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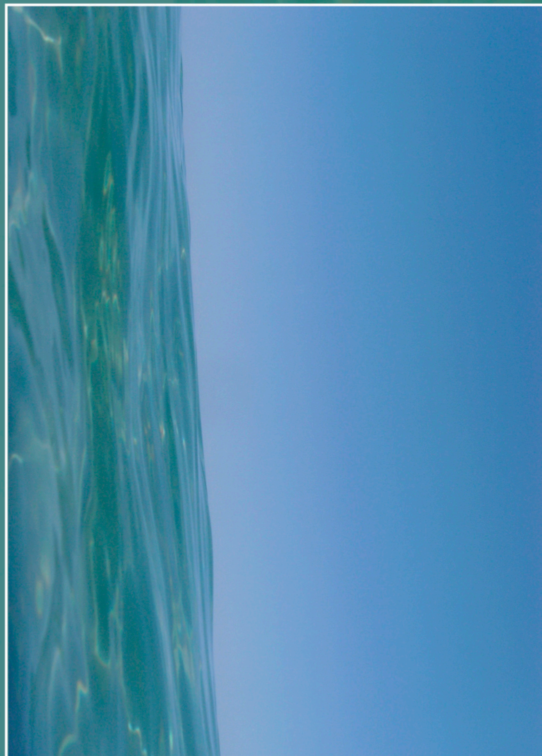
Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World



Edited by
Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp,
Marion Gymnich and Klaus P. Schneider

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Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World

Cross/Cultures

READINGS IN POST/COLONIAL
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VOLUME 215

ASNEL/GAPS Papers

ASNEL Papers appear under the auspices of the Gesellschaft
für Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien (GAPS)
Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies

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VOLUME 25

The titles published in this series are listed at *brill.com/asne*

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Cover illustration: © Hanne Birk.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at https://catalog.loc.gov
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021036122

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0924-1426
ISBN 978-90-04-46565-7 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-04-46639-5 (e-book)

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Contents

Notes on Contributors ix

Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World
An Introduction 1
Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp and Marion Gymnich

PART 1
Media, Performance, Genres

1 Poverty, (Neo)orientalism and the Cinematic Re-presentation of 'Dark India' 21
Clelia Clini

2 "Performing with What Little They Have"
Street Theatre in the Slums of Ahmedabad 40
Geoffrey V. Davis

3 Overcoming the 'Crisis of Nonrelation' through Formal Innovation
Aboriginal Short Story Cycles 55
Dorothee Klein

PART 2
Intersectional Approaches

4 Precarious Lives in Tony Birch's *Common People* (2017) 73
Sue Kossew

5 Diasporic Female Precarity and Agency in Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* 88
Maryam Mirza

6 Narrating the 'Black Male Underclass'
The Ethics and Aesthetics of Coming into Representation 103
Anna Lienen

7 Breaking the Cycle of Heathcliff
Precarious Subjects from Emily Brontë to Caryl Phillips 116
Julia Hoydis

PART 3
(Publication) Politics and Precarity

8 Voices of Ugandan Women Writers
Positioning FEMRITE Since 2006 137
Susan Nalugwa Kiguli

9 Poverty, Precarity and the Ethics of Representing Africa 156
Sule Emmanuel Egya

PART 4
Environmental Precarity

10 Sovereignty at the Margins
The Oceanic Future of the Subaltern 177
Malcolm Sen

11 Plantation and Planet
Environmental Precarity in Anglophone Caribbean World Writing 194
Jan Rupp

PART 5
Representing Refugees and Immigrants

12 Narrative Zones of Refuge in *The Lost Boy* by Aher Arop Bol and *A Man of Good Hope* by Jonny Steinberg 213
J.U. Jacobs

13 "Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe"
Precarity and (American) Dream Narratives in Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers 234
Julian Wacker

14 The Scenario of (Im-)Migrants as Scroungers and/or Parasites in British Media Discourses 246
Andreas Musolff

15 Narrating Precarious Lives
Refugee Tales, African Titanics, *and* The Year of the Runaways 261
Janet M. Wilson

Index 281

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Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World

An Introduction

Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp and Marion Gymnich

"Precarity is everywhere today", French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu announced in a lecture in 1997 (qtd. in Springveld 26). "[P]recarity is not a passing or episodic condition, but a new form of regulation that distinguishes this historical time", American philosopher Judith Butler writes in her foreword to German political theorist Isabell Lorey's study *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (2015). In a similar vein, American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), asks: "What if […] precarity is the condition of our time – or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?" (20). Finally, according to British economist Anthony B. Atkinson, "poverty is one of the two great challenges facing the world as a whole today, along with climate change" (1). This list of prominent voices from different academic disciplines clearly testifies to the centrality of poverty and precarity for our time.

Poverty and precarity are among the most pressing social issues of our day and their potential impact on political (in)stability and social cohesion has become the subject of intense political debate in many societies. The last two decades have seen an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor across the globe as well as an exponential growth in the number of forcibly displaced persons. In 2019, almost a fourth of the world's population lived in poverty (UNDP, "Global"), with global income and wealth inequality steadily increasing since 1980,[1] and 79.5 million people worldwide had been forced to leave their homes by the end of 2019 (UNHCR). It has been argued that "it is the poorest who are, and will be, hit earliest and hardest" by the global climate crisis and the damage from climate change (Stern 232). Of course, poverty and precarity can take many shapes and have many different causes. At the time of

1 Poverty and inequality are linked, but they are not the same: inequality is a matter of unequal distribution of wealth and income and concomitant social capital. According to the "Human Development Report 2019", published by the United Nations Development Programme, global income and wealth inequality has been increasing since 1980, as a result in particular of "the growing inequality of asset return rates, as the returns on financial assets, disproportionately owned by the wealthy, increased." (132).

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writing this introduction the COVID-19 pandemic has the world in its grip and occasions new and unprecedented dimensions of precarity (cf. Wilson et al.) which the contributors to this volume could not have imagined at the time they submitted their essays.

The last two decades have also seen a steady growth of fictional and non-fictional representations of disenfranchised groups and individuals as well as an intensification of research into the visual and narrative forms of these representations. The contributions to this volume address conceptualisations of poverty and precarity from the perspective of literary and cultural studies as well as linguistics and investigate the ethics and aesthetics of representing poverty and precarity across the postcolonial world. While there is no doubt that poverty reduction and the amelioration of precarious lives require political measures, scholars agree that representations impact on "the public imagination or 'social imaginary', that is, the knowledge, values, attitudes and emotions with which societies and individuals perceive poverty and take measures against it" (Korte and Zipp 2). Of course, as Gareth Griffiths reminds us, this social or cultural imaginary has always been the foundation upon which "both oppressor and oppressed" have constructed their identity and social environment (9). Representations of poor and precarious lives suffering from deprivation, insecurity, violence, and social and political exclusion thus might also serve the purpose or have the effect of stabilising prejudices against the objects of representation, furthering their exclusion and silencing, eliciting no response other than sympathy or compassion on the part of the listener. At the same time, socio-political change requires an act of the imagination to envisage alternative futures, to assume responsibility and spur action. As Griffiths has pointed out: "Imagination allows human beings to conceive of a reality different from that which they are experiencing and to understand their world as part of a changeable past and future. The exercise of this power to imagine allows human beings to manipulate their world in a unique way" (9).[2]

The "new poverty studies" (Christ) and the "turn to precarity" (Morrison) are firmly embedded in ethical criticism analysing the frameworks of representation that facilitate or disavow the affective and ethical responses to precarious subjects. Originally concerns of social studies and economics, poverty and precarity have increasingly been discussed in literary and cultural studies in recent years. This growing interest can be attributed not only to the mediatised awareness of the emergence of new forms of precarity, subalternity and

2 See also Melissa Kennedy on the relevance of the imaginary to neoliberal critique, in *Narratives of Inequality: Postcolonial Literary Economics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 218.

marginality resulting from the effects of neo-liberal capitalism, terror and war, environmental degradation, or persecution and discrimination, to name but a few of the possible causes. It might also be partly due to the shifting geographies of global poverty and precarity, which are no longer identified as an issue and a reality restricted to the Global South or so-called developing countries, but are recognised to likewise affect countries in the Global North. According to Atkinson, "[t]he 'rediscovery' of poverty in rich countries helped in the past to place poverty on the political agenda" (2–3); it has obviously served to place poverty and precarity on the agenda of scholars, not least in literary and cultural studies, undermining traditional binaries and paving the way for both a greater sense of global entanglement[3] and more interdisciplinary research.

Above all, the recent surge of poverty and precarity studies might be related to a shift in definitions that links them more closely to questions of justice and human rights. For many years, poverty was conceived of primarily in monetary terms of income and consumption;[4] more recently, social scientists such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have argued that poverty is linked with deprivation of social capabilities that limits people's freedom to pursue their goals in life and to participate fully in society. This approach, which is also endorsed by the United Nations Development Programme, implies that poverty must be understood "not only […] as (relative) material deprivation, but also as encompassing socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)", as Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp summarise in their study *Poverty in Contemporary Literature* (2).

Precarity[5] is a term widely used in recent years by political and social scientists in the context of growing insecurity within labour markets and contingent employment, also referred to as "precaritization",[6] which according to Guy Standing is leading to the emergence of "a new dangerous class", the "precariat" (cf. During). Scholars in the humanities draw especially on Judith Butler's conceptualisation of precariousness and precarity in her studies *Precarious*

3 Cf., e.g., Roy and Crane, Harris and Nowicki (388–389), Kennedy ("Postcolonial" 54–56) and Kennedy (*Narratives* 6).

4 For a variety of definitions and measurements of poverty, see chapters 2 and 3 in Atkinson. Atkinson's study was published posthumously and has remained in part a fragment. See also Lister, chapters 1 and 2, and Pete Alcock, chapters 5 and 6.

5 For the etymology of the term, see Lemke (*Inequality* 14) and Elze (24, 66–67).

6 See, e.g. Lorey, according to whom precaritisation is "a technique of governing [i.e., also of individual self-government] that is in the process of being normalized" in the neoliberal present (66); cf., in the same vein, Harris and Nowicki, who also point out that their self-precaritisation is even glamourised by young urban middle-class Londoners (389).

Life (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). According to Butler, "precariousness", or vulnerability – terms she seems to use synonymously – refers to an existential condition all living beings share: "[T]here is no living being that is not at risk of destruction" (*Frames* xvii). Precarity, by contrast, refers to the way precariousness is organised in social situations and political structures and foregrounds the uneven distribution of vulnerability. In Butler's words: "Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (*Frames* 25–26). Beyond the spectacular, these forms of poverty and precarity include the "slow violence" (Nixon) of economic and environmental exploitation or "slow death" (Berlant), "modes of exhaustion and endurance that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime" (Povinelli 132) which Elizabeth Povinelli has termed "economies of abandonment". It is the shared existential condition of precariousness or vulnerability that forms the basis of Butler's humanist ethics which rests on the fundamental principle of human interrelatedness and social interconnectedness and results, at least theoretically, in the "global obligation imposed on us to find political and economic forms to minimize precarity and establish economic political equality" ("Precarious" 150).

Of course, poverty and precarity are contested terms and have different meanings in different parts of the world, which is a challenge this collection of essays with its focus on the postcolonial world faces. Butler's humanist ethics of vulnerability and cohabitation has been charged with substituting "abstract humanity for historical humanity" (Danewid 1683) and turning "questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality" (1675), resulting in "a politics of pity rather than justice" (1681). At the same time, her conceptualisation of precarity challenges us to explore changing and historically contingent practices and structures that enhance vulnerability in particular times and places. It is no doubt essential, as Jens Elze argues, "to speak of a distinctive, rather than an all-encompassing condition of precarity, especially in a postcolonial context, as colonial domination partly enabled the earlier social compromises in the West and neocolonial exploitation still mitigates some effects of neoliberal accumulation through maintaining widespread consumption" (27).

In literary and cultural studies, inquiries into representations of poverty and precarity are closely tied to the ethical and social turns in criticism and informed by the current debate about the legacies of poststructuralism, in particular the tension between materiality and signifying practices.

Following Butler's definition of precarity, poverty forms a subcategory of the broader concept of precarity or one shape amongst many that precarity can take. Surveys of the "new poverty studies"[7] tend to begin with Walter Benn Michaels' bestselling book *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* of 2006 and Gavin Jones's 2008 study *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in American Literature, 1840–1945*. Michaels attacks American studies scholars for privileging identity politics over questions of social class and their foundation in material conditions, for celebrating cultural diversity rather than attending to economic disparity. He reclaims the category of social class for analysis, arguing that it is fundamentally different from other, socially constructed identity markers such as race, gender and ethnicity.[8] While his intervention reflects the current dissatisfaction with poststructuralist approaches and calls upon readers to engage with (representations of) increasing socio-economic inequality and impoverishment in order to take measures against them, it leaves the tension between materiality and signifying practices unresolved and also ignores intersectionality, that is, the multiple ways in which race, gender and ethnicity impact on social class.

Gavin Jones's *American Hungers* is considered a foundational text in the field and the first to make poverty the "organizing frame" (149) of inquiry into literature. By making poverty his principal category of inquiry, he circumvents the complex relationship between poverty and social class, arguing that "class analysis often fails to focus sharply on what poverty means as a social category" (8). He defines poverty as "a specific state of social being, defined by its *socio-economic suffering*" (3) and thus characterised by both the "materiality of need" and "the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion and culture" (3), positing a "dialectical relationship between the material and the discursive" (4) and poverty as a category of social being marked by in-betweenness. "At once outside the discourse of identity altogether, in the realms of social structure, institutional organization, and material conditions, poverty is clearly connected to the cultural questions of power, difference, and signifying practice that animate any discussion of social marginalization in its most basic and universal sense", he already argued in his 2003 article on "Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism" (778), adding as further evidence "how socioeconomic factors have gone hand in hand with culturally based factors of racism and sexism throughout American history" (778).

7 For surveys of poverty research in the humanities, see Christ; with a focus on American Studies, Lemke "Facing Poverty", "Poverty and Class Studies" and *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity* (esp. 6–9); with a focus on British Studies, Korte "Dealing with Deprivation".

8 On class, see Lemke ("Poverty") and Butter/Schinko.

Research specifically in representations of poverty and the poor in literature and other media has so far prominently focused on Britain and North America,[9] less so on the postcolonial world.[10] As the titles of Lemke's and Korte's studies show, scholarly attention to poverty quickly broadened to include precarity and inequality. As mentioned before, inequality as a decidedly relational category refers specifically to the uneven distribution of wealth and income. Melissa Kennedy, who has published widely on literary representations of inequality,[11] reads this shift of emphasis from poverty to inequality as a response to the 2008 global financial crisis, which has challenged scholars to turn from the specificities of poverty to international and historical comparisons of inequality (cf. *Narratives* 6). Unlike poverty studies, approaches with a focus on precarity and inequality have regularly included narratives and visual arts from the postcolonial world, and this also applies to more recent scholarship that has further shifted the focus to questions of justice and human rights.[12]

In terms of scholarship, precarity has become the most productive category, generating a growing corpus of research not only in the social and political sciences but also in literary and cultural studies. At the time of writing, the academic database *Project Muse* connects to more than 3,800 articles and books containing the keyword "precarity", and the term has meanwhile also been included in standard English dictionaries (Buchanan). In literary and cultural studies, investigations under the heading "precarity" or "precariousness" range

9 Extensive research has been submitted by Sieglinde Lemke in the field of North American Studies and Barbara Korte in the field of British Studies. See especially Lemke's 2016 study *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, and Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp's 2014 study *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Book Market*, as well as the collections of essays *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*, edited by Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (2014) and *Narrating Precariousness: Media, Modes, Ethics*, also edited by Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (2014). For a more detailed account of the "new poverty studies", cf. Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, "Introduction", *Representing Poverty in the Anglophone Postcolonial World*, edited by Verena Jain-Warden and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (2021).

10 On this diagnosis, see already Korte ("Indigent" 294, 306 n4). While there are quite a number of critical articles that explore representations of poverty in selected texts from the postcolonial world, there are only few book-length studies; examples include Nandi with a focus on India, Butale with a focus on Southern Africa, and Dalcastagnè with a focus on Brazil.

11 Kennedy's 2017 monograph *Narratives of Inequality: Postcolonial Literary Economics* explores "fictional portrayals of poverty and inequality" (211); see, e.g., also Kennedy ("Postcolonial").

12 Cf., e.g., the collections of essays edited by Bartels et al., *Postcolonial Justice* (2017), and Griffiths and Mead, *The Social Work of Narrative: Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary* (2018).

from *Ecoprecarity* (Nayar) to precarious temporalities in literature and the visual arts (Fuchs) and precarious labour in contemporary novels (Connell); other studies use precarity as an analytical tool to explore specific genres, such as the picaresque novel (Elze) and drama (Fragkou; Aragay/Middeke).[13]

The use of the concept of precarity is by no means uncontested. As Buchanan notes, precarity "is an expansive concept, used to apply to a wide variety of situations in which people feel precarious". Its rapid spread has been seen to carry the danger of its decaying into an "empty buzzword", "a trendy thing to say to forestall rather than develop analyses" (Horning).[14] Critics usually target the concept's predominance in Western discourse and its tendency towards universalising and thus obscuring historically specific contexts and meanings,[15] which takes us back to the already stated requirement to always historicise and pay due attention to the specificities of context. Defenders of the concept have foregrounded its "reformist and critical dimension" (Lemke, *Inequality* 17); if conceptualised in a more dynamic sense rather than as a static condition of suffering, precarity opens up moments of resistance and prefigures alternative imaginaries that contest the condition of precarity and might hold the possibility for political mobilisation (cf. Butler, "Foreword", and Lorey). Whether responses to representations of precarious lives ultimately reinforce precarity or translate into transformative politics emerges from the specific interaction of individual texts and visual artefacts and their readings.[16] Scholars in the field of literary and cultural studies have readily embraced the framework of precarity for their analyses of representations of disenfranchised groups and individuals in literature and the visual arts; 2018 also saw the foundation of the international network "Challenging Precarity: A Global Network" (cf. Wilson et al. 443).

Wilson et al. emphasise that

> [t]he operational plasticity of precarity as a theoretical concept of literary and cultural analysis allows for emerging synthesis with other modes of methodological enquiry such as subaltern, feminist, postcolonial,

13 Cf. Lemke for a survey of the pioneers in precarity studies in the social and political sciences (*Inequality* 15–18) and for a list of scholars from a variety of academic disciplines (169 n3).

14 For an engagement with this criticism, cf. Nyong'o, who quotes Horning.

15 Trenchant criticism of the concept of precarity as an analytical tool is, for example, voiced by political scientists Samid Suliman and Heloise Weber.

16 On the ethics and aesthetics of representing precarity, cf. Schmidt-Haberkamp ("Imagining", forthcoming).

> environmental, or disability studies which, in turn, have traditionally addressed – and still do address – issues that are framed by familiar categories of analysis such as race, class, or gender, in areas of research that explore unequal power relations. (440).

There is methodological affinity in particular between poverty and precarity studies and postcolonial studies, given that the latter field has long been concerned with conceptualisations and analyses of marginalisation and subalternity, with the asymmetry of discursive power between the observer and the observed, with constructions of identity and alterity and processes of othering, as well as with questions of voice and agency. The suitability of a postcolonial framework for the inquiry into representations of poverty and precarity is not uncontested: While During sees precarity studies as compatible with subaltern studies (84) and argues that "postcolonialism retain[ing] a connection to the thematics of anxiety, dislocation, conceptual instability, uneasiness […] can today be used to think the condition of precarity" (76), Kennedy ("Urban"; *Narratives* 26–27, 217–218) addresses the failure of postcolonial critics to consider the material realities and historical roots of poverty, precarity and inequality.

While poverty and precarity are global phenomena, their representation in literature and other fictional and non-fictional media, we argue, can be approached by using the established frameworks of postcolonial studies. Since the representational appropriation of disenfranchised groups with usually limited access to self-representation poses both an ethical and an aesthetic challenge, investigations therefore address the power of and over representations, questions of agency and voice (speaking for/about/as the other), of authenticity and essentialisms, of marginalisation and subalternity, including material conditions and the legacies of a long history of colonisation with its concomitant history of impoverishment and subjugation. Scholars in the field of poverty studies have amply commented on the pitfalls resulting from the asymmetries of power between those represented and those representing (cf. Korte and Zipp 3–5, 12–15; Christ 36–47; Lemke, *Inequality* 6–9). To give but a few examples, representations of precarious lives can serve to make visible marginalised groups and thus raise awareness and empathy, or they can confirm stereotypes of diverse kinds. They can call for political action or merely serve the emotional needs of readers. They can spectacularise those represented into passive victims and objects of the voyeuristic gaze or emphasise their agency and resilience. Othering can work to stabilise the boundaries between those represented and those representing, but it can also serve to

prevent the representation of others as positive objects of knowledge and thus the assimilation of their difference.

With regard to the function of representations of poverty in literature – and this holds true for both other media of representation and representations of precarious lives more generally –, Jones has argued that "[l]iterature reveals how poverty is established, defined, and understood in discourse, as a psychological and cultural problem that depends fundamentally on the language used to describe it" (*American* 4). Much therefore depends on the way such narratives are framed or configured. "The frame", Judith Butler has pointed out, "does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (*Frames* xiii). Ethics and aesthetics are, of course, closely entangled. A novel's formal properties, such as mode, perspective or voice, a film's camera work and mise-en-scène, and a newspaper article's phrasing frame readers' and viewers' affective responses towards the lives represented, which may range from empathy to revulsion or detachment, and impact their attitudes towards them. Scholars exploring representations of poverty and precarity are therefore required to critically reflect their own (privileged) position of listening and speaking and to constantly revise their epistemic frames. This echoes the warning against Western intellectuals' assumed capability to represent the other, the kind of imperialist knowledge production that was already famously criticised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity" (280).

The contributions to this volume investigate conceptualisations of poverty and precarity from the perspective of literary and cultural studies as well as linguistics and explore the ethics and aesthetics of representing poverty and precarity in the work of writers and artists from regions as diverse as India and Australia, Britain and the United States, Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, and the Caribbean. Central, and partly overlapping, concerns, which form the five thematic clusters of this volume, are the ways in which representations of poverty and precarity are impacted by different media and genres, the ways in which poverty and precarity intersect with race, class and gender, institutional frameworks of publishing and their impact on the writers and stories published, environmental precarity in local and global perspective, and, finally, the framing of the representation of refugees and migrants as precarious subjects in fictional and non-fictional accounts.

The present volume is a selection of papers presented at the annual conference of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies/Gesellschaft für

Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien (GAPS) at the University of Bonn, Germany, 25 May–27 May 2017. Together with our co-organiser Klaus P. Schneider, we would like to thank our sponsors, the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), the University of Bonn's Faculty of Arts, and GAPS for their generous financial support.

We would like to conclude by commemorating our contributor, friend and colleague Geoffrey V. Davis, who passed away in November 2018. A dedicated pioneer in the field of postcolonial studies, he was one of the founders of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (GNEL/ASNEL), now GAPS, in 1989 and co-editor of the *Cross/Cultures* series, in which this volume appears, not to mention his roles as Chair of both the European and the international branches of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS, ACLALS) and as co-editor of *MATATU: Journal for African Culture and Society*. We retain fond memories of numerous meetings with Geoff Davis at conferences or board meetings over the decades. In particular, we remember listening to his presentation at our conference, captivated by the force and energy of his delivery and the story, meticulously researched and exciting at the same time, he told us about his encounter with members of the Budhan Theatre in a slum on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India. We sadly miss him.

Overview

The contributions in Part 1 highlight in particular the specific possibilities that different genres and media open up for representing poverty and for engaging with public discourses on precarious lives. CLELIA CLINI argues that a distinct (neo)orientalist stance has emerged in a number of Western and Indian films produced in the course of the last few years. Instead of unfolding a potential for social and political criticism, which one might expect in recent representations of poverty, the films analysed by Clini tend to depict slums primarily as a spectacle that supports 'Dark India' narratives (e.g. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Lion* (2016)); alternatively, some films (*Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011)) treat poverty as a 'normalised' ingredient of a supposedly authentic image of India. The other two films discussed by her – *Peepli Live* (2010) and *Dhobi Ghat* (2011) – are examples of Hindi cinema that, according to Clini, provide a somewhat more complex response to the political dimension of precarity, even if these movies are likely to be marketed as 'Dark India' narratives, which have proved to be appealing to a socially privileged, global audience.

Though GEOFFREY V. DAVIS also explores representations of poverty in contemporary India, he focuses on an art form that is more openly political, more local, and more community-driven than the films examined by Clini. His discussion of street theatre in contemporary India is largely based on a case study and partially draws upon interviews with members of the Budhan Theatre in Ahmedabad (Gujarat). Davis pays attention to the history of the community that the Budhan Theatre is embedded in and addresses performance strategies and themes (such as police brutality) that are characteristic of its plays. He shows how street theatre has been used by a specific marginalised group as an instrument that allows them to find their own voice.

In her article on Aboriginal short story cycles, DOROTHEE KLEIN likewise examines literary voices that seek to undermine hegemonic accounts of precarious living conditions. While public discourse in Australia is still likely to perpetuate fairly homogeneous accounts of the causes and consequences of Indigenous poverty, the short story cycles discussed by Klein first and foremost stress the heterogeneity of precarious lives in contemporary Australia. In her analysis of selected short stories from Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* (2006), Klein, for instance, argues that these narratives are informed by the genre of the *bildungsroman* and trace a life trajectory that is undeniably shaped by loss, by the experience of precarious living conditions and the protagonist's exposure to domestic violence. Still, this short story cycle also provides room for a development from what Klein refers to as a 'crisis of nonrelation' towards a sense of belonging.

Part 2 comprises four contributions that focus especially on intersectional approaches in discussions of poverty and precarity. In her article on the short story collection *Common People* (2017) by Australian Indigenous author Tony Birch, SUE KOSSEW shows how these stories challenge preconceptions that are all too often perpetuated in hegemonic discourses; for instance, a foregrounding of working-class and underclass realities serves to undermine the myth of a classless society. Presenting precarity as a result of institutional failure, stressing the resilience of the marginalised, and featuring precarious individuals as story-tellers are some of the strategies Kossew identifies as characteristics of Birch's attempt to represent poverty as a heterogenous phenomenon. Kossew shows that the emphasis on survival and even hope in some of Birch's stories is complemented by a succinct critique of condescending acts of charity that reiterate racist thought patterns.

MARYAM MIRZA discusses Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) from an intersectional angle, examining primarily how female agency, religious faith, and the impact of (patriarchal) family structures are intertwined in the lives of the novel's two female protagonists. According to Mirza, the

juxtaposition of Savraj, who is introduced as an illegal immigrant, and British-born Narinder raises numerous questions concerning the factors that shape female precarity specifically in diasporic communities. She argues that the development of the two abovementioned female characters touches in particular upon the impact (family) honour and moral responsibility may have on responses to precarious situations.

The concept of a 'black male underclass' is at the centre of ANNA LIENEN's contribution. She compares representations of marginalised male identities in two contemporary British novels – Alex Wheatle's *East of Acre Lane* (2001) and Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English* (2011) – and reaches the conclusion that the two authors imagine the black male underclass in radically different ways: Wheatle explores why marginalised people become involved in crime and stresses the potential effects of police violence by choosing the perspective of a character who commits crimes. Kelman's narrative, by contrast, privileges the point of view of an 11-year-old victim of and witness to crime and essentially ends up reproducing binary oppositions of good and evil, as Lienen shows in her analysis. She emphasises that the different perspectives that are chosen in the two novels play a vital role for articulating two very different ideological positions.

JULIA HOYDIS revisits a classic of nineteenth-century literature, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), i.e., a novel that, as various postcolonial critics have shown, links precarity with matters of race and class in its depiction of the protagonist Heathcliff. The novel *The Lost Child* (2015) by Black British writer Caryl Phillips is among those contemporary literary responses to Brontë's novel that take their cue from the mystery surrounding Heathcliff's background in the Victorian text. Hoydis' comparative analysis moves from a reading of *Wuthering Heights* that examines the nexus of race, class and gender in this particular novel to an intertextual interpretation of Phillips' *The Lost Child*. Hoydis discusses specifically the effects resulting from the juxtaposition of various plotlines in *The Lost Child*: a narrative about Heathcliff's origin story, a segment focussing on Emily Brontë, and a plotline set in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century that revolves around homelessness, unemployment, prostitution, and mental instability.

The two contributions in Part 3 shift the focus from close readings of individual literary texts to an exploration of the impact social and institutional frameworks and specifically opportunities for publishing one's works have on representations of poverty and precarity. SUSAN NALUGWA KIGULI provides an account of the agenda and of selected activities of FEMRITE, the non-profit Women Writers Association founded in Uganda in 1996. She points out that FEMRITE has primarily aimed at fostering networks and at offering female

writers a forum for publishing their works, thus enhancing their visibility. Yet its politics have also been informed by Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of 'nego-feminism', which favours connectedness as well as the inclusion of male voices. Kiguli discusses various developments within FEMRITE in the years since 2006, such as the growing interest in the genres of life writing and creative non-fiction, which seem particularly apt to articulate stories of precarity, abuse and suffering, caused for instance by war or HIV. She stresses that these stories are not just documents of hardship; instead, they often turn out to be stories of resilience and survival.

While Kiguli focuses on the voices of (women) writers in Uganda, SULE EMMANUEL EGYA widens the scope and addresses the role of African writers in the context of globalisation. He deplores the fact that a growing number of African authors are leaving their countries of origin to benefit from the better publishing conditions in Europe or North America. According to Egya, the pronounced 'migration impulse', which can be noticed since the 1990s, means that African literature in European languages today looks very different from its post-independence beginnings, when authors saw the necessity of writing *from* Africa and not just *about* Africa. Today, Egya argues, African literature increasingly becomes diasporic literature, which tends to present African countries from a certain distance and in ways that seek to cater to the expectations of non-African readers. These 'extroverted' literary texts are also likely to imagine poverty and precarity through a diasporic lens, often reflecting Western/metropolitan discourses and preconceptions.

Environmental precarity, which is addressed in the articles in Part 4, is a facet of precarity that has become more and more prominent in recent years, as the awareness of the dangers associated with global warming has increased substantially. MALCOLM SEN discusses the consequences climate change already has and is bound to have in the near future in one particular region of the world: the Sundarban islands in the Bay of Bengal, whose inhabitants have a long history of destitution and of being marginalised by the state and who now face the imminent loss of their livelihood. In his article, which stresses the interdependence of the global and the local, Sen pays attention to the past, the geography, the economic background, and the ecology of the Sundarbans, all of which are vital to understanding the reality of a region where human subsistence is apparently at odds with an ethics of conservationism that has been imposed on the people in the Sundarbans by turning the area into a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987.

JAN RUPP focuses on another region of the world where the interdependence of the local and the global is particularly tangible. He argues that environmental precarity is a major theme in Anglophone Caribbean literature, citing texts

such as Derek Walcott's long poem *Omeros* (1990) and Olive Senior's poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994). Rupp claims that the striking awareness of the environment having been shaped by humans in Caribbean writing is in particular due to the region's long history of exploiting what appears to be a lush tropical environment by means of plantations and, later on, by tourism. In his exploration of the ethical and ecological dimension of literary texts from the Caribbean, Rupp draws upon Philip Nanton's *Frontiers of the Caribbean* as well as on concepts such as Mary Gallagher's 'world writing' and Gayatri Spivak's 'planetarity'.

The final four contributions (in Part 5) examine representations of refugees and immigrants. J.U. JACOBS discusses two narratives from South Africa about refugees from southern Sudan (Aher Arop Bol's *The Lost Boy*, 2009) and Somalia (Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope*, 2014). The two texts differ very much in terms of authorship: *The Lost Boy* is a memoir in which the author looks back on his childhood during the Second Civil War in Sudan in the 1980s, when he was among the more than 20,000 orphaned Dinka and Nuer children. *A Man of Good Hope*, which tells the story of a boy's flight from Mogadishu, by contrast, is an example of a mediated, collaborative life narrative, which is based on interviews with the former refugee as well as on further sources. Jacobs argues that both accounts of refugee experience have to be understood as the outcome of complex processes of meaning-making, which show the impact of narrative patterns, motifs, and tropes structured around the notions of home and 'unhoming'.

JULIAN WACKER's analysis of Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) shows how this particular 'Afropolitan' novel revisits and problematises the concept of the American Dream, which functions as a pull factor for the protagonists' migration from Cameroon to New York and which is shown to lead to precarious lives. Wacker stresses the timeliness of both Mbue's focus on the significance of citizenship and the writer's exploration of the impact the American neo-liberal economic system has on a global scale. He argues that the over-use of dream tropes in *Behold the Dreamers* even serves to present the American Dream as a highly ambivalent notion for those American citizens whose alleged financial security was compromised by the 2008 financial crisis. Still, the Cameroonian migrants in Mbue's novel ultimately simply seem to 'translocate' the American Dream upon their return to their home country.

Within the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, ANDREAS MUSOLFF examines a facet of racist hate speech: occurrences of dehumanising metaphors referring to immigrants as 'social parasites' in British media discourses. In his corpus-based analysis, he compares data from three different types of sources: firstly, mainstream UK newspapers and magazines, secondly,

managed online discussion forums, and, thirdly, blogs. Musolff shows that the notion of immigrants as social parasites can, in fact, be found across the three types of sources examined by him. Yet his findings also reveal striking differences with respect to frequencies, collocation patterns, and contexts; for instance, the tendency to draw upon parasite metaphors while simultaneously marking these expressions as being merely 'quoted', i.e., used by others, is characteristic of the press sample.

In the last article, JANET M. WILSON examines three refugee narratives: Sunjeev Sahota's novel of migration *The Year of the Runaways* (2015), *Refugee Tales* (2016), a collection of stories edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus, which is the result of a collaboration involving refugees, people working with them, and British authors, and Abu Bakr Khaal's semi-autobiographical novel *African Titanics*, which traces the flight of a group of people from Eritrea to Europe and combines different modes of representation (e.g. songs and oral testimony). In her analysis of these works, Wilson addresses complex questions regarding the ethics of representation and the danger of commodifying precarity raised by these three texts, which exemplify types of refugee narratives that are increasingly common and are likely to influence the public perception of refugees and asylum seekers and of a particular type of precarity.

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PART 1

Media, Performance, Genres

CHAPTER 1

Poverty, (Neo)orientalism and the Cinematic Re-presentation of 'Dark India'

Clelia Clini

This article focuses on the representation of poverty in films, and in particular the cinematic representations of poverty in India. In recent years, several scholars have commented on the growing popularity of narratives of 'Dark India', both in Indian literary production in English and in international and Indian films. 'Dark India' is the counterpart to 'India Shining', the media campaign launched by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in the run up to the political elections of 2004, which "promoted India as the future global superpower of the twenty-first century, a country of unrestricted opportunities and achievements" (Brosius 1). In stark contrast with the economic optimism of this campaign, there has, from the beginning of the twenty-first century, "been a rise of fiction depicting poverty" as "more IWE, Indian films and representations of India of all kinds have focused their attention on the underbelly of India, the slums, the destitution, the crime and the inequalities" (Lau and Mendes, "Authorities of Representation" 138). The popularity of these narratives has prompted Mendes and Lau to argue that, "at present, the exotica that seems to be thriving in the cultural scene is the exotica of poverty" ("India" 710). Their observation is the point of departure of the present analysis. While representing poverty in India could be a way to give visibility to a worthwhile social issue, in analysing filmic representations of poverty in India, this study will investigate the relationship between poverty and orientalist and, following Lau, re-orientalist fantasies and also their relationship with the commodification of poverty as the ultimate marker of exotic difference in the cultural marketplace. The purpose of this article is thus to discuss a set of common themes across different films set in India, in order to detect the general trends in this manifestation of the representation of poverty.

1 Orientalism, Exoticism and India

In her analysis of Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008), Ana Cristina Mendes talks about 'Dark India' as "a new-fangled object of exoticist discourses"

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("Exciting Tales" 276). If 'Dark India' is the new exotic, exoticist discourses around India are certainly not new and can be traced back to colonial accounts of the subcontinent. As something that "occurs outside everyday experience, beyond the ordinary, maybe even the fantastic" (Nayar 59), the exotic (the prefix *exo-*, from Greek, literally meaning 'from outside one's country') was the most suitable framework to define India in colonial writings, for, Nayar argues: "India-as-exotic was the *distant* colony, unique, different" (59). Used to encode the difference that India represented in comparison with Europe, exoticism was thus a literary device that reinforced Orientalist discourses on the subcontinent, as in fact this difference was not neutral but served the specific purpose of affirming Europe's superiority over its colonies. In fact, in Edward Said's terms this affirmation served ultimately to define Europe itself, for the Orient provided Europe's contrasting image. As a place of difference, the Orient was the place of "disorder", "irrationality", "primitivism", whereas Europe was the place of "order", "rationality" and "symmetry" (Said 38). Along the same lines, in the case of India, the colonial discourse produced a dichotomy according to which India was "barbaric, primitive, irrational", whereas Europe was "advanced, modern, rational" (Nayar 61). The notion of the exotic was thus "aligned with not simply difference, but also a scale of civilization" (60).

The legacy of the discourse of difference "as an apparatus of power" (Bhabha 100) is traceable in popular culture and in cinematic portrayals of the subcontinent in the West, as seen for example in films such as, among others, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg 1984), or in Roland Joffé's *The City of Joy* (1992), where India is portrayed as a space of difference and as a counterpoint to the West. The representation of India as the exotic Other remains common in popular culture, as demonstrated by the debate sparked by Coldplay's and Beyoncé's video clip for the song *Hymn for the Weekend* (2016) – where the band strolls around Mumbai during *holi*, alternatively encountering saffron-clad priests, street children who dance along with their music, and even a child dressed as Lord Shiva (a figure already seen, although in context, in Danny Boyle's film *Slumdog Millionaire*). While not the subject of this article, this music video points to the persistence of Orientalist representations of India as the exotic Other, and it has in fact been criticised for reproducing "reductive tropes originally intended to preserve western hegemony", while also "perpetuating hackneyed fantasies of India as an exotic playground for rich white people to explore and to exploit for cultural capital and economic gain" (Kumar).[1]

1 It is not even the first western music video playing with Orientalist imaginings of India: Major Lazer's *Lean On* (2015) and Iggy Azalea's *Bounce* (2013) again see western singers/musicians

"[H]ackneyed fantasies of India as an exotic playground for rich white people" are also found in more recent films such as *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (John Madden, 2011), which show western characters who travel to India precisely for spiritual or material gain, discovering India first and foremost as a place of exotic difference. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert goes to India in a quest for spirituality – it is the 'pray' segment of the film – as she is trying to 'find herself'. Her decision to 'find herself' in India, of all places, is based on what King calls "romantic Orientalism", the idea of a "mystic East" that contrasts with the rational West (King 92). This is perfectly expressed in Gilbert's frustration at her inability to meditate. Her travel seems to respond to "the lure of the exotic and 'mystical' nature of the East and the belief that it can provide Westerners with some much-needed spirituality"[2] and it attests the continued popularity of "a romantic and exotic fantasy of Indian religions as deeply mystical, introspective and otherworldly in nature" (King 142). *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (whose title directly points to the exotic allure of India), instead of having characters looking for spiritual fulfilment, sees British pensioners moving to India for 'material gain': unable to afford a dignified life in Britain, they decide to retire to a luxurious mansion in Jaipur, which, due to the economic power of the sterling, they most certainly can afford. Except that the place is not the luxury residence they expected it to be and they find themselves facing the challenge of living without the comforts of the West – in yet another reiteration of the modern-primitive dichotomy between Europe and the Orient.

In both films, the characters' introduction to India is rendered through a risky trip through the crowded streets of the country, which, with the chaos of vehicles, people, animals (alternatively cows and elephants), signals their arrival in a different world. India is characterised as a place of poverty, of chaos ("a riot of noise and colours", says Evelyn in *Marigold*) and clearly distant from the modern West. References to teeming crowds, poverty, heat, beggars, in contrast to the order, symmetry and modernity of the West, abound in both films.

taking centre stage with Indian people (again mostly dancers, children and priests) in the background. Cf. Butler, Cupchik, Kumar.

2 The fact that western people look to the East searching for spirituality does not make their assumptions on the existence of a 'spiritual East' less stereotypical. The very idea that the East was more spiritual than the West was a key point of the colonial discourse, which, since the early nineteenth century, insisted on the "identification of a world-denying and ascetic spirituality as the central teachings of Hinduism" (King 131) to prevent social activism and revolutionary tendencies. Ironically though, this discourse was later on appropriated by Gandhi to articulate anticolonial resistance. For a more detailed analysis of the idea of "mystic India" cf. King.

These juxtapositions, together with the privileged position that characters in both films occupy within the Indian context, inevitably recall colonial fantasies of western superiority. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, this dichotomy is rendered first by the context of Elizabeth's stay: not only is the ashram run by white westerners in the absence of the Guru, who is on a trip to New York, but also, notwithstanding the fact that the ashram attracts a mixture of Indian and western devotees, Elizabeth's interactions are restricted to white western people, so that Indians remain in the background. The only local she interacts with is Tulsi, a 17-year-old girl who, as soon as she meets Elizabeth, wastes no time in informing her that her parents are "marrying her off" to a boy from Delhi (as is the "custom", she explains) whereas she would like to go to university and study psychology. The second time we see them talking, Tulsi expresses her admiration at Elizabeth's decision to end her marriage ("it is most commendable the fact that you ended your marriage", she says), commenting on how lucky she is to be "free" and not have to have children. The implication here again seems to be western superiority over an East that is still stuck in a pre-modern era. The characterisation of Tulsi echoes Mohanty's reflections on orientalist discourses on the 'Third World' woman, according to which, she observes, she "leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I [Mohanty] suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions" (337). The juxtaposition of Tulsi and Elizabeth follows precisely this pattern and it is most visible during the wedding scene, where a sad-looking Tulsi, celebrated by her family and friends, keeps her eyes firmly on Elizabeth, the free and educated woman that she cannot be.

If *Eat, Pray, Love* offers a view of an 'immanent India' characterised by mysticism and spirituality, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* offers a look at a more modern India, and yet, it is still markedly distant from the West. The binaries East/West, modern/primitive, superior/inferior are first evident in the material condition of the hotel: far from being a luxurious residence (it contains broken chairs, broken sinks, no electricity, and so on) it will need one of the residents to invest in it to finally make it work (in the sequel). But it is not only their economic possibilities (compared to the locals) that make them special in India, it is also the cultural capital of the residents, as authentic Britons. Evelyn, who has never worked in her life, obtains a job as a cultural consultant in a call centre precisely because of her nationality. Initially rebuffed by the call centre's

manager, who informs her that the call centre only employs graduates from top universities, "ambitious people", she gets the job after explaining to him the pleasures of "dunking a biscuit" in a cup of tea. If the idea that Indian top graduates' greatest ambition is to work in a call centre is not enough to suggest that India is still in the "waiting room" of history, the period of transition that it would supposedly need to catch up with western modernity (Chakrabarty 8–10), then the fact that a woman who has never worked in her life is offered a job at this highly sought-after place only because she is British cannot but remind the viewer of the colonial power relation between Britain and the subcontinent – as if the hotel owner quoting Kipling was not a strong enough reminder. References to an 'Indian essence' also abound in this film: while one of the pensioners refuses to stay in this "uncivilised" place and immediately regrets her decision to go to India, all the others immerse themselves in "the spirit" of the land and are fascinated by it – although, yet again, not at the cost of actually mixing in any significant way with the locals.

In both films the exoticisation of India, which is clearly a legacy of orientalist discourses, goes hand in hand with the characterisation of the country as a space of poverty, a poverty which furthermore is in fact a key element of its exotic appeal. This is because poverty is not portrayed as especially ugly, but is rather encoded as a form of 'simplicity' that goes along with the idea of a 'mystic East': poor Indians, who remain firmly in the background in both films, calmly accept their fate instead of trying to change it. The background position of these characters is also not coincidental: it is their distance that maintains them as exotic, and in turn maintains poverty as something alien. The exotic character of poverty is clearly expressed in Jean's exchange with Graham (*Marigold*): when she says she cannot understand what he finds in the country (which, to her, is all "squalor and poverty"), he praises its "light", its "colours", the "smiles" of the people and tells her how much he appreciates the fact that people "see life as a privilege and not as a right", again a reminder of orientalist discourses of eastern passivity. It is perhaps the references to (often children's) smiles (made more than once in the film) or to people's "grace" (in *Eat, Pray, Love*) that are most significant to how poverty is portrayed in these films, because, as Frenzel and Koens argue, representing "impoverished communities as poor but happy" (207) is a way to neutralise poverty. This representational strategy effectively "limits the potential of poverty to shock, move and change people's perspective" (207) while allowing western characters to pursue undisturbedly their quest for spiritual and/or material fulfilment without the need to question their own privilege nor the roots of inequality in the society they are visiting/have moved to. The normalisation of poverty as an integral

part of daily life in India reduces its perception as a social and political issue, and maintains the dividing line between the mystic East and the pragmatic West. Both *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* thus contribute to the exoticisation of India as a space of poverty, as they portray poverty as part of what makes the country so exotic, indeed, so distant, from the West.

2 'Dark India' Narratives

And yet, Morley and Robins remind us that as much as "difference can be seductive it is always disturbing, dangerous, and ultimately intolerable" (162). The imperialist construction of the exotic India that I previously referred to also included elements of, as Nayar observes, "barbarism", "obscurity, darkness, shadows" (73, 74) and it is especially these elements that can be found in narratives of 'Dark India'. If 'Dark India' narratives focus on "the underbelly of India", crime, poverty and destitution, as Lau and Mendes argue ("Authorities of Representation" 138), then two western films that fit the description are Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and Garth Davis's *Lion* (2016), whose portrayals of India and of Indians do not dwell on mysticism, colours and smiles, but highlight the shadowy, dark and obscure aspects of Indian poverty – albeit within two distinctly feel-good narratives that plot a route to escape from poverty. *Slumdog Millionaire* tells the story of Jamal, a poor boy from a Bombay/ Mumbai slum who, despite a life of hardships, ends up one question away from winning the famous TV show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, and focuses on the path that led him there. *Lion* tells the true story of Saroo, a five-year-old boy who lives in a village in Madhya Pradesh with his mother and family but gets lost after accidentally boarding a train to Kolkata, West Bengal. Unable to identify himself to the police, the child, after some time in the streets, is eventually adopted by an Australian couple and more than twenty years later he embarks on a mission to find his lost family. In both films, Indian characters take centre stage – rather than staying in the background, as in the two aforementioned films – and in both cases their experience of poverty could not be farther from 'grace' or 'spirituality': poverty in these two films leads to violence, crime, exploitation – the abduction of children being the common motif here.

Far from resembling the romanticised depiction of 'poor but happy' Indians, these two films offer images of India that are closer to the primitivism which the orientalist discourse attributed to India (cf. Nayar) as the crude harness of a life in the streets is portrayed in all its violence. In this respect, neither of the two films has escaped accusations of reproducing a foreign orientalist outlook

in their depiction of "barbaric India" (Desai 73, 76; Mattes)[3] and of omitting to address the roots of inequality and poverty in the country (Roy). Mattes's comment that *Lion*, which concludes by showing figures of children going missing each year in India only then to publicise international adoption, is "one of the most Orientalist visions seen onscreen" of late is certainly sound, as this vision inevitably resonates with the rhetoric of the civilised West saving the barbarous East. While the film is a biopic, the visual grammar of the Kolkata scenes in *Lion* strongly recalls *Slumdog Millionaire* – Dev Patel also plays the lead character in both films, and, interestingly, he is also the hotel owner in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* – a film which has triggered a very intense debate over questions of Orientalism, exoticism and authenticity[4] (or lack thereof). While it is beyond the scope of this article to enter this debate, it is relevant to reference the key issues raised by commentaries on the film, summarised by Narain as "poverty porn, slum tourism, imperialist guilt flick, post-colonial inequalities continued, Bombay's underbelly revealed-revelled, brilliant, feel good movie, accurate portrayal, gross misrepresentation, a visual *Lonely Planet* guide to Mumbai, an (anti-)Indian movie, Bollywood mania". This list suggests that reactions to the film could be divided into three broad and at times overlapping categories: those accusing the filmmaker of exploiting poverty to perpetuate fantasies of western superiority and to demean the growth of the country (as symbolised by the 'India Shining' campaign); others praising him for his courage in showing the hardships of those living at the margins of society; finally a third group of enthusiasts for Boyle's take on 'Bollywood' and its feel good effect.[5]

3 In the case of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Desai (87) observes how, notwithstanding the fact that the film is the cinematographic rendition of Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* and that it was co-directed by an Indian director, Loveleen Tandan, while also featuring popular Indian actors and the soundtrack of popular Indian musicians, it is rarely thought of as a kind of re-orientalism perpetrated by Indians.

4 Desai notes how accusations of a lack of authenticity have sprung in particular from those who, within India, would rather promote the modern image of "India shining" (77, cf. also Roy) in the world, and therefore label any hints at poverty in western films as a sign of Orientalism, overlooking the fact that Hindi popular cinema itself has tackled this issue numerous times in the past, and notwithstanding the fact that Boyle's film pays homage precisely to one of these films focused on the urban underworld, *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1995, starring Amitabh Bachchan). Narain also asks if this discussion would have taken place at all had Danny Boyle's ethnicity been different.

5 The relationship between *Slumdog Millionaire* and Hindi cinema would deserve an entire chapter on its own and will not be addressed here as it goes beyond the scope of this article. For in-depth analyses of media and audience responses to the film cf. Banaji, Desai, Korte and Narain.

The first two categories are especially of interest here, as they revolve around the construction of Indian poverty in film. While representations of urban poverty in India inevitably raise questions of orientalism and exoticism, it is worth clarifying that it is not the portrayal of poverty *per se* which makes a film orientalist, but rather the framework within which this poverty is inscribed that points to its orientalist character – which, Lau and Mendes suggest ("Authorities of Representation" 142), could come from the outside as well as from the inside. This is a "difficult tightrope for artists and authors to walk" (142) as in putting the spotlight on the darker aspects of India, instead of promoting a sanitised version of the country, the trap of exoticism is always around the corner.[6] In the case of *Slumdog Millionaire* however, Arundhati Roy argues that 'Dark India' and Shining India are not really in competition, for she believes that "*Slumdog Millionaire* does not puncture the myth of 'India shining' – far from it. It just turns India not-shining into another glitzy item in the supermarket". Roy's observation interestingly converges with the opinion of Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan, who "took issue with the exploitative poverty porn that exoticised and packaged Indian slum life for the consumption of voyeuristic Western audiences" (Mendes, "Showcasing India" 473). Both Bachchan and Roy, in their criticism of the film, refer to the currency of 'unshining India' as the ultimate marker of exotic difference in the cultural marketplace, something that *Slumdog Millionaire* has contributed to, whatever one thinks of the film.

Indeed, *Slumdog Millionaire* has given great visibility to the slum of Dharavi and placed it in international awareness. Images of the Indian slum offered by the film have impacted western imaginings of the subcontinent to the point that, Ananya Roy maintains, the slum now stands as a 'metonym' for India (224–26) itself. It is not a coincidence that Dharavi has now become one of the favourite tourist destinations in Mumbai, the tour company which organises guided tours of the slum (*Reality Tours and Travel*) having significantly increased its business since the release of the film (by more than 25% in 2010, cf. Banaji 5).

6 In this respect, Miriam Nandi's suggestion that we are left with, following Chakrabarty (45–46), a "politics of despair" which "requires a reading strategy that shows why the predicament which we have to criticize is necessarily inescapable" (Nandi 168) seems to be the most suitable way to approach literary or cinematic representations of poverty.

3 The Slum and the Exotica of Poverty

If exotic narratives of India as a space of poverty have dominated the cultural discourse since colonial times, what makes images of the slum so successful in the global cultural marketplace? This is a matter of debate: Deepika Bahri, drawing a connection between poverty and the orientalist binary construction Europe/Orient previously mentioned, suggests that representations of poverty and of “the smelly, chaotic mass of others” can be used to promote and reinforce ideas of western superiority (quoted in Mendes and Lau, “India” 711). And yet, this may not fully explain the currency of ‘Dark India’ tales – the emphasis on crime, violence, corruption. According to Ellen Dengel-Janic, the contemporary focus on, and popularity of, ‘Dark India’ is not only a matter of Orientalism, but a phenomenon directly connected to the current social, economic and political crisis of the West, for, she suggests (referring in particular to *Slumdog Millionaire*) that this kind of narrative “reflects not only the West’s exoticism of India, but also its repressed fear and paranoia of becoming abject and poor. In times of financial crisis, the very stability of cosmopolitan capitalism is shaken, and therefore, films like *Slumdog Millionaire* offer immediate relief from the Western citizen’s anxiety of losing status, money and security, since, it is *there* and not *here*, that poverty can be securely located”. This is a point subscribed to also by Korte, who proposes that narratives of poverty are attractive to readers (and viewers) of the Global North because they “deflect a problem which is also the North’s by setting it in the developing world” (295). The popularity of ‘Dark India’ narratives emerges thus from the combination of the cultural legacy of colonial discourse and the reassuring perception that “abject poverty” is a matter of alterity, and it is again this combination that feeds into what Rushdie calls “poverty tourism”, or to borrow Bachchan’s words, the “consumption” of the slum (quoted in Mendes, “Showcasing India” 473).

Despite the boost that Boyle’s film has given to slum tourism in India, this practice is not a new phenomenon: it began in Victorian times, when “*slumming* originally stood for the leisure activities pursued by the upper and upper-middle classes touring the poorest quarters of London” (Meschkank 47). It is in the 1990s that organised tours of slums of the metropoles of the Global South began to emerge (in particular in South Africa, Brasil and India) and it is in 2006 that Chris Way and Krishna Poojari opened in Mumbai *Reality Tours and Travel*, a charity which offers guided tours of Dharavi. It is worth noting that, while the global popularity of this Mumbai slum might have reached its peak with Boyle’s film, it has to be dated back to at least the publication of David Gregory Roberts’s *Shantaram* (2003), a very important part of which is set

there. Notwithstanding the charity's aim to bring awareness of the conditions of life in Dharavi, research conducted with participants reveals the persistence of exoticist discourses in the perception of the slum.[7] More importantly, what is exoticised here is Indian poverty for, Rushdie again suggests, "people want […] enough grit and violence to convince themselves that what they are seeing is authentic; but it's still tourism" (quoted in Mendes, "Showcasing India" 475).

Rushdie's reflection leads us to a key element of the popularity of 'Dark India': the idea that authentic India is poor India. This is a point which is made clear by research conducted among tourists who visit 'authentic' places like Dharavi. The name of the charity providing tours in the slum, *Reality Tours and Travel*, already suggests that what they have on offer is a taste of the 'real' India, and on their website this suggestion is reinforced by their self-description as "a responsible tour company dedicated to providing fun and authentic experiences around India". Studies conducted on these tours and their clients confirm that the promise of authenticity is the main reason why tourists sign up: as Meschkank notes, "to many tourists, Dharavi represented not only a place of reality, but also a place of authenticity, in the sense of the true Indian life" (53). As she explains, "for the tourist […] the *real* India in the sense of *authentic* India is the poor India" (53). The popularity of slum tours thus responds to the tourists' search for authenticity, an authenticity that should be gritty enough to satisfy their expectations, but one that, at the same time, can be kept at arm's length because, as Bauman maintains:

> In the tourist's world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist's wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist's desire, made and remade with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse. […] Unlike in the life of the vagabond, tough and harsh realities resistant to aesthetic sculpting do not interfere here (29–30).

Bauman's point is particularly relevant in this context because research on Dharavi tours shows that tourists, initially frightened at the idea of meeting poverty and, with it, possibly crime and violence, complete their tours having re-imagined the meaning of poverty, as they define the place as a space of harmony, community, with hardworking people (Meschkank 56–59; Nisbett

7 Anne-Marie d'Hauteserre maintains that "exoticism itself is deeply rooted in colonialism and tourist experiences of exotic landscapes are a thin parody of the colonial experience" (237).

41–42). This way, poverty is not only "domesticated", it is also depoliticised, as the structural inequalities persisting within Indian society are not addressed (Nisbett 43), and in fact the very geopolitical inequalities and racial hierarchies that bear historic responsibility for India's underdevelopment themselves receive further contemporary reinforcement.

The exoticisation of India, metonymically associated with poverty, not only depoliticises poverty, but also, as a symbol of authenticity, transforms it into another commodity in the culture of leisure. This is indeed an exceptional condition for, as Freire-Medeiros observed: "In his much-cited piece on the theory of commodity fetishism, Marx (1884) states that, although under capitalism every single thing may be turned into a commodity, there is one thing which can never be bought or sold: poverty, for it has no use or exchange value. The fact is that, at the turn of the millennium, poverty has been framed as a product for consumption through tourism at a global scale" (586). As India is essentialised as a symbol of poverty, and poverty has become just another commodity in the leisure and cultural marketplace, narratives of Indian poverty retain a strong popularity in the West. And yet, even if maybe not as popular, they are not watched in the West alone. In an article published in 2009 on *darkmatter*, Atticus Narain, while discussing the hype around and the reactions to *Slumdog Millionaire*, wondered if "this Slum's Eye view may cause Bollywood to readdress its fascination with elite power, consumerism and diasporic life in the West". This is a question that will be briefly addressed in the following section.

4 Hindi Cinema[8] and the Aesthetic of Poverty

Poverty is certainly not a new subject for Hindi films. In the aftermath of independence (1950s – 1960s) films of the so-called 'Golden Age' of Hindi cinema (made by Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy) tackled issues of poverty and inequality by focusing on the economic changes within the country and the effect of urbanisation on the lives of ordinary people. In the

8 Hindi cinema and Bollywood are two overlapping but not identical terms. They both refer to the Indian popular film industry, in Hindi, based in Mumbai (former Bombay), but while Hindi (or often 'Bombay') cinema refers to Indian popular films made since the early days, 'Bollywood' is mostly used to indicate the films produced since the mid-1990s, when the Hindi film industry acquired a more transnational character (in terms of operations and narratives). The term also refers to the transnational culture industry that has emerged, in that very same period, around films (cf. Prasad 43–44; Rajadhyaksha 30; Punathambekar, *From Bombay* 1–2). For a more in-depth discussion of the term 'Bollywood' cf. Mishra, Dudrah, Thomas, Vasudevan.

1970s, with the emergence of Amitabh Bachchan and the 'Angry Young Man' character, the focus was on the struggle of the working class, the criminality and the corruption that plagued Indian society. However, since the mid-1990s, a new trend of films emerged, which, instead of openly tackling socio-political issues, focused more and more on the affluent lives of the upper classes, offering a sanitised version of Indian society in which differences of class are effectively erased and poverty does not exist, or it is not acknowledged (cf. Punathambekar on *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham*). While these films dominated the box office up until at least the mid-2000s, since the twenty-first century a new type of films have emerged which, contrary to the aforementioned upper-class centred blockbusters, turned their attention to "the crime-ridden, rotting underbelly of urban India", the "dark shadow" of the glittery fantasy of urban modernity (Shah) – an early example being Ram Gopal Varma's *Company* (2002), which focused on the Mumbai underworld, but also most of Anurag Kashyap's films fit in with this description. In addition to a renewed interest in the underbelly of India, filmmakers also re-introduced social and political issues in their films, often tackling questions of inequality and disparities within society (Devasundaram 4–5).

Two films that certainly readdress Bollywood's "fascination with elite power, consumerism and diasporic life in the West", to borrow Narain's words, are *Peepli Live* (Anusha Rizvi, 2010) and *Dhobi Ghat* (Kiran Rao, 2011), both produced by Aamir Khan, one of the most famous actors in the Bollywood scene. As films which deal with poverty, corruption, inequality and crime, these films get very close to western imaginings of India as a space of poverty, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that they both premiered at international film festivals (respectively the Sundance Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival). *Peepli Live* focuses on the issue of urban-rural divide, poverty and farmers' suicide, as it tells the story of Natha, an indebted farmer who grabs the attention of the media when he threatens suicide – the only way he could provide money for his family as the government has a support scheme for the families of those farmers who commit suicide. *Dhobi Ghat* instead is set in Mumbai and focuses on the intertwined lives of four very different people in terms of class, caste and religion: a banker who, on sabbatical, goes back to Mumbai from New York to pursue her career as a photographer, a painter who is looking for inspiration, a washer-man who aspires to become an actor and an immigrant who chronicles her life in Mumbai on videotape.

Considering their approach to sensitive social, political and economic issues such as class divide, inequality, corruption, destitution, these films clearly mark a decisive shift from the Bollywood films of the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. And yet, going back to Narain's question regarding the possibility

that *Slumdog Millionaire* could prompt "Bollywood to readdress its fascination with elite power, consumerism and diasporic life in the West", I want to consider the possibility that Boyle's film, rather than influencing the emergence of this indie genre, which is rather a response to a changing social, cultural and economic context,[9] might have had an impact on the visibility of these films on the international stage, as well as on the filmmakers' ability to navigate it. In contrast to most Bollywood films of the previous decade – except for *Laagan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) starring and produced by Aamir Khan, which won the audience award at the Locarno Film Festival – *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* had much more international visibility, as they both circulated in the international film festival circuit before their release in India (unlike most Indian films). Both films have been mostly praised in the West and by the English-speaking press in India for broadening the horizons of Indian popular cinema – "Star expands reach of Indian films" was the title of a *Variety* article on *Peepli Live* – as well as for challenging the 'India Shining' myth (Mukhopadhyay 130). Many reviews, in praising these films, stressed on the one hand their distance from Bollywood films[10] and on the other their portrayal of "real life in India": Pallav Mukhopadhyay, for example, commented on how *Peepli Live* is "an attempt to showcase the 'real' people of India" (131) as did *The Times of India*, which suggested that the film is about "real India". These are of course interesting remarks, because they seem to conflate the realist style of these films with their concern with 'real' people. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that upper-class Indians living affluent and consumerist lives (like the characters of most Bollywood films of the previous decade) are not 'real people' – we could argue perhaps that they are not represented in realist tones. The emphasis on these films representing 'real India' and 'real people' reintroduces the question of authenticity and the western stereotype of India as a space of poverty.

This is an issue directly addressed in Rao's film through Shai's tours around the Dhobi Ghat (the outdoor laundry of Mumbai). Shai, the upper-class banker on sabbatical from New York, asks Munna the Dhobi Wallah (washerman) to

9 For a detailed analysis of indie films cf. Devasundaram and Dwyer. Devasundaram also offers a detailed analysis of *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat*.

10 Although different from traditional Bollywood films, most of these films are connected to it, having Bollywood actors and/or producers investing in them, and often having Bollywood actors in the main lead, or playing cameos. Both *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* were produced by Aamir Khan, who also stars in *Dhobi Ghat* (and is married to Kiran Rao), while Naseerudin Shah stars in *Peepli Live*. On the relationship between Bollywood and indie films, cf. Devasundaram and Dwyer.

guide her around the place because she “wants to see, wants to understand [real life]”. Her guided tours of the Dhobi Ghat, which she documents with her camera, retain an uncanny similarity with the aforementioned slum tours, for she, like tourists in Dharavi, “want[s] to immerse […] [herself] in a strange and bizarre element (a pleasant feeling, a tickling and rejuvenating feeling, like letting oneself be buffeted by sea waves) – on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish” (Bauman 29). Shai’s visits to the ‘real India’ of the Dhobi Ghat thus reiterate the same dynamics of exoticisation seen in western films about India (she does not mingle with the locals, only with Munna, who acts as the ‘native informant’) and yet, the clear disparities of social, cultural and economic capital between Shai and Munna do not disappear under the pretence that Munna is happy where he is; neither does he find a way out as he was hoping for. Rather than simply reproducing poor India as an exotic spectacle, Shai’s visits to the Dhobi Ghat hint at the phenomenon of poverty tourism, thus demonstrating the filmmaker’s awareness of the currency of poverty in the international marketplace and her ability to appropriate the dominant discourse that produces poverty as a spectacle only to re-write it and subvert its meaning.

Talking about the position of postcolonial writers in the global literary marketplace, Graham Huggan suggests that “they recognise that the value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience” (24) as exoticism remains a key element for their success. The same can be applied to Indian filmmakers, as Ganti observed in fact that “filmmakers’ prestige and status is critically connected to the ability to circulate within elite social spheres, such as international film festivals, and to garner praise from the English-language press in India and abroad” (130). As previously mentioned, both *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* have circulated at international festivals, and their ability to ‘sell’ Indian poverty has certainly contributed to their popularity in the international circuit. But rather than merely reproducing traditional exoticist approaches to poverty in India, the ability of both films to gain visibility on the international scene could be read as the result of a politics of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 477), which gives them access to the global stage only to allow them to then subvert the dominant discourse (of India as the exotic, poor, Other) and bring forward their own agenda.

The representation of poverty in *Peepli Live* as well as in *Dhobi Ghat* is significantly different from the approach of films focused on spiritual India or ‘Dark India’. Indeed, even though both films play with the trope of ‘the East as spectacle’ their strategic exploitation of poverty resembles what Lau and Mendes call “a re-Orientalist technique of claiming cultural truth and

authority in representation" ("Introducing Re-Orientalism" 5). The very idea of poor India as a spectacle, which is mimicked in both films, rather than being a way to confirm stereotypes, serves the purpose of unsettling people's perceptions of reality: in *Peepli Live* this is seen through the mediation of the camera and of journalists preying on the misery of farmers, and in *Dhobi Ghat* through Shai's photographs and the recordings of immigrant Yasmin. Moreover, in both films poverty is not depoliticised, and class differences and inequalities rather than being overcome at the end of these films are actually reaffirmed: both Munna and Natha are in fact "essentially pawns, malleable to the vested interests and whims of privileged individuals and groups and therefore dispatched to the periphery at the culmination of both films" (Devasundaram 196).

5 Conclusion

Representations of India as a space of poverty in contemporary films are still heavily influenced by the legacy of the orientalist discourse of difference as an apparatus of power (Bhabha 100), as they keep reproducing the binaries East/West, modern/primitive, rational/irrational, ordered/disordered that characterised the colonial discourse. In particular, in cinematic representations of India, such as those offered by films such as *Eat, Pray, Love* or *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, poverty itself is exoticised and conflated with the myth of mystic India, de facto producing a neutralisation of poverty which, normalised as a key characteristic of the exotic Other, is no longer treated as a social and political issue. The more recent narratives of 'Dark India' reiterate the orientalist binaries between the East and the West and, once again, reproduce the idea of India as a space of poverty. Despite their continuity with orientalist discourses, these narratives mark a shift in the representation of poverty because, rather than representing Indians as 'poor but happy', they put the spotlight on the violence, crime, fear that comes with poverty. And yet, films such as *Lion* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, even though they give visibility to pressing social issues, end up providing a spectacle of poor India which, once again, is not contextualised, and, by allowing their characters to escape poverty respectively through adoption and the participation in a TV show (symbol of the neoliberal shift of the country, cf. Desai), poverty is once again neutralised and, emptied of any significance, turned into a spectacle. Narratives of 'Dark India' thus feed into an exceptional trend of the twenty-first century: the commodification of poverty in the global marketplace, exemplified by slum tours taking place in Dharavi.

The popularity of 'Dark India' tales as well as the growth in what Rushdie calls "poverty tourism" respond to western anxieties at a time of deep economic, social and political crisis. With disparities on the rise in the West, in fact, taking refuge in the fantasy that "abject poverty" is a matter of alterity, as it is always "there" and never "here", is a way to "deflect a problem which is also the North's by setting it in the developing world" (Korte 295). It also feeds into a nostalgia for a lost past which, in the UK at least, has been accompanied by a renewed popularity of films and TV series tackling the imperial past. The hype around poverty has had in turn an effect on Indian popular cinema which, operating in a global arena, is keenly aware of international trends. While films like *Dhobi Ghat* and *Peepli Live* offer an interesting perspective on the social and political conditions of contemporary life in both the urban and rural space, these films have been also marketed in such a way as to appeal to the same viewers who, as Rushdie said, "crave enough grit and violence to believe that they are portraying a real India", thus playing along with contemporary exotic representations of 'Dark India'. It was Khan himself who, in an interview, declared that these films were meant for an international audience (Daniels, Kindle version). What remains to be seen is the extent to which these films will manage to re-write dominant discourses of India and poverty and subvert the long-lasting legacy of orientalism.

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CHAPTER 2

"Performing with What Little They Have"

Street Theatre in the Slums of Ahmedabad

Geoffrey V. Davis

> They are still performing with what little they have –
> their bodies, their voices and their creative talent –
> in the hope of changing society so that
> they may have a future within it.
> DAKXIN BAJRANGE (qtd. in Malekar)

1 Introduction[1]

In February 2016 I visited the Budhan Theatre in Chharanagar, a slum on the eastern outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India. During my visit some of the group's members proudly showed me an old, one-room dwelling which they had converted into what they call a 'Museum of Hope'. Lining the walls were artifacts and fading photographs of tribal life; in one corner stood a liquor still. Since they wanted to give me an idea of their latest performance, we all sat on the floor and listened as Atish Chhara, one of the group, began to solemnly recite a text in Hindi. It was a suicide note written by Rohith Vemula, a Dalit

1 For their assistance with the research for this paper I am greatly indebted to Ganesh and Surekha Devy of the Bhasha Research Centre in Vadodara, whose commitment to working with the marginalized peoples of India has been a constant inspiration; to Sonal Baxi of Bhasha for her translations of some of Budhan's plays and for her help with locating Indian source material; to Atul Garg for taking me to Chharanagar and for acting as translator; and to the members of the Budhan Theatre including the co-founder of the group and writer of the plays, Dakxin Bajrange, Kalpana Gagdekar, Roxy Gagdekar, Kranti Gagdekar, Atish Chhara, Siddarth Chhara, Poonam Chhara, and Sahil Chhara for allowing me to interview them. I am particularly indebted to Dakxin Bajrange, who was kind enough to answer my subsequent questions by email. I should also like to express my thanks to Marc Maufort of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, who first persuaded me to write about theatre in India.

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student, who had been reading for a PhD at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi ("Full Text"). It formed the centrepiece of a play Atish and the co-founder of the group, Dakxin Bajrange, would be performing that same evening to sensitize local people about an event which had caused great consternation in India and about which local people knew little. Vemula's suicide was a subject close to the members of the group since many of them are, or have been, students. Such a topical performance is an example of Budhan's activist commitment to intervening in national debate and of the way the street theatre they practise functions as an "interpreter of daily events" (Hashmi 12).

This paper traces the process by which a marginalized community found its voice through theatre. It looks at the history of their community, the establishment of the theatre group, the nature of street theatre in India, and some performances which will serve to illustrate their theatre practice.

2 History of the Community

In order to understand the kind of concerns the Budhan Theatre espouses it is important to know of its origins, of the community its members belong to, and of the place where they live. Originally the Chharas were a nomadic tribe of forest people or *adivasis*. Increasingly rendered destitute through the alienation of their land by British colonists, some followed a life of petty crime, stealing grain and stock as well as brewing liquor. Others were "traditional entertainers such as street singers and dancers" (Bajrange, *Liberation* 17). Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, passed by the British, who regarded such communities as subversive, they were consigned along with many other such communities to a newly created social category of so-called 'criminal tribes'. In his comprehensive study of these tribes Henry Schwarz describes how, in terms of the Criminal Tribes Act, "petty crime became identified with the totality of the tribe's behavior and became synonymous with its identity as a whole" (2); he shows how the authorities ascribed a "set of behaviors to collectivities without ever proving that actual crimes had been committed" (3). And he further argues that the notion of "hereditary crime," that is the idea that the tribespeople were 'born criminals', was "employed opportunistically to bridge the difference between individual acts and collective identity" (38). This whole oppressive process, he finds, was like dropping "a legal sledgehammer on a wide variety of marginalized groups who were now found to be practicing crime instead of a livelihood" (3). Increased subjection to colonial control and the stigma which proceeded from the ascription of the notion of criminality to the Chharas as a people would determine their identity for decades to come

and constitute the burdensome colonial legacy which they have had to bear since the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, the imposition of the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act is dismissed by Dakxin Bajrange as a product of the "colonial regime's inability to understand Indian communities," particularly those who lived a nomadic life (*Liberation* 10).[2]

In 1911 the Act was amended and settlements for the 'criminal tribes' were established. These were known as 'free colonies' and were run by the Salvation Army. Effectively they were labour camps. Males found themselves reluctant labourers in the textile industry and on public works such as bridge and railway building, while children were separated from their parents ostensibly "for the sake of reformation," as Schwarz puts it (4). This latter measure is reminiscent of the similarly misguided colonial policy which led to the plight of the Stolen Generations in Australia and the incarceration of First Nations children in Catholic residential schools in Canada. Not surprisingly, the Chharas regarded such settlements as open prisons. In 1932 they were themselves removed to what is now Chharanagar, a place which has an estimated population of some 20,000.

After Independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed, but the low social status of the Chharas and the other communities to whom the Act had applied was perpetuated post-Independence under the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952, in terms of which their official designation was changed to the only apparently less discriminatory term Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs).

If the story of the Chharas under the British was one of colonial oppression, after Independence it became one of neglect. Their plight even escaped Gandhi's attention. Since they were ignored by government, "they had no other option," as Bajrange puts it, "but to revert to thieving or brewing illicit liquor" (Interview) – "illicit," of course, because Gujarat is a dry state.[3] Since the 1980s, however, there has been a marked change in the attitudes of the Chharas, who have begun to see in their increasing access to education and jobs a means to change their way of life and to overcome the legacy of the past (Bajrange, *Liberation* 17).

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2 Bajrange has traced the process by which, after Independence, the Criminal Tribes were transmogrified into Denotified Tribes in his Leeds MA thesis. In association with Leeds University the theatre has produced an informative film on the history of the criminal tribes policy and its effects on their community, entitled *Birth 1871: History, the State and the Arts of India's Denotified Tribes* (2014) which uses historical footage, period photos, and contemporary interviews.

3 Sonia Faleiro reports that an estimated 20% still practise thievery while 60% brew liquor at home.

The turning point in the way the people of Chharanagar were perceived by outsiders came with the involvement of the activist Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi in 1998. This came about in consequence of the death of a young basket maker by the name of Budhan Sabar, who belonged to the Kheria Sabar Denotified Tribe of West Bengal and who was killed in police custody on 10 February 1998.[4] Mahasweta Devi filed a court case on behalf of Budhan's widow Shamli and her children (Devy, *Nomad* 24) and, remarkably, the case went to the High Court in Calcutta, which granted her compensation and punished the police (Schwarz 12).[5] The death of Budhan led to the formation by Mahasweta Devi, together with Ganesh Devy, of a human rights movement which they called the Denotified and Nomadic Tribals Rights Action Group, DNT-RAG (Devy, *Nomad* 24). At the same time a newsletter for the Action Group was established which, appropriately enough, was given the title *Budhan*. When it subsequently published the High Court's decision in the matter of Budhan Sabar, Ganesh Devy suggested to the young people of Chharanagar that they might like to make a play out of the case which they could perform at the First National Convention of the Action Group to be held there on 31 August (Bajrange, *Liberation* 31). The subsequent performance of the play *Budhan* at the convention marked the beginning of Budhan Theatre, an event regarded by one critic as "the first ray of hope for a community living on the margins of society" (Malekar) and by members of the group themselves as the signal event which "changed their lives" (Bajrange, Interview).[6] We may thus regard the setting up of the theatre group as the first step taken by the Chharas towards finding their voice and gaining agency.

3 Budhan Theatre: Actors, Aims, Modes of Performance

When I visited the theatre group we met in a small library inaugurated by Mahasweta Devi in 1998. Formerly a gambling den, it has become a place of dialogue and rehearsal. I wanted to know who the people were who comprised

4 Schwarz points out that "the fact that Budhan belonged to a DNT positioned him within an immediate historical relationship with the police that made him always already suspect" (4–5).

5 The legal reference to the court case is: *Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samity v. State of West Bengal & Ors*. W.P. No. 3715 of 1998.

6 The founding of the theatre group in such tragic circumstances is reminiscent of the establishment of Tara Arts by Jatinder Verma in the wake of the killing of an Asian teenager in London in 1976 (Schlote 313).

Budhan Theatre some 18 years after its foundation. What were their personal histories? What were their concerns? What had been their experiences working with the group?

The actors in Budhan are between the ages of ten and forty; some have been with the group for more than a decade; they are now 'moulding' a fourth generation. A striking feature of the experience of these young Chharas is the way participation in the group has opened up what Bajrange calls "livelihood options" (*Liberation* 25) for them: one is studying sociology; another is doing a degree course in the theory of modern Indian theatre; a third, who joined the group as a founder member in 1998 while still at school, has become a crime reporter for local and national media; two actors who were in the original performance of *Budhan* have gone on to Bollywood fame.

In a society with very conservative views on the role of women, female members of the group have encountered social pressures and parental opposition to their participation. Kalpana, who has now embarked on a career in local television, describes how, when she first joined Budhan, she was pressurized by her parents who forced her to leave several times, whereas – a sign of the times – her own daughter is now a member of the group. Another young woman, married at 17, with two children but already widowed, also had to struggle to convince her family to allow her to perform. It is not surprising that Kalpana feels that there are not enough women in the theatre and that more should join. In spite of such under-representation, Budhan does perform plays on women's issues and, as Kalpana rightly points out, all DNT issues are essentially women's issues, too.

The group performs plays "about what impacts on them" (Bajrange, Interview) in their daily lives, local issues which, they feel, would otherwise go unreported. Strongly aware of the discrimination suffered by their community historically, when the nomadic tribes had neither education nor health care, when the lack of jobs meant that children had to go begging, and local schools discriminated against them, they do not now want to see members of their community reverting to stealing or being forced by the police to brew liquor; instead, what they want is education for the younger generation. Accordingly, the group aims to work for change – by encouraging community development, heightening awareness of the historical injustices the Chhara community has suffered, promoting social justice and human rights, furthering the education of deprived young people, and fostering dialogue with the wider society.

Two facets of this mission are particularly notable. The first is the need to address the history of their own people. Bajrange's remark that he knew nothing of the history of the Chharas before 1998 reveals the extent of the problem (Johnston and Bajrange 7), as does his characterization of Budhan's plays

as "plays for liberation from the historical stigmatization" (*Liberation* 25). In accordance with this thinking, the group states that their theatre practice is an attempt to "perform hard truths and real facts, no matter how disturbing, because it is in this way we connect with our history" ("Theatre for Social Action").

The second facet is the vexed issue of identity. "In India," Bajrange realistically points out, "where the caste system is very strong, you need to know who you are, which community you belong to. This is wrong, but (in terms of politics) you need to know" (Johnston and Bajrange 7). Thus, a constant theme with Budhan is their concern to establish a contemporary Chhara identity freed of the legacy of the past. Their creative work is an attempt at "refashioning [...] selfhood" (10). This aim they pursue through increasingly varied activities, among them children's theatre, theatre with disabled women, as well as the making of films and running training workshops.

Budhan's preferred mode of performance is street theatre. For Bajrange this type of theatre articulates "the voice of the common man"; it is a performance style where performer and spectator are "on the same level" and the audience is recognized as participant (*Liberation* 23). In India, street theatre is preeminently a theatre of social and political engagement. Dating back to the 1930s when it emerged as a form of protest against the British Raj, it was widely adopted in the 1940s and came into its own during the political unrest of the 1970s and 80s (Pattanaik 451). A particularly prominent practitioner was Badal Sircar, who, faced with the problem of audiences with no experience of theatre-going, pioneered free, open-air performances "using improvised dialogue, minimal props and encourage[d] active audience participation" (Singh et al. 148). Breaking the barriers between performer and spectator was a key element in the theory of "Third Theatre" which he developed. He was convinced that theatre should "be a collective exercise to awaken and enhance the social consciousness of participants, who include the viewers" (Raha 449).

In India today, street theatre is a form of theatre for development, "a low-cost and immediate means of reaching the illiterate" (Iyengar 490), a means by which non-governmental organizations, for example, can address a whole range of urgent social issues such as ecological consciousness, HIV/AIDS awareness, family planning, female infanticide, and other human rights issues.

It is worth remembering, however, that street theatre in India, performed in open spaces and before all manner of audiences, can be a hazardous undertaking, and on several occasions it has even led to the deaths of performers. Ashis Chatterjee of Theatre Unit was killed in 1972, Prabir Datta of Silhouette in 1974. Safdar Hashmi, the dramatist and co-founder of the theatre group Jana Natya Manch, with whom he had created plays on such issues as bride burning and

migrant labour, was killed during a street performance of a play criticizing government repression of the labour movement in 1989. Numerous others have been "arrested, beaten up and tortured by the police" (Pattanaik 452). In 2003, Bajrange himself was informed that he was "performing theatre against the police"; he was arrested on a trumped-up charge of assault, and then imprisoned for fifteen days (Malekar). Budhan's focus on police corruption and brutality is not accidental.

4 Budhan's Plays

Fortunately, five of Budhan`s earlier plays have been translated into English.[7] These are *Budhan* (1998), *Encounter* (2001), *Bulldozer* (2006), *Mazhab Hame Sikhata Apas Mein Bair Rakhna* (Religion promotes divisiveness among people of different faiths) (2002), and *Ulgulan* (Constant struggle against injustice) (2006). Largely based on personal experience and with much local reference to Ahmedabad, the plays are conceived as documentary dramas based on real events such as deaths in custody, forced removals and the 2002 Gujarat riots. Since most Budhan actors speak three or four languages they are able to perform in Gujarati, Hindi and Bhantu, the latter being the endangered language of the Chharas. Using Bhantu in the theatre may be regarded as contributing to preserving a language which is now spoken by only few people (Bhan). Developed in performance through a process of improvisation, the overall effect of the plays depends as much on the fairly simple dialogue as it does on the resourceful physical skill of the performers and on their versatility in transmitting to the audience an image of the locations where individual scenes are set, such as a police station, a jail or a courtroom. Performed in "any available space" (Bajrange, *Liberation* 53) and often in the round, the plays explore interaction between performers and audience in a variety of ways rather as did traditional Indian theatre (Anand 12, 19). A narrator will mediate between the actors and audience, addressing them directly, or the actors will step out of their roles to establish the continuity of the action or to offer comment on it. In this way questions arising from the action of the play which are designed to enable the audience to grasp its key message are posed to the audience, as in *Budhan*, which ends with the provocative question "Are we second-class citizens?"[8]

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7 With the exception of *Budhan*, the plays have not been published.

8 The text is available in G.N. Devy's *Painted Words*, pp. 260–85, 285. It is also contained in Dakxin Bajrange's *Plays*, pp. 1–18.

Budhan (1998) was the first of the plays. It was an experiment in theatre making which established the group's performance style and achieved enough success to encourage them to develop further plays. As Bajrange has admitted though, when Ganesh Devy first invited them to perform a play surrounding the death of Budhan Sabar they had no previous experience to guide them: "I neither had a sense to be politically correct nor any particular awareness about politics, aesthetics, grammar, and various forms of theatre. We did not even know that we could bring community development through theatre" (*Liberation* 33).

Budhan is a hard-hitting documentary on police brutality which does not shy away from graphic evocations of the violence inflicted on the tribals. Budhan is beaten and tortured in order to extract a confession from him and his wife is assaulted. Police corruption is also exposed when Budhan is arrested without any evidence, but solely because the arresting officer is "looking for [a] Sabar whom he could hold responsible for all of his pending theft cases" (Devy, *Painted Words* 263), and once Budhan has been killed the police arrange a cover-up to make his death look like suicide.

In light of the stigmatization as criminals which is still attached to the Chharas and which the police, too, had had instilled in them through their training, one of the stated aims of Budhan Theatre is to engage with the authorities in order, as Bajrange radically formulates it, "to transform the consciousness of their oppressors to break the atrocious and vicious cycle of violence" (*Liberation* 36). An unusual example of the successful achievement of this aim was provided by the performances of *Budhan* which since 2008 have been hosted by the Gujarat State Police Academies and have been attended by police trainees as well as senior officers.[9] In his report on the first of these occasions, Bajrange appears surprised that what "was clearly an anti-police play" (35) should have met with such a positive reception to the extent that the police even took an oath to prevent such incidents of brutality recurring. Bajrange describes the event as "the first ever positive dialogue between the Chhara community and police" (36). Apparently it bore fruit, too, since performances of *Budhan* seem to have contributed to police brutality "slowing down" (Bajrange, Interview).

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9 An interesting parallel to this development can be found in the performance history of Roy Williams's play *Fallout* (2003). Based on a knife crime killing in London and broadcast nationally on Channel 4 television, the play is highly critical of the Metropolitan Police's handling of such incidents and their treatment of Black people generally. The welcome response of the police here, too, was that they requested permission to use the play as a training tool.

The theme of police brutality and corruption was taken up once again when *Encounter* was performed in 2001.[10] In order fully to understand the play, one has to be aware of the specific usage of the term 'encounter' in India, where it is used to describe both killings of gangsters by police and, in the combination 'fake encounter', killings set up by the police where the evidence is falsified. Such an 'encounter' forms the theme of the play. It concerns the killing by police of a young Pardhi tribal by the name of Deepak Pawar, who lives in a slum and earns his meagre living by begging and brewing liquor, which he is allowed to do only by paying bribes to the local police. When he becomes unable to pay a bribe he is killed by the police who cover up the murder by alleging he was dealing in arms. Deepak is portrayed as a helpless tribal, a prey to the corruption of the police who seek bribes and who are brazen enough to demand a "small favour" (34) from Deepak, in the shape of his making his wife available to them. The policeman, who lacks all compassion for the poor and who kills Deepak, knows of course that he can escape justice, for he cynically asks: "These Pardhis are Born Criminals … how can there be a murder case?" (40). The play thus goes a step further than *Budhan* in its depiction of police corruption.

The next play, *Bulldozer* (2006), was a more ambitious undertaking than its predecessors. It depicts the forced removal in the name of urban development of the Chharas from a site they had occupied for decades in Ahmedabad. It portrays the anxiety of a people who have already been subjected to repeated demolitions on the eve of yet another removal and the devastation of the removal itself, which takes place in the midst of winter. It recalls the people's lives as nomads, the deprivation of their land and forests (42), and the consequent loss of livelihood. It represents in detail their appalling living conditions, describing how the impoverished people are forced to live in shacks, where there is no compassion for the plight of the elderly (59), women give birth in the street (70) and children die of exposure (72–73). It shows how little support in alleviating their plight is to be gained from elected councillors, bribe-seeking officials (61) and a corrupt and brutal police force (64). In the first scene, the chorus of actors speaking from positions within the audience describes the play as a "play for the oppressed, a play for survival" and declares that its aim is "to expose the truth" (42). The truth which the play graphically exposes stands in bitterly ironic contrast to the words of the President of India with which the play ends: "Let us not give rise to a situation where it is said of India that

10 The text is included in Bajrange's unpublished *Plays*, pp. 19–40. Page references to the plays in the text are to this collection.

in its hurry for development this great republic destroyed its motherland and societies of Adivasis" (75).

Of the earlier plays, *Mazhab Hame Sikhata Apas Mein Bair Rakhna* (Religion promotes divisiveness among people of different faiths) (2002) is possibly the most courageous.[11] It seeks to "expose the truth" (78) about the extremely sensitive issue of the communal riots which racked Gujarat in 2002 and which led to over one thousand deaths and the displacement of thousands more. The causes of these horrific events remain contentious today, for, as one character remarks, "[n]obody [knew] whether the cause [was] communal animosity or the politics of the ruling government" (80).

The central section of the play makes the greatest impact. It depicts the reality of the 2002 Gujarat riots and recalls the 1992 dispute over the destruction of the Islamic *Babri Masjid* (Mosque of Babur) in Ayodhya and the proposed construction on the same site (claimed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram) of the Hindu Ram Janmabhoomi (Rama Birthday Temple). One day after the Godhra train massacre of Hindu pilgrims, which became the flashpoint for the riots, the rightwing nationalist *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* calls for a protest (*bandh*) which is to be held provocatively in a sensitive Muslim area of Ahmedabad (80). A Muslim shop owner, unwilling to observe the requirement of the *bandh* that shops be closed in an expression of solidarity, is attacked and killed by Hindus before general mayhem ensues with Hindu and Muslim mobs calling, the one for *Hindutva* and the other for *Jihad*, and then slaughtering one another (84). This is followed by two similarly horrific scenes in which first a Muslim family is attacked by Hindus and the wife raped, doused with kerosene and burnt, and then a Hindu family is set upon and killed by Muslims who were formerly their neighbours (92–93). After a scene in which a politician in the name of "making India a Hindu nation" (93) dismisses with cynical indifference his secretary's protestations that without government action "many innocent lives will be lost" (93), two mobs, one Hindu and one Muslim, bitterly confront one another in the marketplace to assert the claims of their respective religions (94–96) before inflicting terrible violence on one another. To end the scene, the chorus articulates the general truth that "[t]his is not a battle of religions / This is a war of politics" (96), while two starving children search for their parents amid the heaps of corpses.

This play, which "has been performed [many] times in Ahmedabad city to promote communal harmony among conflict groups" ("Theatre for Social Action"), is remarkable for the forthright but even-handed manner in which

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11 The text is included in Bajrange's *Plays*, pp. 76–104.

it tackles one of the most urgent issues in the recent history of Gujarat. It criticizes religious leaders and politicians alike. It portrays the common people, whether Hindu or Muslim, as the all-too-passive victims of manipulation. And it ends with a fierce accusation:

> Both these religions work on the selfish and political interests of our politicians. Our political leaders have limited Hinduism and Islam to the temples and mosques. Covered by the garb of politics, the core message of both these religions is now lost. Our religious leaders have transformed the original form of our humanity, and we as mute and deaf spectators act on their designs. (101–102)

5 Adapting European Plays

An aspect of Budhan's work in the theatre which can hardly fail to interest a European critic is their adaptation of European plays.[12] The plays selected, whose themes were regarded by the group as very close to their own experience, were Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*) of 1960, Dario Fo's *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (*The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*) of 1970, and Maxim Gorki's *На дне* (*Lower Depths*) of 1902. These productions occupy an important place in Budhan's work since in performing adaptations of these fictional texts Budhan were departing from their normal practice, which was to create the plays themselves through a process of improvisation on the basis of their everyday experience and to have Bajrange then write them up. They were the first plays Budhan performed on stage. All three plays may be regarded as experiments in interculturality, as attempts to transform Western sources in an Eastern context. Here I propose to look briefly at only one of these productions, Gorki's *Lower Depths*.[13]

The idea of performing Gorki's play *Lower Depths* was proposed by a friend of Bajrange's, the Bollywood actor Zeeshan Mohammed Ayyub, whom he describes as a "great fan of Budhan Theatre [who] wanted to do something meaningful" with them (E-Mail). Bajrange set about studying the play in Hindi translation, but as he confessed, "[f]or many days, I could not understand the

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12 The group has also performed adaptations of works of Indian literature, notably Mahasweta Devi's story *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai* (*What is beneath the Blouse*) and three short stories by Kanji Patel translated from the Gujarati by R. Burke and dramatized under the title *Pata* (*Railway Track*).

13 The Budhan performance is available on YouTube.

play at all" (E-Mail). So he invited his friend to Ahmedabad and they agreed to co-direct the play. "As we were doing readings and then rehearsals," he recalls, "I slowly understood each and every character of the play" (E-Mail). *Lower Depths* with its harrowing depiction of the lives of the Russian lower classes, homeless, often in ill health, given to alcohol and violence, and with little prospect of ever escaping their plight, was, of course, a very appropriate choice for a Budhan performance. Not only did it offer the opportunity to unfold the hardships of Chhara life through the lives of the individual characters in an absolutely realistic setting, it also held out the hope through the exhortations of Gorki's compassionate "wanderer, pilgrim" Luka (Gorki 56) of a common humanity and a better life which is worth striving for however hard the way may be.

In selecting a space in which to perform the play Bajrange had the unusual and very productive idea of siting it at the Maninagar DNT *Basti*, i.e. a slum occupied by Denotified and Nomadic Tribals. The play was performed in the open air at Dabghar Vaas at the foot of the steps leading up to a railway bridge at Maninagar. The significance of the place name Maninagar will not be lost on Indians since this is the constituency which returned Narendra Modi, the present Prime Minister of India and former Prime Minister of Gujarat, to the Gujarat Legislative Assembly in 2002, 2007 and 2012. At the time of the performance, the *basti* or slum at Maninagar was a community which was facing eviction by the civic authorities. A fundamental element of Budhan's adaptation of the play and one which corresponded very well to Gorki's dosshouse basement was thus the setting itself amidst the impoverished dwellings of a marginalized community: a site-specific performance if ever there was one! Not without reason did the group advertise the performance as "Environmental Theatre," as "a first of its kind in the city."[14] The play was performed only once, on 2 September 2012, a significant date since this was the 60th anniversary of Denotification in 1952.[15] It was, as it happened, also the time of the monsoon, so much so that the audience, who had had to travel to the *basti*, were also much plagued by mosquitoes.

The choice of such an authentic performance venue enabled Bajrange not only to recruit some actors from the *basti* itself, who were thus able to "play characters like they are living real life," but also to adapt what for them was a difficult play "to the requirements of this locality" (E-Mail). In advance of

14 The phrases are included in the invitation to the performance. Cf.: groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/friends-of-budhan-theatre/B2VZT6RvjPs.

15 The anniversary was 31 August, but the play was performed on 2 September.

the performance he was thus able to announce that "the play will highlight the life of tribals of the locality and will also talk about the ordeal they face when they are displaced" (Desai). The script of the play which Budhan actually performed had thus been adapted through collective discussion among the members of the group to include references to the DNT context. They did not perform a line-by-line translation – some soliloquies were abridged, the unfamiliar Russian names of the characters were changed, and a number of scenes were improvised in Hindi – but largely they stayed fairly close to the Russian original. The cast were Budhan players and residents of the *basti*, but they also brought in a well-known actor, Rajoo Barot, to play the part of Luka.

The central playing area was lined with string beds under awnings, at the back a trishaw was parked, at the side a bike was being repaired, while a stray dog occasionally roamed through the space. Musical accompaniment was provided by clapsticks and the beating of oil cans. The performance was accompanied throughout by the external noise of vehicles and trains on the railway bridge above sounding their horns. In these quite unusual circumstances the performance of *Lower Depths* proved to be one of Budhan Theatre's finest achievements.

6 Conclusion

To come back to my interview with the members of the group, I ended by asking each of them what they regarded as the essential achievement of the Budhan theatre. Their responses summed up what they felt they had achieved over an 18-year period and spoke eloquently of the impact that making theatre in this way had had on their own lives.

Some pointed out that they had made the transition from born criminal to born actors, others argued that they were giving education to otherwise helpless children and had generally sensitized mainstream society, which is expressed, for instance, in the fact that many colleges and schools are now admitting Chhara children which did not do so previously.

Many of them found that the theatre had given its members pride in themselves, and one woman added that Budhan had given her space, a new identity and a rebirth, where she was identified as a theatre artist rather than as a young widow. All of them subscribed to the view that to be able to do theatre was an achievement in itself, which had not been open to them before. They had, they thought, done the impossible: they had survived.

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CHAPTER 3

Overcoming the 'Crisis of Nonrelation' through Formal Innovation

Aboriginal Short Story Cycles

Dorothee Klein

1 Introduction

The 2016 report of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) documents the widespread poverty and the precarious living conditions prevalent in numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Analysing data from the 2014 *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey, the report states that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more likely to experience poverty than other Australians, and are less likely to 'exit welfare' than other Australians" (ACOSS 37). As the 2020 HILDA survey found, rates of material deprivation are still significantly higher for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous Australians, thus making them more likely to live in poverty, which is conceived of "as *relative* deprivation or socio-economic disadvantage" (Wilkins et al. 54, 35). Moreover, according to the 2020 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report, even though the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has improved for many indicators over the last two decades, including employment rates, there has been little change or even a worsening in others areas, such as imprisonment and youth detention, alcoholism and substance misuse (Steering Committee 6). And even in areas such as employment, which has seen improvements, at least until 2008, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in terms of their respective employment rates is still considerable with around 49 percent for Indigenous people compared to around 75 percent for non-Indigenous Australians (*Closing the Gap* 65).[1]

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1 These are the most recent data available on Indigenous poverty. The figures presented here are merely meant to give a general, statistical overview of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage; they do not, for instance, reflect differences with regard to geographical location, gender or education. For the most recent, comprehensive overview of Indigenous employment, education and health cf. *Closing the Gap*.

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In public discourse, Indigenous poverty and other, often related problems such as violence and drug abuse are frequently linked to dysfunctional cultural traditions. As Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp and Elisabeth Baehr (5) point out, this line of argument blames social issues on Indigenous culture rather than on the traumata of colonialism. According to Judy Atkinson, the traumatic experiences of the past, such as frontier violence, dislocation from traditional lands and forced child removal, have a continuing impact on later generations. As she explains, many of the problems that Indigenous communities face today, such as poverty, alcoholism and family violence, are symptomatic of the transgenerational transmission of traumatic behaviours resulting from Australia's long history of oppression and marginalisation (Atkinson esp. 24, 82–83, 226–34).

The narrative of Indigenous dysfunction has been heavily criticised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, scholars and activists. In her essay "On Writing *Carpentaria*", the Waanyi author Alexis Wright, for example, states that she wants to move beyond the "typical, pathological, paternalist viewpoint" that prevails in non-Indigenous discourse on Indigenous subject matters and that perceives Indigenous people as "pathetic welfare cases" (85). Similarly, Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that "according to the logic of neo-liberalism, the impoverished conditions under which Indigenous people live are a product of dysfunctional cultural traditions and social pathology" (6), and, as she contends, this populist view is used to deny Indigenous people their sovereignty.

A note on terminology seems necessary at this point. Overall, I use the terms 'poverty' and 'precarity' in the sense outlined by Barbara Korte. As she explains, in critical discourse, poverty is commonly conceived of as (material) deprivation that is inextricably linked to social exclusion as well as a lack of "agency, opportunities and access to knowledge, traditions, rights or capabilities" (1). The existential insecurity that may result from these deprivations and exclusions is often subsumed under the term 'precarity'. However, as Boyd Hunter (9) reminds us, Indigenous poverty is multi-dimensional, including not only income but also health, housing, justice and affinity with the land, all of which have an impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Since Vicky Grieves argues that "Aboriginal Spirituality", in the sense of a "wholistic [*sic*] notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe" (7) is essential for Indigenous people's social and emotional well-being, this article focuses in particular on the relationship between experiences of poverty and precarity and the feeling of being alienated from the land.

Given the economic deprivation and social exclusion that many Indigenous Australians face, it comes as little surprise that issues such as poverty, domestic violence, alcoholism and drug abuse also feature prominently in Aboriginal literature, across all genres.[2] More recent examples include, for instance, poetry by Romaine Moreton, the poetic memoir *Too Afraid to Cry* by Ali Cobby Eckermann (2012), short stories by Alf Taylor, and novels such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) or Tony Birch's *Blood* (2011) and *Ghost River* (2015). Many of these works question the equation of poverty and Aboriginality by presenting, for example, self-confident Aboriginal characters that uphold cultural traditions despite, or in the face of their socio-economic disadvantage.[3]

One genre that I wish to argue is particularly well-suited to counter this populist discourse of Indigenous poverty and dysfunction is the short story cycle – a genre which has become prominent in Aboriginal writing in the last decade, including works by Tony Birch (*Shadowboxing*, 2006), Jeanine Leane (*Purple Threads*, 2011), Marie Munkara (*Every Secret Thing*, 2009) and Ellen van Neerven (*Heat and Light*, 2014). Using the figure of thought of relationality as an analytical tool, I wish to illustrate how the short story cycle through its very form fosters a critical engagement with prevalent discourses that simply equate Aboriginality, or being Aboriginal, with poverty and precarity. This article focuses primarily on Tara June Winch's award-winning debut fiction *Swallow the Air* (2006), a short story cycle composed of twenty short stories. *Swallow the Air* traces how the narrator-protagonist, May Gibson, attempts to overcome what I call her 'crisis of nonrelation' – a term which I take from Leela Gandhi's study *Affective Communities* (148) and which I use to refer to an existential lack of relationality, a loss of feeling interconnected to other human beings and to the land. Winch's cycle foregrounds the importance of relationality on a formal as well as on the content level, as I will demonstrate in my analysis. Moreover, this inscription and mediation of relationality extends to the reader as well in that the narrative encourages an intersubjective and participatory reading that pays heed to notions of plurality and multiplicity, while raising awareness of our own reading positions, as Davis (18) has also argued with regard to Asian American and Asian Canadian short story cycles. Ultimately, Aboriginal short story cycles such as *Swallow the Air* present an ambiguous view on the issue of poverty, oscillating between an emphasis

2 I use the term 'Aboriginal' in the following, since my analysis does not include works by Torres Strait Islander writers.

3 Cf. also Jan Alber on how recent Aboriginal fiction uses humour and references to cultural traditions in its representations of Indigenous poverty in order to "counteract the potential victimization of indigenous Australians" (148).

on cultural specificity and inclusiveness, the potential of traditions to instigate a process of healing and the shortcomings of such a mono-dimensional approach. As a loosely connected series of short stories, these texts provide us with a kaleidoscope of individual accounts of living a precarious life, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of Aboriginal poverty. Through their form, they warn us against homogenising and teleological readings that lump together diverse forms and experiences of poverty and that try to account for them on the basis of just one parameter, such as culture.

The first section briefly expounds the formal specificity of the short story cycle as a promising field for investigating the cultural function these texts perform in and through their form. The next section then traces how *Swallow the Air* mediates the potential of relationality, especially on the level of form, as an ambiguous (and partly utopian) means to overcome the 'crisis of nonrelation', that is, the problems of precarious living conditions and social exclusion that lead to a feeling of profound alienation and which are to some extent the result of a disconnection from the land. After these formal considerations, the third part turns to the level of reader-text relations, looking at how *Swallow the Air* positions us as readers through evading a sense of finality and defying reader expectations. A brief comparison with Tony Birch's *Shadowboxing* (2006) complements this analysis, illustrating how the form of the short story cycle may serve to complicate questions of ethnicity and ethnic identity. Overall, I wish to show how Aboriginal short story cycles potentially undermine simplistic discourses of Aboriginal poverty and dysfunctional cultural traditions by engaging us in a web of narrative relations that make us aware of the moral responsibility involved in discussing the reasons for and potential solutions to the multi-faceted challenges that Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) people in Australia face today.

2 The Promise of Relations – Aboriginal Short Story Cycles and Reading Practices

The genre of the short story cycle is notoriously difficult to define. However, while there is much disagreement on terminology (short story cycle, composite novel, short story composite, short story sequence)[4], critics are surprisingly unanimous in describing its central characteristic: several interrelated short stories that compose a larger unit.[5] Interrelation, or what I prefer to call

4 For an overview, cf. Lundén (12–18).
5 Cf., for instance, Dunn and Morris (2), Mann (15) and Nagel (15).

relationality, can hence be considered the central formal characteristic of this particular genre in that the individual short stories assume additional meaning when read in relation to one another. For the most part, short story cycle criticism, especially on North American literature, has focused on specific thematic concerns such as the representation of fragmented identities, migrant experiences and communities, and how notions of hybridity and multiplicity are reflected in the very form of the short story cycle.[6] In my analysis, I wish to combine this focus on the work's socio-political agenda with the attention to formal detail that is often found in short story criticism, trying to delineate how the poetics of representation in *Swallow the Air* influences and reflects its politics.[7] This influence, I contend, extends to the reader as well in that its particular form affects how we read the narrative, calling for an intersubjective and participatory engagement with the text.

In her book *Transcultural Reinventions* (2001), Rocío Davis argues that the form of the short story cycle requires new reading strategies.[8] Through its necessarily elliptical form, this genre invites the reader to participate in the production of meaning, placing us in a strategic position because we need to bridge the gaps between the individual short stories. In particular, we need to abandon the self-contained world of one short story before moving on to the next one. As the following analysis attempts to show, this positioning of the reader as well as certain formal features within individual short stories make the short story cycle a particularly effective medium to (re)present a multifaceted view of Aboriginal cultures and hence to subvert and challenge simplistic discourses of Aboriginal poverty.

3 *Swallow the Air* – Overcoming the 'Crisis of Nonrelation'

Swallow the Air is a short story cycle written in the form of a *bildungsroman* and tells of the narrator-protagonist May's quest for a place to belong. Growing up, May's life is shaped by the stories her mother told her about the land and about ancestral spirits such as Mungi, the turtle (Winch 4–5). As the first short story in the cycle indicates, May's childhood years are marked by an intimate

6 Cf., for instance, Davis, Löschnigg, Lynch and O'Connor.

7 Two noteworthy exceptions from this dominance of thematic analyses in short story cycle criticism are Davis's *Transcultural Reinventions* and Löschnigg's *The Contemporary Canadian Short Story*. To date, hardly any scholarly attention has been paid to Aboriginal short story cycles, despite their growing visibility on the Australian literary scene.

8 The following is based on Davis (18).

relation to the land, more specifically the beach and the ocean ("Swallow the Air"). However, after her mother's suicide, at the end of the first short story, she is unable to appreciate or live an interconnected life anymore. As she explains in retrospect: "When Billy and me lost our mother, we lost ourselves. We stopped swimming in the ocean, scared that we'd forget to breathe. Forget to come up for mouthfuls of air. We lost trust because we didn't want to touch something that was going to fall away. Like bubbles, too delicate, too fragile, too brief" (Winch 195). Through her mother's stories, which May experienced directly in that her mother took her to the places that held these stories (137), she "felt Aboriginal [...] felt like [she] belonged" – a feeling that she loses with her mother's death (97). Instead, she feels as if she did not belong anywhere (97) and with cultural traditions as a source of strength fading away, issues of loss, poverty and alcohol abuse come increasingly to the fore.

In many stories, especially in the first half of the cycle, the reader is introduced to a world that is shaped by poverty, domestic violence and drugs. May lives in precarious conditions with her brother and her aunt, an alcoholic and gambler, and she repeatedly witnesses how her aunt is beaten up by her boyfriend. After one of these incidences, May runs away from home and stays at a junkies' home, a place that she describes as "a drug house of anxious nobodies" (Winch 65). It is here that her 'crisis of nonrelation' reaches its peak, because, as she says, she "did not know any of them; [she] did not know [her] brother" (74). In other words, many stories depict how May becomes increasingly alienated from the land and from other people and finds herself in an environment dominated by material deprivation, violence and drugs. This particular arrangement of the short stories – moving from a focus on the beach as a place of ease and interconnectedness to several locations marked by the absence of meaningful relationships – suggests that alienation from the land may be one factor that contributes to May's descent into poverty.

However, other stories, especially in the second half of the cycle, oblige us to abandon this world of precarious living conditions. Instead, the focus shifts to the ways in which May attempts to overcome her 'crisis of nonrelation'. In this context, the significance of Aboriginal, or more specifically Wiradjuri cultural traditions comes to the fore. Many later stories focus on the experience of feeling interrelated with other people and with the land, thus mediating the centrality of relationality for Aboriginal wellbeing. A turning point is the short story "Wantok", in which May and Johnny, a Torres Strait Island boy, tell each other stories about their ancestral lands, which they have never been able to visit. Their storytelling is not detached, or merely descriptive; instead, they imaginatively take each other to places that they feel connected with. The short story begins as follows: "Johnny takes me away, together we run

the white-sanded beaches, and we eat mangoes and pick coconuts and wade through swamps to pull up lily roots and eat them as sugar rhubarb” (Winch 119). Though physically still in Sydney, they mentally relocate themselves to distant places through stories. In other words, they undergo what Marie-Laure Ryan terms “fictional recentering” (21–23) and what Marco Caracciolo refers to as “imaginative projection” (117); that is, they feel present in places that they have never visited but can only experience through narrative.

This short story is particularly noteworthy in terms of its formal features. For one, it makes extensive use of the present tense, exploring the potential of this pluri-significant tense, which, as Dorrit Cohn (106–107) has pointed out, can refer to imagined scenarios as well as to perceptions and descriptions of the real world. The present-tense narration in “Wantok” fuses the narrated story world, Sydney, with the children’s imaginative world of their ancestral homelands. Both ‘worlds’ have the same experiential quality for the characters, which reflects the importance of an imagined homeland for them since their connections to the real land are broken. Moreover, the present tense in this short story indicates a sense of momentariness, presenting us with extensively imagined, and narratively experienced, moments of feeling interconnected with the land instead of with an authoritative and coherent account of reconnecting with Country. Furthermore, May and Johnny are presented as a joint consciousness, as the first-person plural pronoun “we” underlines – “we scramble”, “we run”, “we fish”, “we read”, “we beachcomb”, “we visit”, “we dance”, “we rest” (Winch 121). Through this projection of a joint consciousness, the narrative further highlights the importance of relationality, with other human beings as well as with the land, by making it impossible to attribute any of the perceptions and actions rendered in this passage to just one person. Put slightly differently, the short story depicts a *communal* experience of relating to the land.

“Wantok” assumes a crucial function in *Swallow the Air* in that it epitomises the moment in which a joint immersion in an imagined place leads to a desire for the real place, at least for the protagonist May. The later short stories tell of the journey May undertakes to her mother’s Country in order to find a place to belong. This ‘Journey to Country’ theme is a common trope in many Aboriginal narratives, starting with Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), but also in more recent ones such as Melissa Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby* (2013). However, Winch introduces a different version of this theme. May’s ancestral Country does *not* serve as a straightforward source of healing in the sense of helping her to overcome her ‘crisis of nonrelation’, as Robert Clarke (134) also suggests. Structurally, this continuous disconnection is emphasised in that the short story titled “Country” precedes and is set apart from the one titled “Home”. The cycle hence requires us to abandon the almost romanticised and stereotypical

notion that ancestral Country always and unproblematically provides the character with a sense of belonging. Instead, May feels at home in her aunt's place, the place she returns to in the very last short story, "Home".

This concluding short story contains a tension that is never resolved. On the one hand, May has finally rediscovered her ability to relate to the land in the sense of experiencing it. The experiential importance of this development is again emphasised through the use of the present tense. As Matthew DelConte (430–31) contends, in simultaneous narration the narrative location constantly shifts so that the narrating location is often identical with the experiencing location. DelConte is here indebted to Cohn, who has pointed out that in present-tense narration the distinction between narrating and experiencing is "literally reduced to zero: the moment of narration *is* the moment of experience, the narrating self *is* the experiencing self" (107). Coming home, May notes that "[w]e don't need words. I can smell it. I can feel it. […] As I walk up toward the beach entrance, across the little raindrop dimples on yesterday's footprints, and feel the gritty warm-wet sand carry me. As the starburst eelgrass clusters roll like tumbleweeds off the dunes. As all the salt hits me. I know what the word really means, home" (Winch 194). Through the use of present-tense, i.e., simultaneous narration, the narrative foregrounds the important experiential feeling that the beach holds for May. May's intimacy with the land is reflected on the level of narration in that the distinction between experiencing and narrating is levelled. The form of the short story cycle in combination with present-tense narration in some stories thus mediates the subconscious, fragmented yet immediate nature of May's experiences of the land. This provisional and discontinuous form of establishing relationality is mirrored and recreated in our reading of the narrative, firstly through the elliptical form of the short story cycle, and secondly through the use of present-tense narration, in which, as James Phelan (234) has argued, our reading experience is very close to the ongoing experiences of the protagonist.

This analysis of present-tense narration seems to suggest that May has found a tentative and provisional place to belong by learning to relate to *any* place, not necessarily her ancestor's Country. As she maintains, "[e]ven though this country is not my mother's country, even though we are freshwater, not saltwater people, this place still owns us, still owns our history, my brother's and my own, Aunty's too. Mum's. They are part of this place" (Winch 194). Ken Gelder describes this as a "*displaced* form of belonging" (62). Indeed, *Swallow the Air* does not end on a decidedly positive note. The home that May returns to is the same that she has left earlier: her aunt is drinking, the house is dilapidated, and the neighbourhood is in the process of being demolished. In other words, May's circular journey brings her back to the precarious living conditions she

has sought to leave behind. In fact, the final short story "Home", and thus the whole cycle, ends in a way that in some regard stands in marked contrast to the positive narrative thread that tells of May's re-found ability to connect to the land. The final paragraph reads as follows: "An excavator starts its smothering engine over the torrent of each barrel. Over the sun. Over the blue. And I wonder, if we stand here, if we stay, if they stop digging up Aunty's backyard, stop digging up a mother's memory, stop digging up our people, maybe then, we'll all stop crying" (Winch 198). The cycle closes on a note of profound uncertainty, as emphasised by the recurring "if". Although May is now able to connect to the land, this feeling does not alleviate the precariousness she and her family experience in their everyday life, such as the threat of becoming homeless. While many short stories in *Swallow the Air* highlight the function of Wiradjuri cultural traditions as a source of confidence and resilience, other stories remind us of the pervasive problems of Aboriginal material deprivation and social exclusion. The form of the short story cycle presents these two worlds both as coexistent and in partial opposition, prohibiting a reading in which a world of lived relationality functions as a simple solution to socio-economic problems.

The utopian quality of relating to any land in order to feel at home is, for instance, juxtaposed to the harsh reality of the dire living conditions in remote communities, which is brought to the fore in the short story "Mission". May experiences this place as a desolate and bleak locale, devoid of any hope: "Dead land. [...] The windows have no shutters, some doorways have no doors, and every house is exactly the same, like someone's idea of fancy concentration camps" (Winch 167). May's observation is partly confirmed and supplemented by an old Aboriginal man, Uncle, who talks about the problems this remote station community faces on a daily basis. As he notes, alcoholism is pervasive – "too much grog" (169), "so much drinkin, drinkin, drinkin" (170) – as is violence – "so much anger" (170). Uncle attributes these problems to the fact that Aboriginal people are "still seen as second-rate person [*sic*], still treated like they don't matter" (171), and his monologue bristles with railings against genocidal government policies and against racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people. However, it is noteworthy that this bleak assessment of government policies is clearly framed as an individual and subjective perception. As Uncle stresses at the end, "[y]ou know what, maybe I don't know what I'm talkin bout, I sure as hell would like someone to tell me I'm wrong, I wish someone would just tell me I'm wrong" (172). Instead of pretending to give an authoritative insider account of the hardship Aboriginal people face in this community, the text frames these depictions as clearly subjective ones – May's observations and Uncle's personal interpretation.

While this brief passage on the dire living conditions in a remote community serves as a means to counter idealistic images of living a harmonious, interconnected life, it also highlights that all we are presented with are short, isolated and individual perceptions and "attempts to make sense of the world", as stated in the dedication and as the overall form of the short story cycle further reinforces. Moreover, as Wiradjuri academic and writer Jeanine Leane has pointed out, the narrative emphasises that the substance abuse and violence of some Aboriginal characters is not the result of "innate dysfunctional behaviour" but "part of a generational response to institutionalized racism and mistreatment" ("Rites" 117). Put slightly differently, Winch presents us exclusively with individual opinions and actions within a specific context, thereby subverting generalising notions of the inherent dysfunctionality of Aboriginal communities.

Overall, *Swallow the Air* urges readers to constantly move not only between stories but between the two worlds that are contained in them: one which depicts the problems and challenges of poverty, drug addiction and domestic violence, and one which foregrounds the relationality between people and the land, or, more broadly speaking, Aboriginal cultural traditions and knowledge systems as a potential source of belonging and healing. The tension between these two worlds is never resolved. Instead, the short story cycle provides us with a kaleidoscopic account of a Wiradjuri family's life – a life which is characterised by both hope of reconnecting to people and places and despair in the light of poverty, alcoholism and dispossession. The form of the short story cycle privileges this focus on the individual nature of experiencing precarity in its many guises, including alienation from the land, over telling a teleological story about Indigenous poverty that presents us with straightforward conclusions.

4 Defying Reader Expectations

Especially through the ambiguous concluding short story, *Swallow the Air* seems to evade a sense of finality, which, as Davis (16) has pointed out, is a common feature of many short story cycles by minority writers. This rejection of a conclusive narrative is often linked to a refusal to fulfil reader expectations (16), which Winch's cycle does in two regards, thus fostering a critical engagement with our alleged knowledge about Indigenous poverty. For one, a return to Country does not lead to a sense of belonging, that is, it offers a different, inconclusive 'Journey to Country' story. This alternation on a common theme in Aboriginal literature scrutinises idealised notions of Country

as a source of healing.[9] On the other hand, Winch's text is not what Melissa Lucashenko in her review calls the "Sally Morgan story". It is not about May discovering her Aboriginality – she grows up knowing that she is Wiradjuri (Winch 97). While May's Aboriginal heritage contributes to the hardship she suffers especially in the first half of the cycle – for instance racism and rape ("My Bleeding Palm") – the narrative has at the same time an inclusive outlook, and thus exceeds notions of absolute otherness. This inclusive quality is already implied in the dedication "*for all of us, attempting to make sense of the world*", and it is "the most universal of human quests" that is at the heart of *Swallow the Air*: a place to feel home and safe (Lucashenko, "Review"). The short story cycle, I would argue, warns us against reading it through an exclusively 'ethnic' lens, which runs the danger of simply equating poverty, alcoholism and violence with Wiradjuri culture.

To be more precise, instead of focusing exclusively on questions of Aboriginality, *Swallow the Air* also points towards our common humanity, to what we share, and especially criticises using skin colour as a marker of difference. As May maintains, for example, "[w]hen I looked into the mirror I saw a girl, lost and hollow – the same as every other fifteen-year-old, I guessed. I didn't see the colour that everyone else saw" (Winch 97). Skin colour only provides a superficial difference that does not withstand scrutiny. Visiting an illegal fist fight event near Darwin, May notes "[b]lack men and white men, separated by only skin, only by skin until it rips open and the red blood and red dirt become the same, same red brute" (84). Violence, this particular short story emphasises, is not in any way linked to a person's cultural background or skin colour.

This countering of notions of absolute otherness, which may translate into equating Aboriginality with issues of poverty or domestic violence, becomes even more pronounced in Tony Birch's short story cycle *Shadowboxing* (2006), a text that defies reader expectations, especially with regard to cultural identity, to an even greater extent than *Swallow the Air*. Tony Birch's fiction, such as his novels *Blood* (2011) and *Ghost River* (2015), is characterised by two recurring features: a social-realist framework that concentrates on people who live on the social and economic margins, and the scarcity of any references to or indications of the characters' cultural background. Unlike Kim Scott or Alexis Wright, for example, Birch does not draw on Aboriginal cultural traditions or

9 Cf. van Toorn, who argues that "the Aboriginal subject's journey is usually towards home and traditional country" (37).

narratives and thus he does not direct attention to his work as a contemporary Aboriginal cultural form, as Eve Vincent has pointed out.

These observations also hold true for *Shadowboxing*, a collection of ten linked short stories about the experiences of the narrator-protagonist Michael, a boy growing up in a working-class neighbourhood in Fitzroy in the 1960s. He lives in a world of poverty, a world in which domestic violence is widespread, and where the law of the jungle prevails on the streets. The ethnic identity of most characters remains unexplained throughout the whole cycle. There is only one passage in the short story "The Bulldozer" that refers explicitly to Michael's ethnicity. One of the workers looks at Michael and asks: " 'What about you, kid? An Abo, an Indian, or a no-hoper? What are you? A bit of each, maybe?' He called over his shoulder to his workmate. 'What do you reckon, Andy? This kid? Do you reckon he's one of us, or one of them? Hard to tell, hey?" (Birch, *Shadowboxing* 79). This passage is significant in two respects. For one, the narrative defies the workmen's desire to unambiguously establish Michael's ethnicity by classifying him as "one of us, or one of them" based on his bodily appearance and thus foregrounds the arbitrariness and superficiality of these exclusive and reductive categories. Secondly, this passage and the workmen's behaviour can be read as a mirroring of and critical comment on our engagement with the text. Even though readers may recoil from the racism depicted in this scene, there may still be a subconscious wish to come to terms with Michael's cultural background, as Vincent has argued. *Shadowboxing* therefore most poignantly challenges what Maria Löschnigg has termed "the common 'reader fallacy' of automatically attributing the ethnic identity of the author to his/her fictional characters" (162). By leaving out "obvious ethnic markers" (162), Birch foregrounds that the themes of poverty, domestic violence and generally life at the socio-economic margins are not in any way directly and inextricably linked to questions of culture and traditions. The elision of "ethnic markers", I would argue, is an especially effective means to counter discourses that equate Aboriginality and poverty in that it confronts us with our own prejudices and the subconscious expectations and assumptions that we bring to the text. The form of the short story cycle further enhances this effect. It requires us to continually scrutinise our own reading positions, since the loose connections between the individual stories complicate a simple transfer of insights gained from one story to the next. In other words, the narrative form favours individuality and encourages us to respect that focus on the particular by making it difficult to come up with a unifying thread, including ethnicity, as an overarching, meaning providing category.

5 Conclusion – The Potential of Relationality

Winch's short story cycle *Swallow the Air* as well as Birch's *Shadowboxing* warn us against exclusively 'ethnic' readings that run the danger of simply equating poverty and violence with Aboriginality. The form of the short story cycle reflects the episodic, fragmented and subjective nature of the narrator-protagonists' experiences, providing us with a kaleidoscopic insight into diverse lived realities instead of an authoritative, univocal account of Aboriginal living conditions. *Swallow the Air* in particular uses several narrative strategies to counter pathological discourses of Aboriginal poverty. It juggles culture-specific and universal themes and depicts two simultaneous worlds, one of poverty, domestic violence and drug abuse, and one of cultural resilience and hope through relationality with other people and with the land. However, despite this emphasis on relationality as a means to overcome the 'crisis of nonrelation', there remains a constant tension between these two worlds. Through this unresolved tension the narrative subverts pathological and paternalistic discourses of Aboriginal poverty and precarity without resorting to an idealised and romanticised view of Aboriginal cultures.

In this context, the genre of the short story cycle assigns a crucial role to readers. Moving between the individual short stories and between the different worlds depicted in them, we are encouraged to constantly shift our reading positions. In particular, through the use of present-tense narration in *Swallow the Air*, we are invited to experience the potential of relationality, with other people and with the land, as one possibility to counter the 'crisis of nonrelation'. Tony Birch, on the other hand, confronts us with our (subconscious) attempts to read Aboriginal-authored narratives of poverty and precarity through an exclusively 'ethnic' lens. This negation of ethnicity as a primary meaning-providing feature of Aboriginal fiction and the emphasis on relationality can be seen as gesturing towards the potential of what the Caribbean writer and theorist Édouard Glissant terms "Relation", in which "the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity" (192). Diversity, for Glissant, provides the "real foundation of Relation" (190), where Relation describes a "fluid and unsystematic system whose elements are engaged in a radically nonhierarchical free play of interrelatedness" (Britton 11). This is what the very form of the short story cycle also reflects in that it offers us loosely connected stories about diverse experiences regarding, for instance, alienation from the land, material deprivation and alcohol abuse, without subsuming them under a conclusive, unified narrative of Indigenous struggles or cultural dysfunction.

Moreover, the short story cycle can be seen to embody a politics of communality in that it acknowledges the larger framework of a common humanity, the quest for a place to belong and to feel safe, but without discarding cultural differences and individual experiences. In such a reading, poverty and precarity constitute factors that have a profound impact on the lives of individuals and whole communities, but they are not inextricably or directly linked to the values and customs of a particular culture. The fragmented nature of the cycle, which encourages participation in the reading process and raises awareness of our own reading positions, suggests that confronting our prejudices and alleged knowledge about Indigenous poverty may be a first step in a long, open-ended process that necessarily concerns all of Australian society.

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PART 2

Intersectional Approaches

CHAPTER 4

Precarious Lives in Tony Birch's *Common People* (2017)

Sue Kossew

1 Introduction

As contemporary Australia is generally regarded as a first-world, economically stable nation, it is not usually associated with issues of poverty and precarity. However, like many other "global North" or Western countries, it combines within it aspects of the "global South," that is, groups of people – among them refugees, migrants, dispossessed First Nations or Indigenous peoples, the economically deprived, the homeless – who may be seen as members of what has come to be called "the precariat." As Guy Standing suggests, this term is a neologism that combines the adjective "precarious" with the class-based noun "proletariat," pointing to the "fragmentation of national class structures" (11–12) and to growing global inequalities. Australian Indigenous writer Tony Birch has expressed his own commitment to writing stories about the working class and the marginalised ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview"), most particularly in the setting of his home city of Melbourne. While Melbourne is consistently rated among the world's most liveable cities, Birch's narratives tell a different story: one of disadvantage and inequality, but also of resilience and survival. His collection of short stories *Common People* (2017) addresses the problems encountered by those having been precaritised and consigned to living by their wits on the margins of social acceptability.

Birch's depiction of precarious lives illustrates the link between what Judith Butler defines as individual "precaritization" and the "failures and inequalities of socio-economic and political institutions" (13). For Butler, precaritisation is a process "usually induced and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions that acclimatize populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness" and that is "built into the institutions of temporary labor, of decimated social services, and of the general attrition of social democracy" (13) as a result largely of the operation of neo-liberal ideologies. In this way, it is, she suggests, the deliberate policies of governments that precaritise vulnerable members of the population, often refugees, migrants, the marginalised, racial or ethnic "others" and the poor. The word "acclimatize" is an important

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one, not just for its attending to the potential human cost of environmental crises but also for its pointing to the slow but relentless acceptability of precaritisation, not just by its victims but by whole societies (the frog in boiling water scenario). Victim blaming by those whose lives are not as precarious and the "hopelessness" of those whose lives are precarious are two sides of the neo-liberal coin, displacing blame onto the "failure" of individuals rather than examining the social, political and economic power structures that have produced such inequality.

This neo-liberal discourse, and its consequences that Butler outlines above, has been prevalent in Australia, particularly under the various Coalition Federal governments of John Howard and Tony Abbott. Australia is often described as "the lucky country"[1], a place of opportunity for migrants, refugees and even (going back further in history) for "reformed" convicts. Yet the rhetoric of a "fair go" and a classless society is undercut by the reality of a dispossessed underclass that is particularly evident in present-day city streets in the form of "rough sleepers". In Melbourne, for example, the setting for Birch's stories, the incidence of people sleeping rough increased by 74 per cent between 2014 and 2016 (Wright).[2] Shockingly, it is estimated that on any given night, around 1,100 people sleep rough in [the state of] Victoria, a cohort made up of various groups of people, including single men aged between 20 and 54 years, women (especially older single women), Aboriginal Victorians, young people, older people, families with children and members of the LGBTIQ+ community, many of them as a result of family violence.[3]

While not exclusively focusing on the issue of homelessness *per se* (apart from in the stories "Harmless" and "Worship"), Birch's short story collection *Common People* thematises issues of precarity. Birch has spoken of the characters in these stories as "common" in a double sense: they "share a common humanity" that his stories showcase in order to "give value to those [marginalised] lives" and "an indication […] of the complexity of those sort of lives" despite the fact that they are often the source of trouble "to themselves and others" ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview"); and, in the other sense

1 This phrase originates from Donald Horne's 1964 book, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*. It has become a cliché of national smugness although Horne used it ironically to critique this very tendency.

2 It should be noted, however, that the 2018 StreetCount survey, released after the publication of Birch's text, recorded a slight decrease in the number of rough sleepers in Melbourne, largely due to local Council actions to reduce the problem.

3 These facts are taken from *Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan January 2018* published by State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, January 2018. www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/towards-home.

of the phrase, they are often regarded as "common" and looked down on, patronised or over-compensated for by those who are better off (as in the story "The White Girl"). He further states, in the same interview, that most of his characters are working class and Indigenous people who "don't really interact with people outside their class or their structure" ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview") so that, for them, their precarious lives are considered normal and they work within the material limitations placed upon them. In one of the stories in *Common People*, "Paper Moon," there is an image of an Australian flag that "hung limply from a pole" (174) at the psychiatric institution where the narrator's father is a live-in patient. As Birch has commented, the image represents "the failure of institutions in Australia" to help the disenfranchised, like the father ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview"). It is in the context, then, of these precarious lives and what Birch has termed "the culture of violence that underpins Australian society" ("Australia's Culture of Violence") faced by Birch's characters, often as a result of such systemic and institutional failures, and their resilience in the face of precarity, that I will, in this essay, consider the ways in which a number of the stories in the collection – including "The Ghost Train", "Harmless", "White Girl", "Sissy", "Paper Moon" and "Worship" – cast their protagonists as those who, despite their harsh lives, exposure to violence and marginalisation, turn out to be resilient survivors.[4] As Rebecca Stringer has argued in relation to gendered violence, victims are also "agentic bearers of knowledge" who have important stories to tell (14). It is significant, in the light of this comment, that the characters represented in these stories are often themselves story-tellers. A comment by Sister Josephine, a nun in the story "Sissy", although made in a different context, sums this up: "If the girls from the school excelled at anything, it was storytelling. As Sister Josephine often remarked, *Those who have little or nothing have the greatest capacity for invention*" (*Common People* 127; italics in original).

Born in 1957 into a family of Aboriginal, West Indian and Irish descent ("Acclaimed writer Tony Birch"), Birch's own life story is not dissimilar to those of some of his characters. Now a Professor and the inaugural recipient of the Bruce McGuiness Fellowship (named for one of Victoria's most respected

4 The concept of Indigenous survival or "survivance" is found in a number of contemporary Aboriginal fictional texts. Kim Scott, whose novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010) epitomises this cultural resilience, links it to his own project of recovering the Noongar language. He writes: "The very act of language regeneration can reveal the extent of historical damage along with, importantly, a narrative of survival, resilience, recovery and inclusion"; quoted in John Bradley et al., pp. 57–58.

Aboriginal elders and a long-time activist in the struggle for Aboriginal justice) ("VU Academic Tony Birch") at Victoria University in Melbourne, having previously taught creative writing at the University of Melbourne, he came what may be seen as somewhat late to writing and to academia. He took his school leaving examination as a mature student at the age of 30 (having been expelled from two high schools in one year as a teenager), after working for 10 years as a member of the fire brigade, and going on to study for his BA, MA and PhD degrees. In 2017, he was awarded the Patrick White Prize for his body of work, including four books of short stories, a book of poetry, and two novels, the first of which, *Blood* (2011), was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, and the second, *Ghost River* (2015), won the prestigious Victorian Premier's Award for Indigenous writing in 2016.

His first collection of linked short stories, *Shadowboxing* (2006), comprises semi-autobiographical stories (all narrated in the first person and filtered through the character of Michael) of his own 1960s childhood in the Melbourne working-class suburb of Fitzroy, and includes stories of domestic violence and the often-brutal parenting methods of Michael's father, as well as the institutional violence that includes the bulldozing of community housing to make way for urban "development." His most recent collection, *Common People* (2017), is less gritty than this early work and more varied, ranging across narrators, ethnic and racial identities and situations. As one reviewer writes of his stories: "Birch's characters remind us that Aboriginal lives are everywhere shared with the lives of people who are not Aboriginal; there are no discrete, bounded Aboriginal worlds" (Vincent). As he has proposed of the shift in tone from his earlier work, these stories, while not about "repair," show a sense of "resignation and acceptance" ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview"). This change is exemplified in the story "Paper Moon", narrated in the voice of a young girl that rewrites the final story, "The Haircut", from *Shadowboxing*, both stories engaging fictionally with Birch's own fractious relationship with his father. In the more recent story, he suggests, there is a "letting go of anger" that manifests in a tender father-daughter interaction which perhaps represents his "psychologically forgiving" his father by refiguring a paternal relationship in a far more gentle way ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview"). And this more conciliatory approach that Birch refers to here in relation to his father is articulated narratologically by a character at the end of the story "Sissy", when she says, of her selective recounting of events: " 'It was better to concentrate on the best part. That's how stories work' " (*Common People* 140).

2 Agency and Resilience

The first two stories in *Common People*, "The Ghost Train" and "Harmless", epitomise the way that Birch draws attention to both the precarity of his characters' lives and to their spirit of hopefulness. While "The Ghost Train" captures the grim desperation of workers who take on the risky and bloody work of the illegal meat-packing industry, the voices of its two women characters, Lydia and Marian, are vulgar, larger-than-life and good humoured despite their circumstances. While it is clear that they are being exploited and that the industry, which includes the illegal use of greyhounds for meat, thrives on its workers' desperate need for cash payment, it is ultimately the women's solidarity on which the story focuses. Although Lydia and Marian are exhausted at the end of their midnight shift and Marian's face is "smeared with animal blood", the Vietnamese woman, Rose, who is an experienced worker, and whom Marian had earlier carpingly described as a "machine" (10), unexpectedly offers the women a parcel of meat each to take home with them. This act of kindness ends the story, along with the image of Marian's T-shirt smeared with blood. The significance of this is that her T-shirt has been given to her by an American ex-boyfriend and features a photograph of Barack Obama and the word "Hope". Although bloodied and "a mess" (14) by the end of the story, the message of the T-shirt – "don't give up" (3) – seems to sum up the indomitable spirit of the women.

The story "Harmless" begins with the words, "I want to tell you a story about Harmless, which wasn't his true name, although it was the only one I knew him by" (15). The intimacy of this story-telling tradition with its direct address to the reader as "you" and its strong sense of an oral narrative *event* establishes the tone of a number of the stories in the collection: that of the "yarn" that, while delivered in a casual way, promises a story that will also provide some kind of meaningful message. It is in the telling and the listening that this meaning emerges. In this story, the name given to the deaf homeless man who talks to "nobody but himself" and "always minded his own business" (15) sums up the story's ironies. While the man himself may be harmless, he has been, and continues to be, harmed, literally and metaphorically, by the world in which he lives, though no details are given of his past. The precarity of his existence is epitomised by his having to sleep in the bandstand in the middle of the park (15); on the other hand, his fierce sense of independence causes him to refuse help from anyone, so that he only reluctantly takes up the offer from the police of food and shelter on cold, wet nights when they "insist" (15), and agrees to collect a weekly food parcel from the kind sergeant at the police station only

when a newspaper is added to the "deal" (16). The story emphasises his autonomy in negotiating this "deal", not just his neediness.

The story's unnamed narrator, a thirteen-year-old girl, is herself, like Harmless, considered different. She is avoided by the other girls at her school because, according to one of them, she is " 'too much of a tomboy' " (18) and she lives with her grandmother, not her parents. It is perhaps this shared outsider status that makes her curious about Harmless, to the extent that, after he has been beaten up and left the town to live in an abandoned timber cutter's shack in the bush, she follows him and, when he is not there, inspects his home. She is struck by his neatness and cleanliness, understanding that he "had made his own life, one he owned" (20) and that her pity and sadness for him had been misplaced.

The story's climax is the result of gendered violence: a heavily pregnant young girl from the narrator's school, Rita – who at "only fourteen" (2) is underage – is violently assaulted by a local bully who, it turns out, has caused her pregnancy. The narrator witnesses this scene and helps Rita, who is about to give birth prematurely as a result of her beating, to the safety of Harmless's nearby shack. After Harmless assists in the birth while the narrator goes for help, he disappears to avoid the attention of the police and the local press, who have decided that he is a hero. He never returns to the town, and the narrative ends with the narrator making a warming fire in the pot-belly stove in his now-empty shack, perhaps symbolically keeping his story and his spirit alive. The story illustrates Harmless's agency, as well as his disadvantage, summed up in the narrator's grandmother's description of his "gift" (27): although he is deaf, he can "lip-read perfectly", which means that if he does not want to listen to people, "all he has to do is turn away or close his eyes" (27). In other words, he is able to make his own decisions, despite his disability and poverty.

3 The Charity of Others

If these first two stories focus on the agency of their precaritised protagonists, there are two stories, both written from the perspective of Aboriginal children, which highlight the wrong-headed assumptions of others about those whom they consider to be in need of help. In the case of "White Girl" and "Sissy", it is "do-gooder" white women who play the part of rescuers. The ironies of their attempts are underlined by Birch's reprisal in the stories, through these white women's words and actions, of the colonial discourses that led to the precarity of Indigenous families in the first place through racist governmental policies of assimilation, in the form of the removal of lighter-skinned babies from their

Aboriginal parents to foster families and to missions. Much has been written of these Stolen Generations, and the precarity of childhood and selfhood endured by those taken away from their own families and removed from their cultural heritage is still the painful subject of a number of life writing texts in which those who have suffered this cultural and familial dislocation bear witness to the trauma and its long-lasting intergenerational effects.[5] Birch's two stories, however, while dramatising some of these issues, manage to do so with a dry humour that, again, attests to an attitude of survival and the ability to see through the façade of seemingly charitable behaviour in his characters.

In "The White Girl", the story is narrated in the first person by Noah Sexton, a young Aboriginal boy, whose own poverty (evident in his "piss-stained shorts" and "bad smell", 68) is contrasted throughout with the ultra-cleanliness of Heather Moran ("the cleanest person I'd ever seen", 69), the white girl of the title with whom he falls in love the first time he sees her. Excluded as Noah is by the other pupils and bullied by the teacher, the new girl, Heather, is the only one in the class who will sit next to him, his family "cursed" with a reputation that, he tells her, is "like a disease" (71). The references to the smell of *Velvet* soap recall Anne McClintock's book, *Imperial Leather* (1995), in which she demonstrates the ways in which soap as a commodity of Empire "could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress", thereby associating whiteness with "purity" and blackness with "dirtiness" (209). Indeed, in the story, Noah, despite not having hot water at home, takes to scrubbing himself "with a cleaning brush, hard enough for the sharp bristles to draw blood" (*Common People* 75) and hanging his clothes outside to air at night in order to make himself cleaner for Heather. In this way, Birch narrativises Noah's internalisation of abjection that is expressed in the colonial discourse of cleanliness.

Birch further satirises this notion of cleanliness being 'next to Godliness' (as in the well-known aphorism) in the encounter between Noah and Heather's very religious mother, who invites Noah to their home, immediately asking him if he is a Christian, as he has such a "rich Christian name" (77). Her insistence on his having a bath before dinner and wearing "some fresh clothes" that her husband (a policeman) "hands out to drifters" (78) embarrasses Noah but he succumbs. She commiserates with him on his having no mother (she'd "shot through" – 75) and insists on towel-drying him herself, despite his wanting to scream "no" at her. By infantilising him, calling him a "poor, poor boy" and then

5 One of the most well-known of these life-writing or life-history texts is Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996).

generalising that "you [Aboriginals] are all such poor, poor boys" (80) in the final lines of the story, she is expressing both her Christian compassion ("she was crying" – 80) and her racism at the same time. This misguided sense of mission and knowing best is expressed earlier in the story, too, when Heather takes Noah to task for calling himself an "Abo", suggesting with magisterial certainty and generalisation that echoes her mother's: "That's a dirty word […] People like you, we call them half-castes. It's more proper" (72). For Noah himself, the words "Abo" and "blackfella" are more appropriate than the colonial-era weasel-worded discourse of racial (im)purity. Birch, though, rather than providing a bitter critique of these patronising (if well-meaning) attitudes, offers a kind of humorous rebuke while, at the same time, not underplaying the very real and material implications of dispossession and precarity that these mind-sets have engendered. He has commented more overtly in an interview on the devastating effects that the "half-caste Act", initiated in Victoria in 1886 and called the Aborigines Act, had on Aboriginal families, separating them and becoming the "foundation stone of the stolen generations policy." This Act sought to legally separate Aboriginal people into "categories of blood" (calculated in fractions using terms such as "half-caste" and "full-blood") and that led to family structures being "disintegrated" (Sefton-Rowston and Birch). In the light of this historical context, Heather's perhaps naïve and misguided insistence on the word "half-castes", and her mother's clumsy and patronising attempts at "mothering" Noah, resonate strongly in the story as reprising these historical wrongs.

The eponymous twelve-year-old protagonist of the story "Sissy", like Noah in "The White Girl", is Aboriginal and subjected to the charity of others. In her case, it is provided by the Daughters of Charity's House of Welcome where she attends Girls Club on Saturday mornings in order to get a free mug of chocolate and a buttered roll, "followed by a hot bath for every girl" (127). As in "The White Girl", the religious Sisters insist on cleanliness as an accompaniment to being fed and, similarly, Birch uses satire and irony to draw attention to the paradox inherent in this "charity". For, unlike Noah's luxurious bubble bath, Sissy has to line up and bathe in dirty water in which she suspects some of the girls have peed (her surname "Hall" is a disadvantage as the water is only changed after those whose surname starts with a K), thereby undoing the apparent benefit of the physical and spiritual cleansing regime. Tellingly, Sissy "never put her head under the water" (127) and would rather wash her hair "under the cold water tap […] in the backyard at home, no matter how bitter the weather" (127).

As in "The White Girl", charitable acts of helping the poor are shown to have unforeseen consequences. The idea of gratitude, for example, undercuts Sister Mary's offer to Sissy of the opportunity to have a summer holiday with

a more fortunate white Catholic family by her insistence on their "generosity" towards "your [her] people" (129). The power imbalance set up by this transaction (Sister Mary tells Sissy that the family is interested in "*taking* a girl" [128, emphasis added] for the holidays) ironically reproduces the language of the Stolen Generations; the idea of being "taken" signals this very clearly. Indeed, Sissy's best friend, Betty, tells her a cautionary tale about her cousin, Valda, whose mother was similarly assured by "the Welfare" that Valda was going on a holiday but who subsequently disappeared. While Sissy is somewhat sceptical of Betty's story (rightly, as it turns out), her enthusiasm "gradually faded" and she "was no longer sure how she felt" about going away (133). Sissy's mother, Miriam, similarly displays a sense of dread on hearing of this "generous" offer. This is despite Sister Mary's patronising confidence that Sissy's mother has always been a "grateful woman" (129) – suggesting also that there are some who would not be so grateful and would thus render themselves ineligible for this privilege – who will be happy for Sissy to go away for the holidays. In referencing the deep-seated distrust of such generosity by linking it to the taking of lighter-skinned children into white families, Birch shows the continuing trauma of these assimilationist policies, and the Church's implication in them. This is underlined still more when Betty says to Sissy: "Don't blame me when they powder your face even whiter than it is and force you to church every day of the week" (132). Earlier, Betty had hinted that Sissy had been chosen to go with the white family because she has "whiter skin" and nicer hair (like "straw" rather than Betty's "steel wool") than Betty (130). Furthermore, Betty suggests that "white skin equals teacher's pet. That's the way it is. Always has been, and you know it" (130). The link between "the way it is" and the way it "always has been" is that between historical assimilationist policies and the ongoing politics of more recent interracial relations, uncovering the sting in the tail of these acts of generosity and charity.

Birch's depiction of the encounter between the white woman, Mrs Coleman, and Sissy and her mother, Miriam, is both humorous and sad. Sissy, in particular, is torn between a fascination with cleanliness and purity and a sense that whiteness is not necessarily an advantage. The powder blue car in which an immaculately dressed Mrs Coleman arrives to pick up Sissy is described as "clean and shining" (136), and Mrs Coleman is "so white" (136) that Miriam, not being used to encountering such white skin, is convinced that Mrs Coleman is ill and Sissy, too, regards her as "sickly looking" (136). Despite this, Sissy is fascinated by this whiteness, even being able to see the veins in Mrs Coleman's cheekbones (137). Miriam is aware of the "self-conscious deference" (137) she is showing towards the visitor while Sissy feels shame for being embarrassed "of, and for, her mother" (137). The contrast is drawn between Mrs Coleman's

"spotlessly clean" (137) car windscreen and the "street corner [...] crowded with people, all of whom would never take a holiday" and some of whom "would never leave the suburb" (137). It is Mrs Coleman's injunction to Sissy to lock her door against her own people (including Betty, who is watching) that impels Sissy to escape. For Sissy, despite leaving behind her suitcase with new underwear in it, and despite the trouble she will be in with Sister Mary, the rebellion is worth it as she is staying home, with Betty and with her own family, rather than going off with a "strange lady" (139). The story shows both the ongoing intergenerational trauma associated with being "taken" and the spirit that revolts against such compromised acts of charity. The gentle humour recurs at the end of the story, when Betty admits that her cousin Valda had not, after all, disappeared but had run away and returned after a week, and that she had simply left out this part of the story as "that's how stories work" (140). And yet, this omitted part of the narrative echoes Sissy's experience: it is a story of resilience, return, pride and survival.

4 The Precarity of Family Life

In the final two stories that I examine here, Birch focuses on the fragile relationships between parents and children, and the precarity of family life, particularly when the parent is recovering from a mental illness or alcoholism, as is the case respectively in the stories "Paper Moon" and "Worship". "Paper Moon" is, as Tony Birch suggests in the interview quoted earlier, a quieter and gentler version of the autobiographical story "The Haircut" that ends *Shadowboxing* ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview"). Here it is focalised through a ten-year-old girl, Carol, who goes to visit her father in a psychiatric institution, paralleling the visit of the son, Michael, in the first-person account of a similar situation in "The Haircut". In the latter story, however, Michael has to have his father – who is portrayed initially as recalcitrant, confused and self-destructive – admitted to the hospital. Once there, his father displays "naïve dutifulness, as if he had decided to be on his best behaviour" (*Shadowboxing* 176). The story implies a difficult relationship between son and father, ending with a touching scene in which Michael cuts his father's hair in the hospital as an act of love. This is echoed in the last image of the story where Michael watches a young boy initially refuse to hold his father's hand to cross the road, and then to give in to his father's "protective demand" (178) so that they cross the road "hand in hand" (178). This (perhaps fleeting) reconciling of differences and acceptance of filial duty, despite the physical and emotional violence that Michael's father has shown towards his family throughout the collection of

stories, is a more conciliatory ending to the somewhat harrowing previous stories of family violence.

"Paper Moon", then, rewrites this scenario from the perspective of a ten-year-old girl whose relationship with her father is very different. She is the one who is represented as "fearful" (*Common People* 172) and her father as her protector: "he made the world safe" (180). The story ranges over a number of incidents when her father helps her overcome her fear or tiredness, beginning with his making of a paper moon to allay her anxiety that the setting moon would never rise again. Carol's sense of dread about the moon's disappearance is echoed when her father goes to hospital and does not come home, her mother "unwilling or unable to explain where he'd gone to" (179). Carol's mother gives in to her request and takes her to see her father at the institution, where she encounters other disturbed patients, including a man whose repetitive behaviour makes him appear to be "stuck in a place he would never be free of" (181). When her father repeatedly says that he wants to go home, Carol helps him to "escape" (181) on the bus while her mother is talking to the doctor, and is overjoyed that he can remember the time he carried her on his back when she was tired after a long walk. Their close relationship, and yet the unresolved nature of his future, is beautifully captured in the final image of the story, as they sit on the bus, waiting for its departure: she "slipped her arm through her father's and held on tight. He looked anxiously out of the window. They waited" (182). While the closeness of the father-daughter relationship in this story provides a less confrontational version of family life than in "The Haircut", the precarity of the father's mental health remains a source of anxiety. There is some implication that Carol herself may have inherited this sensitivity, but, more urgently, the success or failure of their escape remains unresolved and precarious at the end.

In "Worship", the story is focalised through an older woman, Lola, who is preparing to take care of her baby granddaughter, Isabel, for the first time. It begins with a description of her "morning ritual" (203) that has enabled her to overcome her addiction to (her "worship" of) alcohol, explaining why her daughter has had her "on probation until now" (210) and is only now allowing her to look after her ten-month-old granddaughter. Her daughter's ongoing suspicions seem to be confirmed when she finds a wine bottle in Lola's house, until Lola explains that is has been unopened for two years and is used only for her sobriety ritual.

The story, though, is not just about Lola's tussle with addiction and her success at coping with it, but also about her interaction with people who are living on the streets and are less able to access help (like the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings that Lola attends). Lola's reactions to a homeless couple

show her compassion, perhaps in contrast to her own daughter, who remains on guard and suspicious of her mother's relapsing, providing her with strict written instructions about caring for the baby and "pacing the footpath" (214) when Lola returns home with the baby slightly later than expected, fearing the worst.

Birch draws a stark contrast in the story between the lives of the middle classes and those of the precariat, the homeless. While the middle-class "men with beards, neck tattoos and pedigree dogs" who frequent the trendy new café feel "better about themselves" by dropping "a few coins into the bowl of someone sleeping rough for the night" (204), a homeless young man and his mother have "set up home outside the old hardware store" (204). The irony of people's charity, as in the stories discussed previously, extends to one woman giving the rough-sleeping mother Vitamin C tablets to protect her from catching a cold, while the homeless woman wonders why her benefactor had not left her a blanket instead. Lola's description of their "home" emphasises the care they are taking to keep it looking clean and neat: the young man sweeps the footpath clean, and there are neatly folded blankets at the base of the mattresses under the awning of the abandoned hardware store. The woman is sitting in a canvas chair and they have set up "a large flat-screen television against the shop window" (205) in an attempt to create the feeling of a home on the streets.

Lola's generous interactions with the woman contrast with others' more casual acts of charity and their concomitant desire for the homeless to display gratitude, showing Lola's empathy for the plight of the homeless duo (a story of compounded bad luck), perhaps as a result of her awareness of her own precarity: "Anything can happen", she tells the woman (209). The obviously close mother-son relationship is represented in the woman's rearranging the blanket over her now-sleeping son, Robbie, and kissing him on the forehead (209), calling him a "good boy" who "sticks fast" (210), contrasting with the judgemental attitude of Lola's daughter towards her mother. When Lola returns later with the gift of a blanket, she finds the council workers removing all of the couple's goods and hosing down the footpath so that it is "as empty as it was clean" (213). While they may have cleared away the homeless mother and son, the cycle remains in the image of an old man "carrying his life in a plastic garbage bag" (213). If the juxtaposition of Lola's ongoing battle with alcohol addiction and the hopeless lives of the homeless may seem somewhat arbitrary, the story seems to be suggesting that they all live with precarity, struggling to maintain a strong sense of family life against the odds.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, all of these stories focus on their characters' common humanity despite their precarious lives and, in some instances, the weight of a traumatic history still bearing down on them. The genre of the short story collection enables character-driven narratives, each of which highlights a snapshot moment in an array of different people's lives as they are impacted by hardship, violence and relationship problems. The tone is never preachy even while the themes (of hard lives, racism, addiction, family violence, mental illness, deprived childhoods and life on the streets, among others) are weighty. As Kerryn Goldsworthy has suggested of the short stories of another Indigenous writer, Tara June Winch, and that equally applies to Birch's, "behind these tales of individual lives the reader can always sense the politics of race, of class, of gender, and can sense behind those things the massive forces of history, ruthlessly shoving these characters around" (49). At the same time, Birch maintains a strong sense of his characters' agency, of resilience in the face of hardship, and, perhaps above all, an empathy for and understanding of precarious lives that his stories elicit both through his characters and in the reading process itself.

It is especially appropriate, then, that the short story itself has been regarded as "particularly suited to the representation of liminal or problematized identities" (Brosch 198)[6] and that "in the ruptured condition of colonial and postcolonial societies, the form speaks directly to and about those whose sense of self, region, state or nation is insecure" (Hunter 138) such as those whose precarious lives are briefly illuminated in Birch's stories. Additionally, as a number of short story theorists have proposed, the genre is itself highly interactive and participatory, as compression, dissonances and gaps require the reader to make both cognitive and imaginative connections in the reading process (Brosch 198). In other words, short stories demand a "dual understanding in the reading experience, one in which one's own perspective is constantly co-present with, projected onto and interactive with those of the fiction" (197), thereby performing a particular kind of socio-historical, political and cultural function. For Brosch, this affective postcolonial reading "promotes acts of cultural transfer" (205) enabling a connection with fictional subjects that moves

6 By including Frank O'Connor's name in brackets after this phrase, Brosch acknowledges that this claim arises from O'Connor's suggestion that "always in the short story, there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society"; Frank O'Connor, "The Lonely Voice." *Short Story Theories*, edited by Charles E. May. Ohio UP, 1976, p. 87.

beyond the stereotypical. In this way, Birch's aim in *Common People* of giving "a sense of the complexity of those [marginalised] lives" ("*Common People* by Tony Birch, Interview") is realised both in the content of the stories and in the genre itself.

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CHAPTER 5

Diasporic Female Precarity and Agency in Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*

Maryam Mirza

Sunjeev Sahota's Booker Prize shortlisted novel *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) charts, alternating with numerous flashbacks, a year in the life of three Indian men in Sheffield: Tochi, an illegal Dalit immigrant, Avtar, who enters the United Kingdom on a student visa but very much with the intention to work, and, trying to escape a shameful past, Randeep, who arrives in the country on a spouse visa resulting from a sham marriage. My essay, however, is concerned with the two female Sikh characters, Randeep's 'visa wife' Narinder and her unlikely friend Savraj, who, as we will see, are central to Sahota's preoccupation with the various forms that precarity can assume for women and the complex expressions of agency that it can spawn in a transnational context. In particular, I trace Narinder's changing relationship with her religious faith to demonstrate that the subtle exploration of female agency and defiance in the novel is intimately bound up with pressing questions of 'honour', freedom and moral responsibility in a profoundly unjust and unequal world.

1 Conceptualizing Female Precarity and Agency

In this essay, I take female precarity as a term that encapsulates the visible manifestations of the marginal positioning of women in patriarchal societies, whereby certain women, more than others, "suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death", and are "at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (Butler, *Frames* 25–26). Through the characters of Narinder and Savraj, Sahota explores the myriad risks, constraints and challenges characterizing women's lives within the so-called public and private spheres, both in the Global South and the North.

Compared to the British-born Narinder, who belongs to an orthodox lower-middle-class immigrant family based in Croydon, the precarity experienced

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by Savraj is much starker. When Narinder first meets her, she is a destitute, undocumented immigrant in the UK, working as a prostitute and bearing the weight of ensuring her family's survival in India. Narinder's precarity, on the other hand, needs to be read in the context of patriarchal oppression coupled with religious orthodoxy, which also exposes her to physical violence within the family and severely limits the kind of future that she can envisage for herself. Moreover, Narinder's subordinated positioning is accentuated by her family's commitment to keeping itself, and especially its women, untouched by the mainstream culture of the host country and even that of other immigrant communities, thereby seriously restricting her access to "institutional structures that ensure safely [*sic*], stability, income opportunities and protection" (Malreddy 14).

If *The Year of the Runaways* brings to the fore the depth and extent of female suffering, it also grapples with the intricate contours of agency, the "socially constructed capacity to act", under conditions of economic, legal, religious and familial constraints (Barker 241). In doing so, it resolutely avoids recycling clichéd images of the "oppressed third world woman" (Chow 603) or, more specifically, of "the passive downtrodden South Asian woman" (Puwar 25). Of course, passivity and victimhood are not the only attributes that are stereotypically assigned to Indian women; Raka Ray (1–2), in her discussion of the film *Bandit Queen*, has alerted us to "the mythic polarization of 'the Indian Woman' in popular imagination", which entails her being cast as either "victim or heroine". Sahota's novel, on the other hand, steers clear of such Manichaean representations. Instead, his portrayal of female agency, particularly Narinder's, appears to echo Dissanayake's call for recognizing agents as "shaped irreducibly by social and cultural discourses" while having "the *potentiality* to clear cultural spaces from which they can act in accordance with their desires and intentionalities" (xvi, emphasis added). The word 'potentiality' is significant here since Sahota's novel is as concerned with the exercise of agency resulting in concrete, dramatic acts of resistance, as it is with the timorous promise of a character being able to act in accordance with her desires, a promise which may well not be fulfilled. As we will see, rather than giving way to a triumphalist narrative which entails a simplistic victory against systemic (gendered) oppression, the novel constitutes a reflection on the "sorts of agents [that] women can be despite their subordination" (Jeffery 223). Moreover, it underscores the tensions that agentic behaviour generates within the family and between women, but also within the female subject who exercises, or seeks to exercise, agency.

2 The Girl from God

The sixth chapter of the novel entitled "Narinder: The Girl from God" chronicles her initiation into orthodox Sikhism, her first trip with her mother as a four-year-old child to a temple in Punjab for a summer of *seva*, or religious service, and the delight with which she takes to wearing the turban. We learn that both Narinder and her brother Tejpal were homeschooled, and by the time they "were eight they knew all of the sukhmani sahib" (Sahota, *Year* 249). But while Narinder's brother appears to have continued his education beyond the age of sixteen, is employed (outside the home) and possesses "a vast gym-trained chest" (263), Narinder's life as a teenager and a young adult living with her father and brother largely comprises "daily shuffling between the house and the gurdwara, to reading and tidying and heating up meals, to working at the langar hall[1] and awaiting her turn on the harmonium" during religious hymns (259). This restricted life, in many respects and for many years, seems to have satisfied her and indeed, the novel is interspersed with passages which evocatively underscore Narinder's feelings of mystical oneness with a divine force and the immense joy that it brings her: "It made her feel as if she was underwater, submerged deep within His love. She felt weightless, like she was gliding. The words seemed to generate inside her a different heartbeat, and behind her interlocked lashes, sunlight squandered itself across the world. Swallows swooped over copper fields. And in the penance of song she could hear His breathing" (266). But for Narinder, "goodness is at the heart of religious practice" (Shamsie), and her desire to contribute to society outside of the narrow confines of the gurdwara and to experience joys and satisfactions other than those of a spiritual nature becomes stronger as the novel progresses.

Paid employment for a woman in Narinder's family is seen as an act dishonouring paternal authority and not befitting an orthodox Sikh. Therefore, the choices available to her are extremely limited, which becomes apparent when her father rejects her tentative request for permission to apply for a paid job, even if it is one that would have entailed working at the temple:

> 'There was a poster in the gurdwara. About teaching Panjabi to some of the children after school. Do you think I might ask about it?'
> 'I don't think so, beiti[2]. Do you need money?'
> 'No, Baba.'

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1 Langar hall refers to the area of the temple where free food is served.
2 Beiti (Punjabi/Urdu/Hindi) means daughter.

> 'And in one or two years you'll be married – these are things you can discuss with your husband'.
> 'As you say, Baba. Goodnight.' (Sahota, *Year* 256)

One of the defining characteristics of the orthodox Sikh community depicted in the novel is submission to patriarchal authority even if, as in the case of Narinder's father, this authority is not devoid of love. But as Narinder's father's just-cited words make very clear, the assumption is that, once married, she will have to surrender to yet another man's will. Financially, she is completely dependent on her father, with the only money to which she has access lying in "a savings account her father had opened for her wedding" (268). We see Narinder turning to religion almost by default after her attempts, however unambitious, to spread her wings are thwarted. It is worth recalling, for instance, Narinder's reaction when her father forbids her to apply for a job. As she retires to her room that evening, she "allowed herself to feel disappointed, though she knew he must be right" (256). She puts on religious music to soothe her agitated mind. But, and it is important to point this out, she does not actively choose to play a *shabad*, or hymn; rather that is the only music allowed in the house, and she is able to recognize that "anything would have filled her mind with musical delight" (256), suggesting her awareness of, and thirst for, secular joys.

As a young adult, on one of her trips to India to serve at a temple, she becomes conscious of the unhealthy innocence bred by the constricted life that she has been made to lead, rendering her ill-equipped to survive outside the house and the gurdwara: "It was more that she felt inadequate. She felt like a child. No. She felt that the world made her feel like a child" (278). When she turned eighteen, her father decided that "she was never to take the evening walk alone" and assigned her brother to chaperone her home from the gurdwara: "For your safety, he had said" (263). Sahota thus provides us with an example of what bell hooks has termed "benevolent patriarchy" (113), which is patriarchal oppression couched in a language of protection, care and responsibility. As hooks explains, under the benevolent patriarchal model, "the father is the ruler who rules with tenderness and kindness, but he is still in control" (114). It is arguably this language of benevolence that makes it difficult for Narinder to first recognize that she is indeed oppressed and that she has the right to live a life that does not conform to the restrictive expectations of her family and community. Her brother's desire to control her is more blatant as, at one point in the narrative, he tells her: " 'You're thinking. Don't. Girls shouldn't think' " (Sahota, *Year* 263). The summer months that Narinder spends in India, away from her father and Tejpal, are shown to provide her with a modicum of freedom that is denied to her in England: "One of the best things – perhaps the very best thing – about

coming to India was being able to roam, to breathe" (277). Sahota effectively subverts the stereotypical notion that living in the Global North, as opposed to the Global South, necessarily results in greater freedom for women, and underscores how controlling patriarchal practices might become amplified within a diasporic context in the 'semi-elected' isolation of the immigrants who are determined to distance themselves from the wider population, much like the orthodox Pakistani-Muslim immigrant community depicted in Nadeem Aslam's 2004 novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (Moore 6).

Narinder slowly begins to challenge patriarchal and religious authority (and the direct speech attributed to her in the narrative becomes progressively marked with questions), as she gets drawn into the secular world, following her meeting with an elderly, impoverished woman in India; she tells her about her daughter Savraj who has gone missing in England and Narinder promises to find the girl. Narinder dutifully shares with her father the details of this encounter as well as her desire to help the woman. Her father's response is gentle but firm: he labels the woman's plight as a "police matter" and tells Narinder to not get "involved" and more generally, to not "take on all the world's troubles" (Sahota, *Year* 259).

Narinder's irrepressible desire to help others and her sense of responsibility clash starkly with her family's moral code which is underpinned by the idea of honour and an overwhelming concern for their reputation within the community. Narinder's insistence to help the woman trace Savraj and the support, financial and otherwise, that she later offers to her, represent, to quote Judith Butler, a "call to interdependency", underlined by her "recognition of a generalized condition of precariousness" (*Frames* 48). Narinder rejects "the tacit interpretive scheme that divides worthy from unworthy lives" (51), and, ironically, her first act of resistance against her family stems from selflessness and is derived from the emphasis placed on charity in the Sikh religion. As she later confesses to Savraj, her father and brother's reaction had provoked an unprecedented anger in her, strengthening rather than undermining her resolve to find Savraj: " 'I've never been so angry. When they said what I was doing was wrong, I just wanted to scream. I wanted to shout. I've never been like that' " (Sahota, *Year* 267).

3 Gendered Economic Precarity

Savraj's illegal passage to England was organized by a transit agent in Ludhiana on the understanding that she would be employed at a factory in Newham, thus allowing her to alleviate her family's desperate poverty. It is not specified

in the narrative whether Savraj ended up as a sex worker because she was brought to the UK under false pretences and the job did not materialize, or if she left her job because of unacceptable work conditions, but what we do know for certain is that when Narinder first meets her, Savraj has not eaten in two days. She is living under abject conditions in a decrepit shed where even her most basic needs are not being met: "It was a dispiriting little room: damp, cold, unloved and unloving. Not quite enough height to stand up straight. The mattress lay on the floor, beside a dog-chewed armchair probably taken from the alley outside. No electricity. Narinder wondered how she cooked or went to the toilet" (Sahota, *Year* 261–62). Her deprivation is accentuated by the utter lovelessness of her existence; it belatedly occurs to Narinder that Savraj's mother had only asked Narinder to locate Savraj and to tell her to send money to the family, and that she had not expressed "fear for her daughter's safety, or concern over her welfare" (262). Narinder thus gains a closer insight into the forces underpinning the relationships within Savraj's family and the importance of money in ensuring human survival, where spiritual matters or even emotions can become a luxury. At this point in the narrative, for Narinder, help can still primarily be imagined within the context of the orthodox Sikh community and within the space of the temple, but Savraj rejects Narinder's attempts to guide her to the local gurdwara. As Savraj is quick to point out to her, among the ostensibly devout men who frequent the gurdwara, some come to her for sexual services; moreover, she is all too aware of the kind of welcome she would receive at the gurdwara as a 'fallen' woman. Savraj also claims that she "enjoy[s]" sex work, but this assertion is followed by mirthless laughter which, rather than suggesting a genuine enjoyment of sexual labour, points to her need to disrupt Narinder's simplistic reading of her plight, as well as to her desire to reclaim some semblance of agency and not to be perceived as a passive victim (265). Moreover, when she later reveals to Narinder that she has resumed sex work after having taken up a poorly-paid cleaning job for a few months, it becomes clear that this decision was dictated, above all, by the urgent need to ensure her own and her family's survival: " 'More money for less time […]. Do you think I wanted to go back to the sheds?' " (286–287).

In her study *Live Sex Acts*: *Women Performing Erotic Labor*, Wendy Chapkis argues that women's voluntary participation in sex work or "consensual prostitution" often results from the exercise of rational, rather than free, choice (52). As she points out, "very few women's lives are models of 'free choice' " since "most women's 'choices' are severely limited by their disadvantaged position within hierarchical structures of sex, race and class" (52). In Savraj's case, her ability to exercise free choice is further hampered by the very serious ramifications of her undocumented immigrant status. Moreover, while working as a

cleaner, Savraj's health and appearance continue to decline, with visible signs of ageing appearing over a span of a few months (Sahota, *Year* 270). Savraj is "unconvinced" that the cleaning job is "so much better" than prostitution, as Narinder insists it is, underscoring a fundamental lack of understanding and communication between the two women (270). Through Savraj's refusal to idealize her work as a cleaner, *The Year of the Runaways* compels us to address uncomfortable truths not only about the sex work carried out by illegal immigrants, but also about other types of precarious work which Narinder considers more respectable but which appear to be no less damaging to the immigrant's physical and emotional well-being. It is surely no coincidence that Savraj's new job consists of performing cleaning tasks for a former client as it reveals the suffocating continuities between various forms of degrading labour, and highlights her complete lack of say in the matter; indeed, as the novel brings to the fore, illegal female immigrants like her cannot "draw boundaries or refuse work they find demeaning" (Anderson 113).

Abandoned by her family, alone and living illegally, Savraj wonders about the ultimate good that providing help to others brings about:

> 'I don't see what's so good about helping others, though. If they only become reliant on you. Then you're just part of the problem.'
> 'But we have to help,' Narinder insisted. 'I couldn't live with myself if I just walked away. I know how people can do that.' (Sahota, *Year* 264)

Driven by desperation, Savraj does accept Narinder's assistance, in particular the food that she starts bringing for her on a regular basis, and even asks her for money, but Savraj complicates Narinder's narrative of help and support, particularly when offered by a collective whose identity is defined in terms of religion. When Narinder tries to reassure her by saying, "God will find us a way", a tearful Savraj responds with despair-laden anger, "There is no way" (271), and is scornful of Narinder's attempts to turn her into one of her "turbanwallis", as Savraj pejoratively refers to orthodox, turban-donning Sikh women (263).

4 Religious Faith, Honour and Moral Responsibility

Indeed, an indication of Narinder's increasingly complicated relationship with her faith is the way in which the turban takes on contradictory connotations for her and she begins to think of God in terms that are not necessarily tied in with the symbols of orthodox Sikhism: "It was strange how unprotected, fearful even, she felt without her turban during the day, but how much closer to Him

she felt without it at night. She didn't understand it" (271). This slow shift in her perception also becomes apparent when she brings a gift for Savraj, which instead of a "gutka", a book of hymns from Sikh Scriptures, as Savraj suspects, is a flashy red lipstick (264).

In helping Savraj against her family's wishes, Narinder will come face to face with the possibility of violence being inflicted on her by her own brother. In one scene, when she refuses to pay heed to his warnings about seeing Savraj, whom he labels a 'whore' (266), mingling intimidation with emotional blackmail, Tejpal warns her: " 'See her again and I'll really do something' " (268). Then, yanking her by the elbow, he reminds her in no uncertain terms: " 'Your duty is to uphold our name. Mine is to protect it.' His face softened and his hand moved to her cheek. 'Don't force me into doing something I don't want to' " (268). Sahota thus draws our attention to the existence of 'honour'-based violence within this orthodox diasporic community: as Gill and Brah explain, 'honour'-based violence encompasses any form of violence perpetrated against women within a framework of patriarchal family and social structures (72–73). The main justification for the perpetration of this kind of violence is the protection of a value system predicated on norms and traditions concerned with 'honour' and it manifests itself in the form of physical, emotional and psychological abuse. The notion of honour is interlinked with the idea of shame where the former relates to the "behaviour expected of members of a particular community", while the latter (shame) is associated with "transgressions against these expectations" (74). Women, according to Gill and Brah, "play a particularly important role in the maintenance of honour" (74). Narinder has grown up with the importance of both 'honour' and 'shame' instilled in her and vividly recalls, for instance, an uncle who "cut a razor blade across his wrists because his daughter had run off with a Muslim boy. [...] Most parents whose daughters had strayed lived with their aura of shame, and everyone else gave them a wide berth, as if they really did stink of shit" (Sahota, *Year* 283). As we see later, Narinder will find it far more difficult to free herself of the shackles of an 'honour'-based moral code and the sense of duty based on it than of the demands of the Sikh faith.

Narinder discovers that Savraj and her brother Kavi lied to her about their mother having cancer, and that they wanted to manipulate her into marrying Kavi so that he could migrate to the United Kingdom and escape a life of destitution in India. Sahota's nuanced portrayal of precarity also sheds light on how one subaltern group may in turn discriminate against other subaltern groups. For instance, we see Kavi demean lower-caste women whom he considers as being innately inferior to himself, and to women belonging to his caste, and therefore entirely expendable, serving the sole purpose of satisfying

his libido: " '[S]he's just one of the chamaars[3]. She gets passed around. I'd never treat one of our own girls like that' " (281). Savraj, too, is deeply hostile towards "chamaars", who she sees as receiving preferential treatment in the form of a quota system which "is an attempt by the central government to remedy injustices related to low-caste status" (CHR&GJ 39), and she holds them partly responsible for her family's financial woes: " 'There are no jobs. There is only corruption. Or if there are jobs they go to the fucking chamaars with these government quotas' " (Sahota, *Year* 287).[4] Studies show that the "reservation policy has not been uniformly implemented by various state governments" in India and, while some improvement in their life chances has taken place, "Dalits are still oppressed and marginalized, especially in villages, where they are economically dependent on upper-caste groups" (Mahalingam 50). Savraj's lack of compassion for and antagonism towards the Dalits, who have endured centuries of oppression and discrimination, and her brother's sexual exploitation of lower-caste women complicate our sympathy, as well as Narinder's, for these characters and our reading of them as victims, but do not negate Savraj and Kavi's very real suffering. When Kavi begs Narinder to become his visa wife, his words are laden with desperation and hopelessness: " 'We can't make anything of ourselves here. Land rents keep going up. Rates are going down. Nothing's growing. It's impossible. I'd be forever in your debt' " (Sahota, *Year* 281). And, as Savraj later informs Narinder, Kavi even considered "selling his organs" to survive (287). However, deeply repulsed by their earlier attempts to manipulate her by lying about their mother's health, Narinder distances herself from Savraj and Kavi's family. Savraj reappears in the narrative on one more occasion to share the news of her brother's horrifying death. Her vanishing from Narinder's life and from the narrative underscores the precarity of what the narrator of Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has called the "shadow class" consisting of illegal immigrants who are "condemned to movement" (102). It also underscores the limitations of solidarity between women, as Narinder and Savraj struggle to come to terms with the respective challenges facing them, with questions of communal/familial honour and religious duty vying for importance with the imperatives of basic survival.

3 "Chamaar" (also spelt "chamar") is "a *Dalit* sub-caste associated with leatherwork"; this term, which carries highly derogatory connotations, is used to refer to "a person of low-caste" and its derivative "chamariya" also functions as a generalized insult (IPT xiii).

4 "To allow for proportional representation in certain state and federal institutions, the constitution reserves 22.5 percent of seats in federal government jobs, state legislatures, the lower house of parliament, and educational institutions for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes" (CHR&GJ 39n103).

Narinder is racked with guilt upon learning that Kavi suffocated to death alongside two other men while attempting to illegally make his way to Europe, "[h]iding in a gap cut into the ceiling" of a coach (Sahota, *Year* 291). This guilt drives her to an act of extraordinary kindness: she wilfully seeks out, through an Indian lawyer, a young man looking to escape to the UK, which is how she becomes Randeep's visa wife. Sahota has called Narinder "the moral heart of the book" ("Literary Star") and we see how her British nationality, rather than her faith as she had initially thought, will emerge as her most valuable resource that she can put to the service of others. Indeed, the idea of "responsibility across borders", to borrow Iris Marion Young's terminology, keenly informs Narinder's sense of "political responsibility" (123). As Kamila Shamsie has noted, "the question of the responsibilities borne by the citizens of the more fortunate nations of the world towards those from other countries" is integral to Narinder's story, but it is a story that "is told in the most intimate of ways, as an issue that is not theorised but deeply felt". Narinder's moral code is dictated, instinctively it seems, by the notion of equality which she will find increasingly hard to reconcile with her faith which rests on a blind acceptance of and submission to a God who allows inequalities to exist and who "make[s] people suffer" (Sahota, *Year* 272). But her friendship with Savraj and Kavi's tragic death bring in their wake a vivid shift in how Narinder responds to the needs of others. Though she is not as yet able to abandon the Sikh religion, she becomes increasingly conscious of the dangers of the kind of certainty it had cultivated in her, and "what had at one time seemed clear was now a confusing grey" (391).

In entering into a sham marriage and secretly leaving home to live in Sheffield, Narinder initially postpones her arranged marriage. The sham marriage is a testament to her moral resolve to help others and also brings sharply into focus the degree to which her life had been confined. Moreover, coming into close proximity to the three illegal immigrants, especially Tochi, will compel her to confront the sheer magnitude of human suffering. While Narinder herself is oppressed as a direct consequence of the "chauvinistic requirements of her family" (Charles), her time in Sheffield more keenly attunes her to the anguish of both men and women: "She thought of Tochi's face, of Randeep's, of Avtar lying in hospital. Who would be a man, she thought, in a world like this" (Sahota, *Year* 455). The year in Sheffield also allows her to acquire certain skills which, as a woman, her family had not thought it necessary for her to develop: it is also now that she learns to swim and change lightbulbs, and for the first time in her life she applies for a job that entails working outside of the home and the gurdwara. Her joy at being accepted for a part-time job at the neighbourhood library is short-lived, however, as she is forcefully removed from the flat by her brother and relatives and taken back to Croydon. When

Narinder leaves home again to return to Sheffield, she does not do so surreptitiously and instead confronts her father in words which are at once defiant and beseeching:

> 'I'm going, Baba,' she said. 'I won't let you stop me.' She felt the words rushing up her throat. 'Why can't you give me this? All I wanted was one year. A few months now. Why can't you give me that? I've given my whole life to you. For you. I've thrown my life aside so you can walk with your head held high and you can't even give me this? How is that right? How is that fair?' (400)

Her father does not prevent her from leaving and offers her financial support, but he clearly perceives giving her permission to leave as an immense sacrifice which jeopardizes his 'honour'. He even removes his turban and places it at her feet: "A tear rolled down his cheek. 'A Sikh's honour lies in his children and in the pugri[5] on his head. Don't step on my honour, beita' " (401). Historically the turban in South Asia, among Hindu as well as Muslim and Sikh men, has been a symbol of honour but since the twentieth century it has become, as Nikky-Guninder Singh points out, "the critical symbol of Sikhism" (188). Narinder is acutely aware of the capitulation that this gesture signifies, not just in cultural and religious terms, but also with respect to her father's identity as a man. As we will see below, this gesture comes back to haunt her when she finds herself falling in love with Tochi.

Her inability to accept societal hierarchies that designate certain groups of human beings as inherently inferior to others makes her acutely sensitive to the mistreatment meted out to Tochi, a Dalit, not only in caste-ridden India but also by the diasporic Indian community in Britain. She is unable to connect the image of "Tochi being forced to eat some blank-faced master's leftovers" with "some idea she'd always held of His goodness. She couldn't do it" (Sahota, *Year* 392). Narinder's growing ability to question long-held religious beliefs as well as her "progress, from the very limited horizons for an obedient young woman to a greater sense of herself as an active participant in her destiny" is reminiscent, as Alice O'Keefe has also noted, of the shift in perception that comes about in Nazneen, the Bangladeshi female immigrant protagonist of Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane*. In one of the most poignant scenes in Sahota's novel, the narrator charts in detail the precise moment when Narinder, who had been struggling to remain a believer in the face of endless human suffering, finally

5 Pugri (Punjabi/Urdu/Hindi) means turban.

and irrevocably loses her belief in God, and actively rids herself of the visible markers of her faith. After Tochi shares with her details of the breathtaking brutality to which he and his family were subjected because of his caste positioning, of how he was set on fire, his pregnant sister's stomach knifed open, his fifteen-year old brother's testicles cut off, and his parents' bodies so badly mutilated that they could not be told apart, Narinder removes her turban and unties her hair. It is a gesture that functions as a visible enactment of her dramatic loss of faith in divine goodness:

> She raised her fingers to her head, to her turban. She lifted it off and put it on the table. She eased out the hairpin down by her neck and placed that on the table too. And then the pin above that, and then pin after pin and clip after clip and all the while her hair was coming down in ribbons, loosening, uncoiling, falling. [...] She stared at him, her arms arranged over her chest as if she were naked. [...] He felt her hands lightly touch him and they both wept for all they had lost. (Sahota, *Year* 433)

The succession of verbs ("raised", "lifted", "put", "eased" and "placed") in the first three sentences of the excerpt underscore the sense of purpose and determination underpinning her actions, suggesting Narinder's heightened awareness of her own agency. Moreover, the flowing rhythm of the passage as a whole lends a ritualistic quality to the act of removing the turban and freeing her hair; it brings to the fore not only her solemn rejection of beliefs that had defined her sense of morality since childhood, but also the depth of her feelings for Tochi.

Tochi's love and his very presence now produce in Narinder the same feeling of serenity and joy that in the past she had so strongly associated with the confines of the temple: "she heard him moving about upstairs and there was a sudden feeling inside her of being safe. It was a feeling she recognized. It was the same feeling she used to get inside the gurdwara" (422). But, as O'Keefe points out, Narinder's "journey of personal liberation", unlike Nazneen's in *Brick Lane*, "is tempered by a recognition of the powerful bonds of tradition and family" and, more broadly, with the deeply entrenched idea of honour and her sense of duty towards her father. While she yearns desperately to build a life with Tochi, and even though she is now able to dissociate morality from religious faith, given the implications of his 'untouchable' status within the deeply casteist community in which her father is so deeply anchored, Narinder is unable to bring herself to stay with him: "He was begging for her to be with him and she knew that he loved her. All she had to do was take this chance that had been so delicately brought before her, on cupped palms. [...] But below the cupped palms lay her baba's turban, on the floor and at

her feet. She saw what her being with Tochi would do to him, the lifetime of disgrace" (Sahota, *Year* 440). Her being with Tochi, she knows, would not only destroy her father's standing within the community, but also shatter his very sense of self. As we saw earlier, in focusing on the suffering of others, Narinder becomes acutely conscious of the flaws in religious logic which requires believers to accept instances of appalling injustice as part of God's will, but by situating the needs of others at the heart of goodness and morality, Narinder subscribes to what Erich Fromm has described as "the doctrine that love for oneself is identical with 'selfishness' and that it is an alternative to love for others" (127–28). She finds herself incapable of paying heed to Tochi's exhortation to not hurt herself in attempting to ensure that "other people aren't hurt" (Sahota, *Year* 440). When we meet Narinder next in the epilogue, which is set ten years after she lost her faith and left Tochi to return to her family, we learn that she ended her arranged engagement and, though her father never forgave her, she nursed him devotedly till he died. In the final pages of the novel, Narinder returns to India, not to perform *seva* as she had fervently done in the past, but in deference to her father's wishes, to scatter his ashes in Kiratpur. She spontaneously makes her way to Thiruvananthapuram, a town that Tochi had dreamt of visiting, and sees him there with his wife and children. The two do not meet and the novel ends with Narinder travelling back to England. Indeed, in wanting to live what she considers to be a moral life, and in conflating her dedication to making "the lives of others bearable" with abnegation, Narinder necessarily and devastatingly banishes the possibility of her own happiness (Butler, *Gender* 17).

Narinder's agency is evident from the fact that, with her help, Randeep ultimately succeeds in becoming a legal immigrant and that, by the end of the narrative, she does acquire a degree of assertiveness vis-à-vis her family, which she displays through her continued rejection of religion and through her decision to live as a single woman, despite her father's disapprobation. However, as the preceding discussion illustrates, her agentic subjecthood does not signal a victory over and freedom from female precarity, with neither Narinder nor the narrator being able to offer any solutions to Savraj's terrible plight. Savraj's vanishing from Narinder's life, and from the narrative, is a powerful reminder of the vicious tenacity of some forms of precarity which resist being overcome in an individual's life. Moreover, Narinder's agency emerges as a tragic paradox: while her rebellious actions against her family and the laws of the land are fuelled by a self-imposed exacting moral code that recognizes and seeks to redress the precarity of others, it is this very moral code that will compel her to reject Tochi's tender offer of love and to thus surrender her emotional freedom.

Acknowledgements

This publication is supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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CHAPTER 6

Narrating the 'Black Male Underclass'

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Coming into Representation

Anna Lienen

According to Stuart Hall, the phrase "com[ing] into representation" ("New Ethnicities" 164) refers to the chance for a marginalised group to become visible to the larger public in its diversity. The media and other public discourses obviously play a major role not only in enhancing a group's visibility but also in (ideologically) shaping how exactly the group is meant to be perceived. Media reports in the UK certainly identify gun and knife crimes as increasing problems,[1] but these crimes, it seems, belong to the few aspects of life in the inner cities that actually get the media's attention. Thus, when it comes to reporting about 'black youths' or 'the inner cities', the people living in these spaces are often reduced to this issue alone. It is hard for young black people and especially for young black men[2] to "come into representation" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 164) when, apparently, only negative events make it into the newspaper headlines. In a similar vein, Mercer and Julien point out that there are "a limited set of guises in which black men become visible" (145), and most of them are cases which confirm prejudices about pathological behaviour; those black men who comply with the 'norm' remain invisible. This paper focuses on the representational practices used in contemporary British novels which try to go beyond the simplified and stereotypical depictions referenced by Mercer and Julien as well as by Hall. For example, black British authors like Alex Wheatle manage to depict the so-called 'black male underclass'[3] in a way which does not glorify crime and violence but gives an insight into how people become entangled in criminality. In comparison, white British author Stephen Kelman seems to focus on the victims rather than the perpetrators of

1 A quick google search yields a vast number of articles from broadsheet to tabloid newspapers, cf. Camber, Ford, E. Thomas and Younge.

2 Cf. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien who point out that "the term 'black youth' really means black *male* youth" (138, emphasis in the original).

3 James Procter uses the term with regard to Alex Wheatle's writing arguing that his "fiction focuses on a dimension of postwar black British culture that has been surprisingly neglected in available literary representation: the black male underclass".

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knife crime with a tendency to divide characters into binary categories of good and evil.

The term 'underclass' is a very controversial, ideologically charged expression.[4] While it pretends to be an objective description, it actually functions as a value judgement with underlying suggestions about moral deviance, unemployment and illegality. In their study *Dependency Culture: The Explosion of a Myth*, Hartley Dean and Peter Taylor-Gooby consider the term a "discursive rather than [an] objective [phenomenon]" (27). Due to the lack of objectivity, they argue, the "reflexive effect of the underclass concept is not to define the marginalised, but to marginalise those it defines" (44). Overall, academic discussions about the 'underclass' are shaped by strongly opposing ideological beliefs. US-researcher Charles Murray highlights individual behaviour and controversially defines the 'underclass' by three criteria: "dropout from the labor force amongst young males, violent crime, and births to unmarried women" ("Ten Years Later" 26). At the other end of the political spectrum, John Rex[5] and William Julius Wilson[6] focus on the structural surroundings and their influence on the creation of precarious living conditions, in the UK and the US respectively. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to fully engage in a detailed discussion of the 'underclass' debate. It is, however, worth keeping these opposing views in mind as a context when analysing the narrative structures employed in novels about the 'black male underclass' and their attempts to steer reader sympathy.

Some of the literary texts dealing with this demonised group construct very strong binary oppositions between good and evil characters, whereas others show how the lines between these opposing concepts become increasingly blurred and, thus, to some extent allow their characters to "come into representation" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 164). Novels such as *East of Acre Lane* (2001) and *The Dirty South* by Alex Wheatle (2008) as well as *The Scholar: A West Side Story* (1997) by Courttia Newland put those living on the margins of society at the centre of their narratives and dig beyond the stereotypes and prejudices about 'black youths' and 'gang culture'. By contrast, *Pigeon English* (2011) by Stephen Kelman creates a strong contrast between its young, innocent narrator

4 According to John Welshman (3), 'underclass' could be included in Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* due to the various meanings that were and still are attached to the term as well as the political struggles surrounding it. To indicate the controversial status of the topic, the term is placed in inverted commas here.

5 Cf., for example, Rex's *The Ghetto and the Underclass: Essays on Race and Social Policy* (1988).

6 Cf., for instance, Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1987).

Harrison, who is fatally stabbed at the end of the novel, and the slightly older gang of adolescent boys who murder him.

The novels by Alex Wheatle and Courttia Newland show young men who are either already involved in crime or become entangled in it in the course of the narrative. What is more, it is not only the characters themselves who act violently but they are also on the receiving end of violence, not just from rivalling gangs but also from the police. As a result, these narratives engage in discussions about behavioural versus structural reasons for the characters' situations. While the texts definitely shine a light on the obstacles which society creates for the characters, they do not shy away from addressing arguments about individual behaviour and mistakes or even choices made by the protagonists. This paper will focus on *East of Acre Lane* by Alex Wheatle and compare it to Stephen Kelman's debut novel *Pigeon English* in order to discuss the extent to which the different representational practices employed in these novels convey different ideological positions.

1 Deconstructing the 'Violent Avenger' in *East of Acre Lane*

East of Acre Lane, set in 1981 in the lead-up to the Brixton riots, centres around the protagonist Lincoln, called Biscuit by almost everyone, who deals drugs to support his struggling single mother. The two main conflicts of the novel are on the one hand whether Biscuit can stop dealing and try to make a better future for himself and his love interest Carol and on the other hand, the struggle to free Biscuit's sister Denise, who has been seduced by the local gangster Nunchaks and forced into prostitution. While Biscuit is the main character, the narrative provides a variety of perspectives by not focussing solely on him but shifting focalisation to various other characters. By doing so, the novel gives diverse insights into the Brixton community, which, for instance, include Frank, Biscuit's white Irish neighbour who struggles with unemployment and the feeling of worthlessness, or Biscuit's aunt Jenny, who has managed to climb up socially and is concerned about the bad influence of Brixton on her niece and nephews.

One subplot that deals with violence and gun crime in particular involves Biscuit's friend Coffin Head, who gets beaten up by the police and decides to get a gun in order to seek revenge. The storyline begins with Coffin Head reluctantly agreeing to sell cannabis for the local gangster Nunchaks on the notorious Railton Road in Brixton. Coffin Head is "[r]elieved" to have finished his stint on the street and turns his mind towards the very mundane and universal topic of an upcoming wedding, pondering "what outfit he should buy for

[it]" (Wheatle, *East* 104). This calm and relatively unremarkable moment ends when he becomes aware of "six dark uniforms converging on him" and hears "the dull echo of the polished black boots" (104). As readers, we know that Coffin Head has just peddled drugs. Yet the racist undertones and disrespectful behaviour of the police, which include addressing him only by his first name or calling him "Midnight" (110), increasingly blur the supposedly clear-cut notion of the good policeman arresting the evil offender:

> One policeman handcuffed his wrists behind his back. Another went through his pockets, revealing a bunch of keys, some loose change, a box of matches, a stick of Lipsyl and a steel-toothed afro comb. 'So,' smiled the senior policeman, studying the comb. 'That's two charges already – selling drugs and carrying an offensive weapon.' [...] One of the policemen picked up the beret, which had fallen to the kerb during the handcuffing, then dropped it theatrically on the dog shit. 'Oh, clumsy me.' (105)

The reader vividly experiences Coffin Head's ordeal through his perspective as he is "being hurled into the back of the [police van]", feeling "two boots pressing upon his spine" as well as "smel[ling] the stench of a thousand arrests" (105) during his transport to an undisclosed police station. At the station, a detective tells Coffin Head that his "superiors are not really interested in picking up the likes of [him]" because he is "not worth more than two for a penny" (108). The police's actual motivation behind the arrest is finding out who is selling heroin and cocaine on Railton Road. As Coffin Head refuses to give the police a name, they start beating him up severely:

> Coffin Head felt the knuckles of a fist detonate against his stomach, knocking him off his slab and propelling him to the floor. He thought he was going to bring up his cornmeal porridge breakfast. He felt himself exhale vigorously and he doubled up in pain. There was a slight pause as the other officers looked at each other before deciding to get in on the action. Coffin Head covered his privates with his right hand and used his left to cover his face. This is it, he thought. Don't give dem de pleasure of screaming. [...] Then he felt the severe pain of boots hacking at his torso. He didn't know which way to roll to escape as he was kicked in from both sides, his back, chest, shoulders and backside. The stench of dead urine rose from the floor and filled his nose, causing him to sneeze violently. (110)

By using Coffin Head as focaliser in this scene, the narration highlights the brutal behaviour of the police. As readers, we witness Coffin Head's pain and fear and are encouraged to feel empathy for him. Yet, within the overwhelming example of police brutality, the text also includes the brief appearance of a young policeman who winces as he witnesses the beating and turns away, stating "I'm going, I don't want no part of this" (110). Thus, although the policemen as such remain quite flat, stereotypical characters, the novel refrains from overgeneralising, while still taking in the harsh realities of institutional racism within the police force.

What is more, the reader also gets an insight into the after-effects the beating has on Coffin Head as well as his parents. His mother "[knows] her son ha[s] joined the ranks of the underclass" and reasons that "[y]ou can only influence your children to a certain extent, [...] but the environment where that child grows up will have its undeniable effect" (Wheatle, *East* 117). Interestingly, his mother's response constitutes one of the few scenes in which the term 'underclass' is actually used in the novel. One might suggest that due to "her part-time job as a consultant to Lambeth social services" (117) Coffin Head's mother – despite living in Brixton herself and empathising with her son's problems – also takes on the perspective of a member of the institutional state apparatus. By contrast, Coffin Head avoids alerting his father to the situation since he does not anticipate a supportive response: "No one will listen to you, Mummy. How do you expect politician to believe us when my own paps don't? Look at dat time last year when I was arrested on sus. He t'ought I really was 'bout to raid a jeweller's" (117). The different reactions of his parents to the police beating (or in his father's case, a previous arrest) mirror the diverging discourses on the 'underclass' as well as readers' potential reactions to the character. Although the narrative leaves no doubt about the harrowing events at the police station, it is possible to point at the structural surroundings (as Coffin Head's mother does) as well as to the character's behaviour, i.e. dealing a drug which, though widely accepted in his community, is illegal in the eyes of the law. While causing him to stop dealing, the after-effects of the beating also create a desire for revenge in the young man which culminates in his decision to buy a gun:

> Coffin Head knew he was taking a risk. He hadn't slept soundly since the beating, suffering nightmares of being thrown into a gladiatorial arena armed with just his fists, and having to fight a hundred truncheon-wielding policemen. A crowd of politicians would yell their approval as the Home Secretary, sitting on a regal throne, signalled a thumbs down. Coffin Head had awoken every morning since the beating with a burning

> desire for revenge. The other day, Floyd had given him a book about the Black Panthers in America, and he had read it at night, the story of Eldrige Cleaver and his fellow Panthers adding to his anger. One of those friggin' beastman gonna suffer, he repeatedly told himself. Cos a violent oppressor only takes notice of violence, not words. (139–40)

While these thoughts and feelings do not justify Coffin Head's decision to buy a gun, the passage certainly makes his need to take revenge more relatable and aims at giving readers from different socio-economic backgrounds an idea of how black British citizens can experience state institutions such as the police.

The actual process of obtaining the gun is also important with regard to the way in which the novel tries to influence reader sympathy. To get the gun, Coffin Head goes to Herbman Blue, who is one of the big figures in the Brixton underworld.[7] This encounter securely establishes Coffin Head as only a small player within the wider context of organised crime. Moreover, to physically acquire the gun (Herbman Blue is only the middleman), Coffin Head needs to go to Rotherhithe, or as his friend Sceptic, who accompanies him, calls it, "National Front country", arguing that "Black man wid sense don't walk der" (Wheatle, *East* 145). Similarly to the encounter with the police, this defies typical concepts of good and evil or friend and enemy as the contact from which Coffin Head gets the gun is a white skinhead. While the atmosphere during their meeting is certainly tense, the fact that these two opposing groups do their illegal business together breaks with conventional stereotypes as well as readers' expectations and unveils a complex, multi-layered and contradictory underworld.

2 Confronting Enemies outside and within the Community

Towards the end of the novel there are two scenes in which Coffin Head tries to use the gun, but both times he does not find the courage to pull the trigger. The first time, he discovers an unsuspecting policeman on his own in the chaos of the Brixton riots who is just relieving himself:

> The policeman zipped up his flies and turned around. He looked up and saw a dark figure in front of him. Open-mouthed and stock still in

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7 To emphasise the contrast between the two characters further, the novel resorts to portraying Herbman Blue as a stereotypical black gangster. Cf. also Hall ("The Spectacle" 239), regarding the links between contemporary images of black youth with the five main stereotypes identified by Donald Bogle (1973).

> shock, his eyes widened as he noticed the gun. Coffin Head trained his aim to the mouth of the constable who was ten yards away. His hand trembled as if there was a wasp in his grasp, forcing the revolver to shake in a drunken circle. The assassin searched the distressed eye of his prey and felt an awesome power take over him. The power to take a life or grant one. Coffin Head's whole body shook like a pneumatic drill. The wanna-be killer examined the eyes of his enemy once more, but he could not squeeze the trigger. He swivelled around, placed the gun within his jacket and burned his soles to the end of Leeson Road, hot-stepping under the bridge, looking back only when he reached a housing estate by Somerleyton Road. (Wheatle, *East* 275)

The reader witnesses Coffin Head's conflict as he wants to seize the opportunity and enjoys the reversal of power but eventually does not find the courage to shoot and decides to run away instead (highlighting his inner moral compass). Tellingly, the narrative perspective here shifts from Coffin Head as the focaliser to the policeman for a few sentences only and then to a heterodiegetic narrator who analyses the scene, assigning the roles of "assassin" to Coffin Head and "prey" to the policeman. The label "assassin", however, quickly turns into "wanna-be killer", suggesting that Coffin Head is, in fact, an amateur who is not really able to kill another human being. With this shift of perspective the narrative pretends to become more objective by distancing itself from the action but actually continues to side with Coffin Head's experience of the events rather than creating empathy for the policeman. One might even suggest that this shift represents Coffin Head's consciousness taking a step back to analyse the situation – without explicitly drawing attention to it. This is an even more subtle attempt to evoke the reader's sympathy for the character than if the scene were focalised through Coffin Head from beginning to end.

Only slightly later, this confrontation is followed by a stand-off between Biscuit and a group of his friends, including Coffin Head, and the local gangster Nunchaks, who has trapped Biscuit's sister Denise and forced her into prostitution. As the friends try to free Denise, they have to fight various gang members who are protecting Nunchaks' brothel. After a first blow to the head, Coffin Head almost loses consciousness, but soon

> come[s] to with the blurred images of the cell beating he'd received. No, not again, he promised himself. Not fucking again. He looked at a dazed Floyd beside him and immediately went for his .45, training his aim on Nunchaks' face as he stood up, strength returning to him by the second. [...] Shrieks filled the flat. [...] Nunchaks stood transfixed at the doorway,

> staring down the gun barrel in disbelief. Coffin Head remained motionless, sweat drenching his face, not realising that blood oozed from the back of his head. Visions of the police beating formed powerfully in his brain. All this is Nunchaks' fault, he felt. This so-called bad guy. Well, he don't look so *bad* now. (Wheatle, *East* 297, emphasis in the original)

Similarly to the previous situation with the policeman, Coffin Head is once more unable to summon the courage to pull the trigger, while the tension rises and others already scream at him to fire the gun. Again, it is the fear in the eyes of his opponent which are "stilled with terror" (298) which relativises Nunchaks' badness and emphasises his humanity. In the end Frank, the white Irish neighbour, takes the gun off Coffin Head and shoots Nunchaks just in time before the friends lose control of the situation.

Although murder is a criminal offense, in the case of Nunchaks the gun is aimed at an individual who is marked as evil and poses a threat himself. Coffin Head explicitly links his harrowing ordeal in the police cell with Nunchaks as the original source of his bad experience since it was Nunchaks for whom he was dealing when he was arrested. Yet even in this case where the enemy is more clear-cut and less coincidental than the lone policeman during the riots, looking into the eyes of another human being, seeing the other person's fear, blurs the binary opposition between good and evil. As Coffin Head realises that this "so-called bad guy" does not "look so *bad* now" (Wheatle, *East* 297, emphasis in the original), it becomes impossible for him to pull the trigger.

Thus, overall, *East of Acre Lane* depicts characters who commit crimes and become violent themselves but who are at the same time also victims of their circumstances. Although they take part in organised crime, they are often only minor figures within the criminal underworld. The narrative suggests that the label of 'real evil' should be attributed to others. While local gangsters and the police are predominantly characterised by their violent and ruthless behaviour, small scenes where the gangsters or the odd police officer are humanised propose that 'the real evil' is, in fact, something more diffuse, such as the overall system which assigns roles or even forces individuals into them. So how does this compare to *Pigeon English*?

3 Empathising with the 'Noble Savage' in *Pigeon English*

In contrast to *East of Acre Lane*, *Pigeon English* is centred around the slightly younger Harrison, who is 11 years old and has only recently immigrated to Britain from Ghana. The novel opens with the murder of a boy Harrison knew

and ends with Harrison himself being fatally stabbed. Harrison is shocked by the murder and, together with a friend, embarks on a *CSI*-inspired but finally unsuccessful mission to find out who could have killed the schoolboy. At the same time, Harrison seems either unaware or cannot bring himself to admit that he holds several pieces of information which could identify the murderer as a member of the Dell Farm Crew, a group of older schoolboys who have tried to recruit Harrison.

As Harrison also serves as the autodiegetic narrator of the novel (who is only sometimes interrupted by the voice of the pigeon he imagines to follow and protect him),[8] the narration is limited to his perception of events and cannot provide any insight into the mind-set of the members of the Dell Farm Crew. It positions Harrison as the innocent and at times quite naïve child who is essentially good-natured and who, the novel seems to suggest, falls victim to his morally corrupt environment. Crucially, 'environment' in this context means the people around Harrison, many of whom are still underage themselves, rather than state institutions.[9] One gang member, for example, explains his annoyance when during his first stabbing the blade got stuck: "I hit a rib or something. I had to pull like f--- to get it out. I was like, give me my blade back, bitch!" (Kelman 14) While Harrison as the autodiegetic narrator is able to observe that another gang member, called Killa, does not seem to respond to his friend's descriptions, due to the narrative perspective readers cannot find out what might be going on in this character's mind and see beyond the telling name he has been given. Similarly, in another scene where Harrison witnesses the gang members' reactions to a passing police van his observations are restricted to the fact that the older boys stop joking around and decide to leave the area (109). Other instances where Harrison voices well-meaning but quite naïve ideas, for example when he muses that he might "tell [the gang] about God" in order to "save them" (113), highlight that the 11-year-old is still more child than young adult who does not yet fully grasp the situation.

While Harrison's death is foreshadowed throughout the novel, the tragedy and the ruthlessness of his murder are amplified by contrasting the shock at

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8 Within the confines of this paper, it is not possible to elaborate on the voice of the pigeon more extensively (cf., for instance, Perfect for a more detailed analysis). While this additional voice might serve as (in some cases) a welcome break from Harrison's at times overly-sweet point of view, it has also been one of the major points of criticism regarding the novel by many reviewers, with Susie Thomas most graphically describing it as, "[a]lthough well meaning this is a bit like being accidentally shat on from on high".

9 Cf. also Perfect, who points out that the Dell Farm Crew are the only ones "who actively attempt to *include* Harrison" and suggests that the novel poses the question of "what it is exactly that migrants are being asked to integrate into" (197, emphasis in the original).

the sudden and unexpected fatal attack with the genuine happiness that he expresses, running home at the end of the school year. After readers have only just witnessed the exuberant joy Harrison shows after having just shared his first kiss with Poppy, his death appears extremely gruesome:

> I ran fast. I ran down the hill and through the tunnel. I shouted:
>
> Me: 'Poppy I love you!'
>
> It made a mighty echo. Nobody else heard it. [...]
>
> I ran past the flats and around the corner to the stairs. [...] The stairs were lovely and cool. I had only to go up the stairs and I'd be home and dry. I was going to drink a lovely big glass of water all in one go. The tap in the kitchen is safe.
>
> I didn't see him. He came out of nowhere. He was waiting for me. [...]
>
> He didn't say anything. His eyes gave it all away: he just wanted to destroy me and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I couldn't get out of the way, he was too fast. He just bumped me and ran away. I didn't even see it go in. I thought it was a trick until I fell over. I've never been chooked before. It just felt too crazy.
>
> I could smell the piss. I had to lie down. All I could think was how I didn't want to die. All I could say was:
>
> Me: 'Mamma.'
>
> It only came out like a whisper. It wasn't even loud enough. Mamma was at work. Papa was too far away, he'd never hear it. (Kelman 262)

Although *Pigeon English* and *East of Acre Lane* deal with similar topics, their choice of narrative perspectives makes them adopt very different ideological positions. *Pigeon English* focuses on the innocent victims of knife crime. The novel operates in a strong binary system of good versus evil that is at times reminiscent of the ways in which racism constructs the black subject (and especially black men) as double: "noble savage and violent avenger" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 167). Whereas Harrison is an innocent child and thus does not pose a threat in the sense of a hypermasculine, hypersexualised black man, we hardly get any insight into the older group of boys who seem to be behind the initial murder in the novel as well as Harrison's death. Since scenes involving the Dell Farm Crew are restricted to Harrison's point of view as the narrator, it is unclear whether the few things we find out about them represent what actually happens or rather Harrison's interpretation of their behaviour. *East of Acre Lane*, by comparison, even gives the reader some insight into what fuels Nunchaks' ambition for power by citing his "memory of waking up in a Brixton slum, not knowing when he was going to eat", which "still haunt[s] him to this

day" (Wheatle, *East* 252). This does not really make him likeable or excuses his behaviour but it at least helps to understand what formed his character.

In *Pigeon English*, readers are encouraged to mourn the death of the innocent child but there are no instances which invite them to question why these older schoolboys murder other children. Apart from one oblique suggestion that the teenager killed at the beginning of the novel provoked the Dell Farm Crew,[10] the reasons for his death are never revealed. And because of the novel's point of view, readers have no way of finding out about the thoughts or feelings of Killa or other members of the Dell Farm Crew. Thus, what is highlighted is the tragedy of the death and the despair in the face of such terrible crimes. Although the novel emphasises that children like Harrison need to be better protected, it does not seem to extend the same courtesy to the perpetrators who are, after all, also still pupils and not yet of age. Considering the immigrant status of these characters, one could even criticise the novel for creating empathy for the newly-arrived immigrant but ignoring the question why parts of the community of second and third generation immigrants have drifted into a socio-economic position so precarious that this kind of criminality becomes part of their everyday lives. While *East of Acre Lane* tries to deconstruct the stereotype of the violent avenger and show the complexities involved in the protagonists' decisions, *Pigeon English* presents a world that is very neatly divided into good and evil characters with little room for ambivalence.

On the level of publishing and critical reception, this clear-cut message seems to be more successful. One might wonder whether this is due to the fact that less ambivalence makes the novel easier to market as well as to digest. In the case of *Pigeon English*, the boost in terms of media attention as well as market sales that a nomination for the Man Booker Prize entails stands in stark contrast to the fact that Alex Wheatle and Courttia Newland have been writing about similar topics with comparatively less critical and economic success for years. In an article for the *Independent*, Alex Wheatle praises Stephen Kelman for his "bold choice to write about the black underclass" but also contemplates "why it had to take a white author to explore the black underprivileged to finally attract the attention of a major award" (Wheatle, "The Race Problem"). Irrespective of any aesthetic criticism that might be directed at both *East of Acre Lane* and *Pigeon English*, it is quite telling that it is the ideologically less ambivalent novel of the two that is more successful. One cannot help suggesting that, for potential readers (especially white middle-class ones), it might

10 According to Miquita, the girlfriend of Killa, "[i]t's his own fault he got killed, he shouldn't have been fronting. You play with fire you get burned, innit" (Kelman 28).

simply be easier to feel empathy for the innocent Harrison than delve into the strongly ambivalent and at times even disturbing mind-sets of the protagonists of Wheatle and Newland (plus confronting their own and society's potential part in these). Yet, Wheatle's and Newland's novels point towards society at large when wondering how these calamities can be prevented, while at the same time including individuals making mistakes or wrong choices. *Pigeon English*, on the other hand, seems to vilify the older black boys as violent avengers – 'older' both in terms of age and their actual 'arrival' in the UK, where integration into society has failed – and to seek consolation in solidarity with the young, noble savage who has only recently arrived from Ghana and might still be formed.

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CHAPTER 7

Breaking the Cycle of Heathcliff

Precarious Subjects from Emily Brontë to Caryl Phillips

Julia Hoydis

Black British writer Caryl Phillips's tenth novel, *The Lost Child* (2015), continues the author's engagement with themes of belonging and exclusion, specifically with questions of parentage and being 'outcast', through an intertextual dialogue with a Victorian classic, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). While Brontë's novel has inspired adaptations across different media far too numerous to mention here,[1] Phillips employs it, one reviewer notes, as "a symbolic conduit for ideas of alienation, orphanhood and family dislocation" (L. Miller), also drawing on his own experiences of growing up in the 1960s as a child of West Indian migrants in the harsh, poor north of England, very near to where the historical Brontë family lived (S. Simon). Bringing several of the Victorian text's main themes into the twentieth century – abandonment, loss, mental and physical illness – and disambiguating Heathcliff's ethnic origins, Phillips's narrative highlights the presence of disenfranchised, precarious individuals then and now and underlines the necessity of postcolonial memory.

With this being the focal point, this essay first looks at *Wuthering Heights* and its reception in order to reveal the centrality of Heathcliff's racial otherness and the relation between cruelty and revenge as a response to abandonment and abuse; it then engages with intertextual resonances and parallels in *The Lost Child*. Drawing on sociological studies of the effects of poverty, abandonment and abuse on the human psyche that continue by means of a vicious cycle, the depiction of which, I argue, lies at the heart of both texts, this essay also raises questions about what, if any, means of survival and breaking what I call 'the cycle of Heathcliff' are offered in Phillips's novel, and about the ethics and aesthetics of the intertextual representations of precarity.

While Phillips can generally be seen as a writer who, throughout his fictional oeuvre, highlights his "characters' *precarious lives* that unfold across distant times and locations" (Buonanno 95, emphasis added), the argument

1 For example, there are at least 25 TV/film adaptations across the globe produced between 1920 and 2003, and countless plays, as well as graphic novels (Elliott 126–35).

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is furthermore inspired by the author's ongoing textual concern with the family as "a perfect laboratory for really seeing the damage that society does" (Ranguin 6, 11) to individuals and with the precarity resulting from corrupted, unhealthy relationships and severed bonds between siblings and between parents and children. Ultimately, I suggest that *The Lost Child* presents a postcolonial response to a Victorian classic that successfully reveals the persistence of the particularly precarious existence of women, black and mixed-race children, and orphans.

1 Brontë's Lost Child

In *Wuthering Heights*, Mr. Earnshaw brings home to the Yorkshire moors a poor boy found on the streets of Liverpool in 1771, with the benevolent intention of integrating him into his own family, but without giving him a secure emotional or legal place (Dellamora 537), i.e. he is not adopted. Supposed to function as a substitute for a lost child, he is baptized Heathcliff, "the name of a son who died in childhood" (E. Brontë 26). However, he is immediately othered because he is from elsewhere, looks, speaks, and behaves differently, and is later violently abused by Hindley Earnshaw. Heathcliff is the catalyst bringing discord into the rural domestic setting; he is also the romanticized appearance of (Orientalist) otherness. Racialized descriptions abound in the narrative, e.g. "a dark-skinned gypsy" (E. Brontë 3), "his thick, brown curls […] rough and uncultivated" (7), "it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (25). Particularly (in)famous in this regard is the beginning of chapter 4 where narrator Nelly Dean remembers her first glimpse of the boy thus:

> I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; […] it only stared round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand. […] The master tried to explain the matter; […] a tale of his seeing it starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool, where he picked it up and inquired for its owner. Not a soul knew to whom it belonged, he said; […] he thought it better to take it home with him at once […]. (25)

Though the scene quoted above evokes stereotypes of racial difference and is filled with common imperialist associations of a dark otherness with dirt, animality, and linguistic incompetence (Mardorossian 47), the reception of the novel has been split between Brontë scholars who read Heathcliff's darkness metaphorically as a sign of his later moral depravity and postcolonial readings,

which see him as racially mixed, possibly Black, of Afro-Caribbean origins, or as Irish.[2] Throughout the novel, racialized meanings are entangled with gender and class dynamics, and Cathy, despite sharing a passionate love and 'half-savage' nature with Heathcliff, cannot marry him due to his perception as dependent and inferior – economically, as well as, by implication, racially. So even if these issues have more of a latent presence in *Wuthering Heights* and Emily Brontë was not interested in depicting racial blackness in the historical context of the abolition of slavery, it is hard to view the reference to Liverpool, the only specified locale of Heathcliff's otherwise unknown origins,[3] as historically contingent. For in the late eighteenth century, Liverpool, John Thieme reminds us, "was not only the main British terminus of the triangular trade at this time […], but also the home of a small community of freed slaves, one of the earliest groups of its kind to become established in Britain" (75).

So while there is (arguably) no concrete evidence in Brontë's text that Heathcliff is associated with the slave trade, Caryl Phillips himself, who says that Heathcliff was one of the first literary characters to seize his imagination, emphasizes the inescapable historical irony of trying to read "this 'dark alien' [who] should find himself adrift in the streets of Europe's major eighteenth-century slaving port" ("Leaving Home" 92), as anything *but* black or mixed race. Though Phillips is, of course, not the first writer or film director to take Heathcliff's racial origins as the inspiration for an adaptation of or intertextual engagement with Brontë's novel,[4] *The Lost Child* resolves Heathcliff's racial indeterminacy – and it does so from a particular postcolonial vantage point, aiming to narratively reclaim, as Ledent and O'Callaghan also argue in a recent essay, "absent stories, the unvoiced accounts of orphans and lost, stolen, or denied children of the Empire" (229).[5] Phillips's novel ends with the episode that is only narrated in the briefest retrospect in *Wuthering Heights*, Mr. Earnshaw's trip to Liverpool from which he returns, instead of bringing the promised gifts for his two children Cathy and Hindley, with a 'lost' child, here

2 For readings of *Wuthering Heights* focusing on race and slavery, cf. Mardorossian (44–50), Althubaiti (201–25), von Sneidern (171–96) and Meyer (96–125). For readings of Heathcliff's otherness as Irish, cf. Eagleton (125) and Michie (125–40). There is, in fact, enough historical and textual evidence to sustain both arguments.

3 About Heathcliff's history Nelly Dean says: "It's a cuckoo's, sir – I know all about it: except where he was born, and who were his parents" (E. Brontë 24).

4 Cf., e.g., Andrea Arnold's film version of *Wuthering Heights* (2011), where Heathcliff is casted black.

5 Cf. also Alan Rice, who argues that texts like Phillips's are helping to narrate a "fuller, more nuanced and less majoritarian account of Black British history and culture" (181) and the history of the Black Atlantic.

imagined as his own illegitimate son with a former African slave woman who has just died. The cue for Phillips's engagement with *Wuthering Heights* is the unreliable account of Mr. Earnshaw's "tale" (E. Brontë 25) of how he came to bring home the dark, lost boy and of his origins. Therefore, *The Lost Child* continues what writer J.M. Coetzee has described as the sole aim of Phillips's fictional oeuvre, namely "remembering what the West would like to forget" (41), in other words, histories of imperialism, slavery and forced migration.[6]

2 The Lost Child Writing back

Although marketed as a rewriting of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Lost Child* is only framed by the obvious Heathcliff-origins story.[7] Heathcliff's mother, an unnamed former Congolese slave, and her suffering are not at the centre of the narrative, which, in fact, has no centre and consists, characteristic of Phillips's writing that does not prioritize plot and characterization over structure and style, of a series of fragmented chapters held together by recurrent motives.[8] Intertwining the stories of Monica and her family with Heathcliff's, there is also one chapter about Emily Brontë, who mourns the death of her brother Branwell, whom the family lost to alcoholism at just 31. Herself being fatally ill, she has a dream about "the boy who came from the moors" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 105), another lost child; in her feverish imagination, her own family story blurs into the creation of *Wuthering Heights*.[9] To some extent, the book resembles a

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6 Another example of this from Phillips's fictions, which shares several narrative strategies with *The Lost Child*, is *The Nature of Blood*. It also contains a 'rewriting' of a classic Western text, in this case Shakespeare's *Othello*. The narrative, consisting of several different time levels and fragmented plot lines, juxtaposes different histories of racial discrimination and displacement, of Blacks but in particular Jewish people.

7 However, this seems to be less surprising than an inevitable phenomenon whenever a novel or other artwork is labelled as an adaptation of a classic pretext. In the case of *The Lost Child*, its labelling as a 'remake' of *Wuthering Heights* has provoked a lot of critical reviews. Cf., for example, Upchurch and Williams.

8 A valuable source on the academic and popular reception of Phillips's works is 'The Caryl Phillips Bibliography' compiled by Bénédicte Ledent, University of Liège, 2017. It is available online at: www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/phillips/cponline.html.

9 Claire Jarvis notes that *Wuthering Heights* is "one of the most written about, and most demanding, novels of the midcentury. Brontë's novel has, in many accounts, been read alongside her life" (25). Considering this tendency, the life story of the Brontë family and the biographical information available and commonly used to supplement readings of *Wuthering Heights* also form a kind of intertext in *The Lost Child*. Phillips's novel joins the debate about the pretext's reception history by including a chapter on the historical Brontë family and Emily's imagination of Heathcliff.

collection of vignettes about lost children.[10] Meanwhile, mechanisms of separation by class and ethnicity are constant undercurrents, as are violence and abuse. These narrative strategies reflect Phillips's indirect take on responding to *Wuthering Heights* and the focus placed on depicting ongoing histories of racial othering and poverty in Britain. As Todd McEwen aptly puts it, "in Phillips's view, there is much more to say. Heathcliff's resonant story is only one representation of the book's major theme, that of the 'intrusion' of blacks into Britain, wonted [*sic*] or unwelcome, then and now: Heathcliff, Julius Wilson, Tommy and Ben – lost. The British response to them echoes down the generations, and keeps on echoing". Similarly, Alan Rice emphasises that in *The Lost Child* Phillips comes to a rather bleak diagnosis of persisting exclusion and "demonising of the other" (182).

The opening chapter depicts young Heathcliff in precarious conditions on the docks of Liverpool, crouching next to his dying mother, who is worn down by a life of slavery, prostitution and poverty; in the end, we see him as a half-orphan being taken across the moors in a thunderstorm by Mr. Earnshaw. The main plotline, however, follows the steadily deteriorating life of Monica, who abandons a promising future at Oxford in the 1950s to marry Julius Wilson, a PhD student from an unnamed West Indian colony, and ends up as a single mother on a council estate in Leeds. With her mental health crumbling, she begins to neglect her two sons, Ben and Tommy, and embarks on an affair with Derek Evans, a shady married man with a liking for wearing anoraks, bird watching, and Monica's two boys. In an essay, which details his inspiration for the novel, Phillips admits to having modelled Evans's character on Ian Brady, who together with Myra Hindley was part of the sinister couple behind the so-called 'Moors murders' that kept Britain in horror and suspense in the 1960s (Phillips, "Finding"). Although the tragic events are narrated only elliptically and in passing, forcing the reader to piece them together, Tommy disappears one day and is found dead a week later; Derek Evans is put on trial, and Monica is admitted to a mental institution where she eventually commits suicide. As it is the case with the boys' suffering due to poverty, racial prejudices, and their mother's mental instability – for years they are always in and out of foster care –, Monica's own struggle is only presented overtly to the reader once it is already lost, in a surreal chapter told in the first-person which chronicles her

10 On the structural disunity of the book and the argument that each of the short pieces might possibly be written by Monica in order to come to terms with the loss of her son, cf. the review by Todd McEwen. He further argues that Monica " 'channels' Emily's illness, and, deranged herself with grief over Tommy, feels she knows what the author of *Wuthering Heights* was fantasizing about her beloved little hero as she died" (McEwen).

descent into full-scale insanity after the loss of both her sons – Tommy being dead and Ben placed permanently out of her care in a foster family. In this episode, she is unemployed and homeless, dependent on picking up a stranger to find a bed for the night, overwhelmed by the guilt of letting Derek Evans get close to her kids; and while she still has some illusions of getting "myself up on my feet again" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 216), it ends with her complete break-down.

3 Being Outcast – Between Nature and Nurture

Phillips's text explores what forms being lost and outcast can take and presents a haunting response to the 'nature vs. nurture' debate. As readers familiar with Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and its critical reception history, Phillips directs us not only to think about Heathcliff's origins,[11] but to read the tragic plot of revenge, insanity and decline with a focus on the psychological consequences of (childhood and ongoing) experiences of poverty, abandonment, abuse and neglect; the plot also highlights mental instability and the impact of dislocation and loss as disruptive forces in a domestic context. Such a reading of Brontë is, of course, informed by contemporary academic theories about the effects of poverty and abuse on the human psyche. These effects, dealt with more explicitly in Phillips's novel, refer to what can now be taken as facts substantiated by medical and sociological research: childhood suffering (and neglect, poverty, abuse) function as central negative environmental factors with long-lasting consequences, as potential sources of emotional, behavioural disorder, and depressions and mental illnesses can be referred back to previous or current emotional and physical maltreatment (A. Miller 103–11; Loughan and Perna). But there is also some evidence which shows that the issue of the origins of evil and the tension between nature and nurture surround Brontë's novel from the time it was first published. Though hardly expressed in what we would nowadays consider politically correct terms, Charlotte Brontë writes in a letter how the characterization of Heathcliff "exemplified the effects which a life of continued injustice and hard usage may produce on a naturally perverse, vindictive, and inexorable disposition. Carefully trained and kindly treated, the black gipsy-cub might possibly have been reared into a human being, but tyranny and ignorance made of him a mere demon" (C. Brontë quoted in Hafley 201). This suggests that the literary interrogation of the tensions between biological

11 For the argument that *The Lost Child* is partially "an attempt to solve the puzzle of Heathcliff's backstory" cf. also Ledent and O'Callaghan (232).

and social determinism, which only increased in importance from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, inherently shapes Brontë's novel.

Phillips's novel supports a reading of Brontë's Heathcliff as possibly being severely damaged by his childhood and lack of kind treatment and education. In *Wuthering Heights*, the first impression is of him ('it') as an orphan, "starving, and houseless" (E. Brontë 25),[12] and economic precarity continues to be an issue throughout the novel. Cathy fears being condemned to poverty by marrying Heathcliff; later his revenge is also economic, as well as physical and emotional, for he reduces Hindley to nothing. Furthermore, in both texts there are various forms of psychological and physical abuse, specifically of (orphaned) children by a supposed caretaker or family member. In *The Lost Child*, aside from Tommy's murder by their mother's lover Derek Evans, and the ill-treatment of the boys by their foster-mother Mrs. Gilpin, there are rumours of Monica's father once having molested a girl. In any case, Mr. Johnson is described as having "bullied his wife into near-mute submission" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 16). Though Monica is not abandoned by her parents, she actively distances herself from them, "carefully widening the gap with each passing year" (16). Despite her mental instability and depression, which show early on, Monica is capable of active resistance against being victimized by men, at least at certain moments and until she is fully consumed by her illness. Reflecting a characteristic trait of Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, a stubborn striving for independence and refusal to communicate her emotions, Monica makes her own (however misguided) decisions and, as a means of self-protection, shuts out her father, who in turn views her as "downright disobedient" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 17), but she knows the dangers "of revealing emotional vulnerability to this man, [...] the end result of such stupidity was having your wings ripped off" (17). Although she often is overwhelmed by small household tasks such as deciding which kind of bread to buy, she manages to leave her by then loveless marriage behind and chooses to bring up her sons alone. She says to her husband: "I'm not going to follow you around. [...] I came to you, Julius, because I thought you might be a better kind of man than my father, but you were never really interested, were you?" (51).

In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff chooses a different route and, instead of seeking distance, turns into a victimizer to take revenge for his own victimization. His behaviour, prone to violence, greed, and emotional detachment, is determined by his poverty-stricken childhood on the streets of Liverpool and his humiliating and exploitative existence at Wuthering Heights. Growing up,

12 Cf. also Berry (107).

he is also first mistreated by Hindley, and then betrayed by Catherine, the only person he loves and trusts. Both are suggested as triggering his later development and the cycle of revenge involving Cathy and the Linton family: Hindley is driven to his death by debts and drink; Catherine and Edgar die; after Heathcliff inherits Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, he enslaves Hindley's son Hareton and he tortures his own son, Linton, after the death of his wife Isabella; finally he forces Cathy into living at Wuthering Heights.[13] So we are faced with a whole line-up of mistreated (half-)orphans in Brontë's text, which is a theme continued in *The Lost Child*.

4 The Precarity of Orphanhood and Familial Bonds

It hardly needs mentioning that throughout history and across cultures children without one or both parents are among the most vulnerable members of society, and that orphanhood, hinging on the central ideas of "care" and "dependency", raises urgent questions of protection and victimhood.[14] While the (mis)treatment of orphans generally has a long tradition as a literary subject, in Phillips's text we are confronted with a failure of care interventions (familial, institutional, community-based) on various levels. Ben and Tommy's situation furthermore illustrates how children can become orphans long before their parents actually die, if the adults are not present or gradually reduced in their capacity to care for their children. While the emotions a teenaged Ben is most familiar with are anger and shame (Phillips, *Lost Child* 164), his younger brother is both so worried and embarrassed by his mother's condition that "he wished he was an orphan" (159). But what complicates the construction of any clear-cut lines of causality and responsibility with regards to poverty and orphanhood and degrees of vulnerability and social marginalization is that Tommy ends up dead, while Ben survives and even completes an Oxford education. In comparison to his younger brother, who starts wetting the bed again and is bullied at school, Ben copes much better. He is determined to leave his environment behind and make it to the town's grammar school, instead of the secondary school near their estate where Tommy ends up ("the hellhole I was dead keen to avoid"; 145–46). After Tommy's disappearance and with his mum in hospital, Ben finds himself once again in foster care, yet feeling fully alone this time. He turns to his school work as a means to assert a sense of agency

13 Brontë's novel is full of different forms of violence (towards people and animals), beatings, and sadistic relationships. Cf. Jarvis (25).

14 Cf. Tatek Abebe and Judith Ennew (128–46).

and achievement to counteract the feeling of precarity: "It was my way of keeping my mind off the depressing reality that I'd been fostered out again, and this time it looked like Mam wasn't coming to rescue me" (178).

In the final chapter of *The Lost Child*, tellingly entitled "Going Home", a seven-year-old boy is abducted and taken across the moors by a seemingly friendly, yet to him also strange, man. Scared, and missing his mother, the boy begs the man not to hurt him. The final lines of the novel read thus: "The boy stares now at the man in whose company he has suffered this long ordeal, and he can feel his eyes filling with tears. *Please don't hurt me*. Come along now. There's a good lad. We're nearly home" (260, original emphasis). Whether one wants to imagine the boy to be Heathcliff taken by Mr. Earnshaw to Wuthering Heights, or Tommy being taken by Derek Evans, it is an ending which appears at least in equal parts benevolent rescue and the forceful transfer of a child from one precarious state into another. Laura Berry, who argues that endangered children are a dominant presence in Victorian fiction,[15] reflecting contemporary public discourse about the condition of children and the need to protect them from harmful, precarious conditions, sees in the novels by the Brontë sisters a turn away from fictional sentimentalizing of the nuclear family as a "safe haven for the liberal subject" (96). This is a view clearly underlined in Phillips's novel. Although one can argue that *Wuthering Heights* begins with an act echoing the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan[16] – Mr. Earnshaw finding a child in need and taking him home as his own – what happens in Brontë's and what is implied in Phillips's narrative – a fearful child being taken 'elsewhere' by a man only to end up being abused – makes us question the long- and short-term effects of Mr. Earnshaw's assuming of the role as Heathcliff's benefactor. *The Lost Child*'s final chapter draws attention to the question of failed charity and the taking of responsibility for a child which comes too late and cannot heal a sense of loss.[17]

However, in the opening chapter Phillips's narrative reminds the reader of a particular quality of the boy's character, his pride, wilfulness and ambition, which will guarantee his survival through precarious circumstances.

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15 On suffering children in nineteenth-century literature, cf. also Langbauer (89–108); on child abuse and the literature of childhood, cf. Fiedler (147–53).

16 Cf. Dellamora (536).

17 According to Susan Meyer, Heathcliff's cruelty can be seen as mimicry of the ugly brutality of British imperialism (116); cf. also Jarvis (34); similarly, Richard Dellamora (539) reads Heathcliff's behaviour as a result of the psychology of slavery borne out of the experience of physical and economic difference that determines his relationship with Catherine, but also Hindley.

Underneath her son's tears, his dying mother detects "that a strong and tenacious heart beats in his tiny body. This being the case, all is not lost" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 6). And although she fears that she has ruined him "by the example of her own indolent misery", her hope also lies in the recognition that he is unfit for (racial) subordination: "Her son will never walk behind a fair lady" (6). Also Mr. Earnshaw, taking Heathcliff across the moors, notes "an abundance of pride" (252) in the child. This potential to resist being crushed by misfortune allows Heathcliff to survive and rise out of poverty, but tips over into a self-destructive mission of revenge and ends with his unhappy, lonely rule over Wuthering Heights. As Linda Simon suggests, Ben in *The Lost Child* can be seen as the literary heir of "Brontë's indelible creation", the "lost child, revenge seeker Heathcliff". He possesses roughness and cunning, learns how to steal without getting caught and to utilize education as an escape; thus he ends up surviving his mother and brother, who "couldn't fight to save his life" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 150), and gains a scholarship to Oxford. And unlike for Heathcliff, for him the narrative hints at his chance of a lasting romantic relationship in this life.

5 Cycles of Loss

Considering it to be a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, Jerome Bruner identifies as a main result of poverty the "production of a sense of powerlessness, [which] alters goal striving and problem solving in those it affects" (36). Warren Haggstrom similarly describes the characteristics of the "*powerlessness* of the poor" (221, original emphasis) as being (somewhat) apathetic, having little motivation to change, fewer problem-solving skills, and showing little planning for the future. Descriptions such as Haggstrom and Bruner's of this "cycle" (Bruner 36), which entraps with particular frequency poor urban mothers and their children in a kind of depression and reduced capacities of goal seeking, can be applied to the depiction of Monica and her sons in their Leeds council estate environment in *The Lost Child*. Emphasizing Phillips's concern with social problems in his fictions, it illustrates the interaction of socio-economic disadvantage and a sense of deficit which cannot be remedied easily. It is typically caused, as Bruner notes, by the lack of a male wage-earner, unemployment, and a neighbourhood setting "that has adapted itself [...] to 'being at the bottom', with little by way of long range perspective or hope, often alienated by a sense of ethnic separation from the main culture" (41). The depiction of Ben, however, counteracts the inevitability of this cycle, as he manages to break through the perhaps most crucial component of the

"psychology of the *powerlessness* of the poor" (Haggstrom 221, original emphasis), the hopelessness and inability to plan for the future. Still, remembering growing up without a father, the worries about the condition of his mother and never having any money, he notes in his diary how "there was no point in dreaming. About anything" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 144).

Although already Monica's Oxford tutors, her father, and Julius all worry at some point about her mental health, e.g. her "lethargic, expressionless gaze" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 25) and her "often flighty state of mind and proclivity to wander in her head" (28–29), long before she ends up a single mother on the estate,[18] Monica's depression worsens during her struggle to make ends meet in the small dingy flat. Money is so tight that buying a portion of fish and chips is a luxury, and she is so worn out by worry that "at thirty-one she looked ten years older" (76). Consequently, she falls for Derek Evans because "she wished, above everything else, for somebody to help her out, for she knew that things couldn't go on like this for much longer" (70). Meanwhile Ben and Tommy encounter prejudice due to their upbringing everywhere, because as "estate lads" they are automatically seen as liars and thieves by their foster mother, social workers, or the local shopkeepers: "They'd steal the milk right out of your coffee" (131); "nothing good will ever come of you kids. They should build a trunk road between that estate and the local lockup because that's where most of you are heading" (159–60). And Tommy, who suffers bullying and is never part of any group, is seen by his teacher as simply a typical case: "that timidity has most likely been introduced into the lad's soul by a neglectful upbringing. He sees it all the time – like whipped puppies, some of them – but there's nothing to be done, for on top of everything else, they can't be expected to minister to the welfare of the disadvantaged" (119). The final parts of Phillips's narrative serve to emphasize the historical continuity of economic precarity and its further inducement by ethnic and social marginalization, in addition to critically showing the view on children concerned by this taken by those who are more privileged. Closing the narrative circle by returning to Heathcliff's story, Mr.

18 Her father remembers thinking about his daughter on her sixteenth birthday how "beneath her fierce intelligence and studious determination Monica possessed a wayward, slightly ethereal streak, and he started to fear for his child and wondered if he should put her down for counselling" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 55); long before the break-up of their marriage, Julius is aware that "Monica needed help […]. It was not just the blank stare that perturbed him, for the truth was she has always displayed a tendency to lapse into these trances; what alarmed him the most was her ability to withdraw completely from him yet continue to function as though nothing were happening" (35). Both men fail, however, to put their concern into actions and help Monica seek out counselling or medical care.

Earnshaw's assessment of the boy's likely fate now echoes the situation of Ben and Tommy that takes up the larger middle part of the novel. Justifying to himself his decision to ignore his dying mistress's wish to provide her and her son with the money for a passage back to the West Indies and to force them to stay in Liverpool, Mr. Earnshaw now wonders what hope there is for "the boy on the streets of this town? […] it will be only a matter of time before the child is propositioned with a tot of rum and overwhelmed and pressed to serve as a prize upon one of His Majesty's ships, or else accused of thievery and snatched up and spirited away to a workhouse" (251–52).

If Phillips's novel fills one narrative gap by clarifying Heathcliff's origins, it creates several others: Tommy's disappearance remains a mystery, as do the causes of Monica's mental illness; possible reasons include the difficult relationship with her parents and her precarious situation as a single mother. To some extent, she is also ruined the old female way by not completing her degree, her marriage and its subsequent failing. But, as noted above, there are clear signs that she had been mentally instable before. Thus, one reviewer notes: "Depressingly, the message seems to be that some people are born outcasts, regardless of circumstances" (L. Miller). This would rule out any chance of social or personal intervention. But this is contradicted in the case of Tommy, for example, by the scene where Ben drives out into the moors and confronts his sense of guilt for not having done more to protect his brother: "As a family we had nothing […]. It's easy to turn a kiddie's head when he has nothing" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 188). This clearly links the liability to trust the wrong people and be abused, which applies, in fact, to both Monica and Tommy, to social isolation and poverty. If the consequences of the sense of powerlessness of the poor, as psychologist Jerome Bruner postulates, can be remedied by encouraging interest in personal projects and the future, this is what saves Ben, who is driven by the desire to escape his surroundings by making it to the good grammar school, putting all his energy in his schoolwork, seeking solace in films and music, and later doing film studies in college. By contrast, this 'saving' interest is completely crushed in Tommy, whose only dream was being a football player, after Monica turns down the scouts from the Pudsey Juniors who want to recruit him and makes him play instead for the much worse local Scott Hall Juniors, "Uncle Derek's team" (Phillips, *Lost Child* 162). Monica retreats into a similar hopelessness after she is denied re-admittance into university to complete her degree, due to an unfavourable review of her domestic situation.

One might therefore ask if the novel, focused on the depiction of poor women and children as society's unwanted outcasts, does hint at a way out for them. Jeffery Allen suggests that the narrative entails the view that "Britain's

orphans and outcasts must find sustainable sources of rebellion – and one place they can reliably do so is in art". The idea that education, art and literature function as means of expression, rebellion and escape from social hardship is hardly a new one. But it makes sense, in particular if one reads Phillips's novel also autobiographically.[19] In *The Lost Child*, Phillips confronts his own 'lost' childhood memories of precarity, especially a two-week stay at Silverdale, a camp for underprivileged children on the Lancashire coast organized by the Leeds City Council, where Ben and Tommy are also sent in the novel. In retrospect, Phillips says, he is forced to acknowledge his socio-economically precarious situation growing up as a son of migrants in North England in the 1960s. Back then, however, the author admits: "The truth is, I didn't consider myself to be in any way deprived; I just suspected that somewhere – down south – there were others who had more than I did of pretty much everything – including fun" (Phillips, "Finding").

Though probably for most readers a much less obvious and less known intertext than *Wuthering Heights*, as inspiration for *The Lost Child* and the depiction of a particular regional harshness and precarity Phillips also refers to Leeds-born writer Keith Waterhouse's memoir *City Lights* (first published in 1994), reading which, he says, confirmed his childhood memories of Silverdale and of a sense of abandonment, loneliness and wretchedness. This in turn relates back to Phillips's reading experience of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and its setting, close to where Phillips lived as a teenager. With its sense of darkness and violence being only increased by other childhood memories of rumours and reports about the gruesome "Moors murders" Brady and Hindley, the author describes this as an inspiration for an emerging narrative pattern clustering around the moors, the "landscape and lost children, and broken parental ties, and familial pain and discomfort" (Phillips, "Finding").[20] Regional histories and other biographical memories strongly inform the narrative, while the different plot strands and time levels (of Heathcliff, Monica, and Emily Brontë) are connected through the bleak, sinister setting,[21] families being fractured by illness, abandonment, or death, and difficult sibling/parent and sibling/sibling relationships (Wade).

19 On the novel as a complex form of autobiography, cf. also Buonanno (101).

20 In fact, Phillips admits to developing the novel around five key words: "Yorkshire. Moor. Lost. Child. [...] Literature" ("Finding").

21 The bleak and stormy weather and regional setting are the main cue for – if not the actual protagonist – in another prose adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* (1990), which also interweaves a contemporary plotline which engages with the life of Emily Brontë.

6 Conclusion

Phillips's intertextual dialogue with Brontë's novel, "taking the off-stage colonial element of *Wuthering Heights*" (Woodward) as its starting point, interrogates the ongoing fragility of human relationships and realities of poverty, abandonment, and abuse. Heathcliff's story functions mainly as a framing device, while the narrative's main focus is on the story of a single mother with mental health issues and two mixed-race kids on a Yorkshire council estate, which finds a thoroughly tragic ending. While this has provoked the (expected) disappointment of readers who see the novel as being too far from the Victorian pretext in order for it to be called an 'adaptation',[22] one can argue that a value of Phillips's novel is that it returns *Wuthering Heights* to a reading which emphasizes the text's inherent historical and culture-specific meaning through the focus on forgotten and suppressed histories of poverty, race, and empire. Regarding *Wuthering Heights*, author, novel and main characters have come to be seen predominantly as signs and representations of "pathological, female, psychic life" (Levy 96). A discourse of female insanity also runs through Phillips's text; it is, however, of equal importance as the sociological descriptions and the histories of poverty and discrimination in the novel, which serve to put *Wuthering Height*s back into a specific locality and history. In a way, it thus counteracts a phenomenon which, according to Anita Levy, has persisted since Charlotte Brontë's attempt to 'rehabilitate' *Wuthering Heights* in her preface to the second edition of the novel in 1850: Brontë's description of the text as distinctly personal (and female), discarding the 'regional' quality as being of minor importance, have opened the way for subsequent critical readings which largely detach the text from historical-sociological implications (Levy 76, cf. also 78).[23] There are several other parallels between the texts, though there is no romance, no great all-consuming passion in *The Lost Child*. Both novels tell the story of a family decaying over three generations and chronicle the influence of poverty and exploitation. Marriages are largely loveless and damaging; in particular female characters suffer from physical and mental instability which can be

22 Reviews of the novel reveal the typical division of opinion and persistent questioning of the supposed adequacy of Phillips's intertextual engagement with Brontë according to an implied 'fidelity' paradigm, which adaptation studies has long been criticizing and trying to discard. Presenting an imagined prehistory of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Lost Child* is neither a fully-fledged adaptation, retelling, nor a prequel, but perhaps best described as a response to or intertextual engagement with the pretext.

23 Cf. C. Brontë (xiv-xviii).

escaped only through death. With isolation, silences and a lack of communication and intimacy shaping characters and relationships in both novels, Phillips puts the theme of loss centre stage.[24]

Lastly, considering the style of the narrative, the lack of emotion in Phillips's "kitchen-sink realism" (Williams) response to *Wuthering Heights* has been, I think unjustly, criticised,[25] as has its tone for being "unfailingly downbeat and dispirited", lacking the "macabre glee" (Upchurch) of Brontë. Phillips's prose, in its detachment and flat dreariness, befits the emotional tenor of the characters, locality, and social setting he wants to portray. Elements of Gothic sublimity are substituted for bleak realism, wind-swept moors and dark houses for run-down flats in London and Leeds, excess for banality.[26] The characters avoid confrontation and action, leading to a sense of "chilled detachment" which, as some critics argue "in contrast to Brontë's approach, fails to pull you viscerally into their world" (Upchurch). While the fragmentation of the narrative and the fact that many crucial events happen off-stage contribute to this effect, this can be seen as being conditioned by the social and psychological conditions portrayed and Phillips's particular style of writing. *The Lost Child* achieves a haunting realism that still leaves room for Gothic mystery, but is, admittedly, hardly satisfying as a thriller or romance. It presents a multi-layered narrative which returns *Wuthering Heights* to a specific postcolonial reading focused on precarity. It deals with realities of poverty in post-austerity, post-colonial Britain, without providing answers to the troubling question "what makes some people able to save themselves and others seemingly destined to slip beneath the waves with barely a fight" – one that Phillips's novel, as Alex Clark rightly notes in his review, "doesn't presume to answer but commits itself to asking in an intriguing variety of ways".

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24 Heathcliff loses his mother, Ruth and Ronald Johnson lose their daughter and grandson, Ronald later loses his wife to cancer, Monica loses her sons, Ben successively loses his entire family, Emily Brontë loses her brother. One can also argue that due to their respective physical and mental illnesses Monica, like Catherine Earnshaw and her creator, Emily Brontë, lose touch with reality. However, on a meta-level, Phillips's complex narrative can also be read as acknowledging losses as well as cultural and historical connectivities, as Ledent and O'Callaghan (235) have argued.

25 Cf., e.g., Prentiss Campbell.

26 Cf. Elaine Savory. But one can also see the presence of Heathcliff looming over the whole narrative, thus transferring at least some of the Gothic atmosphere of the Victorian pretext. Cf. Buonanno (99).

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PART 3

(Publication) Politics and Precarity

CHAPTER 8

Voices of Ugandan Women Writers

Positioning FEMRITE Since 2006

Susan Nalugwa Kiguli

FEMRITE, the Uganda Women Writers Association, "is an indigenous, non-governmental, non-profit making women's organisation publishing, training and promoting writers" (*FEMRITE*). This contribution draws on the experiences of FEMRITE's last ten years as a case study to interrogate the notion of precarity of women writers' lives in Uganda as well as the representations of precarity in the literature produced by FEMRITE. It relies on the basic and most common premise in African literary scholarship that women occupy marginalised spaces in African literatures.[1] In seeking to examine FEMRITE's commitment to precarious lives by examining the stories and experiences of Ugandan women writers in FEMRITE, this article investigates what kind of spaces FEMRITE has carved out for her writers since her celebration of ten years of existence in 2006, what in their conditions of existence and production has remained constant, and what has changed or is changing. It will then from the picture presented examine options for both the visibility and sustenance of Ugandan female writers living on the continent. Conceptually, the article uses the notions of precariousness as defined by Judith Butler (*Precarious Life*; *Frames of War*) and nego-feminism by Obioma Nnaemeka ("Nego-Feminism") to cater for both a literary and a sociopolitical/sociocultural perspective because the social and historical contexts must be taken into consideration in any discussion of women writers and their texts in African literature.

Questions of voice and visibility of Ugandan women writers are central to this article. It seeks to reflect on the idea of women as twice the Other in Africa alongside the paradoxical reality of the knowledge of strong formidable women with the most riveting courageous stories. It argues that Ugandan women writers should be seen as women who are aware of the ironies of

1 See, for example, Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, and Obioma Nnaemeka, *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*. There is also emphasis in these texts on the importance of opening up critical perspectives on feminine presence in African literatures and the significance of being very alert to cultural imperatives and shifts.

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women's experiences. Even though some women may occasionally wield power, on the whole, because of the patriarchal structures, women find themselves in vulnerable and evidently weak positions.

Obioma Nnaemeka's notion of nego-feminism provides a useful platform to raise women's consciousness and to support and work for women's self-confidence and self-respect. She also insists on taking stock of the border crossings and ambivalences encountered in women's realities and their creative work. In her explanation of nego-feminism, Nnaemeka emphasises the notions of third space, border crossing and intersectionality. She describes nego-feminism as a "third space of engagement", as one "which allows for [...] coexistence, interconnectedness, and interaction of thought, dialogue, planning, and action" ("Nego-Feminism" 360) in her experience of the practice of feminisms in Africa. It is a space which allows for flexibility and re-interpretation of knowledge and actions. She points out the importance of looking at different options and being open to multiple approaches in order to come up with structures that are appropriate in different spaces. She also defines nego-feminism as "the feminism of negotiation; second, *nego-feminism* stands for 'no ego' feminism" (377).

The debate within FEMRITE about the inclusion of male writers illustrates the relevance of Nnaemeka's ideas. For instance, I can recall our experience of trying to explain to our partners in New York that we had to have male representation on the Uganda committee of the Women Writing Africa (Eastern Africa) project. Our decision to work closely with male colleagues was based on our realisation that our male colleagues, most of them senior academics, knew where we could find archives of women's writing or actually had some of this writing in their possession. We recognised early on in the life of the project that we could only advance this project if we adopted the principles of solidarity, cooperation and compromise. Our partners did not understand our insistence until they came to East Africa for the regional meeting and met and worked with these colleagues. In the end, our fellow researchers in New York insisted that some of these male colleagues had to be on the final regional team of editors for the volume that came out of our research. This experience illustrates Nnaemeka's argument that African feminism "knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" ("Nego-Feminism" 378).

In centring the concept of women's stories, one of the dominant arguments has been that women's talk and women's writing, though much dismissed, holds power. A number of feminist critics have argued that women's writing shows women as survivors whose survival is based on listening and remembering and learning from their mothers' stories (Emecheta; Azodo and Wilentz;

Nfah-Abbenyi; Mugo). On numerous occasions, African women writers, from Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Leila Aboulela, Goretti Kyomuhendo, Kopano Matlwa, Lebogang Mashile, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to NoViolet Bulawayo, among others, have made it known that they listened to and learned from their mothers' storytelling against the background of the belittling of women's wisdom.

In the last about 60 years of the formal recognition of written African literatures in English, different women writers have addressed in their poetry, drama and novels issues central to women's identity, creativity, lived experiences and survival. While African women celebrate women's stories, they also focus very deliberately on the questions of women's subordination, oppression and on the highly important point of diversity and the contradictions within the women's literary movements themselves.

1 FEMRITE within the Ugandan Literary Landscape: The First Ten Years

Judith Butler's discussion of ideas of precariousness and precarity made me reflect on the fact that my experience as a woman writer in Uganda has been marked by a heightened sense of vulnerability and invisibility as ever present conditions. I have on a number of occasions recounted the incident when the editor of a publishing company in Uganda told me that he was not ready to look at my creative work because women do not engage serious themes in their creative writing. In categorising and dismissing my writing without even a cursory assessment, the editor was denying me visibility. Goretti Kyomuhendo recounts a similar situation in her article "To Be an African Woman Writer: Joys and Challenges":

> When I wrote my first novel, there were hardly any publishing houses to speak of in my country. The only mainstream publishing house at the time could not risk investing their money into an unknown, little girl from a rural area, writing about grandmother's [sic] stories. I was advised to borrow money from the bank so that author and publisher would equally share the risks. This, of course was no option to me. I was an unsalaried single mother struggling to survive in a harsh world [...]. (188)

These experiences resonate with Butler's argument that

> [t]he structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we

> address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. (*Precarious Life* 130)

In dismissing our work or putting tough conditions of publication on it, the editors and publishers were denying the books and their authors visibility, and when the books are not visible they cannot be talked about.

These conditions led Mary Karooro Okurut to mobilise other writers to form FEMRITE. It is because our lives as women and as women writers in particular were rendered almost invisible that the desire and attempt to take control of our words and have tangible products such as books to give force to the much-sung notion of women being natural storytellers came to life. Pumla Gqola, in her keynote speech at the 2016 conference marking FEMRITE's twenty years, presented on the idea of rioting women and writing women.[2] She discussed the idea of writing as a form of protest, as a way of refusing invisibility but at the same time as a form of acknowledging the existence of forces beyond women such as patriarchal structures that they must confront and paradoxically learn to work with and negotiate. This constant paradox of precariousness as discussed by Butler, where normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, is what frames FEMRITE's existence (*Precarious Life* 20).

FEMRITE's history is well documented and quite easily accessible (Ebila; Katjavivi; Barungi, *In Their Own Words*; Kiguli, "FEMRITE"; Kruger; Strauhs). For those of us who are in Uganda, FEMRITE has been looming large on the literary scene since her official launch on 3 May 1996. FEMRITE started as an idea by founder and now President of the organisation, Hon. Mary Karooro Okurut, who is currently a member of the 10th parliament of Uganda and Uganda's Minister in charge of General Duties in the office of the prime minister. When she thought of the idea of a space where women writers in Uganda could think and write, she was still a lecturer in the Department of Literature at Makerere University. FEMRITE marked twenty years of existence with a conference that ran from 28–30 July 2016. The conference's theme was 'Rethinking African Literature' ("FEMRITE@20") and focused centrally on matters of survival and sustenance of a reading and publishing culture in which women were recognized and active participants.

2 Pumla Gqola gave the keynote address at FEMRITE @20: Rethinking African Literature Conference, Makerere University, 28–30 July, 2016. The address is now a published chapter: "Writing African Feminists: Celebrating FEMRITE at 20", in Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Reflecting Rogue: Inside a Feminist Mind*, Jacana Media, 2017, pp. 158–76.

When FEMRITE started, the association was thought of by many people, academics and members of the public in Uganda alike, as an alternative space. At its inception, the idea of a space where women could be free to share ideas and to dream of being active participants in the Ugandan literary fraternity and even beyond was especially promoted, or even touted, by FEMRITE members and observers. At the risk of generalising what were really varied and individual years, the first ten years of FEMRITE could be summarised by saying that FEMRITE in those years attempted a number of deliberate strategies to ensure that Ugandan women writers hold their own on the Ugandan literary scene, some of which are still the core pillar strategies even after 2006.

First, there was a deliberate effort to focus on writing that discussed issues of gender and sexuality in the different genres produced, particularly in the short story and novel. The focus on these genres was deliberate because FEMRITE wanted to consolidate its position by producing writing that was popularly thought to have a ready market then. I contend that the effort was in line with Butler's observation:

> More generally, discourse makes an ethical claim upon us precisely because, prior to speaking, something is spoken to us. In a simple sense, [...] we are first spoken to, addressed, by an Other, before we assume language for ourselves. And we can conclude further that it is only on the condition that we are addressed that we are able to make use of language. It is in this sense that the Other is the condition of discourse. If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside the conditions of address. (*Precarious Life* 138–139)

Butler, following Levinas, calls to mind the idea of influence and exchange, of dynamism, of reciprocity of situations and creation of tension as necessary prerequisites for discourse and the use of language, while their failure is caused by conditions that either obliterate the presence of the Other or seek to erase the Other's presence. It is the systematic erasures or the inscription of preferred versions of the Others' presence that demonstrate the precariousness of their lives. The absence of voices of women talking about women's experience of life ignited writing that sought to consciously bring to life women's writing in the spirit of responding to an absence, a vacuum. Butler suggests a talking back approach, a response created by a condition of language that does not cater for the experiences and lives of women. FEMRITE thus represents an unassailable move to gain control of women's experiences, to take over and speak about women's worlds and lives.

Second, there was also an implicit attempt to continue in the spirit of the essay collection *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Boyce Davies and Adams Graves), in the contributions to which women writers and critics appeared not only as writers but also discussed representations of female experiences in texts already written or being written by themselves or by male writers. The spirit in *Ngambika* is demonstrated in the preface by Anne Adams Graves when she remarks:

> In attempting to redress the relative inattention to women in African literary scholarship, the criticism in the present anthology is concerned with expanding and augmenting the interpretation of the whole body of African literary creativity. This objective involves both a re-reading of earlier writings, produced by men, and a balanced reading of the more recent writings by women and by men. (vii)

Representation at linguistic, social and political levels was a very important issue and continues to be a very big issue as far as FEMRITE is concerned because it is only through inclusion of female voices and experiences that a balanced canon of Ugandan and African literature can be produced.

Third, there was a deliberate effort to build a body of women writers' works, and at the ten years celebration, this was hailed as a major achievement. There was recognition that FEMRITE had nurtured women writers who had consistently written either individual books or contributed to anthologies. The issues of the visibility and sustenance of the voices of the women writers from FEMRITE were considered pertinent ones. And fourth, issues of publication and publishing were also very important in the first ten years, to the extent that in 1998 FEMRITE came up with what we termed its publishing arm and produced books under this wing, and this continues in a slightly different form to this day.

At its ten years celebration, FEMRITE elicited many comments from its members projecting its future: Goretti Kyomuhendo, FEMRITE Coordinator for the first ten years, in the collection of essays *In Their Own Words*, states: "Happy FEMRITE 10th anniversary! More power to the women's elbows, more ink into our pens and more stories in print" ("Introduction"). There was a conscious endeavour to make sure that the project of putting women's voices into print continued so that the impact would be palpable and sustained.

In the same vein, I wrote in the preface to the collection *Gifts of Harvest*, the publication that came out that same year:

> This decade is viewed as a foundation securing process and a precursor to the explosion of talent from more Ugandan women writers [...]. FEMRITE was begun as a collective effort guided by Mary Karooro Okurut a.k.a Mother Hen; it has never been a one person venture. Thus the anthology of different writers who have achieved at both international and national level is a fitting representation of the ten year endeavour. I have found the pluralistic approach in this anthology most delightful. All writers are presented equally; no one is favoured over another and at the risk of sounding clichéd, I say 'Together we can'. (iv-v)

This quotation addresses a trait which is a significant feature of FEMRITE and which Obioma Nnaemeka, too, has emphasised in her analysis of how African feminisms operate, namely the ideas of "community, alliance, connectedness" ("Nego-Feminism" 374). The characteristic of solidarity and of working closely together as a body of women writers is at the very core of what has consistently driven FEMRITE's literary ventures.

Nevertheless, it was not all hopeful predictions in 2006; after one panel discussion we held to mark the ten years, a participant wondered whether it would not be proper to close business since it had been ten years of what he called affirmative action for female writers. My reply was close to what Micere Mugo so aptly noted in her 2012 collection of essays *Writing and Speaking from the Heart of my Mind*:

> The focus on women is pertinent because in spite of the milestones made by women's movements globally – especially during the United Nations' Women's Decade culminating in the Beijing conference and the years after – the woman's narrative still remains largely silenced under patriarchal domination. (4)

These sentiments of affirming and contesting form the patterns that frame an organisation such as FEMRITE. As Butler contends in *Frames of War*:

> Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know or know not at all. (14)

The quotation points to the fact that there is no definitive 'we' and that, therefore, women's lives and writing have to be constantly looked at in new ways on

the assumption that the need to assert their rights and presence presupposes that those rights are theirs even when the women feel they do not have access to them; for example, there is no law against women writers being published in Uganda even when women writers find it hard to get published. In this case therefore, it is important to see survival and overcoming oppressive attitudes against women writers in Uganda in transactional terms where both men and women fight against attitudes that hinder women's progress.

FEMRITE's very existence and sustenance is constantly informed by what Nnaemeka refers to as

> a third space where the immediacy of lived experience gives form to theory, allows the simultaneous gesture of theorizing practice and practicing theory, and anticipates the mediation of policy, thereby disrupting the notion of the academy and activism as stable sites. ("Nego-Feminism" 377)

The third space connotes ongoing transactions and states of change which influence each other and are permanently in flux without a clear-cut beginning or a clear-cut end. The drive to persist is derived from the claim that there is no reason for FEMRITE to continue. It is the insinuation that the need to promote women's voices is not essential that makes the drive to assert the importance of women's writing even more urgent.

2 FEMRITE: Challenges and Achievements Since 2006

After its first ten years, FEMRITE faced some major challenges. First, the main funder, the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation, ended its funding phase in 2007, and since then FEMRITE has been receiving funds from its publications and small grants aimed at specific activities from various partners. Resilience is without doubt the core feature of FEMRITE and the primary reason the organisation was able to celebrate twenty years of existence in July 2016.

After its first ten years, FEMRITE as an organisation focused deliberately on developing programmes that aimed at nurturing and strengthening the writers in the organisation while making sure that they cultivated strong networks with other women writers, especially those living on the continent. The star programme in this category is the FEMRITE Regional Residency for African Women Writers. From the testimonies of the various women writers who have attended these residencies, it is evident that the one important offshoot of this programme has been networking. FEMRITE members have been able to

create strong solidarity with women writers from various parts of Africa and beyond. Many of the workshop facilitators are recognised women writers willing to support fellow writers. Most FEMRITE women writers interviewed confess that the experience of sharing space with writers from elsewhere has been inspirational. Apart from providing space for Ugandan women writers to write, the programme also offers writers opportunities to attend writing workshops that have helped them improve their skills as well as find time to talk to other writers about writing, performing, producing and publishing work.

The residencies have been instrumental in opening up spaces and creating networks for FEMRITE women writers and the other writers that get invited to the residencies. One of the most fascinating and encouraging outcomes of these residencies is the publication of anthologies of some of the work that the writers produce during the residency. This effort was flagged for by the publication and launch of a mixed genre anthology titled *Pumpkin Seeds and other Gifts* in 2009 (Moffet and Barungi). Other anthologies have followed this and have made visible a number of hitherto unknown FEMRITE writers (Twongyeirwe, *World*; *Nothing*; Twongyeirwe and Banda-Aaku, *Summoning*; Banda-Aaku). It is important to note in relation to the programme of residency that FEMRITE as an organisation has worked with different partners over the years to sustain this programme, which saw the 7th residency taking place in February 2018. The inaugural residency was in 2008 and was co-sponsored by Africalia and The Commonwealth Foundation. Related to this prominent effort are other associated ventures that the organisation has actively encouraged and participated in. FEMRITE is an active member of African Women Writers Initiatives Network (AWWNET), which is an umbrella organisation intended to support coordinated action among initiatives for African women writers. They aim to strengthen and to strategically position the literary output on the continent's development agenda. From 2007, the Executive Director of FEMRITE, Hilda Twongyeirwe, has insisted that the idea of women writers from the continent working together is to ensure that women writers strengthen international solidarity on the African continent in the first place. This strategy has been dominant and a productive feature ever since. Beatrice Lamwaka, a long-time member who has served on the executive and worked untiringly to ensure that the organisation and herself as a writer stay afloat, remarked that this approach has boosted FEMRITE members' confidence and helped them cultivate more ideas in writing their stories.[3]

3 Conversation with Beatrice Lamwaka, the then FEMRITE General Secretary, FEMRITE Offices, Kamwokya, on 19 April 2017.

There are programmes that FEMRITE as an organisation developed and nurtured in the first ten years and that have since 2006 become more established and have given FEMRITE writers opportunities to speak with and for women in marginalised positions and contexts. In 2003, FEMRITE started a tradition of focusing on life writing and published a collection of stories by Ugandan rural women attending legal clinics in Western Uganda, titled *Tears of Hope* (Wangusa and Barungi).[4] FEMRITE was seen as a trailblazer in effecting the writing down of stories of women who had suffered abuse. In the foreword to *Tears of Hope*, Hon. Irene Ovonji-Odida remarked:

> FEMRITE is to be commended for giving these women an opportunity to be heard, to tell their story in their own voice. I would strongly urge all policy makers, legislators and persons in authority at all levels to buy and read this book for what is portrayed here is a reflection of the gendered experiences of countless daughters, mothers, wives and sisters in Uganda.

Ovonji-Odida seems to suggest that sharing the stories of women who have suffered various forms of abuse highlights their vulnerability as well as their agency and also points to the acts of aggression and injustice that the patriarchal structures promote. She recommends that people in places of authority should show commitment to justice for the many women in Uganda who suffer abuse because of their gender. There is hope that the stories told by women who have undergone diverse experiences of pain and unfairness could start a process of social and political reflection especially as far as women's lives are concerned.

FEMRITE has actively participated in producing stories of marginalised women such as those who have experienced war and girls who have undergone female genital mutilation. It has entered into partnerships with a variety of other organisations to give a voice to women whose voices would otherwise never be heard. The organisation has deliberately branded itself as a channel that gives a voice to vulnerable and marginalised women. The approach of making sure the silence is broken has given birth to an interesting trend of life writing which focuses on true life stories (Strauhs 154–58). Most of the women who tell their stories to the FEMRITE writers use their mother tongues, and the writers transcribe and translate those stories. After translation into English, the writers then write down the stories. Often the writers do not retain the

4 On FEMRITE's life stories, see Katherine Hallemeier as well as Candice Taylor Stratford.

original names of the women who tell them their stories in order not to expose them to further abuse by their assailants and other people in their communities who do not believe in the women's speaking out. In this category of life writing, FEMRITE has produced anthologies of creative non-fiction. This is an important trend because it benefits both groups of women participating in the production of stories. The source of the stories are the women whose experiences are expressed, for example, the women from war-torn Northern Uganda who feature in the collection of written and radio stories titled *"Today You Will Understand"* (Christie) and in the collection of written stories titled *Farming Ashes* (Barungi and Twongyeirwe). These stories by women caught up in the Northern Uganda war, written down by women who also hail from Northern Uganda, are most compelling in terms of the emotions invested in them and their ability to focus on the protagonist's voice. The protagonists are women of varied ages and backgrounds who undergo unimaginably painful experiences; for example, in "Mildred's Story" Mildred and her children are locked in their hut and set on fire, and later have to live in an IDP (Internally Displaced People) camp with the constant threat of starvation (Christie 10–12).

The second group consists of the women writers who record and write down the stories. Both groups of women benefit from these stories because the ones who tell their stories, as most of them declared (Twongyeirwe, "Introduction", *Today* 3; Christie 20; Rwakasisi 102), felt released from the burden of silence and thought their stories created avenues for people to know about their experiences. They also felt that they were able to do something about their experiences by at least telling their stories. The act of expressing themselves had a powerful psychological effect on these women as victims because they also achieved agency by being able to tell their stories. Nnaemeka argues that African literature's engagement with feminist issues often calls for disruption of the "oppressor/victim dichotomy to demonstrate that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways" ("Introduction"). The readers of the stories not only get to know the reality of the women storytellers' lives but also reflect on these experiences. By telling their stories, the affected women pass on their experiences of, for example, war, which for the readers thus take on a human face and become realities rather than 'myths' read about in the media. Dominic Dipio, in her foreword to the narratives in *Farming Ashes*, discusses the power of the stories to draw the reader into the experiences of the storytellers. She points out how the stories demonstrate the women's resolve to seek freedom and to survive. She argues that the stories help the reader to see, beyond the pain, the resilience and triumph of the human spirit. Dipio asserts that "telling stories humanizes the narrator and the listener" (vii).

The second group of women were inspired by the opportunity of sharing the stories of fellow women and felt this gave them an opportunity to participate in a positive manner in other women's lives (Twongyeirwe, "Introduction", *Farming* viii-ix). A number of writers who participated in the projects of life stories said that writing about other women's lives helped them realise their goal of bringing to light the issues affecting women and creating a forum where thinking about women's lived experiences became very important.[5]

With its life stories series, including *I Dare to Say* (Kiguli and Barungi), which are stories by women living with HIV and AIDS, and *Beyond the Dance* (Barungi and Twongyeirwe), which are stories by girls and women who have undergone female genital mutilation, FEMRITE has created a pool of mediated autobiographies. Records of Ugandan women's experiences in literature are few, and these publications of women's stories are therefore a radical move to capture a series of painful experiences that people do not easily talk about. This is a small step towards erasing what I term as Ugandan amnesia where troubled experiences are concerned; for example, novels by Ugandans on Amin's period or the time immediately after are few and far between. While mediated thematic writing may have its weaknesses – such as the writers imposing some of their views on the original storyteller, or some of the meaning being lost in translation, particularly for those stories that were first told in the narrators' mother tongues – it is a much needed intervention in Ugandan literary history, especially where women's experiences are concerned.

Among the programmes that became the face of FEMRITE after 2007 is the Readers Writers Club. This activity first began in 1998 and has become well established since the late 2000s. This is a programme that has involved female and male writers from the start. It is the programme that FEMRITE has used to show that even though its focus is on women writers, it is flexible enough to give room to male writers of like mind to work with the FEMRITE women. In fact, the poetry anthology *Wondering and Wandering of Hearts* (Kiguli and Twongyeirwe), which marks the twenty years of FEMRITE's existence, includes the work of many participants, male and female, from the Readers Writers Club. FEMRITE has sought to show that the women writers' aim is to make women's stories visible and that they recognise that they cannot achieve this visibility alone without working with their male counterparts. This is in line with Obioma Nnaemeka's theory of nego-feminism, in which she argues that African feminists operate in a gendered context which she

5 Focus Group Discussion with The FEMRITE Readers Writers Club at the FEMRITE Offices, Kamwokya, 10 April 2017.

describes as “a healthy mix of men and women” (378). FEMRITE, although very keen on promoting and cultivating spaces for women’s literary activities, has been constantly alert to the need for inclusion in order not to project the image of women writers as working in exclusion. As Nnaemeka explains, in the African context, “African women’s willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances is quite pervasive” (380). She insists that African feminisms are anchored in the language of collaboration, accommodation, and compromise. Davina Kawuma, the current General Secretary of FEMRITE, commented that the Readers Writers Club has helped hone her skills because she got tremendous and well-meaning critique from the members. She thought the group’s strength lay in its inclusiveness (Dila).

The contested inclusion of male writers in FEMRITE points to how the organisation’s definition of space is not exclusive and fixed; there is an attempt to accommodate views other than women’s experiences and stories alone and to include the other voices as a way of expanding the understanding of how our context functions. The organisation would like to create spaces where women can explore their creativity and assert their identity but at the same time acknowledge the existence of others and see how to navigate and negotiate the power relations between both male and female writers. There is a definite ambivalence in defining how the relationship between male and female writers works. There are inevitable tensions resulting from the fact that the women writers have had to make a deliberate effort to gain recognition, and there is the constant anxiety of both male and female writers that the carving out of a space for female writers may mean that the male writers may be eclipsed. Concerning the gap between experience and representation and the resulting ambivalence of representation, which again need to be self-reflexively addressed, Butler has argued:

> For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. (*Precarious Life* 144)

This ambivalence in the attempt to fully capture and represent a situation also applies to the attempts to represent both men and women writers equally, particularly because FEMRITE came into being with the aim of addressing the absence of women writers from the Ugandan literary canon. FEMRITE’s attempt to represent itself as an organisation that is ready to take in male writers is complicated by the fact that the organisation was born to cater for the

specific need of promoting women's writing and stories, and that mission is not yet fully achieved.

One of the steadiest activities after 2006 has been Author of the Month. Apart from featuring different writers every month and promoting FEMRITE's ideal of giving space to different writers, this programme, like the Residency for African Women Writers, has featured writers from abroad as well as writers from Uganda. Like the Readers Writers Club, it features both female and male writers. The emphasis in this activity is to give an opportunity to FEMRITE members to hear and interact with recognised writers from different countries, particularly in Africa. In addition, FEMRITE has been active in working with different schools all over Uganda to nurture younger talent. Members of FEMRITE are convinced that this will ensure continuity and help promote Ugandan women's writing.

3 Recent Developments in FEMRITE

A number of interesting trends seem to have emerged since 2006. FEMRITE has concentrated on producing and publishing anthologies, particularly short story anthologies. Indeed, FEMRITE has substantially contributed to popularising the short story form in Uganda. The trend of writing and publishing short stories comes from the need to include as many voices as the training workshops produce, and in a way it caters for the expanded membership of 50 active writers since publishing avenues in Uganda are quite limited. FEMRITE as an organisation believes in providing a platform to as many writers as possible, and since the short story form seems quite a popular form with the writers and is also easier to monitor and produced in a shorter period of time than a novel or even a novella, it has taken precedence over other forms in terms of what FEMRITE publishes these days. The stories are of varied quality with a number of different writers, although critics such as Strauhs are critical of how FEMRITE represents different women's voices, arguing that it glosses over issues of women with different sexual orientation, thus offers only limited space to gender debates, and also favours prescriptive canonisation strategies (151–52).

The concentration on the short story form in FEMRITE has in a way also slowed down other processes that seemed to be flourishing in the first ten years, for example, the grooming of promising writers in the novel genre, as Glaydah Namukasa promised to become and may yet become. The other genres such as drama and film have not yet produced strong individual voices from FEMRITE, even though Violet Barungi's play *Over my Dead Body* won the

British Council New Playwriting Award for Africa and the Middle East in 1997. The play addresses the themes of poverty and the education of female children. Poetry has generated quite a lot of interest in FEMRITE, with my collection *The African Saga* (1998) proving a popular text, particularly the poem "I am Tired of Talking in Metaphors" (4), which has become a signature poem both at secondary and tertiary levels. It explores the theme of domestic violence. There are also talented, young and upcoming voices featured in the already mentioned anthology of poetry *Wondering and Wandering of Hearts*, such as Lillian Akampurira Aujo, the 2009 winner of the first BN poetry prize from the Babishai Niwe (BN) Poetry Foundation, and (performance) poet and essayist Gloria Kiconco. There is a burgeoning scene of performance poetry at FEMRITE, and in Uganda generally. Still on the whole, the short story has earned FEMRITE a number of nominations to prestigious awards including actual winners such as Monica Arac de Nyeko, who won the 2007 Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story "Jambula Tree", and Jackee Budesta Batanda, who was Africa's Regional Winner of the 2003 Commonwealth Short Story Competition.

As much as FEMRITE needs to encourage as many female writers as possible, it should also nurture strong individual voices irrespective of gender. After all, FEMRITE is a space of competing narratives; it desires to keep a space of separateness for the women to develop their talent but also does not want to be seen as excluding men. Thus, on a number of occasions, FEMRITE chairpersons have claimed that FEMRITE also publishes the work of male writers, but so far FEMRITE has not produced any individual publications by men, although a few men have been co-editors of anthologies and its Readers Writers Club has many male members.

On the whole, FEMRITE's achievement is based on the ideas of commitment and networks. The image of FEMRITE as home for women writers is actively promoted. Glaydah Namukasa, the FEMRITE Chairperson 2014–2018, in an interview included in the documentary *FEMRITE Celebrates 20 Years*, states in emphatic tones, "FEMRITE has given writers a home", and another member reiterates this sentiment by remarking, "FEMRITE is like a family". The Executive Director, Hilda Twongyeirwe, emphasises this point when she says: "Among FEMRITE's achievements is its being able to survive for 20 years, and one of the reasons for this is that it has committed members. The membership of FEMRITE is its pillar" (Dila). She has further emphasised that FEMRITE has survived because its members share and use opportunities that are available to them. In addition, FEMRITE as an organisation enjoys a lot of goodwill from other organisations and partners, such as Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), Goethe Zentrum Kampala, Alliance Française de Kampala, British

Council Uganda, African Writers Trust (AWT) and BN Poetry Foundation, who expect that working with the organisation will promote their own work as well.

FEMRITE members have found ways of surviving as writers even though funding from donors is scarce and it is not possible in Uganda to sustain oneself on sales from creative writing. Primarily, the profiles of women writers in FEMRITE show that most of them have a main job from which they earn an income, and engage in writing as a serious but side activity they carry out in addition to their other roles and responsibilities. Most FEMRITE members acknowledge that they write because they know that it is important for women to give their own perception of life, but they are aware that book sales in Uganda, their primary market, are low. In fact, a general survey shows that apart from bookshops being few and concentrated in urban areas, they also primarily stock textbooks and hardly any creative work (Kasozi). FEMRITE members are aware that FEMRITE as an organisation is very active in selling and marketing the books they produce. FEMRITE staff members are always present at conferences, book fairs and other forums where they can sell their books. This effort is outstanding in a context where marketing of books is not prominent.

In addition, in the last decade FEMRITE has seen a number of its members launch other initiatives to enhance literary activities, and the membership of FEMRITE has supported these initiatives and at times worked closely with them. Among the most prominent is Goretti Kyomuhendo's founding of the African Writers Trust (AWT) to ensure that there is a connection between African writers on the continent and those in the diaspora. The AWT as an organisation provides a number of activities, such as editorial training workshops. The Uganda International Writers Conference, which has featured three editions,[6] is a sterling programme which apart from opening avenues to Ugandan writers has publicised Ugandan writing. Beverley Nambozo, another FEMRITE member, launched "The Beverley Nambozo Poetry Award" in 2008 as a poetry award focusing on women poets and in 2014 transformed it to Babishai Niwe Poetry Foundation (BN Poetry Foundation) open to all African poets. Beatrice Lamwaka founded the Arts Therapy Foundation to provide psychological and emotional support to vulnerable groups through creative arts. Furthermore, Helen Nyana Kakoma founded the online platform Sooo Many Stories, which is now also a publishing house. FEMRITE has provided a starting point for women writers in Uganda to support writing and publishing in different ways; as Beverley Nambozo remarks in the already mentioned

6 1st Edition, 7–9 March 2013, Imperial Golf View Hotel, Entebbe, Uganda; 2nd Edition, 1–6 March 2015, Fairway Hotel, Kampala, Uganda; 3rd Edition, 6–8 March 2017, Fairway Hotel, Kampala, Uganda.

documentary *"FEMRITE Celebrates 20 Years"*: "I learnt skills from FEMRITE that I use in BN Poetry Foundation".

Apart from being a launch pad for writers, FEMRITE has produced women writers who have produced stories about women and society that have the immediacy of a first witness and achieve the authority of people who know the stories and contexts they write about. FEMRITE hopes to strengthen the sense of Ugandan women writers' autonomy and power by encouraging the idea of collective strength and solidarity.

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CHAPTER 9

Poverty, Precarity and the Ethics of Representing Africa

Sule Emmanuel Egya

> You really must try and get arrested – that's the quickest way to make it as a poet. You'll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award.
>
> (Habila 218)

…

> Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West.
>
> (Wainaina)

∵

1 Introduction

Central to my thesis in this chapter is the question: who or what determines the ethics and aesthetics of representing poverty and precarity in Africa.[1] I answer this question by evaluating the roles of African writers in the present time characterised by globalisation, the impulse of migration, and what I would call, following Niyi Osundare, the "exogenous mentality" (21) (the desire to look outward) of contemporary African writers. A crucial point here

1 This contribution is a revised version of an article published in two parts in *The Guardian* online (Nigeria): "Poverty, precarity and ethics of representing Nigeria, Nay Africa – Part 1", 31 December 2017, guardian.ng/art/literature/poverty-precarity-and-ethics-of-representing-nigeria-nay-africa-part-1/; and "Poverty, precarity and ethics of representing Nigeria, Nay Africa – Part 2", 7 January 2018, guardian.ng/art/poverty-precarity-and-ethics-of-representing-nigeria-nay-africa-part-2/.

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is the fate of African aesthetics, their appropriateness in describing the conditions of Africa, and prospectively imagining and constructing discourses that will assist in dealing with poverty and precarity on the continent. With the question of appropriateness comes the ethical role of African writers who must decide whether they will be writers committed to their arts alone, to the glorification of their craft, or see themselves also as public intellectuals, social beings, concerned with the fate of their societies, willing to engage in extra-literary discourses, activities or movements aimed at confronting the concrete problems of their nations. These issues demand attention as they affect literary production in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa (perhaps with the exception of South Africa) where the realities are that conventional publishing is nearly non-existent, reading culture is at its lowest point, and educational infrastructure is neglected. Perhaps the most crucial factor here is the collapse of the publishing industry, often seen as the result of the mismanagement of resources and the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes on most African economies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1980s and the 1990s. This was also the period of post-independence disillusionment when most nations of Africa began to lose hope, as home-grown politicians and civil servants who took over the management of their countries from colonial masters ran their economies down under the weight of corruption and ineptitude. Arbitrary usurpation of power brought some of the African nations under severe dictatorships, such as the rules of Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Hastings K. Banda of Malawi, Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Sani Abacha of Nigeria, among others.

The precarious conditions of poverty I refer to here started in the period of disillusionment that was the aftermath of flag independence, characterised by intense military oppression, pervasive corruption, descent into civil wars, and extreme humanitarian conditions across Africa. The late twentieth century, when Africa had barely had political independence, turned out to be a time of descent into anomie for most African nations. At this point, many thinkers and scholars came to realise that "Africa has the richest natural resources and yet it is poor and stagnant in growth and development. In other words, in spite of all the wealthy resources including human and material in its possession, Africa is the world's poorest continent." (Addae-Korankye 147) The crucial point to make here is that this descent into poverty and precarity, which engenders "powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom" (World Bank, qtd. in Addae-Korankye 148), is the context for the collapse of conventional publishing in most African nations and the consequent extroversion of African literary aesthetics. Writing about the effects of government mismanagement, oppression and poverty on Nigerian writing in the 1990s, Toyin Adewale-Gabriel points

out that "[s]everal Nigerian citizens were forced into exile by the death threats of the Military terror squad or by harsh economic conditions. Some young Nigerian writers who had shown much promise [...] chose to go into voluntary exile. Literary groups like the Nigerian Poets League petered out. The publishing sector sneered at Nigerian creative literature rejecting it as unprofitable [...]." (iii) This situation is not peculiar to Nigeria, as Jack Mapanje, who has suffered oppression and censorship, reports of Malawi, or, as Micere Githae Mugo, also a victim of state oppression, says of Kenya. Although the issues raised here are about Africa as a continent, most of the references are to Nigeria, the society that I have closely studied over the years.

At the beginning of African literature in European languages, the pioneer writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Awoonor, David Diop, and Camara Laye, cast themselves as protagonists of an imperative counter-discourse, attending to the urgent need of narrating Africa from the inside, redeeming the image of the continent from colonialist narratives. This was a great service to the continent, matched by their extra-literary spirits that led them to nationalist struggles, resulting in flag independence. The 1950s and 1960s were marked by continent-wide nationalisms in Africa; the writers did not only draw the historicity of their imagination from acts of nationalism, but they also dedicated their lives to it as stakeholders. The generation of writers after them came with a Marxist outburst, locally rooted aesthetics and an aggression against the hypocritical discourse of messianism (in the manner of the European discourse of the 'civilising' mission) formed by the political heirs of the colonisers, home-grown politicians and civil servants working within what Achille Mbembe refers to as the structures of "colonial *commandement*" (31). These post-independence African writers had a commitment that was not only to their arts, but also to their countries, their continent. Most pioneer writers and those after them, namely Femi Osofisan, Atukwei Okai, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, among others, began writing while living in their countries, Western publishers sought them out in their countries (some of the post-independence writers even rejected Western publishers), became famous in their countries, and constantly stirred great debates about literary aesthetics (Négritude, the language question, Eurocentric versus Afrocentric values, alter-native tradition, generational anxieties). They, however, also spoke passionately about the socio-political welfare and future of their countries and the continent (pan-Africanism, post-independence disillusionment, apartheid, Structural Adjustment Programmes, military dictatorship, democratisation). The verve and energy powering these writers' great service, literary and extra-literary, to the continent began to wane when some of them succumbed to what I would call the great exodus (migration to the West) of African writers

and intellectuals in the 1990s. This exodus resulted in permanent migration of Africans to especially the United States of America. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza calls this condition "the diasporas of structural adjustment". According to him, "[t]he diasporas of structural adjustment have been formed since the 1980s out of the migrations engendered by economic, political, and social crises and the destabilizations of SAPs [the IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes]. They include professional elites, traders, refugees, and students" (36). It is in this period that great Nigerian scholars and writers, such as Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Ojo-Ade, Isidore Okpewho, and Tanure Ojaide, among others, left Nigeria in search of greener pastures in the United States of America. As it turned out, their movement to the West marked a significant decline in Africa's literary production and, invariably, in the hitherto robust contribution of African literary aesthetics to the development of indigenous knowledge production on the continent. It also marked the extroversion of African literary aesthetics, its commodification in the West, and the new process of inventing Africa through a West-controlled literary imagination characterised by diasporic discourses projected to shape the views of people, even in Africa, about the continent.

My contention is that the current practice of inventing Africa through "extroverted" narratives (indeed one of the corollaries of the exogenous mentality) by writers mostly based outside Africa, or dreaming to move to literary capitals of the West, hugely attracted by Western instruments of validating and canonising African literature, has, in the end, a negative effect on any efforts made towards representing the prevalent conditions of poverty and precarity in Africa. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation in its 2018 report estimates that "Africa remains the continent with the highest PoU [prevalence of undernourishment], affecting almost 21 percent of the population (more than 256 million people)" and that "the situation is more pressing in the region of sub-Saharan Africa where an estimated 23.2 percent of the population – or between one out of four and one out of five people in the region – may have suffered from chronic food deprivation in 2017". If discourses on African literature from the West determine not only at the global stage but also on the continent how we represent hunger, diseases, wars, corruption and inequality in Africa, then such representations will eventually be of no use to the continent since they become a commodity to be consumed by the West in their hunger for the African exotic or their propensity for turning a kind pitiful eye to Africa with the hope of rescuing the continent from itself, a gesture that continues the rather unending task of "civilising" Africa. I am strongly of the view that contemporary African writers have to rethink their role, have to return to the past and see how to reinvent the original role exemplified in the contributions of pioneer African writers as writers, public intellectuals and,

possibly, activists. But this will only be possible, I argue, if most African writers resist the impulse of migration (as only few are able to do so today), shear themselves of the comfort the literary capitals of the West claim to offer them, and face, with a deep sense of sacrifice in the form of returning and giving back to the continent, the imperfections of the continent from within.

2 Africa and the Paradox of the Migration Impulse

By the paradox of the migration impulse, I refer to the tragedy, the existential fallacy, the counter-productivity and the negative impression that the continent suffers as its writers and intellectuals migrate to the West. Most people who migrate to the West do not think of their action as brain drain but as a necessary move to realise their potentials which will be consciously directed to constructive use in Africa. That is to say, migration is seen as necessarily helpful to Africa. To problematise this, let me refer to a recent saga involving the protean Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, arguably the most towering literary figure alive in Africa today. In the wake of Donald Trump's repugnant rhetoric, Soyinka had, in a lecture at Oxford, threatened that if Trump won and became the president of the United States of America, he would permanently leave the States (Flood). Of course, Soyinka was not the only one to pose this threat. But unknown to Soyinka, an army of social media users in Nigeria, mostly the youth, had grabbed his threat and kept it, waiting eagerly for the outcome of the US presidential election. As soon as Trump won, they brought up Soyinka's threat, turned it into a weapon with which they attacked him, mocking him for daring to threaten that he would tear his green card. What did Soyinka think of himself, they said, that he would so arrogantly threaten to tear the US green card, an irresistible passport to the comfort the West offers against the poverty of Africa. They then dared him to tear it. Some of their comments were to the effect that Soyinka was merely posturing since, by all means, he should know the value of the almighty US green card, how it had offered him a comfortable alternative to Africa and its many existential problems. Characteristically, Soyinka hit back at these social media critics, calling them "the nattering nitwits of Internet" and threatening to exit Nigeria in what he called "WOLEXIT" (Soyinka). Soyinka, whether out of the intention to carry out his threats or provoked by the unnecessary attack from the army of social media critics, eventually rendered his green card invalid. Months later, the news emerged that Soyinka had taken up a visiting appointment at a university in South Africa. Soyinka had, in effect, stopped visiting universities in the US.

I find the Soyinka story instructive in many ways. It shows the anxiety, the desperation of young Africans – the crop on whom the future of the continent ought to depend – in looking to the West for the comfort that Africa has failed to offer them. In spite of Soyinka's bravado and spirited counter-attack on the youth, the saga should bring home to him, in the best dramatic way, his conviction (which he has repeatedly uttered) that his is a wasted generation; that is to say, his generation has failed the youth. The conflict between him and his social media critics is symptomatic of the rift and its attendant blame game between the older generation that witnessed the glorious moment of flag independence and the younger generation that feels politically and economically crippled by the bastardisation of that independence. I believe that both Soyinka and his critics are implicated in the same narrative of failure, fear and desperation, which results from the paradox of the migration impulse. If Soyinka, in the first place, had not allowed himself to be lured into thinking of the US as the best place to live and work (this, after all, is the concept of the green card), given the fact that his country Nigeria needs his services more than the US, he would not have been attacked. And what figural connotation did Soyinka provoke when the green card first came to his mind while thinking of America's misadventure into Trumpian choices? Regrettably, the green card meant to Soyinka what it meant to the youth – an instrument of escape from the failure and poverty of Africa.

It is precisely this point – that African writers, intellectuals and professionals may seek an instrument, an opportunity, a possibility to escape to the West – that should form the central question in deconstructing the paradox of the migration impulse. If Africa finds itself, or has been made to become, a continent of poverty, do we not impoverish her the more when we migrate with the intention of living and working in other places? Are we not, in point of fact, taking what belongs to her to other places and by doing so impoverishing her? Of course, something has to push us out of Africa, something is always there to push us out of Africa; but in succumbing to the push to move out of Africa, what effects, positive or negative, does our movement have on the cultural, political and economic productivity of Africa? I will dwell on these questions, with attention to the cultural economy of African writers' migration to the West, publishing in Western capitals, the morality of what Graham Huggan calls *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), of self-positioning with hyper-publicity. I am interested in asking how the totality of the strategies of making oneself a successful metropolitan writer, globe-trotting around the West, occasionally visiting Africa to possibly watch with detachment how much messier it has become, add to Africa's development index.

To say Africa is poor, suffers from the poverty of turning ideas into resources, is not wrong; but to say Africa is hopeless and to allow this conclusion to propel the impulse of migration is not right. It seems to me that the conclusion that Africa is a hopeless continent, incapable of being redeemed, is the most crucial force behind the disturbing exodus of writers, intellectuals and professionals out of Africa in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The Nigerian poet and academic Femi Ojo-Ade has a somewhat confessional preface to his collection of poems, *Exile at Home*, in which he reveals his impulse – not quite different from that of other people – for migration. Usually mentioned alongside his contemporaries (Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare), Ojo-Ade had had a remarkable career as an academic in Nigeria before migrating to the United States. According to him, he had initially thought that going into exile was simply "errantry"; but, in his words,

> Nigeria was taking the wrong turn, drifting towards destruction. And I began to question the whole notion of commitment. And I started to see reason in running away from home. And I found that exiles and errantry met at the crossroads of struggle and sorrow and survival, of self-survival and strained, strenuous communal continuity. And I ran away and left behind family and friends and fears, all of whom and which never ceased to haunt me and inhabit the space of my dreams and desires. (viii-ix)

In his estimation, as Nigeria sank into despair he simply lost hope in the country and succumbed to the impulse to run to the West. This is the situation of most Africans who move to the West, who are still struggling to do so. Today, there is no doubt that the most celebrated of contemporary African writers live outside of Africa (cf. Amatoritsero; also Garuba).

But let us return to the question: is Africa such a hopeless continent? One other way to answer it is to properly diagnose the problems of Africa, to know, according to Chinua Achebe, when the rain started beating us (*There was a Country* 1). Diagnoses, you may say, have been repeatedly done. In Nigeria, for instance, Achebe has, in his *The Trouble with Nigeria*, stressed that it is nothing other than political failure. Many thinkers and observers of course would agree that political failure is integral to Africa's stagnation – a place of backwardness, poverty, diseases, corruption and violence. I also believe so in spite of Africa's democratisation process. We must be suspicious of democracy in most nations of Africa if votes are stolen, commercialised, mystified; if democratically elected leaders turn into merchants of votes, repeated winners, extra-terms mongers, constitution manipulators, and serial abusers of human rights.

I see African leaders as people who, willingly or imperially, inflict what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" on Africa.

Much as it sounds clichéd, we must trace this violence to colonialism and, by doing so, I do not imply that these acts of violence are insurmountable. The structure of violence inherited from colonialism is what political leaders deploy and rely on to inflict violence on Africa. One of the elements crucial to this structure is "*commandement*" as a concept and as a practice, very well theorised by Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony*. Mbembe points out that "throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, governing in a colony meant first and foremost having *commandement* over the native. [...] Power was reduced to the right to demand, to force, to ban, to compel, to authorize, to punish, to reward, to be obeyed – in short, to enjoin and to direct" (32). This commandment has come to characterise the bureaucratisation and stratification of socio-political roles and power handed down by the colonial masters to Africans who, upon assuming governance, in mimicking their predecessors, bring to it the theatrical sense of overdoing what those before them had done. It is part of the colonially acquired structure and taste – albeit in an exaggerated, melodramatic manner – that political leaders in Africa today ascribe to themselves incredible perks of political office, accumulating wealth and stashing it outside of Africa. They are also known for their inordinate display of power, intolerance of opposition, dehumanisation of citizens, among others.

The concept and practice of commandment is central to the systems operating in Africa and, along with other discourses and practices (largely the result of the European "civilising" mission), have a powerful effect on the ways that democracy is perceived and practised in Africa today. In other words, Africa has yet to move away from the colonial structure; in fact, it has demonstrated a lack of will to do so (Osaghae). Consequently, I would like to argue that the real problem of Africa is not that we have bad people in positions of political power; rather, it is that we have failed to critically examine and alter or modify the structure of governance, based on commandment structures and other colonial philosophies. This implies that should anyone of us – politician, musician, artist, athlete – find himself or herself in the position of power today, within the same commandment structure, he or she will hardly turn out a better leader, but would only become another home-grown colonialist, which is what I believe our political leaders are today, or are programmed to be. To be a leader in Africa is to become a product of that received structure of governance; it is, therefore, not so much about changing our mentality as it is about challenging and changing the received structure. The writer as a

public intellectual stands a good chance to perform this role of challenging the received structure.

3 African Literary Production and the "Extroverted" Narrative

I borrow the idea of extroversion from Eileen Julien who, in her article "The Extroverted African Novel" (2006), brilliantly argues and demonstrates the dependence of contemporary African writing (aesthetics, cultural narrative, canonicity) on, and its appeal to, Western aesthetics, patronage and authorisation. In Julien's words, extroversion is the "condition of being turned outwards to target a metropolitan audience" (681). Since Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), scholars of African studies within and outside the continent have expressed the worry, especially beginning from the late 1990s, that African literatures in European languages have increasingly turned towards Western literary capitals, drawn by alluring literary prizes, fantastic packages of conventional publishing (hard-currency book contract, publicity, impactful review, reading tour), and the fame that comes with them. Reasons, excuses abound in Africa for any writer, young or old, to turn to the West: the terrible decline in reading culture, the incredible death of conventional publishing (with the exception of South Africa), the perilous and precarious condition of life writers face, Africa's dictatorships' general neglect of the cultural sphere of life. But questions have to be asked, are being asked, concerning the extroversion of Africa's narratives and aesthetics. What values, we may ask, does extroversion add to Africa's literary heritage? How has the Western way of doing it "better" impacted on our aesthetics, productivity and cultural wealth? In what ways, let us wonder, do our Westernised, globalised and multicultural writers contribute to the Africa they have left behind, not the Africa they have imagined for themselves in Western capitals through emerging discourses such as Afropolitanism?

To attempt answering some of the questions above, let us reflect the fate of our extroverted narratives in the West. In moments of *angst* and Freudian slip, some African writers burst out with the anxieties of living and writing in the West, of contesting the protocols of satisfying Western taste, of having to circumvent their tales begging to be told. In a "Women Writers' Roundtable", published in *Research in African Literatures*, the Nigerian fiction writer Sefi Atta could not help blurting out:

> It is amazing to me how the publishing world here [in the West] encourages African women writers to speak out about the oppression that we

> face. They can't get enough of those stories and yet they refuse to hear what we have to say about their own racism and sexism [...]. I win a prize every time I have a protagonist who is some sort of a victim. That is the reality. I have stories of Nigerians in everyday situations that no one wants to publish. (Azuah et al. 110)

Atta's personal experience here illustrates what has become a culture of extroverting the African story, or of inventing Africa for the West, earlier described by the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina in "How to Write about Africa" (2006). Wainaina presents the narrative strategies and West-invented protocols for producing an extroverted narrative to satisfy the longing of an existing audience. Wainaina's pungent essay remains a formula that writers living in and having to publish in the West struggle to circumvent but end up unable to fulfil. For instance, Atta, like some of her contemporaries, has had a good package that comes with conventional publishing in Western literary capitals, and in spite of her rather serious complaint she still lives and writes in the West. How, then, can we say the extroverted narrative that Atta and others are compelled to tell, the tales that must keep them famous in the West, that would make them the best voices of African writing, is of any use to Africa?

At best, the extroverted narrative offers an avenue, a comfortable one (far from Africa's poor and hostile publishing terrain) for the West-based writers to anthropologise themselves, as Amaritsero Ede posits, by way of staging and magnifying their talents through what he calls "an extra-textual migrant identity politics that particular writers deploy as paratexts to hold up the credibility of their self-anthropologizing fictional creations, on the one hand, and to draw sympathy to their personal fortunes as exiles, on the other" (123). Ede explains this identity politics thus:

> Identity politics might take the form of a cultivated eccentricity, idiosyncrasy, and conscious self-positioning, or an assumed political persona sometimes anchored on, and couched in, pre-exilic and life-threatening real-political terms. Some writers insinuate or directly lay claim to outlandish and fantastic tales of persecution and endangerment by the postcolonial state, consequent on their "fleeing" into exile. (123)

The identity politics described is inevitably the reason for, and the result of (in terms of benefits), producing the extroverted narrative. It is the niche the writers negotiate for themselves to be relevant in the West by inventing an Africa for their ready-made audience in the global literary capitals, one that is necessarily different from the continent; the process of inventing that Africa, of

imagining it, has to be midwifed by the West through irresistible instruments. Therefore, in acts reminiscent of colonial moves, the best of African writers, young or old, are outside the continent (Adesanmi and Dunton vii-xii). At best, they 'divide their time' (this is one of the prettiest phrases of neoliberal migration) between the West and Africa, since they have to, in any way, constantly return home to fetch the raw materials needed for the extroverted narrative.

In a sense, then, the invention of Africa, in the manner V.Y. Mudimbe describes it, is still continuing, the difference between the colonial period and now being that the agents of invention are no longer outsiders but insiders who, in the colonial style, produce a narrative palatable to the West. Among what he calls the "genres of speeches" that contribute to "the invention of primitive Africa", Mudimbe mentions the "exotic text"; this text which "dominates in the seventeenth century" (69) is not different from its twenty-first century version which must continue to influence Western consciousness about Africa. In the present time, the exotica, or what Huggan calls "strategic exoticism" (32) and what Wainaiana so vividly describes, are often seen as a strategy of marketing that African writers based in Western literary capitals must key into in order to market their works "as cultural commodities [...] within an economy regulated largely by Western metropolitan demand" (Huggan 30). My contention is that this market strategy must not only be construed as responding to "Western metropolitan demand", the economy of demand and supply, or to the cultural logic of self-anthropologising identity politics (Ede); it must also be construed as a conscious or unconscious process of inventing Africa for a twenty-first century Western consciousness.

A literature produced under this market strategy, for the Western gaze, I would further contend, cannot usefully, fruitfully, represent poverty and precarity in Africa, because it only invents Africa's *other*; that is, it produces narratives or discourses that fail to capture the experiences of people in most nations of Africa, not because writers are incapable of capturing those experiences but because their narratives have been tailored to the taste of a particular audience. A young writer and blogger Siyanda Mohutsiwa, from Botswana, exclaims in her essay "I am Done with African Immigrant Literature" (2016) that she no longer recognises her Africa in African writing – the effect of the extroversion of the African story. "I found myself," she writes, "flinging my copy of *The Granta Book of the African* [*Short*] *Story* across the room, vowing to never read a piece of African Fiction again, or at least its 'Afropolitan' variety". Using as reference points Teju Cole's *Open City*, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Mohutsiwa laments the extroverting of the African story, and looks back with nostalgia to when she read stories written by Africans for Africans and about Africa. These stories, she says,

> were written for me. For three decades these books had been doing a very simple job: entertaining numerous ordinary Africans by telling exciting stories in environments we could imagine. They were not competing for the Man Booker Prize, and probably wouldn't make the cut for any contemporary short-story competition. But that's because they weren't written for the White gaze. They were not made to explain Africa to half-curious American housewives, or home-sick African students in UK. These books were written not for the purpose of lifting a mirror to the European psyche, nor did they need to tell yet another tale of the New York immigrant experience.

It is instructive that writers and audiences at home on the continent are expressing dissatisfaction with the extroverted narrative, as Mohutsiwa does here; and yet the tellers of the extroverted tales are said to be the best voices of African writing. Such judgements, it should be clear by now, are made in the West, served by the extroverted story. In the end, the extroverted African story and its privileged writers in the West will hardly make any impact on Africa's cultural development. The poverty and precarity the extroverted story depicts is sometimes aimed at satisfying the desire of the West, considering Wainaina's words in the epigraph to this article which suggest that depicting the starving people of Africa is to attract the "benevolence of the West". This is, however, not entirely the case as such depictions are also found in the works of writers based on the continent. The degree and the verisimilitude of such depictions, therefore, become crucial in differentiating what might be seen as Africa-facing depictions as against a West-feeding hyperreality. In other words, the positioning of aesthetic representation – the intentionality underlining the depictions – stands as an important parameter in determining a narrative useful to the development of the continent. The emphasis, I would like to stress, may not really be where a writer lives, whether on the continent or outside the continent (although living on the continent gives some advantage); it is rather on the aesthetic choices a writer makes concerning, among others, indigenous publishing, impactful narratives, audience focus, thematic focus, cultural rootedness, and positionality (contentious as these issues might be), building up to national consciousness as against diasporic consciousness.

4 Rethinking the Role of African Writers

I make these remarks about what I think the role of African writers should be in the present time, quite aware that a writer, African or not, is a free spirit,

a free agent. Whether or not writers are able to freely express themselves is another point, given, for instance, Atta's worry over what and how the West wants, compels, her to write (Azuah et al. 110). I am also aware that a writer is not forced to be committed to a cause, but we cannot deny the fact that to set an agenda of what to write for a writer is to implicitly coerce him or her to pursue a cause. It must be pointed out clearly that the writer has a will, an agency; no matter what, every writer, I would like to guess, views the act of writing as an act of enunciation – the intentionality of enunciation could have far-reaching consequences.

African writers, however, have to give a deep thought to the question of exile and migration. Globalisation and neo-liberalism – the complication of notions of home and belonging – have opened up more opportunities for writers and intellectuals across the world. But conscientious African writers may have to pause, give it a good thought, take some precaution, before thrusting themselves upon the vast opportunities the global community appears to offer. On the surface, it is advertised that one is free to live and work anywhere in the world. But that is, of course, not really the case in the sense that laws from different nations show the attitudes of such nations towards migration. To live and work in any nation, for instance, implies subjecting oneself to the social, cultural, political, economic structures of that nation, a situation that will definitely compel one to reconsider his or her idea of freedom, that may even lead to temporarily suspending one's freedom. Given this fact, migration or exile, in my view, becomes meaningful only when one is faced with threat to one's life at home or anywhere at all. I am talking about the kind of threat that compelled apartheid South African writers like Dennis Brutus and Eastern African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Micere Mugo and Jack Mapanje to go into exile. Indeed, it is in apartheid South Africa that you find writers with the kind of ethics to give artistic expression to the predicament of their society, mostly from inside; and if they had to go into exile they did so to save their lives. This, however, is certainly not the case with most African writers, intellectuals and thinkers today. The epigraph to this article from Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* captures the impulse of migration in the present time whereby a writer stages himself or herself as an endangered person (even when the danger is really not there) and seeks the comfort of the West. While governments in Africa have incredible records of human rights violation and perceived hostility towards the intelligentsia, migration seems to me the thing in vogue, whereby a person develops himself or herself as a writer, an intellectual, and fervently seeks means of going to the West. The question is: must all winners of the Caine Prize for African Writing eventually end up in the West?

As a way of being conscious of their roles, African writers may therefore reconsider the notion of exile, of migration. Africa bleeds when her writers and intellectuals migrate out of the continent. A writer's commitment, whether in Africa or any continent, is not to the arts alone; he or she may have a commitment to his or her land, to his or her immediate society. He or she may have a deep sense of place – a rootedness not as a dogma but as a crucial element in the chemistry of his or her arts. I am not demanding of a writer to be overly nationalistic. My thinking is that the writer need not turn his or her back on Africa where the political class creates and uses poverty and diseases as weapons of mass destruction. The example of the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah is important here. He left the US in the 1980s, having completed his MFA studies and rejected lucrative job offers, and came to Africa, his mindset being that Africa needed his services more than the US needed them. Although he was unable to settle in Ghana or Nigeria where he wanted, and although he has encountered great difficulties in living and writing in Africa, he has been making his modest contribution to the continent. I am a product of the nine-month Per Sesh Writing Workshop which he ran between 2007 and 2009, sponsored by TrustAfrica – a workshop that exposed aspiring writers to fiction writing skills, with a mentoring segment that saw Armah giving very close attention to the younger writers' works. That the novel I wrote under his mentorship, *Sterile Sky*, has received critical acclaim is a credit to Armah's contribution to the development of African culture. The need to return home from abroad to make a contribution to the continent is also captured in Doreen Baingana's collection of short stories *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe* (2005). In the last story, "Questions of Home", Christine, fed up with life in the US, returns home with the resolve that no matter how undeveloped, how hostile, home is, she will stay and render her services: "She would have to learn all over again how to live in this new old place called home" (156).

Hard as it may look, I believe that the task of dismantling the colonial structures of commandment, what I see as a colonial legacy, operating in Africa, reproducing dictatorships even in civilian garbs, is that of writers and intellectuals. In a world driven by knowledge economy, struggles for freedom and good life must have a firm epistemological base whereby indigenous knowledge production should be pivotal to growth and development in Africa. The best way African writers can engage the continent, therefore, is to deploy their creative thoughts towards deconstructing the structures, systems, narratives and discourses inherited from colonialism, which the political class has continued to use to under-develop the continent. For literary writers, this task takes the shape of aesthetic representation in which themes, focalisations and positionalities are not only presented as counter-discourses to Western discourses, but

also as self-interrogative discourses whereby writers confront the problems of their societies without pandering to the West. African writers need to question received and conveniently domesticated categories such as, e.g., the systems of governance, bureaucracy, education and healthcare. They must expose, for instance, the motive underlying the political elite's attitude towards public education in Africa, an educational system deliberately underfunded so that it fails to produce intellectual minds that will compete for space with children of politicians sent to schools abroad. African writers must take their task further by contributing to the creation of a pragmatic Afrocentric epistemology – a new knowledge system responsive to the peculiarities of the continent, on which to build a future. For instance, a system based on indigenous knowledge will question the wholesale adoption of the US-type democracy in Nigeria which has, rather than tackle poverty, helped to deepen precarious situations of poverty.

African writers also have to go practical, depending on individual temperament, by way of engaging in extra-literary activities that will not quite be injurious to their writings – social activities that will project their voices in defence of humanity. This engagement could be in the form of pressure group, NGO, or other spheres of the civil society. I am talking about the kind of extra-literary activities, some of them subterranean, that some South African writers had engaged in during the apartheid period as efforts to dismantle the structures and discourses of subjugation, injustice and violence. In Nigeria, the military oppression of the 1980s and 1990s did not only inspire an efflorescence of writing, in diverse genres, that constituted an anti-military discourse, it also provoked writers into the streets in persistent anti-military demonstrations, some of them going underground, some of them ending in detention, some of them, notably Soyinka (and the contradictions in his US green card saga must be understood against this background), going into exile to establish powerful formations against the dictatorship at home.

The example of the Ghanaian undercover journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas is crucial here. His exploits in investigative journalism, in spite of the 'perilous' atmosphere in which he finds himself, have yielded positive results in the direction of revolutionary change. I give just one example. In 2015 Anas went undercover to investigate and expose the huge corruption characterising the Ghanaian Judiciary. He disguised himself as a client and caught about 34 judges and magistrates, most of them respected in the system, in hidden camera taking bribes, in cash and in kinds, to influence court cases. His report and the premiere of his film, *Ghana in the Eyes of God* (2015), based on the report, in front of a large audience of 6500 people caused a serious shake-up in the judiciary system. Anas has carried out dozens of such investigative works including

"Nigeria's Baby Farmers", "Nigeria's Fake Doctors", "Ghana's Sex Mafia", "How to Rob Africa". I believe this kind of effort, which a writer could choose to take as an extra-literary engagement, beyond organising writers' events, could – in the long run – cause the desired change in Africa. Group efforts based on the continent such as the Kenyan Kwani Trust (a literary network that runs the magazine *Kwani?*), the Ugandan FEMRITE (Uganda Women Writers Association), the Nigerian ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors), and the continental PAWA (Pan-African Writers Association), may consider greater engagement in the public or political space in order to influence governments and organisations to spend more money on the development of arts and culture. Arts and culture endowments by governments and multinational corporations are crucial to efforts made to turn around the fate of Africa's publishing and indigenous knowledge productions.

5 Conclusion

To say that there is poverty and precarity in Africa is, in my view, an understatement. I am also of the view that to fully represent Africa's condition, in this regard, African writers must pragmatically and fruitfully engage Africa from within, not from outside. While the rhetoric of neoliberal globalisation suggests that it does not matter where one lives and works, I firmly believe that African writers – given, in spite of, the slow development of the continent – should consider living, working and writing at home on the continent. I do not find tenable the argument that the shortcomings of the continent are so injurious to writers that they have to escape to the West to write, rather than confront the shortcomings. In point of fact, there are emerging writers who had demonstrated great promise in their countries only to escape to the West and who fail to realise their dreams. Olu Oguibe's tribute to Esiaba Irobi, aptly titled "Esiaba Irobi: The Tragedy of Exile", tells how the West kills the literary talent of the prodigiously gifted dramatist. Living and writing in the poverty and precarity of Africa will keep writers alert to the problems of their society, inspire them to seek new ethics and aesthetics of representing the African condition, compel them to imagine solutions, no matter how hard, and to physically get involved by joining existing forums for change, or creating their own forums as writers and public intellectuals. Furthermore, the need – made more urgent by the realities of globalisation – for Africa to continue to evolve its aesthetics or domesticate borrowed aesthetics, to take control of its literature by way of drawing canonical protocols from within, not from outside, requires that the best of African writers be based on the continent. Let me make the

point, by way of concluding, that literary capitals in Europe, the US and elsewhere to which African writers are attracted must have evolved as the heritage of the contributions of writers, intellectuals and patrons of literature of such nations – indeed writers who probably suffered hostility and persecution in their homes. African nations will only be able to produce literary capitals when African writers, rather than seeking the comfort of writing abroad, remain on the continent and work with other stakeholders such as publishers, distributors, and educational institutions to push through the difficulties and contribute to the development of the continent.

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PART 4

Environmental Precarity

CHAPTER 10

Sovereignty at the Margins

The Oceanic Future of the Subaltern

Malcolm Sen

> Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, tornadoes, volcanoes – they all have a visceral, page-turning potency that tales of slow violence cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss because of ravaged habitats may all be cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations. (Nixon, "Slow Violence")

It is early January in 2018 and the weather forecast for the next few days in the Sundarban islands seems reasonable enough: an average of 22 degrees Celsius, 0% probability of rain or thunderstorms, hazy sunshine during the day.[1] The Indian subcontinent, a mere hundred kilometers to the west of these islands, has had one of its hottest winters in recent memory, and temperatures are not any cooler in the Sundarbans.[2] But that anomaly does not even begin to compare with the long-term forecast for these islands. By all accounts this region of the world, home to nearly 5 million people, will become hotter, and much, much harsher for human settlement in the coming decades. Given the fact that almost all climate change indicators are occurring faster than predicted, perhaps the future of these islands will also arrive sooner than anticipated

1 Throughout this article the word "Sundarbans" is used to reflect the original Bengali sense that incorporates the plurality of islands in the archipelago even when used in the singular. When the word "Sundarban" (in the singular) is used it is followed by the word "islands" in keeping with the grammatical rules of the English language.

2 There are numerous articles that proclaimed 2017 as the hottest year on record for the subcontinent. For an example, cf.: "India Saw Its Hottest Winter in History in 2017."

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(Samanta et al. 195–213). The oxymoronic nature of climate change predictions ensures that the archipelago will be simultaneously hotter and significantly wetter in the future. The vital waters of a tropical rain, however, will be complemented by the briny wetness of rising oceans: this is the kind of dampness that annihilates people, villages and cultures, and engulfs entire islands.

None of this is news. The obituary for the Sundarban islands and its communities has been written many times over: both in academic journals and in popular newsprint. The reason why I wish to focus on this location is not to reiterate that which has already been predicted and that which is already showing signs of arrival. The Sundarbans and the location of the Bay of Bengal on which these tidal islands are buoyed up, help us articulate questions that display the architecture of a new "climate leviathan"; that is, they show us that we are witnessing an era in which a new social contract of statecraft and sovereignty, modulated by the pressures of climate change, is evolving (Mann and Wainwright). This leviathan is demonstrably oceanic; its subjects are more often than not stateless refugees. While I turn to this area of the world for its singular importance in mapping the oceanic futures of the subaltern, I am also aware these islands and the wider frame of the Bay of Bengal also become synecdochal signifiers of precarity on a planetary scale.

The Bay of Bengal is an astonishing location and not only because nearly one in four people on this planet at this present moment live in countries surrounding it (Amrith, "The Bay").[3] This is not surprising given the strategic place occupied by the bay historically, which allowed traders and colonists maritime access to the Malay Peninsula, to China, and to other South Asian countries, making it the site of the rise of both ancient and modern empires. Iconic colonial commodities on which modern capitalism built its foundation, such as tea, coffee, rubber, and opium, were traded along its shores. In this network the Sundarbans occupies a complex and heterogenous identity: it is a biodiverse ecosystem of mangrove forests, a conservation zone of keystone species such as the Bengal Tiger, a carceral space of British colonialism, a sanctuary zone for refugees from India and Bangladesh, and a geographic location in which the effects of anthropogenic climate change are increasingly and alarmingly visible. According to legend, the Sundarbans are considered to have been inhabited for thousands of years, but they were properly settled from the nineteenth century by tribal populations such as Adivasis and landless laborers from the subcontinent at the behest of the British colonial government. Since the late

3 Also cf., for a comprehensive analysis, Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*.

twentieth century it has been a place marked by both political and ecological violence: refugees and dislocated populations from both India and Bangladesh have found themselves targeted by the Indian government in these islands, a subject on which much has been written, and the islands have also borne the brunt of sea level rise in the Bay.[4] The Sundarbans, therefore, is a place where the outcasts of colonial society and the surplus populations of statist politics have been jettisoned: these subaltern subjects traverse a thin line separating migrancy from criminality, and the human from the sub-human. The effect of vanishing islands, which result in the loss of both sanctuary and political agency for deterritorialized communities (which I elaborate upon below), needs to be understood within this longer historical trajectory.

1 The Oceanic Turn

The invasion of the local at a time of climate change is of a different magnitude from the fast-paced intrusion we associate with globalized neoliberal capital. The difference does not discount the fact that anthropogenic climate change is intricately braided to capitalism but it does speak to the ecological nature of the invasion. The pace of coastline erosion and sea level rise may not match the velocity of capital but it gives way to a new sense of a shared planetary future: as we bid what Peter Wadhams calls *A Farewell to Ice* (2017) in the Arctic, we confront that ice melt as surging waves in the tropics. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has argued that sea level rise "is perhaps the most powerful sign of planetary change, connecting the activity of the earth's poles with the rest of the terrestrial world and producing a new sense of planetary scale and interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean" ("Submarine Futures" 34). DeLoughrey traces an intellectual trajectory for what she terms the "oceanic turn of the twentieth century" that developed from "geopolitics as well as new interdisciplinary groupings in the humanities and social sciences" (32). The interlinked historical markers in this genealogy are as follows: the Truman Proclamation that extended US territory to include a two-hundred nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone, the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea that re-mapped 70% of the planet, and the rise of "space" as an area of critical interest since the 1970s (32). The critical transition towards the oceanic, DeLoughrey goes on to state, is an "important shift from a long-term concern with mobility

4 I have written elsewhere about the developmental politics that endanger the lives of both human and non-human inhabitants of the Sundarban islands (Sen 365–77). For an overview of the West Bengal State's response to Bangladeshi refugees, cf. Mallick 104–25.

across transoceanic surfaces to theorizing oceanic submersion, thus rendering vast oceanic space into ontological place" (32). In historical terms the critical theme of "oceanic submersion" bears the weight of the drowned bodies of the Middle Passage, or those of the coffin ships of post-Famine Ireland, and other enforced drownings that together make up the anthropology of the ocean. The contemporary emergence of the critical theme of oceanic inundation is written in the shadow of such drownings: oceanographical predictions of sea-level rise and political realities of the refugee crisis (a recent example of concerns with "mobility across transoceanic surfaces") conjoin to form a discourse that allows us to bear testament to the drowned bodies of climate refugees that silt up the theme of "oceanic submersion".

It is such a scenario that I trace below in the context of the Sundarbans and the Bay of Bengal. The reasons for this are straightforward: on the one hand the Sundarbans provoke us to negotiate the emergence of a new form of sovereignty determined by the oceanic, and on the other, their location addresses an omission in the geographical contexts predominant in the environmental humanities. The engagement of the environmental humanities with this region of the world has been significantly less than the attention that the Pacific and the Caribbean islands have received.[5] If the "history and geography of the Caribbean suggest a tidalectic engagement with land and sea and their associated narratives of empire, transoceanic diaspora, and postcolonial nation-building" (DeLoughrey, *Routes* 51), then the site of the Sundarbans calls for a similar commitment. This is especially urgent as climate chaos unfolds in the Bay of Bengal region.

What Amitav Ghosh calls "the tide country" in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (8), the Sundarbans (or "beautiful forests" in Bengali) is a massive archipelago of islands buoyed up by the fine balance between the saline waters of the Bay and the muddy waters of subcontinental rivers. The total area of the Sundarbans, including waterways, forests and cultivated islands, is close to forty thousand square kilometers. The total land area of the part of the Sundarbans that falls within the jurisdiction of the Indian state of West

5 The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs categorizes some 57 states and territories as small islands developing states or SIDS. These SIDS are located across the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans, and the Caribbean Sea. However, the United Nations never established criteria to determine SIDS. It also does not provide an official list of islands under this category. An unofficial list is found here: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *UNCTAD's Unofficial List of SIDS*, unctad.org/en/pages/aldc/Small%20 Island%20Developing%20States/UNCTAD′s-unofficial-list-of-SIDS.aspx.

Bengal is nine thousand six hundred and thirty square kilometers (Jalais, *Forest* 2).[6] Many of these islands are covered by mangrove forests, which are the largest of such forests in the world. Geographically, these islands lie on the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers that converge on the Bay of Bengal. Politically, these islands constitute the southern ends of West Bengal and of Bangladesh. Ecologically, the Sundarbans are of great biodiversity value to both regional and planetary ecologies. Deemed a World Heritage site in 1987, the UNESCO website describes the Sundarbans in this way:

> The site is intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests, and presents an excellent example of ongoing ecological processes. The area is known for its wide range of fauna, including 260 bird species, the Bengal tiger and other threatened species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Indian python.

Most of the website's narrative concentrates on the importance of ecological niches and sanctuaries whose residents, it is made to seem, are singularly non-human. Such a rhetoric displays the dominant neoliberal discourse of sustainability and conservation of "nature", which although attached to environmental questions glosses over lived human experience and socio-cultural productions of "nature".[7] Ghosh's narrative poignantly evokes the moral and ethical dilemmas that arise from such a conservationist ethic and has been the focus of a number of critical articles on the postcolonial and ecocritical aspects provoked by the Sundarbans.[8] These islands are of exceptional biodiversity value but they are also inhabited by approximately five million people. Interestingly, the UNESCO site barely mentions the human inhabitants of these islands, a fact that mirrors books written about these islands by white, colonial chroniclers,

6 Jalais' comprehensive account clarifies that what is often called the Sundarbans forest "refers to the un-inhabited islands to the south that constitute the southern end of the Sundarbans region. There are two kinds of inhabited islands: those closer to the mainland, which were deforested and cultivated largely between 1765 and 1900, and those on the fringe of the mangrove forest, reclaimed between 1900 and 1980" (*Forest* 2).

7 The argument here is, of course, that "nature" itself is a creation of a particular worldview that has dominated western discourse, at least since the Enlightenment. For a materialist critique of the "death of nature", a phrase that has gained much traction in recent years, cf. Moore.

8 Cf., for example, Mukherjee 144–57.

such as W.W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Bengal* published in 1875. Eliding any mention of the human population of the Sundarbans from official narratives seems to follow a well-established pattern that we can trace to books such as Hunter's: "fascination with the natural aspects of the Sundarbans but an unsettling silence on the social and human facets of the region" (Jalais, *Forest* 5). When the UNESCO site does briefly mention the human inhabitants of the Sundarbans, the precarity underlying the everyday lives of the islanders is not simply muted but, rather, the Sundarbans is hailed as a location which fosters refuge from natural disasters:

> The Sundarbans provides sustainable livelihoods for millions of people in the vicinity of the (World Heritage) site and acts as a shelter belt to protect the people from storms, cyclones, tidal surges, sea water seepage and intrusion. The area provides livelihood in certain seasons for large numbers of people living in small villages surrounding the property, working variously as wood-cutters, fishermen, honey gatherers, leaves and grass gatherers.

The rhetoric of refuge and sustainability employed in such a narrative distorts the levels of socio-economic and environmental vulnerability that the islanders confront on a daily basis. For example, Ghoramara, one of the fertile islands of the Sundarbans delta, is very close to being entirely engulfed by the rising sea. Over the last twenty-five years the island has shrunk rapidly: from a hundred and twenty square kilometers to only five square kilometers. Some oceanographers believe that the entire island will disappear into the surrounding river by 2025 (Mitra). Apart from the overtly environmental aspect of disappearing islands what is noteworthy in such cases is the political implications for citizenship; that is, a drastic reduction in the democratic rights of islanders to exercise political agency. In 2016, during the Legislative Assembly Elections in West Bengal, *The Economic Times* ominously reported that the remaining islanders in Ghoramara may have cast their final vote from their home constituency (Mitra). For the last few years, the inhabitants of this vanishing island have been fleeing further inland, rebuilding their washed away huts in the wake of tropical storms and cyclones, with the knowledge that fiercer storms, stronger winds, and larger waves beckon from the future. It is clear that for the inhabitants of these islands, some of the first climate change refugees in the world, displacement and deterritorialization are not mapped theoretically, in an academic fashion, but existentially, as lived experience.

2 The Muddy Texture of Precarity

An ever-evolving threat of inundation interjects the visual economy of Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, which otherwise often traverses tropes of romantic sublimity. The Sundarban islands are described as "the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the ãchol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea," in the novel, but this romantic image is at odds with the muddy texture of precarity which encompasses the cartography of these islands: "the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable" (6–7). How else do we theorize oceanic submersion in such cases but by highlighting the unpredictability of refuge and the precarity of dwelling places; that is, refuge only as a process of repeated re-buildings, refuge as always under erasure, and refuge forever foreshadowed by future deterritorialization leading to an eventual extinction of habitability. Survivor testimonies, such as Rabiul Saha's description of re-building his hut below, demonstrate that this register of dwelling enmeshes both the home and the nation:

> Those who have money can cross the sea. Those who don't, wait like us to get drowned. Even if we get to the mainland, we remain refugees with no homes, no identity and no community. We are simply losing the battle [...]. We shift inward but nothing can hold the fury of the river. (quoted in Azim)

The fragility of the ecosystem of the Sundarbans, it seems, is matched in equal measure to the fragile biological and political lives of its inhabitants. Such entanglements speak to the uncanny nature of dwelling in the frontline of climate change; deterritorialization of this magnitude challenges all notions of home, homeliness and rootedness that culminate in the cruel logic of building and re-building mud huts on a disappearing island that is itself constituted of disintegrating mud. Thus, the Sundarbans simultaneously demonstrate the biopolitical dimensions of habitat loss and provoke us to think of the materiality that constitutes precarity. The mud itself is, of course, the silt of the rivers and the detritus of the ocean that promises only momentary solidity before being washed away to the sea. If "the sea dissolves phenomenological experience and diffracts the accumulation of narrative," the muddiness of the Sundarbans frames the liminality underwriting contemporary precarity (DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures" 33). The critical task here is to resuscitate these dissolved narratives and conceptually reframe the conditions of displacement and deterritorialization that form the language of refuge.

We cannot begin to approach this theorization without acknowledging the crucial temporal aspects of a discourse haunted by a dissipating spatiality. In a manner similar to the Caribbean islands, where "submarine temporality" distorts linear models of time, the future of the Sundarbans seems to have already arrived (33). "Time Runs Out for Islanders on Global Warming's Front Line", *The Guardian* newspaper reported in 2018 (McDougall). However, Zadie Smith reminded us recently that "[t]ime travel is a discretionary art: a pleasure trip for some and a horror story for others". The inhabitation of futurity means that the subaltern, or "the precariat" (to use Simon During's term), is propelled towards extinction at a speed faster than predicted and in ways more gruesome than anticipated.[9] Just as the linear trajectory of temporality is skewed under conditions of the oceanic, so too is the spatiality of islands that are in the process of being submerged into a river and then diluted further in the marine waters of an adjoining sea. These disappearing islands, a viscous version of the vanishing glaciers in the northern hemisphere, ask us to draw, erase and re-draw the map of the world. A unique, terrifying dance of melting ice and disintegrating earth regulates our temporary cartographical exercises. The resulting muddiness, the framing device of island precarity, is politically animated so that the "material phenomenon" of mud, its "viscous agglomeration of finely dispersed grains of soil, silt, and clay suspended within a relatively small amount of water" (Klingan et al. 25) account for much more than a sublime metaphor of interstitiality as such. This mud is an apt signifier of a new amorphous sovereignty, the climate leviathan, which enacts borders that are in perpetual flux and which renegotiates territory with the turning of tides:

> Mud does not possess any particular structure nor are its limits and borders clearly distinguishable; it consists mainly of textures, surfaces, and thickness. It is a highly amorphous medium of distribution, a turbidity current sprawling out, blurring boundaries, defying cartographies, always there to mold new, temporary surfaces, geomorphologies, and strata. (25)

9 During's term acknowledges that socioeconomic insecurity and poverty often go hand-in-hand with statelessness but it also "denotes an anthropological or existential condition, one for which human beings are constitutionally unable to fully ground themselves in the world and for that reason are open both to anxiety and to openness and risk." This elaboration appears problematic to me and my reference to the term "precariat" above is made in the spirit of engagement with During's attempt to expand upon Gayatri Spivak's complex and erudite construction of the "subaltern". Cf. During 57.

Such an elaboration on the nature of mud helps us conceptualize the geographical and political peripherality of the Sundarban islands, the viscous material that forms them, and the architectural substance used to build huts on those islands. The muddy register of precarity in the Bay of Bengal makes certain that home, like its surrounding landscape, remains un-fixed now and appears illusory in the future. Islanders like Saha live at the margins, not simply of geopolitics and economic globalization, or between land and ocean, but between being considered citizens of a nation-state to being stateless climate change refugees. The sea awaits the turbid molecules of disintegrating islands and islander bodies: from the Maldives to Kiribati, from Palau to the Sundarbans, and many more. These islanders point us to revise our academic notions of marginality along coastal, as well as socio-cultural and political, lines. Everyday lives at the hinterlands of capital and the nation-state should similarly point us to revise our understanding of sovereignty on which the modern geopolitical framework of states revolve. The porosity of these islands maps, in an astonishingly new way, what Saskia Sassen once determined to be holes in the fabrics of sovereignty.[10] What Sassen was interested in was the movement of international finance that made some cities appear as global entities. The oceanic register of rising sea levels, as I have already mentioned, calls for a different kind of global, or planetary, vision. As I narrativize the existential questions which underwrite precarity and oceanic submersion in an era of rapid climate change, I want to propose that in this contemporary moment the resilience of the Indian state, as the bearer of sovereignty, depends inversely on the level of precarity that islanders like Saha face. Just as climate change refugees around the world test the limits of international law for recognition, similarly, vanishing islands, and drowning citizenry, question the nature of sovereignty at this time.[11]

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10 Sassen makes this claim especially in relation to the concept of the "global city" (115–32). Reflecting on international finance capital and the place of the global city within that framework, Sassen states: "[W]hen the global gets made inside the national, one effect is to create structural holes in the tissue, the fabric of the national: these become spaces that exit the construction of territory we call sovereign national territory, a complex category that contains within it logics of power but also the right to make claims on your government. In a way, the global city is a new type of assemblage of bits of national territory, authority, and rights which partly can be seen as a structural hole in the national territorial tissue. The space of the global city is neither fully national nor fully global" (129).

11 For more information on the legal frameworks that determine the refugee status of climate change victims, see the European Parliament's policy responses: European Parliament, Directorate-General for International Policies, Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs. *'Climate Refugees': Legal and Policy Responses to Environmentally*

3 Sovereignty at the Margins

The margin is where constructed theoretical frames crumble. The subaltern issues forth a host of intersectional concerns that parade entanglements, hybridization and fluidity, muddying the waters of a fetishistic postcoloniality, and demonstrating the paucity of our critical vocabularies. Re-imagining the subaltern by identifying the precarity of coastal lives at a time of climate chaos especially addresses such non-conformism and allows us access to a language that demonstrates the folding of the political, socio-economic and cultural within the ecological. These lives, it would seem, are marked by their disposability and their depoliticization; the subaltern body is the site on which the sovereignty of the state and the climate leviathan inscribes its violent characteristics. The "ecological and human disposability" (Nixon, *Slow Violence* 4) underwriting the Sundarbans today therefore needs to be viewed historically; their contemporary precarity is the result of socio-cultural and political factors that work in tandem with the natural vulnerability of tidal islands in the Bay of Bengal. Villagers in the Sundarbans are threatened both by the regressive and repressive politics of the state and the rising waters of the Bay. Often, state violence is marked by a politics of environmentalism itself so that the subaltern becomes the collateral excess of business-as-usual neoliberal postcolonial politics (as in the case of the West Bengal government's strategic deployment of conservationist rhetoric in the Sundarbans even as it paved the way for a multi-billion rupee tourism project in 2002) (Jalais, "Heritage Site" 335).

As has been well documented, the archipelago became synonymous with the conservation politics of a strident, postcolonial India, the iconic mascot of which was the Bengal Tiger. Under the scheme called "Project Tiger" (launched in 1973) the Sundarbans, large parts of which were already categorized as "Reserve Forests" under the Forest Act of 1875, became internationally recognized as a conservation site for the Bengal Tiger that is still under threat of extinction. The resultant politics produces a careless disparity between the public spending allocated for "environmental" reasons and that which is allocated for the islands inhabited by human communities in the delta. The proximity between the human and the tiger populations has resulted in a number of tiger attacks on islanders. Similarly, human encroachment on land has also stressed tiger habitats. These issues give rise to exceptional ethical and political

Induced Migration. European Parliament, 2011, www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2011/462422/IPOL-LIBE_ET%282011%29462422_EN.pdf.

questions because here we face the threat of extinction of a non-human species and the dying-off of a whole people and culture. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* poignantly raises this human-tiger dynamic in the Sundarbans as a confounding question that severely tests our moral and ethical frameworks of environmentalism. But, for the islanders, it is clear that the Indian government is more interested in saving the tiger than the human. As one islander pointedly remarked: "Tigers seem to have become more important than us people now" (qtd in Jalais, *Forest* 13). It seems ironic that such a place is repeatedly identified in global forums as a space that conserves, fosters and offers refuge, even when its human inhabitants are marked as disposable property in the environmental rhetoric of a predatory neoliberal order. What is also striking in this instance is the fact that apart from sinking islands the demonstration of marginality's entanglements is encoded in the islanders' everyday lived experiences: for example, fishermen in the Sundarbans ritually dramatize the threat of man-eating tigers by dressing in tiger costumes in indigenous theatrical productions of the Bonbibi myth; honey-gatherers in these islands wear human masks at the back of their heads to ward off predators that might attack them from behind. The ritual of replaying the mythographical origins of inhabitation in the Sundarbans – the myth of Bonbibi – and the scant protection offered by human masks worn at the back of the head, reveal another form of precarity for those that inhabit the margins of the postcolonial.[12]

The subaltern especially complicates the rhetoric that attempts to separate environmental politics from the political as such. There is little that is clean and beautiful about decomposing huts, drowning islands, disenfranchised, dislocated and threatened bodies. The rhetoric of environmental conservation, which solely focuses on the non-human, the biotic and the aquatic, cannot accommodate such corporealities without difficulty. The viscosity of submerging islands blurs the boundaries between land and water, home and homelessness, just as the proximity of the human and the non-human transgresses established speciesist narratives on which our theories of political modernity have been founded. To live in the Sundarbans is to be constantly in the throes of a condition of emergency; to bear witness to "the definitive erasure of the limit between the political subject and the living subject" (Malabou). It is this trespass of the political into the bodily that speaks uniquely to the condition of sovereignty of the human subject within the violent and extractive ethos of neoliberal postcolonial politics and the experience of politico-ecological

12 The Bonbibi myth is a fascinating commentary on the religious, cultural and species entanglements in the Sundarbans; for a brief overview, cf. Shapiro.

violence by a citizenry that may carry national affiliations but are increasingly stateless. The erasure of the biological from the political, enshrined in Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, is at odds with the political theories on which nation-states are constructed, that is, the frameworks which glamorize borders, abhor porosity, delegitimize free movement and fetishize foreignness. When it comes to nation-states trespassers have to be wary: walls – whether rhetorical or material – if constructed need to be surmounted, checkpoints evaded, oceans and other geographical frontiers crossed at great peril. There is little that is *natural* about the construct of the nation-state, no matter how normative it appears in the long arc of pre-history to modernity. The nation-state model has been, on the other hand, *naturalized* through the peculiar discursivity that distinguishes humanity's 'state of culture' from an earlier 'state of nature', as in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or as has figured in the era of decolonization. The nation-state, of course, has centered around an understanding of sovereignty which is at odds with the porous nature of boundaries and the fundamentally muddy construction of the margin. Where do we situate the vulnerable, deterritorialized and apparently disposable bodies of such islanders in this political formation?

In popular discourse the islanders are labelled as victims of 'natural disasters', falling prey to the rising waters of the Bay, confronting the growing turbulence of super cyclones that carry the precipitation of a warming sea, and encountering the animal instincts of the Bengal Tiger. The disenfranchisement that follows deterritorializations in the Bay couples the epistemic violence of rhetorical constructions such as 'natural disaster'. It is, of course, tempting to see hurricanes and cyclones, floods and desertification, and sinking islands, as 'Acts of God', beyond human causality. However, the common appellation 'natural disaster' is a contemporary deployment of a premodern fear, namely humanity's "primal struggle […] with environmental forces" that appear to be beyond human intervention: "In the (unwittingly) animated universe of the modern world, 'natural disaster' continues to manifest Nature's displeasure with humanity – or worse, her indifference" (Wald 148).

Such conceptions are at odds with the agency-laden charge of the disposability of subaltern lives. The Sundarbans asks us to re-imagine 'natural disaster' as an after-effect of human history: how else can we ethically read contemporary storm surges, sea level rise and altered landscapes? Just like nature is a cultural construction, natural disasters, especially in the contemporary scenario of climate chaos, have more to do with human history than initially appears comprehensible. Contemporary catastrophes that result from weather-related phenomena are more likely to be the localized effects of long-term anthropogenic climate change produced by heightened carbon dioxide emissions. Such

disasters are therefore the result of socio-political and economic factors which consolidated the capitalist mode of interminable consumption and growth as the de facto template of geopolitical functioning. While the global North bears a significantly larger share of responsibility in this regard, what is also paramount in this equation is that what translates as a disaster in the global South due to socio-economic and infrastructural incapacities may be nothing more than a major inconvenience in the global North. The effects of climate change, and indeed of 'natural disasters', are therefore the modern manifestation of a longer arc of geopolitical discrepancies and the great inequalities built into the global context of climate change.

Anthony Carrigan's call to "treat postcolonial studies as a form of disaster studies and vice versa" (117) seems especially relevant in this regard. In such a scenario we not only have the old enemies of capital and empire but also the complex interplay between historical victimhood, ascendant neoliberalization and hyper-nationalist agendas of postcolonial states like India. Carrigan notes that "[t]he technocratic language of 'solutions' is rife in disaster studies, and is often complicit with the exclusionary approaches to recovery and with retrenchment of the very processes that exacerbate pre-disaster vulnerability through structural ignorance" (133). The West Bengal State government's response to sinking islands like Ghoramara in the Sundarbans displays such "exclusionary" tactics and stop-gap "solutions" that unfortunately replicate the Indian State's extremely poor record of refugee resettlement in the area.

We can further historicize the oceanic imaginaries called upon to conceptualize the coastal, interstitial lives of the subaltern. Islands and oceanic spaces have often challenged the territorial fetish of colonial conceptualizations of sovereignty. As Sugata Bose contends in the context of the Indian Ocean: "The new concepts of sovereignty in the wake of colonial and paracolonial dominations in the Indian Ocean arena were matched by some novel departures in the definitions of frontiers. It is not that precolonial states did not possess notions of territorial boundaries. But frontiers between states were more often than not nebulous zones not amenable to sharp demarcation" (55). Bose argues that the colonial state's attempt to import the idea of "unitary sovereignty" had to face up to the "layered and shared sovereignty" that defined the polities around the Indian Ocean (43). The ultimate outcome of this confrontation between a Hobbesian version of sovereignty and the lived politics of the Indian Ocean rim was to provoke a "sea change in the [notion of] sovereignty" (71). What Bose calls the "territorial obsession of a modernising state" or the "cartographic anxiety" of sovereignty is decidedly undercut by the nebulous porosity of oceanic boundaries and oceanic imaginaries (55–56). The interregionality highlighted by such spaces ironically speaks to the liminality of the subaltern in

both geographical and political forms. It seems clear that just like the older version of sovereignty drew its lineage from Thomas Hobbes's own volatile historical period (the *Leviathan* was the author's attempt to restore some order to a chaotic English political order), another treatise needs to be written to address the unique challenges of political dominion brought about by disintegrating islands that were once a part of the body politic.

One way to address the classical concept of sovereignty during climate collapse is to think of it as a juridical and territorial problem: sovereignty's close ties to the idea of territory and its inhabitants may need to be re-imagined. In this new configuration, deterritorialized subjects would naturally cease to be under the rule of law but would also automatically become stateless refugees. However, one imagines that the drowning poor of the Sundarbans islands, or the Maldives, would seek rehabilitation elsewhere. The denial or miscarriage of such rehabilitation would ultimately assert that sovereignty, as embodied by the nation-state, is nothing other than the power to mark certain bodies for life and others for death. This is exactly the case in relation to India and the Sundarbans, a space which has, since the independence of India, been marked by a history of enforced migration and destitution. Sovereignty was, and is, "the law's authority to determine life and death" (Hensley 12); it is power writ large. But what changes is that rather than firm territory it is the nebulous liminality of disintegrating earth and deterritorialized subjectivities that now determines this authority. To imagine the bodies on which the power of sovereignty is marked is to now consider not the imagined communities of nation-states but, to use Robert Nixon's memorable phrase, to focus on the "unimagined communities" that lie outside the fold of territorial politics ("Communities" 62). The vulnerabilities faced by the Sundarbans are manifold. These islands are at the frontline of climate change although the accountability of its inhabitants in relation to greenhouse gases and other climate change accelerators is miniscule. The islanders are also at the mercy of the racist and classist discourse, often politically engendered, in the economically flourishing postcolonial state of India. They are also, at the same time, at the mercy of the common currencies that dominate popular discourse about catastrophes and disasters. But, drowning bodies are, more often than not, the result of distributions of power rather than the fickleness of weather.

In contemporary terms Giorgio Agamben configures violence and sovereignty in the context of the US "War on Terror". He notes that, "[t]he state of exception has today reached its maximum worldwide deployment" where the "normative aspect of law can […] be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence that […] nevertheless still claims to be applying

the law" (50). The context for Agamben was political and not overtly ecological but it is not hard to imagine how that violence permeates internally in ecological forms, where politics cannot be neatly cordoned off from the environment. "Climate change demands a fundamental shift in our understanding of the political, the terrain upon which all other calls for adaptation must inevitably rely", write Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (79). They read the theory of sovereignty against the backdrop of Hobbes's own time of civil war and argue that "[a]s with some civil wars, climate change poses political problems for which the current order has no answer. Like Hobbes, we are living through a period where the immanent, hegemonic conception of the world requires and presumes the emergence of a new kind of sovereign, a new order [...]" (24). Politics, like our understanding of sovereignty, is not static but evolves over time as it responds to stressors which reveal its shortcomings: "Leviathan is never dead, it merely hibernates" (22). It seems to me that in the twenty-first century, even as the rhetoric of nationalism gains popularity, sovereignty itself will be determined by the agglomeration of particulate matter, atomic dust, vaporous emanations and turbid fluids, all of which are averse to securitized borders. There is little doubt that the nation-state model is increasingly under threat in an age of diminishing financial returns and contracted ecological horizons, a form of long-term precarity ushered in by climate change. Simultaneously, the early twenty-first century is a time when cross-border transgressions, migrancy and exile are increasingly becoming normative conditions of our lived ecologies. The bare lives of the islanders, precariously situated in the Sundarbans, signify a rapidly unfolding planetary predicament.

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CHAPTER 11

Plantation and Planet

Environmental Precarity in Anglophone Caribbean World Writing

Jan Rupp

1 Introduction

Depictions of environmental precarity are a mainstay of Anglophone Caribbean writing. In the opening scene of his long poem *Omeros*, one of the defining epics in the Caribbean literary tradition, Derek Walcott invokes deforestation and tourism as two ominous moments shaping life in the Caribbean today:

> 'This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.'
> Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
> his soul with their cameras. 'Once wind bring the news
> to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking
> the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
> because they could see the axes in our own eyes. (3)

Philoctete and his fellow fishermen depend on the trees to build canoes and make a living, even if this does not save them from having to sell their soul to tourists, as the quotation suggests. To be sure, modern tourism has itself been a devastating factor for the reduction of forest cover in the Caribbean. From this perspective, Walcott's fishermen represent a supposedly less invasive practice of smaller-scale land use, though in describing them as axe-wielding "murderers" (3) the poem leaves little doubt as to the consequences of their doing. Unlike the tourists and their consumption of resources, however, the fishermen islanders are bound to nature through shared histories of suffering. As a matter of the poem's intricate intertextuality, Philoctete is the Caribbean *alter ego* of the Greek hero Philoctetes, a character featuring in Homer's *Iliad* among other ancient works. Philoctetes is chiefly known for a festering wound, which he received from a snake bite as divine punishment, according to one of several versions of his story. Philoctete, whom Walcott names after the Greek hero (though he drops the last letter in the character's name), nurses a similar wound, which he also offers to the tourist gaze for money:

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> For some extra silver, under a sea-almond,
> he shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor,
> rolling one trouser-leg up with the rising moan
> of a conch (4).

Conspicuously, Philoctete's "scar" and the "rusted anchor" transpose the ancient Greek story of Philoctetes to the Caribbean's maritime context then and now, with obvious associations of shackled feet, slavery, forced labour and the history of the Middle Passage.

Throughout his long poem and many of his other works, Walcott charts traumatic pain across human and non-human spheres, frequently animating nature to convey its suffering, such as the fearful *laurier-cannelles* with shaking leaves as they look their killers in the eye. As Elaine Savory points out, Walcott's poetry invites "a reading of literary texts not only in relation to ecological themes, but with regard to aesthetic strategies," focusing on an "ecopoetics" that, in Walcott's case, frequently involves "aesthetic representation of the indissoluble bond between the fate of humans and the fate of flora" (81). In any case, there is little sense in *Omeros* of an island paradise as popularized by early colonial poems like James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730) and James Grainger's *Sugar Cane* (1764). Ironically, these eighteenth-century works depicted the Caribbean as pure, passive and virginal nature when it was already being heavily transformed by imperial conquest, colonial plantocracy and commercial farming. In much current Anglophone Caribbean writing, this acute sense of eroding, precarious nature is consistently foregrounded.

Dialogue between ecocriticism and postcolonial as well as Caribbean literary studies has been a belated but rapidly productive area of inquiry. Part of this tardy though immensely timely charting of common ground between the two fields was postcolonialism's relatively "little attention to environmental factors" (DeLoughrey et al. 5) until a couple of decades ago. At the same time, early U.S. ecocriticism tended "to understate the social and historical specificities of place" (5) in a blanket call for nature preservation. In the meantime, critical studies have gone a long way towards filling these lacunae, as titles such as *Postcolonial Green* and *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* attest.[1] Among other regional contexts, the Caribbean has featured prominently in postcolonial recalibrations of such founding but misleading nature/culture or nature/history binaries that characterize ecocriticism's beginnings in the western

1 Cf., *inter alia*, Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt, eds., *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (2010), and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010).

academy: "Although North American ecocritics often inscribe an idealized natural landscape that is devoid of human history and labor, the colonization and forced relocation of Caribbean subjects preclude that luxury and beg the question as to what might be considered a natural landscape" (DeLoughrey et al. 2). As recent analyses show, Caribbean literatures are acutely attuned to the man-made impact on tropical landscapes, shaped by a century-long history of plantation agriculture as well as by modern neo-imperial forms of economic exploitation and tourism. In unearthing and remembering this history, literary texts and their specific postcolonial ecologies fulfil an important ethical function, highlighting the region's environmental and social precarity as well as envisioning alternative modes of human-nature solidarity.

If the plantation has become a major locale of the Caribbean environmental imagination, writing from the region and the ecological ethics developed in it have also begun to be discussed in terms of their larger, planetary resonance. A range of contributions in the recent volume *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics*, edited by Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett, link the environmental historian Jason Moore's concept of world-ecology to current debates over world literature. World-ecology for Moore is the intricate interplay of economic, social and ecological factors as engendered by global capitalism. Capitalism's trajectory as a trans-Atlantic world economy in turn is tied to histories of New World discovery and triangular trade, empire and environment. From this perspective, Caribbean writing is ideally suited to bespeak local as well as global environmental legacies and to attend to persistent inequalities with severe social repercussions, suffered in the Global South but frequently caused elsewhere.

This special historical and geographical location significantly adds to the ethical relevance of Anglophone Caribbean writing on a wider world scale, which I will elaborate by drawing on recent scholarship in world literary, environmental and memory studies, probing notions of world writing, its critical ethics, and planetary or environmental memory. Taking Olive Senior's poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) as a core text alongside additional examples, particular emphasis will be placed on dominant poetic and narrative forms of representing environmental precarity in the Caribbean, as well as on their potential functions for a global ecological ethics.

2 World Writing as Ethical Imperative

'World writing' is Mary Gallagher's term to map literary phenomena in the wake of globalization. While her edited volume *World Writing: Poetics, Ethics,*

Globalization takes its cue from other approaches in world literature studies, it stands out in that it foregrounds the ethical dimension of world literature. As a concept, world writing is developed correspondingly and contrastively to related terms such as world music or the circulation model of world literature as first sketched by nineteenth-century intellectuals such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, though without adopting the exoticizing tendencies of " 'world music' [as] a highly ambiguous and even problematic term" (Gallagher 44). In fact, Gallagher rejects any more substantial parallel between world writing and world music, because the latter tends to suggest non-Western music or ethnic inflections of Western music, but not to include Western music as such. By contrast, world writing draws on the more recent, widely-shared understanding by world literature scholars such as David Damrosch, conceiving as world literature those works which travel beyond their location of production and are actively translated, read and received in national literary systems different to their own, original one (Damrosch 6). Included in world writing, however, is a decidedly critical perspective on processes of transnational circulation, once lauded by Goethe as a humanistic vision to replace inner-European conflict and nationalism in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, and their underlying vested interests.

For Gallagher, the promise of world writing today is essentially constituted by the fact that it might articulate a corrective and critique of present-day globalization as a homogenizing, market-driven force of transnational capitalism, which for Marx and Engels, in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848), was the major drive-belt of world literature to begin with. On this point, Gallagher suggests common ground between world writing's critical ethics and Gayatri Spivak's notion of " 'planetarity' as an alternative to 'globalization' " (Gallagher 32). Indeed, Spivak has developed the concept of planetarity to move beyond the idea of globalization as well as beyond the confines of globalized literature as assessed by "conventional U.S. Comparative Literature training: English, French, German, poetry and literary theory, romantic and modernist" (208). Comparative and world literature studies under the sign of planetarity is extended in both time and space, taking in "precapitalist cultures" of the global South as well as "the new postcoloniality of the post-Soviet sector and the special place of Islam in today's breaking world" (215, 208). Ultimately, this extension has disciplinary and institutional as well as ethical implications, since "the 'planet' is, here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right" (216). In place of globalization, which privileges few economic elites and disenfranchises a majority of the world's population, the alternative imaginary of the planet thus restores, to those on the shadow side

of globalization, a sense of relation, entitlement and indeed responsibility for the world-encompassing processes involved.

Moreover, Gallagher and Spivak's notions of planetarity as well as world writing and its ethical potential suggest that world literature needs to be understood both in a subjective and in an objective genitive sense; that is to say, as literature of the world and circulating across it, as well as literature about the world, and engaging critically with the world. It is in this latter, objective genitive sense of "the ways in which the verbal imagination intersects ethically with the world" (Gallagher 3) that the study of world writing has lagged behind. In Gallagher's view, "the effects of this phenomenon [globalization] on the textures of the creative imagination and on the ethical fabric of humanity's imaginative relation to the world have received much less sustained critical attention" (35).[2] This aspect of Gallagher's criticism is highlighted by her "neologism 'poet(h)ics' [… which] serves to consolidate the view that poetics and ethics, literature and the ethical, are intricated in ways that politics and poetics are not" (22).[3] Moreover, it ties in with other recent contributions in world literary studies which have likewise foregrounded the text and its creative production as a possible moment of world literature and worldliness, just like the consecutive phases of translation and circulation. Thus, Susan Stanford Friedman, in her discussion of "world modernisms", emphasizes "the role of transnational cultural traffic in the originary sites of creativity", criticizing the focus on "circulation *after* the original aesthetic production" in much of world literature studies (503). In thinking about the ways in which "[c]irculation impacts art *before* and *during* the creative process as well as *after*", Friedman draws attention to "the cultural translations shaping [world literary texts'] creation" (503). Similarly, Brigit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl point to the potentials of literary works for worlding and world-making: "Rather than simply understanding 'the world' in terms of the global circulation across various national and territorial boundaries, our aim is to put greater emphasis on literary processes of creating worlds, i.e. on the world-making capacities of literature" (3). In this way, world literature can be located on at least three different levels; the level

2 To be sure, research into globalization and literature has rapidly progressed from the state of the art that Gallagher, writing in 2008, describes. Cf., e.g., the *Theory for a Global Age* series (2014–) published with Manchester UP and Svend Erik Larsen, *Literature and the Experience of Globalization: Texts without Borders*.

3 Elaborating on her association of poetics and ethics vs. politics, Gallagher argues that "the ethical and the poetic imperatives are not just compatible, but also associated, and that their mutual intrication is dependent on their shared insubordinate, or at least critical, engagement with the temptations or imperatives of closure and totalization often inherent in the plots and processes of politics" (21).

of production including the far-flung itineraries of nomadic writers' lives; the level of literary, text-internal configurations of the world, such as poetic tropes or narrative storyworlds; and finally, the level of reception including flows of institutionalized distribution, publishing policies and practices of translation. Understood in this all-around sense, literary works are seen actively to construct the world (or indeed plural worlds), in a manner which adds to the critical use of 'world writing', as a term that captures literature's 'writing' of worlds, over the more static notion of 'world literature'.

Focusing on Anglophone Caribbean world writing may thus accentuate its ethical dimension as well as its imaginative relation to the world, which is frequently inflected in ecological terms. Caribbean writing has clearly emerged as world literature in the subjective genitive sense, moving back and forth between the region and a plurality of "Caribbean spaces" (Boyce Davies) in the wider world and on a planetary scale. Spurred on by globalization and global migration, Caribbean writing now comprises a diverse set of literatures circulating to and from various continental diasporas of the Americas and Europe. Precisely because of this global scope, however, it is also in the objective genitive sense that Anglophone Caribbean world writing needs to be assessed. For the world-wide Caribbean spaces it travels across are by no means external to it. On the contrary, they are registered, charted and co-produced in literature as an instance of what Carole Boyce Davies, following the cultural geographer Doreen Massey, has called " 'ever-becoming' space" (Boyce Davies 6).[4] This dynamics of space may variously manifest itself as cultural translation between movements and different locations, as a working through of colonial New World/Old World distinctions, and as an engagement of the Caribbean's entanglements with a wider world-ecology.

The Caribbean's place in the world at large is at the centre of the aforementioned collection of essays *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics*, which takes developments of world literature and world-ecology to be effects and representations of the capitalist world-system as theorized by Immanuel Wallerstein and others. Most notably, in Moore's concept of world-ecology as drawn on in this publication, local environments intersect with the overall workings of global capitalism.[5] Capitalism is a world-spanning system indeed, in which "human and biophysical natures are intertwined at every scale, from the microbiome and the body to world empires and global markets", as Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett summarize Moore's argument (Campbell

4 Cf. also Doreen Massey, who stresses the view of "space as always under construction [...]. [I]t is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (9).

5 Cf., e.g., Moore.

and Niblett 3). More than an economic or social system, capitalism extends to politics, finance, trade, and ecology. From the materialist or Marxist point of view as adopted by Wallerstein, Moore, as well as Campbell and Niblett, world literature is a medium that registers and reflects back on the workings of world-ecology. Global Capitalism and the world-ecology it engenders serve as "the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape" (Campbell and Niblett 8).

While this encompassing concept of world-ecology involves a relatively weak notion of literary mediation,[6] it may, as Campbell and Niblett point out, profitably "extend [...] our understanding of the 'eco' in ecocriticism" (3). World-ecological aspects may range from more immediate environmental concerns such as "extreme weather events" to representations of social factors such as "state violence as a tool in the co-production of nature" (3). Anglophone Caribbean writing, for its part, has a pivotal role to play in this wider world-ecology. For the capitalist world-system, as delineated by Wallerstein, is closely connected to European imperial expansion to New World settings from the sixteenth century onwards. Thus, Campbell and Niblett highlight "the centrality of the Caribbean to the development of the capitalist world-system and the often rapid and catastrophic nature of the ecological transformations experienced by the region" (3).

From a materialist perspective, in other words, writing from and about the region is a reflection of global developments as they manifest themselves locally. Caribbean writing stands at the hub of world-ecological and world-literary processes – in fact, it has occupied this position for centuries. As a result, Caribbean literary texts frequently involve a diachronic perspective of large-scale as well as *longue durée* processes, making them a medium of world literature and environmental memory at the same time. Environmental memory, in Lawrence Buell's definition, is "the sense [...] of environments as lived experience in the fourth dimension – *i.e.*, the intimation of human life and history as unfolding within the context of human embeddedness in webs of shifting environmental circumstance of some duration" (96). For Buell, literature and other expressive media act as important carriers of such environmental memory and of shifting socioecological values, redressing the "inertial force of what the environmental psychologist Peter Kahn, Jr., has called 'environmental generational amnesia' " (97). From this perspective, Anglophone

6 Building on the work of "materialist critics", Campbell and Niblett assume a certain precedence of social structures over literary production, understanding "world literature [...], in the broadest terms, as the literature of the capitalist world-system – as the literature that registers and encodes the social logic of capitalist modernity" (7, 8).

Caribbean world writing provides particular and privileged insights into environmental and world-ecological precarity characterizing the region's pivotal location. Moreover, it might ultimately contribute to ensuring "the planetary future of humans and nonhumans alike" (97), thus again underlining the ethical project of an ecologically informed world writing. In the light of recent discussion of the Anthropocene, the planetary scale of environmental memory and anthropogenic climate change has begun to receive special attention, as alternative terms such as "planetary memory" (100)[7] in recent contributions at the intersection of environmental and cultural memory studies show.[8] Staging and engaging critically with these developments is an important way for Anglophone Caribbean writing to function as world literature.

3 Poet(h)ic Visions of the World

In his recent study *Frontiers of the Caribbean*, Philip Nanton highlights planetary and world-ecological dimensions as outlined above by calling for "an awareness of the need for reimagining the Caribbean in a world context". Nanton draws on the central motif of the frontier to suggest connection through multiple border crossings, between the local and global, between past and present, as well as between various academic disciplines and artistic discourses. A mixture between historical study, sociological analysis and postcolonial critique, the book also includes examples of Nanton's creative work. With respect to all these different genres, Nanton sets out to transcend isolated or insular perspectives, contextualizing the Caribbean within larger historical, intellectual, geo-political and invariably global formations.

Nanton ostensibly emphasizes present and future concerns as he asks "the question: how can a small, increasingly ignored, dependent region contribute to the dominant debate of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries – i.e. the impact and meaning of globalisation?". Any such contribution, he suggests, will need to move "beyond offering anti-colonial rhetoric, couched in a smattering of Marxist analysis and mixed with gratitude for occasional national or international handouts during natural disasters". In gesturing beyond existing paradigms and practices, however, it becomes clear throughout the book that

7 Cf. also Lucy Bond, Ben De Bruyn, and Jessica Rapson, who "seek […] to imagine a mode of 'planetary memory' able to address the scalar and systemic complexities of the Anthropocene" (853).

8 Cf. the concept of "socioenvironmental memory", as used by Rob Nixon (24), referred to by Bond et al. Cf. also Crownshaw.

the Caribbean, its territory and history, offers a fertile ground to inspire and reconstruct the critical planetary or global imaginary Nanton calls for. For example, intersections between the global and the local come to the fore in his poem "Punctuation Marks", originally published in 1992 under the title "I" and reprinted in *Frontiers of the Caribbean*. The poem presents an origin story in more than one sense. It recounts the speaker's (and arguably Nanton's own) personal formation by introducing the landscape in which he was born and grew up. Thus, the poem traces the speaker's identity, but it also chronicles the Caribbean's genesis and continuous transformation through geological forces. Both variants of the origin story are supported by the poem's earlier title and its two possible meanings, with "I" as first-person pronoun referring to the speaker's persona or identity, or to the Roman number one ('I') as a signal of narrative beginning. Not least, the poem tells a story of literary creation and inspiration, as the new title "Punctuation Marks" suggests. References to punctuation and writing continuously inflect the speaker's account of his identity and his island world as the poem opens and unfolds:

> Where sea and land meet, begin there.
> The ampersand, the join, is a fault
> that caused jagged peaks to rise
> from the ocean's floor
> spanning a vacant gulf.
> On any map of the world they are footnotes
> reminders of nature's force. (Nanton)

Tellingly, the poem's first section quoted here oscillates between different scales and perspectives, starting from ground level at the shoreline and then zooming out to the far larger, in fact planetary scale of the world map. A central move and motif throughout Nanton's book, this symbolical merging of frontiers between the local and global is performed again as the poem's third and concluding section zooms in again to return to land and sea:

> Come nearer, focus on one dot of an island.
> I was born there, on the rim of a volcano
> on the edge of a large full stop
> where the sand is black
> where the hills are a gun-barrel blue
> where the sea perpetually dashes at the shoreline
> trying to reclaim it all.

Nanton's optical allusions are indicative of a holistic, planetary vision, which characterizes his as well as many other Caribbean texts. In envisioning the local and global as one, Nanton also references, and ultimately rejects, the self-understanding of European colonizers as "discoverers of the new world". Nanton's world-making in "Punctuation Marks" echoes other poems such as John Agard's "Old World, New World" (2002) or Derek Walcott's famous essay "The Muse of History" (1974), which have likewise taken on the New World/Old World distinction as inherited from the Western literary canon. In his essay, Walcott acknowledges "the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice" ("The Muse" 64). Tellingly, the idea of two worlds is resolved in the organic image of the fruit as a miniature globe. That said, Walcott's trope by no means glosses over painful history, but resonates strongly with world-ecological transformations such as slavery, colonialism, plantation agriculture and forced labour.

In the second and middle section of Nanton's "Punctuation Marks", the poem further deconstructs European views by filling in the Americas' long pre-history, including previous phases of Amerindian nomadic migration, discovery and environmental memory within the Caribbean. Nanton remembers "the pre-ceramic Cibony", the "ceramics of Saladoid and Suazoid" and the fate of "Common island Caribs," who were

> sunk in a murderous tide
> that flowed from East to West
> bearing assassins and poets
> discoverers of the new world.

Again, world-spanning historical processes cut across local experience (of indigenous Caribbean tribes), with the sea figuring as a central environmental memory and as a harbinger of globalization.

Highlighting the region's environmental precarity and planetary entanglements, Nanton's poem throws into relief the larger role of Anglophone Caribbean world writing as a medium of world-ecology. Texts that display expressly environmentalist concerns may be a more recent phenomenon, but a planetary, environmental and world-ecological dimension has been a long-standing and foundational concern of the Caribbean imagination. The impact of geophysical forces, global capitalism and attendant forms such as international tourism have long been registered in Caribbean literary traditions. Nanton's account of "jagged peaks", the hills' "gun-barrel blue" colour and the sea's "murderous tide" is a case in point. Geophysical forces such as the

hurricane and extreme weather, deforestation and the import of foreign crops, or distinctive sites such as the beach, the hinterland, the sea and the underwater world recur frequently in Caribbean writing. In the words of Édouard Glissant, they constitute a "language of landscape" (145),[9] rooting Caribbean literatures locally while simultaneously referencing larger processes of world-ecology.

Of these themes, tropes and topoi, the hurricane is an especially prominent and versatile example. Like many other elements of Caribbean world writing, it variously appears as a devastating and endangering as well as life-giving force. In political and historical contexts, it has frequently served as an emblem of indigenous liberation and resistance against outside rule, as a constant threat undermining the stability and infrastructure of (neo-)colonial regimes. As Sharae Deckard notes, the "hurricane as kairotic event can function in its most radical form as the prefiguration of modalities of revolt and rebellion" (35). Elsewhere, in contexts of diaspora and migration, the hurricane can become a symbol of personal identity and planetary consciousness, as in Grace Nichols' poem "Hurricane Hits England" (1996), which Deckard discusses as well. Inspired by a 1987 tropical storm that extended across the Atlantic into the British Isles, the poem mediates on the speaker's alienation and her sense of self, which is reconstituted by hurricane: "It took a hurricane to bring her closer/ To the landscape" (Nichols 34). At the same time, hurricanes, and the particular storm that inspired Nichols' poem, are symptomatic of larger weather and world-ecological dynamics. Much more than a marker of regional Caribbean identity and experience, Nichols' storm creates an awareness of planetary ecological entanglements in her speaker, expressed the poem's concluding insight "That the earth is the earth is/ the earth" (35).

Another central topos linking Anglophone Caribbean world writing and world-ecology is the tropical garden. Like the hurricane, it is a polyvalent trope, variously appearing as the stereotypical garden Eden of the European imagination, as a de facto space of century-long environmental exploitation, or as a site of postcolonial resistance and regeneration. In Olive Senior's poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) most if not all of these possible meanings are explored. As Jordan Stouck notes with respect to Senior's collection, "[t]he concept of the garden [...] has historically been an ambivalent dialectic [...]. As a metaphor, gardening works both in relation to post-colonial theories of hybridity, diaspora, and dissemi/nation, and in relation to colonial histories of conquest and the desire for pure origins" (20). For example, in "Plants", Senior warns against any attempt at transfiguring the island flora by declaring that

9 Cf. also Phillips Casteel.

"Plants are deceptive" (61). The poem's opening line, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey observes, "queries the process of cultural and biological rootedness" (299) to draw attention to a long-standing human-nature rationality instead: "The 'colonizing ambitions' of flora and fauna suggest the discursive entanglement between island biogeography and empire, as well as the disturbing continuities between fifteenth and twenty-first century colonisation of island spaces" (306). Rather than authenticating a 'natural' landscape, plants and gardens in the Caribbean turn out to be part of an "imperialistic grand design" of plantation agriculture and of importing alien crops from elsewhere:

> Plants are deceptive. You see them there
> looking as if once uprooted they know
> their places; not like animals, like us
> always running around, leaving traces.
>
> Yet from the way they breed (excuse me!)
> and twine, from their exhibitionist
> and rather prolific nature, we must infer
> a sinister not to say imperialistic
>
> grand design. Perhaps you've regarded,
> as beneath your notice, armies of mangrove
> on the march, roots in the air, clinging
> tendrils anchoring themselves everywhere?
>
> The world is full of shoots bent on conquest,
> invasive seedlings seeking wide open spaces,
> matériel gathered for explosive dispersal
> in capsules and seed cases. (Senior 61)

To the extent that these images resonate with a violent history of colonial military conquest, coerced migration and forced labour (Phillips Casteel 485), they lend themselves well to an extended understanding and postcolonial reading of the 'eco' in ecocriticism. In Senior's poetic world-making, interrelated political, social, economic and natural factors come together to form an overarching world-ecology. Like the hurricane, however, Senior's plants already contain within themselves seeds of resistance, with a strong sense that the "capsules", "seed cases" and other explosive materials will soon backfire.

Images of resistant, resilient nature such as these recur frequently in Senior's collection, and they are a prominent feature of Anglophone Caribbean texts

about the island flora and its entanglements with the world at large. However, despite the emphasis on unruly nature and recalcitrant "weed" (Senior 61), there is little sense of returning the Caribbean to a romanticizing version of unspoilt nature, as though replacing colonialist stereotypes with nativist fantasy. Quite the contrary, Senior's poems time and again present a thoroughly historicized landscape, marked by different forms of human intervention. Picking up the collection's title, her poem "Brief Lives" laconically comments: "Gardening in the Tropics, you never know/ what you'll turn up. Quite often bones" (85). If this points to past legacies, hidden yet simultaneously disclosed by the thickly-layered "deep history of island landscapes" (DeLoughrey 298), a complementary future perspective is contained in Senior's poem "Pineapple". In a dystopian scenario of modern-day plantation agriculture, armies of pineapples are preparing for a day of reckoning:

> So you
> plant pineapples
> arrayed in fields
> like battalions
> not knowing
> each headdress
> of spikes
> is slanted
> to harness
> the sun's
> explosions (Senior 67)

A far cry from a tropical dreamland of exotic fruits, this scene, like many others in Senior's collection, calls on the reader to confront intricate ecological entanglements of human and natural history. It is in the Caribbean, more than many other places, and the world writing developed in dialogue with it that the costs and environmental memory of century-long monoculture, land use and resource consumption are thrown into relief, shaping the present and posing a decisive challenge to act on for the sake of the planet's future.

4 Conclusion

In his discussion of environmental fiction and non-fiction, Rob Nixon highlights the role of representation to render visible the 'slow violence' of environmental degradation: "The representational challenges are acute, requiring

creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (10). Summarizing and pinpointing major functions of Anglophone Caribbean world writing as explored above, a first, dominant concern is not with themes alone, but indeed with developing forms of representation, an 'ecopoetics' capable of expressing and, quite literally, of sensitizing the reader to environmental and planetary precarity so as to enable an ethical response: "How, indeed, are we to act ethically toward human and biotic communities that lie beyond our sensory ken? What then, in the fullest sense of the phrase, is the place of seeing in the world that we now inhabit? What, moreover, is the place of the other senses?" (15). As in Nixon's study of environmentalist writing, all texts discussed in the foregoing analysis clearly "intervene representationally" by "devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (10). As in Walcott's opening scene in *Omeros*, personifying nature is a frequent intervention in Caribbean writing to apprehend and render visible ecological repercussions. In addition, these animistic representations of nature often mobilize indigenous cosmologies of human-nature oneness and thus serve as a critique of dominant forms of resource consumption.

Apart from making the inanimate speak, a second, related function of Anglophone Caribbean world writing is to highlight resistant and resilient environmental agencies, as in Grace Nichols' and Olive Senior's poems. Both the hurricane and Senior's depiction of recalcitrant crops defy neo-imperial fantasies of conquest and land use. Moreover, both Nichols and Senior open up forms of local environmental experience to a larger global or planetary perspective.

A third overarching function, therefore, consists in making visible the interconnectedness of global ecological transformation. Many Caribbean writings recount a larger narrative of world-ecology in Moore's sense, drawing on specific knowledge enabled by the region's history, and enabling a fundamental critique and redefinition of planetary relations. From this global scope of Anglophone Caribbean world writing emerges its critical ethics as a fourth and final function. The texts explored and many more, such as Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) and *My Garden Book* (2001), offer a sustained critique of globalization, transnational capitalism and its ecological repercussions, suggesting alternative models of human-nature solidarity instead.

To explore this critical global ethics further and as for future perspectives of studying world writing and environmental precarity, other postcolonial case studies from the Caribbean as well as elsewhere clearly merit closer analysis. More work also needs to be done to attend to what Nixon describes as possible

conceptual tensions between world literature studies and "a materialist postcolonial studies":

> World literature studies has become a rich, dynamic field [...], but I do feel some concern about how the categorical turn, in literary studies, to world literature often ends up deflecting attention away from the anti-imperial concerns that a materialist postcolonial studies foregrounded. To be sure, we need scholarship and teaching that can address, in transnational terms, territories beyond postcolonialism's conventional reach (38).

Indeed, critical engagement with material environments, local as well global, has been conspicuously underrepresented in the study of world literature. It is here that concepts of environmental or planetary memory and world writing – highlighting literature's world-making, its imaginative as well as ethical relation to the world – promise to redress the balance. Ethically inflected concepts of world writing as well as ecocritical projects in postcolonial literary and in memory studies constitute an important and expandable intersection to attend to growing environmental precarity on a planetary scale.

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PART 5

Representing Refugees and Immigrants

CHAPTER 12

Narrative Zones of Refuge in *The Lost Boy* by Aher Arop Bol and *A Man of Good Hope* by Jonny Steinberg

J.U. Jacobs

1 Introduction

Refugees are defined in terms of traumatic severance from their homes, communities and home countries. In their narrative accounts of flight or expulsion, danger, displacement and insecurity, "precariousness becomes an existential determination" (1), as Cecile Sandten expresses it in her analysis of how poverty and precariousness are represented in contemporary refugee narratives. Among the many refugee narratives that have appeared in the last few years, two in particular from South Africa, Aher Arop Bol's *The Lost Boy* (2009) and Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope* (2014), deserve closer consideration for the different ways in which their refugee subjects – the former from southern Sudan, the latter from Somalia – are presented. *The Lost Boy* is in some ways comparable to Gulwali Passarlay's memoir *The Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as a Child Refugee* (2015), which Sandten discusses in her article, since it is both "a testimonial act" and a reflection – although modest – "on the writing process of the refugee narrative itself" (6). From the position and perspective of a young adult, Bol, like Passarlay, "recollects his traumatic past and the difficulties he experienced as a child refugee, seeking to turn his memories of flight from an oral into a written account in order to be able to make sense of his life, losses, and traumatic experiences" (Sandten 6). *A Man of Good Hope*, on the other hand, is a much more complex and self-reflexively mediated account of the life of its refugee subject in a text that finally belongs as much to its author as to its subject – and therefore deserves more extensive analysis. What both *The Lost Boy* and *A Man of Good Hope* have in common, however, is their foregrounding of the refugee's experience of being unhomed and subsequent attempts to pursue the idea of home and refigure the self as a member of a community. I propose in this essay to examine in what sense refugee subjects might be said to seek for a home in the narratives of their unhoming, and also in what sense they might be said to be doubly unhomed: not only from their place of birth and subsequent places of refuge, but in the end also from their

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life stories, which can provide them with, at best, a provisional narrative zone of refuge.

2 Home and Unhoming

In *The Postnational Self*, Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort speak of "a foundational, existential, 'thick' notion" (vii) of home that is interdependent with belonging: "Our home is where we belong, territorially, existentially, and culturally, where our own community is, where our family and loved ones reside, where we can identify our roots, and where we return to when we are elsewhere in the world" (vii). Out of this notion of home come our feelings of 'homeness' and homesickness, our sense of identity, and national belonging. Along similar lines, Avtar Brah describes home as the site of our everyday lived experience: it "connotes our networks of family, kind, friends, colleagues and various other 'significant others'. It signifies the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of a neighbourhood or home town" (4). In his book *Home: How Habitat Made Us Human* (2015), John S. Allen provides a neuro-anthropological argument for such existential notions of home. He maintains that "[t]he human need to feel at home has its roots in our evolutionary biology and is reinforced today by our cognitive psychology" (9). Home is the "single primary fix-point" (Allen 228) in our habitat, a central location where we recover physically and mentally from the labours and challenges of the outside world. Home, in this sense, may be regarded as our primary zone of refuge: a protected or controlled environment where we experience empathy through "emotionally vested, mutually beneficial relationships" (48) with the members of a shared household whose lives are synchronised with our own. Home is the basic unit of human societies, and "the building block for human cultures" (14). You can acquire a house, Allen says, but a home is something you have to build yourself, "according to the blueprints drawn from your evolutionary history, cultural traditions, and personal experiences" (180). And, importantly, home is therefore also the place around which our 'autobiographical self' pieces together the events of our life into an ongoing narrative (246).

Allen makes a number of important observations about absence from and loss of home. The experience of homesickness is akin to grief (5); but, fortunately, we have the capacity to transfer the sense of home to different locations and situations throughout our lives and to reestablish our feeling of being at home in a new environment (53). To be completely homeless, however, is from a cognitive point of view "to be in an emotionally vulnerable and distressed state" (185). Homelessness is "to be on the margins of society" (181), a source of

shame and stigma, and often regarded as a disease. Losing the important emotion of feeling at home can lead to a condition of "psychic homelessness" (200).

It goes without saying that the refugee experience dispels any such 'foundational' or 'existential' notions of belonging harmoniously to a home, and thereby to a community and home country; such notions would be what Hedetoft and Hjort call "organicist", or "pre-political" (xii). In *The Politics of Home* Rosemary Marangoly George also qualifies any essentialist or 'thick' notion of home by emphasizing its fundamental ambiguity; she argues that home is also a way of establishing difference because it is premised on select inclusions and exclusions: it is always doubly coded in terms of those who belong there and those who do not. The same ambiguity of belonging and non-belonging applies also to community, which is conventionally conceived of as home writ large, as well as to home country, which, in turn, is thought of as community writ still larger.

Non-belonging is not the same as *un*belonging, however: unbelonging denotes a process of alienation or detachment from feeling at home. The sense of unbelonging – expulsion from a secure sense of home – can be registered in varying degrees, from just an awareness (to use Freud's terms) of what was once *heimisch*, or familiar, becoming *unheimlich*, or uncanny, to the condition that Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty describe in their essay "Feminist Politics" as "not being home": in contrast to living within the safety of familiar and protected boundaries, "not being home" is "a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (197). A still further stage of unbelonging is knowing what it means to be "unhomed" and to experience "unhomeliness", which, as Homi K. Bhabha explains in *The Location of Culture*, is an "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (13). To be unhomed, he says, is the displacement when you find yourself suddenly "taking the measure of your dwelling" in a state of profound unease (13). In this state of disorientation you are aware that the "recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions", and "the borders between home and the world become confused" (13). For the refugee, the rupture is traumatic, and its consequences are lasting.

3 Aher Arop Bol, *The Lost Boy* (2009) – A Refugee Memoir

Aher Arop Bol was born in a Dinka village in southern Sudan at the time of the outbreak of the Second Civil War in 1983 between the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the south and the Islamic government in the north – a 22-year-long war in which two-and-a-half million lives were lost, roughly four

million people were displaced in southern Sudan, and thousands of orphans were abandoned. Aher's autobiography, *The Lost Boy*,[1] was published in 2009, after the Peace Agreement in 2005 and before the independence of South Sudan in 2011. The civil war in South Sudan from 2013 on has since claimed a further 300 000 lives and displaced about three million people in a country of twelve million, two million internally and one million to neighbouring countries. The situation in South Sudan today has been called the "African Union's worst nightmare, and its most urgent challenge" (Ebrahim). International refugee figures suggest that South Sudan is now the third most fled country in the world after Syria and Afghanistan.

Aher is one of the so-called 'Lost Boys' of Sudan, over 20 000 boys (and girls) of the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups who were orphaned and separated from their families during the Second Civil War and trekked in groups across southern Sudan in the 1980s, seeking refuge across the border in Ethiopia and Kenya. The front cover blurb announces *The Lost Boy* as "[t]he true story of a young boy's flight from Sudan to South Africa," which Aher explains further in a Prologue: "This book is about my experiences and those of other minors in Panyido and other refugee camps. It tells of the agony, the hunger, disease and thirst we survived, of the relief and camaraderie we found during periods of unrest, of our search for meaning and for ways in which to make this world a better place to live in" (Bol n.p.) Sidonie Smith alerts us to the kind of ideological packaging for globalised consumption that characterises many such stories:

> The commodification of stories of ethnic suffering obscures the complex politics of international events, stylizes the story to suit an educated international audience familiar with narratives of individual triumph over adversity, evokes emotive responses trained on the feel-good qualities of successful resolution, and often universalizes the story of suffering so as to erase incommensurable differences and the horror of violence. (154)

Most recently, Loren B. Landau has called for a recalibration of "how stories are told about migrants – their rights, suffering and their relationship to the citizens around them".[2] There is a recognisable tendency among migrants, he

1 *The Lost Boy* can be regarded as either an autobiography or a refugee memoir. Both terms will be used here depending on the particular generic narrative feature being discussed.

2 The article was republished in the South African newspaper *The Mercury* under the heading "Xenophobia: It's Time to Upend the Narratives about Migrants", 10 Sept. 2018, p. 10. Landau is Research Chair on Mobility and the Politics of Diversity at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

says, “to ensure they are read as helpless, needy and innocent to secure access to protection and help”. It would be unjust, however, to approach Aher’s story in such narrow terms. Although it is cast for the most as a straightforward, first-person retrospective homodiegetic narrative, including maps of his various refugee routes, Aher is fully aware of how his young life has been determined by complex and ongoing historical conflicts. His memoir is first and foremost an act of autobiographical ‘conversion’, to use John Sturrock’s term for the process by which the autobiographer creates significance for himself as a historical being by turning – or ‘converting’ – his past into a narrative (24). The textualisation of his pre-textual life, Sturrock argues, involves the autobiographer shaping “his past to the constraints of his language equally with shaping his language to the constraints of his past” (25). Aher’s narrative includes the story of how he became a Christian, and acquired an education in English in various countries of refuge. His published memoir represents a final stage in the coming together of self and language, as Paul John Eakin maintains about the autobiographical act, its “act of composition [...] reaching back into the past not merely to recapture but to repeat the psychological rhythms of identity formation, and reaching forward into the future to fix the structure of this identity in a permanent self-made existence as literary text” (226). In this respect it is also important to bear in mind Eakin’s classic argument that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and further, that the self that is at the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3).

More pertinently, in his comprehensive study of writers’ memoirs and their various sub-genres at the turn of the twenty-first century, *Through the Looking Glass* (2017), Robert Kusek considers the proliferation of memoirs in the present-day “golden age of life writing” (24) as representing a “human turn” in contemporary culture. In response to the questions about whether memoir is a sub-genre of autobiography or biography, whether its subject is the self or the other, and whether it belongs to the realm of non-fiction or fiction (38), he postulates that “memoirs can fulfil the same epistemological, ethical and aesthetic functions that are typically ascribed to works of literature; [and] that memoirs are literature *per se*” (28). Eschewing the fact vs. fiction binary, Kusek argues that memoirs, more than any other kind of life writing, occupy “a threshold zone, in which historical/factual accuracy co-exists with fiction without qualitatively prioritising one over the other” (63). Furthermore, “since memoirs cannot be reduced to a single narratological formula concerning their narrative voices (in terms of person, level, and time)” (67), Kusek borrows from Ryszard

Nycz the term "sylleptic" (67),[3] which Nycz applies to the memoir's subject to explain "the relationship between the empirical and the textual 'I' " (67). The memoir's subject, Kusek suggests, is always a "sylleptic" 'I', "always ambiguous; always real and literary at the same time" (67). To apply this to Aher's memoir: as its subject, he is sylleptically both its empirical subject, Aher, and the 'Lost Boy,' the fictional trope he employs to represent himself as member of a community of Lost Boys in his life story, which comprises a series of unhomings and precarious re-homings.

Aher's narrative begins in 1987 with his arrival, aged three or four, on the shoulders of his uncle at the Panyido refugee camp on the banks of the Tana River in Ethiopia. Too young to have formed any clear sense of the home from which they had been forced to flee, or why, he registers his unhoming mainly as the absence of his mother and father. Instead of food and shelter, the stream of refugees coming from the bush and crossing the river find in Panyido "nothing but more hungry faces and people crying for help" (Bol 15). The camp is a place of heat, starvation and disease, with the stench of rotting corpses everywhere.

When Ethiopian relief workers eventually arrive, a community of sorts begins to be established: food is distributed, clinics are started, and teams of soldiers collect and bury the rows of abandoned bodies. The 3000 lost boys and 500 girls are separated, and when his uncle disappears to join the SPLA, Aher is put together with a group of boys between the ages of three and ten in a compound for 'minors'. They are subdivided into groups of 500 and, under the leadership of older, stronger boys, formed into teams to distribute what little food there is, fetch water, stake out latrines, and fell trees and cut grass with which to build shelters. Later, when they receive food, blankets, clothing and books from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other donors, the children help to build more shelters and classrooms, and begin their first-grade education. Military discipline is maintained, although the boys illicitly barter their aid goods at the nearby Ethiopian market. In 1990, at the age of about seven, Aher, who is from a Dinka animist background, is baptised as a Christian.

Like Panyido, where Aher lives for three years, each of the subsequent places of refuge in his story illustrates George's argument that home, community and home country are all paradoxically places of inclusion as well as exclusion (9); all are zones of security as well as constraint, places to escape to and also to escape *from*. When President Mengistu is ousted in 1991 and

3 The term is developed by Ryszard Nycz in "Traces of 'I': Concepts of Subjectivity in Polish Literature of the Last Century", pp. 386–87.

the South Sudanese refugees come under attack by the new Ethiopian government's forces, they have no option but to run back to the SPLA-occupied part of southern Sudan. Aher, now about eight, follows the SPLA soldiers and, together with hundreds of other fleeing refugees, swims across the Gilo River, under machine gun fire. At the Sudanese border town of Pochella, however, they find themselves under bombardment by Sudanese aircraft. Attaching themselves to an SPLA platoon, Aher and a number of boys trek through the swamp to the displacement camp at Corchuey, the military camp of Jabal Boma, and the Kapoeta army barracks, where they are again bombed. At the beginning of 1992 the minors are transferred into the care of the International Red Cross at Narus near the Kenyan border; but when the government planes head for Narus, they flee to Lokichokio across the border in Kenya, and after some months are relocated to Kakuma. In this huge camp for the displaced run by the Kenyan government and the UNHRC, a community is re-established: the boys erect shelters for themselves, receive monthly food rations, and resume their primary schooling. In 1995 Aher, now twelve, and six other boys travel to Ifo, a resettlement camp in northeastern Kenya. For most of the two years that they spend there they starve, since Sudanese are excluded from the American resettlement plan, nor are they given ration cards.

At the beginning of 1998, aged fourteen and determined to complete his high school education, Aher travels from Nairobi, via Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique, to Zimbabwe – bribing police, being robbed by traffickers, and assisted by immigration officials, bus drivers and fellow passengers. Harare proves to be yet another zone of conflict. In the four years he spends there completing his secondary education at a mission boarding school, he becomes part of the community of students and staff at the school as well as of his ever-hospitable Sudanese 'brothers'. However, it is the self-serving SPLA representative who is hostile and tries to block the Sudanese boys' applications for refugee status so as to force them back to fight in the warzone from which they have fled.

In 2002 Aher and a friend finally make it into South Africa by negotiating with human smugglers, crossing the Limpopo River, crawling under the border fence, and being accepted as legitimate asylum seekers at the Beit Bridge border post. With the help of Lawyers for Human Rights and the Jesuit Refugee Services they obtain temporary residence permits from the Department of Home Affairs in Pretoria. Although a number of the lost Sudanese boys have re-grouped in Pretoria, Aher cannot dispel his feeling of despondency.

To help Aher recover structure and meaning in his life, a white Afrikaner woman teacher at the Misericordia International Centre for refugees in

Pretoria encourages him to write his life story.[4] The narrative aporia of his 'autobiographical self' having no notion of home to inform his life story is overtaken by events, however, when in August 2002 he learns that his uncle is alive and living in the United States, and that his mother in Sudan has never ceased searching for him. Part 2 of Aher's autobiography is an account of his return – paradoxically as a stranger – at the age of eighteen to Turalei in southern Sudan, "the place where [his] history began" (Bol 161), and finally to his own village of Marol Amiol, "the village where [he] belonged" (180). He tells of his father's overwhelming joy on finding again the child whom he thought he had lost at an age when he was "too young to have memories of [his] home" (171); of being welcomed back with special rites that he is unfamiliar with at the tombs of his hitherto unknown ancestors; of learning that he has five siblings and of being introduced to the members of his extended family – and, finally, of being reunited with his mother, of whom he had "no picture in [his] memory" (180). Aher's filiative homecoming is, in effect, a new set of affiliations, and a precarious event, since the family compound he has returned to can provide no lasting home and proves to be yet another place to escape from. He eventually follows his father's advice to leave and make his future in the safe haven of South Africa, away from the ongoing war in Sudan and its religious bigotry, racism and tribalism. Aher's narrative homecoming is similarly contingent: his memoir has no real closure, but the reader is left at least with the trope of the Lost Boy for some insight into the lives of the Ahers of this world.

4 Jonny Steinberg, *A Man of Good Hope* (2014) – A Mediated Narrative

In contrast to Aher's account of his unhoming and ambivalent homecoming, the story of the Somali refugee, Asad Abdullahi, in Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope* (2014), is a much more complex narrative construct about different zones of refuge. *A Man of Good Hope* is a collaborative text, a generic mélange co-constructed by Asad and Steinberg. It is a biographical account of Asad's life from when, in 1991, at the age of eight, he fled, together with other Daarood people, from his home in Mogadishu to escape the butchery of the Hawiye militiamen who killed his mother. It incorporates his memories of the main stages in his subsequent life of flight, abandonment and struggle in refugee

4 It is in this sense that Sturrock views autobiography as a forensic genre: "an expedient by which the writer can reply to the injuries that have been done to him" (49).

settlements in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia, until he eventually follows the illegal immigrant route to South Africa.[5] The narrative further documents the Somali refugee crisis, which is one of the most protracted in the world, with people having been displaced for more than twenty years, over one million within Somalia and another million living in camps in Kenya, Yemen, Djibouti and Ethiopia ("UN Backs Summit"; UNHCR). Or, to use an image of the Somali diaspora that comes to Asad himself: "dense gatherings of Somalis, represented as clusters of flickering lights, scattered across a map of Africa. The east of the continent was aglow, but down here, too, in the south, the Somali lights blinked" (Steinberg, *A Man* 175). The narrative also provides a meta-discursive reflection on the various ways in which the story of these zones of refuge comes to be told between the author and his Somali diasporic subject, on the identity and self-perception of the refugee, and on what it means to Steinberg to have been, as he says, "under the skin of a human being I am not" ("Moving Back") and to Asad to have had his life memorialised.

In his review of the book, Ian Birrell describes Asad's story as not just another "misery memoir" but as "an epic African saga". Steinberg's self-reflexive mediation of Asad's story and realistic representation of migrant communities place it at a far remove from the kind of "victim journalism" that Landau speaks of: "Many of the accounts [of migrants] offered by South African civil society and scholars rapidly descend into a parade of miseries and indignities. As if the more people suffer, the more deserving they are of not only sympathy, but a place in a hosting country". The relationship between Steinberg and his refugee subject is a symbiotic one: Asad is the oral source of the narrative whereas Steinberg is the writer who controls and structures the material.[6] Moreover, in contracting with Asad to write a book about his life, Steinberg is conscious of the ethics of "[t]rading money for access to a poor person's private world" (*A Man* xiii),[7] and of the exercise of power that writing a book involves.

The zone of narration in which Asad's story takes shape is metonymic of his life as a refugee: between October 2010 and September 2011 they sit in the driver and passenger seats of Steinberg's car, a notebook passing between

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5 *The Economist* reviewer says that Steinberg "looks at broad social and political themes through the eyes of a single protagonist" ("Finding His Feet").

6 Michela Wrong refers to the "form of reverse ventriloquism" that Steinberg has perfected over the years, "in which he becomes the mouthpiece for the Africans whose lives intrigue him. This process must require relentless badgering, as interview is piled on interview, memory upon memory".

7 In pointing to the financial arrangement between them, Colette Sheridan says that Steinberg "draws up this deal, all too aware of the unequal relationship that can arise between an author and his subject".

them as Steinberg "record[s] his testimony in shorthand and Asad draws pictures of the scenes he describes" (xv).[8] They are parked next to Asad's shack in the township of Blikkiesdorp, where the city's evicted are housed, including displaced Somali and Congolese families, and which is described as "Cape Town's asshole, the muscle through which the city shits out the parts it does not want" (xi). The narrative is fashioned between the author, a South African citizen who is "a person from the other side, a person who travels within the orbit of the law" (xvi), and the Somali refugee who does not enjoy such security and is constantly wary of possible attack by township gangsters – as Steinberg formulates his subject's double vision: "While his internal eye peers into his childhood, the eyes on either side of his nose scan the street" (xvii).

The trajectory of Asad's refugee story begins with his uncle leading a party of fleeing Daarood Abdullahis out of Mogadishu to the nearby town of Afgooye, from where they are loaded onto 'special trucks' run by AliYusuf clansmen and travel towards the Kenyan border. At Qoryooley they come under mortar attack and Asad is separated from his family. Heading farther away from what used to be his home in a truckful of strangers marks the moment in his life, Steinberg says, that he "would never again be firmly moored to any particular adult, to any family. He would become a child whose connections to others would dissolve and re-form and disappear again" (5) – like Aher in *The Lost Boy*. At Afmadow, the last Somali city before the Kenyan border, Asad is handed over into the care of a female relative, Yindy, whose shack and yard become his shelter against the violence outside as refugees start shooting each other amidst rumours of imminent attack by the Hawiye. When the fighting comes closer to the city, Asad and Yindy, who has been badly injured, leave for Dhoobley where fellow refugees build a makeshift shelter for them and Asad, still a child, looks after her and forages across the Kenyan border for food.

When they are overtaken here, too, by the fighting, Yindy and Asad are transported to the border town of Liboi in north-east Kenya where they are absorbed into the refugee camp, one of four collectively known as the Dadaab

8 Leon de Kock describes Steinberg as "an aggregator of stories, high and low, historical, mythical, apocryphal, oral, you name it. Stories and their tellers become secondary characters in his play of tales and their telling, which he brings into view with forensically analytical precision". Other such works by Steinberg include *Midlands: A Very South African Murder* (2002), *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (2004), *Sizwe's Test: A Young Man's Journey Through Africa's AIDS Epidemic* (2008), *Thin Blue: The Unwritten Rules of Policing South Africa* (2009), and *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (2011).

camps, which were established by the UNHCR with the help of NGOs, Doctors without Borders and Care International. Official reports about Liboi at the time, Steinberg says, are "a description of hell" (30): there was a constant shortage of food and water, refugees, especially children under the age of five, were dying in their hundreds, the camp was awash with firearms, and there was a clan-based epidemic of punitive rape, particularly of Bantu Somali women, over rations. Two years later, in 1993, when Yindy qualifies for resettlement in the United States, she arranges for the ten-year-old Asad to be taken in by an AliYusuf clansman living in 'Islii' (Eastleigh) in Nairobi.

All the subsequent places Asad takes refuge in are Somali enclaves in a foreign country – all places of shelter as well as conflict. These locations may also be regarded in terms of what Jopi Nyman calls "alternative spaces" that "are transnational and can be found in spaces between the nations and also in urban spaces amidst migrant communities", and that show "the extent to which national borders are artificial and porous" (46). Eastleigh is a run-down Nairobi neighbourhood full of Daarood Somalis who have escaped the war and live in overcrowded lodges, each one occupied by a different clan, and all living "somewhere in a zone between illegality and unofficial acceptance" (Steinberg, *A Man* 46). When tensions between Asad and his adoptive family become too great, he is put into the Hotel Taleh where he lives for two years, spending his days on the streets and nights in the rooms of different families, free but also out of control. When he is eleven or twelve, he is sent by the AliYusuf elders to Ethiopia to wait for his resettlement documents to America. He spends a year in Dire Dawa with Yindy's hostile family in the Hafad neighbourhood, the Somali part of the town where the streets "smelled and sounded like home, his mother tongue bouncing from one mouth to the next, the world a hive of shouting and laughing" (59). From there he is taken to Wardheer, deep in the desert and full of nomadic people, where everybody is Ogadeni: "the town was in Ethiopia, but it was really Somali. Even the currency people used was Somali in the centre of town, Ethiopian on the outskirts" (64). Abandoned there by Yindy's family, Asad, aged twelve or thirteen, survives by lugging water barrels for a cafeteria, and then by working as a "*kirishbooy*"[9] for a truck driver, travelling across the Ogaden for the next year and a half, until he is fifteen or sixteen. Living on an Ogadeni truck, moving people and things, gives him a sense of coherence in his life: "To live one's life on an Ogadeni truck was to be at the centre of the universe" (85).

9 A "*kirishbooy*", Asad explains, "is in charge of the cargo, flat tyres, the engine: everything to do with the truck except driving it" (82).

Frustrated in his attempts to get into school, Asad moves to the Bole Mikhael district of Addis Ababa, "a truly opaque place" (105) where it is impossible to distinguish between Ethiopian citizens from the Ogaden and Somali refugees. With his quickness "to surmise, to read a terrain for its opportunities" (105), Asad becomes a broker, an intermediary between newly arrived Somali refugees and Ethiopian officials and landlords. He shares a room with four students, earns a living, and feels, at age sixteen or seventeen, for the first time "like a serious person" (112). In 2002, at the age of nineteen, on an impulse, he marries Foosiya, ten years his senior, and becomes the "breadwinner in an eccentric household" (129), supporting a wife and a group of unemployed men, all older than himself.

The (auto)biographical relationship between writer and model, Philippe Lejeune first pointed out, is one of reciprocal possession: "the writer allows himself to be possessed by the model, but at the same time he possesses the model himself in traditional narrative and rhetorical forms" (191). In his narrative Steinberg constantly foregrounds the dialogue between his own role as possessed and possessive author who selects, eliminates, condenses, develops and orders Asad's memories, which have gaps and suppressions, as well as their own obsessions.[10] On the one hand Steinberg carefully prompts Asad and sometimes feeds him the words for describing his feelings, but on the other hand he also chokes back more probing questions – for example, about the young Asad's reaction to the killing of his mother – and is content to accept what he is prepared to tell.[11] Steinberg notes that Asad has different ways of speaking about his mother and Yindy; when recalling a particular night in Liboi when intruders wanted to rape the crippled Yindy, Steinberg says: "it seems from his rapid and rehearsed diction that the memory of that night is gone, that what he really keeps of that moment are the words with which he tells the tale" (35). When Steinberg asks him about the army and rebel roadblocks in Ethiopia, Asad's "account is quick and stylised, like a story written on a surface of slick, shiny steel. People get taken away, never to be seen again, and then the tale slides on, as if it cannot stop for anything, no matter how alarming or dramatic. I try to think of ways to slow it down" (89). Asad may be reticent when asked about the sexual behaviour of Somali youths, but he is surprisingly forthcoming about the difficulty of his and Foosiya's consummation of their

10 Richard Dowden refers to "Steinberg's diligence in checking and rechecking the narrative and conclusions to make this an authentic co-authorship".

11 Carl Rollyson says: "Only through Steinberg's adroit persistence – he knows when to probe and pry and when to retreat when Asad seems nettled by constant questioning – can the account of Asad's remarkable, almost miraculous life journey emerge".

marriage because of the traditional Somali circumcision she had undergone. And when he later recalls her pregnancy, "he is on a roll [...]. The memories are pouring out and will not cease" (212).

It is Steinberg who contributes an account of the allegiances and lineages in Somali society, which stretch back dozens of generations to the Somalis' six great clan families. He explains the complexities of modern Somali society, as well as the "unwritten rules of conduct" that come from "deep within the lives of the refugees" (23). He compares Asad's childhood recollections of life in the Liboi refugee camp with the reports of NGO s and international newspapers. In 2012 he travels to East Africa, walking in Asad's footsteps through the Hafad neighbourhood in Dire Dawa, and speaking to Ethiopians about Bole Mikhael in Addis Ababa. He provides an account of the incorporation of the Somali Ogaden into Ethiopia and of Somali clans into northern Kenya when the independent state of Somalia was formed in 1960, and of the 1977 war between Ethiopia and Somalia. He includes the massacre in Wardheer of prominent Somalis by the Ethiopian army as background to Asad's innocent account of his childhood there two years later, and wonders about "the countless events that do not come into a person's s head when he is telling his life story to a chronicler. Is it simply a question of chance? [...] or do [they] simply lie untouched, out of reach, on the deep ocean bed of his inner world?" (72). Importantly, Steinberg explains how the AliYusuf clan of Qorahay in the Ogaden "understand themselves to be at the centre of the great drama of Somalia's thwarted nationalism, a part of the limb severed from the motherland" (75), and that in the bloody aftermath of the Somali defeat in 1978 an estimated 800 000 people fled the Ogaden for Somalia – among them Asad's parents. Asad learns from Steinberg his true history: that he was not from an old Mogadishu family, but that his parents were themselves refugees from the Ogaden, and that the story of his "unraveling" goes back much further than his mother's death and his own flight – "a notion he had not dreamed of" (77). Asad responds to the "slippery, difficult gift" (91) of this knowledge about his family history with the words: "For my family to have been on the run for such a long time is a very sad thing" (94).

Asad's journey from Addis Ababa, via Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to South Africa at the beginning of 2004 is another story – like Aher's in *The Lost Boy* – of smugglers, fake travel documents, arrests, networks of traffickers, corrupt border officials and police, and of crawling through border fences. At an early stage of the journey, when things begin to go badly, Steinberg says, "the stability of the story Asad is telling me begins to give way. [...] his memories of the next few days come in the form of flashes and scenes and spectacles, the connections between them not entirely clear"; his "memory

dissolves, or, at any rate, his will to recall fades" (158–59), and his "narrative is racing, desperate to leave this time of transit behind" (160).[12]

5 Living between Zones

Asad's life in South Africa brings his refugee experience of negotiating his way across national and cultural borders into sharp focus, as he tries to make a home in various Somali enclaves and make a living by running a *spaza*, or general trading store, in rural Kirkwood and Sterkstroom in the Eastern Cape, and later in Mabopane outside Pretoria. The store is typically a shack on the edge of a black township, the yard surrounded by a high wooden wall, and the storefront itself covered in wire mesh and bars. Money and merchandise are exchanged through a little half-moon gap at the level of the countertop. In the diasporan Somali community Asad feels himself to be "both in, and yet not in, South Africa" (Steinberg, *A Man* 182). This ambivalent sense of belonging is reinforced in Kirkwood where, sharing a small cage of a room at the back of the shop with the shopkeeper, Asad encounters his fellow Somali's deference towards his toyingly hostile black customers. When Asad's uncle is shot and killed in a robbery in his store in Motherwell outside Port Elizabeth, he is left "feeling that the bottom of his world has fallen away" (198), and leaves the Port Elizabeth area together with the other AliYusuf people.

In 2004, aged about twenty, Asad and an Abdullahi cousin, Kaafi, open a store in the small black township in Sterkstroom, near Queenstown, where they are soon joined by Kaafi's wife and child, and later by Foosiya. Asad has no recollection of their reunion at the Queenstown bus station, so that Steinberg can only try to imagine it, wishing that he could have witnessed with his own eyes this one event in Asad's life. Asad finds himself ambivalently positioned between the supportive network of Somali shopkeepers and the corrupt

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12 Leon de Kock provides an excellent and detailed analysis of the narrative relationship between Steinberg and his interlocutor: "Steinberg works from the inside out. He places himself at the living, palpitating, always fragile heart of a story-in-the-making as it is being experienced, rendering any sense of fixed or settled trajectory questionable, and he narrates in the present tense, not only remaining in touch with his interlocutor throughout the telling of the tale (and showing him drafts, too, as he writes) but also combing and combining diverse realms of knowledge, testing them against each other, and bringing them to his interlocutor for comment. In a sense, Steinberg the scholar [...] defers to the subject of his story. Or, if not 'defers,' then certainly 'negotiates,' observing and reporting back to the reader on the effect that his own enlargement of the more encompassing story-context has on the interlocutor's understanding of his own life".

officials of the Home Affairs Department – and not least by his discovery that in South Africa he is regarded as black. Steinberg observes that the Somalis' relation to the black people around them is Janus-faced: they appreciate the kindness and respect the extended family ties of the elderly Xhosas, but have "a genuine contempt" (220) for their poverty-stricken neighbours whom they regard as having the mentality of confused and violent teenagers. When Kaafi is robbed and knifed to death in their store by two local men, who come to taunt Asad after the charges against them are dropped, Asad feels that he is caught between the dangers of life in South Africa and the danger he would experience as a Daarood and Ogadeni back in Somalia. When Foosiya leaves, pregnant with their second child, for Nairobi and her father's house in Somalia, Asad sells the shop to another Somali businessman.

The motif of living between conflicting zones structures Steinberg's account of Asad's life in South Africa. After an abortive attempt to get to the United States via Brazil on a fake South African passport, Asad comes to understand that "Somalis in South Africa lived in two zones" (242): each of the country's urban centres has a Somali space, a pocket of safety, such as Mayfair in Johannesburg and Marabastad in Pretoria; but to earn a living Somalis need to venture outside their Somali bubble into the dangerous black townships and shacklands. He goes into business with an AliYusuf man who owns a store in the township of Mabopane, but lives in a lodge in Marabastad, in "a pure Somali world" (242). When Asad and his shopkeeper are robbed, badly assaulted and their shop looted, with the cooperation of favourite customers, Asad develops an antipathy towards black people who, he feels, have been reduced by past oppression to "submissive, treacherous slave-beings, beings without self-worth, without honour" (252) and unable to handle the freedom they have attained.

Cape Town, to which Asad relocates, is – like all South African towns – divided into an outer and inner world: "the outer settlements were black townships, the inner towns white neighbourhoods" (177). Mitchell's Plain Town Centre is "thick with Somalis" (255). Asad and yet another AliYusuf man, Hassan, set up a *spaza* shop in the township of Khayelitsha, where they live with the "crazy normality" (259) of customers to whom they sell bread and cigarettes every day threatening to kill the foreign "*makwerekwere*" (258),[13] and young hoodlums shooting at them. Khayelitsha becomes yet another place to

13 *Kwerekwere* (pl. *amakwerekwere*) is an onomatopoeic (imitative of an incomprehensible sound), derogatory term used by black South Africans in many parts of the country to refer to foreigners, especially African immigrants, and also to people of particular ethnicities from South Africa. Here, where the Xhosa word has been borrowed in a colloquial English-language context, the noun stem -*makwerekwere* has been retained and the initial vowel *a*- dropped.

flee from when xenophobic violence breaks out across the country in 2008 and marauding mobs, targeting especially Somalis, chase foreign Africans from their homes, loot and burn their shops, and slaughter them. Asad and Hassan are attacked, their shop is looted, and they flee together with thousands of other Somalis to the Mitchell's Plain Town Centre. Steinberg proposes that, perversely, black xenophobia in South Africa "is a product of citizenship, the claiming of a new birthright. Finally, we belong here, and that means you do not" (270). The crowds rampaging through South Africa's informal settlements were exercising the logic of apartheid – "sorting, categorising, differentiating" (271) – against other Africans. The Somalis, on the other hand, have no interest in making South Africa their home: "They want to make money. And that is what they do. Night and day. Without rest. […] There is something magical, something insidious and relentless, about this moneymaking. Something less than human" (271). For Asad, the space where his shop once stood, and where now only the concrete floor remains, "is evidence of a will to obliterate him, to scorch and burn him until he no longer has a presence on this earth. It is in his history to be obliterated" (284).

Thirty-four Somali families, including Asad and Sadicya, the outcast Galgale woman whom he marries, are relocated from the Soetwater resettlement camp to Blikkiesdorp, where Asad opens another store. Again, the fearful Somalis are intimidated by the township people, and assaulted, robbed and killed by gangsters, often in collaboration with the local street committees and the police. Because Asad will not talk about this period of his life when he becomes a spokesperson for the Somali refugees, Steinberg is obliged to interview the government officials who encountered him during negotiations.

6 Refiguring the Refugee

The trajectory of Asad's life as a refugee is marked by the disappearance from his life for years on end, and then the sudden reappearance, of his Abdullahi and AliYusuf lineage that shapes his fate. He identifies himself with the persona of the child refugee, which is his equivalent of Aher's 'Lost Boy'. As an orphan boy in the Hotel Taleh in Eastleigh in Nairobi, Asad "belonged to everybody […] belonged to nobody" (Steinberg, *A Man* 47). In his mind, waiting to be claimed by his father, he perceived himself as "living in an unfortunate interval from which he would soon be delivered" (50). In Dire Dawa in Ethiopia, he thought of his life as being "in a holding pattern" and as "merely an unexpected delay in his journey between Islii and America" (61). When Asad tells him about his decision to go to South Africa, Steinberg realises that "[h]e

has learned to speak the language of the refugee" – but adds that a refugee "is somebody who escapes violence and fear in search of a stable place", whereas this is not what Asad was doing: "He was willingly leaving a world he understood and heading blindly into the unknown. Why? In the hope that he would come out on the other side of his journey metamorphosed, a new man with a new life" (136). Passing through Eastleigh again on his way to South Africa, Asad is obsessed with "the idea of paths not taken", and perceives himself as "a puppet waiting for his strings to haul him upright" (149). While travelling on the bus to Harare, exhausted and frightened, he is "caught in the spell of a kind of madness" (162). From what Steinberg can reconstruct of Asad's journey south, he is struck by the extent of his loneliness: "Every alliance he formed on the road, every friendship, was always thin, always circumstantial" (169).

In South Africa the division between the different zones in which he lives becomes internalised. While waiting for Foosiya to join him in Kirkwood, he perceives himself as two Asads: "The first was a young man saving a lot of money, a man waiting for his wife to come. […] The second Asad was a boy locked in a bolted room. He was trapped there, day in and day out, a lone Somali in a very strange land" (194). His self-detachment and -objectification grow, and when his uncle is killed in Motherwell, Asad sees himself "from a great height, a shivering wreck of a Somali man in a sea of hostile people" (200). Later, when he finds himself in yet another resettlement camp at Soetwater, he feels himself "splitting in two […] in a makeshift camp of the homeless, forging alliances and selling airtime – he was falling backwards into his own past" (273). The prospect of returning to Khayelitsha after the xenophobic attacks also steers him back into his childhood; "Asad the man and Asad the boy" mingle and blur, and he knows that the violence of Khayelitsha has mixed in him, in Steinberg's formulation, "a strange cocktail of adult and child" (274). On agreeing to move into Blikkiesdorp while awaiting resettlement, he feels that "[w]hatever choices he made, it seemed, his life went around in a circle" (292). When he is eventually interviewed by the Americans with a view to resettlement, he tells "a carefully crafted story" that omits his energy, ingenuity and enterprise, but describes "faithfully and in great detail the incidents of violence to which he had been subject since coming to South Africa […] it was as if he had recorded each act of violence and was replaying the very worst of his life in slow motion" (300). The strategic image of himself that he offers to the Americans is both the truth and a lie: the persona of the refugee is all that remains of Asad Hirsi Abdullahi as in his account he "whittled away at the flesh of his being, leaving only a stick figure, a hapless refugee" (300).

When Asad leaves for America, the communication between Steinberg and himself becomes more troubled, and Steinberg visits him in the Kansas City

apartment in which he has been installed by local resettlement organisations. As a taxpayer in the United States, Asad now has a new sense of home: "Home is where the social security is" (318). Steinberg realises that his sense of his subject has changed – mainly because Asad had told him his story in the misleading language of a refugee, which had been the language required of him at every border post and government office. According to Steinberg,

> [a] refugee has lost control. Great historical forces have upended him and he no longer has a place in the world. He has become an in-between sort of being, suspended between a past in which he belonged somewhere and a future in which he might belong somewhere once more. But for now he is in abeyance; he is swept this way and that, like flotsam in a tide. (312)

Steinberg can no longer usefully think of Asad in terms of a refugee. Rather, he concludes, he is "a person with an enormous appetite for risk" (313). Asad's "trajectory has been shaped by his propensity to plunge, again and again, into the unknown" (313). He and Asad are very different people: the model is prepared to court death in ways that the writer is not. Steinberg explains:

> At the back of our thoughts and our actions, I think, stands an image of a completed life, a sense of who we will have been at the moment of our deaths. For Asad, to have lived a fully human life is to have altered radically the course of his family's history, so that his children and their children and their children in turn live lives nobody in Somalia at the time of his own birth could have imagined. If this is indeed Asad's idea of a worthwhile life then it must, by definition, entail plunging into the unknown. For there is no bridge from the world of his parents to the one he imagines for his children. Getting there requires jumping over a void in the hope that he will land on his feet on the other side. (313)

Steinberg acknowledges that he has followed Asad to America in order to fiddle and probe some more – however, the book was never Asad's; he cooperated in its construction for financial reward. Asad abandons the book shortly after beginning to read it, and is unable to pick it up again. The zone of refuge offered by its narrative is no safe haven. The book upsets him, and this turns to anger. What has come out of Steinberg's relentless digging into his life, he says, is an overwhelming sense of loss: "Everywhere it is loss, loss, loss" (326). Although Steinberg has spent the last couple of years memorialising Asad's life, there is, he concludes, "no intrinsic value in remembering" (326). Asad "cannot

afford to take in the sweep of his life. To remember in this way is crippling. It is better for him [...] to see his past as a series of sparks or flashes, a selection of moments when he was the one who decided what would happen next. That is what he must see in his past in order to craft a future" (326–27). Steinberg's book, Asad's story, is yet another place to flee from.

7 Conclusion

By pursuing the motifs of unhoming, re-homing and contingent homecoming in Bol's refugee memoir and Steinberg's book about textualising the life of a refugee, this essay has tried to suggest how the respective works might be seen metaphorically to offer their subjects narrative zones of refuge from their precarious lives. In the case of Bol, however, his ambivalent homecoming to what has only ever been a void in his existence concludes his memoir on a provisional note. In his autobiographical act of self-discovery and self-creation, the subject Aher Arop Bol has to be sought somewhere in the precarious overlap between his traumatic experiences as a child refugee and the persona of the Lost Boy through which he re-imagines them. Steinberg's more complex, meta-discursive work provides an even less secure narrative refuge for its subject. For Asad to have identified himself with the figure of the refugee and yet not wanting to recognise himself in Steinberg's text constitutes yet a further kind of unhoming. And for Steinberg to conclude that he has miscast his daring subject as an abject refugee is to unsettle himself as well as Asad from the security of their joint narrative. The truth of Asad Abdullahi's story is finally to be sought somewhere on the threshold between the zones in which it has been lived as well as textually crafted. The refugee narrative, it appears, provides its subject with, at best, a precarious zone of refuge.

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CHAPTER 13

"Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe"

Precarity and (American) Dream Narratives in Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers

Julian Wacker

In early September 2017, President Donald Trump announced to scrap the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, commonly referred to as DACA. This governmental measure allows for the temporary protection of children who arrive in the United States as what has been labeled 'illegal' immigrants. While this announcement is perceived as but one of the various steps in Trump's anti-immigrant agenda, for many it marked a new moral low in the administration's attempt to wall up the country's borders. Trump's motion even urged his predecessor Barack Obama, who initiated the program during his term as president, to speak up from his self-imposed period of silence. In his response, Obama writes: "These Dreamers are Americans in their hearts, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper. [...] It is self-defeating – because they want to start new businesses, staff our labs, serve in our military, and otherwise contribute to the country we love" (CNN). Obama's statement, which directly refers to the children in question by their nickname 'Dreamers', locates these young people as a new generation which potentially can and wants to live the American Dream. This does not only highlight a relatively recent turn in American Dream discourse – towards a greater accessibility for non-citizens – but adds another very timely layer to Imbolo Mbue's 2016 novel *Behold the Dreamers*.

Mbue's novel portrays the intertwined, detrimental dynamics of American Dream discourse, late capitalism's heightened emphasis on individualism as well as material gain, and migrant precarity. In so doing, *Behold the Dreamers* employs and overuses the trope of the dream to lay bare how its protagonists, Jende and Neni Jonga, continuously – and harmfully – idealize the American Dream. Ultimately, the American Dream is translocated as an internalized conviction that, as idealized reverie, travels with the Jongas from the United States to Cameroon.

Imbolo Mbue's novel can be read against the backdrop of what has commonly been referred to as 'Afropolitanism'. Ever since writer Taiye Selasi

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published her article "Bye-Bye Babar" in 2005, scholars and writers around the globe have engaged with her usage of Afropolitanism as a means of describing young, educated, and arguably 'hip', contemporary black diasporic identities across the globe. While many of these debates foreclose an engagement with Afropolitanism's various conceptualizations since they, first and foremost, mostly respond to Selasi's admittedly provocative and popular academic piece, Selasi has certainly set the tone for a continuing discussion of African (diasporic) identity politics in the twenty-first century. Today, most of Afropolitanism's opponents tend to read it merely as product-driven cultural production, which is said to ultimately benefit Western interests. In a similar fashion, other scholars criticize its tendencies to elevate the experiences of a privileged few as a 'new single story', to twist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's term, of Africans in an international context. Given the novel's international success and that Mbue has signed one of the most lucrative film deals in history for its adaptation, it is part of an Afropolitan variant of global literature that is widely-circulated and consumed around the globe. Without a doubt, this commodification of diasporic cultural and literary production, which, for instance, favors Afropolitan writing over other writing from the continent, needs to be critically addressed. However, Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* offers a reading that complicates and critiques the larger frameworks, such as its commodification by Western readerships and markets that the novel itself partakes in.

1 American Dream Discourse and Precarity in the Novel

In *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, Korte and Zipp note a "wider public's interest in the [poverty] topic" (11) on a competitive market and provide us with possible figurations of poverty in present-day literary texts. Their deliberations prove useful as a theoretical vantage point to analyze how precarity is represented and mediated in Mbue's novel. As they argue,

> poverty within the textual world is configured in terms of the text's characters and the environments in which these characters are situated: the types of people and lifeworlds identified as 'poor'; the kinds, causes and consequences of the deprivation they experience; the way in which the poor are shown to be able to act and make choices (or not), and how their poverty intersects with gender, age, ethnicity and class; the personality traits ascribed to the poor [...]. (12)

The subsequent analysis follows these observations as it examines how Mbue's *Behold the Dreamer* mediates recent black immigrant precarity in the United States. The novel tells the story of a Cameroonian couple and their son, who migrate to the United States. Subjected to strict immigration laws, Jende Jonga and his wife, Neni, undergo a trial for residence permission. Thanks to his cousin Winston, who has already established the center of his life in New York, Jende starts working as a chauffeur to an upper-class banker at Lehman Brothers. Meanwhile, Neni studies to follow her dream of becoming a pharmacist. From the start, two worlds seemingly collide: the Jongas, who inhabit a precarious niche struggling to make their ends meet, and their employers, Clark and Cindy Edwards, who live a luxurious life between inner-city New York and their other residences. Although certain moments of intimacy and trust exist between the Jongas and the Edwards, the relationship between the two families as well as between the different spouses spirals downward after the 2008 financial breakdown. In the end, the Jongas move back to Limbe, but with them travel the experiences they have made in New York.

For Jende Jonga, the American Dream promises upward social mobility and economic benefit. In one of his first conversations with his employer, Clark Edwards, Jende reveals his dream of becoming someone in the United States:

> Everyone wants to come to America, sir. Everyone. To be in this country, sir. To live in this country. Ah! It is the greatest thing in the world, Mr. Edwards. [...] Because my country is no good, sir [...]. It is nothing like America. I stay in my country, I would have become nothing. I would have remained nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir? I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man. (Mbue 39)

Jende's problematic comparison between Cameroon as a place of lost opportunities and America as a location of hope displays the United States as a place in which the Jongas not only long to belong, but as the only place where 'belonging', from Jende's perspective, is possible. He parallels a negatively connoted notion of a strict societal hierarchy in Cameroon and the notion of becoming, of upward social mobility in the United States. Jende's beginnings as a hardworking, diligent, faithful employee resonate with Catherine Rottenberg's analysis of American Dream discourse in modern African-American literature and Jewish-American literature, in which its ideals become accessible for the individual minority characters through their "readiness to emulate certain norms that are produced, reinforced, and circulated by the American Dream"

(57). More specifically, she argues, "the norms of determination, hard work, and moral uprightness are revealed to be regulatory ideals or normative injunctions that the protagonists constantly must endeavor to approximate and embody if they wish to 'better themselves' [and their condition]" (57). Rottenberg moreover highlights that moral uprightness has always been an integral part of American cultural negotiations of class (58). Upward mobility is then moralized in such a way that, while fame, power, and wealth remain constant determinants, "the motives and the way in which a person transforms him/herself are important and must correspond in some way to the dominant perception of moral uprightness" (59). According to these observations, American Dream discourse, in theory, offers the illusionary possibility of upward social mobility only to those who, on the one hand, are willing to cater to its own individualist notions of self-determination and, on the other hand, display the concept's very own morality.

While said idea that class and status are transformable through the individual's readiness to lift themselves up in society persists, Mbue's text brings to our attention a principal component to the accessibility and performativity of the American Dream: the importance of citizenship and residence permission. Jende's dream of becoming someone, of belonging, is ultimately tied to, first and foremost, his precarious status as an 'illegal' immigrant and his dependency on his employer, Clark Edwards. During his job interview, Edwards, in turn, makes sure that Jende understands his positionality, stating that he is "glad someone understands when they've been given a great opportunity" (Mbue 46). Although Jende, for the most part of the novel, displays the virtues commonly circulated within American Dream discourse, he is unable to achieve upward social mobility in the United States because he is a non-citizen seeking residence permission. As such, *Behold the Dreamers* mediates pre-2008 immigrant precarity as directly linked to a lack of citizenship and the – at least temporary – reliance on upper-class benevolence.

The novel also attests to how the rise of neo-liberal economics have affected American Dream discourse on a national and societal transformation on a global scale. As Simon During notes,

> neo-liberalism has produced a new social group – the precariat – who do not fit the class analysis that could be applied to both to industrial and social capitalism. This is the group of those who fall outside of citizenship, stable employment, and state support. They too are administered within increasingly surveilled and technologized societies but without actually belonging to those societies in the social-democratic sense of 'belonging'. (53)

As Ching Kwan Lee and Yelizavetta Kofmann note, Arne Kalleberg observed in *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* (2011) that precarity is a global phenomenon specifically linked to a shift in uneven, international economic macrostructures (Lee and Kofmann 388). Drawing on Ignacio Lewkowicz's observation that this new form of neo-liberal precarity has surpassed the state of temporary crisis and become a fundamental principle of subjectivity, Gabriel Giorgio moreover adds that "[p]recarity means, then, not only an instance of deprivation and vulnerability but also a threshold in which the very assumptions about what a subject is should be reinvented and recreated. Subjectivity, therefore, cannot be understood as a defense or an immunization against precarity, but a 'work' through it, a relation with that which is left once the structures that provided social protection and symbolic recognition are dismantled" (70). As such, "precarity – or 'precariousness' – also indicates an ontological condition of vulnerability, exposure, or capacity to suffer shared by all living creatures: the inability of life to survive without a protective net provided by others, by social caring, and collective protection" (71). In the novel, the Jongas are unable to work through precarity as part of their subjectivity because they cling on to and idealize the American Dream, even as they suffer dramatic consequences. While a constant threat of precarity might today be regarded as a crucial part in subjectivity formation, it is far from being – as much as American Dream discourse – a universally applicable concept. In other words, different groups of people in different locations are affected in different ways by precarity. In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Guy Standing acknowledges that the international rights structures in combination with neo-liberal developments continue to construct new groups of denizens, which vary in their assigned rights (94). With this regard, he locates undocumented immigrants, like Jende and Neni, and asylum seekers as the least secure because, albeit being covered by the territory principle, they have no economic or political rights.

The text portrays the American Dream in an ambivalent state. As the 2008 financial breakdown unfolds and Barack Obama is sworn in as the 44th President of the United States, i.e. crisis on the one hand, narratives (and rhetoric) of hope on the other, the protagonists' inability to escape precarity within the United States strips the American Dream of its supposed universal, yet always already restricted claim. Along the lifelines of the protagonists, the idea of an American Dream is not only detached from a socio-political and national American context but translocated as a highly personal, intrinsic set of values traveling with the main characters. However, *Behold the Dreamers* does not only engage with black immigrant precarity but also cracks the American Dream's façade of upper-class life as a secure, carefree and achievable goal. While the scope of this essay forecloses an in-depth analysis of the

Edwards' situation, Cindy Edwards' elaboration on her former life exemplifies this crumbling: "But I came away from all that, as you can see. I *worked* my way through college, got a job, my own apartment, *learned* how to carry myself well and fit effortlessly in this new world so I would never be looked down on again, or seen as a piece of shit. Because I know what I am, and no one can ever take away *the things I've achieved for myself*" (Mbue 124, emphasis added). As Cindy Edwards sees it, in her own case hard work and the willingness to learn eagerly reassure an entrepreneurial self. Cindy Edwards, however, uses the rhetoric of the American Dream to describe her – from the start – still comparatively privileged white position. And yet, the Edwards' relationship draws to a dramatic end: the time-consuming work ethic of Lehman Brothers' banker Clark and their unwillingness to work on their personal problems culminate in Cindy Edwards' suicide.

2 Re-living the Dream: *Behold the Dreamer*'s Use of Dream Tropes

The text's thematic negotiations of what it means to strive for economic benefit as Cameroonian immigrants without residence permission find formal expression in its use of dream tropes. The over-use of these tropes emplots a narrative layer which, for the Jongas, blurs the lines between realization and reverie – and ultimately forecloses said working-through precarity as part of their subjectivity. For instance, when Jende goes to work on the day of the financial crash, the text's third-person narrator elaborates on possible consequences after the economic breakdown: "Dream homes would not be bought. Dream wedding plans would not be reconsidered. Dream vacations would not be taken, no matter how many days had been worked in the past year, no matter how much respite was needed" (Mbue 184). The economic crisis destroys the benefits that would ideally result from hard work, i.e. dream homes, dream wedding plans, and dream vacations, and keeps employees trying to work even harder in the face of a dooming existential crisis although they might have already exhausted their capacities. Directly following this passage, now with an internal focalization on Jende, the text presents him as unable to reasonably grasp the calamities of slavery in US-American history because he idealizes the United States and the American Dream:

> The only difference between the Egyptians then and the Americans now, Jende *reasoned*, was that the Egyptians had been cursed by their own wickedness. They had called an abomination upon their land by worshipping idols and enslaving their fellow humans, all so they could live in splendor.

> They had chosen riches over righteousness, rapaciousness over justice. The Americans had done no such thing. And yet, all through the land, willows would weep for the end of many dreams. (184–85, emphasis added)

Although Americans also chose "riches over righteousness, rapaciousness over justice" in "enslaving their fellow humans", i.e. generations of Africans during transatlantic slavery, Jende is unable to acknowledge the lineage of slavery that, arguably, finds a current variant in his own precarity. While Neni is working for Cindy Edwards in the Edwards' cottage during vacation, the Jongas conspire to steal from Cindy Edwards' money and again play the system to their own benefit. Jende's cousin Winston, however, advises him not to betray the Edwards because otherwise Jende will "be like Joseph in Egypt … [b]ut instead of solving a dream about seven years of plenty and seven years of famine, [he']ll be living in seven years of hardship" (202). Paradoxically, Winston's advice to play by the rules contains a strong critique of capitalism: unlike Joseph, capitalism is unable to resolve the seven years of plenty and seven years of famine but creates ever-renewing hardship. As such, capitalism in this sense becomes a misreading of Joseph's dream. The passage thus also further contours the text's structural engagement with dream tropes.

When Jende loses his job as Clark Edwards' chauffeur, his new situation finds expression in the text's reversal of American Dream rhetoric: "The next week, after a series of long restless nights, he got a job washing dishes at two restaurants. […] On his first day back a colleague told him about an opening at another restaurant in Hell's kitchen" (Mbue 257). Instead of taking the path from dishwasher to millionaire, Jende is now a dishwasher who formerly worked for a millionaire. This is how Jende judges his newly found occupation:

> Better this than to be like all those people with no jobs in this bad economy, he consoled himself. Still, it was an undignified fall. To be wearing a suit and holding a briefcase every day, driving to important places, eavesdropping on important conversations, only to now find himself scraping leftovers from plates and loading them into a dishwasher. To once have driven a Lexus to executive meetings, only to now stand in a corner cleaning silverware. (257)

In retrospect, Jende still validates his job as a chauffeur and perceives his new job as a drastic downgrading. He values symbols of corporate business (e.g. the suit and the briefcase) that, in his perception, marked him as important.

While the Jongas are trying to (re)live the American Dream at daytime, its calamities are foreshadowed through nightmares when Neni and Jende are

asleep. Shortly before the financial collapse, for instance, Jende wakes up from a nightmare:

> Two weeks before it happened, he had a lifelike dream, the kind of dream he would remember in detail even months after. He was back in Limbe with Bosco, who, oddly, was slender and tall and looked nothing like the tree trunk of a man he was in real life. […] ‘Don’t give your money to money doublers. Money doublers are bad people. God will punish them! […] They will never sleep at night again. Their children will all die horrible deaths!’ […] Finally, out of breath, he got to the beach. But there was no water there, only a pile of garbage in its place, foul-smelling and stretching to the horizon. (Mbue 168–69)

While Jende attributes this dream to his feeling of guilt for not sending back money to support his relative Bosco, it foretells Jende’s own development in the United States: supporting the capitalist system as represented by “the money doublers”, which can stand for both local practices in Cameroon and internationally-operating bankers in the United States (like his employer Clark Edwards), leads to seemingly endless contamination and catastrophe. Even as the Great Recession unfolds and the Jongas experience its brutal consequences at first hand – the pressure on Jende climaxes in him beating Neni –, they cannot rid themselves of the American Dream’s seductive lure. In the following, the text mediates the global financial breakdown as causing a far-reaching precarity which surpasses questions of citizenship. As Jende then states, “*Papier* is not everything. In America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how many people with papers are struggling. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country. They have American passports, and yet they are sleeping on the street, going to bed hungry, losing their jobs and houses every day in this … this economic crisis” (307). This passage simultaneously functions as an unsuccessful wake-up call for Neni to stop the reverie. While Jende is ready to move back to Cameroon as his residence trial is failing, his wife desperately tries to find means for them to stay in New York. One night close to their encroaching deportation back to Cameroon, the Jongas both experience nightmares which again idealize America as a country of opportunities and stigmatize their hometown Limbe as a place of lost hope:

> They encouraged each other to be hopeful, to believe that they would one day realize the dream of becoming Americans. But that night they had nightmares that they told the other nothing of the next morning. […]

> Neni dreamed of returning to a largely deserted Limbe, a town devoid of the young and ambitious, scantily populated with those too old, too young, and too feeble to flee to distant lands for the riches that could not be gotten in Limbe. (227)

It is this nightmare of losing opportunities and material security once promised by the ideal of the American Dream that continues to haunt the Jongas. The text unmasks the lure of the capitalist USA and the accompanying brain drain of African localities as a horrible trade-off.

3 Translocating the American Dream

Although the novel paints a dark and strenuous picture of immigrant life in the United States, the Jongas' return to Limbe does not break with the ideas that the American Dream promotes. Even though Jende acknowledges that his dreams of becoming someone within the United States' economic system remain unachievable, he cannot escape the American Dream and his reverie. The American Dream, the dream of becoming someone economically, travels with the Jongas back to Limbe. Although they have experienced exclusion and precarity in twenty-first-century Great Recession USA, the Jongas bring back with them all premises to reproduce precarity elsewhere. After their return, "they would have enough money for Jende to become one of the richest men in New Town" (Mbue 352). Jende refuses the offer to work as a hotel manager; instead, "he wanted to run his own business, get to know what it was like to answer to no man" (353). Given Jende's dependency on Clark Edwards and his experiences in the United States, one might feel tempted to read this as an emancipatory effort. While Limbe has experienced capitalist influences since colonialism, the Jongas are ready to plant the American Dream into the town's soil upon their return. This is not to say that the text caters "to the [colonial] illusion that cultures and societies could indeed be transplanted (or translocated) wholesale from one geographical location to another without significant modification" (Munkelt et al. xxvii). But it translocates the American Dream as an internalized belief system, i.e. strips the individualist, neoliberal ideology of socio-geographical confinements and connects it across spatial entities. The text satirizes Jende's efforts to start a business in Limbe: "His slogan would be 'Jonga Enterprises: Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe.' He would diversify and conglomerate and acquire as many competitors as possible. But he'd have to start small. Maybe he'd own a couple of taxis or *benskins*. Or hire people to farm the eight acres of land his father

had left for him in Bimbia" (Mbue 353). Starting small, aiming big: Jende now embodies neoliberalism's entrepreneurial self-concept without ever realizing that he does. When his cousin Winston, himself a Wall Street lawyer, reminds him not to become an "American Wonder", the text focalizes Jende's thoughts on Winston's advice: "He would never become an American Wonder, one of those *mbutukus* who went to America and upon their return home spoke with laughable American accents, spraying 'wannas' and 'gonnas' all over sentences. They strutted around town wearing suits and cowboy boots and baseball caps, claiming to understand very little of Cameroonian culture because they were now too American" (355). Undoubtedly, this stands in stark contrast to Jende's corporate slogan. This satirical, almost paradoxical intertwining of Jende's self-concept and its simultaneous impenetrability through its over-use of dream tropes unrecognizably blurs the lines between constant dreaming and realization.

The novel's last chapter makes it apparent how life in the United States has transformed the Jongas. Especially Neni, who has been hit by Jende in an unrelenting escalation of their personal situation, mourns her children's lost future in the US:

> They would lose the opportunity to grow up in a magnificent land of uninhibited dreamers. They would lose the chance to be awed and inspired by amazing things happening in the country, incredible inventions and accomplishments by men and women who look like them. They would be deprived of freedoms, rights, and privileges that Cameroon could not give its children. They would lose unquantifiable benefits by leaving New York City, because while there existed great towns and cities all over the world, there was a certain kind of pleasure, a certain type of adventurous and audacious childhood, that only New York City could offer a child. (Mbue 361–62)

The novel explicitly addresses the many inhibitions immigrants, and citizens, face in the United States, and yet, Neni still holds on to a possible idealized future for her children. The textual dream narrative entraps Neni in an idealized, constant re-living of the American Dream. The point that the text makes, I argue, is not that the text portrays constant hope for migrants in precarious situations to finally achieve something if they only kept trying but that the American Dream in its contemporary form entraps people in an impenetrable, ever-repeating neoliberal nightmare narrative. This narrative hinders processing precarity as part of their subjectivity. Take, for example, how the text narrates Neni's thoughts on the plane back to Limbe: "Cindy's things she

planned to reserve for special occasions. She would wear them to weddings and anniversaries to show those girls that even though she had returned home and was living among them, she was not one of them – she was now a *woman of class*, with *real* designer items, and none of them could compete with her" (381, emphasis added). This satirical comment on the concept of the American Dream stresses that Neni's status actually, once more, depends on Cindy Edwards' supposed charity and benevolence. It can, however, be read as yet another transferal of neo-liberal, materialist ideologies to Limbe. The fact that Neni elevates herself over other women in town "even though she had returned" signals to a translocation of possessive individualism as an intrinsic set of values. The chapter's final passage epitomizes the ideal of a supposed American Dream as a narrative without a final waking up: " 'What did you say, Papa?' a drowsy awakening Liomi asked. Jende turned from the front seat and looked at his son. 'Guess where we are,' he whispered. 'Where?', Liomi asked, struggling to open his eyes. 'Guess,' Jende whispered again. The boy opened his eyes and said, 'Home?' " (381–82). This very overtly open ending, with the question mark lingering on, leaves the reader wondering if there actually is a waking-up. Liomi, a next generation Jonga, who grows up between Limbe and New York, a 'Dreamer' so to speak, leaves us with the question where exactly home is located. The question of belonging becomes a guessing game between two locations yet remains entrapped in the novel's limbo of waking-up.

Nigerian novelist Chibundu Onuzo asks a succinct question in her review of Mbue's novel: "Who are the dreamers? Jende and Neni, who believe that through hard work and luck they can force their way into the American dream? Or we, the readers, who close our eyes to the Jendes in our midst, lulling ourselves into inertia with dreams of peace and security?". Or, are the Dreamers the children formerly protected under DACA whose right to stay in the US has come under attack? *Behold the Dreamers* invites these questions as it posits precarity as a direct consequence not only of late capitalism's macrostructures but of the American Dream's individualist strivings for economic benefit, which, in the novel, ultimately refuse to be bound to any specific location. The narrative mediates black migrant precarity prior to the 2008 financial crash as closely tied to notions of citizenship, while the collapse functions as a turning point not only in the Jongas' lives but extends precarity into a more universal sphere, less bound to civic rights. The family's return to Limbe, however, does not break with the criticized American Dream ideal; rather, the idea of individual success and material profit travels with them as an internalized set of values and translocates the novel's dream narrative. Kept in this continuous state of dreaming, the Jongas themselves turn into people who, through their

engagement back in Cameroon, might reproduce precarious dependencies elsewhere.

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Chapter 14

The Scenario of (Im-)Migrants as Scroungers and/or Parasites in British Media Discourses

Andreas Musolff

1 Introduction

The use of dehumanizing metaphors in immigration debates has become a focus of numerous studies in cognitively informed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)-oriented research over the past decade.[1] The categorization 'dehumanizing' refers not just to the metaphorical source for a target group of humans as something other than 'human',[2] but to its function of stigmatizing its target as being of less worth than a 'proper human'.[3] This stigmatizing, degrading function puts it on a par with racist hate speech in general, but is specifically directed at people from 'outside' the home nation or community who are identified as, e.g., 'foreigners', 'strangers', 'refugees', 'asylum seekers' etc. Whilst the (dis-)qualification effects of such metaphor use have been well documented and analysed in detail, we may still ask what makes stigmatizing metaphors gain argumentative plausibility and affective force in a discourse community? After all, they clearly stand out as strongly polemical, extremist and dangerous language use that is not approved of in mainstream discourse and may even incur legal sanction and prosecution if it can be proven to constitute 'hate speech' or 'incitement to violence' etc.[4] Figurative language use may reduce the risk of prosecution, as it provides an easy excuse for the speakers along the

1 Cf., for instance, Catalano, Cisneros, Cunningham-Parmenter, Hart (*Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science*), Hart ("Force-Interactive Patterns"), KhosraviNik, KhosraviNik et al., Musolff ("Immigrants and Parasites"), Richardson and Colombo, Santa Ana (" 'Like an Animal' "), Santa Ana (*Brown Tide Rising*), Santa Ana ("Three Mandates"), Tipler and Ruscher, Wodak (*The Politics of Fear*).

2 The metaphorical use of non-human source concepts for humans (e.g. HUMANS AS ANIMALS/AS ANGELS) can look back at a venerable tradition in the form of the MACROCOSM-MICROCOSM correspondences of CHAIN OF BEING theories that reach back several millennia in Western and other cultures, cf. Lovejoy, Lakoff and Turner (166–67).

3 For stigmatization theory and its recent theoretical and methodological advances cf. Bos et al., Dijker, and Goffman.

4 On incitement as part of hate speech theory and pragmatics cf. Brown (26–30), Kurzon.

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lines of 'not having meant literally' what they said; however, at the very least they face severe criticism and disapproval as 'racist', 'irrational' and/or face-damaging comparisons with Nazi-speech or other historically stigmatized forms of discourse (Gelber; Stötzel).

This paper attempts to analyse in detail the function of one specific dehumanizing metaphor, viz., the stigmatisation of immigrants as *social parasites* in British public discourse,[5] in relation to three genre-specific sub-discourses that correspond to various communities of practice (Holmes and Meyerhoff, Wenger), viz. that of the mainstream press, that of managed internet forums, such as the BBC's *Have Your Say* website, and lastly, the 'Blogosphere'. In this way, we hope to gain a differentiated picture of different argumentative and narrative sub-strands of metaphor use that can help us to identify its discursive function(s) in more detail than a broad 'metaphor-as-(dehumanizing) categorization' approach would do.

2 Data and Methodology

The data for this analysis consist of three samples: a press sample, a sample of three online discussion forums that are maintained on the BBC under their popular *Have Your Say* website (www.bbc.co.uk/news/have_your_say/) and 40 Internet weblogs (Blogs) with readers' comments as far as these have been kept accessible by the website managers.

The press sample consists of press articles that have appeared in mainstream UK media, which have been collected from the online sites of the respective newspapers or magazines. This sample does not contain readers' comments, even if the respective media operate comment sites of their online versions. The *Have Your Say* sample, on the other hand, consists exclusively (with the obvious exception of the forum theme question) of online comments by members of the public who participate in the forum debates. The third sample, i.e. Blogs, was collected by a Google search for keywords, with the specific goal of finding websites containing *parasite*-metaphors in relation to the immigration topic. The three samples are so different in elicitation procedure, respective time frame and size that they cannot be regarded as balanced, let alone validated in a statistical sense. They are solely intended to provide a heuristic basis

5 Here and in the following text, italicisation (apart from titles of newspapers etc.) is meant to indicate the discursive manifestation of linguistic items such as *parasite*. By contrast, when their semantic-conceptual aspect is highlighted, this is indicated here by small capitals (hence, 'PARASITE', 'CHAIN OF BEING concept', etc.).

TABLE 14.1 Corpus overview

Media	**Newspaper and magazine articles (2003–2016)**	*Have Your Say* **Online forums (April-June 2010)**	**Blogs (accessed December 2013)**
Titles/key words	*Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Observer*, *Scotsman*, *Spectator*, *Sun*, *Telegraph*, *Times*	(1) Should politicians be talking about immigration? (2) How should immigration be tackled? (3) Are immigration rules fair?	40 websites, searched on www by key words: *immigration*, *parasites*, *UK*
No. of items	238 articles	2473 postings (566, 881, and 1026 for the respective forums; with altogether 81 postings removed by BBC online forum management)	40 websites
No. of words	230,756	333,518	89,950

for further comparative analysis of different media genres and, in particular, for exploring how press discourse produced by journalists (and, via the press, also by politicians) relates to the more general public's use of stigmatizing metaphors.

The above table (Table 14.1) gives an overview of the range and size of the whole corpus. Word counts for Blogs include some extra website material; their word count is thus not as exact as that for the other media genres (in addition to being the smallest sample).

The methodology used here is corpus-based analysis of metaphorical discourse,[6] specifically 'scenario analysis' as applied to political metaphors.[7] The

6 Cf. Charteris-Black (*Corpus Approaches*), Deignan ("Corpus-Based Research"), Musolff (*Political Metaphor Analysis*).

7 Cf. Musolff ("Metaphor Scenarios"), Semino (220–22), Sinding.

category of 'scenario' serves as an analytical construction to capture clusters of conceptually closely related figurative formulations in a corpus, which add up to mini-narratives, with default participants, action schemas outcomes and attached standard evaluations/stances. It is related but not identical to the notion of semantic 'frames' as conceptual ensembles that include a selection of domain elements and a relational 'schema', which help the reader or listener to integrate new linguistic or other semiotic input into a context that makes it meaningful.[8] 'Scenarios' are a dynamic and relatively content-'rich' type of frame that includes narrative and evaluative perspectives, which make the frame a platform for drawing strong inferences and, thus, for use in political discourses and planning.

As framing devices, scenarios combine snippets of practical knowledge to arrive at a default conclusion or evaluation based on common sense experience and knowledge, e.g., that 'if you have only limited resources, you cannot afford scroungers depriving you of them' or 'if you are infected with a toxic substance you need to get rid of it'. These conclusions can be applied to the target notion by designating SCROUNGER or POISON status to a social group vis-a-vis a larger entity, e.g. a nation state, as the PERSON or BODY. The *parasite* metaphor fits both these versions of what could be termed the SCROUNGER-scenario of immigration, which is one of four scenario groupings that can be identified in discourses about migration, e.g. in the figurative passages of the *Have Your Say* discussion forum:

1. SPACE-CONTAINER scenarios are present in 21% of the *Have Your Say* postings.[9] The 'home' society/nation is conceptualized as a *container* with distinct *boundaries*, which distinguish those *on the outside* from those *inside*: immigrants are thus *outsiders* that want to *come/move into the container*. The *container* has *doors* or other openings that can be *closed*, *open* or *half-open* and it is seen as having a *limited capacity* to include people; if too many immigrants come in, this increases the *pressure* inside to *bursting point* and necessitates the erection of new *barriers*.
2. MOVEMENT scenarios (specific to immigrants as PARTICIPANTS) for another fifth of postings (20%). The most famous (or, rather, infamous) scenario version is that of a *flood*, *tide* or *wave* that *pours/rushes* into the container. It fits into the wider concept complex of a *mass movement*, which is also indicated by verbs such as *flock*,

8 For the semantic-cognitive concept of 'frames', and 'schemas' cf. Fillmore, Taylor (87–90).

9 Percentages for scenario types given here indicate their relative frequencies to each other out of 100%. Some passages can be allocated to several scenario-types.

pass through, *overwhelm*. However, there are also instances of single immigrants being pictured as *swimming over*.

3. (RE-)ACTION scenarios (specific to CONTAINER-insiders as PARTICIPANTS) form the biggest group (37%). They fall into two distinct groups: on the one hand, those politicians and social groupings who are viewed as (and mostly condemned for) *inviting*, *letting*, *allowing*, *bringing* immigrants into the country, and on the other hand those who try to *send them home*, *round them up*, *chuck* or *kick them out* or at least *limit*, *target* and *control* immigration. Their reactions can be violent, as indicated by terms such as *backlash*, *combustible issue*, *dangerous game*, *invasion*, *rivers of blood*,[10] *start a revolution*, *storm troopers*, *time bomb*, *weapon*, which portrays immigration as a wilful violation of the INSIDERS' rights and their predicted response to this perceived aggression.
4. The remaining 22% are accounted for by the EFFECT (OF MIGRATION ON THE HOME COMMUNITY) scenarios and can be differentiated into three sub-scenarios: MIX, GAIN and SCROUNGER. The first one is most strongly represented in the online commentaries and in tabloid anti-immigrant press articles, referring as it does to an alleged blending of cultures that makes them interchangeable, unrecognizable but most importantly *submerges*, *dominates* or *subjugates* traditional British culture, i.e. the effect that insiders recognize 'when they go out in the street' (see above). This sub-scenario includes colorful formulations such as the supposed vision of *Coronation Street* (a TV soap opera set in a terraced street, supposedly in the Manchester area) having been *moved to Pakistan*; it is particularly frequently used in debates about the pros and cons of 'multiculturalism'. The GAIN sub-scenario is confined to the quality press and small sections of the forums that report and comment on debates about those immigrants that *benefit UK Plc*, who are among the *best and brightest* of their respective home countries and who may thus provide an *economic benefit* to Britain: it is mostly used in arguments made by centre-left leaning journalists and public figures in defence of continued emigration of certain specialized groups (e.g., foreign students, skilled

10 The phrase *rivers of blood* alludes to the conservative politician Enoch Powell's speech of 20 April 1968 (Charteris-Black *Politicians and Rhetoric* 27–28). It is also mentioned in the press and Blog samples: in the former it is referred to predominantly as an exemplary historical case of dangerous xenophobic rhetoric; the Blogs sample includes both positive and negative evaluations.

workers, business people). The last sub-scenario, which is of particular interest here, is that of the IMMIGRANT-AS-SCROUNGER who *sucks*, *drains* or *bleeds the country dry*, *aims for freebies* and *lives off* or *sponges from Britain*, thus exploiting it as a *treasure island.* Its references to immigrants range from depictions as *welfare-tourists* to their dehumanizing stigmatization as *leeches*, *bloodsuckers* and *parasites*, which will be analysed in detail in the following section. They make up the largest subgroup of the EFFECT scenarios and amount to c. 13%.

3 Immigrants as 'Parasites'

A closer view at the stigmatization of (im)migrants as *parasites* reveals a complex picture of the immigration debate in Britain. As part of the SCROUNGER sub-scenario, PARASITE metaphors do indeed occur across all three genres under review (press articles, blogs and online forums) but their frequencies, collocation patterns and argumentative contexts across the media genres are markedly different.

3.1 *Immigrants as 'Parasites' in the* Have Your Say *Discussion Forum*

Throughout all discussion strands on the *Have Your Say* forum, the SCROUNGER scenario is used in an assertive-aggressive way to depict immigrants as people who do not 'earn their living' but instead 'live off' the host society, thus damaging its resources. They can even take the form of quasi-allegorical fantasies as in this scenario escalation in successive postings on the first forum strand:

(1) Illegal immigrants […] are not welcome here. […] If I walked into someones [*sic*] home that I didn't know unannounced and said I was moving in I would expect to get filled in. Obviously I'm not saying do that just deport them to wherever they came from. (BBC, HYS-1, 29/04/2010).[11]

(2) So, what you are saying is that if you live in a nicer house than I do, it is OK with you that I just move into your house, let you and your family

11 All quotations from the online forums used as examples have been anonymized and are identified here only by reference to the respective *Have Your Say*-sample (forum-threads 1–3) and the date of the posting. Omissions are indicated by '[…]' but all special notations, highlighting, typographic and other errors in the postings have been preserved and none added.

live in one of the rooms while my family and I take over the rest, eat the food that you work and pay for, set the TV to receive only the channels that I want to watch, while forcing you to learn my language and observe only my traditions and customs? [...] [Y]ou would have a great deal of difficulty finding such a tolerant society that would put your views and needs above the views and needs of their own citizenry. I feel sure that many of us will be only too willing to wish you 'Goodbye'! (BBC, HYS-1, 29/04/2010).

(3) OK so I to [*sic*] would like a better life for myself and my family [;] so on this basis all I have to do is move into a multi millionaires [*sic*] home (with indoor swimming pool of course) expect the owners and servants to allow us to stay there, feed all of us for years, cloth all of us for years, tend to all our medical needs and not say a 'Bigoted' word against us and in general give us anything we ask for why we do nothing or give nothing in return. Sorry it does not work like that! (BBC, HYS-1, 29/04/2010).

These increasingly grotesque exaggerations of the SCROUNGER scenario show how their authors are competing to produce the most outrageous horror scenario version of the immigrants' catastrophic invasion of the speakers' home. The conceit of assuming the role of the aggressor reveals the intensity of their xenophobic sentiments: they cast themselves as the wrongdoer to convince themselves and their readers that ethical condemnation, persecution and exclusion of the invaders are justified. Unsurprisingly, such use of the SCROUNGER scenario often overlaps with the INSIDER-(RE)ACTION scenario, so that radical measures against the 'sponging' illegal immigrants are advocated, e.g. using the army to "round up imigrants [*sic*] who are not working & deport them immediately" (BBC, HYS-1, 29/04/2010). As regards the use of metaphors such as *parasites*, *leeches*, or *sucking blood/life out of* [*the host society*], the picture becomes more complicated: in the first place they appear to be rare in general, accounting as they do for just 16 instances in a sample of 2,473 postings, and of these 50% are directly targeted at immigrants, as in the following two examples:

(4) If they haven't been detected for ten years then they are either living via the proceeds of crime or tax dodging. And that makes them parasites and criminals (BBC, HYS-2, 30/04/2010).

(5) [...] the sort of immigrants who Labour has been busy encouraging are precisely the sort whose existence guarantees that quality, skilled immigrants don't consider the UK a worthy destination. These dregs naturally become potential Labour 'clients' of lazy spongers and parasites, almost guaranteed to vote for the party who will keep feeding them benefits (BBC, HYS-3, 09/06/2010).

The remaining 50% of *parasite* examples in *Have Your Say*, however, consist of critical thematisations of such uses within a context of arguments that defend the right of immigrants (see examples 6 and 7 which both react to the posting in example 4) or engage in what might be called 'counter-usage' by applying the metaphor to 'indigenous' UK benefit receivers, with whom the immigrants are compared favourably, as in examples 8 and 9:

(6) And Gordon [Brown, = then Labour PM] and Dave [Cameron, = leader of the Conservatives] want to keep them as 'parasites and criminals'. Nick Clegg [= leader of the Liberal Democrats] wants to let them contribute towards society [by way of an amnesty]. Sounds good to me. (BBC, HYS-2, 30/04/2010).

(7) This is a true story. A young man came to England from Zimbabwe to study business and finance [followed by story of an immigrant who through no fault of his own became illegal] comment 56 called this young man a parasite and a criminal. [...] I shudder to read some of the comments here. (BBC, HYS-2, 30/04/2010).

(8) Lets [*sic*] tackle the real problems of a lazy bunch of parasites feeding of [*sic*] the life blood of our hard working people, who consider benefits to be a God given right and work to be beneath them and stop bashing the hard working immigrants, just because they are fulfilling a vital place in our farms and factories (BBC, HYS-1, 29/04/2010).

(9) [...] there are far more work-shy benefit scrounging and criminal indigenous Brits [than immigrants] who suck the life out of the public services. (BBC, HYS-3, 10/06/2010).

3.2 *Immigrants as 'Parasites' in the Press*

The press sample appears to have a much larger share of SCROUNGER scenarios than the online discussion forum, i.e. 25% (= almost double that of the forum). This can be explained as an effect of including strongly anti-immigration biased texts from the tabloids in the sample. However, the *parasite* metaphor is again only sparsely documented (occurrence in just 20 texts out of 238), and only in a few cases are they directly employed by the authors in an assertive sense to denote immigrants. The vast majority quote the *parasite* metaphor (or claim to quote it) as having been used by others, e.g.:

(10) The attempt of the far right to present the citizens of these countries as parasites [...] is as absurd as it is repellent (*The Scotsman*, 04/01/2014).

(11) The government is telling us that the coming Romanians and Bulgarians are ill-educated, parasitic benefit tourists. These people deserve better (*The Guardian*, 05/02/2013).

(12) people like me: non-EU immigrants […] are all viewed as grasping parasites (*The Spectator*, 27/04/2013).

(13) 'I don't believe everyone moving around the European labour market are parasites or criminals trying to abuse the welfare systems', said Mr Juncker [EU commission president]. (*Daily Express*, 10/07/2014)

Note that example 13 from the tabloid *Daily Express* contains an explicit rejection of the *parasite* metaphor, albeit in the form of a quotation from the EU Commission president, in the context of an EU parliament debate. It is unlikely that the *Daily Express* (which is strongly anti-immigrant and anti-EU) shared Juncker's attitudes but even they do not criticize his opposition to *parasite*-terminology. Example 12 (from the venerable, now right-leaning magazine *The Spectator*) and example 13 show that even media which due to their general political line can be expected to rely strongly on the SCROUNGER scenario shy away from using or endorsing the *parasite* metaphor. It seems that for the mainstream press across the political spectrum this metaphor is too ideologically loaded to be used freely and uncritically; instead they report, quote and reflect it critically as being employed by what they regard as the xenophobic/racist part of the political spectrum in Britain.

3.3 *Immigrants as 'Parasites' in the Blogosphere*

The picture is completely different for the Blogs. Most of these start with strong assertions of immigrants' *parasite*-status, often with headlines such as the following:

(14) Muselmanic Welfare Parasites Cost Britain £13+ BILLION A YEAR! (sheikyermami.com/muselmanic-welfare-parasites-cost-britain-13-billion-a-year/).

(15) Britain: Muslim immigrants are the chief parasites (jonjayray.wordpress.com/2007/10/03/britain-muslim-immigrants-are-the-chief-parasites/).

Such headlines/Blog titles are then followed up by emphatic endorsements and reinforcements in the main text body of the Blog and its further comments, which detail the *parasites*' alleged effect on the *host* in graphic detail:

(16) Parasitic Immigrants arrive here with their begging bowls out, to milk our hard won welfare & housing system. IDI Amin was not a nice guy but he had his country at heart, when he slung out its milking immigrants (www.weeklygripe.co.uk/a294.asp)

(17) Anyone can see that Muslims are pouring in unchecked and bringing the entire country to its knees, like parasites on a host […] the country is slowly becoming diseased and weak. (www.liveleak.com/view?i=83b_1381867592)

(18) The irony of the situation is inescapable: their [= the immigrants'] parasitical behavior obliges governments, through taxpayers, to subsidize their adopted country's own destruction. (answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20141206204434AALHoSo)

In these Blog comments, the general SCROUNGER scenario is clearly present but, at least in the latter two, the PARASITE concept implies the idea of a deadly threat beyond the more general notion of damage to the host: the PARASITE is thought here of as an organism that weakens or destroys the host. This latter version goes far beyond the general PARASITE-AS-SCROUNGER idea as it presupposes the source concept of a BIO-PARASITE that kills the host either by taking all of its sustenance or infecting it with a disease or actively destroying it. This biologized PARASITE domain is historically relatively new. It originated during the enlightenment thanks to advances in scientific experimental methods and started being applied to socio-political targets only since the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, in contrast to the PARASITE-AS-SCROUNGER concept that has existed since antiquity and played a famous role in literary satire about idle servants or toadying courtiers (e.g. Roman satires, Renaissance plays by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson).[12] Whereas the latter were ridiculed and (dis-)qualified as being a nuisance that must be controlled and kept in check but not regarded as an existential threat, the biologized version asks for more drastic measures: the preferred scenario outcome of a parasite infection is the destruction of the parasite (lest it destroys the host). Its most infamous historical precedent – which is still referred to in the press as a 'warning from history' – is the stigmatization of Jews in Nazi-propaganda and -ideology.[13]

We thus have not one but two historical antecedents for *parasite* metaphors in today's usage: the ancient but today still comprehensible and usable figure of the lazy scrounger, a contemptible and ludicrous but ultimately only annoying figure, and the (popular) science version of a bio-parasite, which not only damages its host by reducing its resources but can destroy it. Both these versions fit the SCROUNGER scenario as identified in our corpus; in order to differentiate the two types, we therefore need to consider the metaphor's

12 Cf. Damon, Gullestad, Musolff ("Immigrants and Parasites"), Serres (3–25), Zimmer (1–22).

13 For the Nazi metaphor use cf. Musolff (*Metaphor, Nation and the Holocaust*); for a comparison of present-day anti-immigration discourse to Nazi racism cf. e.g. *The Guardian*, 24/04/2015: "The UN's human rights chief has attacked the Sun newspaper for publishing an article by columnist Katie Hopkins, branding her use of the word 'cockroaches' to describe migrants as reminiscent of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda".

collocations with biological terminology and argumentative contexts that construe explicit analogies between BIO- and SOCIO-PARASITES. It is these uses, which are characteristic of the Blog sample, that can most plausibly be said to be 'dehumanizing', rather than the general PARASITE-AS-SCROUNGER ones; in addition they are complemented by variations on bio-terminology through lexical items such as *leeches*, *locusts*, *rats*, *vermin*, *cockroaches*, *plague*, *germs*, *contamination*. In the press and forum samples such uses appear, as stated above, only in the meta-represented discourse of others that is criticized and disqualified as racist/xenophobic.

Eight out of 40 Blogs also contain comments that are critical of the main anti-immigration thrust but these are apologetic, arguing details about exaggerated statistics, the economic benefit that a 'good' minority of immigrants bring to Britain and issues of Human Rights legislation. However, they seldom tackle the issue of stigmatizing and dehumanizing imagery critically in the way the press and online forum users do. Instead, it is the aggressive-assertive bloggers who defend their own xenophobic rhetoric, including use of *parasite* terminology, against the accusation of being racist:

(19) All the main parties seem to think that the average Brit wants parasitic immigration, I do not know why. [...] most people are too frightened to say they are opposed to immigration in case anyone accuses them of being 'racist'. (www.weeklygripe.co.uk/)

(20) Over here, we have dozens of these parasitical elites, [...] People of other races, creeds, cultures [...] are too busy holding up the Racist card whenever us Indigenous Brits protest at their lack of their understanding in OUR plight to save OUR race, on OUR ISLAND (www.bnp.org.uk/news/national/immigration-necessary-white-nations-not-others)

The use of disclaimers as part of denial and justification strategies in racist and xenophobic hate speech is of course nothing new (Wodak, *The Politics of Fear* 58–60), but its combination with the emphatic, anti-immigrant use of the PARASITE metaphor, especially in its 'biologized' version, underlines the deliberateness and consciousness of this type of rhetoric.

4 Conclusions

The results of our comparison of *parasite* metaphors in three media genres show that they form part of a narrative-argumentative scenario of 'scrounging' that is well-established in the British public debate on immigration. However, by no means can the data be regarded as evidence of a uniform pattern of usage. Only the Blogosphere appears to exhibit a relatively consistent

xenophobic and polemic bias insofar as *parasite* metaphors are used together with other 'disgusting/dangerous organism' terminology as well as 'biologizing' analogies, which drastically dehumanize immigrants and denounce them as not being part of the 'proper' national society. By contrast, such usage is explicitly criticized in the online forums and to an even greater extent in the press; there, it is usually ascribed to a section of the political spectrum that the relevant journalists and commentators (or the politicians they quote) are opposed to and which they disqualify as 'xenophobic' or 'racist', even if they are happy to employ the general SCROUNGER scenario themselves against migrants or other minorities.

Ironically, the xenophobic bloggers corroborate this disqualification *ex negativo* by exposing their racism through the use of *parasite* metaphors. Disclaimers such as those in examples 19 and 20 just underline the high degree of their authors' awareness of being vulnerable to the accusation of racism on account of their rhetoric. In the logic of the disclaimer, they see themselves as 'merely stating facts' or 'exercising their right to be patriotic', i.e. as not being polemical or stigmatizing. However, such excuses are disingenuous. The Blog and forum data show that their respective communities of practice are characterized by a high degree of meta-communicative sensibility and awareness of the polemical and stigmatizing power of discursive devices, especially metaphors. To feign ignorance in the use of stigmatizing figurative language whilst at the same time showing hyper-sensitivity to criticism is a contradiction.

There is little evidence of politicians or journalists exercising a 'model' or 'originator' function for the use of dehumanizing metaphors in the immigration debate. On the contrary, at the level of mainstream public discourse, as represented by the press, these elite public voices shy away from or are openly critical of explicitly dehumanizing metaphors. This is perhaps not a direct reflection of their real stance on the subject but rather an indication of their wish to position themselves in the official, respectable public sphere.

Overall, we can conclude that *parasite* metaphors are never used neutrally or naïvely in public debates on immigration. Whoever is employing them is doing so in the knowledge of their strongly polemical, insulting and defamatory bias. The press and online forum debates show that across the whole public sphere users are aware of their contested status and their discourse-historical record as a typical feature of racist ideological and propagandistic traditions, such as the Nazi jargon. Even the Blog data show that xenophobic users of the metaphor are aware of the metaphor's contentious status, for otherwise they would not need to disclaim their own racist language use. To achieve such exculpation, they depict themselves as victims of stigmatization. However, their own use of the *parasite* metaphor – especially in its biologized

version, i.e. PARASITE AS CARRIER OF DEADLY ILLNESS/INFECTION THAT MUST BE ERADICATED – contradicts and exposes this pretence of victimhood. Even if one were to give them the benefit of the doubt by assuming that they have no detailed historical knowledge of the precedent uses of *parasite* metaphors, they unequivocally exhibit a general awareness of the metaphor's racist meaning by obsessively and disingenuously trying to deny its dehumanizing implications (and potentially genocidal consequences). A minimum degree of discourse-critical *awareness* of the parasite metaphor's function as an indicator of racist attitudes thus seems to be evident across all communities of practice in the public debate on immigration.

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CHAPTER 15

Narrating Precarious Lives

Refugee Tales, African Titanics, *and* The Year of the Runaways

Janet M. Wilson

1 Refugees and Narrative Representation

Refugees and asylum seekers are considered by many social commentators to be the zeitgeist of our age, their statelessness and homelessness epitomising the radical unbelonging of all displaced peoples.[1] The exponential rise in the numbers of refugees over the last decade, populations fleeing their homelands in the war-torn Middle East or from famine and political crises in African nations, without papers and means of support, and the use of immigration centres for detention without legal recognition of their status and rights as refugees, have attracted widespread media attention and intense public concern.[2] The scale of the migrant exodus and the universalising categories of labels used to discuss the humanitarian crisis means that refugees are inevitably homogenised and stereotyped, perceptions that are reinforced by saturating media images of what is now called the "Black Mediterranean" (Danewid): of desperate flight mainly from Libya, Morocco, and Senegal, upturned boats, drownings and bodies washed up on its shores. Political debate and controversy have raged about the granting of asylum in all European countries of reception, generating responses ranging from revulsion and dismissal, to heightened empathy and ethical concern, to xenophobic racist discourses and generalised fears about overcrowding and national security which cast some refugees in terms of terrorist threat.

A complex cultural terminology has emerged to describe people of such uncertain status, and the labels that are applied, often imprecisely, mean that the very concept of refugee narrative, a term which is widely used of a range of writing about stateless migrants and those involved in illegal movement, carries numerous connotations.[3] The term refugee is used of various migrant

1 Cf. Thomas Nail: "the twenty-first century will be the age of the migrant" (1); also cf. Maley.

2 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that by the end of 2020 there were 82.4 million forcibly displaced people including 26.7 million refugees over half of whom are under 18 (UNHCR, "Figures").

3 I use this term to refer to both non-fictional and fictional texts.

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types who may also be called asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, sans papiers, sojourners, nomads, detainees, clandestine travellers, political exiles, or stateless people. A refugee, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention, is defined in law as someone forced to flee their country because of persecution or threat of violence and who must convince authorities of this level of threat to their life and their unwillingness to seek their country's protection, in order to gain asylum (UNHCR, "What Is a Refugee?"). In considering the range of refugee narratives, the most fundamental is the official, orally delivered version, usually unpublished, told by asylum seekers desperate for refuge or sanctuary who must provide an authentic dimension by using testimony, and so represent their life story as truth telling. Many non-fictions and imaginative fictions by and about refugees are often told in direct contradiction to these narrowly defined, truth-determined narrative structures and the official expectations that channel them. They may be accounts mediated by western sympathisers or refugee activists driven by a sense of ethical responsibility to produce such narratives as a form of political intervention. Novelists, by contrast, may see in the refugee story the potential for heightened pathos, or a literature of ethical engagement based on a more nuanced understanding, and use various narrative devices to represent their precarious subjects through mobile, plural identities and volatile social and political positioning due to their illegality and statelessness. The literary and cultural narratives of asylum create a higher ethical demand than, for example, accounts required for the official machinery of adjudication whereby subjects in detention are deemed worthy of sanctuary. According to Agnes Woolley they can be read as "politicized responses to the condition of statelessness", demanding revision of current asylum practices in light of the "instability and legal contingency of statelessness" (211).

Representations of refugees, asylum seekers, or forced migrants through visual images, documentary accounts and narrative fictions, therefore, both reify and contest the dominant impressions of victims lacking in basic rights or legality and subject to forces beyond their control, living precariously the 'bare lives' of exclusion, and may introduce alternative images of self-agency, endurance, and resilience. The issues of interpretation associated with documentary, testimonial texts and biographical accounts point to the inherent instabilities in imaging refugees and asylum seekers. They emerge from the limited nature of their accounts of minimal survival, a consequence of such disenfranchised subjects' lack of access to representation, the imperatives of truth telling and authentication in accounts by refugees who apply for official status to gain asylum, and the reduced scope of official accounts which may omit circumstantial details, historical perspectives, memories, and reflections. Reporting such narratives through the mediation of western writers, editors or translators, or

retelling them inevitably raises questions about the dubious ethics of speaking for the other, or the possibility of representational appropriation, and hence of misinterpretation.

This article examines three recently published narratives by and about refugees which represent a range of fictional types: *Refugee Tales* (2016), edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus (followed by two further volumes, *Refugee Tales* II and III in 2017 and 2019), *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) by Abu Bakr Khaal, and *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) by Sunjeev Sahota.[4] It draws for its informing conceptual framework on Judith Butler's theories about the precarity and vulnerability of the displaced human subject outlined in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*?, and in particular the frames of perception that she identifies whereby such subjects are apprehended as precarious. Butler argues that "in the politics of immigration [...] certain lives are perceived as lives while others [...] fail to assume perceptual form as such" (24), and this axiom underpins these and many other narratives about the haphazard survival and unpredictable existence of the refugee or asylum seeker, as consequences not only of illegal movement. Following Butler's advocation of introducing alternative interpretative frames to interrogate the conventional framing perceptions of lives, and to consider how to apprehend a life (by contrast to those we cannot) (3), I examine the narrative form and aesthetic innovation of these fictions; I consider how they challenge the normative frames that cast some precarious, displaced lives as inauthentic, as "permissible collateral damage" (xviii), as in time of war, for example, or disposable, to illustrate how readerly perceptions are managed and regulated in reassessing the meaning of such lives. Such departures and the variation between different social, political and cultural perspectives of various refugee narratives indirectly contribute to the fluctuating impressions and multiple interpretations of these disenfranchised subjects. Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp note, citing Elke Brüns, that poverty is interpreted according to "discourses of natural law, poverty theory, economics, political philosophy and religion" as well as the "images and interpretative frames [that] are circulating and have circulated" (7n9; Brüns 8–9). In fictional texts any number of contemporary discourses may influence existing perceptual frames and revise common perceptions, as for example, in moving beyond mono-dimensional official perspectives visible in the struggle to gain asylum and access citizenship, or polarised media representations of refugees as either victim figures or threats – even while raising problems about the wider reception of such narratives.

4 This article is a revised and expanded version of an earlier article (Wilson).

2 Refugee Writing, Precarity and Ethical Engagement

Butler has advocated a new critical humanism, based on the vulnerability of the precarious subject and the ethical obligations we should feel for such suffering, arguing that one of the marks of life being recognised as human is the grievability at its loss; life matters when "the apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of a precarious life" (15). In terms of the representation of lives in fictional and non-fictional terms questions such as whether humanness is not an inalienable right elicit a moral response from readers. Do the lives of such disenfranchised populations matter as "grievable, as worthy of protection as belonging to subjects with rights that ought to be honoured" (41), or do they slip from recognition? As Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard comment, this reshaping of the category of being human takes the form of a growing concern with "how humans live and what they live for" (7n2, citing Schwarz 3). Butler's new humanism, based on grief, relationality, and bodily vulnerability calls for a non-violent progressive politics of co-vulnerability that draws on Western solidarity with dispossessed subjects. It has been widely influential in Western theory and instrumental in shaping critical approaches to writing about vulnerable subjects such as refugees (see Sandten). For example, Butler's concept of frames of perception, and the politics of seeing that she promotes, have been deployed by Jago Morrison in studying the twenty-first-century novel in which he defines a turn to precarity: the ethical and affective responses of readers to vulnerability, death and violence are regulated by particular frameworks of perception in ways reminiscent of Dickens's treatment of poverty in the nineteenth century.

The recent backlash to Butler's work on violence, grief and mourning, namely that her call for a new humanism means that other positions are occluded by "a veil of ignorance" (Danewid 1676) or "white amnesia" (1681, citing Hesse), foregrounds a more activist approach in reading refugee narratives than responses dominated by empathy and ethical awareness. Butler has been accused of universalising the human subject, predicated as a "wounded and injured, but essentially innocent western subject" (Thobani 135), as interchangeable with the victimised subject who is mourned, while her mandate for empathetic engagement and ethical responsibility is seen by her critics as marginalising the systemic nature of precarity and its roots in colonialism; her Western orientation, that is, ignores the postcolonial project of responding to historical situations of oppression, inequity and injustice as likely causes of today's migrant exodus. These arguments in favour of a politically active response also appear in critical discourses on and about refugees, asylum

seekers and other disenfranchised people, in particular those focusing on the historical dimension of cultural identities to explain the risks of becoming stateless, or on the Human Rights questions involved in crossing a border, and moving beyond the categories of citizenship, when the subject's humanity becomes ontological (Sandten; Pedwell; Khorana).

In the global marketplace refugee narratives command a range of positions and play a significant role in the ongoing social and political controversy catalysed by the contradictory opinions and responses to refugees both across national borders and within the nation state. The politics of reception appear, for example, in the way that narratives of victimhood have been promoted and reified by pro-refugee activists to draw attention to the dehumanising treatment of refugees in detention centres, and to challenge xenophobic representations of them as ungrievable because ethically non-recognised. *Refugee Tales* (2016), one of the texts under discussion, belongs to a genre of refugee writing consisting of advocacy-based story collections whose authors, editors and publishers contribute to mediating migrant voices that might otherwise be inaccessible, to bring them to the attention of a wider public: for example, from Australia is Rosie Scott's and Thomas Keneally's collection *A Country Too Far: Writings on Asylum Seekers* (2013); there is also Lucy Popescu's *A Country of Refuge: An Anthology of Writing on Asylum Seekers* (2016), and *Breach*, edited by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes (2016). Some genres are guaranteed success precisely because of their commodification of precarity, and strategic command of empathy in the Western marketplace. For example, the boy refugee narrative, a now fashionable form of fictionalised biography, has proliferated because it is used as a strategy of self-fashioning that may gain Western support for the author or first person narrator in his flight to search for a new life. But such empathetic, compassionate responses are also criticised as fleeting and transient, protecting Western viewers and readers from acknowledging the intransigence of inequality, injustice and persecution. As Carolyn Pedwell points out, they seem to be the correct response, "framed as a 'solution' to a very wide range of ills and instrumental to building cross-cultural and transnational justice" (x). But Western recipients of refugee accounts may strike 'the limits of empathy' when confronting scenes of trauma by turning them back on themselves rather than seeing refugees as subjects with agency. These responses do not cross over into the realm of responsibility or of political engagement. Sukhmani Khorana, writing of the reception in Australia where refugees are being detained indefinitely in offshore detention centres like Nauru and Manus islands in order to enforce its 'Pacific Solution', identifies this tension:

> The evocation of empathy in refugee-themed narratives is sometimes accompanied by a depoliticisation of systemic issues. This occurs by shifting responsibility onto the feelings of the ethical citizen rather than the imperative international obligations and/or the power imbalance in regional relations. (305)

Nevertheless, types of refugee writing such as short stories, novels and fictionalised biographies that present multiple, coexisting, and directly competing perspectives may engage the reader on more than the single level implied by an affective response. Expanded insights are made possible through cultural and social contextualisation, as well as multiple viewpoints provided by overlapping narratives, and greater interiorisation in representing subjects of dispossession than is possible with media or other non-fictional accounts. By providing more diverse positions and angles of vision, defining contradictions within precarious situations through alternative or sub-narratives, and by assigning the refugee more complex roles than the stereotypical victim one, as being either incorporated into existing social constructs or, as a force for change, resisting institutional or political frameworks, imaginative fictions can expand readers' insights and range of potential responses, encouraging more nuanced approaches and perspectives.

I suggest that the more historically and culturally informed fictional writing on refugees aims to elicit a range of responses, posing the textual challenge to readers' interpretative frameworks and inviting postcolonial critique of historic injustice, inequality, or discrimination which underlies the material conditions of many illegal migrants or refugees, and so catalysing a determination for socio-political change. Morrison urges readers to question the habitual frames of perception and the affective dynamics by which their responses to vulnerability, death and violence are regulated, and develop alternative critical responses such as motivation towards social politicisation (28).

The challenge for imaginative fiction is in expanding the single life and narrative voice of documentaries, biographies and testimonials into broader social, political and historical contexts in which alternative points of view may be represented, and in encouraging multi-directional readings and multiple perceptions of the refugee character. The three narratives discussed here are selected as representative types of such writing available in today's global marketplace: from the politically engaged, Western-mediated stories of *Refugee Narratives*, to the semi-autobiographical first person fiction about the flight from the Global South of *African Titanics*, to the more generically recognisable novel of migration, *The Year of the Runaways*, which balances departures with arrivals. All three are indicative of the innovativeness and variation in

the form and aesthetics of the core refugee narrative, which blends the self-representation and testimony that is commonly found in autobiography or life writing. They show how such a precarious life is accountable or grievable under the pressure of illegality, when lived outside social and civic structures – and, as I shall argue – they control and regulate readers' responses by challenging habitual frames of perception, ranging from empathy to an ethical responsibility to resistance and political engagement.

Most overtly political and polemical in its exhortation to a political readerly engagement is *Refugee Tales*, a collection of stories which draws attention to the practice of indefinite detention, a feature of UK Immigration policy. A collaboration between refugees or asylum seekers and a group of British writers and people who work with refugees, it originated in a walking project organised by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group from 13–21 June 2015. The stories arise from the Western mediators' or writers' engagement with a refugee or detainee, or someone involved in their journey, such as a lorry driver or lawyer. Abu Bakr Khaal's novel *African Titanics* is about the flight of a group of so-called "travellers" from Eritrea, who journey along different routes through the desert and across the Mediterranean in successive attempts to reach Europe. The words of a drowned poet/singer become testimony to and commemoration of an entire generation that has fled – and whose fates are mostly unrecorded. Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* is not, strictly-speaking, a refugee narrative; instead it resembles the familiar Indian diaspora novel about incorporation into the new society. It weaves together narratives of three illegal migrants from India who flee to the UK in 2003, showing their tensions and struggles during their crucial first year when, lacking recourse to official support structures, exposure, deportation, or imprisonment are all possible.

3 Mediated, Collective Story-Telling in *Refugee Tales*

This collection of stories, the first of three volumes of *Refugee Tales*, is a political intervention, an explicit challenge to the contemporary law of detainment in the UK whereby people can be held in confinement indefinitely in Immigration Removal Centres. In the Afterword, editor David Herd calls for an end to this practice (133; cf. Muir). A production of two humanitarian organisations, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Kent Refugee Help, the collection illustrates fiction's agency as a mode of cultural production when conceived as a form of collective action or shared communal space, here between migrants, artists and critics. In assembling real life stories that combine reportage and literary responses to the stories of migrants, refugees and detainees into a

fictional framework with the aim of challenging non-humanitarian practices, it resembles other advocacy-based story collections in which refugee stories are gathered and published as an act of solidarity.

Told from the multiple perspectives of detainees and the professionals and humanitarian groups concerned for their welfare, the narratives highlight the risks already taken, the losses endured, and the suffering incurred by a system of detention and the threat of deportation. Endorsing the value of storytelling as a collective engagement is the framing of *Refugee Tales* through its intertextual relationship to the foundational English tale-telling collection, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, the walking project along ancient pathways across the Weald of Kent in June 2015, in which the collection has its origins, retraced the route taken by Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims in the fourteenth century along the North Downs Way to Canterbury, here now seen as a "deeply national space" from which such illegal arrivals are usually kept from view (Herd and Pincus 138). The telling of tales based round the various roles and types, such as "Unaccompanied Minor", "Visitor", "Friend", "Deportee", or "Refugee", draws on the structure of Chaucer's text as a literary template. Intertextual echoes of particular stories in *The Canterbury Tales* appear throughout, in particular of "The Man of Law's Tale" (in which an Italian princess is taken to Syria and then sent to Northumbria where she is falsely accused of a crime), but most strategically in the Prologue in which the challenge to indefinite detention is launched. The words of Chaucer's narrator in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* reappear in a radical political idiom articulating an oppositional agenda: "That people present/Reject the terms/Of a debate that criminalises/Human movement" (v); while Chaucer's famous invocation to spring, about how nature quickens the spirit and energises the human instincts, encouraging people to go on pilgrimages, is now revised to embody the new political energies that aim to reject the official stories in favour of those that have been buried or ignored: "So priketh hem nature/Not believing the stories/Our officials tell./Because we know too much/About what goes unsaid" (vi).

In its mediating of refugees' stories by Western voices the collection handles inconsistently the ethics of representation, of speaking for the other, making this problematic because not necessarily faithful to their experience. In some stories the instinct to articulate and solicit feelings of pity and concern comes at the expense of encouraging a more political response; instead, stereotypical elements, implied by the titles of the stories, reinforce habitual frames of perception. Ali Smith, author of a powerful piece called "The Detainee's Tale", has been criticised for overtly manipulating narrative conventions in order to arouse ready empathy for emotional effect, overriding the voice of the

detainee; in being more about her own experience it adds to "the voicelessness of the voiceless" (Braun). This management of public perception in narratives of advocacy that aim to rouse compassion towards refugees on account of their degrading treatment by official forces is a common response. It has led to controversy in Australia, for example, where there has been angry condemnation of indefinite detention in the camps on Nauru and Manus islands by humanitarian groups. Some see this public reaction as participating in the "politics of pity", and assimilating the suffering of others, rather than striving to effect any socio-political change (Khorana 305). Yet Smith's superimposed voice works to further the collection's aim of advocating an end to detention: the detainee's plight would be less arresting if given in his own words alone. It contributes to the collection's deliberate disjunctions of tone and approach, reflecting a range of writers' responses – a heterogeneity traceable to its model, the *Canterbury Tales*, in which each teller, identified by their vocation, presents a radically different notion of story-telling.

The Afterword also presents the refugees' and asylum seekers' collective response that stresses the greater benefits of a collaboration despite the risk of being represented disproportionately, because of their wish for anonymity, and for some account of their suffering: "[I]t was a relief that the tale was being told, though […] they could not […] be the person who told it. […] they were relieved that the account was being passed on" (Herd and Pincus 142). As in similar collections like *A Country Too Far*, the collectivity of voices emerges from a common activity and ideology, here the walk on which the stories were told. This shared space is where the refugees' liminal voices and stories become audible; one aim of the collection as a political intervention is to value such confessional moments among other perspectives. Smith's story can be compared, for example, to a more 'authentic', affective story (keyed to Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale") about a refugee from Syria, whose body language betrays the viscerally painful experience of telling, and hence reliving, his narrative of suffering and loss: "He holds his upper arms and rocks back and forth" (4).

The welfare group of asylum seekers, detainees and refugees mixed with an artistic community is motivated by a shared awareness of human life as grievable, and the vulnerable individual whose story is being retold is metonymic of the attempt signified by the real life walking project: to establish what Butler calls the "interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment" (19). The telling of stories provides a dynamic of co-responsibility as the detainees' and asylum seekers' situation is collectively addressed; it offers an alternative sense of belonging informed by the image of travel and movement on a micro-scale – which, Herd

claims in the Afterword, creates a parallel with the collapse of the Calais camp that occurred at the time of the project – thus giving greater presence to and understanding of the metaphor of space that is central to the migrant experience (134, 142). The editors' polemic incites readers to adopt a more pro-active stance in engaging with refugees and detainees and to protest against the practice of indefinite detention.

4 The Poetics of Risk: *African Titanics*

Written in Arabic in 2008 by an Eritrean writer now living in Denmark, and translated into English in 2014, *African Titanics* is closely correlated to the current twenty-first-century refugee crisis as a representative account of an entire generation mobilising itself to seek a new life in Europe: it tells of their vicissitudes in trying to reach this Shangri-La, which include life-threatening encounters with bandits and leaking boats, as well as official rejection upon arrival. Recounting the exodus of boat people from North and East Africa to the Mediterranean, it is written in a semi-realist style as a first-person narrative interspersed with stories, songs and legends. In this blend of written narrative and eyewitness, oral testimony the novel has some resemblance to the familiar autobiographical refugee tale.

However, from the outset the narrator, Abdar, asserts control over the narrative, and stresses the discrepancy between fact and fiction by highlighting the power of rumour, stories and language to delude and deceive; in preferring fiction to fact or truth, he elevates his role of artist as tale spinner. Abdar contributes to the volatile discourses of witchcraft and sorcery that circulate in the Eritrean society to which he belongs, enhancing the untold benefits of migration, and he becomes 'converted' from scepticism to addiction to this powerful force:

> Migration came flooding through Africa, a turbulent swell sweeping everything along in its wake. […] I, and many others beside me, attributed it all to the works of a dark sorcerer, emerging from the mists of the unknown and sounding a magnificent bell […]. It was a pandemic. A plague. […] Dong, dong, dong pealed the bell, calling one and all to its promised paradise. (Khaal 3)

As Korte and Zipp point out, "poverty is […] a 'collateral' motif in much literature dealing with migration" (3), and it provides a powerful reason to migrate along with the limited social capability in the homelands of Africa. Indeed,

this explains the willingness of an entire generation to put their lives at risk in *African Titanics*, for the people are seduced by the lure of material wealth – the flash car and beautiful woman. But there is no indication that these motivations can be traced to historical problems of Eritrea's colonisation or to famine, or other forms of deprivation due to long-term mismanagement, and hence little opportunity for developing postcolonial critique or positions in order to challenge the dominant reading position which is based on empathy.

Instead, the compulsion to flee the homeland is represented in terms of superstition and myth-making, and attributed to the black arts, a demonic force in the form of rumour fostering false hopes. The real dangers of migration – the losses at sea – are blurred and ignored in the flow of gossip, rumour, and "strange and wonderful stories" (Khaal 6). The novel's title, referring to the most famous, apparently unsinkable boat *The Titanic*, alludes to the migrants' untrustworthy boats, otherwise called "The Doomed" (15, 41, 61), and the text records that the sinking of these vessels and the drownings are often met by public uncertainty and incredulity. Just as the problematic conditions of life in Eritrea are overlooked in these colliding and impressionistic perspectives, the narrator and his Eritrean community have little knowledge of the West, which becomes equated with their aspirations rather than a reality. Symptomatic of this disconnection from Western society is that they see themselves as "travellers", not as refugees, until they see the media reports from satellite Italian channels, broadcasting images of shipwrecks and drowned corpses (59).

At one with this community in his willing suspension of disbelief, Abdar falls victim to his own rhetoric in becoming convinced, in a moment of revelation, that the power of song will overcome that of sorcery and witchcraft. He refocuses the exodus through his own conversion to the "migration bug", anticipating the novel's later commemoration through song of a doomed generation (6). His false premise – that by becoming a traveller he will defeat witchcraft with the power of song – hardly justifies his failed flight to Europe with others from Eritrea, Liberia, the Sudan and Somalia. This framework of perception occludes the apprehension that life is precarious and the valuing of life as worthy of protection that in Butler's terms is an ethical response to such an apprehension, and so distances the Western reader from any response based on a sense of obligation or concern. The narrator values the superior power of song for its romantic enhancement of flight, yet it differs only in kind from the magical power of migration witchery that he claims to overrule.

In this context the figure of Malouk, an artist who travels with his guitar, and whose powers of music and song make him instantly legendary after he sinks to a watery grave in one of the capsized boats, may be a mirror image of the narrator himself. Malouk's appearance in the novel causes a change of mood

signified by a shift in typographical form. The narrator partly appropriates his identity by writing down Malouk's songs and stories on behalf of the collective to give voice to the tragic loss of life. This implies some hierarchy in the grievability of life, as the deceased singer becomes valued through testimony and memory while false rumours that he has been sighted make his death felt all the more widely. The importance of Malouk as a commentator and recorder is also aesthetically and artistically represented through the use of italicised stories and poems set into the narrative told by Abdar. These lyrical sections, expressing sadness mixed with bravura at the fates of those who have departed and are not heard of again, have a memorialising function that is reinforced in the concluding lament for those who have perished:

> To all the pounding hearts
> In feverish boats
> I will cut
> Through these paths
> With my own liberated heart
> And tell my soul
> To shout of your silenced deaths
> And fill palms of dust with morning dew
> And song. (Khaal 122)

In writing down Malouk's words in the conclusion the narrator confirms his belief in song's power to overcome sorcery, showing that art has enabled him to break the spell that sorcery (or the lure of migration) casts.

The final lament demands an affective response, one of empathy rather than ethical concern or determination towards political change. It is anticipated by evidence of the developing bonds between the travellers, the culmination of many affective moments and incidents in which their physical vulnerability is painfully evoked; for example, in the non-spaces that they occupy in the shadowy world of illicit travel across the Sahara desert or the Mediterranean: in unseaworthy vessels, crowded trucks, the smuggler's den or prison. The characters are increasingly represented as fragile, as victims of smugglers who are generally unreliable, dishonest, and out of control, due to unpredictable forces like rival bandits, unseaworthy boats, or harsh weather conditions. An affective thematic appears as illness and death take their toll; there are signs of co-caring and responsibility: even the smugglers and bandits are moved by the visible decline of some of the travellers, and they take to hospital a Kurdish woman who falls ill in the smuggler's den.

Focalising the novel's memorialising function are the emotional responses of Abdar and one of the women, called Terhas, when they encounter the marks and words of those who have gone before and have now disappeared. They read out the inscriptions written in different languages in the smuggler's den, either as letters or notes scrawled on the walls, intended for those who come after: " 'If this letter reaches you, I beg you will not feel sad or fearful for me. Please do not shed any of your precious tears on my account' "; " 'Where will you take me, oh fleeting hours?' read one beautifully written message in Tigre [...] signed 'Anonymous' "; " 'How can the journey from shore to shore be so very difficult? It seems so simple on the maps,' a French hand had written just a few days earlier"; " 'Forgive me, my dear Hamouddi,' came another message in Arabic. When I translated it to Terhas tears welled in her eyes [...]: 'maybe it was her son?' " (Khaal 45–47). These traces and relics of past journeys, disclosed by the written fragments, testify to the disappeared, to lost lives or unknown fates. Abdar's and Terhas's affective responses to these hinted-at, untold stories are a stalking horse for the reader. Reading out the words of those whose fates are unknown brings both characters and readers to a threshold of recognition and memory, just as Malouk's poem, cited at the end, provides some closure to the suffering the story records. This emotive dimension counteracts the self-determining framework provided by the narrator, enabling the novel to fulfil one of the demands of testimony – that is, to overturn the perception that such lives will be forgotten because not regarded as materially grievable (hence valuable), and to overcome their victim subaltern status by recuperating them (Butler 25).

5 Migration and Precarity in *The Year of the Runaways*

Butler's humanism and call for an international politics of mourning based on suffering and vulnerable humanity is appropriate for a reading of *African Titanics*, in which solidarity in the commemorative act is solicited, but Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*, by contrast, invokes a sceptical, politically aware response, and, like *Refugee Tales*, its distancing mechanisms contribute to a reading along the lines of a political intervention. The novel attributes the illegal migration of its characters to social crises and domestic and financial problems typical of the developing and developed worlds; although these reflect current inequalities of socioeconomic status and gender and class/caste discrimination in India, their historical origins might be traced to colonial conditions of oppression and injustice. These appear in the novel's two

time frames, the late 1970s, covering the characters' early lives in India, and 2003, the year of their arrival in the UK, and an era when increased mobility reflects the widening gap between rich and poor caused by neoliberal global capitalism, alongside historically-based causes of famine, civil war or persecution. The novel's contemporary setting, from winter 2003 to autumn 2004, also belongs to a period when the Home Office under Theresa May was making conditions more difficult for immigrants to the UK (Jones 2015). *African Titanics* represents its fleeing population as susceptible to the urge to move at any cost, without identifying the reason or asking why, and unable to manage risk and mitigate disaster. *The Year of the Runaways* takes a wider overview by linking poverty and the socioeconomic disadvantage of communities in India and the Indian diaspora in England to more than one concept of precarity and one historical, political cause. Present-day precariousness is revealed as a pervasive condition, not just economically conditioned and hence aligned with poverty, but also a general state of unease due to psychological, cultural and domestic insecurity. The novel's transnational, transcultural frameworks and dualistic time frame of pre- and post-migration reference the multiple class, caste, and geographical demographies of India and its English diaspora. This structure suggests that precaritisation and insecurity are powerfully present and persistent in many lives of those who move between nations and social systems.

In both *African Titanics* and *The Year of the Runaways*, narrative framing can be identified with what Butler calls "the politics of moral responsiveness" (41) at the social failure to meet some or all of the basic conditions for survival: "shelter, work, food, medical care, legal status" (13). But there are significant differences. In *African Titanics* there is no argument or debate about whether these rights exist or should be guaranteed, thus inspiring an affective rather than a moral response. In *The Year of the Runaways* such privation is weighed up in the cost of illegal movement; it is spelt out to the migrants upon their arrival in the UK and reinforced throughout the novel, urging them to question their course of action. They could return to India, as Tochi, a Dalit, is advised by an Indian co-worker: " 'Take my advice and go back now. Before there's nothing to go back for and you're stuck here' " (Sahota 89). Like the warning represented by the heartfelt messages of farewell on the walls of the smuggler's den in *African Titanics*, these perspectives on individual choice challenge readers' perceptions of what constitutes a "grievable" life. The undimmed faith in flight is questioned by those who have gone before in Abu Bakr Khaal's novel, but it is too late for the protagonists who read their messages to recalculate the risk to their lives.

The Year of the Runaways is closer to the novel of migration, whereas *African Titanics* resembles other refugee accounts such as those published in *Refugee Tales*, and they differ in their attitudes towards departure and movement. In the novel of migration, management, planning and support underpin the financial contracts that are entered into, negotiations with facilitators and transporters, and arrangements for the migrants on arrival in the host land, whereas in the refugee novel such systems are arbitrary, even non-existent. Unlike *African Titanics*, where travel ends in failure and a return to base, and *Refugee Tales*, in which refugees and detainees live in Immigrant Detention Centres in forced suspension, unable to move on with their lives, *The Year of the Runaways* shows the painful but ultimately successful mechanisms for arrival and then settlement in the host society. By contrast to the refugee narratives, this novel details the intricate negotiations required for departure. The black market of people smuggling ensures safe passage to England, through the purchase, with the requisite extortionate fees, of travel and other documents to guarantee entry: a fake student visa for one of the migrants, Avtar, and a fake marriage certificate for his friend, Randeep. Both young men receive hospitality from relations already settled in the UK upon arrival, although they cannot rely on this source of support, and turn to the Indian diaspora network for illegal work.

The novel's condemnation of global poverty and subalternity continues with a close-up examination of the system of illegal, subaltern labour in the UK which denies security and a work-based identity, keeping the labourers in thrall to the black market. The three men – Tochi, Randeep and Avtar – obsessively hoard their meagre earnings because of financial commitments to money lenders, family or Randeep's illegal bride in her flat. They suffer this adversity and abandonment because of the fear of being deported, and because labour, however poorly paid, is a means to gain residency, citizenship, or sufficient wealth to return to India and start over again, as Tochi, who has lost all his family in a casteist attack, eventually manages to do. In *African Titanics*, by contrast, systemic poverty and lack of opportunity mean that travel is a desperate resort, becoming a way of life. Accordingly, no plans are laid down, decisions are arbitrary, money is traded only for passage out, labour has little place in the scheme of things, and the chances of a better life exist only in an imagined future. The absence of voice or resistant utterance is indicative of what is seen as the lack of rhetorical space for stateless subjects rendering them "statementless" (Morton 232, citing Young Ah-Gottlieb 34).

Sahota's novel, like Abu Bakr Khaal's, shows how conditions of adversity and risk generate vulnerability and relations of responsibility, but with the difference that these become unstable: the material hardships of survival during

the first year in the new land undermine expectations of support and goodwill with rivalry and conflict. Whereas in *African Titanics* the fellow travellers reinforce ties of loyalty under their life-threatening circumstances, and in *Refugee Tales* bonds between detainees and welfare groups create a humanitarian bulwark against the asylum system's heavy officialdom, in *The Year of the Runaways* insecurity of employment with no rights of social protection, and threats of poverty, debt, and deportation render relations of caring and support more arbitrary, as the illegal migrants are threatened by violence and abandonment. The three men sharing temporary occupation in the bleak environs of Sheffield question their ties and loyalties, as Sahota's depiction of privation illustrates the reduced quality of life. There is scepticism about the value of family affections, an overriding rationale for their migration to England. To Randeep's question Avtar replies:

> '[I]t's not work that makes us leave home and come here. It's love. Love for our families. [...] Do you think that's true?' [...] 'We come here for the same reason our people do anything. Duty. We're doing our duty. And it's shit.' (7)

The men, especially Avtar and Randeep, maintain relations of co-protection, often turning in moments of need to the diaspora community's centre of religious practice, the Sikh temple, or Gurdwara. Yet the ties are fragile, as indigence creates ruthlessness. The Dalit Tochi steals Avtar's second job; in return Avtar, when his debtors finally come after him threatening to kill his family in India, steals Tochi's savings to pay them off. The familiar distinctions of class and caste also break down in the diaspora, and the ability to mask ethnic identity leads to further conflict, as Tochi discovers when a wealthy Hindu family considers him as a suitable match for their daughter, then turns against him when they find out about his Dalit status.

Precarity also relates to the differential distribution of resources playing out into the political struggle between wealthy and marginal groups. Sahota addresses the injustice that the subaltern group is more routinely exposed to high levels of precarity, and his novel challenges economic differences and class inequality, and overturns the assumption that wealth and social status are ultimate markers of value. Symptoms of precaritisation, what Guy Standing notes as drifting, a loss of purpose, alienation from labour, "anomic, uncertain and desperate [...] behaviour" (23), occur among the affluent elite, displaced migrants who have prospered in the diaspora. Dr Cheema, a wealthy Indian businessman who works with newly arrived international students at the university at which Avtar is enrolled, suffers a psychological, existential crisis

when he feels that his new belonging in the host society involves sacrifice of all that is familiar. Feeling alienated in England, he sees in the indigent working class migrant who, in his eyes, represents a greater authenticity of being, a positive counterpart to his own spiritual losses, dispossession and nostalgia for the homeland. Meeting the illegal student Avtar makes him aware of his alienation, precipitating a crisis of cultural identity and a desire for security beyond the family and workplace: " 'We don't belong here. It's not our home. [...] You've helped me realize that. People like you' " (Sahota 317). Dr Cheema's urgent need for greater rootedness overrides his class and wealth, effecting a shift in the relative positions of authority between the two men; here poverty marks "an ethic of authenticity" (During 59). The younger, impoverished student, by contrast, is oblivious to Cheema's state of desolation and criticises the material values that give rise to spiritual losses: "What decadence this belonging rubbish was, what time the rich must have if they could sit around and weave great worries out of such threadbare things" (Sahota 316). Yet even in the novel's epilogue, set ten years later, when Randeep and Avtar are comfortably settled in suburban lives with their families, they are seen as subject to similar psychological stresses of incomplete belonging, of anxiety and insecurity, suggesting that precarity manifests in more interior ways even after financial and other forms of privation are overcome (Kennedy 287–88).

6 Conclusion: Precarious Lives and Frameworks of Perception

The comparison of the different frameworks of perception provided by the three fictions began with the fundamental contrasts in their representations of precarity, between the dramas of asylum and detainment in *Refugee Tales*, life-endangering flight in *African Titanics*, and the hardships of arrival in *The Year of the Runaways*. The levels to which the reader's affective, ethical and political responses are mobilised vary according to how life in each is apprehended and valued as precarious. In *Refugee Tales*, the value of life is mediated by the Western interpreter, writer, or mediator, against markers such as freedom of movement, human rights and the dignity of the subject. In *African Titanics* life is easily expunged, and the well-attested tradition of testimony testifies to and memorialises this vulnerability, although the first person narrator's mendacious claim that Malouk's stories and poems will enable his art to outwit the sources of tragic loss of life in sorcery destabilises the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. The added level of fictionality is reinforced by retellings of folktale and legend suggestive of a rich local culture in the face of non-existent state support and limited historical knowledge, further adding

to the novel's memorialising function and affective dimension. *The Year of the Runaways* constantly mobilises an ethical awareness that overrides an affective response. Sahota demonstrates sympathy for all three characters in their struggle to preserve some integrity under life-threatening circumstances, and to survive at the cost of acting appropriately, but the novel's scepticism about the ideologies and value systems in which they are trapped solicits in the reader some desire for social change. In this light, the abrupt change of fortunes in the novel's Epilogue, in which all three characters have ordered their lives into comfortable domesticity, suggests a wish to rise above the level of privation, and to show the value of investment in hardship. The novel has attracted readers, and its being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015 suggests that Western readers may be sustaining a global demand for such third-world success stories that naturalise the problematic process of relocation and so shed an outsider light on Western society (Bystrom 395). Yet the defamiliarisation of society in *African Titanics* and *Refugee Tales*, the emphasis on the irreducible humanity of refugees and the questions of social justice, equality and Human Rights that these arouse, are likely to solicit a more instantaneous empathetic response, albeit tempered by an ethical awareness of how the narrators in both texts are exploiting the boundary between art and life to mobilise it.

The confusing reversals and disruptions of the larger social pattern of the Indian diaspora community in *The Year of the Runaways*, the absence of any coherent social structure at all in *African Titanics*, and the system of detention that comprises the background of *Refugee Tales*, illustrate the extreme marginality of refugees as social actors. This is reinforced in the formal shape of all three as texts about movement and spatiality. The rhythm of Abdar's journeys is mirrored in the narrative form and dominates the novel's aesthetic structure, the characters' real and imagined journeys between England and India in *The Year of the Runaways* inform that novel's aesthetics, and each story told in *Refugee Tales* is cognisant of the journeys made to reach England, overlaid by the motif of the walking tour shared by the welfare characters and the artistic community. The refugee groups and diaspora communities of these novels make them literary templates for how forced exile and flight undermine social hierarchies, revealing gaps in the global political and economic system as mobile subjects point to cracks and alternative spaces in the social structure. As narratives about movement caused by the extremity of individual hope, they challenge and extend readers' habitual frames of perception that are conditioned by affective documentary and media accounts of refugees. The stress on the flow of experience at the expense of history, the urge to survive in adversity, and the ongoing revaluation of ties of belonging comprise new ethical

and political dimensions in these narratives about illegality, statelessness and migrancy.

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Index

abjection/abject 29, 36, 79, 93, 231
Aboriginal 11, 55–68, 74–76, 78–80
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 55–56
Aborigines Act (1886) 80
Achebe, Chinua (see *The Trouble with Nigeria*) 158, 162
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi 139, 166, 235
Adiga, Aravind (see *The White Tiger*) 21
Adivasis 41, 49, 178
The African Saga (Kiguli) 151
African Titanics (Khaal) 15, 261, 263, 266–267, 270–278
African Union 216
Afrocentric 158, 170
Afropolitanism 14, 164, 166, 234–235
Agamben, Giorgio 190–191
Agard, John (see "Old World, New World") 203
Ahmedabad 10–11, 40, 43, 46, 48–49, 51
AIDS (see HIV/AIDS)
alcoholism/alcohol abuse 55–57, 60, 63–65, 67, 82, 119
Ali, Monica (see *Brick Lane*) 98
AliYusuf 222–223, 225–228
American Dream 14, 234–245
American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in American Literature, 1840–1945 (Jones) 5
American resettlement plan 219
Amin, Idi 157, 254
ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) 171
Anas, Aremeyaw Anas (see *Ghana in the Eyes of God*) 170
anthropocene 201
apartheid 158, 168, 170, 228
Armah, Ayi Kwei 169
Arnold, Andrea (see *Wuthering Heights*) 118
asylum seekers 15, 219, 238, 246, 261–262, 265, 267, 269
Atta, Sefi 164–165
Australia 9, 11, 42, 55–56, 58, 73–75, 265, 269
Australian Council of Social Service 55
AWT (African Writers Trust) 152
AWWNET (African Women Writers Initiatives Network) 145
Babishai Niwe Poetry Foundation 151–152
Baingana, Doreen (see *Tropical Fish*) 169
Bajrange, Dakxin 40–47, 50–51
Bangladesh 178–179, 181
Bantu Somali 223
basti 51–52
Behold the Dreamers (Mbue) 14, 234–235, 237–238, 244
Bengal 182
  Bay of Bengal 13, 178, 180–181, 185–186
  Bengal Tiger 178, 181, 186, 188
  West Bengal 26, 43, 179, 181–182, 186, 189
Berlant, Lauren (see slow death) 4
The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (dir. Madden) 10, 23–24, 26–27, 35
Bhabha, Homi K. (see *The Location of Culture*) 22, 35, 215
Bhantu 46
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 21
Birch, Tony (see *Common People* and *Shadowboxing*) 11, 57–58, 65–67, 73–86
Black Atlantic 118
Black Mediterranean 261
Bol, Aher Arop (see *The Lost Boy*) 14, 214–216, 218, 220, 231
Bollywood 27, 31–33, 44, 50
Bombay (see Mumbai)
border 97, 184, 188, 191, 198, 215–216, 219, 222–223, 225–226, 230, 234, 265
  border crossings 138, 201
Bose, Sugata 189
Boyle, Danny (see *Slumdog Millionaire*) 22, 26–27, 29, 33
brain drain 160, 242
Brick Lane (Ali) 98–99
Britain (see United Kingdom)
British Raj 45
Brixton 105, 107–108, 112
Brontë, Emily (see *Wuthering Heights*) 12, 116–119, 121–125, 128–130
Barungi, Violet and Susan Kiguli (see *I Dare to Say*) 140, 145–148, 150
Budhan (play) 43–44, 46–48
Budhan Theatre 10–11, 40–52

Bulldozer (play) 46, 48
Butler, Judith (see *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*) 1, 3–5, 7, 9, 23, 73–74, 88, 92, 100, 137, 139–141, 143, 149, 263–264, 269, 271, 273–274
"Bye-Bye Babar" (Selasi) 235

Caine Prize for African Writing 151, 168
Calcutta (see Kolkata)
Cameroon 14, 234, 236, 241, 243, 245
Canada 42
The Canterbury Tales (Chaucer) 268–269
capabilities 3, 56
Cape Town 222, 227
capitalism/capitalist 3, 29, 31, 178–179, 189, 196–200, 203, 207, 234, 237, 240–244, 274
Caribbean 9, 13–14, 67, 180, 184, 194–208
Carpentaria (Wright) 56–57
Chaucer, Geoffrey (see *The Canterbury Tales*) 268–269
Chharanagar 40, 42–43
Chhara/s 40–48, 51–52
Chopra, Yash (see *Deewar*) 27
Christie, Jackie (see *Today You Will Understand*) 147
citizenship 14, 182, 228, 237, 241, 244, 263, 265, 275
City Lights (Waterhouse) 128
class 3, 5, 8–9, 11–12, 29, 32–33, 35, 46, 51, 73–76, 79, 84–85, 88, 93, 96, 103–104, 107, 113, 118, 120, 169, 235–238, 244, 273–274, 276–277
  underclass 11–12, 51, 74, 103–104, 107, 113
  working class 11, 32, 66, 76, 277
climate change/chaos/crisis 1, 13, 177–180, 182–183, 185–186, 188–191, 201
climate refugees 180, 185
commandement (see Mbembe) 158, 163
commodity/-ies/commodification 21, 31, 34–35, 79, 159, 166, 178, 216, 235, 265
Common People (Birch) 11, 73–77, 82–83, 86
Company (dir. Varma) 32
Congo 119, 222
conservation/-ism 13, 178, 181, 186–187
corruption 29, 32, 46–48, 96, 157, 159, 162, 170
crime/criminality 12, 21, 26, 29–30, 32, 35, 41, 44, 47, 103–105, 108, 110, 112–113, 179, 252, 268
Criminal Tribes Act (1871) 41–42
crisis of nonrelation 11, 56–61, 67
Critical Discourse Analysis 14, 246

Daarood 220, 222–223, 227
Dalit 40, 88, 96, 98, 274, 276
Davis, Garth (see *Lion*) 26
decolonisation 188
Deewar (dir. Chopra) 27
Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) 234, 244
denotification 42–43, 51
Desai, Kiran (see *The Inheritance of Loss*) 96
deterritorialisation 179, 182–183, 188, 190
Devi, Mahasweta 43, 50
Dharavi 28–30, 34–35
Dhobi Ghat (dir. Rao) 10, 32–36
diaspora/diasporic 12–13, 31–33, 88–100, 152, 159, 167, 180, 199, 204, 221, 226, 235, 267, 274–276, 278
Dinka 14, 215–216, 218
The Dirty South (Wheatle) 104
dislocation/dislocated 8, 56, 79, 116, 121, 179
displacement 1, 4, 49, 52, 62, 88, 119, 147, 182, 213, 215–216, 219, 221–222, 261, 263, 276
Djibouti 221
drug/s 56–57, 60, 64, 67, 105–107
During, Simon 3, 8, 184, 237, 277

East of Acre Lane (Wheatle) 12, 103–114
Eastern Cape 226
Eastleigh 223, 228–229
Eat, Pray, Love (dir. Murphy) 10, 23–26, 35
ecocriticism 181, 195–196, 200, 205, 208
economies of abandonment (Povinelli) 4
ecopoetics 195, 207
Ede, Amaritsero 165
Egya, Sule Emmanuel (see *Sterile Sky*) 169
Encounter (play) 46, 48
England (see United Kingdom)
environment 3–4, 8–9, 13–14, 74, 180–182, 185–188, 191, 194–208
Eritrea 15, 267, 270–271
"Esiaba Irobi: The Tragedy of Exile" (Oguibe) 171
Ethiopia 216, 218–219, 221, 223–225, 228
Europe 13, 15, 22–23, 29, 50, 97, 118, 158, 163–164, 167, 172, 185, 197, 199–200, 203–204, 254, 261, 267, 270–271
exile 158, 162, 165, 168–170, 191, 262, 278

Exile at Home (Ojo-Ade) 162
exogenous mentality/extroversion 156–157, 159, 164, 166
exotic/ism 21–23, 25–36, 159, 166, 197, 206

Fallout (Williams) 47
Farming Ashes (Twongyeirwe and Barungi) 147–148
feminism/feminist 7, 138, 143–144, 147–149
nego-feminism 13, 137–138, 148
FEMRITE 12–13, 137–155, 171
financial breakdown (2008) 14, 236, 238–239, 241, 244
First Nations 42, 73
frames of perception 9, 263–264, 266–268, 278
Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (Butler) 4, 9, 88, 92, 137, 143, 263

Gandhi, Mahatma 23, 42
Gardening in the Tropics (Senior) 14, 196, 204, 206
gaze 8, 166–167, 194
Ghana 110, 114, 169–171
Ghana in the Eyes of God (Anas) 170
Ghoramara 182, 189
Ghosh, Amitav (see *The Hungry Tide*) 180–181, 183, 187
Glissant, Édouard 67, 204
global city (see Sassen) 185
global/isation 1, 3–4, 6, 8–10, 13–14, 21, 29, 31, 34–36, 73, 143, 156, 159, 164–165, 168, 171, 179, 184–185, 187, 189, 196–203, 207–208, 216, 235, 237–238, 265–266, 274–275, 278
Global South/ North 3, 29, 73, 88, 92, 189, 196, 266
Gorki, Maxim (see *Lower Depths*) 50–51
Gowariker, Ashutosh (see *Laagan*) 33
Gqola, Pumla 140
Great Britain (see United Kingdom)
Great Recession 241–242
grievability 264–265, 267, 273–274
Griffiths, Gareth 2, 6
Gujarat 10–11, 40, 42, 46–47, 49–51

Habila, Helon (see *Waiting for an Angel*) 156
Harare 219, 229
hate speech 14, 246, 256
Herd, David and Anna Pincus (see *Refugee Tales*) 15, 263, 267, 269
Hindi cinema/films 10, 27, 31
HIV/AIDS 13, 45, 148, 222
Hobbes, Thomas 188–191
homeless/ness 12, 51, 63, 73–74, 77, 83–84, 121, 214–215, 229, 261
"How to Write about Africa" (Wainaina) 156, 165
human rights 3, 6, 43–45, 162, 168, 219, 255–256, 265, 277–278
hunger (see starvation)
The Hungry Tide (Ghosh) 180–181, 183, 187
"Hurricane Hits England" (Nichols) 204, 207

"I"/"Punctuation Marks" (Nanton) 202
I Dare to Say (Barungi and Kiguli) 148
IMF (International Monetary Fund) 157, 159
immigration (see migration)
India 6, 9–11, 21–36, 40–52, 88–89, 91–92, 95–98, 100, 177–181, 183, 185–187, 189–190, 267, 273–276, 278
Indigenous 11, 55–57, 64, 67–68, 73, 75–76, 78, 85, 137, 159, 167, 169–171, 187, 203–204, 207, 253, 256
inequality 1, 5–6, 8, 25, 27, 31–32, 73–74, 159, 265–266, 276
The Inheritance of Loss (Desai) 96
injustice (see justice)
intersectionality 5, 11, 138, 186
Irobi, Esiaba 171
Islam 49–50, 197, 215

Jones, Gavin (see *American Hungers*) 5, 9
justice/injustice 3–4, 6, 44, 46, 48, 56, 76, 96, 100, 121, 146, 170, 240, 264–266, 273, 276

Kelman, Stephen (see *Pigeon English*) 12, 103, 113
Kennedy, Melissa 2, 6, 8, 277
Kenya 157–158, 165, 171, 216, 219, 221–222, 225
Khaal, Abu Bakr (see *African Titanics*) 15, 263, 267, 274–275
Kiguli, Susan (see *The African Saga*) 151
Kincaid, Jamaica (see *A Small Place* and *My Garden Book*) 207
Kirkwood 226, 229
Kolkata 26–27, 43

Korte, Barbara 2–3, 5–6, 8, 27, 29, 36, 56, 235, 263–264, 270
Kusek, Robert (see *Through the Looking Glass*) 217–218
Kwani Trust 171
Kyomuhendo, Goretti 139, 142, 152

Laagan (dir. Gowariker) 33
labour camps 42
Lamwaka, Beatrice 145, 152
Lemke, Sieglinde 3, 5–7
The Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as a Child Refugee (Passarlay) 213
Limbe 236, 241–244
liminal/ity 85, 183, 189–190, 269
Lion (dir. Davis) 10, 26–27, 35
The Location of Culture (Bhabha) 22, 35, 215
The Lost Boy (Bol) 14, 213, 215–220, 222, 225
The Lost Child (Phillips) 12, 116–130
Lower Depths (Gorki) 50, 52
Lucashenko, Melissa 61, 65

Madden, John (see *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*) 23
Malawi 157–158, 219
A Man of Good Hope (Steinberg) 14, 213, 220
Man Booker Prize 88, 113, 167, 278
Mapanje, Jack 158, 168
marxism 158, 200–201
Marx, Karl 31, 197
Mazhab Hame Sikhata Apas Mein Bair Rakhna (play) 46, 49
Mbembe, Achille (see *commandement* and *On the Postcolony*) 158, 163
Mbue, Imbolo (see *Behold the Dreamers*) 14, 234–245
Melbourne 73–74, 76
Michaels, Walter Benn (see *The Trouble with Diversity*) 5
Middle Passage 180, 195
migration/migrants 9, 13–15, 46, 59, 73–74, 111, 116, 119, 128, 156, 158–162, 165, 168–169, 190, 199, 203–205, 216, 221, 223, 234, 243–244, 246, 249, 251, 255, 257, 261–262, 264–267, 270–277
  emigration 250
  illegal im/migrants 12, 88–89, 93–94, 96–97, 221, 234, 237–238, 251–253, 261–263, 266–268, 273, 276, 279
  immigration/immigrants 14–15, 32, 35, 88–89, 92, 94, 98, 100, 113, 166–167, 219, 227, 234, 236–239, 242–243, 246–258, 261, 263, 267, 274–275
  migrancy 179, 191, 279
Miles Franklin Award 76
Moffet, Helen and Violet Barungi (see *Pumpkin Seeds and Other Gifts*) 145
Mogadishu 14, 220, 222, 225
Mohutsiwa, Siyanda 166–167
Morgan, Sally (see *My Place*) 61, 65
Mozambique 219
Mudimbe, Valentin-Yves 166
Mugo, Micere 143, 158, 168
Mumbai 22, 26–29, 31–33
Murphy, Ryan (see *Eat, Pray, Love*) 23
"The Muse of History" (Walcott) 203
My Garden Book (Kincaid) 207
My Place (Morgan) 61

Nairobi 219, 223, 227–228
Nambozo, Beverley 152
Namukasa, Glaydah 150–151
Nanton, Philip (see "I") 14, 201–203
nation/s 49, 73, 85, 97, 157, 162, 166, 168, 172, 180, 183, 185, 188, 190–191, 204, 223, 246, 249, 261, 265, 274
nationalism/nationalistic 158, 169, 191, 197, 225
The Nature of Blood (Phillips) 119
nego-feminism (see feminism)
neo-liberalism/neo-liberal 2–4, 14, 35, 56, 74, 116, 171, 179, 181, 186–187, 189, 237, 242–243, 274
Newland, Courttia (see *The Scholar*) 104–105, 113–114
New York (City) 14, 24, 32–33, 138, 167, 236, 241, 243–244
Nichols, Grace (see "Hurricane Hits England") 204, 207
Nigeria 9, 157–162, 165, 169–171
Nixon, Robert (see slow violence) 4, 163, 190, 201, 206–207
Nnaemeka, Obioma (see feminism/nego-feminism) 13, 137–138, 143–144, 147–149
North America 6, 13
Nuer 14, 216
Nussbaum, Martha 3

Obama, Barack 77, 234, 238
Ogaden 223–225, 227
Oguibe, Olu (see "Esiaba Irobi: The Tragedy of Exile") 171
Ojo-Ade, Femi (see *Exile at Home*) 159, 162
Okurut, Mary Karooro 140, 143
"Old World, New World" (Agard) 203
Omeros (Walcott) 14, 194–195, 207
On the Postcolony (Mbembe) 163
Orientalism/orientalist 10, 21–29, 34–36, 117
Ovonji-Odida, Irene 146

parasite metaphor 15, 247, 249, 251, 253–258
Passarlay, Gulwali (see *The Lightless Sky*) 213
patriarchy/patriarchal 11, 88–89, 91–92, 95, 138, 140, 143, 146
Patrick White Prize 76
PAWA (Pan-African Writers Association) 171
Peepli Live (dir. Rizvi) 10, 32–36
Phillips, Caryl (see *The Lost Child* and *The Nature of Blood*) 12, 116–130
Pigeon English (Kelman) 12, 104–105, 110, 112–114
"Pineapple" (Senior) 206
planetarity/planetary 14, 178–179, 181, 185, 191, 196–204, 207–208
plantation 14, 194, 196, 203, 205–206
poverty porn 27–28
Povinelli, Elizabeth (see economies of abandonment) 4
The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class (Standing) 238
Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (Butler) 137
precaritisation 3, 73–74, 274, 276
prostitution (see sex work)
Pumpkin Seeds and Other Gifts (Moffet and Barungi) 145
"Punctuation Marks" (see "I") 202–203

Q&A (Swarup) 27

race/racialised 5, 8–9, 12, 85, 93, 117–118, 129, 256
racism/racist 5, 11, 14, 63–66, 78, 80, 85, 106–107, 112, 165, 190, 220, 246–247, 254–258, 261
Rao, Kiran (see *Dhobi Ghat*) 32–33
Reality Tours and Travel 28–30
refugee/s 9, 14–15, 73–74, 156, 159, 178–180, 182–183, 185, 189–190, 213–231, 246, 261–279
Refugee Tales (Herd and Pincus) 15, 261, 263, 265, 267–269, 273, 275–278
relationality 57–64, 67, 264
resettlement 189, 219, 223, 228–230
resilience 8, 11, 13, 63, 67, 73, 75, 77, 82, 85, 144, 147, 185, 262
resistance 7, 23, 89, 92, 122, 204–205, 215, 267
Rizvi, Anusha (see *Peepli Live*) 32
Roberts, David Gregory (see *Shantaram*) 29
Rushdie, Salman 29–30, 36

Sabar, Budhan 43, 47
Sahota, Sunjeev (see *The Year of the Runaways*) 11, 15, 88–89, 91–92, 95, 97–98, 263, 267, 273, 275–276, 278
Said, Edward 22
SAP s (Structural Adjustment Programmes) 157–159
Sassen, Saskia (see global city) 185
The Scholar: A West Side Story (Newland) 104
Scott, Kim 65, 75
Selasi, Taiye (see "Bye-Bye Babar") 234–235
Sen, Amartya (see capabilities) 3
Senior, Olive (see *Gardening in the Tropics* and "Pineapple") 14, 196, 204–207
sex work 12, 93–94, 105, 109, 120
Shadowboxing (Birch) 57–58, 65–67, 76, 82
shame 81, 88, 95, 123, 215
Shantaram (dir. Roberts) 29
Sheffield 88, 97–98, 276
slavery/slave trade 118–120, 124, 195, 203, 239–240
slow death (see Berlant) 4
slow violence (see Nixon) 4, 163, 177, 206
slum 10, 21, 26–31, 34–35, 40, 48, 51, 112
Slumdog Millionaire (dir. Boyle) 10, 22, 26–29, 31, 33, 35
A Small Place (Kincaid) 207
social mobility 236–237
Somali/a 14, 213, 220–230, 271
South Africa 9, 14, 29, 157, 160, 164, 168, 213, 216, 219–221, 225–229
Southern Sudan 14, 213, 215–216, 219–220
sovereignty 56, 177–178, 180, 184–191

Soyinka, Wole 160–161, 170
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 9, 14, 184, 197–198
Standing, Guy (see *The Precariat*) 3, 73, 238, 276
starvation 4, 88, 147, 159, 216, 218
statelessness 184, 261–262, 279
Steinberg, Jonny (see *A Man of Good Hope*) 14, 213, 220–231
Sterile Sky (Egya) 169
Stolen Generations 42, 79, 81
Sundarban islands 13, 177–179, 183, 185, 190
subaltern 2, 7–8, 95, 177–179, 184, 186–189, 273, 275–276
Sudan 14, 216, 220, 271
suicide 32, 40–41, 47, 60, 120, 239
survival 11, 13, 48, 73, 75, 79, 82, 89, 93, 96, 116, 124, 138–140, 144, 162, 262–263, 274–275
sustainability 181–182
Swallow the Air (Winch) 11, 57–59, 61–65, 67
Swarup, Vikas (see *Q&A*) 27
Sydney 61

Tanzania 219, 225
Tears of Hope (Wangusa and Barungi) 146
Through the Looking Glass (Kusek) 217
Today You Will Understand (ed. Christie) 147
tourism/tourist 14, 27–31, 34, 36, 194, 196, 203, 253
trauma 56, 79, 81–82, 85, 195, 213, 215, 231, 265
triangular trade 118, 196
Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe (Baingana) 169
The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality (Michaels) 5
The Trouble with Nigeria (Achebe) 162
Trump, Donald 160–161, 234
Twongyeirwe, Hilda and Susan Kiguli (see *Wondering and Wandering of Hearts*) 148
Twongyeirwe, Hilda and Violet Barungi (see *Farming Ashes* and *Beyond the Dance*) 147–148

Uganda 9, 12–13, 137–141, 144, 146–147, 150–152
underclass (see class)
undernourishment (see starvation)
unemployment 12, 104–105, 125
UNESCO World Heritage 13
United Kingdom 6, 9, 12, 23, 25, 36, 88–89, 91–93, 95, 97–98, 100, 103–104, 110, 114, 116, 118, 120, 127–128, 130, 204, 250–254, 256, 267, 274–278
United Nations 1, 3, 143, 159, 180, 261
United States of America 9, 104, 159–162, 169, 172, 179, 190, 220, 223, 227–230, 234, 236–239, 241–244

Varma, Ram Gopal (see *Company*) 32
Victorian Premier's Award 76
violence 2, 4, 9, 26, 29, 30, 35–36, 47, 49, 51, 56, 60, 63, 65, 67, 75–76, 78, 82, 85, 88–89, 95, 103, 105, 108, 120, 122–123, 128, 162–163, 170, 179, 186, 188, 190–191, 200, 216, 222, 228–229, 246, 262, 264, 266, 276
  domestic/family violence 11, 56–57, 60, 64–67, 74, 76, 83, 85, 151
  police violence/brutality 11–12, 47–48, 107
voice/lessness 8–9, 11, 41, 43, 45, 76, 111, 137, 141–142, 144, 146–147, 150–151, 170, 265–266, 268–269, 272, 275
voyeurism 8, 28
vulnerability 4, 73, 122–123, 138–139, 146, 152, 182, 186, 188–189, 214, 238, 257, 263–264, 266, 269, 272–273, 275, 277

Wainaina, Binyavanga (see "How to Write about Africa") 165, 167
Waiting for an Angel (Habila) 168
Walcott, Derek (see *Omeros* and "The Muse of History") 14, 194–195, 203, 207
Wangusa, Ayeta Anne and Violet Barungi (see *Tears of Hope*) 146
war 3, 13–14, 49, 146–147, 190–191, 215–216, 220, 223, 225, 261, 263, 274
Waterhouse, Keith (see *City Lights*) 128
Wheatle, Alex (see *East of Acre Lane* and *The Dirty South*) 12, 103–105, 113–114
The White Tiger (Adiga) 21
whiteness/white 22–24, 65, 78–79, 81, 103, 105, 108, 110, 113, 167, 181, 219, 227, 239
Williams, Roy (see *Fallout*) 47
Winch, Tara June (see *Swallow the Air*) 11, 57, 61, 64–65, 67, 85

Wiradjuri 60, 63–65
Women Writing Africa project 138
Wondering and Wandering of Hearts (Twongyeirwe and Kiguli) 148, 151
world-ecology 196, 199–200, 203–205, 207
world-system 199–200
Wright, Alexis (see *Carpentaria*) 56–57, 65
Wuthering Heights (dir. Arnold) 118
Wuthering Heights (Brontë) 12, 116–130
Xhosa 227

The Year of the Runaways (Sahota) 11, 15, 88–89, 94, 261, 263, 266–267, 273–278
Yemen 221

Zambia 225
Zimbabwe 219, 225, 253