny Boy cannot be called “homosexual” since the term “comes from Western, Christian, medical discourse” (2018, 203). Representations of non-normative desire in adolescence and adulthood in the South Asian context, as depicted in the novels, inevitably encompass a complex debate about the status of modernity in postcolonial spaces. Both novels explore questions of modernity whereby queer adolescence and adulthood in South Asia appear inextricably interlocked with the experience of postcolonial modernity. In my reading of Selvadurai and Parivaraj, therefore, I attempt to align queerness to postcolonial sites revealing a complex resignification of class, caste, ethnicity and religion.

Selvadurai and Parivaraj’s narratives raise concerns over the status of postcolonial modernity through a process of interrogation of queer adolescence in South Asia. In fiction, queer identity construction hinges on teenage representations that produce the oft-celebrated genre of coming-out narratives since “most texts describe a boy in his early teens from a middle-class home” (Saxey 2008, 40, emphasis added). Although working within the parameters of the Western coming-out story, Funny Boy and Shiva and Arun rework the narrative of adolescent identity-in-crisis from the South Asian perspective. As the protagonists struggle with their respective closets, the novels signal a larger crisis of postcolonial definition of modernity, which refuses to be subsumed under Western classification of modern/non-modern binary, and simultaneously
documents the difficulty of articulating queer subjectivity in the multiply-severed contexts of language, regional and ethnic identity, class and religion. If the novels represent the birth of modern queer subjectivity in South Asia, then this emergence carefully distances itself from any Eurocentric discourse.

In his examination of Selvadurai’s account, Andrew Lesk laments the unavailability of a Western-style identity politics of homosexuality in Sri Lanka. For him, “despite its cultural Westernization, [Sri Lanka] does not favour the liberating sexual alternates” and “a certain sense of Western modernity and its attendant emancipatory trappings is [...] most underdeveloped” (2006, 35-36). Such a trenchant critique of Sri Lanka epitomises an orientalising tendency to make Euro-America the central point of reference in queer practices. Lesk’s argument implicitly legitimises patronising assumptions built on a systematic dichotomy of the “progressive” West and the “underdeveloped” (both economically and culturally) Third World. By fixing the terms of modernity as a Western prerogative, it forecloses the possibility of a queer discourse arising from South Asia.

Although Lesk’s critique serves to highlight the political inscription of global (Western) and local (South Asian) sites, it implicitly raises questions about postcolonial modernity and its relation to queerness in both novels. Queer adolescence becomes central to what I term the crisis of postcolonial modernity since concern about identity and identification that underline both same-sex narratives and the “in-between” period of adolescence interpellates the Eurocentric binary of tradition/modernity in several ways. As such, questions of caste, class, ethnicity, religion and language become intertwined with the representation of South Asian queer adolescence so that the identity crises of the protagonists mimic and inevitably interrogate the status of modernity in postcolonial spaces.

The queer nonmodern and heteropatriarchy

Following the convention of coming-out accounts, *Funny Boy* and *Shiva and Arun* frame the narratives within the distinctive component of exploration of the gender binary that differentiates the queer story from other non-queer fiction. Simultaneously, they depart from these Western models through an explicit cross-gender identification/solidarity, often absent in the former. For instance, in Edmund White’s much-acclaimed work *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982), the narrator’s early realisation of his unconventional behaviour as a “sissy” serves as a key signifier of the narrator’s homosexuality (2002, 7). As an identifiable physical trait therefore, effeminacy is policed and reprimanded and becomes central in the struggle to “love a man but not to be a homosexual” at the end of White’s novel (238). In her critical investigation of coming-out fiction, Esther Saxey ascribes this suppression of effeminacy to “femme-phobia” or centrality of the “plot of concealment and revelation” whereby “it is common for a text to present a protagonist who isn’t overtly feminine or camp” (2008, 46). In this respect, White’s narrator embodies a particular misogyny, especially regarding his mother, that several scholars attribute to gay male representations. However, both Shiva in *Shiva and Arun* and Arjie in *Funny Boy* deflect from the privilege of their masculine gender to produce a bond with other-gendered subjects of shared oppression. Shiva’s sister Shanti is “more than a friend—she was his confidant” and Shiva is the sole person who is willing to help Shanti in the household chores when their mother is ill (Parivaraj 1998, 21). Shiva,
Shanti and their mother constitute a triad, resisting the father’s demand to send Shiva to a Sanskrit school in order to become a Hindu priest like him and his elder son, Govinda (22).

The novels disrupt the traditional assumption of a naturalised link between heterosexuality and patriarchy through an implicit construction of queerness in opposition to the expectation of the father. Heteropatriarchy and heteronormalisation invariably function in tandem to deny the existence of a queer subject. This denial becomes more obvious when the queer subject is in a direct relation of subordination, such as the adolescent, so that the adult father appears as the key signifier of oppressive heteropatriarchy, embodying the threat to the non-normative identification of the queer teenager. The adolescents therefore construct their identity in an oppositional relation to their father. For instance, Shiva does not know “what his father really thought or felt about him” and therefore avoids him “because he would ask questions that always seemed difficult for a young person to answer” (Parivaraj 1998, 43, 20). He does not wish to follow the paternal occupation of being a priest but wants to go to college instead. College entails “the first step out of this house, away from his father’s domination” (26). The novel figures this escape from heteropatriarchy as a crucial site of sexual freedom and queer subjectivity.

Similarly, Arun shares a problematic relationship with his father. Their relationship culminates in an open conflict when Arun refuses to marry according to his father’s wishes and openly declares his homosexuality at the point of transition from adolescence to adulthood. Like Shiva, he does not follow the paternal profession although his younger brother Chitti “seemed to have no option but to join his father” as a building contractor (Parivaraj 1998, 121). Arun’s decision to continue his studies to become a teacher after his graduation becomes “a point of contention with his father” (121). In contrast to Shiva, Arun overtly challenges paternal authority by refusing to marry and moving out of the family home. In addition, the novel connects subjects of shared oppression in a framework of solidarity through a trenchant critique of the father’s wish to impose heterosexuality upon Arun. For instance, it ends with the powerful image of the inclusion of queer sexuality in the family structure and the marginalisation of the patriarch. Arun’s sister Jyothi and his mother, who can be considered as conventional victims of patriarchy in terms of gender, forge a bond with Arun which contests the power of his father.

In *Funny Boy*, Arjie poses a direct threat to heteropatriarchy by his passion for cross-dressing, and the relation with his father is based upon mutual avoidance. Nevertheless, when the adults discover Arjie’s penchant for becoming the bride, the patriarch’s intervention re-establishes the heteronormative order. His father’s worry that Arjie may “turn out funny like that Rankotwera boy” and become “the laughing-stock of Colombo” prompts his mother to force Arjie to play cricket with the boys even though she is unable to comprehend her husband’s anxiety (Selvadurai 1994, 14). The effeminate Rankotwera boy appears as the maligned other and for his father, Arjie must be protected against such influences. Thus, he is rather pleased when his friend’s son and his new employee Jegan befriends Arjie. For him, the absence of masculine identity, apparent in Arjie’s unconventional activities such as playing with dolls and reading can be redressed in the company of a male influence like Jegan. Arjie’s father thus embodies the threat of patriarchal homophobia in the novel such that queerness
can only appear as a temporary chapter in the attainment of heteronormative adulthood.

Patriarchal homophobia manifests its control when Arjie’s father withdraws Arjie from St. Gabriel’s school and enrols him in the Queen Victoria Academy, the school that his brother Diggy attends. Explaining his decision, he asserts that “the [Victoria] Academy will force you to become a man” (1994, 210). The paternal homophobic fear of Arjie’s non-normative identity can only be overcome by calling to aid another “bastion of patriarchy,” which is equally a “colonial vestige of the British public-school system” (Pennell and Stephens 2002, 181). This apparatus of patriarchal control is the colonial-style all-boys school where, as Diggy warns Arjie, “you take it like a man” (Selvadurai 1994, 211). Diggy’s comment explicitly points to the hegemonic model of masculinity that the school deploys for the construction of boyhood/manhood of its pupils. Although Arjie submits to his father’s wish, the homosocial space of the institution allows him to embark on his first homosexual relationship with his classmate Shehan. The colonial/patriarchal enterprise of “becoming a man” is queered to reclaim the homosocial realm and re-signify it as a homosexual space.

Furthermore, the novel becomes a potent critique of gendered hierarchies. Like Shiva and Arun, it reinforces the alliance of queer subjects and women. By placing Arjie at the centre of such associations, the novel effectively challenges the dominant order from a queer perspective. Arjie’s bond with Radha Aunty and his mother highlights the identification of the queer subject with the subjects of patriarchal subordination. The second story of the novel centres on Radha Aunty and her aborted attempt to love across the Tamil/Sinhalese ethnic divide. After pursuing her studies in the United States, she returns to Sri Lanka and commences a romantic liaison with a Sinhala boy, Anil. As a transgressive subject herself, Radha Aunty becomes an ally to Arjie’s transgression of the gender binary: “She painted my eyelids with blue shadow, put rouge on my cheeks” (Selvadurai 1994, 49). Arjie’s bond with her enables him to comprehend that romantic love and family operate in opposition to each other as Radha Aunty concedes to an arranged marriage. Conventional narratives of romantic love in western discourse often use the choice of partner as a metric for postcolonial modern subjectivity. However, Radha Aunty’s embrace of an arranged marriage complicates such facile readings. Similarly, Arjie’s identification with his mother develops beyond the “pleasure of watching Amma drape her sari” (15). In the third story of the novel, he witnesses once again the impossibility of a romantic union in the form of the adulterous liaison between his mother and her friend Daryl, a Sri Lankan burgher. Both the stories attest to the centrality of Arjie’s observations as a privileged witness of the constraints of a patriarchal structure whereby romantic affection and love outside marriage for women systematically appear subservient to the demands of family.

The queer nonmodern and class, religion and ethnicity

In both novels, homosexuality becomes intelligible as one of the discursive sites of identification in its engagement with issues of class, caste, religion and ethnicity. The newness/modernity of Parivaraj and Selvadurai’s texts lies in the contestation of dominant paradigms of class (master-servant), religion (Hindu-Muslim) and ethnic difference (Tamil-Sinhala) in South Asia since all three protagonists experience their
initial homosexual encounters with boys across class, caste and ethnic divide. Shiva’s awareness of same-sex desire for his aunt’s houseboy, Chinni, Arun’s sexual awakening with the servant Krishna, and Arjie’s renewed attraction to Shehan point to the interpellation in terms of class, caste and religious difference for the queer subject. Informed materialist critiques of queer politics underscore the immediacy of addressing inequalities of class in queer discourses.

Marxist scholars have advocated the inclusion of the analytic of class in queer debates such that queer formations can truly become agents of transformative criticism. In his critical assessment of the erasure of the dynamics of class in queer studies, Donald Morton argues that “for queer theory, class conflict turns out to be just another set of problems, marginal at best, which have no determinate relation to sexual politics” (1996, 475). Similarly, Rosemary Hennessy deplores “the formation of a gay/queer imaginary in both corporate and academic circles (that) also rests on the suppression of a class analysis” (2000, 139). However, the specificity of class, caste, religious and ethnic difference in India and Sri Lanka become central to the queer coming-out narratives in the novels. Same-sex desire and homosexual discovery are systematically structured around the severances of class, caste, religion and ethnicity, which characterise the postcolonial South Asian nations.

Shiva’s foremost same-sex experience with Chinni critiques the organisation of a society/nation based on the dichotomy of master-servant and Brahmin-untouchable. As a Brahmin, whose father is a notable priest, Shiva is compelled to understand that Chinni, the untouchable and the servant, does not belong to the realm of humanity. Shiva realises that “Chinni wasn’t a proper person or something” (Parivaraj 1998, 48). However, the novel contests the master-servant trope by staging the attraction of Shiva’s desire for him. At home, when Chinni asks Shiva if he could bathe with him, Shiva is keenly aware of the inequalities of caste and class that separate them. He wonders, “Why in a so-called free India did people still accept it?” (50). Attempting to pulverise the class barriers, Shiva bathes with Chinni and they dry each other immediately after their mutual ejaculation. The episode references the subversive potential of queer love to over-ride class barriers through the proximity of their bodies. Crucially, the emphasis on their same-sex experience defeats the potency of the master-servant hierarchy and re-arranges their roles in a more egalitarian framework. These transgressions are particularly unique in South Asian queer literature and similar examples include R. Raj Rao’s novel The Boyfriend (2003) and Abha Dawesar’s work Babyji (2005).

Shiva and Chinni’s first experience of oral sex unsettles the impervious distinction between the two castes that occupy the highest and the lowest rung on the caste spectrum in India – the Brahmins and the Untouchables. The disruption of the master/servant and the Brahmin/Untouchable dichotomy functions as a key feature of homosexual relations in fiction that threaten the coherence of a national(ist) narrative. Shiva is aware that “it was just so contrary to everything a Brahmin learnt” but, “in an instant, the sensation of what was happening overran all the old taboos!” (Parivaraj 1998, 56). Shiva’s assertion that the “old taboos” were “somehow imposed by the elders and parents” condemns the perpetuation of rigid caste politics through the device of an inter-generational control (50). His repeated caresses of Chinni’s body “from the balls [...] around the pubic ‘nest’ and up through the hair that ran in a fine line to Chinni’s throat” defy the existing norms of social segregation (56). Thus, Shiva’s discovery of
non-normative sexuality is closely aligned to the refusal to accept imposed constructs of social hierarchy.

Similar to Shiva’s contestation of class categories, Arun’s sexual involvement with the servant Krishna transcends the limitations of the master-servant trope. The name Krishna not only signals the inter-implication of queerness and religion, but in the context of the novel, associates the divine with the underprivileged class. Arun’s encounter with Krishna explicitly threatens the hierarchy of a structural relation based on authority and subordination. Their first experience commences on the conversation about “handpumping” but mutual masturbation leads to sharing a bed together and falling asleep in an embrace (Parivaraj 1998, 92). Arun and Krishna reverse the received normative roles of the servant performing fellatio on the master. Arun (the putative master) lets Krishna’s (the alleged servant’s) sperm flow into his mouth before it runs “out of his mouth and onto the floor” (97). Arun’s subsequent gesture of fetching “two glasses of water” secures the absolute subversion of the master-servant binary (99). It uncovers the fictive character of social hierarchy and affirms the queer subject’s capacity to effectively contest as well as subvert it even though in a private gesture.

In *Funny Boy*, ethnic difference between Arjie and Shehan functions as a parallel subtext to Arjie’s developing sense of his own queerness. In his assessment of Sri Lankan politics, Tariq Jazeel points to the “racialised polarisation of identity politics” in which Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities “become the primary markers of identity” (2005, 232). In relation to the novel, Minoli Salgado observes a “reinforcement of constructed, essentialised ethnicities,” bearing a direct contrast to Arjie’s fluid gender identity (2007, 122; see also Gairola 2014). Arjie and Shehan’s same-sex romantic union ironically reflects the dismemberment of the Sri Lankan state based on ethnic division and the last two stories place the question of queer adolescence at the centre of interethnic disharmony.

On the first day of Arjie’s arrival at Victoria Academy, a fellow pupil, Salgado, questions Arjie’s presence in a Sinhalese class even though he is Tamil. When Arjie explains that he has always attended Sinhalese classes and “didn’t even speak Tamil” (216), Salgado dismisses the explanation and commands Arjie to go to the Tamil class. Although Shehan is Sinhalese, he comes to Arjie’s rescue by using the rhetoric of the Sinhalese who want Tamils to assimilate: “But Salgado, aren’t you always saying that Tamils should learn Sinhalese?” (Salvadurai 1994, 216). The increasingly violent interethnic disharmony is responsible for the separation of classes in the school. This divide is manifest in the incident that Arjie witnesses where Salgado and his friends corner a Tamil boy in a cubicle of the toilets in the school. Shehan explains to Arjie that the school is divided into two factions, the supporters of Black Tie, the principal who desires both Tamil and Sinhalese pupils to co-exist, and the followers of Lokubandara, the vice principal who wishes for a more “traditional, vernacular education” with emphasis on Buddhist-Sinhala heritage (220). The school becomes a microcosm of the competing ethnic versions of the nation.

Like Arun, Arjie subverts the relation between established hierarchies. Belonging to a Tamil minority, he needs the support of Shehan to survive in the Sinhala-dominated environment of the school. As their romance develops into a sexual relationship (with their first homosexual encounter in the garage of the Chelvaratnam house), it becomes implicitly dependent on a mutual offer of service and help. For instance, Shehan’s long hair often results in unjust punishment by the principal Black Tie. Arjie realises that
“powerful people like Black Tie or my father [...] got to decide what was right or wrong” (Salvadurai 1994, 274). Arjie redresses the wrongs done to Shehan by disrupting the balance of power. Black Tie needs Arjie to recite poems at the school prize-giving event. As a Tamil, he appeals to the ethnic solidarity with Arjie. However, Black Tie’s cruelty towards both Shehan and Arjie (punished and beaten when Arjie does not learn the poems properly) makes Arjie wonder about ethnic loyalty:

I thought of Mr. Lokubandara and the way Salgado and his friends had assaulted that Tamil boy. I thought of the way Black Tie had beaten both Shehan and me. Was one better than the other? I didn’t think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandra stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better. (247)

Arjie’s resistance to Black Tie’s authoritarian management of the school consists of shaming Black Tie in public by consciously mixing up the verses of the poem on the day of the school gathering. For Arjie, the act becomes an attempt to seek justice for the unfair treatment of Shehan at the hands of Black Tie. When questioned by Shehan on the motive behind his act, Arjie replies, “I did it for you” (284). Arjie’s disloyalty to ethnicity and family members who are disappointed at his failed recital reinforces the bond between Shehan and him.

Arjie’s failed performance at the school prize-giving event crucially works as a mockery of an earlier colonial system of education, which extends into the “new” postcolonial nation. Arjie’s “ultimate counter-performance,” as Mita Banerjee observes, involves an assertive refusal to become an agent of colonial mimicry (2005, 155). The “post” in postcolonial inevitably suggests the transition from a colonial to a modern independent state. Black Tie, the homophobic principal, represents the earlier colonial model of education. Arjie’s refusal to articulate the poems on which Black Tie’s career depends becomes a critique of a former public-school system that can no longer wield the pressures of ethnic divisions in the modern postcolonial nation. By intentionally muddling the sentences of the English-language poems, which pay a tribute to the colonial situation, Arjie not only complicates the relation between the past and the present, the old and the new, but undermines the continuation of colonial public schools in modern Sri Lanka as well. Furthermore, the crisis of postcolonial modernity “jumbles all differences into a single performance of non-sense: the difference between the colonial and the postcolonial, as well as that between queerness and ‘straight’ sexual orientation” (Banerjee 2005, 155–56). Selvadurai demonstrates the agency of queer adolescence to upset the category of the postcolonial by incorporating colonial as well as postcolonial referents in Arjie’s performance. The presence of the old colonial system in modern Sri Lanka, through cricket and the education system, hints at an incomplete decolonisation of South Asia. The modernity of the postcolonial nation defined by independence from a former colonial power becomes increasingly problematic as Arjie’s performance repeatedly references the former colonial situation.

Another significant debate on the status of postcolonial modernity functions around the category of religion in Shiva and Arun. The hierarchical relationship of a modern West and a nonmodern South Asia is constructed around the distinction between secularised Christianity in the West and the continual inclusion of religion in South Asia. Shiva and his Muslim friend Abdullah’s lives in the novel are certainly dependent upon the demands of their respective religions. However, the novel queers both the religions in the bond that Shiva and Abdullah establish and thus makes a passionate plea for the queer sacred. For example, when Krishna enters Arun’s room, he discovers the posters of male sportsmen juxtaposed with the “print of Lord Krishna and the
Milkmaids” (Parivaraj 1998, 92). The heterosexual eroticism that is usually associated with Lord Krishna and the milkmaids is queered when considered in relation to the Arun/Krishna sexual liaison. The significance of a “traditional” past to questions of queer identity in the “present” is further reinforced in Abdullah’s struggle to explain the compatibility of Islam with homosexuality: “He had tried to tell his father about famous Muslim leaders and rulers who had both male and female love affairs” (123). By reclaiming a religious past, Abdullah attempts to legitimate his desire for men, just as a “Brahmin gay” would tell his father “that the Kama Sutra and the wall engravings at Puri temple were real” (124). The incorporation of putatively past sexual practices to frame Abdullah’s sexuality reveals the potency of nonmodern, nonsecular forms to affect, in this case affirmatively, modern debates about queer identity. Outlining the pre-colonial archives as same-sex practices legitimises the claim to South Asian queerness in contemporary times without a recourse to the colonial interregnum. The genealogical connection between Abdullah’s sexuality and South Asian pasts appears more significant than present-day Western models of queerness.

The queer nonmodern and language

Language also becomes a significant marker in the definition of postcolonial modernity in Funny Boy. Black Tie and Mr Lokubandara’s struggle over Tamil/Sinhala education reflects the war of national language in Sri Lanka in the 1970s. The presence of English as the over-arching language of reference in the novel and in Sri Lanka further complicates the linguistic landscape. The language of the coloniser, English, affords privilege and power which is apparent in Amma’s dealing with the police after Uncle Daryl’s disappearance. Amma is able to hide the adulterous nature of her liaison with Uncle Daryl through recourse to English, which immediately signifies her superior status in Sri Lankan society (Selvadurai 1994, 127). However, English is made to signify a product of Western import that cannot embody the entirety of the Sri Lankan experience. The appended glossary of Sri Lankan terms at the end of the novel attests to the inadequacy of English in the Sri Lankan context.

Additionally, the repeated use of the adjective “funny” to define Arjie’s homosexuality by the adults refers to the incompleteness of English to incorporate local versions of same-sex desire. Throughout the novel, Arjie’s queerness appears as an attribute suggested by the term “funny” in the title. The persistent refusal to name and classify same-sex experience consolidates the resistance to Western practices of categorisation. Moreover, homophobic literalises as a Western influence and attaches to the Western lexicon in terms of English language. Tanuja, Arjie’s cousin from Canada, brings terms of homophobic insult to the game of bride-bride. When Arjie refuses to let her play the bride, she calls him “a pansy,” “a faggot,” and “a sissy” (Selvadurai 1994, 11). Tanuja’s act of naming (and consequently shaming) Arjie’s queerness symbolises the Western practice of category formation. The general incomprehension of the insults by the group points to the local development of queer subjectivity in Sri Lanka whereby Arjie and his cousins categorically reject Western discourses of identity classification. Tanuja’s isolation in the group literalises a critique of homophobia that becomes available in the novel through a Western construction of identity sites. This does not imply that homophobia is a Western import. Instead, it points to the ready availability
of homophobic slurs in English, which in other South Asian contexts are to a certain extent articulated through patriarchy as I suggest below.  

For all three protagonists, the realisation of homosexuality is embodied as a crisis of postcolonial modernity in terms of language. Arjie, Shiva and Arun attempt to formulate a critical vocabulary for their queerness. Although written in English, Selvadurai and Parivaraj’s queer fiction signals the inability of the English language to articulate the multiply-positioned South Asian queer subjectivity. When asked by his brother Chitti whether he is a “homo,” Arun responds: “That’s a foreign brand name Chitti. I don’t like it, but o.k. it’s one way to describe me” (Parivaraj 1998, 152). Although spoken in English, the conversation between the brothers becomes symptomatic of the expropriation of English as an alien, non-Indian language. “Foreign brand name” is coterminous with the commodification of “gay” identities in Western capitalist systems that results in what Puar terms “queer consumer citizenship” (2007, 62), and which the South Asian queer subject runs the risk of replicating. Arun, Shiva and Abdullah define themselves in contrast to the Western construct of a homosexual identity as men “who loved men” (Parivaraj 1998, 116, italics in original). The urgency of describing his queerness becomes even more importunate when Arun’s father confronts him on the question of marriage. Connecting homosexuality to effeminacy and paedophilia, the patriarch calls him a chamma chacka and disowns him, thereby effectively framing homophobia as integral to patriarchy (149). As a literal translation, chamma chacka implies that Arun is an effeminate man who has a penchant for cross-dressing. Again, Arun’s retort – “I just don’t want to get married because my sexual preference is for men not women” (150) – affirms the critical significance of self-definition which does not include the naming of sexuality as homosexual, gay or queer.

In this essay, I have argued for a reconsideration of queer adolescence in conjunction with a reading of specific sites of ethnicity, caste, class, religion and language in South Asia. I have also suggested that the illustration of queer subjectivity and queer self-definition in South Asia raises questions about the definition of modernity in the novels. The difficulty of defining queerness in the South Asian context reinforces the impossibility of postcolonial modernity, which complicates and revises the colonial version of the tradition/modern binary. Queer adolescence, as I have shown, disputes the applicability of Western/global constructs to examine queerness in South Asia appropriately. Despite the availability of Western identity categories through the presence of English in South Asia, the novels problematise the articulation of the South Asian queer subject by a disavowal of the English language. Simultaneously, the Arjie-Shehan, Shiva-Chinni and Arun-Krishna bonds underscore the importance of local alliances between marginalised subjects.

The novels signal an inclusion of queerness in South Asian fiction in English. As Jazeel argues, in relation to Funny Boy, the novels are “an important political intervention” (2005, 231). They belong to an emerging body of potentially subversive fiction that locates queer South Asian subjectivity as a site of contest and contradictions. The interaction between global queer narratives and local South Asian versions of same-sex desire appears as a fraught relationship. A significant shift in South Asian attitudes to the master discourse of the West is evident in the way these novels negotiate Western constructs such as modernity and sexuality. In the process, they expose the flaws of globalising discourses based on the principle of universalism, which is neither achievable nor desirable.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES
1. Quijano invokes eurocentred capitalism as the key vector of coloniality of power, which invariably involves “the racist model of universal social classification of the world population” (2000, 540).
2. In similar regard, Purnima Bose analyses the collusion of capitalism, the cosmetic industry and American feminism in coercing the purportedly oppressed women of Afghanistan into what she labels “imperial modernity” (2010).
3. I use the word “untouchable” as it is deployed in the novel. In contemporary times, the self-definitional term is Dalit.
4. This claim is premised on Mignolo’s conceptualisation of modernity and decoloniality whereby “Christian teleology” operates as a marker of Western universalism (2018, 117–20).
5. Ruth Vanita’s specious claim that modern homophobia is a western import elides the myriad expressions of homophobia, which do not exclusively comprise verbal slurs and aggression. See https://feminisminindia.com/2016/04/25/interview-with-ruth-vanita/

ABSTRACTS
In this essay, I offer a queer reading of two works of the postcolonial canon from South Asia to ask what alternative meanings emerge when ethnic, religious, cultural and national matrices are brought to bear upon queer epistemology. Exploring the interconnections between queer adolescence, revolutions and postcoloniality, I disturb neat narratives of postcolonial modernity to suggest the reorientation of South Asian fiction as a crucial outcome of the crossings.

INDEX
Keywords: Selvadurai (Shyam), Parivaraj (P.), queer adolescence, South Asia, postcolonial nonmodern, decolonial
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Dance and Dissidence in Wole Soyinka’s Plays: From Status Quo to Revolution

Inés Bigot

1 Wole Soyinka’s works are not only marked by the cultural and psychological consequences of colonization, but also by the atmosphere of disillusionment and the situation of instability which characterized the post-independence period in Nigeria. Considering such a historical background, the medium of theatre was particularly suited to embarking on a double undertaking: allowing the regeneration of the Nigerian nation and triggering the awakening of the collective national consciousness – which was a necessary step to call into question contemporary socio-political circumstances (Akporji 2003).

2 Chii Akporji, in her book, Figures in a Dance: The Theatre of W.B. Yeats and Wole Soyinka, notes that Soyinka is fully aware of the impact that a ritualized dramaturgy can have on the collective consciousness of colonial and postcolonial communities. Hence his association between a “ritual” kind of total theatre, exploring the creative and subversive potential of the dancing body, and the dynamics of spiritual regeneration and revolution. Indeed, Biodun Jeyifo reminds us that in Soyinka’s essays on drama (in Myth, Literature and the African World and in some of his essays in Art, Dialogue and Outrage), ritual is seen as a “revitalizing and revolutionizing source for contemporary drama and theatre” (2004, 125).

3 It is precisely on the role of dance – understood as literary motif and performance – within the context of a ritualized dramaturgy, that I intend to focus. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins suggest, not only does dance, interpreted as a stylized spatial inscription, offer the opportunity to re-appropriate a territory which bears the mark of British imperialism, but it also corresponds to a non-verbal form of representation of the subject which is closely linked to the notion of empowerment (1996, 239–40).

4 In Soyinka’s plays, dance is dual in the sense that it stands out both as the opposite of language – an unreachable oddity linked with the unspeakable, spiritual experience of
the ritual trance – and as a strategic medium of expression which is conceived as a form of counter-discourse. Soyinka often turns the dancing body into a paradoxical discursive image which mediates a controlled, subversive message targeting the ideological constructs of power and authority. Suggesting that dance acts as a rebellious, disruptive discourse in some of Soyinka’s plays does not imply that the specificity and autonomy of dance is being ignored in favour of a logocentric stance. Besides, the recurrent lack of detailed information as to the nature or the sequence of the dancers’ movements and steps makes it difficult to reconstitute what Arnaud Rykner calls “a gestural grammar” (“une grammaire du geste”) in L’envers du théâtre (1996, 190). However, dance, far from being reduced to the impulsive embodiment of an inarticulate feeling, is often presented as a powerful communicative medium, as a specific type of corporeal language which unites “showing” with “telling,” the language of the dancer embodying its own content, which makes it even more powerful in terms of impact.2

There is no real contradiction between these two trajectories at work in Soyinka’s plays (dance as an opaque, unspeakable moment and dance as a transgressive political statement) since, in both cases, the dancing characters epitomize resistance by refusing to be reduced to a passive “site of inscription,” to borrow Susan A. Reed’s words (1998, 527). This article will mainly focus on the second trajectory: dance as counter-discourse.

The main targets of these dissident dancing bodies are numerous. They extend from colonial powers to the civil and military regimes which marked the postcolonial period starting with the independence of Nigeria in 1960, a key moment when Soyinka’s “erstwhile ‘comrades’” went back to Nigeria to “get a slice a of ‘independence cake’ and “step fast into the shoes of the departing whites before other people got there” (Soyinka 2002, xiii).

Thus, in Soyinka’s plays, whether the dance is “macabre” or exemplifies a moment of pure joy, it is often seen as a metaphor for the redefinition of personal and communal identity, synonymous with the empowerment of the subject. Instead of being limited to a tool aiming at consensus, dance mediates the Nigerian playwright’s dissident questioning of socio-political status quo. Bearing in mind the counter-discursive potential of dance, I will first show that dance is frequently presented as the symbol of “transition” and renewal in Soyinka’s plays, laying particular emphasis on A Dance of the Forests. This will lead me to focus more specifically on various examples of the cohesive, revolutionary force that dance stands for in plays where the off-beat rhythm of rebellious bodies can wreak havoc on the imposed order of society, paving the way for a new dawn.

Dance is prevalent in Soyinka’s total theatre plays which combine it with song, mime and language in a way that is reminiscent of Apidan theatre (traditional Yoruba theatre).3 Often symbolic of the moving body’s inexhaustible power of resistance, it is associated with the notion of “transition” in plays such as A Dance of the Forests, The Road or Death and the King’s Horseman. Let us recall Soyinka’s lines to the producer in The Road: “The dance is the movement of transition” (1973, 149). Beyond the immediate ritual context of the cult of flesh dissolution (Agemo) to which Soyinka alludes here, this notion can be interpreted in broader socio-political terms, especially in a postcolonial context, and bearing in mind the fact that the concept of transition is
often related, in Soyinka’s essays, to the God of iron and creativity’s powerful act of confronting the abyss of transition.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, a play which was produced in 1960 as part of the celebrations for the independence of Nigeria, dance is linked to the necessary escape from intellectual paralysis and political status quo. It is seen as a critical test supposed to trigger an awakening of the Nigerian nation facing its new life. As Biodun Jeyifo explains in *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*, the central action of the play hinges round “a gathering of the tribes” (2004, 120) which is meant to “celebrate the glorious past and hopeful future” (121) of Africa but will eventually turn into a judicial confrontation with the “monstrous evils of the past and present life of the community” (121). Soyinka draws a parallel between this gathering of the tribes and the contemporary situation of Nigeria invested with the “historic task of forging a nation out of diverse peoples and communities which the celebrations symbolically entailed” (120).

Within this particular context the dance in the forest, which is part and parcel of the “trial” condemning the infamous past of Africa, can be interpreted as a critical, initiatory and transitional moment when the human community (represented by three fallible characters, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi), the mirror of the newly independent Nigeria, chooses its future, symbolized by the half-child. The expiatory and inevitable dimension of the dance in the forest that occurs at the end of the play is underlined by Aroni (a forest dweller) in the prologue: “Forest Head, the one who we call OBANEJI, invited Demoke, Adenebi, and Rola to be present at the dance. They followed him, unwillingly, but they had no choice” (Soyinka 1973, 5). This idea of a compulsory step that needs to be taken in order to try and re-build the community on a democratic and peaceful basis is also present in the stage directions describing the “Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice” which takes place in the village after Demoke has restored the half-child to his mother: “Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice, in which Eshuoro and his Jester head Demoke relentlessly towards the totem and the silent dancing figures. Rola and Adenebi are made to sprinkle libation on the scene, continuously as in a trance” (72).

The reference to dawn breaking at the end of the play, along with the idea of a rite of purification undergone by Demoke and Rola, leave room for the possibility of some kind of regeneration despite the absence of a clear answer to Agboreko’s question about the future of the community: “Does that mean something wise, child? [Sneaking up to Demoke.] Of the future, did you learn anything?” (Soyinka 1973, 74). In fact, Rola “looks chastened” (73) and Demoke mentions the “lightning that seared [them both] through the head” (74).

With hindsight, Forest Head’s meditations have proved to be true: “The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered” (Soyinka 1973, 71). However, the historical events that took place in Nigeria a few years after independence (among which the Civil War, 1967-1970) must not lead us to underestimate the powerful potential of change which dance symbolizes in this play. Taking place at night, in the mysterious ritual space of the forest, the dance, which in Aroni’s words was not “as dignified a Dance as it should be” (5), because of the vengeful presence of Eshuoro, goes beyond the “danse macabre” Soyinka talks about in the interview with Biodun Jeyifo. In that perspective, one has to bear in mind the fact that Eshuoro’s presence was anticipated.
by Aroni, and this appears clearly in a dialogue that takes place between the latter and Forest Head:

FOREST HEAD: [...] Ah-Eshuoro?
ARONI: He will find us. I have laid a trail that will bring him to us.
FOREST HEAD: We will make use of him. If the child needs a fright, then the mother must summon the witch. (45–46)

It is indeed the threat Eshuoro represents that will ultimately lead to Demoke’s choice of restoring the half-child to his mother. This is clearly perceptible in the stage directions that describe Eshuoro’s attempt to control the half-child:

[...] When the Half-Child is totally disarmed by the Jester, Eshuoro picks him up suddenly and throws him towards the Third Triplet who makes to catch him on the point of two knives as in the dance of the child acrobats. Rola screams, the child is tossed up by the Third Triplet who again goes through the same motion, the other two Triplets continuing the furious ‘ampe’ round him and yelling at the top of their voices. Demoke, Rola and Adenebi again cluster together. The Half-Child is now tossed back to Eshuoro, and suddenly Demoke dashes forward to intercept. Eshuoro laughs, pretends to throw the child back [...]. They keep up this game for a brief period, with Demoke running between them, until Ogun appears behind the Interpreter, pulls him aside just as the child is thrown towards him, makes the catch himself passing it instantly to Demoke who has come running as before. All action stops again, including the first and second Triplets who have never ceased to ‘ampe.’ They all look at Demoke, who stands confused, not knowing what the next step should be. He decides eventually to restore the child to the Dead Woman [...]. (Soyinka 1973, 70–71)

In spite of the general atmosphere of violence, danger and death that prevails during the climactic scene of the play, the dance stands out as the eloquent medium used by Forest Head to “pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit” (71), the prerequisite for a possible change and revolution in the ways of thinking of the human community. Interestingly, in the 1960 production of the play, “the Dance for the Half-Child” – which takes a different form partly for technical reasons – contains a dance of the Ibos, called “an ‘atilogwu’-ordered dance” in the stage directions, ‘Atilogwu’ meaning literally “putting in the medicine” (76). The potential therapeutic value of dance is underlined even more clearly, despite the fact that this dance is instigated by the Interpreter, Eshuoro’s Jester.

Such a comparison between dance and renewal, dance and transition is also perceptible at the end of The Lion and the Jewel, which is characterized by a festive atmosphere: here, the dance, along with the song that accompanies it, amounts to the joyful celebration of Sidi and Baroka’s marriage, to a fertility ritual. The child that is to be born through the union of a representative of the old world (Baroka) and a representative of the young generation (Sidi) becomes the symbol of the possible rebirth of this Yoruba village in the colonial period, and more generally speaking, of the Nigerian nation:

Festive air, fully pervasive. Oil lamps from the market multiply as traders desert their stalls to join them. A young girl flaunts her dancing buttocks at Lakunle and he rises to the bait [...]. Lakunle last seen, having freed himself of Sadiku, clearing a space in the crowd for the young girl.
The crowd repeat the song after Sidi.
Tolani tolani
T’emi ni T’emi ni
Sun mo mi, we mo mi
Sun mo mi, fa mo mi
Yarabi lo m’emyi t’o le d’omo. (Soyinka 1974, 57–58)
In these lines, the cohesive potential of dance is perceptible, pointing the way to the creation of a new community and a new Lakunle shorn of his warped notion of modernity and knowledge. Thus, often taken as an agent of change and regeneration, the dancing body quickly becomes a threat to the imposed order, defying various forms of authority. In Soyinka’s plays, dance, far from being considered as a frivolous pastime or virtuoso performance, is all the more conducive to rebellion as it is shown as a universal privilege and weapon. It is a means of expression that can be adopted by different members of society, from the traditional Oba (“king”) (Kongi’s Harvest) to victims of the Civil War (such as Aafaa, the spastic “dancer” in Madmen and Specialists) and prisoners (in From Zia, With Love), not to forget apparently disempowered women (Sadiku’s dance of victory in The Lion and the Jewel which celebrates Baroka’s supposed loss of virility (1974, 30–31). To choose but a few examples, Kongi’s Harvest opens with the imprisoned, traditional king Oba Danlola and some of his followers’ adoption of a counter-discourse which is channelled through song and dance. The characters thus voice their protest against the tyranny of the new leader of the nation, Kongi – an “epileptic” dictator – in what amounts to a “desecration” of the National Anthem in the Superintendent’s words. Danlola’s dance, which immediately follows the Superintendent’s denunciation of “these antics” that do not befit an elder and a King, reasserts the Oba’s authority as the stage direction indicates through the use of the adjective “royal”: “to the beat of ‘gbedu’ drum, steps into slow, royal dance” (1974, 62). Here, dance acts as a reply to the Superintendent’s criticism. The dance and the song thus go hand in hand in mediating a rebellious message which is thought to be more efficient than words alone. To illustrate this point, the following lines from the subversive song bear witness to the inadequacy of spoken language in front of the mechanical, repetitive discourse of power which stifles the expression of dissident opinions or arguments:

[...]
Who but a lunatic
Will bandy words with boxes
With government rediffusion sets
Which talk and talk and never
Take a lone word in reply. [...]
I cannot counter words of
A rediffusion set [...]. (61–62)

In the context of this play, where dancing is associated with speaking one’s mind, dance acts as a metaphor for and as the modus operandi of the struggle against the power of Kongi. The recurrent allusions to the dance that is to take place during the Festival of the New Yam where Kongi is supposed to receive the ritual tuber from Danlola’s hands, point to the threat it represents for the established order. As Daodu explains to Oba Danlola in the second part of the play, “Kabiyesi, this is no time for trivialities. We shall all have our dance tonight, when it matters [...]” (1974, 112). In point of fact, the dance during which Kongi receives a copper salver containing the head of Segi’s dissident father serves as a powerful counter-discourse to the leader’s preceding praise of “the Spirit of Harvest” and the “spirit of resurgence” (129). Segi’s decision to present this “season’s gift to the Leader” (129) enables her to turn the frenzied bacchanal that was part and parcel of the “Harvest orgy of food and drink” (130) into a political statement which leaves Kongi “speechless,” as the stage directions indicate:
The rhythm of pounding emerges triumphant, the dance grows frenzied. Above it all on the dais, Kongi, getting progressively inspired harangues his audience in words drowned in the bacchanal. He exhorts, declaims, reviles, cajoles, damns, curses, vilifies, excommunicates, execrates until he is a demonic mass of sweat and foam at the lips.

Segi returns, disappears into the area of pestles. A copper salver is raised suddenly high; it passes from hands to hands above the women’s heads; they dance with it on their heads; it is thrown from one to the other until at last it reaches Kongi’s table and Segi throws open the lid.

In it, the head of an old man.

In the ensuing scramble, no one is left but Kongi and the head, Kongi’s mouth wide open in speechless terror. (131–32)\(^\text{17}\)

As Eldred Jones argues in *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, *Kongi’s Harvest* is not only “the representation of a clash between a modern dictatorship and the traditional system which it has effectively replaced [...]. It is ultimately a representation of the clash between the life-giving forces and death-producing forces” (1988, 100).

Just as dance is chosen by Danlola, Segi and Daodu as a vehicle for protest in *Kongi’s Harvest*, the dissident prisoners in *From Zia, With Love* break into a dance that embodies their potential for revolt, although it comes to a stop when the sick man collapses (1999, 105).\(^\text{20}\) Facing the limits of spoken language (since the Superintendent does not listen to his remarks about the disastrous health of the prisoners), Hyacinth resorts to “rhythm” as an inductive, cohesive and rebellious strength. The stage directions thus show the shift from sterile violence, as Hyacinth shakes the bars of the cell doors, to a creative rhythmic act which translates into a chant and a dance:

He changes the violent shake to a rhythmic one, and is soon joined in by the other prisoners who bang cups, plates, sticks and join in the chant [...]. Someone begins to stamp to the rhythm. In a few moments, the cell is filled with gyrating figures in silhouette, the corridor bulb leaving a pool of light forestage so that the sick man remains visible. (105)

Another striking example of the dancing body’s ability to fight authority through the assertion of a dissident rhythm is Chume’s dance in front of Major Silva, from the Salvation Army, in *Jero’s Metamorphosis*. Chume, who cannot play the trumpet in response to Major Silva’s request and who possesses a practical and natural relation to music in contrast with Silva who says he understands it, plays according to his own sensibility despite Silva’s reproaches and attempt to control his tempo. Chume’s aggressive dance, along with the traditional rhythm of the music he plays, appears as the climax of the struggle, as a re-assertion of his personal identity as a musician, and it succeeds in reverting the balance of power. The dance is understood as a threat by Major Silva, triggering his exit from the scene.\(^\text{21}\) Here are the stage directions which describe Chume’s (momentary) but symbolic triumph:

Throws himself into the music now, turning the tune into a traditional beat and warming progressively. His legs begin to slice into the rhythm and before long his entire body is caught up with it. He dances aggressively towards Silva who backs away but cannot immediately escape as Chume’s dance controls the exit [...]. (1974, 191–92)

Chume’s musical and dancing style is all the more subversive as it deviates from what Silva earlier describes as the expected standards of the Salvation Army tune: “[...] Always remember that the tunes of the Army must be martial in colour and tempo. We march to it remember, not dance” (190). As we learn from Silva, the Salvation Army has “an important date at tomorrow’s executions” (191). This is an allusion to the
transformation of Lagos Bar Beach into a “National Public Execution Amphitheatre” which is meant to boost the tourist trade (Soyinka 1974, 201) – a “reference to the public execution of robbers, a phenomenon that has remained a postwar reality in this country” (Osofisan 1978, 160). Chume’s “swingy beat” (Soyinka 1974, 189) and his spontaneous dance thus trample the disciplinary, military dimension of this kind of music underfoot.

19 This is all about putting forward one’s own dissident rhythm, what Christiane Fioupou calls, quoting from Madmen and Specialists, the “‘self-tickling’ ‘tick-tock’ of the heretic pulsating against the beat of dogma” in “Le pouvoir sur scène : contorsions politico-religieuses dans le théâtre de Soyinka.” In Madmen and Specialists, Aafaa, one of the victims of the Nigerian Civil War, ironically called “the dancer” (Soyinka 1974, 218) in the initial stage directions, invests his personal affliction, St-Vitus spasms, with an explosive dimension. Although Aafaa’s “dance,” a parody of traditional trance dance, is the result of a traumatic shock triggered by the atrocities of the war, the character turns it into a striking denunciation of the “manipulations to which men have been subjected at all levels.”

20 Thus, in Soyinka’s plays, the art of Terpsichore either contributes to or celebrates the redefinition of the balance of power in society. The women’s dance in Death and the King’s Horseman (scene 3), indirectly compared to a “riot,” is a case in point. Coming after the verbal fight with Sergeant Amusa and his men during which the women and the girls succeed in destabilizing these representatives of authority, it indicates the impulse to embody victory not only over the opposite sex but also over the colonial order that Amusa serves. The description of the dance illustrates the intensity of the moment as well as its intrinsic chaotic dimension: “A Woman bursts into song and dance of euphoria […]. The rest of the Women join in, some placing the Girls on their back like infants, others dancing round them. The dance becomes general, mounting in excitement” (Soyinka 2009, 42–43).

21 Such a communal impetus turns into a revolutionary force in Soyinka’s creative adaptation of Euripides’s The Bacchae entitled The Bacchae of Euripides, a Communion Rite, in which the dancing returns the power of the past to the people, the power that Pentheus’ cruel governance had denied them. All the different forms of dancing also image an end to the political and historical structures that empire had imposed on the region – both specifically in Nigeria and more widely throughout Africa – and which power-hungry rulers like Pentheus retained: dancing is liberation. Not only is Pentheus conquered, but other imperial manifestations of his rule are also banished when the dance’s power takes effect. (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 40)

It is clear that the dancing followers of Dionysos are seen by the ruler Pentheus as agents of disorder: “I want an end to the drunken dancing / The filth, the orgies, the rot and creeping / Poison in the body of state. I want Order and – / I want immediate results […]” (Soyinka 1973, 256). In this play where it simultaneously functions as the unspeakable experience of trance and as “cunning subversion” (257), dance is the symbol of revolution and of the “new order” that the Leader of the Slaves celebrates at the beginning of the play (239), an order which implies the death of Pentheus. Throughout the play, dance stands for a “new vitality” which is said to be “catching Thebes on the rebound” offering a way out of the “fossilized past” (252). As such, it produces a shift in the people’s habits, disrupting the rules of propriety and transcending “the barrier of age, the barrier of sex or slave and master” (255).
The reversal of the hierarchical basis of society is put forward in an eloquent scene in which Dionysos turns the strict, tyrannical, “militaristic” (Soyinka 1973, 293) leader Pentheus into a feminized Dionysian dancer: under the influence of wine, Pentheus does not realize that he has been dressed in women’s clothes by the god (“a female Bacchic costume,” 289). His movements which are supposed to be those of a military march actually amount to a dance which closely resembles Tiresias and Kadmos’s own earlier dance (255):

PENTHEUS: He’s taught [the drill-master] a new march to the household cavalry
A masterpiece of precision. We’ll prance through
Thebes like those splendid horsemen. Wait,
I’ll teach you the movements. It’s simple–
Watch my feet!
[He draws his ‘sword’, performs a brief salute forwards and sideways, then strikes a dance pose]
Here we go–
One-Two-Back, One-Two-Back, One-Two-Back...
[exactly like Tiresias. The music of Dionysos accompanies him, swelling in volume as Pentheus throws himself passionately into the dance, exhorting Dionysos’s efforts.] (293)
The Bacchae of Euripides enables us to grasp the nature of the links existing between dance and revolution. When Tiresias tries to explain to Kadmos the “meaning of the dance,” he develops the idea of a better understanding of oneself triggered by a previous process of purification which implies leaving preconceived ideas aside, a necessary step to produce durable changes in the ethos and the lives of the people of Thebes: “When you step into the dance you’ll lose all your silly notions” (Soyinka 1973, 255).

As a medium that helps to create a “crack in the dead crust of the soul” (Soyinka 1973, 244) dance clearly acquires a potent subversive role in Wole Soyinka’s plays where freedom and liberation from all kinds of constraints and fetters often translate into dancing feet treading the road of life. The dancing body – and more generally speaking the moving body’s considerable power of re-creation of a personal and communal identity - easily turns into a rebellious weapon. Even in the plays where dance is interrupted or does not explicitly and immediately bear fruit, it conveys a hope for change as the dancers are pregnant with the embryo of an upcoming revolution. The dancing body, understood as agent and not simply as a passive “site of inscription,” illustrates Jero’s words in Jero’s Metamorphosis, taken literally: “To survive, we need full-bodied tactics” (Soyinka 1974, 177).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. As Akporji notes, Soyinka “understood ritual to denote the communicative aspect of culturally defined sets of behaviour or customs, a much wider interpretation of the term than that by Aristotle or Nietzsche” (2003, 46). In her article “Dramatic Theory of Wole Soyinka,” Ann B. Davis states that “essentially, Soyinka views ritual as that which drama incorporates to develop social consciousness” (1980, 148). The question of the relationship between ritual and drama is a vexed one. While they can be compared, one has to take into consideration the difference between a sacred ritual, taken independently from its potential relationship with dramatic elements, and a ritual which takes place within the context of a specific play (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 59–61). Having said that, Wole Soyinka’s plays often depart from a dramaturgy based on mimesis, opting for a strategy of presentation rather than mere representation which sometimes contributes to the blurring of the line between the efficacious dimension of the ritual and the fictional aspect of theatre (on the subject of ritual and drama, see Gotrick 1984, 14.)

2. These remarks on dance and language echo those developed in my article, “De l’envers des mots au discours muet : danse et langage dans le théâtre de W. B. Yeats et de Wole Soyinka” (Bigot 2019). Kerry-Jane Wallart underlines the ambiguous relationship between language and dance, arguing that in his plays, Soyinka explores the communicative “linguistic” potential of dance while calling it into question at the same time (2014). More generally, as Sylvia Ellis explains in The Plays of W.B. Yeats, the question “can dance be considered as a language?” is “a very old debate” (1999, 248). The links between dance and language have been addressed by many thinkers and writers from Plato (Book 7 of The Laws) to Thoinot Arbeau (Orchesography), Jean-Georges Noverre and Ann Hutchinson (with her work on Labanotation), to quote but a few of them. One can draw a parallel between dance and language which both constitute “symbolic systems,” but it is a fact that dance does not share all the characteristics of language, among which Ellis mentions translatability and synonymity (248–50). My purpose here is not to prove that dance functions exactly as verbal language but to stress the peculiar communicative potential it is invested with in Wole Soyinka’s plays, which do not relegate it to the sphere of asemantic impulses. For more information on the conception of dance as a “purveyor of meaning” in its own right (Ellis 1999, 248), and in a Nigerian context, see Omofolabo S. Ayaji’s Yoruba Dance in which she defines dance as “an effective symbol of communication,” whose richness lies in “the fact that it functions as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, codifying experience in several channels simultaneously” (1998, 22).

3. In an interview with Biodun Jeyifo, Soyinka defines his theatrical aesthetics in the following way: “It was then [when Nigeria became independent] that I began to write A Dance of the Forests, which takes a jaundiced view of the much vaunted glorious past of Africa. And I suppose since
then I’ve been doing nothing but the danse macabre in this political jungle of ours” (Soyinka 2002, xiii).

4. In an article devoted to African total theatre, “The Total Theatre Aesthetic Paradigm in African Theatre,” Praise Zenenga states that “in most African performance traditions and conventions, music, dance, drama, and other theatrical practices exist in a complex, complementary, and logical-dynamic system of performative expressions that are known as total theatre [85–86]. Although ‘theatre’ is a European term with a specific meaning [85], the African view regards theatre as a broad practice and discipline that eludes narrow definition. Likewise, the African concept of total theatre is not restricted to scripted drama alone, but is a broad and inclusive practice that incorporates drama, dance, and music” (2015, 236–37). Zenenga also mentions Western total theatre, arguing that “although it is thought to have risen from Wagner’s intention to produce a Gesamtkunstwerk or “total work of art,” Artaud, Brecht, Piscator, Brook, and Schechner became the leading proponents of Western total theatre, whose radical politics and audience participatory techniques parallel African total theatre” (240).


6. Agemo is described by Soyinka as “a religious cult of flesh dissolution” including “the passage of transition from the human to the divine essence” in his notes “For the Producer” (1973, 149). In The Road, Murano’s masked dance which occurs at the end of the play completes the process of transition that had started during the Drivers’ Festival before the character was knocked down by a lorry. For more on Agemo, see Fioupou 1991, 248–75.

7. “Ogun was the deity who forged the primal instrument that hacked through primordial chaos, blazing a path for the gods’ reunion with man” (Soyinka 2012, 159).

8. Oyin Ogunba shows how Soyinka exposes the “crudities and sufferings of a society in a state of transition.” The “dance” between the Establishment and [...] reformers is what constitutes the essence of the movement of transition and it is the focus of Soyinka’s dramatic art” (1975, 2).

9. The “dance” actually takes the form of three distinct dances in the last part of the play, the “ampe” dance, the “Dance for the Half-Child” and the final “Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice.” While the “ampe” (“a Yoruba children’s dance” as Ogunba explains) is a “demonic,” frantic one which seems to act as an “indication of the pattern of the community’s movement towards self-destruction” (Ogunba 1975, 92), the other two leave room for the possibility of action and positive change.

10. For more on the complex symbol of the half-child, see Jones, Wilkinson and Ogunba. Suffice it to say, following Ogunba, that this “monster child” (1975, 87) that had remained in his dead mother’s womb for a very long time is eventually born thanks to Forest Head’s divine order in the second part of the play (63).

11. Eshuoro, presented as “a wayward cult-spirit” in the stage directions, is driven by his will to avenge his desecrated tree which Demoke has carved in order to build a totem for the Gathering of the Tribes.

12. Here are the stage directions indicating the nature of the place where the climactic scene unfolds: “Back-scene lights up gradually to reveal a dark, wet atmosphere, dripping moisture, and soft, moist oil. A palm-tree sways at a low angle, broken but still alive. Seemingly lightning-reduced stumps. Rotting wood all over the ground. A mound or two here and there. Footfalls are muffled. First, there is total stillness, emphasized by the sound of moisture dripping to the ground [...].” (60). In her doctoral thesis, Christiane Fioupou interprets such a place as the symbolic representation of the “chthonic realm”: “This frightening scene clearly evokes the ritual space par excellence, the chthonic realm, ‘the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming’ [see Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World 142]. It is the place where masks, music and dances will be used intensively since they stand for the rite of passage, ‘the movement of transition’” (Fioupou 316, my translation).
13. The violent, death-like atmosphere of the “trial” scene is partly due to the negative, pessimistic (albeit visionary) words of the various spirits chorusing the future, followed by the presence of the monstrous Triplets interpreted by Eldred Jones as the “physical manifestations of the rhetorical distortions which are used to justify political crimes” (1973, 69).

14. On the subject of the 1960 production, see Robert Fraser’s article in which he puts forward the difficulties engendered by the “dance of the child acrobats” as it unfolds in the original typescript and the published play, as well as the greater theatrical efficiency of the acting version (Fraser 1979). Eldred Jones underlines the dangerous nature of “the dance of the child acrobats”: “This perilous dance, for which Soyinka had to substitute a different tableau in the alternative ending of the play, is done by professional dancers in many parts of West Africa” (1988, 69). Truly, in the 1960 production, the Third Triplet, the Interpreter and Eshuoro toss the “wood figure of an ‘ibeji’” (a twin figurine which the Half-Child “has clutched from his first appearance”) to one another instead of the Half-Child himself.

15. The song is translated as follows: “Tolani Tolani / She belongs to me, belongs to me / Come close to me, wrap yourself around me / Only God knows which moments makes the child” (Soyinka 1974, 58).

16. In the second part of Kongi’s Harvest, Sarumi utters the following words before starting to dance: “In Oba Danlola’s place his sons / Speak out their minds. [Dances]” (1974, 110).

17. It is worth noting that most of the dissident characters of the play (Oba Danlola, Segi and Daodu) often dance, which helps us grasp the links between dance and power, dance and revolutionary potential.

18. This example of dance as counter-discourse is developed in my article “De l’envers des mots au discours muet” (Bigot 2019).

19. The play does not end with the striking image of speechless Kongi but with the “iron grating” which “descends and hits the ground with a loud, final clang” (Soyinka 1974, 138). Danlola and the Secretary’s preceding conversation in the last part, “Hangover,” suggests that the revolution started by Daodu and Segi may very well be interrupted by Kongi (133–38). Nonetheless, the strength and visual impact of Segi’s political act lingers in the reader’s and the audience’s minds, pointing the way for possible future upheavals. As Ogunba puts it, if one considers it from “the point of view of pure theatrical effect,” “Segi’s presentation of a human head […] to Kongi” is “the real end of the play, for it is this incident which stays permanently with the audience as the finale” (1975, 195).

20. From Zia, With Love is based on an event which took place in Lagos in April 1985 under the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, the execution of three drug traffickers by a military firing squad. See Jeyifo (2004, 111–12) for more details on the circumstances of the event. The play confronts us with the performance games of various prisoners who imitate in play the military leaders ruling Nigeria. Its interest lies in “Soyinka’s mobilization of the visual, verbal, gestural repertoire of popular festivity and hilarity as sources of resistance to the authorized, decreed languages and culture of impunity of the state, the state of drunken power and pomp, of obsession with rank and authority…” (Jeyifo 2004, 113–14).

21. See “De l’envers des mots au discours muet” (Bigot 2019).

22. Here is the original version: “Le ‘doux tic tac de l’hérétique’ battant à contretemps du dogme” (Fioupou 1989, 424). The English translations used here have been borrowed from Christiane Fioupou’s own translation of her paper.


24. As Jane Plastow explains in the Bloomsbury Methuen edition of the play, Amusa is a “‘Native administration’ policeman, that is, he is not employed by the British government but by the locally appointed leadership. This was the lowest form of police force in colonial Nigeria […]. As one who fully inhabits neither the Yoruba not the white world, Amusa is generally seen as a
white man’s lackey who has sold his manhood to serve the colonists” (Death and the King’s Horseman edited by Jane Plastow, XXXIII-XXXIV).

25. Beyond the role of dance itself in the play, Soyinka’s own words about The Bacchae of Euripides in “Between Self and System” give evidence of the intrinsic link existing between theatre and revolution: “Revolution, as idiom of the theatre and explication of Nature itself is, in my opinion, at the heart of The Bacchae of Euripides [...]. And perhaps it is because of the recognition of Dionysos as, on one level, a universal paradigm for the artist – the dramatic artist that is, as illusionist, conjurer, agent of release and control, a medium of primordial chaos, yet midwife of beginnings – that a celebration of Dionysos becomes, truthfully, a celebration of theatre: theatre as community, as idiom of liberation and renewal” (1993, 45–47).

ABSTRACTS

In Wole Soyinka’s plays, dance reveals an open conception of African identity, namely a fluid, perpetually evolving one which leaves room for metamorphosis and change. As the symbol of transition, dance is often invested with revolutionary potential, pointing the way to a new dawn, out of an existential and political status quo. Embodying resistance and dissidence, the dancing bodies in Soyinka’s plays contribute to the reconfiguration of individual and communal identity.

INDEX

Keywords: Soyinka (Wole), dancing body, renewal, regeneration, dissidence, counter-discourse

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Mutations of the “Mutiny novel”: From Historical Fiction to Historical Metafiction and Neo-Victorianism

Jaine Chemmachery

1 The “Mutiny novel” was a famous sub-genre of British literature in the second half of the nineteenth century, belonging to the genre of “historical fiction.” The label “Mutiny Novel” refers to “historical novels in whose plot the rebellion plays a more or less substantial role” (Nicora 2013, 11). The Indian Mutiny was indeed a historical rebellion led by soldiers of the Bengal Army which officially started on May 10, 1857, in Meerut. It was characterised by its extreme violence. According to Indrani Sen,

    Several theories about the Revolt abounded in the nineteenth-century colonial mind. It was variously held to have been caused by religious fears of conversion, by sepoy unrest, disaffection among the peasants and talukdars – and not least of all, by a yearning for lost power among the “native” princes. (2007, 1754)

The Indian mutiny is a critical moment for the history of the British Empire which led to massive British retaliation involving villages burnt and numerous murders to avenge the deaths on the British side and deter any future rebellious acts. It also brought nothing less than the transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown, hence a shift from British economic monopoly over Indian raw materials to political dominion.

2 The great variety of terms used to define the events shows the various ideological intentions implied by them. The Mutiny has indeed variously been called the “Epic of race” (Flora Annie Steel), the Indian war of independence (by the Indian nationalist Sarvakar, 1909), the “Indian Rebellion of 1857” (by the historian Michael Edwardes), the “Indian Sepoy Rebellion” (by the literary critic Flaminia Nicora), etc. The very fact that the genre is mainly referred to as “Mutiny Novel” positions it in the realm of Englishness as the English were the ones likely to think of the events as a mutiny, not as a war of independence. But the Uprising is undeniably part of British and Indian histories.
As Hilda Gregg famously wrote in 1897, “Of all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination” (1897, 218). It seems true, given the enduring quality of the theme, from Edward Money’s *The Wife and the Ward; or, a Life’s Error* (1859) to Julian Rathbone’s *The Mutiny*, in 2007. The Rebellion led to a prolific artistic output through time which helped construct it as a milestone in British cultural imagination. It was a mostly popular form, often seen as lowbrow because of its wide appeal and not so literary nature, yet with variations – both in terms of its relation with the British canon and of quantity. The Mutiny inspired fiction writing throughout the twentieth century, *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1955) by John Masters or *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J.G. Farrell being examples of the genre. The 150th anniversary of the Indian Uprising also led to the publication of a few more “Mutiny-inspired” novels whose ideological stance needs to be analysed.

The “Mutiny novel” has thus experienced generic mutation through time, moving from historical fiction to historical metafiction, at least until the 1970s. One may wonder about the political intentions underlying such changes, as well as the ideological underpinnings of the few contemporary novels on the Mutiny. One also needs to ask what accounts for the longevity of the motif in British fiction. After providing a quick overview of the genre, I will have a look into the “cracks in the corner-stones,” in Nicora’s terms, before questioning the contemporary persistence of the genre.

**Common tropes of the Mutiny Novel**

Common features may easily be found in most examples of the genre, from chivalric depictions of British protagonists to elements constructing Indian male characters as savage foils and Englishwomen as damsels in distress, yet sometimes prone to acts of heroism. Such tropes, which are characteristic of colonialist stereotyping, have been present since the birth of the genre. In Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), one may read: “others, maddened by the smell of blood, the sounds of murder, dragged helpless Englishmen and Englishwomen from their carriages and did them to death savagely” (197). While the Indian characters are shown as beasts, excited by blood and noise, and are associated to violent, inhuman(e) behaviour through terms such as “dragged” or “savagely,” Englishmen are granted a form of grandeur which takes them out of the realm of the human as well, locating them on the opposite side of the spectrum: “As he [a British man] walked away, he seemed to the eyes watching him bigger, more king-like, more heroic than ever” (375, emphasis added). Englishwomen are turned into helpless creatures in need of protection through the many associations between the verb “protect” and “women,” as in M.M. Kaye’s *Shadow of the Moon* (1957): “we must protect the remaining women and children” (2011, 437) or “the women had better go and they will need protection” (440). Yet, in Rathbone’s more recent novel, *The Mutiny* (2007), an Englishwoman, Sophie Hardcastle, appears as less in need of English males’ protection: “Sophie […] would rather die than let any harm come to them from these people who had suddenly become for her terrifying exemplars of all the stories she had been told since her arrival of the duplicity, rapacity and savagery the Natives could display when roused” (48). Being the one who “would rather die” than see her fellow countrywomen at the mercy of Indians, she is granted a form of English heroism, which used to be a rather masculine characteristic in earlier Mutiny novels. Yet the enumeration
“duplicity, rapacity and savagery” echoes the stereotypes the Indians have come to be associated with since 1857 in Mutiny fiction, i.e. violence and animality. When it comes to expressing British superiority over Indians, Sophie also perfectly fits the mould:

Here she was, thousands of miles away, surrounded by an alien people, contributing just a little to the history that brought this rightness, this news, this perfection of understanding, this civilisation and love of God to a benighted land, torn with religious dissension as it had been, chaotic, anarchic. It was a noble calling, a noble company she was part of. Earth’s proud empires might indeed pass away, like those of Alexander, Rome and the Mughals, but this one, being the empire of God as well as Queen Victoria would not. On it, with God’s blessing, she thought [...] the sun would never set. (20)

Even though the pompous tone and the use of internal focalisation may be ironical, as the narrative voice would know of the future end of the British Empire, the mindset of Sophie, herself modelled on the “New Woman,” is very much informed by English imperialist doctrine.

The rape of Englishwomen by Indian men is also a recurrent motif in the genre. In one early Mutiny novel, Grant’s First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny (1868), one reads: “women were outraged again and again, ere they were slaughtered, riddled with musket balls, or gashed by bayonets” (3–4). Almost a century after this evocation of Englishwomen being raped by Indian men, Kaye re-uses the topos: “where her breasts had been there was now only blood. And she had been raped before she died” (2011, 475). As Nancy Paxton recalls: “This familiar version of the colonial rape narrative became popular after the Indian Uprising of 1857 when dozens of British and Anglo-Indian novelists began to write and rewrite narratives about the Mutiny which hinged on the rape of English women by Indian men” (1992, 6). The rape motif aptly articulates English heroism, Indian brutality, and Englishwomen in distress, as Paxton shows:

Novels written after 1857 which were organised around this narrative [the rape narrative] naturalised British colonizers’ dominance by asserting the lawlessness of Indian men, and at the same time, shored up traditional gender roles by assigning to British women the role of victim, countering British feminist demands for women’s greater political and social equality. In short, texts which focus on the rape of English women by Indian men were used to mobilise literary traditions about chivalry in service to the Raj. (6)

It also creates a parallel between national and gender issues. After 1857, Englishwomen’s bodies came to symbolise how the British Empire’s integrity was threatened by Indians while domestic defilement became a recurrent theme in the press.

What is important to reassert is that the Mutiny was a historical event, but also a cultural and literary one. According to Herbert, the traumatic impact of the Rebellion on Victorian and post-Victorian consciousness can only be analysed by considering it not as “a geopolitical event but as a literary and in effect a fictive one – as a story recounted over and over, in one stylistic inflection and literary register after another” (2008, 115). Linguistic proximity was visible in both the press and fiction, especially when the 1857 events were presented along the lines of sensationalism. A proper Mutiny hypertext came to be created by the many works of fiction which have constituted the genre, with the more recent ones indirectly quoting and assuredly drawing on the former’s motifs and imagery. Kaye’s Shadow of the Moon (1957) stages for instance the following scene:
A dark, sinewy hand clutched at Delia’s curls, caught them and dragged her back. The sickle swept, and Delia’s severed head, its mouth still open and its blue eyes wide in terror, remained in the man’s hand dangling by its curls, while her body fell sideways in a foam of gay muslin flounces. (2011, 478; emphasis added)

A Gothic subtext is present through the use of a noun such as “terror” while the quote evokes violence, to say the least. Similar imagery is to be found in more recent Mutiny fiction:

The butcher. […] From behind he wound her hair round his left hand and pinned her hair to the floor, drew the knife and neatly, just as he did with pigs, slit her throat, opening the jugular vein. He held her down as the blood spurted […] again using almost surgical skill, dissected out from her womb the still living foetus of a tiny girl, cut the umbilical chord and placed the baby on its dead mother’s breast. (Rathbone 2007, 152–53)

Explicit images are exposed in a clinical description which echoes the adjective “surgical” present in the quote. Such excess in representation and revelling in graphic detail actually counter another feature of the genre, the un-representable nature of the Mutiny, which links it to trauma. Here are instances where the traumatic event appears to be “unsayable”: “The worst horrors of that night, we are told, can never be known” (Steel 1896, 200) or “There is danger here for all of your blood. No, not in Lucknow only, or in Oudh, but in all India. I have heard…. things. Things I dare not tell you. But it is true what I say” (Kaye 2011, 406). The presence of vague terms such as “things” or even “horrors”, along with negative conjunctions or adverbs (“no,” “never”) associated with verbs of communication construct the event as both horrific and impossible to narrate.

The idea that the 1857 Uprising is the ultimate trauma for the Victorians has been developed by Christopher Herbert:

Far from seeming a quarry of materials readily and unproblematically translatable […] the great Indian upheaval seemed to many to define itself first and foremost by virtue of its unnerving recalcitrance to representation […] It was a story that in many ways, so contemporaries never tired of stating, could not be written. (2008, 20)

All such themes were used to build the myth of British heroism, justify retaliation after 1857, legitimise their presence in India and exorcise anxieties that emerged at the time in regard to British involvement in the Indian subcontinent.

The tropes aforementioned link the genre to adventure fiction and romance, but also melodrama. In its Mutiny version, melodrama becomes “a near expressionistic Manichean conflict between Good and Evil, a focus on the times of crisis in the plot and a privileging of the intensification of feelings over psychological complexity” (Nicora 2009, 94). Other characteristic elements would be the centrality of the siege of the British in the narratives and the references to emblematic locations such as Meerut, Cawnpore, or Delhi. Flaminia Nicora, in her study of the genre, provides us with an interesting pattern for it. According to her, Mutiny novels abide by the following structure:

1) current lifestyle in Britain, retrospective narrative
2) description of life in administrative quarters before the outbreak
3) arrival from Britain
4) hunting scenes
5) outbreak and resistance of the British
6) support of allied troops
7) revenge
The outline provides a reassuring structure for readers with order being finally restored. An interesting feature of the genre is also the hybrid figure of the “bourgeois knight” (Nicora 2009, 89) which is simultaneously an oxymoron and a unique narrative paradigm, suited to mass-market society, “where the individual dimension of the chivalric hero in the courtly world is multiplied indefinite times in upper middle-class characters, who retain their distinctiveness in spite of their potential interchangeable nature, given the homogeneity of their role” (Nicora 2009, 89). This – along with the genre’s depiction of racial and gender roles, its focus on British heroism and suffering, its sensationalism which sometimes produces the effect of an ahistorical narrative – structures a homogeneous corpus which provided British readers with identity models and images of British military and moral success. In Nicora’s terms, “the Mutiny becomes a momentous episode in the grand récit of British national history” (2009, 15).

A brief chronology of the genre

Between 1858 and 1880, writers of Mutiny novels were mostly non-professional writers coming from the ranks of the army, or civil servants of the East India Company who had often been personally involved in the war like Colonel Edward Money or Philip Meadows Taylor. These authors wrote in a context of intense written production on the events, constituted of reports, personal accounts, press articles, letters, cartoons, etc. In one of the first Mutiny novels, The Wife and the Ward, published in 1859 by Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Money, the rape theme was already present, as well as the Mutiny being paradoxically both traumatic, and thus unspeakable, and an event of a discursive nature:

“Did you hear all the horrors perpetrated at Delhi on the ladies?” [...] “Yes and no: I heard a great deal from my ayah, and saw much in one of the Calcutta papers; but poor Mrs. Peters would never talk much about it; she said it was not a fit subject for me as an unmarried girl.” (24)

The presence of the many verbs of communication – hear, say, talk – as well as the mention of the Calcutta papers hint at the discursive nature of the Mutiny while the reference to a “fit subject,” along with the encompassing, albeit vague noun “horrors” points to the difficulty of narrating the Uprising.

The span of time between the 1880s and the 1910s is the most prolific period for the genre. According to Chakravarty, about 20 Mutiny novels were published just in the 1890s, reaching out to a more juvenile public with G.A. Henty’s In Times of Peril (1881). Two main trends could be perceived: sensational fiction (aimed at women), and adventure fiction. This accounts for the fact that such novels have not made it into the British literary canon; romance and adventure fiction, though popular among the public, have long been overlooked by literary criticism. At a time of anxiety due to the difficulties experienced by the Empire and the long Boer war, such novels offered the British positive identity models as an antidote.

Romance, in particular, turns useful when it comes to promoting imperial values: in the case of Mutiny novels, “the love story and the rebellion are completely entangled: the resistance to the natives works as a test that unveils the true qualities of man and women [sic].” (Nicora 2013, 108). From Flora Annie Steel’s On the Face of the Waters (1896)
to M.M. Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957), the Mutiny often works as testing ground for men and women. In *Shadow of the Moon*, Winter de Ballesteros, a young Anglo-Spanish heiress, is promised to an English man who is known to be a womaniser and a drug-addict. She is to be escorted to her future husband by Alex Randall with whom she faces the Uprising and who proves to be a better match that she later marries.

Between the 1920s and the 1960s, there are very few Mutiny novels, which is probably linked to the issues England faced in the middle of the twentieth century. The 1920s witnessed the rise of nationalist movements in India while the following years were to be associated with Britain’s loss of prestige and resources during the two World Wars. This was assuredly not the right time to promote the superiority of English civilisation and culture over the East. The Cold War also led England to try to position itself among the world's superpowers and the last decade saw indeed a re-emergence of the Mutiny motif in M.M. Kaye’s *Shadow of the Moon* (1957), for instance.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, two main trends are recognisable: one consisting in parodying the genre; the other, in revisiting history from a nostalgic vantage point. Examples of the former are J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) or George Macdonald Fraser’s *Flashman* series (1969-2005). Farrell took the Mutiny novel out of its peripheral position in the literary scene and located it within the British literary canon with its postmodern poetics. Several “postcolonial Mutiny novels” have indeed a critical take on the Empire. Their aim is to reveal “the imperialistic underlay of certain narrative acts, and the – at times ambivalent – postcolonial deconstruction of imperialist modes of representation” (Nicora 2009, 11).

The second trend, the nostalgic revisitation of the Indian Mutiny, is embodied by Kaye’s *Shadow of the Moon* (1957) or *Far Pavillions* (1978) where nostalgia and romance work together. In *Far Pavillions*, the love story between two English characters is set in an exotic Indian context, in the wake of the Rebellion. This trend toward nostalgia needs to be seen in relation with Thatcher’s praise of Victorian values in the 1980s: “I was brought up by a Victorian Grandmother. We were taught to work jolly hard. We were taught to prove yourself; we were taught self-reliance [...]. You were taught tremendous pride in your country. All of these are Victorian values. They are also perennial values.” In the 1970s and 80s, the function of the Mutiny Novel was to act as “rearguard battle fought by conservative forces so as to oppose the loss of international prestige and the crumbling of ethnic cohesion caused by immigration” (Nicora 2009, 158). Its resurgence at the time might have something to do with the violence of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 which led to the founding of the independent state of Bangladesh, and the internal unrest of the later Indian Emergency from 1975-1977 (Kohlke 2010, 380). While Kaye’s texts sometimes reveal traces of a slightly critical stance, they never question British presence in India. The appetite for Kaye’s writings led to the creation of a “massive” musical – 5 million pounds were invested in the project – in 2005. Raj nostalgia is also visible in movies such as *Viceroy’s House* (2017) or *Victoria’s Friend* (2018), and in TV series like *Indian Summers* (2015-2016). This trend revisits the colonial past of Britain while the Rebellion is seen as a hallmark of England’s past status as superpower.

Since then, few examples of the genre were published until the years 2000s with a quick reference to the Indian Mutiny in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), new narrative histories reiterating the British version of the “Mutiny” such as Saul David’s 2002 *The Indian Mutiny* and two novels that were published in 2007, on the 150th anniversary of

If the Mutiny novel could be seen as “a cultural product instrumental to the consolidation of the colonial value-system, if not quite a form of propaganda” at certain times of history, it is necessary to look for “cracks in the corner-stones” (Nicora 2009, 109) since Mutiny novels, like many other genres, both construct and contest their very ideological frame. The Mutiny novel is certainly characterised by distinctive features such as the promotion of English chivalric masculinity and idea(l)s of Victorian femininity. But Mutiny fiction also reflects contextual anxieties, as the British Empire experienced threats to its security – from Russia (as the novel *Kim* by Kipling underlines), the Boers in South Africa and later, from Germany’s growing influence in Europe.

### Analysing the “cracks in the corner-stones”

Within any genre, one will find dissenting elements which sometimes question the very epistemic structure to which they belong. This is even more true when one deals with historical fiction which, according to De Groot, can be seen as “a disruptive genre, a series of interventions which have sought to destabilise cultural hegemonies and challenge normalities” (2010, 139). Mutiny fiction is no exception to the rule. In *Seeta* (1972) by Philip Meadows Taylor, one reads about interracial love between the English protagonist, Cyril Brandon, and an Indian woman, Seeta, who is a learned Hindu woman. This audacious inclusion certainly echoes the author’s own experience of interracial love – a type of relationship which was seriously compromised in Anglo-Indian society after 1858. After this bold move, “order” is finally restored in the novel since the death of Brandon’s Indian wife, who converts to Christianity on her deathbed, enables the Englishman to marry a “proper woman,” namely an English one. This example shows that despite some liberties taken from the general canon of Mutiny novels which this very novel helped shape, compliance with imperialist ideology remained essential.

Another alternative Mutiny novel is Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) which highlights interracial female bonding beyond questions of race or class. The English heroine, Kate Erlton, bonds with an Indian princess and her English protector’s Indian mistress, Tara, a situation which goes against the imperialist credo of racial separation and offers traditionally subaltern characters of Mutiny fiction a room of their own. Yet, here again, this bold approach is limited as the relationship sorority is temporary. The Indian mistress of the English hero commits suicide, which conveniently enables the latter to marry an English woman. But even if order is finally restored, alternative possibilities and even discourses have emerged in the novel. Steel’s work also points to English masculine violence – it is no accident that this should appear in a female author’s novel – which questions the cliché, in Mutiny novels, of Indian masculine violence. Mrs. Gissing, an English woman, is threatened by a snake and Jim Douglas, the English hero, comes to rescue her:

“Keep still!” interrupted a peremptory voice behind her, as a pair of swift unceremonious arms seized her round the waist, and by sheer force dragged her back a step, then held her tight-clasped to something that beat fast despite the calm tone. “Killed that snake, some one! There, right at her feet! It isn’t a branch. I saw it move. Don’t stir, Mrs. Gissing, it’s all right.” There was a faint scent of lavender
about the dress, about her curly hair, which Jim Douglas never forgot; just as he
never forgot the passionate admiration which made his hands relax to an infinite
tenderness, when she uttered no cry, no sound. (Steel 1896, 123–24)

Even if the man in the end rescues the woman, the words “unceremonious” and
“force,” and the many action verbs like “seized,” “dragged,” “held,” suggest masculine
domination and erotic energy which hint at the possibility of intra-racial, rather than
inter-racial, rape. The depiction of English male violence in the act of protecting an
English damsel in distress undercuts the usual stereotype of Indian men as the ones
who threatened English women’s virtue.

Another type of (rare) alternative Mutiny novels is Indian writing about the events,
such as Manohar Malgonkar’s The Devil’s Wind: Nana Sahib Story (1972).7 The novel
provides an Indian perspective on Nana Sahib who has been long depicted as the great
Indian villain in Mutiny fiction.8 The novel is a first-person narrative which provides
more psychological input on the figure than ever before and rehumanises it. When
Nehru and Gandhi preached non-violence, it must have been difficult for Indians to
deal with the legacy of the Rebellion. But the lack of Indian Mutiny novels also echoes
the aforementioned notion that the Indian Mutiny has long been seen as an English
issue rather than an Indian one. For Indian and Pakistani writers writing in English,
events like the Partition or the Independence, or even the Jallianwallah bagh massacre
of 1919, still seem to be more inspirational objects.9 One may suspect that authors
writing from the ex-colonies are more likely to appropriate events associated with
Indian nationalism in their fiction than an event such as the Rebellion which can
hardly be associated with the birth of a proper Indian national consciousness, as India
was still very much divided into separate entities in 1857.10

Finally, the case of postcolonial Mutiny novels of the 1970s and 1980s is worth
analysing as the two decades are characterised by a subsequent production of Mutiny
novels. A novel like Farrell’s The Siege of Krishnapur (1973) participates in the
postmodern re-elaboration of Mutiny novels through parodying the genre, both in
terms of theme and style, as it trivialises the battle and the siege.11 Another example is
that of the adventures of Fraser’s Flashman who, in Flashman in the Great Game (1975),
is an anti-hero – a coward, a braggart, a liar, a womaniser – who is seen as a hero.12
Moreover, the fact that Flashman’s narrative should be in the first person questions the
plausibility of the events narrated. Both novels examine the cultural premises of British
colonialism and the formal structure of the Mutiny novel and deconstruct them
through parody. In the process, the Mutiny “loses its value as a consensual point of
reference and national myth” for England (Nicora 2009, 163). The siege in The Siege of
Krishnapur is no longer the testing ground of English heroism; it acts rather as a
magnifying glass which enables Farrell to expose the contradictions of colonial reality
dismantle the mythology of English heroism during the Mutiny. It also uncannily
announces something about the dominance of geopolitics over many other fields. In
Farrell’s novel, George Fleury, an Englishman who arrives in India shortly before the
outbreak, asks: “Why, if the Indian people are happier under our rule [...] do they not
emigrate from those native states like Hyderabad which are so dreadfully misgoverned
and come and live in British India?” (Farrell 1993, 38). According to Kohlke,

Farrell’s ironic evocation of geopolitics resonates uncannily with their continued
dominance in globalised world economies and international relations of the present
day, as well as the resulting flow of economic migrants and political and conflict
refugees. The Mutiny’s excessive violence and conjunction of racial, religious, and
nationalist causes could also be read as eerily presaging today’s “clash of cultures”
and the age of global terror, exacerbated by Western nations’ neo-imperialist engagements in the Middle East and Asian subcontinent. (Kohlke 2010, 370)

The fact that the Mutiny has been an enduring theme in British literature since 1858 to this day confirms that the implications of the Rebellion resonate with our contemporary world.

The current persistence of the Mutiny motif and ethics

When the Mutiny is not the major theme of fiction, it can still be spotted through a subterranean presence. In 2000, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* used the Rebellion as a pretext for her Indian hero to question his heritage and feeling of belonging (or not) in contemporary multicultural Britain. Smith’s novel is not a Munity novel per se, but the Uprising appears there as a presence in filigree. Two contemporary novels on the 1857 events are Julian Rathbone’s *The Mutiny* and Garry Kilworth’s *A Rogue Officer*, which both came out in 2007. Rathbone’s novel offers an interesting re-imagination of the Victorians with women saying phrases like “oh shit” (2007, 147) or “bastard groped me! He got hold of my tit” (135). The novel plays with Neo-Victorian linguistic straightforwardness and anachronism and tackles contemporary issues in the process.

During one sermon, a reverend says about the Rebellion: “You will be killed or worse” leading one of the heroines of his congregation to wonder: “What could possibly be worse than death, it [the voice in her head] wondered [...] Rape? If that’s what the reverend meant then he was sadly unaware of how often it occurred in the bedrooms of his congregation” (149). Needless to say, such a statement on marital rape is no topos of the genre. The novel is actually historically well-informed and quite enjoyable. It also elaborates on famous historical events like the circulation of chapatis throughout India before the Uprising or the issue of the cartridges greased with animal fat. Rathbone’s novel is a real historical novel of its time which tackles social, contemporary issues such as feminism in a Neo-Victorian vein but remains ideologically tied to the macrotext of Mutiny fiction.

One thus wonders if contemporary novels on the Mutiny do not participate in the promotion of a certain idea of Englishness, along with other types of Neo-Victorian works, even if they leave more room to Indian characters or appear as more critical of the British enterprise. According to Kohlke, the Mutiny functions nowadays more as an imaginary point of origin for the twentieth-century British identity crisis and “trauma” of the loss of empire, of having to cede its place as dominant world power to the US, the Soviet Union, and later China and seeing its remaining prestige assimilated into the collective of the European Union. (2010, 371)

A few questions, regarding the issue of trauma, could be raised. The Mutiny is still appropriated by British authors, as well as the trauma linked to it. Even if the event is said to be a mutiny from a British point of view, the fact that it claimed lives on both sides suggests more a collective trauma:

The Uprising of 1857 cannot with any accuracy be characterised as a black-and-white struggle between Indians and Britons, as [...] there were substantial numbers of Indians fighting on both sides. [...] There were hundreds of British but many more thousands of civilian Indian victims of 1857. (Wagner 2010, xxvi)

But even in the most recent fictional works on the Mutiny, a difference in treatment when it comes to depicting British and Indian violence is visible: Cawnpore is definitely conjured up as a way to rouse pity and sympathy for the English. A strong divide
remains between the description of Bibi Gahr’s victims (the well) as opposed to the emotional detachment accompanying the description of many Indian perpetrators:

Those who were deemed to have played leading roles were forced to eat pork and beef before being hanged. The Bibigarh murderers were made to lick up at least a square foot each of blood on the floor of the building before they too were hanged on a large banyan tree nearby. (Rathbone 2007, 317)

Difference in treatment is also perceptible as regards the depiction of atrocities: the “British mass executions, collective punishments of whole communities, and arbitrary slaughters of civilians” (Kohlke 2010, 385) are often passed over quickly. Even if the narrator says “In truth [...] both sides in the Mutiny behaved appallingly. The scars, the anger and the guilt remain to this day and vitiate all” (Rathbone 2007, 347), one can still feel that the author tips the scales in favour of the British. According to Kohlke, the description of the British taking “time out to trash and burn the towns and villages they passed through” (Rathbone 2007, 304) evokes a “strangely bodiless crime, circumventing the full horror of the offence” (Kohlke 2010, 388).

This resonates with the more difficult question of the representation of traumatic events in fiction. The exhibition of and insistence on the violence of brutal deeds may be seen as sensationalism, generate a feeling of distance on the part of readers and prevent any type of identification with the victims. In Farrell’s novel, humour and ironic distance make us unable to empathise with the protagonists, be they Indian or English. Kohlke observes that

Although Farrell’s madcap descriptions of death and dying counter traditionally heroic versions of the siege, they do so at the cost of exciting any ethical demands on the reader’s conscience or sensibility. Farrell’s narrative strategy sensationalises trauma, turning it into spectacle, as death is put on display for pleasurable consumption. (2010, 382)

While Kohlke’s argument is absolutely relevant, one may wonder whether Farrell intended his work to be part of a trauma-writing corpus. The author does not seem to be interested in assessing anyone’s trauma, no matter whether the people concerned are British or Indian. Still, how are we, as readers, to experience the narrative of the Rebellion and the horrors associated with it, if we are deprived of the possibility of assessing the events as horrific? Kohlke also speaks of the issue of British postcolonial novels appropriating guilt for imperial exactions, depriving Indians of the possibility of claiming the Uprising and the trauma caused by it.

In many cases, Indians, especially women, are tamed in the English texts, as they are transformed into docile servants/mistresses/ayahs. When women are not domesticated, then the revolution is depicted as arbitrary, sometimes the result of personal vengeance as in Seeta (Taylor, 1872); in this case, the narrative deprives the Uprising of its revolutionary, but also collective dimension for the Indians.

Hence, the form of compensation provided in Malgonkar’s novel offers an original insight into the narration of the Uprising. As a mirror to the real tablet at Cawnpore reading as follows:

Malgonkar’s narrator, Nana Sahib – the great villain of British Mutiny novels – offers the following: "A VILLAGE STOOD HERE. IT WAS BURNED DOWN BY THE MEN OF QUEEN VICTORIA’S ARMY ON THE 12TH DAY OF JUNE 1857. THE MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN WHO RAN OUT WERE THROWN BACK INTO THE FIRE. (299) With all the ideological problems this mirror sentence poses, such as the fact of comparing experiences of suffering, the gesture still appears as a way for Indians to reclaim a part of the trauma induced by the Mutiny and carve a space for themselves into the more English-dominated genre of Mutiny fiction.16

The Mutiny has this compelling iconic status in British literature, “consolidated by its literary and novelistic re-elaborations” (Nicora 2009, 9). It has been seen as shaping English national identity and was almost unanimously interpreted as supporting the national imperialist doctrine. Yet, as with any epistemic form, the genre offers room for dissent, from feminist perspectives on Mutiny fiction’s gender stereotypes to postcolonial critical takes on the Empire. Mutiny novels have also reflected issues faced by British society at different historical moments. Contemporary examples of Mutiny fiction also play into nostalgia for a world under control and show that the Uprising still constitutes a fertile literary topos. The fact that it might be the “supreme trauma of the age” (Herbert 2008, 2) may explain the longevity of the motif. This certainly has to do with its ability to tackle contemporary issues of power relations in a globalised world, helping us “reflect[ing] on the interconnections between colonial pasts and postcolonial presents” (Kohlke 2010, 381). With Brexit looming, the future may have a few more revisions of the Mutiny and interpretations of the “English character” in store for us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The term “roused” indeed conjures up the image of a beast subject to physical stimuli.
2. Cf. “The amount of blood was appalling, spouting, gushing, pouring over everybody, everything. The noise too was hellish: screams of pain, grunts of rage, terrible anguish cut off with gasping, bubbling sobs, the clang of metal when a blade hit a doorway or pillar. What made it yet more awful was the density of the crowd – one hundred and ninety-seven victims, of whom one hundred and twenty-four were children or babies, crushed into less than five hundred square feet” (Rathbone 2007, 315, emphasis added).
3. Cawnpore helped building the myth of British resilience as one of the most horrific events of the Mutiny occurred there; in June 1857, about 200 English women and children were tortured, killed and thrown into a well. According to Nicora, “for the British public opinion, Cawnpore is the icon of the Mutiny, the place that more than any other elicits strong sensations, nurtured by a certain sadistic voyeurism” (2009, 61).
4. This is what Margaret Thatcher said in an interview with Peter Allen in 1980. Conservative MP Jacob Rees Mogg has just published The Victorians: Twelve Titans Who Forged Britain (2019) which
equally participates in the nostalgic trend for a Greater Britain – a trend that has been going on for a few decades now. In the current political context, one of the arguments defended by the proponents of Brexit is that the EU threatens British sovereignty as EU rules override national laws. It is therefore interesting to analyse the mutations of the Mutiny novel throughout history in parallel with Britain’s craze, especially over the last twenty years, for neo-Victorian productions and their re-imaginings of Victorian Britain – which are not necessarily devoid of critical distance – in light of the nostalgia for a time when Britain was a great power, and an Empire. For further analyses of cultural nostalgia, see Primorac.

5. Kohlke recalls that the 1982 Falklands War led to both renewed nationalist sentiments in Britain and artistic recreations of the Raj (2010, 371).

6. Samad Iqbal, an immigrant from Bangladesh living in the UK, maintains that his great-grandfather was Mangal Pande, the famous first mutineer of 1857.


8. Nana Sahib, who commanded the siege of Cawnpore, is the one who ordered the sepoys to kill all the English women and children who had been confined in Bibigarh.


10. A similar remark can be made about how historical work in India, especially through the Subalternists, has defined the Amritsar Massacre as one main object of research as opposed to the Uprising. According to Kim Wagner, “Modern Indian historiography on 1857 still seems, at least in part, to be responding to the prejudice of colonial accounts” (Wagner 2010, xxvi).

11. The following quote which I analysed elsewhere is a typical illustration of Farrell’s mock-epic tone: “There appeared to be a carpet of dead bodies. But then he (the Collector) realized that many of these bodies were indeed moving but not very much. A sepoy here was trying to remove a silver fork from one of his lungs, another had received a piece of lightning conductor in his kidneys. A sepoy with a green turban had had his spine shattered by The Spirit of Science; others had been struck down by teaspoons, by fish-knives, by marbles; an unfortunate subadar had been plucked from this world by the silver sugar-tongs embedded in his brain” (Farrell 1993, 344).

12. In the 1970s, George Macdonald Fraser started writing the memoirs of Sir Harry Paget Flashman, a fictional character created by Tom Hughes in Tom Brown’s School Days (1857). Fraser wrote the character, who was in Hughes’ text a school bully, as an illustrious Victorian soldier who took part in many 19th-century wars and events even though he was “a scoundrel, a liar, a cheat, a thief, a coward – and, oh yes, a toady” (Macdonald Fraser 1975, 13).

13. In February 1857, the British were surprised to see chapatis being circulated from one village to the next in the North-Western provinces and in Central India. Some historians think that the circulation of the chapatis had a direct link with the Uprising while others think that the two phenomena were unrelated. As to the cartridges, the rumor that the British had greased the cartridges to be used by Muslim and Hindu soldiers in the Indian Army is seen as one of the possible reasons for the Rebellion.

14. Current discussions in these times of Brexit and populism strongly resonate with Kohlke’s argument.

15. Such an absence of agents can also be seen in Malgonkar’s depiction of British deeds: “[W]omen were dragged out screaming and pounced upon in bazaars, so that the word ‘rape’ itself acquired plurality, a collective connotation, and people spoke of villages and townships raped, not of single women” (1972, 245).

16. Malgonkar’s narrator is also ambivalent as he writes of the Cawnpore massacre: “The horrifying details of the manner of their death, of how they were hacked to death by professional butchers because no one else could be persuaded to do the killing, and how the dead and wounded were all flung into the same well may or may not be true.” (1972, 218; emphasis added).
He then adds: “Even granting that the details have been exaggerated, the fact remains that every single woman and child in the place was killed” (218). After calling Satichaura and Bibighar “monuments to our brutality” and stating that “excuses cannot make facts vanish” (219), he qualifies his earlier statements by suggesting that these massacres “might never have happened,” had the British not burnt down other villages.

ABSTRACTS

This article aims to offer a limited panorama of the novels that compose the genre of Mutiny fiction and to analyse its mutations through time. By tracing the generic origins of the Mutiny novel and analysing how it variously draws on the chivalrous tradition, the Gothic, and other genres (adventure fiction, romance, and melodrama, among others), I would like to show that the various examples of the Mutiny novel genre have often been used to promote imperial values, or to criticise the Empire retrospectively, as Flaminia Nicora’s work has shown, but also that these novels have continuously responded to historical events. My contention is that the Mutiny motif has been instrumental in building a historical narrative of England and that its continued presence merits being studied.

INDEX

Keywords: Mutiny novel, historical (meta)fiction, ideology, ethics, trauma

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Infinite Revolutions; or, Fred D’Aguiar’s Imaginative Response to Western Metaphysical Perceptions of Time

Leo Courbot

In memory of Wilson Harris (1921-2018)

Something happens to time itself. Time switches from a linear narrative to a lyrical sense. Rather than seeing a past that is gone and out of reach, and the fact of a future always presenting itself, there is, instead, a defiance of the linear. The march forwards may be stalled. The backwards gaze proves not only useful but capable of altering what happened in that past. This idea of time as a continuous present – that is, no past, present, and future continuum, but somehow the past and the future in the present – appeared in Harris’s first novel, The Palace of the Peacock (1960), and continued as an imaginative procedure through twenty-five novels to his latest, The Ghost of Memory (2006). (D’Aguiar 2009b, emphasis added)


1 In his book-length meditative poem Bill of Rights, Anglo-Guyanese and American writer Fred D’Aguiar has the poetic persona pun on cart and horse, saying that putting
“Descartes before the Hobbes / we know and love” would “put an end to verse” (1998, 41). This ironic statement summarizes well D’Aguiar’s tendency, like Hobbes (1909, 14), and unlike Cartesian metaphysics (Banchetti-Robino 2011, 122), to rationalize the imagination as a reliable form of memory, or gateway to the past, in his works. One of the ways in which D’Aguiar manages to rely on the imagination as a temporal threshold granting access to the past, but also to the future, consists in relying on the late Guyanese writer Wilson Harris’ idea of “infinite rehearsal,” which has had a significant impact on D’Aguiar’s writings. It is indeed no secret that Harris has been a persisting influence on D’Aguiar who, before becoming a successful poet and Harris’ friend, intended to write a doctoral dissertation on Harris’ works, and then dedicated collections of poems (British Subjects, 35–38; Continental Shelf), a novel (Children of Paradise), and articles – on infinite rehearsal – to Harris (“Prosimetrum” and “Wilson Harris,” which are quoted from in the two epigraphs at the beginning of this article).

Harris’ theory of infinite rehearsal suggests a revisionary take on Nietzsche’s concept of perpetual return, insofar as it confirms the cyclical nature of time, but substitutes the recurrence of sameness to the repetition of différence in Derrida’s sense of the term, according to which every moment is perceived as a decomposable time differential containing versions of the future and the past. This view of time notably contradicts the Cartesian dimension of Western metaphysics by making the imagination an integral part of rationality and, in this sense, this article argues, D’Aguiar’s recourse to infinite rehearsal translates a revolutionary poetic response to Western-metaphysical perceptions of cyclical time, in addition to infusing his poems with philosophical depth.

In his exploration of Harris’ idea, D’Aguiar suggests some of the literary ways in which one may capitalize on the poetic possibilities of infinite rehearsal:

- For Harris, each return to a memory, image, or dream yields new insights, and each time the viewer or thinker participates in the recall or act of gazing – from a necessarily partial because particular viewpoint – that person changes a little. [...] The artistic compulsion to look and keep looking at this rich source of self-knowledge creates the sense of a revisionary potential [...]. (2009b)

Rehearsal operates through remembrance and imagination, that is, through representation and/or, possibly, metaphor, which may operate as hypomnesic recurrence, like dreams for instance, since, according to Freud, dreams are the unconscious and metaphorical revisions of past, lived experience (1985, 7). In this sense, the literary treatment of infinite rehearsal can rely not simply on tropes of recurrence, but on various revisionary means, and provide different perceptions of the pasts and futures of presence (D’Aguiar 2009b), as can be seen in D’Aguiar’s poems “The Trench Revisited” (1993, 35) and “Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return” (2013, 54).

Of course, D’Aguiar has relied on infinite rehearsal in many of his works (Courbot 2019, 117–36), but these two short pieces, written twenty years apart, attest to D’Aguiar’s continuing interest in Harris’ treatment of time, and allow for a direct and concise introduction to its literary implications. Both texts come from cycles of poems. “The Trench Revisited” belongs to the “Frail Deposits” part of British Subjects (1993, 35), made up of poems narrating moments D’Aguiar shared with Harris on the occasion of a trip to Guyana (D’Aguiar 2009b). “Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return” can be found in the “American Vulture” series, from the author’s latest collection, The Rose of Toulouse (2013, 54). “The Trench Revisited” recounts in verse a life anecdote Harris told to D’Aguiar during their trip to Guyana (D’Aguiar 2009b), and to which the poet reacted by
suggesting rehearsals of the story to Harris. “Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return” corresponds to the description, through a vulture’s eyes, of its spiraling flight down to the ground, and relies on many literary techniques which serve to produce meaning through circulation, recurrence, and aerial revolutions.

**Trench Trip**

The anecdote that provided D’Aguiar with the source material for “The Trench Revisited” consists of a memory that came back to Harris as he and D’Aguiar, in the late 1980s, “walked in a tree-lined street divided by a trench in Georgetown,” the Guyanese capital (D’Aguiar 2009b). Harris explained to D’Aguiar that the then dry trench used to be full of water in the 1930s, when he, as a schoolboy, pushed a friend into it, and pretended not to have done a thing as his friend rose back, drenched, from the waters. The friend, as a result, believed he could only blame himself for his ridiculous fall, and decided from then on that he was incorrigibly clumsy. Harris subsequently felt terribly guilty for having caused such an alteration of self-esteem in his friend, and for not having managed to confess that he had actually nudged him into the trench. In that same street in the 1980s, D’Aguiar responded to the story by suggesting that Harris should push his friend, again, since this time, meaning right then and there, no harm would be done in what was now a dry place. Second, [D’Aguiar] speculated that he, Harris, might look at his friend, falling, back then, from the vantage point of the present, and somehow reach back in time and grab his friend’s arm, just in time to save him from getting soaked. And third, should both those methods fail to appeal, or the rescue not work out, somehow Harris could confess to his friend what he had done, again across time, the moment his friend climbed out of the trench. Of course, he might opt simply not to push his friend at all, by suppressing the awful adolescent impulse with the restraint of an adult sensibility, again exercised across time in this shared space. (D’Aguiar 2009b)

Harris “laughed and nodded in recognition” (D’Aguiar 2009b) of D’Aguiar’s use of infinite rehearsal, that imaginative technique Harris had been developing from his first novel on, and openly so in *The Infinite Rehearsal*. Thus, the trench anecdote, during the conversation with Harris, was first rehearsed by Harris as a reminiscence, then represented as a tale to D’Aguiar who, in turn, repeated four varying summaries of that same story which, as a result, was made to recur into différance. A few years later, D’Aguiar revised the anecdote again, along with his moment with Harris, into the sonnet – that is, one of the most “rehearsed” poetic forms of literary history – entitled “The Trench Revisited,” which reads as follows:

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We’re being driven past when you point to
Where you’d pushed in a friend long, long ago,
Into what was a trench, to test its depth.
You say it taught you how a civilisation,
Feeling a blow or tug may still not know
A hand’s involved, so can’t feel indebted.
I was falling, horizontally, just
To keep up and lucky to win your trust.
Push him again, he’ll fall on land that’s dry
This time and think nothing of it, and you’ll
Bank all that knowledge lifted from the sight
Your friend made clad in mud, convinced totally
That he slipped and your hand on his ribcage
```
Was your brave, unlucky, one-hand-clap save! (1993, 35)

In spite of numerous inversions, all of the poem’s lines approximate iambic pentameters that “can be read with just sufficient rhythmic heightening to bring out the organization of the meter, but without giving any additional stress to the unstressed syllables functioning as beats” (Attridge 1995, 161) such as “to” and “was.” In other words, the iambic pentameter was probably chosen so as to convey the “expressive naturalism” of Harris’ and D’Aguiar’s conversation (161). Moreover, metrical regularity itself is a pattern of recurrence through which D’Aguiar may make form and sense converge in a poem the theme of which is recurrence: “The Trench Revisited,” as its title indicates, is an evident revision – again, an additional recurrence – of a talk he had with Harris. Still in formal terms, the poem’s first stanza transcribes the context of that conversation, while the second verse paragraph recounts the first revisionary suggestion D’Aguiar made to Harris. The space between these stanzas could represent the pause in the conversation that was necessary for D’Aguiar to think of how he would respond to Harris’ anecdote: the beginning of the reply, “Push him again,” is a falling inversion (/xx/) that rhythmically repeats the consequence of Harris’ gesture (a fall), culminating with the word “again,” the last syllable of which, “gain,” falls on the beat, and indicates, again, that repetition may come as a gain: improvement is explicitly described through repetition in the poem’s final volta, which, as in an Elizabethan sonnet, has the tables turned by transforming Harris’ malevolent “hand” into a benevolent one.

But before making his enhancing suggestion, the poetic persona, presumably D’Aguiar here, progressively embodies, in the 1980s, the friend who fell in the trench fifty years before, by depicting himself as “falling, horizontally” in order to keep up with Harris’ walking pace, probably slanting his body forward so much that it approximates a horizontal posture that is, in turn, reminiscent of the friend falling flat into the trench. Yet, in spite of the poet’s impersonation of the fallen friend, differences abound: while the unlucky man in the trench did not know that a “hand was involved” and that Harris was “indebted” to him (emphasis added), that is, owed him a confession and/or an apology that he did not make, D’Aguiar feels lucky for having gained Harris’ trust, expressed through the selection of the poet, who subsequently feels grateful and/or indebted, as the recipient of the confession. As my italics show, the poet is not the identical double of the fallen friend, but his inverted image, contrasting luck with bad luck, confession with secrecy, and debt with credence.

Furthermore, the scope of the event is distorted by being broadened from the intimacy of the two friends to “a civilisation” which, “Feeling a blow or tug may still not know / A hand’s involved, so can’t feel indebted” (D’Aguiar 1993, 35). The lines just cited, referring to a late-1980s Georgetown conversation between two writers of Guyanese origins, conjure memories of Forbes Burnham, who was the dictatorial leader of Guyana from 1955 to his death in 1985. For indeed, “a hand [was] involved” in Burnham’s rise to power in the Cold War context of the 1950s, although “civilisation” did not know it, since he was backed by the CIA and the British Colonial Office (Naipaul 1982, 34–5) to keep Guyana in the Western block and thwart the communist ambitions of Burnham’s former friend and subsequent opponent Cheddhi Jagan. Yet, Burnham did not “feel indebted” to the US or, for that matter, entrenched in the West, since he broke with the USA in 1958, declared Guyana a communist cooperative republic in the years that followed, and created bonds with Cuba and the Pan-African movement (37). Thus, in the poem, the very event of the conversation is, along with the tale it contains, driven...
by the principle of infinite rehearsal, and expands from a private, microcosmic ground to recur to a political and macroscopic past.

The poem is “driven” indeed, as the two writers, in the poem’s first line, are “being driven” past the trench. The fact that in the actual story, as told by D’Aguiar in “Prosimetrum,” the two authors were walking, might suggest that the stride is rehearsed into a cruise. However, since the poetic persona’s self-portrayal is that of a person “falling horizontally” to keep up with Harris’ rapid gait, the two characters are actually still walking, and “driven” should then be understood in its metaphorical sense, as a designation of the two authors as “inspired” persons the expression of whose thoughts are guided by outside inspirational forces. The poem’s clear reliance on infinite rehearsal shows that Harris’ imaginative principle is the “Muse” that dictated D’Aguiar’s revisionary poem, along, perhaps, with the more somber, dictatorial figure of Forbes Burnham (Derrida 1991, 19–43). On the other hand, the poem’s third line more implicitly conveys a sense of what “drives” Harris: that line specifies that Harris pushed his friend into the trench to “test its depth.” Harris’ motive is added to the initial story by D’Aguiar so as to function as a reference to Harris’ first occupation as a land surveyor of the Guyanese interior, where the puzzling and irregular data he gathered from repeated soundings of rivers and observations of meteorological phenomena occurring in the rainforest led him to devise an imaginative conception of time and space, namely, infinite rehearsal, a principle which, in turn, incited him to write novels translating his vision (D’Aguiar 2009b). Hence, while Harris is driven by nature to the formulation of a theory of infinite rehearsal, D’Aguiar is guided by infinite rehearsal for the formulation of poetry, and such an initial chain of causality, in the poem, is representative of D’Aguiar’s connection with Harris, confirmed on the page following “The Trench Revisited” on which D’Aguiar writes that “The flute [he’s] trying to blow a tune / Belongs to [Harris]” (D’Aguiar 1993, 36).

D’Aguiar’s poem thus refracts, disjoints the present into recurrent pasts and futures thanks to Harris’ theory of infinite rehearsal, to which he feels “indebted” (D’Aguiar 1993, 35). In order to pay back his “debt,” D’Aguiar serves Harris’ ideas back to him through the suggestion of rehearsing the trench anecdote, by way of which Harris may gain new insight and confess to his friend, subsequently unburdening himself of his sense of guilt, and “bank all [resulting] knowledge” (35), as the poem’s final stanza explains. Another obviously recurrent poem from which readers may “bank” new insights figures in Fred D’Aguiar’s latest collection of poems, The Rose of Toulouse.

Vulture Culture

That poem is, as indicated above, “Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return,” the title and opening lines of which actually function as a poetic definition of Harris’ imaginative principle: “I fly up and float on one wingbeat for as long as I can make circles / in the circling winds, I see the same things all the time and all that time / I see those same things differently” (D’Aguiar 2013, 54, emphasis added). The circular movement of the hovering vulture is analogous to that of the “circling winds” of warm air on which its wings rest, doubling up the circular image into a varying recurrence that is also evoked through sound, with the wing/circles pair of words becoming circling/winds, and with the alliteration in “fl” that illustrates both the flapping of wings and aerial flotation. As the vulture’s flight follows its repetitive, circular trajectory, the bird’s recurrent
perception of the same elements of landscape, contrarily to what perpetual return
suggests, and, perhaps, because of variations in altitude, changes its perception of the
scenery. This alteration of vision is visible in the second and third lines of the above-
cited tercet, which operate another syntactical mirroring that, again, makes form and
sense converge. In addition, these first three lines from D’Aguiar’s poem appear to
paraphrase Harris’s first-person narrator in The Eye of the Scarecrow, when he states that
“It was to prove the re-living of all my life again and again as if I were a ghost returning
to the same place (which was always different) shoring up different ruins (which were
always the same)” (1965, 25). According to Hena Maes-Jelinek, these lines define “the
substance” of Harris’ prose, and are an apt introduction to his principle of infinite
rehearsal” (1991, 158–9). In this sense, the vulture’s view of perpetual return comprises
altering factors, and coheres with a definition of infinite rehearsal as a variant of
perpetual return that is inclusive of variation itself: Harris’ infinite rehearsal is a
“Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return.”

The five tercets that follow these opening lines are built on the same type of chiasmatic
constructions produced in the poem’s first stanza. In them, the vulture describes the
recurrent sights offered by its trajectory, and how rehearsed visions impact its
thoughts in the process. For instance, in the poem’s fourth line, the narrator-bird
explains that “The maze in the trees keeps [him] counting the trees in the maze”
(D’Aguiar 2013, 54). The syntax may simply sound playful, and the line could come
across as tautological. However, the grammatical play through which the same thing is
presented twice, yet differently, provides the reader with an enhanced perception of
that thing: the interstices of shade between the trees that are offered to the vulture’s
aerial eye form a maze between the trees that induces the vulture to count the trees
constituting such a labyrinth. However, if the trees are “in the maze” as much as they
shape it, they may be viewed not only as its walls but as corridors walled with shade.
Finally, the “maze in the trees” might designate the same maze being repetitively
found in the pattern of every tree’s ramifications, that is, a fractal labyrinth of
generational repetitions that makes any part look like a miniature replica of the whole,
infinity expanding into a dazzling rehearsal that keeps the vulture “counting the
trees in the maze,” while it can never be sure that it is not seeing the forest for the
trees as it hovers down over them.

As far as falling is concerned, the downward spiral of stanzas on the page progressively
fills with ominous evocations of death, as if the vulture were to crash, and suggests that
the bird’s trajectory is not only spatial, but also temporal, corresponding to the amount
of time the animal has left to live: the death of a vulture in the series’ preceding poem
corroborates that impression (D’Aguiar 2013, 53). The first description that might come
across as dark in “Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return” appears in the third stanza’s
final line: “My shadow rides the plains below and thinks it shadow rides the winds”
(54). While the vulture’s imagining that its “shadow rides the plains” is possible, the
reciprocal, mirrored proposition that its shadow “thinks” it imitates the vulture in the
sky is presumably impossible: a light source shining on an object casts its shadow, but a
shadow cannot be cast on its object to produce light, according to physics. Yet, the
imaginative mediation of infinite rehearsal calls those ideas into question, suggesting
that rational, physical rules might flow forth from thoughts as solipsistic as those from
which apparently unreal pictures come. The spectral image of the thinking shadow
may be neither real nor unreal, but could consist in the re-presentation of a becoming-
specter of the vulture as it is being silhouetted against the light. In other words, if, in keeping with the theory of infinite rehearsal, the bird's spatial trajectory corresponds to its movement across time, its shadow may adumbrate — "adumbrate" actually meaning, etymologically, "to cast a shadow on" — the coming into existence of a future recurrence of the vulture's flight. In that sense, what the bird is perceiving is the making, syncretized to its past, of its own future, maybe even of its posterity and/or assumed next life cycle, superimposed to its legacies and past lives, if time is indeed cyclical.

14 It is no wonder, then, to find that from the fourth stanza on, the vulture begins to think of death, for instance, by comparing the loss of a feather to that of a "tooth in a human dead head" (D'Aguiar 2013, 54), an allegorical, skull representation of vanitas that induces the bird in turn to ponder the fact that, if it was a human being, it would be "destined for a hole in the ground if lucky, / luckier still, to grace a table for vultures" (54): the inversion between vulture and men creates yet another mirror image, and is reminiscent of the death of a vulture under the wheels of a truck driven by a man in the preceding poem in the series (53), suggesting that death too recurs in the poems from "American Vulture." In “Vulture's Theory of Perpetual Return,” the vulture also imagines the moment of its death at the hands of an imaginary lamplighter: "The lamplighter who lights all the lamps above / lights the lamps of my eyes and how that lamplighter douses / those cold flames so too my eyes turn dark" (54). The macrocosm of a starry night is reduced to the microcosm of glittering eyes, which then expand again into a starless sky. Such a metaleptic description, by way of which the eye becomes its own planetarium, is a form of bi-directional recurrence that is coherent with the solipsistic impression conveyed by the shadow that “shadow rides the winds,” and suggests that when an individual dies, an entire universe disappears with him or her. Yet, the vulture predicts the impact of its death in the following terms: “I belong to no one and no one wants me when I am gone, / to where I do not know, except for the sound just before / silence and the silence just after sound” (54). These last words, forming the poem's closure, complement the experience of a last breath, or sound before the silence of death, with the presentation of posthumous silence as yet another experience, which implies that someone is there to witness that absence of sound. If not the lamplighter or anybody else at the moment of the vulture’s death, the poetic voice proleptically, if not prophetically, suggests that it is the bird itself that is to experience an afterlife, or a life in death as it were.

15 Through that suggestion, the vulture lets readers imagine that its circular and recurrent experience of life has led to the formulation of a “theory of infinite rehearsal” according to which every moment ends only to recur countless times, albeit in different forms that, it is assumed, can be imagined. Such a view of infinite rehearsal as the acquisition of knowledge through a syncretic perception of time can and has been explained thanks to Harris' interest in quantum physics and its “many worlds theory,” according to which anything that can happen does actually happen in an infinity of quantum realities (DeLoughrey 2007, 63; Polkinghorne 2002, 52). Yet it appears, in the light of our readings, that Jacques Derrida’s notion of différance is another, “original” way in which one may begin to understand infinite rehearsal. In addition, the correlation of Harris and Derrida, albeit incongruous at first sight, actually points to the like-mindedness of two intellectuals that criticism rarely associates, as both Derrida and Harris had been colonial subjects, respectively of France and Britain, who lived in the West, away from their native countries (Algeria and
Guyana), for the major part of their lives (respectively from 1962 and 1959 on), and who wrote profusely in forms of prose so complicated and intricate that they still tend to generate heated debates between enthusiastic and skeptical scholars (Courbot 2019, 2–3, 132). Derrida’s definition of différence, which can help us to understand how Harris’ infinite rehearsal differs from Nietzsche’s perpetual return, is a case in point:

It is because of différence that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called “present” element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself [...]. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called spacing, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (temporization). And it is this constitution of the present [...] that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or différence. (Derrida 1982, 13)

Différance, as the condition of signification through difference, the fact that every single sign always-already refers us to the signs it is not in order to become meaningful, implies that a deferral, a time differential, no matter how infinitesimal, is necessary for the sign to make sense. The presence of the sign is hence intrinsically split into its past and its future, and conditions the decomposable nature of origin, or the impossibility of reducing any speakable thing to prime elements.10

But if origin is naturally prosthetic, if a word is intrinsically différenciel, then time cannot proceed from a single origin onward into the future in a linear way: if nothing is absolutely original or present, then everything is prosthetic and re-presented, everything is a recurrence from the past and a trace of its future, and time, like tropes, must necessarily circulate. Such a hypothesis on the cyclical progression of time, although not formulated in these terms, is probably what led Nietzsche to devise the notion of perpetual return, most clearly described in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

All things recur eternal and we ourselves with them, and [...] we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us. [...] [T]here is a great year of becoming, a colossus of a year: this year must, like an hour-glass, turn itself over again and again, so that it may run down and run out anew: so that all these years resemble one another, in the greatest things and in the smallest. (Nietzsche 1969, 236)

That the present always already splits into cyclical recurrence is, again, conceivable. However, one may have reservations as to the necessity for perpetual return to preclude change, by making every cycle the same “in the greatest things and in the smallest,” for différence shows that the presence of the present is conditioned by the possibility of its absolute other, by its differing deferral. Repetition entails difference and, hence, the cyclical recurrence of time is not the perpetual return of the same, but the perpetual return of the same as different: recurrence is a variation, a differed and deferred version. In this sense, the cyclical qualities of time could, thus, be more specifically represented as a three-dimensional spiral.

Such a claim to différence as a response to Nietzsche’s argument is palpable in Harris’ idea of “infinite rehearsal” as a variant of perpetual return that is not hermetic to difference, and which exerts a major influence over D’Aguiar’s works, as suggested
above. Again, what Harris retains from the idea of perpetual return is the potential for events to recur infinitely. However, instants repeat themselves as variants in Harris’ conception of infinite rehearsal, and the strict similarity in the revolution of every “great year” is not maintained from Nietzsche. As D’Aguiar explains in this article’s first epigraph, in terms reminiscent of Derrida’s Shakespearean description of “time out of joints” (see footnote 8), cyclical time turns the present to temporal syncretism, to an infinitely recurring version of presence into différance. Harris further implies that such a reception of time endows the subject with (poetic) agency over it, with the ability to “alter” (Harris 1965, 25; D’Aguiar 2009b) past and future in the present-as-rehearsal, by way of which every moment conjures the same future and past specters infinitely, yet with different specificities.

As such, and at the risk of rehearsing our argument in turn, infinite rehearsal, in D’Aguiar’s poems, subtly contributes to the satisfaction of his understandable desire, as a creative writer, to subvert the strictures of Cartesian rationality, insofar as Harris’ theory of time induces one to rely on the powers of the imagination as a temporal threshold. Through D’Aguiar’s imaginative reformulations of infinite rehearsal, Harris’ revolutionary mind lives on, like a specter in the spirals of time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. We keep the word in its French spelling, but we do not italicize it, thereby “naturalizing” this supplement to the English language here.


3. The relevance of these philosophical notions in relation to infinite rehearsal is clarified at the end of this article.
4. I am using the model of single-line scansion presented in Derek Attridge’s *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*: stressed syllables are indicated with “/” and unstressed syllables are represented with an “x.”

5. “Trust” is foregrounded in “The Trench Revisited,” as it forms, with the word “just,” the poem’s only line-end rime, conveying a sense of D’Aguiar’s feeling indebted to Harris for “just” a mere expression of “trust” from a literary forebear he admires. This affection for Harris is corroborated by the poem’s final and only internal rime between “brave” and “save,” words associated to Harris’ rehearsed, corrective gesture, and endowed with meliorative connotations.

6. That Harris may “bank” knowledge from the “bank” of a water trench is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s punning on the economy of liquidity in “Tintern Abbey.” I discuss the subsequent possibility for a triangulation between Wordsworth, Harris, and D’Aguiar, and for the operation of links between the Orphic tenets of romanticism and magic(al) realism in the fifth chapter of *Fred D’Aguiar and Caribbean Literature: Metaphor, Myth, Memory*.

7. Such a questioning of reality is, of course, one of the tenets of magic(al) realism which, as a literary genre, questions clear-cut definitions of reality by presenting presumably supernatural events as an integral part of “natural” reality (Bowers 2004, 131).

8. The skull is also one of the key figurations of the baroque movement (see *Hamlet*), from which Harris borrowed heavily, probably via the Latin American authors writing in Spanish, such as Alejo Carpentier, who made the baroque presentation of landscape into another (creolizing) tenet of magic(al) realism (Carpentier 1995, 89–108). In this light, and as clarified below, it does not seem fortuitous for Derrida to have partly derived *différance* (which agrees with the implications of infinite rehearsal) from a baroque source as well, that is, Hamlet’s description of “time out of joint” (Derrida 1982, 13; Shakespeare 2008, 211–12).

9. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Deloughrey explains, “Plotnitsky reads Werner Heisenberg’s 1929 critiques of classical physics (and his concern with the representational efficacy of language) as an important precursor to Derrida” (69). In other words, Derrida’s thought, *like Harris’ idea of infinite rehearsal*, among other concepts, would be founded, in part at least, on a seminal text of quantum physics.

10. That is why Derrida favors hauntology over ontology and the metaphoric over the literal – his “favoring” them might also consist in his merely not *erasing* them, as, according to him, the Western metaphysical tradition does (Derrida 1974, 11).

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**ABSTRACTS**

This article examines Fred D’Aguiar’s poems “The Trench Revisited” and “Vulture’s Theory of Perpetual Return” in light of their “revolutionary” reliance on Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris’ idea of “infinite rehearsal.” Harris' theory of infinite rehearsal suggests a revisionary take on Nietzsche’s concept of perpetual return, because it confirms the cyclical nature of time, but substitutes the recurrence of sameness for the repetition of *différance* (Derrida 1982).

**INDEX**

*Keywords*: Harris (Wilson), D’Aguiar (Fred), perpetual return, *différance*, infinite rehearsal
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Cédric Courtois

The *Fishermen* recounts the coming of age of four middle-class brothers, aged 9 to 15, who, despite their parents’ warnings to deter them from doing so, become the eponymous fishermen in the “Omi-Ala River.” The novel begins at the heart of “the biting economy of 1990s Nigeria” (Obioma 2015, 31). Fishing represents a fascinating adventure for the four brothers and their friends, as explained by Benjamin, the narrator: “Ikenna’s classmate, Solomon, had told him about the pleasures of fishing. Ikenna described how Solomon had called the sport a thrilling experience that was also rewarding since he could sell some of the fish and earn a bit of income” (17). Their so-called mischief lasts for six weeks until a neighbour spots them as they go about their business on the river banks, and reports their wrongdoing to their mother, triggering her wrath as well as their father’s.1

A rudimentary paratextual map of Akure in South-West Nigeria (Yorubaland) has been inserted in the book before the incipit; Akure is the town where the protagonist and narrator, nine-year-old Benjamin at the beginning of the story, was born and raised. It is probably meant to have been drawn by the central character, Benjamin himself, as a child, and it is remarkable to notice that not only does the “Omi-Ala River” occupy a central position on this map, but it also does so in the diegesis per se: a whole chapter (the second one, entitled “The River”) is indeed devoted to “Omi-Ala.” This coming-of-age story of Benjamin and his three elder brothers focuses a great deal on the dangerous quality of this river, on whose banks they meet Abulu, the local madman, who is said to have the power of prophecy, and according to whom the eldest brother, Ikenna, is going to be killed by one of his siblings. From then on, the unity of the family...
is shattered as Ikenna will be on the lookout for any sign as to who could assassinate him.

3 If one follows the classic template of a passage from innocence to experience that corresponds to the classic (teleological) trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*, and if one of the earliest definitions of the genre – Karl Morgenstern’s – is considered, it is clear that the characteristics of *The Fishermen* correspond to those of the *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, Morgenstern writes: “[This genre] will justly bear the name *Bildungsroman* firstly and primarily on account of its thematic material, because it portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness [...].” (quoted in Swales 1978, 12). *The Fishermen* is a first-person narrative with a strong emphasis on the history of Nigeria, and in particular on the revolutionary transition from military rule to democracy in 1993, which eventually failed. June 12, 1993, is still perceived as a pivotal date in Nigerian history as Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton argue in *A History of Nigeria*: “the presidential election in which Bashir Tofa and M.K.O. Abiola took part, on June 12, 1993, is widely considered to have been the freest, fairest, and most peaceful election in Nigerian history to date” (2012, 227). According to Obioma himself, that particular day was and is still perceived as a revolution for the Nigerian people, i.e. a “dramatic and wide-reaching change in conditions, attitudes, etc.,” as shown in his June 7, 2018, Facebook post where he states:

Nigeria’s president President [sic] has finally done one thing I think is truly worthy of praise. Although we have no way of knowing how he would have fared, but back in 1993, M.K.O Abiola ran one of the most persuasive campaigns ever, and had a very strong agenda for Nigeria. His campaign was free of the kind of divisive rhetoric you find during elections even in places like the US. He should be rightly honoured. The man’s life was part of the inspiration for my novel, THE FISHERMEN. Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola had a key role in this attempt to institute democracy in the country. The decision made by the current President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, to which Obioma refers in his Facebook post, consists in making June 12 “Democracy Day” in Nigeria, instead of May 29 which was until summer 2019 set aside to commemorate the restoration of democracy in the Federal Republic of Nigeria when Olusegun Obasanjo became president on May 29, 1999. Obioma seems particularly concerned by this date as is made explicit in the novel itself, through the admiration for the figure of M.K.O. Abiola that the four brothers display.

4 Despite being a *Bildungsroman*, a genre often viewed as conservative in its traditional form, to what extent can *The Fishermen* be said to (paradoxically) put forth “revolutionary politics” and a poetics of revolution? It will first of all be relevant to focus on the development of Benjamin as an individual. The stress will then be laid on the *Bildungsroman* as an allegorical genre which not only focuses on the development of the individual but also on that of the nation. In *The Fishermen*, the June 12th 1993 Revolution, which shook Nigerian society, looms large, and this very revolution leads to excess and (generic) instability, especially because madness seems to affect some of the characters.
Rewriting the *Bildungsroman* Genre? The Revolutionary Development of an Individual

5 The *Bildungsroman*, whose archetypal model is considered to be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre* (1795-96), postulates a linear progression toward experience, knowledge and social (re)integration (the passage from innocence to experience has also been identified as one of the key factors of the *Bildungsroman* by Susan Suleiman in *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* [1983, 65]). In “Struggling with the African *Bildungsroman*,” Ralph A. Austen writes: “Perhaps the only point of consensus in considering whether any narrative can be considered a *bildungsroman* is that it should deal with an individual’s life, focusing on his or her formative youth in the context of a ‘modernizing’ world” (2015, 215).

6 In his *Guardian* review of *The Fishermen*, Helon Habila writes that the novel is “a *Bildungsroman*.” Following the tradition of this genre the adult narrator (Benjamin) looks back, with irony and hindsight, to the events leading to the tragedy that befell his family, that is to say the killing of his brother Ikenna by his brother Boja. Benjamin, now an adult, uses the narrative present to remember past events:

> When I look back today, as I find myself doing more often now that I have sons of my own, I realize that it was during one of these trips to the river that our lives and our world changed. For it was here that time began to matter, at that river where we became fishermen. (Obioma 2015, 20)

A double perspective is therefore at stake in the novel: both that of the child but also that of the adult narrator, who has become a father, and who can judge, years later, his acts as a child.  

7 However, *The Fishermen* drifts away from this teleological and linear grid in favour of a circular pattern, the most striking demonstration of which might lie in the fact that the same words are used at the beginning of the novel and near the very end (“We were fishermen: my brothers and I became fishermen,” [9], “We were fishermen. My brothers and I became –,” [301]). A poetics of circularity seems to be one of the founding principles at the core of *The Fishermen*. The following hypothesis can therefore be posed: that the novel relies heavily on a revolution in the Copernican sense. The rewriting of the *Bildungsroman* offered by Obioma questions teleology and linearity and promotes circularity. The latter seems to be a common feature in many postcolonial Nigerian *Bildungsromane*.

8 The environment that is described in *The Fishermen* is one of disillusionment (which is representative of some third -generation Nigerian novels). It goes against what some writers advocate (including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her 2009 Ted Talk entitled “The Danger of a Single Story”) when they argue that it is time to put an end to Afro-pessimism. Third-generation disillusionment might be seen as an echo to the post-colonial disillusionment that was central among earlier generations of Nigerian writers, in the 1960s, for instance. In “The Postcolonial African *Bildungsroman*: Extending the Paradigm,” Ogaga Okuyade traces a direct line between the former generations and the third generation of Nigerian writers, and writes that “only the political atmosphere differs; the temper remains the same” (2009, 72). Despite the assumption according to which the *Bildungsroman* is “an essentially *optimistic* genre” (Felski 1989, 122), some periods have nonetheless given birth to a rather pessimistic form of *Bildungsroman*, as exemplified by the modernist late nineteenth, early twentieth
-century British and German Bildungsroman, in which satisfactory adult collective life, which implies integration into the larger social order, is particularly arduous: the model of the pessimistic Bildungsroman seems more coherent with a post-independence atmosphere as it is described in The Fishermen. The socio-political atmosphere put forth in the novel can even result in some form of “arrested development” for the protagonist as explained by Jed Esty (2012, 22), or in a “suspended state,” as shown by Sarah K. Harrison (2012, 95, 98).

The “arrested development” at issue in the novel is partly linked to the conditions in which the main character grows up. As is explained by the narrator in the incipit, he became a fisherman “in January of 1996” (Obioma 2015, 9), therefore right in the middle of Sani Abacha’s term in office. When the narrator/protagonist writes “I realize that it was during one of these trips to the river that our lives and our world changed” (20), it points out the conjoined development of the Bildungen of the individual and the nation and it indicates that, in this novel, the individual’s development can be read as an allegory of the nation’s development.

**Allegorizing the Bildungsroman: Nigeria’s June 12 “Revolution”**

Ogaga Okuyade writes that “the personal experiences of the protagonists serve as an index to the larger cultural, socio-historical conditions and thus the protagonists’ personal Bildung becomes inseparable from the political agenda of their nations” (2009, 7). Moreover, in his unfinished essay on the Bildungsroman, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the genre presents “the image of man in the process of becoming.” It classically puts forth “human emergence [with an] assimilation of real historical time” (1986, 21). A strong link between individual emergence and historical emergence is therefore perceived as a characteristic of the Bildungsroman (Bakhtin 1986, 23). The individual’s development often parallels the nation’s in an allegorical way. The allegory having a satirical and propagandist function, it is a powerful instrument for political criticism. To use Bakhtin’s words, the hero emerges with the world and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. [The hero] is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. (23–24)

In The Fishermen, the “border between two epochs” is embodied by June 12, 1993, the date when a transition between military dictatorship and democracy almost took place.

The use of the Bildungsroman genre makes sense in Obioma’s project which focuses on the idea of a “revolution”. As has already been stated, according to Elze, the prevalence of the Bildungsroman genre in the nineteenth century is related to “revolutionary politics” (2017, 38). The critic adds:

To understand the proliferation of the picaresque in the postcolony and its emphasis on subversion and complicity, we need to first understand the relation between both the Bildungsroman and the picaresque, and the social climates they repeatedly emplot. Subversion is certainly not the better or more radical political strategy against which the conservative Bildungsroman somehow falls short. Quite the opposite: the Bildungsroman is, in its most radical form “as the full assimilations
of historical time,” suited like no other genre for the articulation of struggle, transformation, and revolution. (36)

Obioma, and this is the case for most Bildungsromane writers of his generation, sketches the portrait of a Nigeria that is deteriorating; thus, for the hero and his surroundings, development cannot be linear. On the contrary, Bildung is strewn with hurdles – real or metaphorical – for the men and women who live in that society. According to Apollo Amoko, there are similarities between the context of urgency during which the Bildungsroman emerged in Europe, and that of a “revolution” in which the Bildungsroman has become popular in the Republic of Nigeria. In the European context, Amoko speaks of a “radical transformation and social upheaval” (2009, 200). I would argue that the Bildungsroman as it is used by Obioma is central to displaying the crisis of post-independence in 1990s Nigeria for indeed, “the narrative of Bildung clearly has enormous potential for all forms of political struggle” (Elze 2017, 42).

The Fishermen mixes historical facts and fiction, almost offering a form of faction, and it is deeply anchored in the history of the nation as exemplified by the numerous references, among others, to M.K.O. Abiola who ran for the presidency in 1993. The nineties and 1993 in particular were a very troubled and unstable period in Nigeria. The citizens hoped for a transition from military dictatorship to democracy, a transition which failed. Although M.K.O. Abiola was democratically elected, the results were annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida, and General Sani Abacha seized power later that year. Benjamin, the narrator, explains: “Then we knew we were safe and had escaped the 1993 election uprising in which more than a hundred people were killed in Akure. June the 12th became a seminal day in the history of Nigeria” (Obioma 2015, 127, emphasis added). In this short extract, the fate of the hero is intrinsically linked to the fate of the nation. A seven-page passage toward the middle of the novel sheds light on the 1993 riot in which the brothers’ lives are clearly jeopardized, with yet another sentence that weaves individual and national fates: “Outside, it was as if the world had been sawn in two and we were all teetering on the edge of the chasm” (123).

The afore-mentioned transition point between two epochs is inscribed geographically in the text through the “Omi-Ala River.” Depending on the tones used in the tone language of Yoruba, tones which are transcribed by written signs, the meaning of the name of the river (“Omi-Ala”) changes in a radical way. Obioma does not favour any tone and neutralizes the words thus allowing a deeper possibility of interpretation. “Omi” means water while “Ala” with the following tones – “Àlà” – means dream, which in the context of the novel fully makes sense since the madman’s prophecies can be perceived as such. However, “Àlà” can mean threshold, margin, limit, boundary, landmark, confine, precinct, line of demarcation. Therefore, this river carries in its name the very concept of transition. It is a limit, a geographical boundary, a body of water that separates.

The Fishermen first focuses on borders as cartographic limits imposed by (colonial) power. The river physically splits the town in two as can be seen on the map at the beginning of the book: by definition, and because of its liquid quality, this type of border cannot be seen as fixed, but as fluid and shape-shifting. As argued by Johan Schimanski, “borders are constantly under reaffirmation and negotiation: they are not final givens” (2015, 94). This is clear when applied to the “Omi-Ala River” as explained by the narrator himself: towards the end of the novel, after he has spent six years in jail for the murder of Abulu, the narrator is driven back home, crosses the river by car, and sees people fishing there (unlike what he used to see when he was a child). The nature
of the river and the beliefs associated to it seem to have changed. The river as physical border becomes symbolic border. In *The Fishermen*, “Omi-Ala” embodies a prohibited space: since British missionaries made locals suspicious about all the beliefs associated with the river, the latter has been considered ominous. It is explained in the following passage, taken from the chapter entitled “The River”:

Omi-Ala was a dreadful river. Long forsaken by the inhabitants of Akure town like a mother abandoned by her children. But it was once a pure river that supplied the earliest settlers with fish and clean drinking water. It surrounded Akure and snaked through its length and breadth. Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name, and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja, Osha, mermaids, and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies. This changed when the colonialists came from Europe, and introduced the Bible, which then prized Omi-Ala’s adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians, began to see it as an evil place. A cradle besmeared. (21)

*The Fishermen* can be read as a parable of the (negative) impact of colonialism. In this case, Yoruba or Igbo practices were perceived as heathen. Everything that comes from this river seems to be a source of terror. As it is a prohibited in-between “Third Space,” a space that engenders new possibilities, an ambivalent site with no “primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha 1994, 37), the “Omi-Ala River” becomes an object of fascination for the brothers who long to become fishermen despite the inhabitants’ alarmed warnings as regards its hazardousness: “It became the source of dark rumours. One such rumour was that people committed all sorts of fetish rituals at its banks” (Obioma 2015, 21). In this novel, borders – whether they be physical, symbolic, or epistemological – are thus bound to be crossed, in the same way as it would be beneficial for Nigeria to effect the transition from military rule to democracy: the novels points to this interpretation.

The connection between Nigerian history and literature is felt strongly in many post-colonial novels, sometimes giving the impression that they are mere re-articulations of the historical events described. However, *The Fishermen* should not be read as a mere historical account of post-independence Nigeria as such a reading would ignore what Jane Bryce depicts as “powerfully evocative and convincing fictional dramas of individual characters set against realist renderings of a particular time and place” (2008, 54) when it comes to third -generation Nigerian novels. It is therefore important to highlight the importance of poetics in the context of *The Fishermen*, which heavily deals with history. Some readers could consider that the novel lacks literary value by sticking to facts. In this sense, Obioma can be said to display a major interest in Nigerian history also emphasized by other third-generation fiction writers.

*The Fishermen* emphasizes the African postcolonial condition which leads to an irregular development for the main character. The social and political conditions of postcolonial Nigeria represent a real menace to the *Bidungsprozess*, namely through (generic) excess.

When “revolution” leads to excess and (generic) instability: madness in the postcolony

In *The Fishermen*, a series of catastrophes befalls the family and the whole country:

Father was bitter. He bemoaned the poor health facilities in the country. He swore at Abacha, the dictator, and railed on about the marginalization of Igbos in Nigeria.
Then he complained about the monster the British had created by forming Nigeria as a whole [...]. (Obioma 2015, 34)

The protagonist’s father describes a monstrous geopolitical creation, i.e. something exceeding norms, unnatural, that was born during colonisation. The character considered as responsible for the tragedy the family is going through is Abulu, the “madman,” who is paradoxically both a marginal and a central character: he is the ultimate transgressor whose prophecy precipitates the family’s destruction. Excess as personified by Abulu petrifies the children and their development/Bildung. The madman allegorically embodies the state of the nation since he himself is a monstrous figure in many ways. He is excessive, as indicated by the narrator:

I observed that he carried on his body a variety of odours, the most noticeable of which was a faecal smell that wafted at me like a drone of flies when I drew closer to him. [...] He reeked of sweat accumulated inside the dense growth of hair around his pubic regions and armpits. He smelt of rotten food, and unhealed wounds and pus, and of bodily fluids and wastes. He was redolent of rusting metals, putrefying matter, old clothes, ditched underwear he sometimes wore. He smelt, too, of leaves, creepers, decaying mangoes by the Omi-Ala, the sand of the riverbanks, and even of the water itself. [...] But these were not all; he smelt of immaterial things. (229–30)

The focus on bad smells with words such as “wafted,” “reeked,” “redolent,” “odours,” and the polyptoton “smell/smelt,” echo the emphasis laid on bodily fluids of all kinds, whether it be pus, sweat, urine, or faeces. At the beginning of the novel, another marginalized character, a “madwoman,” literally “shat” “at the very centre of the market” (25). This stress on shit is reminiscent of what Joshua D. Esty describes as “excremental postcolonialism.” In Wole Soyinka’s The Interpreters, one of the main characters says that “Next to death, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our beloved country” (1972, 108). Soyinka, and Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, used this grotesque vision and shit (as well as vomit, piss, sweat, phlegm) as “an index of moral and political outrage,” as “political satire” (Esty 199, 22). It is interesting to note that Obioma follows the tradition in which texts are locating themselves “in the context of failed or flawed postcolonial nationalism” (Esty 1999, 24).

Scatology can be a symptom of the nation’s failed development and in this context Abulu becomes a potent symbol of scatological satire. Another passage is interesting as regards this character’s position in society: he is described as “a mediator between two domains, an intermediary between a dream world and our world,” “a prophet, a scarecrow, a deity” (Obioma 2015, 100). This points to what Michel Foucault describes in his seminal book Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason in
which he writes that during the Renaissance, mad people were abandoned at the gates of the city and were therefore confined to the threshold as their natural location. Banishment was what awaited mad people in medieval society. Foucault speaks of “the madman’s liminal position” (1988, 11, original emphasis). The mad inhabitants at the border of society became conspicuous as beings carrying a message from another world. Closer to the context of the text itself, since it takes place in Yorubaland, Abulu also seems to embody Eshu, the Yoruba Orisha, who is known for being the messenger of all Orishas. Eshu inhabits crossroads and is in charge of relations between God and Man. He is well—known for being a gatekeeper, and for having a voracious appetite (including sexual appetite, similar to Abulu’s).

Only through the cathartic death of the mad “prophet,” perhaps reminiscent of Christ’s crucifixion, do the brothers deem it possible to live as before. The following passage describes how Benjamin and one of his brothers kill Abulu:

> The djinn that seemed to suddenly possess us that moment leapt to the fore of my mind and tore every bit of my sense to shreds. We jabbed the hook of our lines blindly at his chest, his face, his head, his neck and everywhere we could, crying and weeping. The madman was frantic, mad, dazed. He flung his arms aloft to shield himself, running backwards, shouting and screaming. The blows perforated his flesh, boring bleeding holes and ripping out chunks of his flesh every time we pulled out the hooks. [...] The madman jabbered about, his voice deafening, his body in flustered panic. We kept hitting, pulling, striking, screaming, crying, and sobbing until weakened, covered in blood, and wailing like a child, Abulu fell backwards into the water in a wild splash. (Obioma 2015, 255)

A rhetoric of excess is clearly at stake here namely through the use of the paratactic rhythm. The accumulation of adjectives, as well as [ING] forms, particularly toward the end of this passage, seems to reinforce the violence used by the two brothers in order to assassinate Abulu. Moreover, the man is literally transformed into fragments, as shown by the references to body parts, and particularly to “chunks of his flesh” being “ripped out” by the hooks used in order to kill him. The odd reference to the “djinn,” a Muslim spirit, attests to the changing world of the two Christian brothers who are losing their cultural landmarks. Madness seems to affect the two brothers as well as the novel itself, hence leading to a destabilisation of generic boundaries. The Fishermen is a Bildungsroman, but has equally been called an “Igbo tragedy” by Obioma himself, pointing to a hybrid genre. In an interview with Premium Times, he declares: “I call [The Fishermen] an Igbo tragedy because it is a different kind of tragedy. It is not working in the same way the Shakespearean or Grecian tragedy works. It is our own kind of tragedy – my own form of tragedy.” Several occurrences of the words “tragic” and “tragedy” appear in the novel and one of the brothers, Obembe, says: “We must kill Abulu or else we cannot have peace [...]. There’s a wound he has inflicted on us that would never ever heal. If we do not kill this madman, nothing will ever be the same” (Obioma 2015, 206). In this context, the killing of Abulu is reminiscent of the sacrifice of a scapegoat who comes to represent a crisis through its ambivalent position within a social order and is subsequently sacrificed so that stability might thereby be achieved.

The Fishermen can also be considered as a “liminal novel” as defined by Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa in her book in which she explains that

> the liminal novel is a novel of coming of age in which the rite of passage [...] remains suspended in the middle stage. At the close of the novel the protagonist is still in the middle of the quest, either still moving towards what supposedly
constitutes the final stage in that quest or having consciously suspended the adoption of a final stance. (1996, 3)

23 The Fishermen abandons its protagonist at the threshold between youth and the beginning of maturity, not making it clear how the next stage will be fulfilled.

24 While The Fishermen deals with political violence, bravery, injustice, but also political instability, Obioma shows that hope lies on the shoulders of Nigerian youths as shown in the last chapter of the book which mainly focuses on the protagonist’s two younger siblings, David, and maybe above all, Nkem who, when Benjamin is driven back home from jail, opens the gate of the compound, making it possible for him to “start [...] all over again,” (Obioma 2015, 301) which are the last words of the novel. Although it can be argued that this emphasis on youth shows that society is turned toward the future rather than toward the past, the Bildungsprozess of the protagonist has failed, if one follows what Franco Moretti describes: “[in the classical Bildungsroman] it is [...] indispensable for time to stop at a privileged moment. A Bildung is truly such only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as concluded” (1987, 26, original emphasis). The Fishermen is open-ended as is the case in many other third -generation Nigerian novels, which indicates that the Bildungsprozess has somewhat failed. Indeed, numerous critics consider that the Bildungsroman presents a form of closure, often through the marriage of the protagonist for instance. Yet, this is not the scenario offered by Obioma in The Fishermen.

25 Obioma’s novel employs a revolutionary poetics in that it lays the emphasis on a revolution in the Copernican sense when it comes to the Bildung of its protagonist. Like a number of “Third World” texts (to use the now infamous Jamesonian category), the development of the individual can be perceived as an index of the (failed) development of the nation at a time when Nigeria was ruled by the military. This socio-political environment leads to madness, as embodied in an allegorical way by Abulu; it is however a madness that also affects the protagonist and his family, leading to the murder of the mad “prophet,” which finally sends Benjamin, still a child at the time, to jail. This novel of post–independence disillusion nonetheless ends on a more positive outcome, with David and Nkem, who embody the future of Nigeria: they are seen as “signs or harbingers of good times” (Obioma 2015, 298).

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NOTES

1. The novel lays emphasis on the loss of authority of the father, which corresponds to what Apollo Amoko describes in “Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature”: “[w]ith its focus on youth, the African Bildungsroman illustrates how, in the wake of colonialism, the father’s authority is irreversibly undermined” (2009, 200). Like the African Bildungsroman mentioned by Amoko, The Fishermen is clearly centered on youth.

2. It is interesting to notice that Morgenstern speaks about a “certain stage of completeness,” therefore putting the stress on a wide spectrum of possible Bildungen. Moreover, in “The Bildungsroman in Nineteenth-Century English Literature,” G.B. Tennyson depicts the Bildung of the child in a “direct line from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty” (1968, 137).

3. I am deliberately borrowing Bernhard F. Malkmus’s idea in The German Picaro and Modernity: Between Underdog and Shape-Shifter, in which he refers to the “revolutionary politics” as an “environment that fostered the emergence of a different kind of initiation story that pitched a human individual in new ways against society – the Bildungsroman” (2014, 34). This idea is also
picked up by Jens Elze in *Postcolonial Modernism and the Picaresque Novel: Literatures of Precarity* when he writes about the “revolutionary politics,’ pointing towards the transformative potential of the *Bildungsroman* and its capacity to mobilize political action” (2017, 38). However, as explained by Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, there are “various kinds of *Bildungsroman*” which can be grouped according to two principles: “the ‘classification’ principle and the ‘transformation’ principle” (1987, 7). According to the description of these two principles given by Moretti, *The Fishermen* can be said to lean toward “the ‘transformation’ principle” namely because the novel is “open-ended.” Yet, it can also be argued that some elements focus on “the ‘classification’” of the hero. This is often the case as, once again according to Moretti, “both are always present in a narrative work” (1987, 7).

4. Many a critic argues that even Goethe’s novel does not meet the generic expectations of the *Bildungsroman*. Gregory Castle refers to the genre as a “phantom formation” for instance.

5. In “Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial *Bildungsroman*,” José Santiago Fernández Vázquez explains that “[t]his retrospective view [characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*], usually charged with irony towards the younger self, highlights the success of the *Bildung* process. In order for this success to be perceived by the reader, the novel must indicate clearly that the protagonist is now a better person than he was” (2002, 86).

6. One could argue that the differences in the punctuation as well as the missing word (“fishermen”) at the end of the novel shows an incomplete circular movement.

7. In Fernández Vázquez’ article, which deals with Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, a very different novel (in terms of the atmosphere described) from the one studied in this article, the critic mentions a rupture of the teleological sequence of events by saying that the protagonist’s story puts forth a “circular, episodic, loop-like narrative technique […] which some critics would consider an attribute of the modern third-world novel” (2002, 98). Because *The Fishermen* does not use an abiku as protagonist, the circularity is by definition far less present than in *The Famished Road*; yet, it is still quite central in the narrated (historical) events. The teleological structure of the traditional *Bildungsroman* goes hand in hand with the concepts of history and progress. Therefore, by interrupting this teleological structure, Obioma insists on the constant return to dictatorship in Nigeria, emphasizes this circularity, and seems to regret the missed opportunity at a transition from military rule to democracy, in 1993.

8. According to Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, members of the first two generations of Nigerian writers “were mostly born during the first five decades of the twentieth century when the colonial event was in full force. Their textualities were […] massively overdetermined by that experience” (2005, 14). The writers who belong to the second generation (Femi Osofisan, Ben Okri, Odia Ofeimun, or Buchi Emecheta, among others) did not really know “the colonial event”: yet, “their formative years were shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis” (2005, 14, emphasis added).

9. Jed Esty’s study on the modernist *Bildungsroman* puts to the fore a *Bildungsroman* of arrested development and, according to Elze, “[r]ather than assuming the full-scale abolishment of notions of *Bildung*, self-formation, and understanding, usually associated with modernism […] Esty focusses on the transformation of the idea of *Bildung* in late nineteenth-century Anglophone literatures that resulted in *Metabildungsromane* of stunted growth or arrested development” (2012, 39).

10. In *The Fishermen*, the daily struggles of the characters cannot be separated from the broader political situation. Fredric Jameson’s assertion that “Third World” literatures should be read as national allegories holds true in *The Fishermen* (1986).

11. The deterioration of the country as described by Obioma is reminiscent of the one denounced by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidate in the 1993 elections, to wit M.K.O. Abiola. This is
particularly striking in the SDP campaign video which portrays Abiola as the only person who embodies hope for the Nigerians (see the bibliography).

12. Amoko goes back to the reasons explaining the emergence of youth in literature in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and explains that “in periods of radical transformation and social upheaval, youth takes center stage, supplanting adulthood. The 18th and 19th centuries were a period of radical social transformation in Europe” (2009, 200).

13. Elze asserts: “Aside from its propensity to articulate historical change, the Bildungsroman is also more adaptable to the climates of insecurity than has often been admitted. In fact, it may even be said to have thrived on these climates” (39).

14. This could remind the reader of Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, in which colonialists convinced the local populations that their practices (namely religious ones) were not acceptable.

15. Some of the most striking examples of this inter-connectedness between literature and history among third-generation writers are Helon Habila’s Waiting for an Angel, Sefi Atta’s Everything Good Will Come, or Chris Abani’s GraceLand. As far as Obioma’s novel is concerned, it puts forth the hope the 1993 free elections represented in the country. The Fishermen is also different from Habila and Abani’s works in that it focuses far less on the poverty and persecution the hero might suffer from in the hands of the military. The novel does focus on poverty through the character of Abulu for instance, but as regards the protagonist himself, who grows up in a well-to-do family, Obioma’s novel is thematically more akin to Sefi Atta’s Everything Good Will Come or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus. It is also interesting to notice that despite being born later than Abani, Adichie or Atta, Obioma (born in 1986) continues to dwell on the centrality of history in his fiction.

16. In the same article, Jane Bryce emphasizes one of the thematic concerns of third-generation novelists, to whom Chigozie Obioma can be said to belong, when she writes that “there is no doubt that underlying [third-generation] novels is a protest against what Nigeria has become” (2008, 58).

17. The Fishermen can be said to be uneven in parts, especially in terms of development and sometimes as regards voice. The novel describes living conditions in Nigeria in 1993 under Sani Abacha’s dictatorship (1993-1998), by including them in the novel itself, running the risk of emphasizing social and historical aspects rather than the aesthetic value of the novel.

18. Jane Bryce demonstrates that third-generation Nigerian “novels embody the effects of forty years of failed democratic rule and military dictatorship, corruption, state violence, and war on those who were either children or unborn at the time of the events which would set Nigeria on its postcolonial path” (2008, 54).

19. What is now referred to as the “National Question” in Nigeria arose from the diversity of ethnic groups present in the country (about 250), making Nigerian society a fragmented one.

20. Chigozie Obioma follows the previous generations of writers as represented by Soyinka, Achebe or even Osofisan. According to the latter, literature has to tackle socio-political problems, among which “the abuse of power, widespread poverty and squalor, kleptomania and corruption in the public life, the suffering of the common people, and so on” (Osofisan 2007, 4). In this sense, many of the third-generation writers can be said to have a socio-critical vision of literature.

21. Orishas are mainly Yoruba deities, but they are also worshipped by other ethnic groups in West Africa and in South America (as a result of the Atlantic slave trade).

22. Moreover, in his Guardian review, Habila writes that “The Fishermen is also grounded in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy” (2015).

23. For further details about the figure of the scapegoat, see René Girard’s seminal work, Le bouc émissaire (1982).
ABSTRACTS

Nigerian writer Chigozie Obioma’s debut novel is a Bildungsroman set in Nigeria in the 1990s. It focuses on the coming-of-age of Benjamin, the narrator and protagonist, whose Bildung clearly parallels, in an allegorical way, the nation’s. Overall, history looms large in this novel which follows the tradition launched by earlier Nigerian writers. The Bildungsroman genre seems to be effective to put forth the “revolutionary politics” and poetics at the heart of Obioma’s project.

INDEX

Keywords: Obioma (Chigozie), revolution, history, Bildungsroman, allegory, madness

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The term revolution may imply a sudden change, a violent political upheaval that gives birth to a new form of government. Alternatively, it may refer to “a very important change in the way that people do things,” which in some cases is linked to the notion of revolving, that is the completion of “a circular movement” (Cambridge Dictionary, online). This dual meaning is exemplified in The Famished Road by the narrator, Azaro, who lives in Nigeria at the time when the country was moving towards independence. In the first pages of the novel, Azaro, a spirit child, chooses to remain in the world of the living, thus forsaking the spirit world. With his decision to stay, he puts an end to the endless, circular return of the abiku who keeps being born into the world of the living before going back to the spirit world. At the same time, in acting this way, Azaro does something that no other spirit child would dream of doing. By putting an end to the endless cyclical revolution of reincarnation, Azaro performs a truly revolutionary and ground-breaking act. At the beginning of the novel, his controversial decision to remain with his birth parents has already brought radical change and there is great potential for more transformations, notably in the political situation of the country. Transformation may occur in two different spaces: in the outside world with political independence, and within the self with the evolution of the characters – to which one should add transformation in the reader’s perspective. This essay examines these various forms of “revolution” in The Famished Road. When analysing the diegesis, revolution as change hardly seems to apply to The Famished Road as changes are not to be found. Instead, what the novel offers is repetition or even indirection. Thus, the idea of revolution as circular movement seems to take precedence, unless the reader focuses on inner transformation, that is a transformation of the self through a revolution in perception.

As the action of the novel takes place a little before independence, one expects drastic changes to unfold. Yet, although at first sight, potential change is present, it later
becomes clear that revolution in the sense of a sudden transformation in the country is not to happen. The upcoming shift in politics foreshadows transitions in society with the political elections and the independence of the country. As Azaro’s mother declares, “[t]his is a new age. Independence is coming” (Okri 1991, 109), showing the dramatic impact of such an event on the lives of Azaro and his family. Dad also hints at this when he tells his son that “new things [are] happening in the world and in our area” (490). Azaro himself makes references to change throughout the novel, implying that transformation is occurring. As elections are on the way, the only two existing political parties, the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor, travel around the country to let everyone know about their programs, which are supposed to bring change. The first party to come to the compound where Azaro and his parents live is the Party of the Rich. They promise many things:

WE WILL FEED YOUR CHILDREN [...] AND WE WILL BRING YOU GOOD ROADS [...] AND WE WILL BRING ELECTRICITY [...] AND WE WILL BUILD SCHOOLS [...] AND HOSPITALS. WE WILL MAKE YOU RICH LIKE US. THERE IS PLENTY FOR EVERYBODY.

PLENTY OF FOOD. PLENTY OF POWER. VOTE FOR UNITY AND POWER. (145)

The repetitive use of the modal WILL shows a projection into the future. Interestingly, with the pronoun “we” as subject, the modal SHALL would have been expected. This, however, would have implied that the politicians were making a promise they know they will not be able to keep. Furthermore, if WILL often contains an idea of resolution, this feeling is not really present here. In comparison, the use of BE GOING TO would underline a clear intention. Steps would already have been taken towards a potential action that would happen soon. However, the Party cannot promise imminent transformations. WILL can be stressed to express a determination to make sure that the action is realised. The problem is that in the extract, every word is stressed with the use of capital letters, thus downplaying that possibility. As a consequence, what we get in this passage is a simple declaration of intention without any real plan for action. The politicians only state what they want to achieve but they cannot say whether their policy will bear fruit. This lessens the impact of the speech and the numerous repetitions of WILL further empty the modal of its potential meaning. WILL becomes an empty shell that we do not pay attention to anymore and the speech becomes a declaration of empty promises. Indeed, the party offers powdered milk to the hungry population, a milk that later proves to be rotten, making everybody in the compound sick. The Party of the Poor is no better, making vague promises: “They too had come with loudhailers and leaflets and had promised a lot of things” (177, emphasis added).

Other potential sources for revolution are the riots led by the population at several moments in the book. At the very beginning of the novel, the reader nearly gets the feeling of a revolution occurring as the compound goes up in flames. The landlord who is certain that the inhabitants are responsible for the fire calls the police, who, for no reason, start flogging people, leading to riots. At that moment, people react to police brutality and to colonial rule as they “[tear] their colonial uniforms and [send] them packing” (12). Similarly, later in the novel, the Party of the Rich returns to the compound after the rotten milk episode. People are ready to act and attack the politicians, the thugs that came with them, and the van in which they arrived. Contrary to the situation in the first riot, the police are now helpless. Moreover, thanks to the photographer, Jeremiah, the news appears in a national newspaper:

For the first time in our lives we as a people had appeared in the newspapers. We were heroes in our own drama, heroes of our own protest. There were pictures of us, men and women and children, standing helplessly round heaps of the
politicians’ milk. There were pictures of us raging, attacking the van, rioting against the cheap methods of politicians, humiliating the thugs of politics, burning their lies. The photographer’s pictures had been given great prominence on the pages of the newspaper and it was even possible to recognise our squashed and poverty-ridden faces on the grainy newsprint. There were news stories about the bad milk and an editorial about our rage. We were astonished that something we did with such absence of planning, something that we had done in such a small corner of the great globe, could gain such prominence. (184)

For once, the poverty-ridden people, who have nothing, are in possession of their “own” fate and they act on it as conveyed by the numerous action verbs. The use of the pronouns “we” and “us” shows the unity of the compound people. The plural “we” becomes singular as the people become “a people” in the expression “we as a people.”

If change can affect a whole population, it can also occur on a more personal level. Madame Koto, the owner of a bar, goes through a major physical transformation as she becomes pregnant and keeps getting bigger, leading to pain in her foot. Her transformation is concomitant with the changes in her bar, which expands continuously. Dad also keeps evolving. In the course of the book, he becomes a boxer, he begins to take an interest in politics and seeks to bring change to the compound by turning into a politician.

However, despite a certain potential for revolution, what eventually prevails in the novel is a lack of real change. First, some changes are forgotten because they have not been recorded. For instance, a second riot that occurs against the Party of the Rich is forgotten because the photographer has not taken any photos of the event:

And because the photographer hadn’t been there to record what had happened that night, nothing of the events appeared in the newspapers. It was as if the events were never real. They assumed the status of rumour. […] After a while, when nothing happened, when no reprisals fell on us, it seemed that nothing significant had happened. Some of us began to distrust our memories. We began to think that we had collectively dreamt up the fevers of that night. (214)

Here, the repetition of “nothing” further cancels the existence of the event. If some changes are forgotten, others simply fail to come to pass.

Upon closer examination, the promised political transformations and independence never occur, be it in The Famished Road or in the rest of the trilogy. The only event worth noting is “the endlessly postponed [political] rally” (180), which eventually takes place in Infinite Riches, the last volume of the trilogy. It is followed by riots which, like all the others, have no consequences other than violence. During the first riot, people act blindly. They simply react to the violence shown by the police and copy gangs that seek only to destroy: “gangs materialised in the darkness. They stamped through the mud. At the main road, they fell on cars and buses. They attacked police vehicles. They looted shops. Then everyone began looting, burning, and overturning things” (12). We can notice that there is a single reference to the police, enclosed with references to other vehicles and shops belonging to people that are in no way responsible for what happened. In the end, the succession of the three verbs introducing the noun “things” underlines that people’s anger at the police has turned to meaningless destruction aimed at “things.” In the case of the second riot, the rage of the people is qualified as “impotent” (182). The people have anger but no power to change the situation. Furthermore, afterwards, Dad confides in Azaro: “Trouble always happens after celebration. Trouble is coming to our area” (186), suggesting that the only consequence of the riot is going to be reprisal. This absence of change is further underlined by
Azaro, who keeps remarking that “Nothing unusual happened” (208), or that “nothing ever happened in the world” (309). This counteracts the quotes noted earlier suggesting potential transformations, and this continues right through until the very end of the novel as Azaro notes on the last page: “Nothing happened” (574).

Finally, going back to the characters’ evolution, Madame Koto’s pregnancy is never-ending, and she actually dies before having the chance to give birth, thus drawing a parallel between the impossible birth of her triplets and the forever delayed birth of the nation. As for Dad, his projects are repeatedly thwarted. He fails to convince people as a politician and when he decides to put the beggars living near the compound to work at clearing the refuse from the streets, it is a complete disaster. Consequently, the general impression produced by the novel is that, as Azaro notes, nothing changes. Rather, the story seems to be going in circles through repetitions, performing another sort of revolution.

If nothing really happens in the novel, leading to an overall impression of randomness as if the story were going nowhere, another form of revolution is however very much present: repetition, as the novel seems to be revolving onto itself. Brenda Cooper noted that in The Famished Road, “[n]ot much happens. What does transpire seems familiar and repetitive” (1998, 68). To the reader, it often feels as if nothing were happening. As Azaro remarks, “Time did not move at all” (Okri 1991, 309) and the text seems to lack a sense of direction. The conventional movement of the novel, from beginning to end, is called into question with a starting point that underlines the existence of a before with Azaro’s previous lives as an abiku, and an ending which offers no conclusion but instead, an opening with the concluding statement: “and then it was another morning” (574). This aspect has been underlined by Kerry-Jane Wallart: “Notions of order, sequence and series but also the very idea of a beginning or an end thus seem threatened or seriously revisited […]. Ben Okri constantly suggests that some meaning will be revealed, even as he postpones such revelation” (2013, 31). Expectations are constantly thwarted. For Christopher Ringrose, “the experience of reading The Famished Road is to set out on aborted journeys, to be moved and then have that emotion left in suspension as the book takes another turn” (2013, 42). Mum and Dad tell Azaro stories which the reader never hears, or which have no ending. In Songs of Enchantment, the second book in the trilogy, Mum herself remarks to Dad: “Your story isn’t going anywhere” (Okri 1993, 267). When Azaro travels with a three-headed spirit, he discovers a people that continuously build a road to heaven that will never be finished as it keeps being destroyed. Thus, incompleteness leads to indirection and the people move in circles as they keep building the road over and over again.

Similarly, the diegesis contains many instances of repetitions and it often feels as if the story were going round in circles instead of moving forward. Several critics have pointed to this. Renato Oliva explains that repetitions “[produce] an effect of cyclical recurrence and immutability, and [suggest] the Eternal return of the identical” (1999, 188). For Vanessa Guignery, “what prevails in the novel is a sense of fluidity, repetitiveness, circularity and seeming randomness” (2012, 63). Wallart notices this as well:

Madame Koto, the photographer, walks in the forest, frantic dances in the bar, strifes [sic] with the spirits, domestic scenes at dusk, all of these have a notorious tendency to come back irrepressibly, while the situation of Azaro undergoes no drastic evolution in the course of this long novel. (2013, 32)
Besides the repetition of scenes, the modal “would” is often used in its iterative form to underline the repetitiveness of certain actions. What is more, the novel is filled with the idea of the cycle with references to “a cycle coming to an end” (Okri 1991, 570) for instance. This starts at the very beginning of the book with the image of the abiku, and later on, of the abiku nation that keeps being reborn. This notion of rebirth is further explored with Azaro dying and coming back to life and Dad nearly dying and then wondering: “How many times is a man reborn in one life?” (414). However, if the trilogy appears to offer “circular stories” (Okri 1998, 120), upon further examination, it becomes clear that these apparent repetitions are never exactly the same. Instead of a circle, what we get is a spiral.

As Wallart explains in her article, between the absence of a forward movement, or of real change, and a circular motion, what is actually present in the novel is a spiral: “The evolution of the narration thus comes to depend on a spiral that foregrounds a movement combining the circle and the line” (2013, 30). This idea of the spiral as being similar but never exactly the same is central to Ben Okri’s works. The spiralling movement appears to go back to the origin but never fully does. There is always a small change, a slight twist. This point has been addressed by Okri himself:

In terms of The Famished Road I’ve been accused by certain ruler-headed readers of repetition. I often wanted to sit them down with a nice glass of wine and say: “what you see as repetition is not really repetition. It’s a spiral.” It appears to go back to the same place but it doesn’t. There’s a constant micro transformation in perception at every point of that spiral. (Guignery and Pesso-Miquel 2013, 26)

Christopher Ringrose described this aspect of the novel as “turbulence and surprise-within-familiarity” (2013, 41). Events that seem repetitive keep coming back with small alterations and Ringrose underlines the fact that “Okri is endlessly inventive in re-staging these journeys, this to-and-fro movement, exhausting the reader and yet giving some sense of development” (41). One example is the apparent repetition and build-up of the phrase “riddles that only the dead can answer” throughout the novel. Early on, Dad asks “riddles that only the dead can answer” (Okri 1991, 39). He soon tells his son that “life is full of riddles that only the dead can answer” (48). Later, the expression is used again by Azaro who ponders over “a riddle that not even the dead can answer” (267) and states that “there are many riddles of the dead that only the living can answer” (489). The last occurrence is introduced by Azaro who further notices that “there are many riddles amongst us that neither the living nor the dead can answer” (559). Each time it is used, the phrase becomes longer and more complex. It expands, like a spiral, throughout the text as the characters, Dad and then Azaro, learn more and further understand this “riddle”: the separation between the living and the dead, suggested by the first statements, appears to dissolve in the face of the mysteries of the world. Another example of the spiralling structure of the novel can be found in the fights Dad has with his various opponents. Although similar, the fights are always slightly different. If Dad is battered every time, his opponents (Yellow Jaguar, Green Leopard, the man in the white suit) vary and become more and more challenging as Dad himself gains in strength.

Beyond actions, the spiralling structure can also be found in the treatment of time and this has much to do with the fact that the narrator is a spirit-child. At the beginning of the novel, Azaro recognizes: “I had no idea whether these images belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come” (8). For him past, present and future are one and the same. As Adnan Mahmutović writes: “We find a kind of ecstatic
model of spiral time in which the present, the past, and even the future stretch into one another” (2013, 146). Likewise, for Wallart:

> It is the spiral of life as seen from the point of view of the abiku, who dies and is reborn without there being any interruption nor straight continuity. The abiku [...] is not a reiteration but the exploration of a new direction, in a whirl, a succession of circling loops. (2013, 40)

The abiku offers another way of perceiving reality as it is connected to the spirit world. Nonetheless, the abiku combines two conflicting aspects regarding the notion of revolution. On the one hand, as Wallart points out, he offers a new direction to the reader. On the other hand, with the exception of Azaro, abikus experience cyclical movements of life and death, indefinitely. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Okri suggested that maybe “we are all abikus” (Wilkinson 1992, 84). This would imply that as an abiku, the reader can move in a new direction but is also at risk of going in circles. The goal then, would be to become more like Azaro, in other words to break the cycle of iteration and to reconnect to life in order to change one’s perceptions. With The Famished Road, Okri does not merely seek to entertain but also, if not mostly, to introduce his reader to a new way of seeing, of perceiving and of thinking. In order to create this revolution in perception, the writer offers a reading experience that lets the reader go inward in a process akin to meditation in order to change, and potentially change the world later on.

If The Famished Road deals with the upcoming changes to be expected as an unnamed African country becomes independent, Ben Okri does not want to reduce his work to its colonial or post-colonial aspects. On the contrary, he endeavours to change minds, as he explains in an interview with Pietro Deandra: “I am interested in affecting consciousness. I do not have time for idle exercises on colonisers and so on. It seems to me defeatist. I am much more interested in transforming consciousness, which goes beyond colonialism” (Deandra 1994, 66). As Sarah Fulford states, for Okri: “the role of the artist is [...] to diffuse [the] disengagement between the earthly and the spiritual to create a conduit between the material world and the ideal world” (2009, 244). The artist should seek to open minds and to help people reconnect to the spiritual.

According to Okri, in order not to move round in circles in life, one has to learn from one’s experiences. If an event is not experienced fully or not remembered, then it can come back. For instance, after a riot against the Party of the Rich, the people from the compound start doubting whether the riot happened because, contrary to the previous one, no photos were taken by Jeremiah to record the event. As a consequence, “the wind of recurrence [blows] gently over the earth” (Okri 1991, 215). This principle is further explored in Astonishing the Gods. In this other novel by Okri, the main character visits a city, the first law of which is that “every experience is repeated or suffered till you experience it properly and fully the first time” (1995, 46). Not only is it by experiencing life fully that we can move forward and bring change to the world, but unless we change the way we perceive the world, nothing can change. How, then, does Okri plan to revolutionize the reader’s perceptions?

Elizabeth Syrkin rightfully argues that “The Famished Road elaborates a trans-realist perception and approach to writing that can, in Okri’s words, ‘restore the kingdom’ of the mind to the dimensions hidden within it” (2013, 54–55). Through a trans-realist aesthetic, Okri complexifies our notion of the real and opens our minds to all its porous and hidden layers. However, if trans-realism can help change consciousness, I would argue that Okri may also have had in mind meditation, which in itself is another form
of revolution, to further manifest changes in his readers. In the fifteenth century the verb “revolve” – from the Latin “revolvere” which later produced the noun “revolution” – referred to the idea of turning over, or meditating (Online Etymology Dictionary). This meaning still exists today as “revolving” can mean “to turn over” or “to reflect” (Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary, online). When Azaro “[sits] outside watching the world revolve slowly with the movement of clouds” (Okri 1991, 490), the revolution of the world gives way to another revolving movement as Azaro starts meditating, being mindful of the movement of the clouds in the sky.

Meditation often implies a focus on the body, notably with a practice known as bodyscan, in which the person focuses on the different parts of his/her body in order to connect to it. This practice, in the same way as a focus on breathing, helps calm the mind and its thoughts. As such, connecting to the body helps one connect to the mind.

In a previous article: “Lire The Famished Road, Expérience du Corps,” I showed how the novel creates an empathic reading experience by affecting the reader physically. I suggested that the purpose of this experience was to reach a more spiritual level (Monnier 2018, 49). Here, I would like to further develop that idea and suggest that reading The Famished Road is at times akin to meditating. First and foremost, through the empathic reading experience, Okri forces the reader to reconnect to his/her body. This experience can be linked to the practice of vipassana meditation which focuses on self-observation notably through a focus on the physical self. Secondly, transcendental meditation advocates the repetition of a mantra as, by repeating it, the person will pay less and less attention to its meaning. That way, practitioners can loosen their grip on their thoughts and let go to the point of reaching a certain level of relaxation and deeper mental focus. As I showed previously, repetitions are central in the novel and as events and sentences keep being repeated throughout the text, the reader may let go of his/her mental barriers regarding the novel and begin to accept a new perception of reality. One final form of meditation that is central in the book is that of mindfulness. This form mainly occurs as the reader follows a character who, as a spirit-child, not only sees the world differently but also sees more than the others. As a child and as an abiku, Azaro sees the world anew and through him, the reader does as well. Thus, at times, reading the novel may feel like going through a meditation practice with the text seeking to guide readers towards a process of contemplation.

We may wonder about the purpose and the effects of such reading as meditation. As I hinted earlier, “meditation is primarily concerned with caring for the mind” (Lama Zopa Rinpoche 2019). In fact, research suggests that meditation affects the structure of the brain. If further studies still need to be undertaken, “there is emerging evidence that mindfulness meditation might cause neuroplastic changes in the structure and function of brain regions involved in regulation of attention, emotion and self-awareness” (Tang, Hölzel and Posner 2015, 10). For Rebecca Gladding, with meditation practice, “you are able to see yourself and everyone around you from a clearer perspective, while simultaneously being more present, compassionate and empathic with people no matter their situation” (2019), that is whether they are like or unlike you. For the readers of The Famished Road, this could mean being more understanding of people from a different cultural background. Beyond the neuronal aspect and on a more spiritual level, meditation is said to help move away from endless repetitions in life, or even from repetitive reincarnations. As an abiku, Azaro has experienced these endless and repetitive cycles of lives. Similarly, if we are to believe Okri’s idea that “we are all abikus” (Wilkinson 1992, 84), we could all experience this coming and going.
According to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, mindfulness is essential for experiences to be lived fully. Consequently, being mindful can help one to avoid having to go repeatedly through certain events as it can help truly connect to each experience. Finally, for Lama Zopa Rinpoche the purpose of meditation is enlightenment for oneself and for others. This question of enlightenment is thoroughly developed in Songs of Enchantment as Okri introduces readers to “The African Way”: “The Way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere, that keeps the spirit pure and primed to all the rich possibilities of living, that makes of their minds gateways through which all the thought-forms of primal creation can wander and flower” (1993, 160). Enlightenment is also central to The Famished Road. Dad learns to see, that is to be mindful. In doing so, he better understands the world around him and in a way, we could argue that he becomes more enlightened. In other words, what potentially occurs through reading the novel is a spiritual revolution through a spiralling movement leading the reader back to the center.

Earlier on, I analysed the spiralling structure of the novel, explaining that subtle changes occur in the text, leading the spiral to become larger and encompass more. Conversely, what happens with the revolution of the mind is an inward movement, that is a reversal of the spiral as the reader goes deeper within himself or herself, to the center or the beginning of the spiral to induce a spiritual revolution. This notion of beginning leads us to the image of the road and the river which is central in the novel. From the very first page of the book, the reader is told: “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (Okri 1991, 3). If the river has turned into a road, at times it can revert back to its original state, notably in the case of floods. Although linked in the novel, the road and the river have different connotations. The road is envisioned as a rather negative force but considering it as “evil” would be an “oversimplification” for Gillian Gane who underlines the manifold possibilities and significance of the roads in the novel (2007, 50). Besides eating people, the road can lead anywhere, meaning characters can get lost because of the multiple tracks:

The road seemed to me then to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, turning in on themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths, twisting into labyrinths. The road was the worst hallucination of them all, leading towards home and then away from it, without end, with too many signs, and no directions. The road became my torment, my aimless pilgrimage, and I found myself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end. (Okri 1991, 134–35)

Fully alive, the road imposes its will onto Azaro. Like a giant snake, with its tail in its mouth, it seems to multiply endlessly while simultaneously always leading back to the same point as “where all the roads lead to” is “where they end” – that is, the road leads nowhere. In contrast to this beastlike road, while travelling with a three-headed spirit, Azaro discovers an endless, magnificent road to heaven that is forever under construction:

I looked at the road with new eyes. It was short and marvellous. It was a work of art, a shrine almost, beautiful beyond description, created out of the most precious substances in the world, out of amethysts and chrysoberyl, inlaid with carnelian, brilliant with patterned turquoise.

‘Why is it so beautiful?’

‘Because each generation begins with nothing and with everything. They know all the earlier mistakes. They may not know that they know, but they do. They know
the early plans, the original intentions, the earliest dreams. Each generation has to reconnect the origins for themselves. They tend to become a little wiser, but don’t go very far. It is possible that they now travel slower, and will make bigger, better mistakes. That is how they are as a people. They have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy them except themselves and they will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it.’ (379)

What the three-headed spirit hints at here is that it is necessary to reconnect to the origin to truly grow and that this growth is endless. The road itself is “hungry for great transformation” (211). The problem of the road in the novel is that it also represents all the various possibilities of life, which are manifold. Consequently, one can get lost or go in circles. As the king of spirits tells Azaro: “you have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny” (6). If the river represents both the origin and the path to destiny, this could imply that it is necessary to go back to the river, to travel back to the center of the spiral to find one’s direction or destiny. One could then spiral outward again and travel the roads of the world without fear of getting lost. It would be possible to create revolutions and build new roads, new possibilities, just like Dad who “[dreams] a road into existence” (501).

In The Famished Road, revolution is neither to be found in any social or political evolution as Azaro’s land never becomes independent, nor in the overall diegesis as one of the distinctive features of the novel is repetitiveness. Overall, it appears that only the reader can experience some kind of revolution, thanks to a change in perception. Still, are we to believe that “stories can re-shape the psychic mould of a people, can re-mould the political and spiritual temper of an age,” as Okri claims in Birds of Heaven (1996, 32–33)? Similarly, are we to trust the idea that spiritual change can change the world? After all, despite his evolution, Dad repeatedly fails to revolutionize his surroundings and his community which continues to suffer. Could this hint at Okri’s own misgivings or at his fear of failing, like Dad, to communicate his intimate experience to a wider audience?

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ABSTRACTS

In The Famished Road, Ben Okri presents a country that is on the brink of independence, a transformation that should bring drastic changes but never occurs. Although this public political revolution fails, Okri creates a revolution in perceptions for the reader, a revolution, which, rather than going full circle, spirals ever deeper and is anchored in the individual.
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**Keywords:** Okri (Ben), repetition, spiral, meditation, transformation

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Re-imagining Delhi as an Ordinary City: Siddharth Chowdhury’s Quiet Revolution

Marianne Hillion

Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same. Delicacy, nuance and irony apparently belong properly to the domain of the English novel and to the rational traditions of the European Enlightenment. (Chaudhuri 2008, 115)

In his essay on the theories of the Indian novel after Rushdie, the writer and critic Amit Chaudhuri attempts to debunk this enduring topos of literary criticism, which mimaetically connects a supposedly chaotic country with formal aspects of its literature: “Since India is a huge baggy monster, the Indian novels that accommodate it have to be baggy monsters as well” (114). This assumption is based on several misconceptions, among which the notion that the Indian novel in English has to represent India as a whole, and the canonization of Salman Rushdie as an emblem of Indian literature. In fact, Indian writing has often been read in the light of Rushdie’s capacious epic novels, thus obscuring other aesthetics, genres, and languages.

This is particularly the case with the reception of post-1990s Indian urban writing, frequently narrowed down to the register of the monumental novel, which portrays Indian globalizing megacities as sprawling organisms beyond control.1 Imbued with a Rushdian sense of profusion and excess, Suketu Mehta’s, Rana Dasgupta’s and Raj Kamal Jha’s works, among others, do represent Indian metropolises as “huge baggy monsters,” illegible maelstroms which defy all understanding. They regularly offer an all-encompassing view of the city and imagine its accelerated urban mutations as spectacular crises and cataclysmic eruptions, thus turning it into an exceptional space and a site of heroic struggle. These formal, scalar and thematic features delineate an epic geography of the Indian city,2 which sometimes verges on the dystopic mode. Madhurima Chakraborty argues that this dark epic paradigm, which focuses our
attention on “intense moments of emergencies rather than [on] the everyday effects of historical situations” (Chakraborty 2017, 3), needs to be acknowledged as one representative mode among others. She does not deny that darkness has a substantial referent in South Asian cities but alerts us to the danger of this “bleak city imagery” (3) becoming a dominant mode of interpretation. The mimetic correspondence between the allegedly cacophonous nature of Indian cities and the narrative forms arising from them thus needs to be questioned.

In line with Chaudhuri’s insistence on the heterogeneity of Indian writing, this article explores one alternative literary mode to that of the urban epic novel, challenging prevailing conceptions of Indian literature and cities. Writers such as Aman Sethi, Sampurna Chattarji and Siddharth Chowdhury map the shifting contours of Indian cities through a small-scale writing of ordinary urban life. Far from casting the advent of “New India” and its shining cities as a sudden catastrophe, these writers undermine the very notion of event by focusing on daily life in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai, critically writing globalization through its everyday local effects rather than through macro-narratives of tumultuous convulsions. If both the urban epic and the urban ordinary are often intermingled in literary texts, my purpose in this article is to shed light on the latter and to scrutinise narratives which probe into the mundane realities of urban life in a subdued, unsentimental tone. These texts, ranging from short-stories to novels and literary reportages, also throw light on common yet eccentric people and spaces, often left out of urban literary maps. I consider this re-invention of Indian cities through an anti-spectacular prism as a surreptitious yet potent imaginative revolution.

This reading resonates with Jennifer Robinson’s reflections on the need to examine cities of the global South as “ordinary cities” and to provincialize Eurocentric norms of urbanity, which endow non-Western cities with an irredeemable otherness and exclude them from the realm of modernity. Indeed, these narratives of urban banality minoritize two former trends of representation, associating Indian cities with the huge and the monstrous. First, Indian cities, especially Bombay and Calcutta, have largely been identified with their slums, a trend fuelled since the 1970s by Western literary, cinematographic and scholarly works (Lapierre 1985, Davis 2006, Boyle 2009, Boo 2012), and more recently by slum tourism (Dyson 2012). The second trend is the exaltation of rural life which, in the wake of Gandhism, pits the authentic harmonious “Indianness” of the village against the artificial, corrupt city, an antithesis which was perpetuated by literature and cinema until the 1980s (Shahani 1995, Khanna 2009, Nandy 2011). The writers of the ordinary city precisely blur this clear-cut opposition as they highlight the interweaving of the urban and the rural at the local level, and their emphasis on familiarity undermines the sensationalist image of the slum-city.

Siddharth Chowdhury’s vernacular cosmopolitanism

Siddharth Chowdhury, a writer born in Patna\(^1\) and living in Delhi, particularly engages in the unsettling of Indian urban and literary monumentality. Tinged with an unsentimental irony, his short stories and novels chronicle the daily life of drifting students and scholars, failed writers and corrupt middlemen making their way through Patna and Delhi, the “twin cities of [his] imagination” (Chowdhury 2016, 247). Chowdhury’s imaginative geography of Delhi is both gritty and sophisticated, combining popular and high-brow cultural references, constantly shifting between

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\(^1\) Patna is a city in the Indian state of Bihar.

**Note:** The text is a critical analysis of modern Indian literature, focusing on the works of Aman Sethi, Sampurna Chattarji, and Siddharth Chowdhury. It discusses the shift from the urban epic to a more ordinary and grounded approach to urban life, highlighting the need to consider Indian cities as complex and multifaceted rather than monolithic or sensationalist representations.
slang and bombastic style. Amitava Kumar and Tabish Khair, both diasporic writers and academics originally from Bihar (see Kumar 2015), praise Chowdury’s art of storytelling and his combination of provincial and cosmopolitan perspectives. Kumar evokes the author’s “specific kind of cosmopolitanism” and his ability to depict life in the metropolis “with the eyes of someone from the margins” (Kumar 2016). Khair also emphasises Chowdhury’s small-town vantage point and defines Chowdhury’s first novel, *Patna Roughcut* (2005), as a “nukkad novel” (Khair 2006).4 The bilingual phrase echoes the interweaving of English and Hindi in Chowdhury’s writing but also renders its small-scale street view of urban life. This reading of Chowdhury’s fiction is consistent with Khair’s praise of small-town cosmopolitanism, a form of openness to difference which he often fails to see in metropolitan centres (Khair 2015).5 Similarly, in his preface to the Routledge Classics edition of *The Location of Culture* (2004), Homi Bhabha opposes two types of cosmopolitical thinking: “vernacular cosmopolitanism” and “global cosmopolitanism.” The latter, based on a privileged position, conceives of the world as a global village and is “founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, free market forces of competition” (xiv). Conversely, vernacular cosmopolitanism “measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective” and does not necessarily involve geographical movement, as it may be taken on by global migrants but also national minorities.6 Bhabha connects vernacular cosmopolitanism with writers who experience globalization from the margins and create in a world-system which overlooks them. Significantly, he only points to the linguistic dimension of the vernacular when he mentions the Dalit poet Prakash Jadhav who writes of the homeless underclass of Bombay, both in Marathi and English, conflating an ornate language and the “demotic slang reminiscent of the Black Panther poets” (xxvi). With regard to the poem “Under Dadar Bridge,” Bhabha states: “The language of the poem catches something of the spark of vernacular cosmopolitanism that I have been trying to explore” (xxiv). It is no coincidence if the “spark” comes from under the bridge, offering a “view of Bombay from beneath the arches of one of its landmarks” (xxiv) instead of the typical panoramic view of the city and its skyline on the sea. It is also from beneath that Chowdhury writes of Delhi, exploring low-life in the city margins and forgotten corners. Though he writes in English and about a national capital turned global city, I would argue that both his language and his position in Delhi make him a vernacular cosmopolitan writer. His transcultural imagination of the city is all the more remarkable as it is not related to diasporic mobility nor to a global audience, his books being published only in India.

My contention is that it is precisely through his singular version of vernacular cosmopolitanism that Chowdhury revisits Delhi as an ordinary city. He thus thwarts the triumphalist discourse of the “arrival” of a global urban India (Kaur and Hansen 2016) but also offers an alternative to the imagination of monstrous Indian cities. He does so in three different ways: through the minute documenting of daily life in the capital, the appropriation of commonplace hardboiled fiction codes to picture ordinary violence and the increasing sense of familiarity with the city.

**Documenting Delhi from below**

Chowdhury’s literary cartography sets him apart from other Delhi Anglophone writers. First, his imaginative map of the capital is not geographically or socially all-
encompassing, covering the entirety of Delhi’s sprawling territory and its bewilder-
ing conjunction of extreme wealth and destitution, like Rana Dasgupta’s and Arundhati
Roy’s epic texts. Nor does he emulate Anita Desai’s or Khushwant Singh’s post-Mughal
melancholy mood and their delving into the city’s fractured history. First, except for a
few excursions to South Delhi, Chowdhury’s literary landscape is geographically
restricted to the northern fringes of Delhi: the University North Campus and its
adjacent districts, and the two neighbourhoods of Daryaganj and Paharganj in Old
Delhi. Chowdhury’s urban world is also socially circumscribed, since it is almost
exclusively peopled with Bihari middle-class ordinary characters, loitering in tea-
shops, small clerks’ rooms and dingy student hostels brimming with scandalous
rumours. The capital is thus constructed through a small-town prism, and is somehow
turned into a double of Patna. In fact, if Patna is set as a provincial counterpoint to
Delhi, it also insinuates itself within the city through the characters’ connections and
habits.7

8 Day Scholar (2010), for instance, charts the trajectory of Hriday, an upper-caste middle-
class young man from Patna discovering the decadent world of Delhi University in the
1990s. In the novel, the student hostel where the protagonist lives is full of Bihari
students, thus appearing as a synecdoche of the “Patna diaspora in Delhi” (Kumar
2003). The protagonist’s introduction to his landlord via his Patna mentor points to the
strong ties between the province and the capital. According to the hostel’s caretaker
Jishnuda, it is actually owing to the landlord’s preconceptions about Biharis that Hriday
gets a room in the hostel: “Uncle has just one condition. The boys should primarily be
Biharis. He seems to think that we are just like Gujars.8 Tough and callous. No need to
disillusion him. So never in any circumstance prove yourself to be otherwise. Be tough,
stupid and callous always” (Chowdhury 2016, 286). The text exposes the enduring
stereotypes clinging to people from Bihar but also humorously twists them into
identities to be strategically performed by Biharis themselves. In The Patna Manual of
Style, the same opportunistic Jishnuda uses these stereotypes of endurance and
callousness to get hired as an event manager.

9 Instead of the typical bewildering anonymity of the metropolis, the provincial narrator
thus encounters a partly familiar world. The university area is imagined as a cluster of
numerous urban villages, structured by closely-knit social and regional networks of
solidarity and allegiances, occasionally enlivened by turf wars and peace-making
protocols. The transplantation of provincial entertainment is described in a mock-
ethnographic manner, highlighting Chowdhury’s focus on the everyday regular rhythm
of urban life:

Like in most small towns of Bihar, when evening descends and people saunter off to
the nearby railway junction for entertainment, so in Delhi University Biharis came
out of their boroughs in Kamla Nagar, Vijay Nagar, Indira Vihar, Maurice Nagar,
Mukherjee Nagar, Hakikat Nagar and myriad other nagars and vihars, and set out
for Chhatra Marg. There they would dawdle for a couple of hours, have tea at Jai
Jawan dhaba, meet their girlfriends at Miranda, or PG Women’s or Meghdoot
hostels, and thrash out “compromises” without any group coming to real blows.
“Compromises” were usually about imagined slights to one’s dignity concerning a
girl who was a “sister” even though the girl may not have known the guy but was
from the same town [...]. Usually in ten minutes flat most “compromises” would be
over. Then the leaders of the two groups would be summoned and asked to “shake
hands karo” and then everybody would have tea at Jai Jawan. All very proper and
civilized. (330–31)
The provincial railway junction is here replaced by the campus main road, which is turned into a stage for minutely explained rituals of mock-confrontations and negotiations between rival clans of the two towns. The proliferation of toponyms, the distinct local meaning of the word “compromise,” the idiomatic conflation of English and untranslated Hindi in “shake hands karo” and the humorous tone all evidence the mock-ethnographic aspect of the narrative. It also suggests that the tense atmosphere of masculine aggressiveness, far from being extra-ordinary, is part of Delhi Bihari students’ everyday life. Chowdhury’s mapping of students’ everyday idleness and habits in the city contrasts with the archetypal representation of the city as an alienating whirlwind at odds with the slow rhythm of village life. His street-corner writing represents the university campus as a small town within a bigger town, pointing to the author’s downsizing of Delhi. However, though geographically circumscribed, the campus is not depicted as a self-enclosed world, hermetically sealed off from the city and the country at large, as is usually the case with campus novels. The university students’ union elections, for instance, are described as “the bonsai version of national elections” (392), revealing the connections of students’ politics with national politics and characterising the campus as a miniature of Delhi, countering the monumental writing of the Indian capital.

The “concrete specificity” (356) of Chowdhury’s narratives, fraught with actual place-names (Volga, Bercos restaurant), brand names (Yezdi motorbikes, Old Monk rum, Navy Cut cigarettes), and untranslated Hindi words (i.e. astura for razor), contribute to the realistic effect given by the text, capturing the peculiarities of a unique locality. Yet the emphasis on details and regular habits also points to the effects of globalization on urban life. The passing references to Adidas tracksuits or to the meeting of young lovers in the proliferating shopping malls obliquely signify the advent of a global leisure-oriented economy and the transformation of everyday life by these new global connections. Chowdhury’s understated writing of globalizing Delhi thus departs from the epic imagination of urban mutations such as that of Rana Dasgupta’s Capital (2014). Indeed, whereas Rana Dasgupta’s essay on the city focuses on the bewildering rise to power of a new economic elite (“global cosmopolitans” in Bhabha’s terms), Chowdhury takes on the common man’s vantage point and voices the aspirations of ordinary (upper caste) middle classes, revealing the ruthless power struggle at work in the city: Mrs Midha wanted her daughter to do well and she was saving money for her to do an MBA later on. What with economic liberalization and the markets opening up, India would need thousands of MBAs to manage all that wealth. “Just when I thought reservation would make paupers of us, God has given us liberalization so that we as upper castes can hold our head high for some time more. Till they eventually catch up.” (2016, 377–78)

Tinged with dark humour, this passage exhibits Mrs Midha’s cynical opportunism, considering liberalization as a providential gift allowing the upper castes to perpetuate their privilege against a threatening “them” and political progressivism. The text conveys her callous voice through free indirect and direct speech and suggests that far from unsettling traditional hierarchies, liberalization and globalization only reinforce an iniquitous system of caste and privilege. It is through the vernacular, understood both as local and common language, that mutations are rendered. Similarly, the post-1990s boom of leisure and real estate industries is embodied by the ascent of Zorawar Singh, hostel landlord, “mid-level political broker and property dealer” (415). A small-scale real estate and then event management businessman, Singh is one of Chowdhury’s typical characters: an unheroic urban dweller and a small-time crook
whose influence is limited to the campus neighbourhoods. His dubious economic success through petty crimes and corruption, helped by his connections with political power, is symbolised by the white government car which comes to pick him up now and then, a sign of “ultimate achievement” for the students (339). Chowdhury thus focuses on the daily life of petty criminals, average students, common individuals whose social trajectory is far from spectacular, at odds with the real estate magnates and businessmen whom Raj Kamal Jha and Rana Dasgupta portray in their Delhi narratives.

However vernacular Zorawar Singh seems to be, he also actually belongs to a cast of literary types: that of the ruthless yet mediocre crook found in hardboiled fiction. The sordid embedded story of his social climbing, told by Jishnuda, portrays him as a parodic gang lord and philanderer. Jishnuda’s sensational tall-tale, full of graphic scenes of sex and violence, highlights the way in which Delhi is reinvented through the negotiation of popular literary tropes, which also gesture to an anti-epic literary geography.

**Hardboiled Delhi**

Although Day Scholar does not involve a proper investigation and crimes are more often talked about than committed, the novel’s narrator confesses his voyeuristic curiosity and somehow becomes a private eye into the decadent world of Zorawar Singh and his hitmen, whom he identifies with “characters in a pulp novel with a lurid cover” (Chowdhury 2016, 371). The opening scene sets the tone as it closely depicts a moment of sexual intercourse between the hostel landlord and his mistress, scrutinised by the narrator and his friends. This peeping scene has been published in the collection of crime stories *Delhi Noir* (2009), hinting at Chowdhury’s noir literary imagination of the capital. Repeated intertextual allusions to Hemingway, considered as the forefather of the genre, and to popular hardboiled fiction writers and characters such as James Hadley Chase, Travis McGee (John D. Macdonald’s detective protagonist) and Lew Archer (by Ross Macdonald) gesture to the author’s transcultural sources of influence but also to his protagonist’s reinvention of his surroundings through a hardboiled lens.

In fact, the novel’s atmosphere of “casual violence, sleaziness and indolence” (Hasan 2011), the gang fights, the abundant use of slang and the self-conscious rewriting of stereotypical scenes of hardboiled fiction all point to Chowdhury’s appropriation of this popular genre in order to imaginatively map the Indian megacity. If hardboiled crime fiction evidently focuses on violence, one of the genre’s singularities is precisely to emphasise its ordinariness: in Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler’s urban worlds, crime and corruption are not pictured as bewildering exceptions but are part and parcel of everyday life, seen through the unsentimental prism of disabused heroes. Thus, the affinity between Chowdhury’s seedy urban world and that of hardboiled fiction only heightens his construction of Delhi as an ordinary city.

The similarities between the two writing contexts further substantiate the notion of scaling down urban tumult and violence: Dennis Porter refers to Chandler and Hammett as “chroniclers of a new urban reality” (2003, 95), representing a fast-evolving material environment shaped by the advent of industrial monopoly capitalism, a heightened class conflict, and the generalization of corruption and crime.

If the Indian post-1990s context is widely different, one cannot but see the
resonances between the two periods and spaces. The parallel between the phases of emergence of industrial and post-industrial global capitalism is suggested by Rana Dasgupta in his essay on Delhi, in which he compares Delhi with Chicago and New York in the 1920s, referring to Martin Scorsese’s films (Dasgupta 2014, 434), another ubiquitous tutelary figure in Chowdhury’s writing. Beyond the contextual intersection, the tonal proximity is striking: at odds with Dasgupta’s spectacular rendering of the corrupt world of “New India,” Chowdhury’s gritty realism depicts this world from within, a world in which crime and corruption (in entrance examinations, in student union’s elections, in real estate...) are the accepted norm.

The low life of Delhi University campus is either narrated through a mock-ethnographic mode, as pointed out earlier with the “compromise” customs, or through mock-dramatic scenes, such as this showdown between the godfather figure of Jishnuda and the alleged harasser of a “sister”:

We saw Jishnuda walk purposefully towards the couple, the astura gleaming in the orange glare of the street lamps, and as he reached the “sister,” he pushed her gently away and swung his hand from left to right and back like a wide X mark, in a controlled arc. The boy looked surprised for a second and then covered his face as blood gushed out. Farid put the Rajdoot in gear, Vinodini Khan ran back into the hostel. The red bandhini chunri swirling in the air like a long-tailed kite.

(Chowdhury 2016, 335)

The passage humorously emphasises both the spectacular aspect of the aggression and Jishnuda’s casual mastery of violence, thus reading as a self-reflexive rewriting of a typical scene from hardboiled fiction or gangster film. Jishnuda’s repeated demonstrations of physical force and shrewdness as well as his detached attitude cast him as the perfect embodiment of hardboiled manhood, which highly depends on dramatization and performance (Strychacz 1989, Abbott 2002). The confrontation setting, Jishnuda’s perfectly controlled gestures, and the image of the vanishing girl followed by the birdlike swirling shawl (“bandhini chunri”) all reveal the mock-heroic aspect of the scene. The heroic tonality is further deflated by the impression that the girl needs no protection at all: “to all purposes it looked to me that she was harassing the poor boy instead” (Chowdhury 2016, 334), thus twisting the canonical damsel-in-distress scenario. Once more, the codes of crime fiction are interwoven with vernacular elements (“astura,” “Rajdoot,” “bandhini chunri”), exemplifying the transcultural dimension of Chowdhury’s urban landscape.

A similar comical twist is performed when the narrator’s bold confrontational strategy, directly inspired by Jishnuda’s advice and borrowed from a hardboiled fiction script, thoroughly fails: “‘Come on, cut my wrists. I dare you to cut my wrists, you moron.’ So Jishnuda did just that. He rushed over to my side and before Zorawar could stop him he had slashed my right wrist” (421). Young Hriday’s attempt at impressing his master-turned-opponent and at mimicking a tough hitmen’s rhetoric runs up against an unsparing reality, as Jishnuda takes his words at face value, abruptly changing the expected script. The tragi-comic effect is enhanced by the laconic monosyllabic phrasing (“did just that”) which mirrors Jishnuda’s sharp blade and surprising brutality. If Jishnuda is fashioned after cynical unsentimental heroes, the narrator’s failure also makes him an anti-hero type, that of the drifting youth, redolent of Salinger’s Holden Caufield (The Catcher in the Rye) or Hemingway’s loser figures (alcoholic Eddy in To Have and Have Not, Jake Barnes in The Sun Also Rises), two writers Chowdhury cites as major influences (Chowdhuri 2015b). The protagonist’s imagination
thus seems imbued with these codes, making the epic tonality appear as a mere lens through which a mundane urban reality is inflated. Indeed, eager to train his eye to close observation at first, Hriday gives up on Hemingway’s school of fieldwork realism to indulge in complete invention, yielding to the tall-tale impulse animating the whole campus (Chowdhury 2016, 380).

Chowdhury’s conversational tone and vibrant use of colloquial language, praised by critics as expressing the vernacular speech of Delhi, also echoes hardboiled fiction writers’ use of local slang. Dennis Porter foregrounds the formal innovation brought about by Hammett for instance, arguing that, in the vein of Hemingway, “Hammett showed how the apparently ordinary, spoken American language could be made to transcend itself in the direction of a new urban poetry” (2003, 99). In Chowdhury’s writing, Delhi’s spoken language is re-invented through the characters’ mix of Hindi and English as well as through their use of Hindi and American English slang, giving birth to a highly innovative urban literary idiom, drawing both on local and global linguistic sources. The importance of local colloquial speech in order to map the city is enhanced in Day Scholar as the novel dramatizes Hriday’s initiation into the “magical world” (Chowdhury 2016, 294) of Shokeen Niwas through his learning of the city’s racy local slang:

“Hriday babu, just like every door has a dwarpal every chut has a chutpal. A chutpal never gets the chut just like the dwarpal rarely gets to sleep in the master bedroom. Every good girl needs at least one chutpal, to run errands for her and listen to her bitch about her mother.” (333)

The coarse neologism based on the vulgar word for female genitals (“chut”) and the suffix “pal” (meaning guard or protector in Hindi) conveys the sexist atmosphere (and the underlying fear of being subjugated by a woman) of the university but also suggests irreverence towards religion as “dwarpal” originally refers to tutelary deities. A similar attempt at rendering the voices of Delhi streets is made by Aman Sethi in his literary reportage on a Bihari labourer’s quotidian life in A Free Man, although the author-narrator’s outsider position is stressed throughout the book (which includes a glossary), thus differing from Chowdhury’s insider vision in that respect.

**Domesticating urban space**

As Day Scholar unfolds, Hriday gradually relinquishes his epic imagination of the city to perceive Delhi’s ordinariness. The epic construction of the city thus appears as a transitory phase or a delusory narrative. This awakening pattern gestures to another popular genre, that of the coming-of-age novel, mapping the protagonist’s progress onto his increasing familiarity with the city. The term “bildungsroman” appears once in the novel in the narrator’s father’s mouth, to refer to the novel the narrator is writing, and numerous references to Dickens’ Great Expectations hint at the appropriation of the genre. The text delineates the narrator’s shifting imagination of the city from his original fantasizing of Delhi as a modern Babylon to a disabused perception of it. His moral and epistemological awakening is treated as the stripping of his crime fiction filter on urban life. The sulphurous Mrs Midha for instance, pictured as a loose “gangster’s moll, like Helen” earlier, finally appears to him as “a regular middle-class mother with a somewhat complicated personal life” (412). The reference to Helen, the famous Hindi film vamp actress and dancer, adds another layer of cinematic intertext to Chowdhury’s writing of the decadent city.
The transformation of the narrator’s perception is also spatialized: Hriday leaves the “magical world” of Shokeen Niwas hostel to move to the neighbourhood of Haki kat Nagar: “I moved in without seeing the room because I liked the name of the colony. I needed a reality check” (422). In an obvious allegorical logic, the pun on the neighbourhood’s name symbolically connects Hriday’s new consciousness with his new environment. The escape out of Zorawar and Jishnuda’s sphere of influence signals the return to the ordinary city and the awareness that the heroic view of the city is a mere delusion. Through his exuberant tall-tales, Jidhnuda is indeed the main creator of the epic of Delhi North Campus, constantly peddling wild legends and sordid rumours about its inhabitants. This wilful delusion seems to stretch out to the whole campus, as the narrator states at the end of the novel: “In North Campus no one bothered about the truth anyway. They all had their own theories. They were all storytellers and I didn’t feel like correcting them” (422). If the epic endures, it only does so as an acknowledged collective fantasy.

The character’s learning trajectory, the systematic indication of the characters’ college, the satirical outlook on students’ short-lived romances, literary dreams and idleness are also redolent of the campus novel, a booming genre in the Indian Anglophone literary landscape (Bhagat 2004, Bagchi 2007, Mittal 2008). However, these popular novels usually focus on hardworking upper-middle class engineering students and enhance the campus as a refuge from the city’s bustle, contrary to Chowdhury’s seedy world. His unsentimental, self-reflexive tone also distinguishes him from this literary production.

The gradual distancing from the epic mode and domestication of urban space is even more palpable in Chowdhury’s latest collection of interlinked stories, The Patna Manual of Style, in which the epic is constantly deflated, mocked or taken on by unpleasant characters. Chowdhury acknowledges the shift of tone between Day Scholar and The Patna Manual of Style: “But with this book, I wanted Hriday to be mellower, more contemplative, less angular” (Chowdhuri 2015c). Therefore, the reader is reacquainted with the former student, now an aspiring writer navigating a city he knows intimately. If the sense of the ordinary permeates the main narrator’s voice, the collection is also full of quixotic characters, prompt to delusions and exaggerations, fully engrossed in an epic world of fiction. In “The Importer of Blondes” for instance, Jishnuda resurfaces and tells Hriday about his “violent love story” (13). Yet, the heroic tonality of the embedded story is distanced through Hriday’s point of view, aware of Jishnuda’s exuberant filmic imagination: “‘You should write about me. I am quite a character,’ Jishnuda said causally, a bemused smile on his face, eyes looking up at the Statesman House building. Heroic gaze into fading light” (Chowdhury 2016, 13). The character’s conspicuously cinematic posing clearly suggests the narrator’s reflexive distance. A last instance of the anti-epic mode of the collection is the story “Damsel in Distress,” which satirises a narrow-minded provincial youth coming to Delhi. Told in the first person, it is a compressed satiric rewriting of a pattern used in Day Scholar, that of an anti-hero’s troubled encounter with the city. As the topos of the title suggests, the ostensibly unpleasant narrator (voicing anti-Muslim and castist prejudices) perceives the metropolis through his patriarchal chivalric norms and wants to save “heroines” from urban corruption, turning every encounter into an extraordinary adventure. The anti-hero’s puritanical prejudices lead to highly comical misunderstandings, such as when he misguidedly disturbs a couple in a park at night, assuming the girl is being assaulted.
Coming from a northern state and ashamed of his “mofussil slowness” (59), the narrator is however proud of his high caste, suggesting both a marginal and dominant position. His epic fantasies of power point to the epic as a self-centred naive projection. Therefore, through the sense of growing familiarity with the city and the exposure of epic flights of fancy as temporary delusions, The Patna Manual of Style signals a shift further away from the urban epic in Chowdhury’s writing, achieving his quiet revolution in the representation of the contemporary Indian city.

The fact that this quiet revolution is completed in a collection of short-stories cannot be overlooked. Day Scholar as well as Chowdhury’s first novel Patna Roughcut already challenged the novel form through their episodic structure, reading as a series of interlinked episodes. Chowdhury’s aesthetic of the everyday and its associated downscaling of the megacity seem to be taken further through the shift to the short-story, a genre which tends to favour a restricted spatio-temporal scope, minor events, and, in the words of Hriday, “concrete specificity and not long-winded waffle” (Chowdhury 2016, 356). It raises the question of the influence of literary genres on the way places are envisaged, suggesting, in line with Amit Chaudhuri’s identification of the novel with monumental “all-inclusiveness” (2008, 114), that the short-story form shapes Chowdhury’s imaginative geography of the small and the ordinary.

His narratives create a small exclusive world, relying on the author’s and readers’ shared knowledge. The pleasure of recognition and the “shared nostalgia for a middle-class material culture” triggered by the constellation of Hindi words, brand names, and toponyms, is underlined by the critic Trisha Gupta and redolent of what Amitav Ghosh calls “a shared shorthand.” Ghosh, who praised Day Scholar as an “enjoyable tale of life in Delhi University in the 1990s,” uses “shared shorthand” to refer to his own writing style when he wrote for his Delhi friends, pitted against his writing for a global audience (2000). Resonating with Chowdhury’s general downsizing strategy, the notion of shorthand is literally substantiated by his shortening of University college names (“Hindu” for Hindu College, “KMC” for Kirori Mal College), as well as his use of local Delhi slang and the absence of translation or explanation, the narrative thus remaining partly opaque to the foreign reader.

Accordingly, what makes Chowdhury’s vernacular cosmopolitanism distinctive is the sense of familiarity with the city it conveys through the interweaving of local and global material, based on a first-hand knowledge of Delhi’s vernacular geography, languages and cultures as well as on the reworking of Western literary and cinematic sources. His transcultural aesthetic of the urban everyday, primarily intended for an Indian multilingual readership, thus aptly chimes with Homi Bhabha’s notion as it takes on a provincial point of view on the megacity and dwells in its northern fringes, focusing on inconspicuous spaces and characters. It conveys the urban common language while tinging Delhi with a self-reflexive hardboiled touch. Therefore, his view from under the bridge, in Prakash Jadhav’s words, reconfigures our understanding of both Indian Anglophone writing and Indian globalizing megacities, offering a potent alternative to the dominant register of the monumental novel and to the triumphalist and dystopian imaginations of Indian cities.


FOX, Terry Curtis. 1984, September/October. “City Knights.” *Film Comment* 20, no. 5: 30–49.


NOTES

1. The 1991 liberalization reforms, opening up the Indian economy to private and foreign investments, profoundly altered the Indian urban landscape, both in material and in cultural terms. Under the influence of the “global city” model, large-scale spectacular urbanistic projects have been launched to turn Indian megacities into showcases of a new global prosperous India, often implying the invisibilization of already marginalized urban dwellers (see Chaterjee 2002, Dupont 2011, Ghertner 2016).

2. John Cuddon defines the epic as such: “a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes, incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history. Epics are often of national significance in the sense that they embody the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner” (1977, 239). I do not consider these texts as conventional epics but as narratives appropriating epic codes, on the level of form, theme, and scale.

3. The capital of the northern Indian state of Bihar.


5. This attempt at de-centering cosmopolitanism has to be located in the broader postcolonial critique of the term, which is said to be too often associated with a privileged position (Brennan 1997). Drawing on this critique, Pavan K. Malreddy reads R.K. Narayan’s fictional town of Malgudi as an example of “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” a place in which one can encounter foreignness at home, in which the local is “an active site of cultivating cosmopolitan ethics and experience” (2011, 567).

6. Bhabha gives the example of Muslims and Southern Indians attacked as non-citizens by the right-wing Hindu supremacist party Shiv Sena in Mumbai, but we could also think of Bihari migrants in Delhi, often marginalized and victims of discrimination and ethnic stereotypes.

7. If Chowdhury’s urban world contrasts with that of other “Delhi novels” in English, it resonates with the atmosphere and setting of Hindi novels, such as Dark Horse: Ek Ankahi Dastan (2015), by Nilotpal Mrinal, which also focuses on Bihari students coming to Delhi to study and take the Indian civil services examinations.

8. An ethnic agricultural and pastoral community of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.


10. “Reservation” refers to the Indian system of reserving seats in the various legislatures, to government jobs, and to enrolment in higher educational institutions to historically disadvantaged castes and tribes.

11. The direct reference to Ross Macdonald’s detective (Chowdhury 2015a, 125) strengthens the connection between Chowdhury, the crime novel and the ordinary city as Mcdonald’s writing distinctively slows down the pace of hardboiled fiction, his detective is even more detached than Hammett’s Op and his clients are “precariously middle-class” (Fox 1984, 33).

12. About the historical context of emergence of hardboiled fiction, see McCann 2000.

13. Chowdhury pays tribute to Scorsese’s films in his first book, humorously entitled Diksha at St Martin’s, diksha being the Sanskrit word for “initiation,” referring to a ceremony in which a guru initiates a student into his teaching, and St Martin referring to Scorsese. The novel recounts how the narrator recognises his Patna neighbourhood in Scorsese’ New York as represented in Mean Streets.

15. The comic episodes of mistaken intentions and identities are strongly redolent of the eponymous novel by P.G. Wodehouse (*Damsel in Distress*, 1919).


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**ABSTRACTS**

At odds with the dystopic representation of globalizing Indian cities, Siddharth Chowdhury’s fiction re-invents Delhi as an ordinary city. Based on Homi Bhabha’s understanding of “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” this article argues that Chowdhury’s conversational prose, the small lens through which he looks at the globalizing capital of India, and his comic appropriation of hardboiled fiction and coming-of-age novel codes, construct a transcultural aesthetic of the urban everyday and a singular counterpoint both to the monstrous as well as the triumphalist imagination of the Indian city.

**INDEX**

**Keywords:** Chowdhury (Siddharth), Indian Writing in English, vernacular cosmopolitanism, global cities, the everyday

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Breyten Breytenbach’s Revolutionary Aesthetics

Sandra Saayman

1 The South African poet, painter, playwright, essayist and novelist, Breyten Breytenbach, was incarcerated in apartheid’s prisons from 1975 to 1982 for his participation in the struggle against the National Party regime. On 27 April 1994 South Africa’s first democratic elections led to the election of former political prisoner Nelson Mandela as President of the “New” South Africa: thus the South African miracle or negotiated revolution was accomplished. Amongst the freedom fighters who made this revolution possible were many writers and poets who were imprisoned for their “revolutionary” or “subversive” work: the list is long and would include writers like Jeremy Cronin, Ruth First, Fatima Meer, James Matthews, and Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness leader and author of I Write What I Like.

2 Ironically, during his imprisonment, Breytenbach’s poetry remained prescribed academic reading at school and university level and it featured in the anthology of Afrikaans poetry, Groot Verseboek (then published by Tafelberg publishers). Thus pupils, students and members of the Afrikaner establishment, deaf to any African National Congress, Pan Africanist Congress or Black Consciousness “propaganda,” were reading, and memorizing, Breytenbach’s poetry. Popular South African musicians like the late Johannes Kerkorrel, Valiant Swart or Koos Kombuis (who is also a novelist) have acknowledged the manner in which their creativity was triggered by their early exposure to Breytenbach’s poetry. Lady One and Mondmusiek (Afrikaans for “mouth music”) are two CDs that offer interesting musical collaborations between Breytenbach and South African musicians and challenge the frontier between poetry and music.1

3 Although Breytenbach’s work has been labelled revolutionary or even subversive, his oeuvre is not necessarily revolutionary to the modern reader in terms of its content. However, the aesthetics of his work can be seen as revolutionary. Breytenbach’s labyrinthine Mouroir. mirrornotes of a novel, written in prison, is a striking example. From his 1964 début collection of poetry until this day Breytenbach’s oeuvre – through its unique and unusual embodiment of beauty – has transgressed boundaries, surprised
and challenged rigid thought. After a brief note on Breytenbach as a public figure, this paper will examine a few features that characterize his literary oeuvre.

Breytenbach as Public Figure

Breytenbach as public figure and Breytenbach the poet often overlap. Louise Viljoen, South Africa’s most respected specialist of Breytenbach’s poetry, points out that when one looks at Breytenbach’s poetic oeuvre overall, one is struck by his unusual productivity. She argues that his life force and commitment to life are particularly poignant in his poetry and even more so in his love poetry. Characteristic of his oeuvre are his urgent need to communicate with the reader, his constant interrogations about the nature of poetry and the creative process, and his continued questioning of the self through the creation of new shapes for the “I.” Breytenbach’s oeuvre further reveals his intense involvement in the socio-political context of his own country, South Africa, but also the larger world, and the desire to be a witness of his time, through his poetry, but also the strong urge to make an impact on world happenings (Viljoen 2014, 273). These points made by Viljoen, in Afrikaans, in her recent work on Breytenbach entitled Die mond vol vuur, underline the manner in which Breytenbach’s creative writing is intertwined with his social and political convictions and commitments. This has always been the case.

Breytenbach has been known to personally embody his own revolutionary aesthetics. An example is his appearance at the 1973 University of Cape Town Summer School. In his speech, he stated in Afrikaans, that Afrikaans is a “bastard language,” a hybrid language born out of métissage. In 1976, a French translation of the speech was published in Feu froid and the line in which Breytenbach refers to Afrikaans as a “bastard language” is translated as follows: “Nous sommes un peuple bâtard avec une langue bâtarde. Notre nature est bâtarde. Voilà qui est beau et bon” (“We are a bastard people with a bastard language. Our nature is a bastard nature. That is a good and beautiful fact.” Breytenbach 1976, 115, my translation). This speech heavily criticized the apartheid government, but that was not the main reason for the government’s outrage. The fact is that Breytenbach, a “white” Afrikaner, had done something that was inconceivable from the Afrikaner government’s point of view. It was indeed revolutionary to publicly criticize the Afrikaner government in beautiful Afrikaans and to furthermore call the Afrikaans language a “bastard language.” From the Afrikaner government’s point of view, Breytenbach had betrayed his own people.

Breytenbach’s speech received a standing ovation, and from this moment onwards the South African security police started following him. Two years later he was sentenced to nine years in prison, for terrorism. With the long title of his prison memoir, The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Breytenbach points both to the label “terrorist” his “betrayal” had afforded him, but also to the unstable nature of “truth” with a capital T. By referring to himself as “albino,” he refuses the arbitrary “racial” qualifications of apartheid. Thus this title is itself revolutionary, in that it overthrows the “racial” categories of apartheid: Breytenbach refuses the label “white Afrikaner” and creates a unique category: “albino terrorist.” In this work he not only shares his intimate experience of incarceration, but describes the South African prison system with as much veracity as possible, with the aim of denouncing it. In the end notes to The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Breytenbach states that “prisons are pretty much the
same the world over” and then expresses the following conviction: “Never before has it become so all-important for all of us – especially the most ‘ordinary’ citizen – to struggle with all the inventiveness at our disposal against the dehumanization of man” (1984b, 339).

7 There are many examples of actions that mark Breytenbach’s public and political commitment to transformation in South Africa – I shall briefly introduce three. In all three cases Breytenbach underlined the role culture must play in political transformation. In 1987, while still in exile, Breytenbach was involved in organizing the meeting between members of IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa; established by Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert and Alex Boraine) and the ANC, then still banned, in Dakar, Senegal.2 The ANC delegates were led by Thabo Mbeki, the future president of South Africa. This meeting between Afrikaner and ANC intelligentsia sped up the negotiation process in South Africa.

8 The second example is Breytenbach’s open letter, dated 16 April 1991, addressed to future president Nelson Mandela a year after his release from prison in February 1990. In this letter, published in a prominent Sunday newspaper (and later re-published in The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution), Breytenbach expressed his concern about the level of “state and communal violence” (1996, 74) in South Africa and underlined Mandela’s role in leading the country out of the cycle of violence. Breytenbach also reiterated his allegiance to the ANC3 and expressed his firm belief that F.W. De Klerk and the NP were then practicing “a scorched earth policy in moral, political and human terms” (77); that the NP government was actually maintaining the violence between Inkatha Freedom Party and ANC supporters in the Natal region. This fact was later confirmed.

9 Thirdly: when Nelson Mandela came into power, and “while the champagne [was] still bubbling” as he puts it (82) Breytenbach was the first left-wing figure to address a critical open letter, dated 17 May 1994, to the Rainbow Nation’s icon. In it, Breytenbach adopts a stance of “critical loyalty” towards Mandela (79), embodying what Gayatri Spivak, in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present, calls “a persistent critique of what we cannot not want” (2003, 110, my emphasis). Interestingly, Breytenbach urged Mandela to set up a “national convention of reconciliation”... articulated region by region and district by district” (86). The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was indeed to be one of the major achievements of Mandela’s presidency.

The Aesthetics of Breytenbach’s Writing

10 Breytenbach was incarcerated for “terrorism” from 1975 to 1982, the first two years of which were spent in solitary confinement in Pretoria’s Maximum Security Prison. Immediately after sentence was passed, an international petition was launched to obtain permission for him to write and to paint. Breytenbach never obtained permission to paint in prison, but permission to write was granted on condition that he handed in the day’s writing to the prison authorities at the end of every day: this fragmentary writing led to Mouvoir. mirrornotes of a novel, a work that can be seen (and has in fact been read by critics) as the shadow or double of his later The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist. The shadow-status of Mouvoir seems to be suggested by the refusal to use capitals in the subtitle, “mirrornotes of a novel” as opposed to “Mirrornotes of a
Novel,” where the capital “N” would have implied something more accomplished than “notes.” Mouroir is a complex work that some critics call unreadable but that can be read, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, when read as a labyrinth. Though the writing in places takes on qualities of automatic writing as practised by the surrealists, Mouroir is in fact a remarkably structured work if one takes into account the fact that Breytenbach could never refer back to previous pages. Rosemary Jolly underlines the significance of the writing act for Breytenbach as prisoner: “By writing Mouroir, Breytenbach literally gives himself an alternative history to that of his victimization. This history does not erase or replace that of his victimization, but it allows him to be something in addition to, something other than, victim” (1996, 74).

11 Mouroir draws the reader into the prisoner’s inner world. It evokes grey deserts, mirrors, labyrinths and minotaurs (as opposed to the Minotaur) and contains surprising reflections like: “But everywhere behind us the mirrors are growing deaf. Or pulling their own faces. When the image is gone, the mirror reigns” (1984a, 91). The mirror, a leitmotif in Mouroir, is also embedded in the title of the work, as Breytenbach confirms in an interview with Claude Wauthier, quoted in Hans-Georg Golz’s Staring at Variations: “For me, the word ‘mouroir’ not only evokes ‘la mort,’ death, but also ‘le miroir,’ the mirror, in which one sees oneself dying, alone, like the prisoner in his cell” (1995, 37).

12 The fragmentary texts that compose Mouroir offer the reader no respite and meaning remains elusive. The descriptive passage below is an extract from the text entitled “Wiederholen” and is composed of one long, masterfully composed sentence. It is both a sample of the aesthetics of Breytenbach’s prison writing and an example of the prisoner-narrator deprived of his paintbrush who paints with words in order to evoke a “land,” or possibly a mindscape, that is qualified as “terrible, sublime, massive, majestic in its absolute barrenness” (Breytenbach 1984a, 24):

Purple it was then, brownish at times, depending on the cracking of day or the twilight of evening – but the dominant colour scheme of this naked world was grey, a hundred different shades of grey, starting with the wet ashen colour deep under the wings of a broody speckled hen, passing through the nearly transparent silver of falling rain to the hard glitter of a blue-grey rock ledge in the sun, and stone reefs and harshness were the most common characteristics of this area, but despite the nudity it wasn’t cruel or sore: all these hues of greys surged and heaved, a gigantic play of aloof light and shade washing over the expanses to give contour and nearness and mobility to a circumscribed plot of earth here, and there again to sombreness, a depth, a mystery, a surfaceless mirror (25, my emphasis).

13 The imagination is challenged by a passage like the above: the emphasised lines require the reader to imagine precise shades of grey. The sentence runs along, one image calling up yet another, to end with a final, stark metaphor for the land: “a surfaceless mirror.” As is the case throughout Mouroir, the reader has the sense that the “naked world” described metaphysically reflects the bland prison environment and, possibly, the effect the grey absence of texture potentially has on the prisoner’s mind. Mouroir, by offering troubling, yet detailed imagery like the above, breaks through the blandness of prison non-existence and resists the dulling of the mind. The reader is both taken into the prison world and, like the prisoner, invited to resist it. If what is described is indeed a mindscape, this passage also bears witness to the prisoner’s sanity: the narrator maintains control of a long, winding, descriptive sentence, creating beauty out of nothing, whilst demonstrating that he has not lost control of the verb.
In an article entitled “A Poet in Prison” J.M. Coetzee describes the characteristics of Breytenbach’s prison writing as follows:

A feature of Breytenbach’s poetry is that it stops at nothing: there is no limit that cannot be exceeded, no obstacle that cannot be leaped, no commandment that cannot be questioned. His writing characteristically goes beyond, in more senses than one, what one had thought could be said in Afrikaans. The pages of True Confessions that stand out, that could have been written by no one else, are those in which he tries to feel his way into the experience of the condemned man, into the experience of death itself, and then into the moral world of the men who order deaths, build prisons, carry out tortures, and then into the very interior of the mad thinking of “security” itself. (1985, 74)

The following extract from The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist illustrates Coetzee’s point:

We have built the mazes, the high walls from behind which we stare at the blocked-off sky. We take with us the images. We have to go down corridors, we have to have keys, we must shout and plead at the gates for guardians to let us through... to lead us ever deeper into the inner sanctum. To where the noose of the penitent waits. To where the altar of the State is erected. In the final heart of loneliness. We are the wind and we are the birds, and the singing, singing of the rope.

It must be like a wall. Very often – no, all the time really – I relive those years of horror and corruption, and I try to imagine, as I did then with the heart an impediment to breathing, what it must be like to be executed. What it must be like to be. Executed.” (1984a, 215)

Until it was abolished in 1995, capital punishment in South Africa took the form of hanging. In Pretoria’s Central Prison condemned prisoners, the majority of whom were black, were hanged: “Hanged by the passage of breath and of words” (215) as Breytenbach puts it in The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist. Clearly the passage quoted speaks from the inside of the prison (from 1975 to 1977 Breytenbach was held in the same corridor as the prisoners awaiting execution), but also functions at an allegorical level: scathing criticism underlies the comparison between the gallows and an altar. The walls evoke prison walls but also the invisible walls of segregation and the noun “guardians” refers to prison warders but also to the various guardians of the racist regime, be they the security police or the censorship board. We note here the manner in which the metaphor of the labyrinth affects the structure of the sentences. By the use of “we” (“We have to go down corridors”), the reader is invited into the labyrinth represented by both the prison and the winding sentences that describe it. The aesthetics particular to Breytenbach’s writing can furthermore be detected in the fragmentation of the sentence: “What it must be like to be. Executed.” Here visual form is given to the cut between life and death.

Often in Breytenbach’s work death by hanging is associated with decapitation, a characteristic I explored in Breyten Breytenbach. A Monologue in Two Voices with the help of Julia Kristeva’s Visions capitales. Breytenbach is also a painter and in many self-portraits he depicts himself as decapitated; sometimes one has to look carefully at his self-portraits to notice the thin line that separates the head from the rest of the body. The prison (and particularly execution by the apartheid state) haunts Breytenbach’s oeuvre to this day and manifests itself in recurrent prison imagery in both his literary and painterly production. In dark and frightening passages like the following, an autobiographical character named Breyten Wordfool finds himself unexpectedly face to face with “colonel Huntingdon” the man who interrogated Breytenbach during his
period in solitary confinement (his interrogation is related in *The True Confessions*): “Soon now, with gestures that are scorched indelibly on that part of Breyten Word fool which is deliriously mad, those gestures which I have tried so hard to forget remembering, soon the predator will tip back the chair on its hind legs and start cleaning his fingernails fastidiously” (Breytenbach 2008, 131).

The way Breytenbach’s writing “stops at nothing,” to use J.M. Coetzee’s words, can again be observed in the opening of an address Breytenbach gave in 1990 in Stellenbosch, weeks after it became possible for exiles to return to South Africa. Stellenbosch University, where many South African ministers and presidents received their secondary education, at the time still had a rector who was a member of the broederbond, a secret organization composed of powerful white Afrikaner “brothers.” Breytenbach was well aware of the fact that the security police was following his movements during his stay in the country. Dressed in the black, green and gold colours of the ANC flag, thus literally embodying his own political allegiance, he opened his speech as follows:

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the police, the security police, National Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Civil Cooperation Bureau, Special Operations, Municipal security, spies, agents, infiltrators, grasses, grey shirts and grey shits, moles, operators, hitmen, handlers, car bomb artists, paymasters, Broederbonders and other intriguers and plotters and schemers and wangler limited, inner-sanctum strategists, public saints and private sinners, deeply troubled intellectuals, Total Responders, ex-torturers, inquisitors, confidential advisors, stable-lads, couriers and courtseans, frustrated functionaries and jacks-in-office, future élite of the people, fellow-travellers, deserters, runaways, movements groupies, hangers-on, henchmen, musket-bearers, quitters, hands-uppers, scabs and scallywags, blue-eyed boys, moral reararmers of the National Party, federated Afrikaner culture carriers and cultured crust and cultural workers and vultures – in short (because I don’t wish to be ill-behaved toward anybody), my dearly beloved fellow South Africans (1996, 24).

The list of “fellow South Africans” that precedes the speech is longer than a page and one has the impression that when Breytenbach reaches the end of the list it is not because he has run out of ideas, but out of time. The reaction to these opening lines was nervous shifting, laughter, and clearing of throats.

Mongrelisation, hybridity, bastardisation, mixing – these are terms that carry positive connotations and are celebrated in Breytenbach’s work. His own use of the Afrikaans language most strikingly conveys this. It is of course Breytenbach’s Afrikaans poetry that is revolutionary in the sense that it led to profound changes in Afrikaans poetry as a whole: not only in terms of what Afrikaans could say, but also in how it could be said. One of Breytenbach’s first public lectures after he was free to return to the country in 1990 was a lecture at the University of the Western Cape, a “coloured” university during apartheid. He was asked about the colourful Afrikaans he speaks and answered jokingly that it was a good thing he had been to prison, otherwise he might have spoken Afrikaans like an Afrikaans professor. “Afrikaans” contains “Afrikaan” – Breytenbach claims an African identity and his implication in African affairs is concrete: for ten years he directed the Gorée Institute on the Island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, for example.

In *White Writing* J.M. Coetzee refers to white South Africans as “people no longer European, not yet African” (1988, 11). The general opinion that writers like Coetzee, Gordimer and Brink were writing for a sophisticated, liberal, *European* audience does
not, I believe, apply to Breytenbach. In South Africa Breytenbach’s readers include people who were formerly labelled “black” or “coloured.”

From the start, Breytenbach’s work is characterized by a reaching out to other cultures, other ways of seeing the world and other ways of being in the world. Though from a Calvinist background, he became a practising Zen Buddhist in the late 1950s and remains a Zen Buddhist to this day; this informs and forms his writing, notably his poetry. A short extract from the seventh poem from Voice Over. A nomadic conversation with Mahmoud Darwish, published in 2009, conveys a minimalism that may be related to a Zen aesthetic:

sleepless snipers never miss
blood
and blood
and blood (26)

The blank spaces allow this poem to breathe and its form recalls other poems in which Breytenbach writes about breathing and Zen meditation. Here the poem is a minimalist and powerful meditation on the death of (Palestinian) children killed by snipers. The value and fragility of life are underlined in the closing lines, “this earth is smaller more silent more black / than the blood of its children” (26).

The influence of apartheid on literature was “imaginatively stultifying” and literature produced during this period in some ways partook of apartheid’s “drabness” (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010, 3). Albie Sachs, a Freedom fighter and Constitutional Court judge, refers to the “ghettos of the apartheid imagination” (1990, 19). Breytenbach’s work is never a macabre looking in: even in his darkest work, Mouroir, death metamorphoses and decomposition feeds life. In Painting the Eye, the book compiled to accompany his first one-man exhibition in South Africa, held in Cape Town in 1994, Breytenbach writes about the act of painting. The following passage brings the labyrinth and the Minotaur, themes found in his prison literature, into the creative space of the artist’s studio:

The true dialogue in the labyrinth of the workshop is not between artist and idea (conception, intention, emotion) or between Minotaur and death, but with the materials. The hand in any event is discovering and tracing a known route. The give-and-take is among colours and brushes and canvas and pencils and paper. The relationships involve notions of favouritism, manipulation, cooptation, even of justice however rough. (Breytenbach 1993, 59)

The element of surprise is an ingredient of Breytenbach’s particular aesthetics. We note here the personification of the working material (“colours and brushes and canvas and pencils and paper”) said to be involved with each other in “relationships” that recall those taking place between prisoners (“favouritism, manipulation, cooptation”). In this way the theme central to Breytenbach’s prison writing, namely that of the prisoner (or “Minotaur”) in the heart of a grey labyrinth, a place of death, is metamorphosed and recycled in an unexpected way. The Breytenbach-scholar will however be sensitive to echoes with the death-world of the labyrinths described in the prison oeuvre and therefore remain on guard when reading a passage like the above.

Literature that opposed apartheid and also literature produced in the years immediately following apartheid is “a space of persistent trauma and anguish,” according to Elleke Boehmer (2012, 30). The South African writer Ivan Vladislavić, quoted in Marginal Spaces, explains the attention he pays in his writing to the detail of the everyday: “But the world is already so overloaded with big stories and important
information that the small and peripheral has come to me to seem as positive value” (Gaylard 2011, 1). One is reminded of Njabulo Ndebele’s famous call for a return to the “ordinary” in his well-known collection of critical essays, Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Breytenbach’s beautifully crafted poems convey his love for trees and birds, chameleons and butterflies, food, and colour. In Dog Heart, he describes an “enormous belhambra tree” by using intriguing imagery: “Call it the singing tree. All day long a whole vocabulary of bees will buzz among the branches, humming the entire tree with their hungry sound, so that one may hear it from a distance with one’s eyes closed” (1998, 75, my emphasis). His poetry celebrates the textures and small pleasures of “everyday lovemaking life” as he puts it in the sixth poem in the collection Voice Over, a work in which Breytenbach is in dialogue with his deceased friend Mahmoud Darwish. Below is an extract from that poem:

we shall be a people when we bleed and mock the sultan
and the sultan's courtesans and clowns in council of state
without being dragged off to court
we shall be a people when the poet erotically praises
the dancer’s belly as bleached as a shell
and as sweetly salt as an oyster (2009b, 22)

The metaphor is one of Breytenbach’s most powerful tools and his work often displays a playful awareness of this, as in this extract from the eighth poem of Voice Over:

to be is to keep moving
through the declensions of dying
looking for magical scripts in the ash
for the line that may spit a perfect metaphor
past the wrong taste of tongue
rotting in its mouth (27)

When looking at a bookcase of Breytenbach’s works published by a variety of publishers over many years, one is struck by the original shape and texture of some of Breytenbach’s published works. It is true that, when possible, Breytenbach involves himself in the design of the covers of his books, often making use of his own paintings, drawings or etchings. Being a practising Zen Buddhist, he has a preference for publications with soft covers as opposed to glossy hard-covers.

In 1969, five years before the independent Cape Town-based publisher Buren went bankrupt after fighting the censorship board over André Brink’s Kennis van die Aand (Looking on Darkness), it published Breytenbach’s collection of Afrikaans poems, Kouevuur. Quite a few poems were censored and could not be published. Buren published the censored poems separately in a thin, soft-cover collection entitled Oorblyfsels (meaning “Leftovers”). It was distributed clandestinely. Archipelago Books’ 2009 edition of Voice Over. A nomadic conversation with Mahmoud Darwish is another example of an interesting aesthetic choice in terms of the physical appearance of a collection of poetry. The work, 12 x 14 cm, is tiny, almost square and printed on soft paper: it is a small, beautiful object, created in memory of Mahmoud Darwish and in celebration of a friendship. This choice too embodies Breytenbach’s revolutionary aesthetics: he pays homage to Darwish in work that does not shout but whispers – and fits into the palm of the reader’s hand.

It was not the aim of this short article to offer a complete overview of an artist who has been producing poetry, literature, essays, plays and paintings for 50 years. By briefly touching on examples of Breytenbach’s literary oeuvre, I have argued that to the
contemporary reader the content of Breytenbach’s work is not revolutionary. His work embodies unwavering ethical values and his writing is the tool he uses and has used to attack dangerous ideologies – whether those be upheld by a past apartheid government or by a more recent Jacob Zuma. His work has been labelled revolutionary, and so subversive that he himself was not allowed to read his own poetry while in prison. But the revolutionary quality of his work clearly lies elsewhere: it can be found in the power of his metaphors, the surprising structures (and sometimes length) of his sentences, his awareness of the plasticity of poems, the texture of his grammar, and the manner in which his texts refuse the reader the respite of easy interpretation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Amazon offers MP3 downloads of Lady One.
2. Breytenbach was aided by Danielle Mitterand and Abdou Diouf, the Senegalese President. 61 IDASA delegates and 17 ANC delegates attended.
3. “The ANC is a resistance movement fashioned from the suffering of generations, embodying the search for justice of a people, the only organization capable of preserving and perhaps realizing the dream of South Africanness” (Breytenbach 1996, 76).
4. Some of the texts that compose Mouroir were initially written in Afrikaans and translated by Breytenbach himself prior to publication. “Wiederholen” was initially written in Afrikaans (conversation with the author, 2001).
5. Capital punishment (executed in Pretoria Central Prison) was abolished in South Africa in 1995 after a four-year moratorium that started in February 1990.

6. I explored the manner in which the prison and related themes like interrogation and alienation resurge in Breytenbach’s later work in an article entitled “The Resurgence of Prison Imagery in Breyten Breytenbach’s A Veil of Footsteps” (Saayman 2008).

7. I was present at this event and remember my own sense of amazement as well as my admiration for Breytenbach’s audacity and creativity as he read his seemingly never-ending list without batting an eye, whereas the audience became increasingly nervous.

8. Guillaume Cingal has written eloquently on the theme of metamorphosis central to Breytenbach’s writing.

ABSTRACTS

This article takes a retrospective look at the literary production of the South African writer and painter, Breyten Breytenbach. It argues that the revolutionary quality of this controversial author’s texts is to be found in the form his writing adopts, that is to say in the texture of his syntax and the power of his metaphors, rather than in the content of his novels, poems, short stories or essays.

INDEX

Keywords: Breytenbach (Breyten), apartheid, Afrikaans, prison literature, “New” South Africa, hybridity

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Varia
“The Whole Island is a Jail and We the Warders”: States of Exception in Tasmanian Historical Fiction

Ellen Turner

...
‘historical fiction’ is a kind of oxymoron, joining ‘history’ (what is ‘true’/‘fact’) with ‘fiction’ (what is ‘untrue’/‘invented,’ but may aim at a different kind of truth)” (2005, x). I argue here that, in retelling the story of Tasmania, Dick and Graves are not only recreating a past but also reflecting a present. Here I am indebted to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the state of exception to theorise the supposed threat of savagery, a threat that undermines legal apparatuses and allows the State to deny basic human rights to the island’s inhabitants. Agamben’s theory attempts to explain the processes that come into play in times of crisis when normal laws are suspended and certain persons are placed outside of the juridical order. It is just as applicable to an 1840s Van Diemen’s Land in which disorder and outlawry ruled as it was to a post-war 1940s world.

2. The history of nineteenth-century Van Diemen’s Land is dominated by the image of transported convicts and the events of what has been designated the Black War. Literary representations of what seems to be a land of extremes are dominated by a sense of paradox; on the one hand the island is portrayed as a living hell, and, on the other hand it is seen as a lush and idyllic land, romanticised to the same extent that it is disparaged and vilified. The island was represented, for C.A. Cranston, “as the source of psychic distress, cultural disenfranchisement, intense disappointment, a land scape-goat for social evils, it was gothic, it was grotesque, it was hell, it was heaven, it was penal, it was paradise” (2003, 29). Van Diemen’s Land was first colonised by the British in the early nineteenth century as a penal colony. For the most part the crimes for which these convicts were transported to Van Diemen’s Land were the inevitable upshot of trying to survive in a poverty-ridden nineteenth-century Britain in which the effects of the industrial revolution were being keenly felt.

3. Running parallel to the story of transportation to nineteenth-century Van Diemen’s Land is the narrative of the Black War. Nowhere else in Australia is the history of the conflict between the Aborigine and the European invaders as sinister as in Tasmania. The Black War has dominated Tasmanian history with far more vehemence than similar occurrences taking place in other parts of the colony. Roslynn Haynes accounts for this fact partly on the basis that the war was given a name in Tasmania where it had not in other parts of Australia: “The on-going war between settlers and blacks was waged in all the Australian colonies but because it was given a name in Van Diemen’s Land it had lived longer in the national consciousness as a continuing event rather than the separate skirmishes elsewhere” (2006, 79). The atrocities perpetrated against the Aborigines in Van Diemen’s Land amount to genocide.

4. James Boyce argues that the tragedy that occurred almost two centuries ago still taints Tasmania’s present-day identity. He maintains that “[t]he silence about the government’s ethnic clearances – arguably the least defensible official action against an indigenous people committed anywhere in the British empire during the nineteenth century – has been maintained for over 170 years” (2008, 257–58). In public perceptions, the Tasmania of today holds a rather peculiar place. From a European point of view, it is thought of (if indeed it is thought of at all) as a minor appendage to the mainland of Australia. Carmel Bird, who was brought up in 1940s Tasmania, suggests that “[l]ike mud or disease or reputation, the quality of being Tasmanian is tenacious. It is desirable and undesirable at the one time, a sharp mixture of pride, guilt and shame” (1989, 251). While Tasmania’s profile is steadily being raised and its image being painted in a more favourable light, it nevertheless retains the quality of an outsider (which is, perhaps, part of its appeal). Ken Gelder writes:
It is, indeed, common in Australian literary studies to speak of the “Tasmanian Gothic,” a genre which expresses the sense of Tasmania’s peculiar “otherness” in relation to the mainland, as a remote, mysterious and self-enclosed place. In popular parlance, Tasmania is “backward,” out of step with civilisation: Transylvania is evoked in a similar way, from the point of view of mainland jurisdiction. (1994, 2)

Tasmania, to this day, is defined in terms of this “otherness” that Gelder identifies, and this is where I want to start my analysis of these two historical novels, *Exile* and *Wild Orchard*. Tasmania can in some senses be regarded as an anomaly; geographically isolated and cut-off by its ocean borders, it provides an appealing case-study of a phenomenon that Agamben was later to recognise as a defining paradigm of governance in post-war Europe.

Agamben’s theory of governance at a time of crisis is based on the notion that power necessitates a dehumanisation of a population. Frequently represented in the novels of Graves and Dick as less than human or animalistic, the convicts are placed in a realm beyond legal protection. The Aborigines too are denied legal status. As Madley writes, “Aborigines were effectively excluded from participation in or protection by the British colonial legal system. The Hobart regime executed both Europeans and Aborigines for killing Europeans but never a European for murdering an Aborigine, despite the fact that Aborigines were frequently shot on sight” (2008, 89). Despite proclamations that every inhabitant of Australia should be under Crown protection, the Aborigines were effectively classed as non-people outside the safeguard of the law on a level that has been considered genocide, which is sometimes read as analogous to the Holocaust.

Jesse Shipway writes that, while the Tasmanian genocide may have borne little resemblance to the Holocaust, “the significatory compression that makes all reference to genocide proceed by way of the Shoah brings the two events together” (2005, 215–16). Our experience of reading Dick’s and Graves’ fiction now, from our position of privileged detachment, is bound to incorporate an understanding of genocide in part drawn from the Holocaust. While an awareness that these events were by no means synonymous, in addition to the recognition that 1940s Tasmanians would have been mostly unaware of the occurrences of the Holocaust, is important, a reading of these novels through the lens of Holocaust theory might prove effective. Incorporating Agamben’s theory of the state of exception, a theory that takes the Nazi concentration camp as its primary exemplar, provides an avenue into reading the political and legal history of Van Diemen’s Land. The Van Diemen’s Land that is written about in the novels of Dick and Graves is a prison; it can be read as an instance of Agamben’s camp – as that which not only encompasses the delineated boundaries of the actual prison walls, but also has repercussions throughout society.

Agamben asserts that “In truth, the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indiscernibility, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (2005, 23). Agamben’s conceptions of the sovereign and the state of exception paradoxically seek to inscribe that which is outside of law within law. The enactment of martial law in Tasmania would be one instance in which the state of exception is enacted, as law is suspended and certain lives (what Agamben designates under the term “bare life”) are excluded from legal protection. To be placed in the realm of bare life means that one’s life is actively excluded from the political realm and implies the license of the state to infringe on biological life by making illegal actions
legal through their exclusion from the juridical system. Where I find Agamben’s theories most useful in my readings of Dick and Graves is in the universalisability of the condition of the state of exception in which not just the lives of those in the prisons or chain gangs, or those of the Aborigines whose lives are discounted under martial law, but the lives of every single inhabitant of the island become threatened by the way such a system encroaches on personal freedom. While Agamben saw the two World Wars “as a laboratory for testing and honing the functional mechanisms and apparatuses of the state of exception as a paradigm of government” (7), the case of Van Diemen’s Land represents an early example of this relegation of people to the category of bare life, albeit an example that, rather than being universalised, is taking place within the clearly defined geographical boundaries of the island.

Isabel Dick and the Myth of Van Diemen’s Land

Published in 1946, Isabel Dick’s *Wild Orchard*, though popular in its day, is now barely mentioned in the history of either Australian or Tasmanian fiction and there is little critical engagement with Dick’s work. In their survey of Tasmanian literature, Margaret Giordano and Don Norman, making a rare reference to her fiction, write that “[f]or Isabel Dick, years of struggle as a writer culminated in hitting the bestseller lists in the US with her pioneering novel about Tasmania, *Wild Orchard*” (1984, 114). Dedicated to the early pioneers of Tasmania, Dick’s historical romance recounts an apparently conventional tale of love and marriage between hero and heroine Harriat [sic] Bracken and John Halifax (who is Nat to his family and Jan to Harriat). Ostensibly the novel follows a conventional romance plot. The naive and inexperienced girl from a wealthy British family meets and falls in love with the rugged Tasmanian gentleman hops farmer (Halifax) while he is in Kent learning the skills of cultivating the plant so that he might return to Tasmania and raise a successful crop. Frustrated with the confines of polite British society, Harriat is quick to accept a marriage proposal from Halifax and is soon on board a ship to 1840s Tasmania to start a new life as a married woman. “Transported” from a secure upper-middle class Kent family (far removed from the stratum of British society that made up the convict class), Harriat undergoes a transition, mediated by the long sea voyage, to what is effectively for her another world. Although this new world is for Harriat in part the pastoral idyll of her yearning, it also gradually reveals a darker and more sinister side: events like Maggie, the convict servant, brutally murdering some kittens, the revelation that the place where Harriat and Jan’s home is located was the site of a vicious attack on settlers by a group of Aborigines, and Harriat’s receiving a visit from a bushranger while she is alone in her house, reflect the island’s ominous aspect. Despite the fact that the novel is set almost two decades after the events of the 1820s, its pages are haunted by the island’s history. It is difficult to reconcile the sometimes saccharin sweet tone of Dick’s novel, characteristic of a number of Tasmanian romances from the era, with the murky other world of old Van Diemen’s Land that haunts it.

While not directly alluding to factual events, *Wild Orchard* is implicitly bound with the past of both Harriat and Dick’s ancestors. Dick’s novel tells the tales of the hardships and delights of starting a new life in the antipodes. Once in Tasmania Harriat longs for the home she has left behind but eventually reconciles herself to the romanticised Tasmania on which she has a plot of land that she slowly (and at times reluctantly)
turns into a “little England.” This “little England” however is the privileged upper-middle class England that Harriat belonged to rather than the deprived and working-class England from which originated the vast majority of the convict population transported to Van Diemen’s Land. This notion of Tasmania as a “little England” is one that runs throughout *Wild Orchard*: “We are as English in our tastes out there as you are here. Don’t you realize that we are a Crown Colony, and that we treasure the things of England?” (Dick 1946, 19) And again, Jessie declares:

“If folks at home could realize how we crave to out-British the British! Think how we read and re-read the illustrated papers, think how minutely we watch out for any and every detail of the Royal Family, see how we shape our homes and gardens in the pattern, so far as we are able, of our old homes!” (202)

The Tasmania that Dick seeks to represent alongside the darker, almost gothic Van Diemen’s Land is very much the Tasmania of the writer Louisa Meredith, who emigrated there with her husband in 1839, a Tasmania that tries to dispel the myths of the past. “‘Little England’ can be read as not only the genteel world that Harriat left behind, but also the more miserable existence of those forced to break the law as a matter of survival. This is also the country that induces in Harriat a “horrible feeling of disgust at the sight of the absolute swarms of flies everywhere, even crawling over their food, and where flies didn’t crawl, ants did, from tiny black ones that smelt vile when squashed to big ‘inch-men,’ as they were called, which stung furiously” (Meredith 1979, 135). It is the same country that she at other times sees as a pastoral idyll, as the Bible picture book image of the oxen dragging a plough attests (152).

Dick continually fluctuates between the two Tasmanias, revealing an underlying element of truth in the mythological construction of the island. The “tales of murder and outrage, blacks and bushrangers, in Van Diemen’s land” (Dick 1946, 13), which take on the quality of legend back in England, expose their latent, but recent, reality in Tasmania. The life that Harriat’s father requests to be told of by his prospective son-in-law is that of the “savage.” As he asks, “Come along, let me know the worst: convicts slayed by cat-o’-nine-tails before shivering crowds, bush-rangers little better than fierce animals who attack defenceless women, animals that sit upright and eat with their front paws daintily as any human” (46). Clearly the little England that Dick both affirms and denies is in part invention. The life to which Jan is taking his wife was one in which “each was obliged to fend for himself – what was more, each must be accountable primarily for his own especial safety” (62). The state of nature then was viewed not just as a property of Aboriginal societies but of invader societies as well. The deprivation and poverty that instigated the arrival of the initial population made up of petty thieves, the general lawlessness that was endemic in a British society with an unjust social system, were transplanted onto this relatively small geographical area. Reflecting a broader paradigm of government, the state of exception that is evident in Tasmania is also somewhat recognisable in British society.

While the treatment of the Aborigines in Dick’s novel reflects a layer of concerns not applicable to society in Britain, it does, in a sense, raise the broader issue of what it means to be a human subject, of who benefits from, and who is excluded from, the protection afforded by the legal system. According to a review of *Wild Orchard* dating from the year of its publication, “[t]he Aborigines are a less important part of the background, but Mrs. Dick recalls their earlier massacres of pioneers and mentions the remorse of some of their persecutors” (Hyder 1946, 203). As Julia Smith writes, “[t]here are many self-conscious absences in *Wild Orchard* regarding the darker aspects of
Tasmania’s past” (2006, 13). For the most part, the Aborigines are represented as primitive and savage. Harriat, for instance, on reflecting on the settler/invader ideology of *terra nullius*, thought:

in uninhabited parts of the world […] such as Van Diemen’s Land before the white men came to settle on the Derwent in 1803, there would of course have been the Aborigines making their queer sounds, and there would be birds calling, and the great winds and the wash of the rivers, but in this island there were never any wild beasts to roar, nothing but stealthy sounds of animals padding through undergrowth. (Dick 1946, 111–12)

When the concepts of bare life (the condition of life outside of political protection) and the state of exception contaminate an entire society, they do not remain abstract political theories. Governance under a state of exception encroaches on daily life. As bare life seeps into the domestic sphere, it stands to reason that the cultural products which deal with issues of daily life will absorb, react to, and reflect this new reality. This is why the romance novels of two now obscure women writers can be read according to Agamben’s terms. A key feature of the state of exception is the blurring of the public/private divide. As Billie Melman notes of the 1920s “Empire Romance,”

[w]ith the young Englishwoman, a personification of the old, civilised way of life, may exert a mitigating influence upon her masculine surroundings. More characteristically, she yields to them. Rather than refine the male-inhabited environment and emasculate it, she herself becomes wild, hard and resilient.

This female figure is equally apparent in the novels of Dick and Graves, which can also be described as empire romances, as the female figure moves away from the conventional domestic ideal in a shift that blurs the boundary between domestic and political space. Agamben claims that when the state of exception becomes universalised, “[b]are life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category” and “now dwells in the biological body of every living being” (1998, 140). Both *Wild Orchard* and *Exile* provide accounts of the functioning of the island in its entirety as a prison. Living from within something resembling the state of nature, all life becomes bare life on the basis of “its capacity to be killed” (Agamben 1998, 8).

Assimilated to wild beasts, the Aborigines are granted a status on a par with the animals. Harriat affirms this sense of inferiority that Europeans conferred upon them when she considers “that less than forty years ago this spot where I sit had never, never vibrated to civilized sounds or English voices…” (Dick 1946, 112). The supposed savagery of the Aborigines is made unambiguous. Telling the tale of brutalities committed against white settlers, a neighbour makes a graphic account of crimes committed by the Aborigines against his own family:

In the yard were my children, speared to death! They lay in one heap. Beyond in the forest where they must have chased her after setting fire to the roof, I found my wife. The natives had attacked her with waddys; she too was dead, my wife, bound to a tree. They, the blacks, those hunted devils, had watched until she was alone, had killed… and had disappeared as silently as snakes. (127)

This man who had once expressed sympathy for the Aborigines articulates his change of heart in response to the above event:

I, who had last year hotly opposed the Black Line, who had argued that by kindness we could win these unhappy creatures whose country the white race had filched, for whose cause I had made endless appeal, written endless articles begging patience with their ignorance, had given to them from my small means, only to be repaid by this foul treachery. (127)
He continues even more vehemently: “[t]heir black hearts can distinguish no good in any man with a white skin. I suffer for the atrocities practised on the native race by convicted felons, by bushrangers who are themselves but escaped convicts, yes, and by settlers too” (127). However, despite this racist sentiment, at times the past treatment of the Aborigines is dealt with slightly more sensitively. For instance, we are told that Appleby “can never forgive himself for being one of the prime movers in the ‘Black Line’” (173). Despite Dick’s intention to convey the events of the 1820s in a factual light, the Aborigines are nevertheless depicted as inferior beings to be “fixed” by the “civilised” settler race: “We should have invited those poor blacks to share our firesides, encouraged them to dress as we do, eat as we do. Cured them of their savage ways by kindness” (185).

On hearing that the land on which she and her husband had built a home and a life “was the scene of a terrible outrage,” Harriat reflects on the fact “that in this smiling country deadly monstrous happenings lurked below so thin a crust!” (Dick 1946, 267) Harriat is told that the “[b]lacks, whites, and bushrangers militated against each other with equal violence” (206), but there is still a part of her that condones such outlawed violence. For instance, after the incident in which she finds herself in her house, alone, with an infamous bushranger, she sees him as a hero rather than a villain: “No, she would not breathe a word of it. So she hid away the copy of the Times. And long afterwards the signature of Martin Cash and the scribbled message above it became a cherished family heirloom” (276). Martin Cash, like Ned Kelly, was a notorious bushranger whose legend has grown into an almost mythical status. In this instance the anarchy of the bush enters a domestic sphere whose boundaries have become permeable to the disorder and seeming lawlessness of the world outside its walls. There is an equivalent scene in Kathleen Graves’ Exile. On hearing the story of O’Dowd the bushranger, Richard “had a sneaking feeling of admiration for the outlaw, not with the troops and field police hot on his tail. Even the settlers themselves hated the police, who had all been convicts in the gangs in the first place, but as hard workers had been raised to the position of spies” (61). What both these instances reveal is a respect for the outlaw and the system of self-preservation made necessary when law fails to fulfil its function.

This conflation of the public and the private is a theme that is central to a reading of these texts in terms of a theory of the state of exception. Jerome de Groot argues that “[h]istory is other, and the present familiar. [...] The historical novelist [...] explores the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar” (2010, 3). Both Exile and Wild Orchard operate within this complex relationship to the past, existing as they do within the very familiar conservative and domestic space of the historical romance and simultaneously disrupting this with the spectre of the gothic; hence we are reading both the familiar and the uncanny. Sigmund Freud in “The Uncanny” spoke of the linguistic intricacies of the German term das Unheimliche (the uncanny) in relation to its peculiar conflation with its opposite: “The uncanny (das Unheimliche, ‘the unhomely’) is in some way a species of the familiar (das Heimliche, ‘the homely’)” (2003, 134). As Julia Kristeva describes this phenomenon, “in the very word heimlich, the familiar and intimate are reversed into their opposites, brought together with the contrary meaning of ‘uncanny strangeness’ harboured in unheimlich” (1991, 182). Kristeva goes on to analyse the uncanny in terms of its temporality, arguing that “that which is strangely uncanny...
The past that is represented in the novels under consideration here is one that is uncanny by virtue of this phenomenon; that which was once familiar is made strange because of its temporal distance from the subject - a sense of the uncanny that is exacerbated for the present-day reader by virtue of its double layer of "pastness."

**Writing the state of exception in Kathleen Graves' *Exile: A Tale of Old Tasmania***

17 The gothic is a term that seems to loom over any reference to Tasmanian history or literature. Graves and Dick write within the gothic romance genre in that "they see history not as a source of information or something to understand but as a place of horror and savagery. [...] Not a repository of pastness but a site where history might attack the visitor" (de Groot 2010, 15). The threat perceived in early nineteenth-century Van Diemen's Land finds an altered but equally visible presence in 1940s Tasmania. In 1947, one year after Dick's *Wild Orchard*, Kathleen Graves' historical novel *Exile: A Tale of Old Tasmania* was published. Set in 1826, two years before martial law was declared against the Aborigines, *Exile* tells the story of Richard Thursby's arrival from England, and his subsequent settlement in Tasmania. The novel commences: "It was on the morning of January the 29th, when the ship, Andromeda, was a hundred and sixty-two days out from Gravesend, that a low cloud appeared on the horizon right ahead" (Graves 1947, 10). As in *Wild Orchard*, the Aborigines represented in Graves' novel are dehumanised figures used to set-off the exotic staging. They are described by the captain of the ship in which Thursby sails as "[n]asty dangerous varmints" (13). They are depicted as "dirty, lazy wretches, given to hunting and idleness, and are nothing but a plague to the settlers" (14). However, we are told that "[f]or Richard Thursby the fires of the natives added one more touch of mysterious savages to the unknown land" (14). Unlike *Wild Orchard*, which constantly shifts between the heaven and hell of the two Tasmanias, the fictional realm of *Exile* lies within a kind of purgatory. Richard goes to Tasmania full of hope, only to become disillusioned. He marries, but his wife falls in love with another man. Many of his sheep perish, and his convict servants are taken away from him. While the setting is certainly far from the pastoral idyll that Dick describes in *Wild Orchard*, it is not irredeemably unhappy either. Ultimately husband and wife discover a renewed love for one another, the disease in the sheep disappears and Richard is allocated servants once again to help him on his farm.

18 As Graves writes in her 1953 non-fictional account of life in Tasmania, *Tasmanian Pastoral*, "it may be the abysmal loneliness of the bush, as well as the mountains, which nurtures that lack of spirituality and the underlying melancholy tinged with irony which is expressed in our literature" (128). The Tasmania of *Exile* is characterised by a similar tone that hints at a degree of resignation to a satisfactory, if harsh existence. Graves' book also lends a certain credibility to her earlier novel by confirming the version of history that it reflected. However, rather than describing Tasmanian history as something atrocious, as it is represented in *Exile*, *Tasmanian Pastoral* reads the history of the island as something congruent with a future good life for the island's settlers. According to Graves, her Tasmania "has seen the black man with his spear depart, and the white man bring his sickle and his bullock team, then his horse-plough,
and now the tractors that hasten to and fro across the plain” (1953, 136). A rendering of history such as this denies the traumatic nature of the island’s past. In this sense, *Exile* is a “tale of old Tasmania” rather than a tale of Van Diemen’s Land. Graves speaks of a Tasmania contiguous with a 1940s or 1950s Tasmania and as such seeks to assuage guilt and render past deeds bearable to present inhabitants.

Dick’s *Wild Orchard* views the savagery of Tasmania as both its curse and its redeeming feature; Graves’ Tasmania in *Exile* is characterised by a sense of lawlessness that requires the whole island to function as a prison. Although Tasmania at this time was known primarily as a penal colony, the metaphor of incarceration and the penal system is extended to encompass the whole of the supposedly free population of the island as well. As Richard’s escort on first arriving in Tasmania tells him:

> If you settle here, as I assume you intend, you will find your lot little better than that of a convict warder. Where he fears the lash and the chain-gang, you will fear the withdrawal of servants, the refusal of an extension of grant, the calling up of quit-rents, the fresh survey of boundaries, even inquiries into the validity of title-deeds. It all depends on your behaviour. The whole island is a jail and we the warders. (Graves 1947, 25)

In *Exile* Richard too is drawn in by the mystery of the island but is equally oppressed by it. It is in some senses a life sentence for him: “there might be no going back” (Graves 1947, 27). As Graves writes of the Tasmanian mountains and bush, “[t]here was something about it which was frightening: it represented the force of natural power that man had always feared, and it hid the wild animals and wild men securely” (78–79). There is a sense that the prison that is Van Diemen’s Land is something that runs deeper than a man-made prison, as if it were underlain by a natural power beyond that of the human. By placing this prison-like nature of the island in a realm that precedes human influence, Graves is perhaps attempting to avoid attributing any sense of blame, suggesting that there is something intrinsically connected with the island which enthrals its inhabitants. The island captivates Richard so that he is bound to it in terms similar to an incarceration: “The island had begun to cast a spell over him, a spell from which he was never to be free for the rest of his days” (42). The mountains and the bush represent a kind of lawlessness that is reflected in the ungovernability of the island’s inhabitants. Likewise, his wife Clair both despises and is in awe of the view of the mountains. Speaking to Clair, his friend’s wife and the woman he loves, Kinnaird says “I love it and hate it myself. The prison walls!” (127).

To Richard, on his arrival, Tasmania represents “an irregular state of affairs – outlaws’ strongholds, bribed police, murdering blacks, and whatnots” (Graves 1947, 37). It is an island governed by an intended disciplinarian system under which all of society operated: “Here it was, disciplined to a curfew, and brooding over all a figure almost sinister, the tall man who had come aboard the *Andromeda* that morning” (27). The suggestion is that the inhabitants of the island would be ungovernable by any other means. Graves’ Governor proposed to “take matters into his own hands as he always had done, parcel out grants double the size, defy the Secretary of State, the Parliamentary Committee and their ideas as if they never existed” (208). He sees himself as the supreme authority, the absolute sovereign: “No one could set him limits, he who had the power of life and death in his own hands” (208). As the Governor understands it, “the only way to govern a convict colony was to control all the people in it” (207, emphasis in original). The whole island is subsumed under a very distinctive form of governance in which legality is decided not by the letter of the law but rather
by the word of this figure of the despot. In this seeming state of nature, human life subsists outside of the protection of law. According to Agamben, sovereignty is defined by the capacity to decide on the exception when what the exception amounts to is the suspension of law; in Agamben’s terms, “a suspension of the juridical order itself” (2005, 4).11

In the state of exception all life becomes, for Agamben, bare life. In the state of exception anyone excluded by the sovereign from the political realm can be killed with impunity. Agamben sees the origins of the universalised state of exception in the emergency measures employed by states in the First World War, but declaration of martial law in Tasmania in 1828, which effectively legitimatized the murder of Aborigines, can be regarded as an earlier, more isolated instance of this phenomenon. There might however be an argument for suggesting that Tasmania represents a microscale state of exception, which encompasses not only the Aborigines but the whole of society, European settlers included. As Graves has one of her characters say, “[i]t appears that the colony is regarded as nothing more than a jail, the inhabitants no better than pickpockets, murderers and convicted felons of all degrees. Apparently there is no idea of a free population” (1947, 111–12). All are subsumed under the category of bare life.

The notion of bare life, of being placed outside the protection of the law, is nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of the Aborigines. The Aborigines in Graves’ novel are not given any voice but are rather treated as specimens to be observed. In line with 1820s perceptions of the indigenous people, Graves represents a view of the Aborigine as not quite human. Kinnaird, for instance, imagines the Aborigine “crouched in lairs like the beasts. [...] He was also an exile, as they all were in this pre-human land” (1947, 124). Graves’ Aborigines are described in almost animalistic terms: “a black lass can drop a bairn as easy as ewes their lambs” (152), and similarly: “I wonder why we have this feeling of repulsion for the black man. Eumarrah in his own way is a good fellow, and yet one can never forget his colour. They are so like us, and yet unlike – as in a grotesque way animals resemble us” (179). When a group of settlers fire upon the Aborigines, in the process killing a number of them, Richard ponders how “[t]he whole business was little short of murder” (168–69). The killings were “short of murder” and not, according to Richard’s interpretation of events, actual murder. While the more explicit rendering of the concept of bare life is limited to the Aborigine and the convict on the island, the general sense of the precariousness of life is unmitigated as it affects all human beings on the island.

Reading the narrative histories of Graves and Dick, we are reminded of events occurring after the settlement/invasion of Van Diemen’s Land. Their words contain echoes of the colonial project from the past and the ongoing problem of racism towards Aborigines in Australia. Graves and Dick, though writers of fiction, are also writers of history and, as John Arnold writes, “historians do not uncover the story of the past, they produce it (and all its meanings, whether explicit or implicit)” (2007, 121). Any writing of history, whether it claims to be objective or fictional, is necessarily affected by the present. In writing this past, the history of a Tasmania inhabited by animal-like natives and equally brutish and bestial convicts and bushmen, Graves and Dick are also speaking of their tainted present. When Graves writes of the uncanny experience of “[p]recognition – that state of being aware at a first meeting that the person is no stranger, that one has known him or her before, and upon visiting an entirely new
scene that one has seen it before," she describes it as “one of those supernormal things that happen to most people. Perhaps it is in dreams, those weird excursions into the future, that we have visited these places, have met these people" (1947, 116). The events of the novel are themselves echoes of the past, views of the present, and potentially predictions of the future, a merging of these temporal dimensions into one space.

In the introduction to Clive Turnbull's history of Tasmania, *Black War* (1948), H. Ian Hogbin writes that the “aboriginal problem” was still a major concern in 1940s Australia. As he writes:

> The worst brutalities of Hobart Town are perhaps unlikely to be repeated today, but anyone who has had contact with our own natives, either around our country towns or in the central and western deserts, will agree that there is no cause for us to congratulate ourselves on what we are doing for them. The reserve, advocated by many – naturally, in a country which no cattle station requires – would only create the same sort of human zoo as that in which the last Tasmanians died on Flinders Island. (II–III)

The image of the “human zoo” that Hogbin sees as threatening Australia is a particularly vivid image of the possible culmination of the state of exception. Although, in theory, all Aborigines were British subjects entitled to the legal protection this status should have afforded them, in practice treatment of Aborigines was far from equal. As Macintyre and Clark write, “Indigenous people were written out of Australian history following the establishment of the nation-state at the end of the nineteenth century. The new Commonwealth sought racial purity. It deprived Aborigines of voting rights, excluded them from the body politic and joined with the states to confine them on reserves” (2004, 43). The state of exception that encompasses Dick’s and Graves’ nineteenth-century Tasmania is also a real threat to their contemporary society. In considering the two novels as part of a layering of narratives that retells the past, it is important to recognise that they are also inextricably bound up with the 1940s perceptions of life in Tasmania. Jesse Shipway describes the state of affairs in the early years of European settlement in Tasmania as “decidedly pre-modern.” Correspondingly, the idea of democracy is described as “non-existent.” As Shipway goes on to write: “It was a prison, a place to forget” (2005, 218). In narrating their past, it seems that Dick and Graves are both attempting to situate this narrative firmly in history, in a place from which it cannot contaminate the present, and indeed, the future of their island. In actuality though, we can see, looking back at Van Diemen’s Land, a past form of governance that has become, in Agamben’s terms, a paradigm of power in modern Western society. For Carmel Bird, “[t]he repression of these memories has had the effect of filling the island with ghosts. [...] Tasmania is a haunted place” (1989, 252). Perhaps, by recognising these memories and affording them the attention they deserve, we are in some small part exorcising this ghost.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Here the term is used in the OED’s sense of “the condition of being primitive and uncivilized; a primitive state of human society” (“savagery, n.”).
2. Benjamin Madley concludes that “Tasmania under British rule was clearly a site of genocide” (2008, 106).
3. Clive Turnbull quotes the report of the 1837 Select Committee on Aborigines: “If the whole of New Holland be part of the British Empire, then every inhabitant of that vast island is under the defense of British law as often as his life or property may be attacked, and the appeal to arms for adjusting controversies with any part of the primitive race, exposes those by whom blood may be shed to the same responsibility, and to the same penalties, as if the sufferers were white persons” (1948, 241).
4. The issue is further explored by Patrick Wolfe who theorises the “relationship between genocide and the settler-colonial tendency that [Wolfe] term[s] the logic of elimination” (2006, 387).
5. Examples of contemporary reviews include those featuring in the 11 April 1946 edition of the Western Mail (“The early days of Tasmania are depicted in the book Wild Orchard,” 33), the 11 May 1946 edition of The Advertiser (“Latest Fiction,” 4), and 22 April 1946 edition of The Telegraph (“Romantic Tale of Early Tasmania,” 2). Confirmation of the claim that the novel was popular in
its day can be found in an announcement in *The Age Radio Supplement* in October 1950 that the novel is to be serialised for radio broadcast (“Tasmanian Setting for AR Serial,” 1).

6. Meredith writes: “No general descriptions would so well tend to show the truth, as the veritable chronicle of everyday life […] as innocent of lawless intrusions as dwellings of a like isolated and lonely character would be in any part of Britain” (1979, xv-xvi).

7. For further discussion on the genre of the Empire Romance see Hsu-Ming Teo’s “Imperial Affairs: The British Empire and the Romantic Novel, 1890–1939” (2016).

8. As David Coad writes: “The idea of female masculinity appeared in both fictional and non-fictional writing in the second half of the nineteenth century and is still a visible feature of contemporary Australian society. The protagonist of Henry Lawson’s short story ‘The Drover’s Wife,’ first published in 1892, has become a literary myth in Australia and encapsulates the idea of female masculinity from the outback” (2002, 99).

9. David Coad writes of the Australian bushranger that “[j]ust as the American West has its cowboy heroes, Australia fondly remembers a certain number of Outback criminals known for their daring, audacity and robbery under arms. […] The bushranging spirit is synonymous with an anti-Establishment desire” (2002, 46).

10. In *Tasmanian Pastoral* Graves writes of the bush-ranging gangs as well as the Black Line and the Black War.

11. The term sovereignty employed in this sense is, of course, different from Aboriginal sovereignty, a complex term that refers to the recognition of Aboriginal customs and laws, and the right to self-governance.

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**ABSTRACTS**

Looking at two historical romances by women writers, Kathleen Graves’ *Exile: A Tale of Old Tasmania* (1945) and Isabel Dick’s *Wild Orchard* (1946), this article seeks to examine narratives of an early nineteenth-century Van Diemen’s Land that are apparently at odds with the 1940s Tasmania it was to become. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception” as the theoretical underpinnings for this essay, I read both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century island as a site for the proliferation of bare life whereby the whole of society finds itself defined by its prison-like capacity to strip individuals of their right to life. In telling these stories in which not all lives are equal, it seems that Dick and Graves are attempting to situate their narratives firmly in the past where they cannot contaminate the present, and indeed, future of their island.

**INDEX**

*Keywords*: Agamben (Giorgio), Tasmanian literature, Van Diemen’s Land, state of exception, historical romance
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Ellen Turner is a senior lecturer in English Literature at Lund University. Her Ph.D. thesis on conceptions of sovereignty and domesticity in interwar women’s writing explored the relationship between popular low- or middlebrow writing and modernist fiction. She has published articles on detective fiction and physical cultures as well as E.M. Hull and the desert romance genre.
Gazing Back: Decolonial Strategies in Zanele Muholi’s “Faces and Phases”

Alexandra Poulain

AUTHOR’S NOTE

A shorter version of this article was presented at the World Humanities Forum, Busan, South Korea, on 31 October 2018, and published online as part of the WHF’s proceedings.

1 This essay discusses South African photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi’s ongoing project “Faces and Phases,” which consists in a series of portraits of black lesbians and transmen, mostly (but not exclusively) from South Africa. The project started in 2006 when Muholi first photographed their friend and fellow activist Busi Sigasa at the old Women’s Gaol in Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, a central suburb of Johannesburg. Sigasa was a survivor of so-called “curative rape,” a widespread practice in South Africa, and had contracted HIV as a consequence of the attack. She was to die eight months later, at the age of 25. The picture (Muholi 2014, 314) is a low-angle close shot of Sigasa, who is dressed in a plain jumper, raincoat and woolly hat and is staring out into the distance, looking calmly determined. She is slightly decentred to the right and has her back turned to a blurred structure which towers above the high grass, and is clearly identifiable as a mirador, a sufficient synecdoche for the Women’s Gaol and the history of political oppression and resistance attached to it. The picture makes several points: on the one hand, the blurred fragment of the prison visible in the shot is also in itself a synecdoche of the anti-apartheid struggle. Throughout the apartheid era many activists were incarcerated there in particularly infamous living conditions. While the dominant historiographical narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle has tended to minimize, or even erase, the contributions of black LGBT+ people, implicitly or explicitly condoning the ubiquitous claim that “homosexuality is un-African,” the
shot forcefully inscribes Sigasa within this context, and thus claims the space of political activism as a legitimate sphere of visibility for the LGBT+ community and, importantly, for this particular individual. On the other hand, Sigasa has her back turned away from the watch tower in the picture, and is gazing out at something which we cannot see. The shot thus opens up a space of intimacy and freedom for her, about which we can only speculate: she will not be passively written into the grand narrative of the South African nation, but will situate herself within this narrative on her own terms. Poignantly, if we are aware of her story, we cannot avoid the thought that what she is contemplating on the horizon may be her own death – a thought reinforced, in Muholi’s 2014 book *Faces and Phases 2006-2014*, by the insertion of Segasa’s spoken word poem “Remember me when I’m gone” on the page opposite her picture and the page after that. The poem’s title is reminiscent of the dying Dido’s aria in Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, but the poem forcefully reverses Dido’s stance of passive acceptance. Structured on the repetition of the anaphoric pronoun “I,” it lists all the positive actions for which Sigasa asks to be remembered, referencing her work as a poet, photographer and activist. It echoes another poem in the book, Sindiwe Magona’s “Please, Take Photographs!” which features as one of the epigraphs to the volume, and urges an unknown addressee to “Take photographs of them all / Especially the children; especially the young, / Before it is too late. […] Before all the children are gone” (Muholi 2014, 8). The poem conjures up a context of pervasive violence and precariousness, where the lives of children are bound to be “snuffed, easily as candlelight” (8), and must be preserved in a photographic archive – an archive which will thus be, in part, a repository of dead presences.

2 Muholi’s project in “Faces and Phases” is, in their own words, “to document, document, document” a community which is ostensibly protected by a remarkably liberal body of legislation, yet exposed to the violence of a largely homophobic, transphobic society in which black lesbians, transmen and gender-nonconforming people are the most vulnerable individuals. The archive she is constituting gives a new kind of visibility to a community who is routinely forced, concomitantly, into invisibility (both reluctantly endured and self-inflicted, because visibility is potentially lethal) and hypervisibility in the mainstream media’s sensational representations of hate crime victims. Part of the compelling power of this archive lies in the fact that we are aware, as we envisage each new person in a picture, that this person may be dead at the time of viewing. This article seeks to articulate the nature of Muholi’s political and aesthetic intervention in this project. Building on and inflecting Judith Butler’s 2015 article “Gender Politics and the Right to Appear,” it first suggests that it constitutes a visual counter-narrative to mainstream understandings of “the people,” in which a community of precarious, invisibilised individuals collectively claim “the right to appear” in the political sphere. Indeed, one might talk of a counterarchive, following Shawn Michelle Smith in *Photography on the Colour Line*. Smith investigates the collection of photographs of modern, urban, middle-class African Americans which W.E.B. Du Bois compiled in his “Georgia Negro” albums presented at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris, challenging the narratives of existing photographic archives produced under the aegis of “scientific” racism, which enshrined white supremacist theories of racial hierarchy. As Baderoon notes, Muholi recognised their work’s deep affinity with Du Bois’ earlier counterarchive when they encountered it in London’s Autograph Gallery in 2010: “I just wanted to cry. What I’m doing is what has already happened. There’s a line of black women in photographs taken back to the nineteenth century” (Muholi qtd. in Baderoon...
With a (necessarily different) focus on their own community, Muholi follows Du Bois’s counterarchival strategy, contesting their people’s relegation to invisibility or misrepresentation, and claims for them the “right to appear” on their own terms.

This essay further argues that the subjects in Muholi’s shots do not merely claim visibility but, crucially, return the viewer’s gaze. Borrowing Nicholas Mirzoeff’s conceptualisation of “visuality” as an arrangement of the sphere of appearance inherent in the project of colonial modernity, it suggests that “Faces and Phases” promotes a counter-visual distribution of space in which participants claim not only “the right to appear” but also, in Mirzoeff’s phrase, “the right to look.” Reading “Faces and Phases” as a decolonial project, I contend that it uses photography to critique a way of looking which manifests, sanctions and perpetuates the continuing epistemic and aesthetic effects of coloniality in postcolonial South Africa, as well as in other contexts referenced in the pictures.

In “Gender Politics and the Right to Appear,” Butler attempts to articulate what happens when disenfranchised bodies choose to gather together in a given public space:

> When bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and inserts the body in the midst of the political field and demands more livable economic, social and political conditions no longer afflicted by precarity. (Butler 2015, 24–25)

Such assemblies may well do without verbalization; rather, their action is performative, in the sense that it is the co-presence of bodies in a space where they are not normally visible which speaks for itself and makes “demands.” Butler critiques the appropriation by neo-liberal rhetoric of the notion of responsibility, which is perversely resignified as the need “to be only responsible for ourselves, and not for others.” Conversely, public assembly performs an ethics of mutual dependence which, she claims, “stand[s] a chance of transforming the field of appearance itself” (43). This is especially relevant for gender-nonconforming people who deviate from the norms which they are expected to embody: “Those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence” (34). By assembling in public places, Butler argues, such precarious bodies claim the “right to appear” – the right to be recognised and accommodated as interdependent bodies.

Of course Muholi’s “Faces and Phases” is not literally a gathering of bodies, but a collection of photographs; yet, I argue that Butler’s concept of public assembly provides useful ways of thinking about its performative intervention in the political sphere. The viewer’s experience of encountering Muholi’s work varies greatly according to circumstances – whether she comes across the large prints (30 x 20 inc.) in an exhibition, where they can be taken in together at one glance, or faced individually, according to the viewer’s standing point, or in the book, where they are much smaller (8 x 5 inc.) and may only be viewed individually or in twos. The life-size shots in public shows give an eerie impression that you are facing real people rather than photographs; individuals, each of them photographed in a way that enhances rather than reduces singularity, but also a community with clearly traceable identity markers (race, and often gender nonconformity). While the viewer is at all times aware that the presence of these individuals is an illusory effect of photographic realism, further undermined by the fact that the prints are in black and white, still they can be seen as
an assembly of disenfranchised virtual bodies in a very specific public space: the privileged, economically and often racially segregated space of the art gallery or the museum. In deciding to take part in the project, Muholi’s subjects (to whom Muholi refers as “participants,” emphasising their active role) claim visibility for the members of a highly vulnerable community in the politically contested space of high culture, and thus in the incipient narrative of the young South African nation. Risking public identification as lesbians or transmen, and thus heightened exposure to violence, they performatively claim the right to appear in this national narrative, and demand to be included in what constitutes “the people.” In South Africa, there is of course a very long history of exclusion of black people from the community of “the people,” and of their relegation to a separate category of underdeveloped human beings. In “Idleness in South Africa,” the opening essay of White Writing, J.M. Coetzee traces this trend in South African ethnographic writing back to what he calls “the discourse of the Cape” – the discourse emanating from observation of the Hottentots of the Cape of Good Hope by the early travellers and settlers from the mid-seventeenth century. Coetzee quotes from one report, published in 1652: “The natives have everything in common from the dumb cattle, barring their human nature” (qtd. in Coetzee 1990, 12). The Hottentots’ humanity is grudgingly recognised, but only as the conceptual frontier that separates them from animals with which they are nevertheless perceived to have “everything in common.” As Coetzee develops, what motivated these early judgements was the Hottentots’ perceived “idleness,” in other words their reluctance to enter into a labour-based economy. What the Hottentot is not, in the eyes of the early Boer settlers, is “Man with a developed Physical appearance, Dress, Diet, Medicine, Crafts, etc. – in other words, what we may call Anthropological Man. The Hottentot is Man but not yet Anthropological man; and what keeps him in his backward state is idleness” (22). Ability and willingness to work, unquestionable values according to the Protestant ethos that sustained the early Boer settlers, were seen as the gateways to fully developed humanity, while the “idleness” of the Hottentots kept them in a separate, ambiguous taxonomic zone whence, though human, they could not be recognised as belonging to the community of “the people.” Coetzee’s take is that the Hottentots’ alleged “idleness” may be read as a valid response to, and refusal of, a way of life predicated on waged labour, and that the perceived attraction of such a response for white men later “compelled” the authorities to promulgate the racist body of legislation known as apartheid, in an effort to prevent them from defecting from a life of paid labour (35). The anti-apartheid struggle performatively demonstrated the capacity of the disenfranchised majority to organise, assemble and impose their inclusion into the community of “the people,” reconfigured in Archbishop Tutu’s utopian phrase as the inclusive “rainbow nation,” but post-apartheid South Africa has generated its own zones of exclusion. Muholi’s work, I suggest, continues the work of demanding inclusion into the category of “the people” for one of the most disenfranchised, vulnerable communities in South Africa, the black LGBT+ people whose sexual preference and/or gender-nonconformity are perceived as irredeemably “un-African.”

6 Collen Mfazwe’s 2012 shot (Muholi 2014, 27) shows her wearing the sash she won when she was crowned “2nd Prince” of Mr. Uthingo, an LGBT-initiated beauty pageant in Daveyton, Johannesburg. The shot playfully references a famous picture by David Godlubblatt: in “Saturday morning at the Hypermarket: Semi-final of the Miss Lovely Legs Competition, Boksburg, 1980,” white women are parading in a beauty contest in a
supermarket while lined up black women and children watch sullenly from the audience. Mhohli’s shot, however, shows us only Mfazwe proudly wearing her “2nd Prince” sash, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion is both quietly encoded and refuted in the picture’s semiotic performance. The word “Uthingo” (“rainbow” in Zulu) ingeniously references both the global symbol of LGBT+ identities and the “rainbow nation,” a narrative of the postcolonial South African nation as a space of inclusion, acceptance and reconciliation. One understanding of the rainbow symbol is subtly set to play against the other, since the “rainbow nation” has consistently denied inclusion to black LGBT+ people, sustaining the myth that homosexuality is un-African, an importation from white colonial culture. While traditional beauty pageants reinforce heteropatriarchy by celebrating commoditised women whose performance of gender best conforms to idealised gender norms, “Mr. Uthingo” queers the national narrative and opens it up to gender-nonconforming individuals. In this picture Mfazwe defeats categorization within the male-female binary and performs instead a fluid, playful version of gender, with her gracefully nonchalant posture, hands in pockets, untucked shirt, spotted bow-tie, and the conspicuous sash labelling her “2nd Prince,” white with black letters, in contrast with the less pronounced shades of grey of the figure and the stone wall against which she is standing. While the “Mr Uthingo” pageant takes place on the margins of mainstream culture, which it parodies, Mhohli’s pictures are shown in the privileged space of high art – both strategic sites in which black lesbians and transmen performatively claim the right to appear and to be included in the national narrative. The subjects in the pictures thus collectively salvage the notion of “responsibility” from its usage in neo-liberal rhetoric and reclaim a form of communal responsibility, each risking exposure for the sake of inscribing a collective body in the public space of the gallery.

However, the singular power of Mhohli’s portraits does not lie only in the way in which they reinscribe marginalised, vulnerable bodies into public space. The project started with Mhohli’s picture of Busi Sigasa, but this picture is atypical in that Sigasa is looking away from the camera. With very few exceptions, all the other subjects in the series gaze back at us with enigmatic gazes, and claim not just the right to appear, but crucially, “the right to look.” I am borrowing this phrase from Nicholas Mirzoeff’s 2011 book The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality. Mirzoeff traces the origin of the word “visuality” to British historian Thomas Carlyle, who used it in 1840 to refer to what he called the tradition of heroic leadership, which visualises history to sustain autocratic authority (Mirzoeff 2011, 3). Visuality does not only comprise visual perceptions, but “is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space.” (3). It produces an epistemic ordering of the world which it seeks to establish as the only legitimate, authoritative one. To do so it first “classifies,” then “separates the groups so classified as a means of social organisation,” and finally “makes this seem right and hence aesthetic” (3). This is an eerily precise description of apartheid; indeed Mirzoeff sees visuality as one modality of colonial domination, which persists in what decolonial theory has termed “coloniality” – the living legacy of colonialism in postcolonial societies in the form of a worldview which perpetuates hierarchies and forms of discrimination and oppression first produced under colonialism. Visuality is thus a confiscation of what Mirzoeff calls “the right to look,” which he glosses as “the right to the real” – the right to construct one’s own understanding, or vision, of the real, without submitting to the authority of visuality. “It is the claim to a subjectivity that
has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable” (1). Crucially, the right to look entails the right to be recognized as a subject. “The right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else’s eyes to express friendship, solidarity or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails” (3).

My intuition is that what makes Muholi’s pictures so powerful is that they dramatize this mutual exchange of looks that constitutes both the person photographed and the viewer as autonomous subjectivities, with no preconceived knowledge of the other, and equally legitimate in the act of “inventing the other.” In this sense, they work to disavow the large tradition of ethnographic photographs which posit a one-way gaze, and an asymmetrical production of knowledge according to the pre-established epistemic configuration of visuality. As Tamar Garb observes, in South Africa, the German anthropologist Gustav Fritsch largely contributed to creating this tradition of using photography “to catalogue the ‘natives’ of South Africa for classificatory and ‘scientific’ purposes” (Garb 2011, 18), establishing the standards for anthropometric two-part side-view/front-view mug shots. Although anthropometric and ethnographic photography nominally seeks “to capture generic traits and features” and erase individuality, Garb notes that “Fritsch’s actual photographs actually seem to exceed the instrumental goals of his project” (18) by unwittingly restoring a sense of their subjects’ intractable distinctiveness. In producing a series of black-and-white portraits shot at a similar distance, Muholi references the tradition of ethnographic photography initiated by Fritsch and subverts it by emphatically bringing out the individuality of their participants, and their capacity to gaze back at the camera. In so doing, Muholi is also, crucially, referencing and countering the practice of identity photographs which developed out of the early-day anthropometric mug shots and were used for surveillance and disciplinary purposes throughout the history of colonial South Africa. As Baderoon comments:

South Africa has a tradition dating from the colonial period under the Dutch of using identity documents to stifle people’s movements […]. Under apartheid, the most intrusive and damaging form of state control was the enforcement of the pass laws, through which black people were forced to carry an identity document, the hated “passbook,” or dompas. If you were black, the lack of a pass could get you arrested and removed to one of several invented countries, or “homelands.” The passbook with its identity photograph was therefore the state’s primary instrument of disenfranchisement, racial division, and restriction of movement. (2011, 404)

While the identity photographs in passbooks were used to turn black people into objects of the state’s ubiquitous gaze, thus enabling colonial visuality in Mirzoeff’s sense, Muholi’s “Faces and Phases” parodies the format of identity photographs but restores the subjects’ “right to look.” In this way, Muholi inscribes themself in a decolonial tradition of photographers which work, in Amanda Du Preez’s felicitous phrase, to “topple the controlling gaze of the empire” (2008, 439). Du Preez mentions, among several instances, the photographs which Marc Garanger had to take of forcibly unveiled women when he served as military photographer in the French army during the Algerian war of independence. Garanger was appalled by the violence inflicted on these women and “stood witness to their silent protest” (436) expressed, in his pictures, by their look of defiance. Du Preez glosses: “Almost to say – here we are – you wanted to unveil us to look at our faces – now take a long and hard look at the resistance in our eyes” (436).
In a picture from “Faces and Phases,” it is not just that the person is looking at the camera, and thus, it seems, at us. Rather, the photographer’s framing choices and the subject’s gestuality combine to suggest a body engaged in the act of looking, of inviting, sustaining and reciprocating our gaze. While we are at all times aware that this exchange is a fiction, since what we encounter is not a person but a photograph of a person who is not literally present (and may indeed be dead), the power of Muholi’s very specific brand of photographic realism is to create the illusion of a reciprocal gaze, so that we feel that as we envisage this person, we enter into an intersubjective transaction with them whereby, as we construct our narrative of who they are from what we are given to see in the picture, we are reciprocally being “invented,” and therefore transformed, by them. More precisely, while the co-presence of reciprocal gazes is fictional, we are nevertheless really being transformed by the experience of encountering their gaze which demands an ethical response – whether we experience recognition, solidarity, puzzlement, or rejection. An overview of the project reveals that Muholi has created a repertory of postures which their subjects then inhabit with infinite variations. In one series of medium and close shots the subjects – often, but not always, strong-looking butch women or transmen – face us squarely with arms folded and a confrontational, cocky or merely observant expression. Curiously, almost all of them have their heads slightly tilted to one side, a movement which cannot be ascribed any given meaning yet suggests attentiveness, a degree of concentration in the act of looking, a readiness to engage with us. In another series (which overlaps with the previous one), the subjects have their bodies turned away from us, but their faces towards us, so that the shots literally capture the movement of the body which enables the subject’s gaze, returning or perhaps soliciting ours.

In the book the pictures are interspersed with poems and testimonies by, or occasionally about, the participants in the project. One recurrent feature is their insistence on being actively involved in the creation of a visual archive of their community. This constitutes what Mirzoeff calls a counter-visuality – an alternative worldview organised by the look of gender-nonconforming people, many of whom describe themselves as “aspiring photographers” and “filmmakers.” Sharon “Shaz” Mthunzi tells of her harrowing experience of awakening to her vocation as a traditional healer in an unsupportive family: “When I started seeing things, getting visions, I’d tell them and they would laugh and say I’m young and couldn’t possibly see anything, there’s no such thing [...]. I was seeing things nobody else saw [...] . I thought I was losing my mind” (Muholi 2014, 224). After initiation, however, she claims to have found a degree of peace, though she registers the difficulty of living up to her responsibility as a healer. Mthunzi’s realization of her vocation comes with the discovery of an alternative way of seeing, one which she cannot resist although it is first experienced as a burden and a cause of rejection, before being embraced as life-enhancing. The story is both a poignant individual testimony and an allegory of the experience of discovering oneself different in an unsympathetic environment which makes you question the reality of your perceptions – or your desire. Mthunzi’s testimony suggests that non-normative sexualities or ways of performing your gender make you see the world differently, and that part of your responsibility is to claim the legitimacy of that counter-visuality. Mthunzi’s story also forcefully inscribes her fluid performance of gender within a specifically African tradition. In the 2014 shot which features opposite her testimony (Muholi 2014, 225), she offers a modernised
performance of the *sangoma*, wearing a traditional hat, dreadlocks, beaded necklaces and bracelets and a leopard-printed skirt, and pointing towards us the end of what seems to be a traditional divination stick. Later in the book, in a 2013 shot (263),17 she stands against a graphically scratched black plastic sheet, hands in pockets, in a stylish tuxedo, white shirt, dark tie and trendy belt. In both shots her expression is defiant, as if daring us to recognise both performances – the African healer and the sophisticated dyke – as equally authentic, legitimate expressions of who she is. Pamela Dlungwana, also an unforgettable recurrent presence in the project, recalls how for her first shot with Muholi (219)18 she “insisted on the third eye” (148) – the shiny earring which disrupts the almost perfect symmetry of the face and the picture, and is a modern transposition of the invisible third eye which provides vision beyond perceptual sight in various eastern esoteric traditions. While Dlungwana mentions this with humorous distance, in the picture she both looks at us with a magnetically grave gaze and claims for her sole attribute (as no other piece of clothing or jewellery is visible) a symbol of heightened vision. Finally, Muholi inserts themself into the archive. The last picture in the book is a self-portrait (322),19 in which they stand in their signature hat and leopard-printed shirt against a leopard-printed cloth, in defiance of the basic rules of “taste,” and in a triumphant demonstration of their mastery of the technique of black and white photography. Framing their gaze, the oversized glasses claim the right to look.

I want to end this essay with one more picture, that of Nosiphiwo Kulati’s portrait (307).20 For a split second this picture is hard to read, because there is a discrepancy between Kulati’s poised look and casual elegance (with her short-brimmed hat, braided hair and dark shirt with a white inscription that reads, intriguingly, “genuine”), her face turning to meet our gaze as we have seen in many other pictures, and what seems to be happening in the background which is strangely blurred, as if deliberately overexposed. How can she be standing there so calmly while people behind her are running in a panic? But if we break away from her gaze and look at the backdrop more attentively, we realise that it is not a scene from real life but an iconic picture which we have all seen before, Sam Nzima’s picture of the young Hector Pieterson being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu after being shot by the police during the Soweto uprising in June 1976. The young woman running alongside them, and struggling to keep up, is Pieterson’s sister Antoinette, dressed in her schoolgirl uniform, her hand raised in a futile effort to fend off disaster. As with Sigasa’s picture with which I started, this shot claims a space for Kulati, and by extension for her community, within the national narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle, and it also asks that this narrative be expanded to include all anti-discriminatory struggles. But because the backdrop of the picture is itself a picture, this picture also demands inclusion within the visual archive of the emerging nation, to which it claims to make a “genuine” contribution. At one level Kulati is using the inscription on her shirt ironically, both to respond to accusations of inauthenticity routinely made against lesbians and transmen (construed as “fake” men), and to reference the nature of both photographs (Muholi’s and Nzima’s) as simulacra. But beneath the surface of the paradoxical postmodern game, it claims the right for a dissident, counter-visual practice of photographic documentation to be recognised as a genuine modality of postcolonial South African historiography.
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NOTES

1. Men who were assigned female at birth.
2. In keeping with Muholi’s preference, I use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” to refer to them in this article.
3. For an extensive inquiry into the “rape culture” of South Africa, see Gqola 2015. See also Difficult Love, Zanele Muholi’s film documenting her life and work. https://www.imdb.com/video/play/vi3128728089.
4. Muholi started the “Faces and Phases” project during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) who supported the notion that the HIV virus caused AIDS, and instituted various
policies aimed to deny antiretroviral drugs to AIDS patients. This resulted in heightened vulnerability and invisibility for the community of South African lesbians and transmen who were exposed to HIV via the practice of “curative rape.”


6. For just two examples of the many responses to this myth, see Lock Swarr 2012 and Osman 2016. Writing about Muholi’s representation of transgender people, Gabeba Baderoon comments: “No matter how historians, sociologists and other scholars show convincing evidence to the contrary, the trope that varied genders and same-sex sexualities in Africa are corrupt practices imported from the West is stubbornly invoked by conservative politicians, as well as religious and civic leaders, to strategic effects, as their claims to represent authentic African culture often deflect attention from issues of governance” (2011, 391).


8. As Muholi points out in the course of the 2013 Aspen Ideas Festival discussion (quoted above), the new post-Apartheid Constitution of 1996 opposed discrimination on the basis of sexual discrimination, and in 2006 the Civil union Act legalised same-sex marriage in South Africa. However, Muholi makes the point that despite this liberal legislation, the country lacks anti-hate crime legislation, specific health measures for lesbians and transmen, and shelters for LGBT+ people. They also points out other hardships faced by LGBT+ people in the country (especially by the more vulnerable among these, i.e. black lesbians and transgender people), such as secondary victimisation by police, health services and social care networks, and the rejection of raped women by their families.

9. Writing about South African literature and journalism in 1986, Njabulo Ndebele took exception to the “hegemony of the spectacle” – the systematic choice of an aesthetics of shock and excess to represent the modalities of oppression in South Africa, to the detriment of “complexity,” “subtlety” and “interiority” – and also perceived and hailed the signs of a turn towards the “ordinary” in new South African writing. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the penchant for the spectacularisation of violence is still pervasive in South African journalism, but other forms of violence, such as homophobic and transphobic hate crimes, have become the privileged focus of the lurid spectacle of violence. One of Muholi’s aims is to reinscribe black LGBT+ bodies within a narrative of the “ordinary.” See Ndebele 1986. I am grateful to Claire Omhovère for pointing me in this direction.


11. A sentiment expressed by the Minister of Culture Lulu Xingwana after walking out of an exhibition at Constitution Hill in 2010 where Muholi’s pictures of nude lesbians were shown. She commented that “it was immoral, offensive and going against nation-building.” Sally Evans, “Minister Slams ‘Porn’ Exhibition”, The Times (South Africa), 2 March 2010. https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2010-03-01-minister-slams-porn-exhibition/.


13. See for instance the pictures of Bathini Dambza (2013; Muholi 2016, 29); Mutseleng Kgaripe (Vosloo, Johannesburg, 2011; 50); Anele “Anza” Khaba, (KwaThema, Springs, Johannesburg, 2010; 79); Thembi Nyoka (Partown, Johannesburg, 2007; 102); Lungiwe “Twana” Kunene (Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012; 177); Inno Tebogo Molaudzi (Parytown, Johannesburg, 2014; 182); Tumi Mokgosi (Yeoville, Johannesburg, 2007; 239).

14. See for instance the pictures of Selaelo “Sly” Manywa (Parktown, Johannesburg, 2010; Muholi 2016, 104); Anele “Anza” Khaba, (KwaThema Community Hall, Springs, Johannesburg, 2011; 114); Tash Dowell (Harare, Zimbabwe, 2011; 199); Thandeka Ndamase, KwaThema, Springs, Johannesburg, 2010; 220); Thobeka Mavundla (Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012;
ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to offer a reading of South African photographer and “visual activist” Zanele Muholi’s ongoing project “Faces and Phases,” which consists in a series of portraits of black lesbians and transmen, mostly from South Africa. While South Africa’s legislation on LGBTI issues is remarkably liberal (for instance, same-sex marriage has been available to LGBTI people since 2006), South African society is still largely homophobic, and the practice of “corrective rape” (or rape used as an alleged means of curing homosexuality) is a widespread threat and an ordeal which numerous black lesbians and transgender people have undergone. Muholi’s work aims to give visibility to their community, but in documenting this community they are also claiming their subjects’ agency as active participants in the project and, crucially, subjects of the gaze. Indeed, while each picture is differently composed and framed, the common denominator which unites the series is the enigmatic power of the subject’s gaze, almost invariably directed at the viewer and challenging us to find our own responses to them in aesthetic, ethical and political terms. Drawing on Judith Butler’s 2015 article “Gender politics and the right to appear” and on Nicolas Mirzoeff’s notion of “countervisuality,” as developed in his 2011 book The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality, this article reads Muholi’s work in “Faces and Phases” as a decolonial project which seeks to challenge the way in which we look and the structure of knowledge.

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Keywords: Muholi (Zanele), photography, counter-visuality, queer, decolonial

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1 Bridget Grogan’s monograph *Reading Corporeality in Patrick White’s Fiction* articulates a welcome challenge to a number of the assumptions of White studies. Her compelling primary thesis is that White doesn’t endorse a dualistic paradigm between spiritual transcendence and corporeal abjection, but rather stages it as an immanent critique of rationalist modernity. This argument draws on the concept of what Grogan calls the “somatic spirituality” which critically diverges from the Platonic and Pauline view of the flesh as the prison of the soul. This is salutary in a number of ways; critics have long recognized the importance of physical abjection in White’s novels, but often in unhelpful and contradictory ways.

2 Australian literary scholarship has a detailed history of misreading White in both complimentary and censorious directions. G.A. Wilkes, the first professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney, thought that White’s emphasis on corporeal experience often got in the way of his metaphysical themes, singling out the apparent but highly debatable “telepathy” between Voss and Laura in his 1957 novel *Voss*. Wilkes’ successor Leonie Kramer, who White famously detested, had similar difficulties with *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) which in the terms of her evaluative Leavisite paradigm she considered a poorly executed allegory especially in terms of its treatment of materialism. Among White’s revisionist critics too, the tension between metaphysical impulses and bodily realities has been singled out. Simon During’s controversial study
Patrick White (1996) encapsulates the pseudo-theoretical reading of White as an Eliot-style aristocratic high-modernist with elitist philosophies and politics. Like Kramer, During argued that White complicates his grand metaphysical inquiries with sanguine physicality.

These readings are, Grogan astutely argues, overwhelmingly informed by Western paradigms which perceive the body as separate to the mind/soul, and therefore incompatible with revelation. Grogan’s sense of the somatic sacred is informed by Kristeva’s theory of abjection as a means of alienating or “othering” aspects of corporeality and thereby defending the narcissistic fiction of the autonomous self. Throughout her study this application is demonstrated to be a very generative way of understanding White’s many characters who, like Voss and Waldo Brown, seem to wage a constant psychological war against their own physical realities. Following this logic, Grogan persuasively argues that White’s undeniable preoccupation with characters who desire to transcend their circumstances through intellect or art does not constitute any kind of simplistic identification or endorsement, but an observant and at times prescient engagement with the errors of rationalism. Here, Grogan’s adroit use of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the fascist impulses of enlightenment, and of Derrida’s theory of the metaphysics of presence, dismisses the trite canard that the decline in White’s reputation was in any way directly linked to the advent of critical theory in the anglophone world. On the contrary, Grogan persuasively argues that White’s treatment of the fascist or elitist principles of western modernity is closer to deconstruction than it is to celebration.

In this respect Grogan’s monograph joins an encouraging development in White scholarship, in which the complex irony and perspectivism of White’s novels is coming to be recognized with appropriate nuance. For instance, where Brigid Rooney describes White’s earlier “metaphysical” trilogy – comprising The Tree of Man (1955), Voss (1957) and Riders in the Chariot (1961) – as “mythic, biblically charged national fictions” (2009, 42), Andrew McCann argues that White’s prose style should be seen as an attempt to “empty out, to travesty and to rephrase as ruin the very signifiers of its own theological orientation” (2015, 119). Grogan’s concept of somatic rather than platonic spirituality strikes one as a useful solution out of this impasse. According to the terms of a transcendent metaphysical spirituality, many of White’s novels – and The Tree of Man in particular – must be interpreted as at least partially redemptive allegories for the European conquest of the Australian continent. According to the parameters of an earthed spirituality in which bodily abjection is revered as the origin of pity, White’s novels needn’t be hampered by the politics and philosophies which they interrogate.

This problem of interpretation has the potential for wider implications for White scholarship and its place within the study of Australian and postcolonial literatures. Australian literary studies developed as a professional discipline in the context of numerous cultural anxieties concerning Antipodean belatedness and distance. As I have written elsewhere, many of the proto-scholars like Vance and Nettie Palmer often wrote to confect or augur the distinctly Australian literary character that the lingering influence of Romanticism taught them to value so highly. Because of this context, White’s celebration as the prophesied advent of the great Australian novelist was in many respects so over-determined that until relatively recently it seemed impossible to read him as anything else. The after-image of this tendency has in turn left White a legacy not unlike the explorer’s statue at the conclusion of Voss, what McCann calls “an
icon in the service of a fairly uninspiring cultural nationalism” (2015, 127). Grogan departs from this disciplinary lineage, not least in her rigorous reading of White’s second published novel *The Living and the Dead* (1941), a text largely ignored by Australian critics. This is one of the numerous ways in which Grogan’s monograph exemplifies the value of reading White beyond and against this limiting cultural prism.

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REFERENCES

1 *Remapping African Literature* puts forth the links between literary aesthetics and publishing policies and reassesses literary criticism on African literature using an interdisciplinary approach to African literature, particularly through the use of archives, which constitute a central source for Ibironke’s arguments. Until the publication of this timely study, these archives had not been published. They come in the form of private exchanges between African authors and Western publishers, namely from the *Heinemann African Writers Series*, a series of books published from 1962, which have enabled African writers to gain international visibility.

2 The “Re” in “Remapping” shows that Ibironke sets out to revise and rethink the reasons that have led to the construction of the canon of African literature until now. With his interest in archives, Ibironke is in line with critic – and former Professor at the University of Austin, Texas – Bernth Lindfors, and the latter’s own fascination with archives which he has considered as material for literary criticism (amidst these archives, those of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, kept at the University of Austin, Texas). The decision to keep Tutuola’s archives in Texas, which serves as just one example to illustrate Ibironke’s point, triggered the wrath of some of the first-generation African writers since, among other reasons, it constituted a continuation of colonial practices.

3 Ibironke shows how publishing and editing practices influenced textual production. By using the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism, which he applies to the *Heinemann*
African Writers Series, Ibironke argues that African literature is a product of Western hegemonic culture. According to Ibironke, “[t]he production of African literature presents a unique problem space for African literary criticism that requires a study of institutional practices and effects that mediate and permeate texts, as well as texts’ reflexivity on conditions of production and their capacity to transform institutional practices,” hence a dialectical process, which he calls “auto-heteronomy.” Among other things, Remapping African Literature puts to the fore African writers’ “counter pressures” targeting the “producers of culture, [...] the institutions of literary production” (3). With the term “auto-heteronomy,” Ibironke has in mind a form of reciprocity of effects whereby texts (and writers) seem to anticipate and therefore contribute to shaping the conditions of literary production. Ibironke goes against Roland Barthes’ poststructuralist idea that the author is dead. On the contrary, the African writer is an essential agent in cultural production.

The book is composed of eight chapters (including the introduction and the conclusion). The Introduction starts off by announcing what will be at the core of Ibironke’s study: “African writers are operators of postcolonial transformation” (1). This short introduction is efficient in that it clearly puts forth the main arguments that will be detailed at length in the rest of the book.

Chapter Two, entitled “The Commonwealth Impresario,” delves into the key role and place of British publishers (among them, James Currey), and the power dynamics in the book industry. For Ibironke, it is clear that some decisions made in publishing houses in London had a huge impact on the content of African literature, later canonized by these very publishers. The latter contributed to giving shape to this literature, which may have been deprived of its original content and purpose, and this situation could have prevented some works from becoming canonical.

Chapter Three is aptly entitled “The Literary Scramble for Africa: Selection and the Practice of Hierarchies,” and takes up the arguments presented in the second chapter. Ibironke exposes the Heinemann African Writers Series’ publishing practices, which contributed to the mapping of African literature (Wole Soyinka referred to “the activities of British publishers as a second scramble for Africa,” 54). These practices clashed with the rising consciousness of African writers and, to a certain extent, their Bildungen as artists. Two main arguments are presented in this chapter: Ibironke points out Heinemann’s “act of mapping” (61), which is intrinsically linked to “the political mapping of Africa by imperial and neo-colonial power” (61). Ibironke also shows how African writers claimed their respective autonomies vis-à-vis the Heinemann African Writers’ Series.

The next three chapters (“The Seeds of the Series: Chinua Achebe and the Educational Publisher,” “Wole Soyinka: The Pan-African Literary Practice,” “Ngugi: Language, Publics, and Production”) each focus on one specific master of African literature. Ibironke develops his central concept, “auto-heteronomy,” thanks to which he analyses the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and sheds light on their respective ideologies, which have often clashed. The Kenyan writer’s role is particularly highlighted, and Ibironke clearly shows how he contributed to shaping the poetics and politics of African literature, namely by focusing on the decolonizing of African minds through language.

Chapter Eight, entitled “Conclusion: The Auto-Heteronomy of African Literature,” insists on the importance of the autonomy of African writers. Ibironke also claims that...
Remapping African Literature makes it possible to put forth “the material agency of writers in exerting genuinely decolonizing counter-pressures to the forces of an apparatus that seeks to confine them” (305), therefore contributing to rewriting the Afro-pessimistic script about the continent: the concept of “auto-heteronomy” enables Ibironke to offer a more optimistic view of cultural production on the African continent.

9 Remapping African Literature is a major contribution. It is nevertheless surprising to notice that Ibironke refers to “African literature” in the singular; also worthy of note is his choice to study literature – or literatures? – written in English only, while his (decolonizing) approach could very well work for Lusophone, Francophone and, of course, Indigenous African literatures. One may also wonder about the androcentric approach adopted by Ibironke, who focuses on male writers only. Despite these limitations, this book remains an excellent study of the relationships between publishers and authors and how they have impacted literary production on the African continent.

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1 *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations* is a study of literary narratives spanning the Middle East over the last half-century. Its focus is on works that both observe and perform revolt against repressive power structures, whether colonial or part of its aftermaths. Setting the stage for analysis and its intervention in postcolonial studies, the book opens with a reflection on the cover image chosen for *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (2013): a photograph of a protester in Cairo’s Tahrir Square during the historic early days of the 2011 uprising against President Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year rule. Moore’s reading of the cover not only establishes the volume’s geographical and temporal framework, but also introduces some of its key themes: repression, revolt, and the disjuncture that often occurs between national imaginaries and actual state formations. From 2011’s moment of historic rupture, Moore looks forward to what remains politically unrealised following the uprisings, as well as back into the long history of collective struggles across the region. She draws on a wide range of authors, from renowned writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Assia Djebar, to contemporary memoirists such as Raja Shehadeh and Ghada Karmi, in order to show how “Arab creative narratives anticipate and reflect retrospectively upon (contested, unfolding) histories” (1).

2 For Moore, reading the *Handbook* cover is a way into discussing and critiquing “the tentative interface between the Arab world and postcolonial studies” (2). The growing interaction between these interfaces allows her to both situate her scholarship within
“the Anglophone postcolonial literary field” (4) as well as to critique the extent to which the Arab world has generally been overlooked by the field until relatively recently, with a coherent body of work now finally emerging, of which Moore's monograph is very much a part. As she states, postcolonial literary studies has been “unconscionably slow” (4) in paying attention to the region. She usefully charts this developing engagement, acknowledging the work of scholars such as Anna Ball, Norbert Bugeja, Karim Mattar and Caroline Rooney, and asserts what a postcolonial perspective can provide, namely a productive framework for analysing texts that grapple with colonialism, neo-imperialism and nationalism. Moore is also refreshingly clear-eyed about the limitations of such a perspective. “We should remember,” she writes, “that a postcolonial approach follows one line, disclosing one part of a complex pattern” (7–8).

The book aims to “pin down the postcoloniality of Arab literary production with reference to four specific contexts” (7), as well as demonstrate how “the postcolonial manifests as a continuous project” (16). Moore's remit is literature attentive to national histories, drawn from Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon and Palestine, with a chapter devoted to each context. The chapters are at their strongest when engaged with questions of gender – such as the assessment of Jean Said Makdisi's *Teta, Mother and Me* and Boualem Sansal's work, or the elucidation of the ongoing impact of colonial and imperial legacies in the chapter on Lebanon, firmly anchored by a focus on gender and sexual violence. What also works really well is Moore's attentiveness to the narration of alternative possibilities to current oppressive realities, whether those imagined by writers concerned with the ongoing Israeli occupation in Palestine, such as Shehadeh, or those grappling with state power in Egypt, such as Miral al-Tahawy.

The book is characterised by astute close textual analyses, which amply support the claims Moore is making. The study, though, would have benefited from an explicit discussion of the politics of translation; specifically Moore's reliance on literary translations for analysis of works that are written in Arabic. Translations have been productively assessed recently by a number of postcolonial scholars (such as Anna Ball and Anna Bernard). A similar positioning of the work would have been useful in order to further bolster the analysis of the translated texts. The book has an ambitious multilingual focus, engaging substantially not just with translated Arabic literature but also with writers working in English and French. For example, the chapter on Algeria looks exclusively at authors working in French and the chapter on Palestine at English-authored texts. Such choices work overall and the book certainly engages with the issue of language in important ways, such as its observations about the development of French as a literary language for numerous Algerian writers, within a complicated post-independence context. With a colonial history undergirding the relationship between Arabic and European languages, this is crucial. But given that the study is explicitly motivated by the heterogeneity of national histories and their narrations, a more sustained attention to this relationship – as well as a fuller discussion of how other regional languages intersect with and problematise this – would have further cemented these choices.

Moore is sensitive throughout to the differences and complexities of each context – indeed, she is keen to underscore specificities and one of the strengths of the study is that each chapter is so distinctly realised, without the flattening of experience and contexts that can so easily emerge in a study of this scope. But at times, Moore's
commitment to specificity does come up against the need to reach for broad conclusions about multiple texts in order to advance her argument about postcolonial Arab narratives as “vehicles for the nation” (1) and to drive forward her “overarching focus on the Arab world within postcolonial literary studies” (169). To return to Moore’s insightful assertion that a postcolonial approach follows only “one line,” it seems worthwhile to ask whether – and how – this also fits with the tendency within the field towards work that takes an overarching perspective on a given topic.

While admittedly beyond the scope of Moore’s study, a final question that arises is what might constitute an Arab narrative that is not postcolonial in the sense that she defines it – anticipating and reflecting on the upheavals of national histories – but that nonetheless overlaps with or productively challenges those narratives that are analysed. This question concerning the postcoloniality or otherwise of a text, as well as the larger question of how to appropriately engage with postcolonial studies in relation to the region, is less an indication of shortcomings in the work itself – which sets its parameters clearly – and more observations on the field as a whole, as well as on potential further work that could emerge from a reading of Moore’s book – work that can remain firmly within postcolonial studies, or look to step outside it. *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations* is generous in its offering of routes into and out of the material it presents, which hopefully will encourage further scholarship.

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1 With Salman Rushdie posting on Facebook, Amitav Ghosh blogging about research, and Teju Cole composing a Twitter novel, postcolonial scholars have seen digital technologies changing contemporary literary interpretation. In *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era,* Simone Murray offers a compelling account of how shifts in media forms influence literary culture. As she notes, “There is a weary sense that, as a discipline, we have been around this block before” (1). However, she offers fresh insight on the material realities of contemporary literature across the entire supply chain of the literary market. Situated between book history and print culture studies, media studies, and electronic and digital literary studies, Murray’s book offers an incisive model for the future of literary studies that conceptualizes contemporary developments in relation to their historical precursors. Moving through production, distribution, and consumption of literature in the digital age, Murray effectively manages not to, in her words, “pit book history and media and cultural studies against each other but, rather, to catalyze intellectual exchange between them and to demonstrate cross-pollination across disciplinary, institutional, and departmental boundaries” (166).

2 Critically, Murray offers a framework for analyzing developments in 21st century literature, from changes in authorial obligation to innovations in publication models and formats to digital platforms facilitating reader engagement. She positions them as
part of a “digital literary sphere,” echoing Jürgen Habermas’s “public sphere.” Coining the term, as Murray does, is critical, for it brings together a number of distinct but related changes at the interface of literary culture and media ecologies. Putting “traditional” dimensions of literary publication (print-oriented media, author, publisher, retailer, reader, and cultural policy entities) into conversation with processes that play out online (performing authorship, selling literature, curating literature’s public life, consecrating the literary, and entering literary discussion), Murray illustrates the complex interplay of digital media and contemporary literary production. Therefore, *The Digital Literary Sphere* offers keen insight on the sociology of literature as well as how digital media influence literary production, how authorship and readership change online, and how to navigate the expansiveness of “literature” in our contemporary moment.

Murray breaks down the landscape of the digital literary sphere throughout the book. The first chapter offers insight on how digital media contribute to the changing role of the author in the global Anglophone literary marketplace. Tracing successive waves of new media forms, Murray demonstrates that the author is far from dead in the digital age; rather, authors are held to a performance of identity and intimacy with reading publics online. Taking into account the commercial relationships and materialist conditions that shape literary community, her second chapter discusses the influences of Amazon and concomitant innovations in literary marketing, such as book trailers and blog tours, on the literary market and reading publics. Murray further considers the value of online marketing for independent publishing and identifies the troubling way the literary community has become a commodity. In her third chapter, she examines tension between literary festivals, which rely on spatiotemporality as a mode of audience engagement, and virtual author events. She proposes that digital media have opened up new spaces beyond literary festivals that facilitate connections between authors and readers, democratizing writer-reader engagements and fetishizing literary locales. Surveying book review culture, chapter four addresses tensions between book reviews as forms of establishment cultural criticism and the amateur review culture fostered by Amazon customer reviews, websites like GoodReads, and literary blogs. Murray proposes that the architecture of the internet itself – which is not flat but hierarchical – plays a role in the distribution of critical authority. In chapter five, Murray considers collective digital reading practices, such as online reading groups and virtual reading communities. These collaborative practices, she argues, offer insight on how reading is changing through a communal reading mode facilitated by digital culture. Murray concludes with attention to the “digital paratext.” While there has been recent critical attention to authors’ social media and websites as paratexts from scholars, including Jaclyn Partyka and Tawnya Azar in postcolonial studies, Murray expands the category to include marketing materials (book trailers and blog tours), digitally archived materials from in-person and virtual author appearances, online book reviews and blogs, and websites that facilitate online reading communities. As she notes, these are often dismissed as trivial, commercial, ephemeral, or strange and thus not worthy of critical attention. However, they are essential to understanding the digital literary sphere and the changing nature of authorship, publishing, and audience engagement in the 21st century.

*The Digital Literary Sphere* offers critics a palatable way of valuing contemporary literary production, even those resistant to or skeptical of digital literary studies. Murray convincingly makes the case that the “digital literary sphere” is an effective heuristic.
for understanding the integral contributions of digital environments to literature in the 21st century and how “traditional” and “non-traditional” literature alike have been transformed. For, as she notes, “[r]econceptualizing twenty-first century literary culture as sited at the dynamic overlap of oral, print, and digital domains allows us to examine the real-time workings of the literary system in a now richly multimedia environment” (110).

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New York: Syracuse University Press. 336 p. 9 7808 1563 6380. $35. 2019

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1 While Arab American literary production began as soon as Arab immigrants arrived in the U.S., Arab American literary criticism has only recently begun to take shape as a distinct discursive field. Within the last two decades full monographs have been devoted to the topic, including Waïl S. Hassan’s *Immigrant Narratives* (2014) and Carol Fadda’s *Contemporary Arab American Literature* (2014). Steven Salaita’s *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide* (2011) is one of the earliest books of criticism devoted to Arab American Literature. In *Modern Arab American Fiction*, Salaita articulates some of the difficulties that prevent Arab American criticism from flourishing (4–5), for example, the lack of clarity about the category Arab American itself. At the same time, he urges critics to take up Arab American literature as fertile ground for discussions of race, identity, and nation in the U.S. (10). Michele Hartman’s *Breaking Broken English* takes up Salaita’s call and interrogates how Arab American literature is informed and shaped by Black literary production, with an emphasis on linguistic and aesthetic similarities. Hartman’s work is preceded and grounded by one other text on Black and Arab literary conversations, Theri A. Pickens’ *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* (2014).

2 *Breaking Broken English* establishes a history of Black-Arab solidarity in the U.S. through examination of Arab American literature. Hartman explicitly chooses to look toward positive and productive relationships between Black and Arab writers over racist or troubling accounts, which she suggests have been explicated in other works (17). In
Breaking Broken English, Hartman finds points of productive contact between Arab and Black literary positions in the rhetorical process of “breaking language.” Breaking language, a counter to “broken” language, is a means of radical disruption and reclamation of English by those that have often been othered through it. Hartman looks to “breaking language and creative soundscapes [to be] used as a framing device for the study of literature” (53). Her study focuses on close reading of language to help readers “think more about English, the multiple englihes that exist and can exist, and American writing more generally” (51). Hartman identifies Arab American poetry and fiction that share breaking properties with African American literary and spoken traditions. Some of these shared features that break language include: *taqasim* (musical improvisations performed within a composition), call and response traditions (a line that seeks a response, or that comments on one prior to it), uses of languages other than English, and more.

In chapter one, Hartman establishes the concept of breaking, the overarching conceptual apparatus of the book, through recourse to Black intellectual traditions, perhaps most indebtedly, via reference to Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2011). Moten’s work, which reads Black literature that is perceived as grammatically insufficient as instead a site of lyrical surplus, inspires Hartman’s use of breaking, where “to break” invites capacity and potential rather than fracture or failure. She refines her articulation of the concept of breaking through close reading of Suheir Hammad’s 2008 *breaking poems*. Through Hammad, Hartman theorizes the break as a space through which Arab writers “embrace solidarity and shared political purpose” with Black writers.

Chapter two studies poems by Arab American writers that pay homage to Black Americans. Hartman’s analysis of the poems of D.H. Melhem, Saladin Ahmed, and Naomi Shihab Nye pays close attention to enjambment, line breaks, and white space as ways for writers to break English at the level of the line. With the exception of Ahmed, who is better known for his work in fantasy and science fiction, Hartman has chosen canonical poets, which lends credibility to her position that Black Arab literary solidarity is not an anomaly in the literature. Chapter two also begins by detailing the concept of soundscapes – the auditory rather than written shape of work – as a site for breaking.

Chapter three continues to analyze soundscapes in a sustained reading of Susan Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin* (2010). Here Hartman delineates the author’s recuperation of “broken english” to “break” through typical, negative representations of Palestine. Abulhawa’s work, unlike that of some writers featured in this work, enjoys a certain cross-over, book club popularity, which Hartman identifies as educational (122). Hartman is most successful in this chapter in instances where her focus is close reading the language and sounds of the text. In the absence of attention to gendered and sexual dynamics in the work, it would have been useful, here and elsewhere, to have a clearer understanding of why and how Hartman uses the label “feminist.”

Chapter four studies Randa Jarrar’s use of Arabic vernacular and popular culture references as forms of “breaking.” Hartman discusses how Jarrar’s use of Arabic in her work parallels the literary disruptions enabled through Black writers’ manipulation of English and creation of other englihes. Here, Jarrar’s awareness of racializing tropes and her direct acknowledgement of appropriation as a potential pitfall in Black-Arab relations helps Hartman argue more convincingly that Jarrar’s work performs
solidarity. In general, Hartman could have devoted more attention to the topic of appropriation in early chapters. Given the propensity of writers, even other minority writers, to appropriate Black culture, as well as the much debated line between appropriation and appreciation, the book is somewhat haunted by its threat, and thus, a more robust refutation or exploration of the topic would have been useful.

Chapter five offers a case study of translation as a breaking process, wherein Hartman details her translation of Radwa Ashour’s autobiography. This chapter offers historical grounding for the project of Black-Arab literary solidarity and thinks about how breaking languages is part of developing a language of liberation. It is a fitting close to Breaking Broken English because it stresses one of Hartman’s central theses: that Black-Arab literary solidarity is rich and complex, with a longer history than is usually attributed to it.

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