

Necessary Treason: Allegiance and Citizenship in Transnational Literature since Mid-Century

Carolyn Ownbey  
Department of English  
McGill University, Montréal  
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## ABSTRACT

After the Second World War, calls for world citizenship were countered by increased demands for national loyalty and patriotism. Many newly formed or independent states configured definitions of citizenship along ideological, religious, or non-territorial lines. By contrast, the Charter of the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) propounded global allegiances and affiliations. The conflict between international and national allegiance is inherent to postwar global structures and their subjects. In the context of totalitarianism and other forms of colonialism, allegiance to the state constitutes a breach of the civil contract: the implicit endorsement of human and civil rights violations through allegiance runs counter to the dialectic of rights and responsibilities fundamental to citizenship. In such a context, non-state allegiance—which is to say, treason—becomes necessary in order to reclaim citizenship and salvage the civil contract.

Attending to various modes of political resistance writing across the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries, “Necessary Treason” asks critical questions about demands for loyalty made both by states and by non-state actors and organizations since 1945. Across diverse social, political, and national contexts, I focus on writers and theorists who question the legitimacy of state citizenship and envision alternative modes of belonging and structures of affiliation. In prose that blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction, Rebecca West and Muriel Spark employ melodrama as an experimental mode for investigations of shifting Cold War loyalties. Writing against the Soviet regime in Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel and Milan Kundera formulate anti-political literary modes to undermine the state. In the context of apartheid South Africa, Mongane Wally Serote and Nadine Gordimer experiment with literary forms as essential supplements to their own anti-apartheid activism. Finally, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Caryl Phillips,

challenging state sanctioned and institutionalized racisms, reject exclusionary community formation and advocate instead for transnational, multidirectional affiliations. In each case, literary modes operate in tandem with embodied forms of political activism, and therefore constitute a crucial component of resistance. Literary modes perform and challenge state-sanctioned categories of belonging and civic duty. In the context of oppressive state formations, literature makes way for alternative citizenships and relationships of responsibility among individuals.

## RÉSUMÉ

À la suite de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, les appels à la citoyenneté mondiale se heurtent aux demandes croissantes de loyauté nationale et de patriotisme. Plusieurs États indépendants ou nouvellement formés élaborent des définitions de la citoyenneté selon des aspects idéologiques, religieux ou non-territoriaux. À l’opposé, la Charte des Nations Unies (1945) et la Déclaration universelle des droits de l’homme (1948) proposent des allégeances et des affiliations planétaires. Le conflit entre les idées d’allégeance, internationale et nationale, est inhérent aux structures mondiales d’après-guerre, ainsi qu’à leurs sujets. Dans le contexte du totalitarisme et d’autres formes de colonialisme, l’allégeance à l’État constitue une transgression du contrat civil : l’acceptation implicite des violations des droits de l’homme et des droits civils commises dans les quêtes vers l’allégeance va à l’encontre de la dialectique des droits et des responsabilités fondamentales à la citoyenneté. Dans un tel contexte, l’allégeance non-étatique—c’est-à-dire la trahison—devient nécessaire, afin de revendiquer la citoyenneté et de préserver le contrat civil.

En s’intéressant aux différents modes d’écriture de la résistance politique de la fin du 20<sup>e</sup> et du début du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle, « La trahison nécessaire » propose un questionnement critique des demandes de loyauté faites à la fois par les États et par les acteurs et les organisations non-étatiques depuis 1945. À travers divers contextes sociaux, politiques et nationaux, je me concentre sur les écrivains et les théoriciens qui remettent en question la légitimité de la citoyenneté d’État et qui conçoivent des modes d’appartenance et des structures d’affiliation révolutionnaires. À l’aide d’une prose qui estompe la ligne entre la fiction et la non-fiction, Rebecca West et Muriel Spark utilisent le mélodrame comme mode expérimental pour étudier les loyautés changeantes de la guerre froide. En écrivant contre le régime soviétique en

Tchécoslovaquie, Václav Havel et Milan Kundera formulent des modes littéraires antipolitiques ayant pour but de discréditer l'État. Dans le contexte de l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud, Mongane Wally Serote et Nadine Gordimer expérimentent avec des formes littéraires comme une partie intégrante de leur activisme anti-régime. Enfin, Abdulrazak Gurnah et Caryl Phillips, tout en contestant les racismes institutionnels et les racismes sanctionnés par l'État, rejettent la formation de communautés exclusionnaires et défendent, à l'inverse, les affiliations transnationales et multidirectionnelles. Dans chaque cas, les modes littéraires fonctionnent en tandem avec des formes incarnées d'activisme politique et ils constituent ainsi une composante cruciale de la résistance. Ces modes littéraires présentent et défient les catégories d'appartenance et les devoirs civiques sanctionnés par l'État. Dans ces contextes de formations étatiques oppressives, la littérature ouvre la voie à des modèles alternatifs de citoyenneté et à de nouvelles relations de partage des responsabilités entre les individus.

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## **INTRODUCTION: Literary Traitors**

Treason takes on new meaning in the years after the Second World War. From the trials of William Joyce and John Amery in England in 1945, to the later-overturned convictions of the Delmas Treason Trial defendants in South Africa in 1988, charges of treason since mid-century illuminate international relations as well as domestic politics. To be a traitor is diametrically to oppose the state and sovereign; individuals or actions labelled traitorous belie political norms and expectations. At times, traitors inspire fury and patriotism; at others, admiration and dissent. Show trials and investigative committees, such as the Slánský Trial in Czechoslovakia in 1952 and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the United States during the early Cold War,<sup>1</sup> parsed “disloyalty” in quasi-legal and administrative terms. When nuclear secrets constitute potential fodder for traitors and spies, the need to root out infiltrators and double agents intensifies. Writing to Lord Beaverbrook in 1947, Rebecca West communicates the ubiquitous existential urgency attached to treason: “this material about treason will go down the drain if I do not record it; and it is valuable not only to the historian but to everybody who wants humanity to survive” (Scott 219). Treason, therefore, is a matter of survival: of states, of political systems, and sometimes of the traitors themselves. The death penalty remained on the books as the punishment for treason in the United Kingdom until 1998; in countries like the United States and Israel, treason remains a capital offense.

Treason is rare as a charge in itself. More often, individuals are charged under the auspices of espionage or subverting, sabotaging, or otherwise undermining the government. The

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<sup>1</sup> HUAC had been in existence since 1938, but only became a permanent committee after the war. It endured until 1975.

cases of Alan Nunn May (1946), Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (1951), and Edward Snowden (2013),<sup>2</sup> fall under the former category; Václav Havel (subversion of the republic), Nelson Mandela (sabotage), and Oscar López Rivera (sedition) are prominent examples of the latter.<sup>3</sup> A series of trials in the United States from 1949 to the late 1950s enforced the Smith Act of 1940, also known as the Alien Registration Act. In Title I, Section 2 (a) (1), the Smith Act takes aim at those who “knowingly or willfully advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States.” Some spies and traitors defected to avoid prosecution, including three members of the infamous Cambridge Five: Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Kim Philby. Others, such as Whittaker Chambers and Harry Gold, testified against their former associates under subpoena or under duress.

Treason can be unwarranted, or it can be necessary. Certainly most traitors view their work as the latter: ideology, real or imagined rights violations, and moral superiority are among the motivations of traitors. When, in John le Carré’s *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), traitor Bill Haydon tries to justify his treachery to George Smiley, his defense follows political ideology:

The statement began with a long apologia, of which [Smiley] afterwards recalled only a few sentences.

“We live in an age where only fundamental issues matter...

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<sup>2</sup> While Edward Snowden has not formally stood trial, the criminal complaint against him was filed on 14 June 2013 in Alexandria, Virginia. He is charged, like the Rosenbergs, under the 1917 Espionage Act. See *United States v. Edward Snowden*.

<sup>3</sup> Before his conviction in 1964, Mandela had been charged with treason in the infamous 1956 Treason Trial, but he was acquitted. The Rivonia Trial in 1963-1964 focused instead on sabotage, presumably an easier charge to prove.

“The United States is no longer capable of undertaking its own revolution...

“The political posture of the United Kingdom is without relevance or moral viability in world affairs...” (np)

Haydon concludes, “it’s an aesthetic judgement as much as anything... Partly a moral one, of course” (np). Pity, as well as a quiet derision, resonate in Smiley’s polite reply, “of course” (np). In a different context, Haydon’s political beliefs would be the mark of a patriot. Treason, after all, has everything to do with context: an individual can only commit treason against a country to which she belongs. Haydon owes his allegiance to England. By the time he receives Russian citizenship in 1961, he had been conveying sensitive information to the Soviets for over a decade. He became “a committed, full-time Soviet mole with no holds barred” (np) in 1956. In this situation, the question arises: what qualifies as necessary treason? Is political ideology enough to justify necessity? To what can a citizen reasonably appeal beyond the laws of her own state? In the postwar years, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is one possible answer, but there could be others. As an exploration of precisely these questions, this project posits a non-prescriptive definition of necessary treason. That is to say, there are no definite politics or underlying ideology required for treason to qualify as warranted; neither communist, nor capitalist, nor any other prescriptive political motivations do the work of validation. Instead, the necessary traitors at the heart of this study share a commitment to humanity, and they refuse starkly ideological rationalizations for their treasonous, often revolutionary, activities.

With the changing shape of the world through decolonization, massive refugee relocations, and Cold War currents, treason becomes harder to pin down in the postwar years. To whom does an erstwhile colonial subject owe allegiance? What sort of loyalty does the Commonwealth require? Following the Second World War, calls for world citizenship were

countered by increased demands for national loyalty and patriotism. Many newly formed or independent states, such as Israel, India, Pakistan, and Ireland, configured definitions of citizenship along ideological, religious, or otherwise non-territorial lines. By contrast, the Charter of the United Nations (1945) and the UDHR (1948) propounded global allegiances and affiliations. In the context of totalitarianism or other forms of colonialism, allegiance to the state constitutes a breach of the civil contract: allegiance to oppressive regimes implies an endorsement of the human and civil rights violations that those regimes commit. Such an endorsement runs counter to the dialectic of rights and responsibilities that is fundamental to citizenship. In that context, non-state allegiance—which is to say, treason—becomes necessary in order to reclaim citizenship and salvage the civil contract.

Treason, as a sensational, high-stakes iteration of betrayal, is the stuff of literature. Whether high-, low-, or middle-brow, literary narratives advance by betrayal. Affairs, double-crosses, espionage and intrigue characterize literary scenarios and plot movements. From Shakespeare's *Othello* to Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, plot hinges on acts of betrayal. Treachery and betrayal drive literary narratives of specific genres: espionage novels of Ian Fleming, Eric Ambler, Helen MacInnes, and John le Carré, among others, have become an integral part of the literary establishment. Spies and traitors are not only the province of Anglo-American literature. International by definition, spies and traitors occur in literature from countless national settings: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and Emile Habibi's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974), for instance, contain traitors at the centre of their narratives.

In this dissertation, literature does more than take treason as its subject. The authors and literary texts in "Necessary Treason" advocate and perform a sort of literary treason: betrayal of

the state by the letter. Cultural forms have always been indispensable to revolutionary and civil rights movements. According to Sophia McClennen and Joseph Slaughter, “the civil rights struggle in the US is almost unimaginable without pulpit oratory; the anti-apartheid struggle without the *toyitoyi*, freedom songs, and aerial photographs of township funeral rallies; the movement for the abolition of slavery without the slave narrative” (7-8). Literary forms, too, have a distinguished place in political movements since the mid-century. Michael Keren, in *The Citizen’s Voice: Twentieth-Century Politics and Literature*, explores the “special role” that “was played by novelists, poets, playwrights, and other persons of letters who contributed to the collapse of totalitarian regimes” (6). In various contexts around the globe—postcolonial, dictatorial, communist, authoritarian—nonconformist writers were censored, banned, exiled, or imprisoned. Novels circulated under cover; plays were performed in clandestine spaces; prison letters were smuggled out from behind bars, in one way or another. “Necessary Treason” tests the hypothesis: if literature can be revolutionary, then it can also be treasonous.

How can literature, which has no fixed jurisdiction, be treasonous? Treason and betrayal customarily entail the violation of some sort of allegiance or loyalty, but literary texts can swear no fealty. Nonetheless, literature can still undermine the order of the day, whether of their states of production or subject matter. A literary text written under or about a regime might be expected to support or honour that regime, or at least not to undermine it. In fact, they often are: “the State wants from the Writer *reinforcement* of the type of consciousness it imposes on its citizens, nor the discovery of the actual conditions of life beneath it, which may give the lie to it” (Gordimer, *Living* 194; original emphasis). Literary texts betray such demands precisely by revealing truths or imagining alternative regimes or forms of social organization. According to Rachel Potter and Lyndsey Stonebridge, “literature speaks to the possibilities of freedom that political systems are

often blind to; writing anchors human rights law by providing images of the persons whose rights must be defended; the very forms of sovereignty possible in imaginative writing offer a challenge to poorly parsed social contracts” (2). Novels, plays, and other imaginative texts reconfigure communities; those communities often relate in unexpected ways to states, nations, or other social or governmental arrangements. Michael McFaul, former US Ambassador to Russia, recently claimed, “political scientists and US government officials, we’re pretty bad at predicting revolutionary breakthroughs. Before they happen, they seem impossible, after they happen, they seem inevitable.”<sup>4</sup> McFaul was likely not making an argument about the revolutionary potential of literature with this statement—but he may as well have been. In circumstances of social or political revolution, literature often anticipates outcomes that are inconceivable in other disciplinary contexts. Literature, then, is necessary because “we are not yet done with the work of imagining new forms of political and fictional sovereignty for a terrifyingly unjust world” (Potter and Stonebridge 9).

The authors and works I take up in this dissertation undermine oppressive regimes and imagine new social and political possibilities. They challenge exclusionary social formations, protest human and civil rights abuses, and confound totalitarian movements. They provide models of allegiance and citizenship that exceed state logics of duty and belonging. In the early postwar years and into the heart of the Cold War, British writers Rebecca West and Muriel Spark employ melodrama as a narrative mode that yields otherwise unspeakable meanings and allows characters to discover otherwise improbable affiliations. Václav Havel and Milan Kundera, writing against the post-1968 Soviet regime in Czechoslovakia, disavow politics as such, and

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<sup>4</sup> McFaul made this observation to Rachel Maddow regarding mass protests in Russia in June 2017. *The Rachel Maddow Show*. MSNBC, New York, 12 June 2017. Transcript available at: <http://www.msnbc.com/transcripts/rachel-maddow-show/2017-06-12>

formulate literary modes that undercut the totalitarian system. Havel evades prison censors by encoding letters to his wife; Kundera parodies the delusions of totalitarianism. In the South African context, Nadine Gordimer and Mongane Wally Serote mobilize literature for the revolutionary, anti-apartheid cause. Testifying to the human rights abuses perpetrated by the state and imagining post-apartheid futures, Gordimer and Serote recreate the scene of activism in literature. Finally, contemporary writers Abdulrazak Gurnah and Caryl Phillips generate complex, diverse networks in their prose in order to challenge exclusionary national formations. Whether in novels or in literary nonfiction, Gurnah and Phillips advocate more hospitable, inclusive communities.

Together, these eight authors comprise a cohort of necessary traitors. They betray totalitarian regimes and exclusionary social orders in the service of human and civil rights. Using form as well as content, these authors challenge the unjust, inhuman systems under or about which they write. Some of them undermine legalities: West circumvents British contempt and reporting laws in order to unmask racist and corrupt police officers, and draws connections among different kinds of dishonest and morally bankrupt authorities; Havel uses a fractured, coded method of literary collage to outwit prison censors and to circumvent the regime's ban on his writing; Gurnah upsets the order of narrative that determines legal asylum, and challenges the state to widen the extent of its hospitality. Other writers foster interpersonal and international connections in the face of exclusive social formations: Spark draws a fevered, international spy drama that questions normative criteria for Britishness as well as patriotism; Phillips reconceives and compounds literary forms—novels, biographies, anthologies—to undercut the monolithic assumptions that nations and governments rely on to maintain supremacy. Still more of these writers use literature as a medium for political (or anti-political) messaging: Gordimer weaves



political positions into her novels, and presents arguments in fiction that would constitute treasonous rhetoric in nonfiction; Kundera nuances definitions, collapses certainties, and mixes genres to combat absolutism; Serote manipulates space and time in his novels to generate revolutionary momentum. These authors do not acquiesce to the state's demands for support, conformity, or silence. Each boldly resists cooptation and censorship, and each devises literary means of doing so.

## Definitions

The concept of necessary treason as I posit it hinges on several key terms. The first, obvious, one is “TREASON.” In legal terms, treason differs by national and state criteria, as well as historical and political context. In Canada, any person—citizen or non-citizen—can commit treason when physically within Canadian territory: the Canadian Criminal Code specifies that “every one commits high treason who, *in Canada*,” perpetrates treacherous crimes against the sovereign (Section 46.1; my emphasis). Residence within borders constitutes adequate responsibility to the state to warrant a treason charge. Conversely, only Canadian citizens can commit treason “while in *or out of* Canada” (Section 46.3; my emphasis). In Australia, one need not be a citizen of or present in Australia to commit treason. According to Article 80.1 of the Criminal Code, “a person commits an offense [of treason] if the person” causes death or harm of the Sovereign, levies war, or “receives or assists” someone doing the same. In these terms, violation of sovereignty amounts to treason, regardless of nationality or location. In instances of regime change, what constitutes treason makes a full conversion: patriots in the old system may be traitors in the new, and vice versa. Marina MacKay, discussing Muriel Spark, explains that, “‘traitors’ is the word Spark conscientiously avoids when she writes, in *Curriculum Vitae*, about

the captive personnel with whom she worked; on the contrary, these were ‘truly patriotic Germans’ eager to volunteer for a role in which ‘they could oppose Hitler and the Nazis’” (“Muriel Spark,” 511). Definitionally, treason covers quite a bit of ground. According to the *OED*, treason can be merely “breach of faith, treacherous action, treachery,” or, more properly “violation by a subject of his allegiance to his sovereign or to the state.” As per the former, treason breaks faith—which is to say, it violates allegiance. According to the latter, treason is a citizen’s dereliction of duty to the state. What is a state? Who qualifies as a citizen? What comprises duty, or allegiance? To what might one swear allegiance? Such questions require definitions:

“DUTY”: literally, what is “due to a superior” (*OED*); related to “RESPONSIBILITY.” Duties are owed in exchange for something. In the customary citizen-state relation, a citizen’s duties to the state are levied in exchange for rights and protections granted by that state. Before 1948, duties were owed to states, lords, feudal superiors, or churches. The UDHR conceives duty differently. Article 29.1 reads, “everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.” The community invoked in this article is not state-bound. The other two mentions of “community” in the UDHR—in Articles 18 and 27—likewise do not designate a state or national definition. The community to which the post-UDHR individual owes duties is a “community with others” (Article 18). In this context, Seyla Benhabib contends, “the refrain of the soldier and the bureaucrat—‘I was only doing my duty’—is no longer an acceptable ground for abrogating the rights of humanity in the person of the other—even when, and especially when, the other is your enemy” (*Rights* 8). The trial of Adolf

Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 confirms this premise in legal terms.<sup>5</sup> The “duty” the UDHR formulates is to a larger human community, one that, according to Benhabib and others, supersedes duty to state or nation.

“ALLEGIANCE,” of which “LOYALTY” and “PATRIOTISM” are variations, is a particular form of duty. One can swear allegiance rather than merely owe it. If one owes or swears allegiance to a state, it becomes legally binding. A breach of the legal contract that allegiance signals is tantamount to treason. According to Ralph S. Brown, loyalty, as opposed to allegiance, “has no such narrow legal bounds. It is something one *feels*, a generous emotion, personal and free” (5; original emphasis). Patriotism, too, is affective: love of country characterizes a patriot. In authoritarian discourse, patriotism is often manipulated in the service of politics rather than of country. In a recent article for *Foreign Policy*, for instance, Mark Galeotti and Andrew S. Bowen identify “one of the new themes of Russian politics: the conflation of loyalty to the Kremlin with patriotism” (17). Neither the Kremlin nor Vladimir Putin is synonymous with “Russia”; Putin hopes to substitute himself and his regime metonymically for country. At recent protests, opposition figure Aleksei Navalny and other anti-Putin protestors “waved Russian flags, cloaking their opposition in the same patriotism that Mr. Putin has used so successfully to boost his popularity” (Higgins np). Opposition in this case is a manifestation of patriotism, against the false patriotism of the autocrat: when Navalny argues that ““all autocratic regimes come to an end”” (qtd. in Walker np), he prioritizes country over regime.

Allegiance need not be exclusive, although occasionally distinct allegiances conflict. In the South African apartheid context, Gordimer explains, “there are a number of things to be

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<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration on the Eichmann trial’s arbitration of duty, see my forthcoming article in *Textual Practice*, “‘Not Guilty in the Sense of the Indictment’: Statelessness, Rights, and Literary Form in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.”

committed to in South Africa—colour groups, language groups, political groups, and so on—and to be committed to one is to find yourself in bitter opposition to one, or some, or all of the others” (“Novel,” 521). Multiple, often conflicting allegiances characterize postwar global structure and its subjects. There is not necessarily something inherent, as Martha Nussbaum contends, “about the national boundary that magically converts people toward whom we are both incurious and indifferent into people to whom we have duties of mutual respect” (14). Rather, allegiance in the postwar globe can be multiple, and transnational. According to Bruce Robbins, loyalties “have to be built up laboriously out of the imperfect historical materials—churches and mosques, commercial interests and immigrant diasporas, sentimentality about hungry children and technorapture over digitalized communication—that are already at hand” (6). Loyalty is not pregiven, and it can be altered: it can be won, or lost.

“DISSENT”: during the Cold War, “dissent” was the term used primarily in the West to describe political resistance or opposition to Eastern and Central European communist regimes. More properly, the “independent activities of many kinds which occur in Central and Eastern Europe, commonly but inappropriately termed ‘dissent,’ challenge the efforts of the communist regimes to establish and maintain total control of their societies and to eliminate any free or autonomous tendencies” (Skilling 211). Havel, Kundera, and others disliked the label because they thought it too isolating. According to H. Gordon Skilling, the term “dissent” suggests “that action is limited to protests by a small band of almost professional dissidents or human rights activists” (211). By definition, dissent implies no such exemplary position: to dissent is merely “to withhold assent or consent” (*OED*). What dissent properly signifies in the context of Central Europe during the Cold War is a specific kind of resistance to totalitarian systems, rather than individual actions or a small group of oppositional people. Havel describes dissent as a form of

protest “born at a time when this [totalitarian] system, for a thousand reasons, can no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power, eliminating all expressions of nonconformity” (“Power,” 23). In the post-Stalinist years, totalitarian systems rely less on violence and more on enforced conformity. Totalitarianism is perpetuated by mass consent; dissent disrupts its momentum.

“NATION” and “NATIONALISM”: the nation is one of several possible objects of allegiance and loyalty; manifestations of such allegiance to a nation constitute nationalism. Nations (as distinct from states or nation-states, defined below) are conceived and rhetorically constructed as coherent, outlined communities. These can be organized around a number of different criteria for inclusion: birthplace, class, ethnicity, language, ancestry, and race are only a few iterations of national criteria. Paul Gilroy, in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), describes, in the British context,

how the limits of ‘race’ have come to coincide so precisely with national frontiers.

This is a central achievement of the new racism... black settlers and their British-born children are denied authentic national membership on the basis of their ‘race’ and, at the same time, prevented from aligning themselves within the ‘British race’ on the grounds that their national allegiance inevitably lies elsewhere. (46)

Criteria for inclusion is also criteria for exclusion. Nations are often thought of, and described as, mutually exclusive. The impulse to separateness is not unique to the British context. Every nation needs a border, and the more definite (and exclusive) said border is, the more certain a nation is of its identity. Nationalism “serves to formulate political identity just as citizenship formulates political power” (Arnold 37); according to Bonnie Honig, “even many of the most

multiculturally minded contributors to diversity debates treat foreignness as a necessary evil and assume that we would be better off if only there were enough land for every group to have its own nation-state” (2).

Grand histories and myths of continuity are often invoked in calls for nationalism. Putin’s 2012 state-of-the-federation address is exemplary of this appeal to such a historical vision: “‘in order to revive national consciousness, we need to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but, rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over 1,000 years and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development’” (qtd. in Galeotti and Bowen 17). Whereas histories claimed by states may be imposingly definitive, histories declared by nations extend to mythic proportions. In truth, most nations are constructed less through real, established, uncontestable bonds between individuals and more out of contemporary political expediency; the US Republican Party’s recent embrace of “alt-right” white nationalists is proof enough of that. Such nations are mobilized for political gain. Recent scholarship tends toward defining nations as “unstable entities, imaginatively even when not territorially” (Carlston 11). Seyla Benhabib, Ian Shapiro, and Danilo Petranović point out that “the idea that national political identification is an ineradicable feature of the human condition permeates much contemporary thinking so completely that people do not even notice it” (3); their collection on *Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances* works to denaturalize such a conception.

“THE STATE”: while the term “state” is often conflated with “nation,” the state in my definition refers to a more concrete, less subjective entity. David Held defines the state as “the supreme power operating in a delimited geographic realm” which has “preeminent jurisdiction... supervised and implemented by territorially anchored institutions” (32). In general terms, I

invoke the territorial state and its cumulative apparatuses of administration, governance, and sovereignty. This includes military and police institutions, welfare programmes and social services, elected officials and administrative officers. The state is often described exclusively as a disciplinary, authoritarian entity. Tony Judt writes back against such a conception, and insists that “we need to learn once again to ‘think the state,’ free of the prejudices we have acquired against it in the triumphalist wake of the West’s cold war victory” (*Reappraisals* 9). I acknowledge Judt’s assertion that “we all know, at the end of the twentieth century, that you can have too much state. But... you can also have too little” (*Reappraisals* 9). However, my use of “the state” in the chapters that follow tends toward the former definition, if only because treason is not often committed, at least not in motive, against welfare and social programmes so much as against political, military, and police institutions.

The state is the entity which confers and enforces rights. Hannah Arendt argues that modern man has never been a “completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order” (*Origins* 291). While the UDHR asserts that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind” (Article 2), Arendt’s statement makes clear that the state—the “larger encompassing order”—bestows dignity and human rights. I tend toward this definition of the state, as an overarching, rights-granting (or rights-withholding) social institution. In my case studies, states abjure responsibility to enforce those rights. Sulman Setty in West’s *A Train of Powder* (1955) and David Oluwale in Phillips’ *Foreigners* (2007) are blatantly denied their rights; the South African Police (SAP) and the Czechoslovak authorities suppress basic human rights in their respective contexts.

States, like nations, promote their own origin stories and tout their continuing existence

as confirmation of their power. This is particularly true for totalitarian states. Unlike nations, states rely on glorious moments of inauguration, rather than on ancient and unspecific origin myths. Ian Baucom explains that “the full time of the nation (past, present, and future) is thus bracketed *within* and contained *by* the present time of the state, and what had appeared to be two competing versions of the relations between the now, the what-has-been, and the what-is-to-come are subsumed within one dominant and over-awing order of time: the now time of the state” (“Afterword,” 714; original emphasis). States are established through revolutions, conquests, or liberations—all of which are easily converted into grand tales of power or moral authority. State histories often serve to justify the existence of the state: state rhetoric is self-affirming and self-perpetuating.

“TOTALITARIANISM” is the socio-political system in which the state and the system most closely align. “In the modern world—and especially under a totalitarian system, of course,” Václav Havel writes, “no one is, nor can they be, completely or absolutely independent of the state” (“Parallel Polis,” 233). Havel theorizes what he terms “post-totalitarianism,” which is “totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships, different from totalitarianism as we usually understand it” (“Power,” 27). This description, as well as my use of the term, is rooted in Arendt’s formulation of totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950). Totalitarianism is “not merely dictatorship” (ix), Arendt argues. It is an all-pervasive political, cultural, and social system that aims to achieve what Arendt calls “absolute power”: “never content to rule by external means” (325), totalitarian bureaucracy “intruded upon the private individual and his inner life with equal brutality” (245). Totalitarianism reconfigures human relationships, isolates its subjects from one another, and fabricates its own truths. Political, cultural, and other views or tastes are programmed. When I describe colonial and other



oppressive regimes throughout this dissertation, I do not always invoke totalitarianism by name, but something of its Manichean, totalizing impulses are at work in oppressive colonial and nationalist systems. The necessary traitors I study work against the totalizing drives of the systems under which they write. They are fundamentally antitotalitarian: “every antitotalitarian tendency worthy of the name (that is, offering more than just another version of totalitarianism) is, in essence, oriented above all toward the good of the polis, toward genuine community, toward justice and freedom” (Benda 220).

“NATION-STATES”: I distinguish the nation-state from both the state and the nation in order to identify governing and territorial entities in relation to the international community. Nation-states participate in trade agreements, peace treaties, and international diplomacy. Sometimes referred to only as “STATES” (as distinct from “the state”), these internationally participatory bodies are more often referred to as nation-states (although the coherent *nation-ness* of such entities is not guaranteed). Nation-states are what scholars refer to when they declare the “fall of the state” (Judt, *Reappraisals* 7) after the Second World War. Such scholars certainly do not mean to say that the apparatuses of the state—welfare programs or police institutions—are waning or irrelevant after the war. Rather, they refer to the reduction of the nation-state as a global contender “at the hands of multinational corporations, transnational institutions, and the accelerated movement of people, money, and goods outside [the nation-state’s] control” (Judt, *Reappraisals* 7). What Held refers to as “an emerging multilayered political system” (17) begins to take shape in the postwar. Whereas the now-defunct League of Nations (est. 1920) was one of a small network of intergovernmental organizations before the Second World War, in the postwar era, intergovernmental, international, and non-governmental organizations flourish. The immediate postwar years saw the establishment of a large number of such institutions: from 1944

to 1949 alone, the International Monetary Fund (1944), United Nations (1945), the World Bank (1945), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1947; replaced in 1995 with the World Trade Organization), the World Health Organization (1948), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (1949) came into being. This developing state of global affairs is one in which “sovereign nation-states no longer exclusively define the field of global political relations or monopolize many of the powers organizing that field, yet states remain significant actors in that field, as well as symbols of national identification” (W. Brown 24). By mid-century, the nation-state as such is only one component in a multifaceted international world order.

“TRANSNATIONAL” and “TRANSNATIONALISM”: in the *OED*, a transnational entity is defined as “extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers.” In my use of the term, the transnational extends beyond both nation and nation-state boundaries. The *OED* also defines “transnational” as simply “multinational.” While transnationalism is necessarily multinational, the prefix “multi” does not quite encompass the movement that “transnational” indicates. Neither does “inter-,” as in “international,” which signifies something fixed between or among nations. In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Aihwa Ong parses the meaning of “transnational”:

*Trans* denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the *trans*versal, the *trans*actional, the *trans*lational, and the *trans*gressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism. (4; original emphasis)

Signaling movement rather than stasis, transnationalism is an apt descriptor of the dynamism

inherent to postwar international affairs and multinational activities. When Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, describes “the new internationalism” as “the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees” (4-5), he would be better served by the term “transnationalism.” Migration, diaspora, displacement, exile, and refugees all inherently entail movement. The “new internationalism,” then, is inevitably transnational.

In her seminal work, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown identifies transnational movements, rather than multinational or international affairs, as driving forces in “the contemporary frenzy of nation-state wall building” (107). “Walls target nonstate transnational actors—individuals, groups, movements, organizations, and industries,” Brown contends: walls “react to transnational, rather than international relations and respond to persistent, but often informal or subterranean powers, rather than to military undertakings” (107; 21). In her characterization of the term, Brown emphasizes the nonstate-ness of transnationalism. International transactions occur between nation-states; the multinational entails multiple nation-states. In transnationalism, on the other hand, the nation-state is a location to or from which a “nonstate transnational actor” moves, rather than a participant undertaking that movement. Some scholars, namely Bill Ashcroft, have theorized an entity called the “transnation,” or “an ‘in-between’ space, which contains no one definitive people, nation or even community, but is everywhere, a space without boundaries” (16). Ashcroft contends that the transnation “is more than ‘the international’ or ‘the transnational’, which might more properly be conceived as a relation between states” (16). In this dissertation, I avoid the neologism “transnation.” Where the “transnation” denotes a space in which transnational actions happen, I take nation-states as the

real, concrete locales where transnational activities happen. I therefore favour the terms “transnational” (characterizing actors or actions across national or nation-state borders) and transnationalism (an assemblage of transnational actions).

“CITIZEN” and “CITIZENSHIP”: in his discussion of citizenship in *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben contends that “one of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics (which will continue to increase in our century) is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside” (131). Citizenship criteria does the work of determining who belongs and who is excluded. “In its narrowest definition,” Saskia Sassen contends, “citizenship describes the legal relationship between the individual and the polity” (180). More specifically, citizenship is the relationship between those whom the polity officially deems its members—or citizens—and the polity. In legal terms the polity equals the state, that rights-granting institution. Legal members of the state make up its citizenry. According to Sassen’s description, something like “world citizenship” might theoretically be possible: a legal relation of the individual to a sort of world community. In practical terms, “world citizenship” is an unworkable concept. Despite the overwhelming number of international organizations in the contemporary global landscape, not one constitutes or represents a truly global polity or authority. While the UDHR opens with the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (Preamble), it relies on “Member States” (Preamble) to guarantee the rights that it enumerates. The UDHR guarantees “the right to a nationality” (Article 15), but it is up to those “Member States” to grant nationality. In a sense, nation-states make up the United Nations citizenry. Nationality and citizenship are not equivalent terms. Citizenship confers nationality; nationality may not entail citizenship. The *OED* defines “nationality” as “the status of being a citizen or subject of a

particular state.” A subject has fewer guaranteed rights and privileges than a citizen, but often the same level of allegiance is expected of the subject.

### **Critical Interventions**

This dissertation, especially its combination of disparate national and transnational case studies, contributes to ongoing debates about what literary and cultural studies conceive as fields under their purview. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's provocative essay, “On the Abolition of the English Department” (1972), motivated this debate, but nearly five decades later, there is hardly consensus. Much of what makes up scholarship in English is still organized along national lines and historical periods: British Romanticism, contemporary American, and the like. Just as often (and frequently in concert), sub-fields in English are divided by literary mode: novels, poetry, drama. In *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, Ngugi suggests that literary studies should look to postcolonial studies (often considered a subfield of the former) as a model for scholarly orientation: “the postcolonial is inherently outward looking, inherently international in its very constitution in terms of themes, language, and the intellectual formation of the writers. It would be quite productive to look at world literature, though not exclusively, through postcoloniality” (49). In this regard, I follow an emergent trend in literary and cultural studies away from national or generic categories. My case studies emerge from, and represent, a number of national contexts: British, Czech, French, South African, German, Jordanian, Israeli, Zanzibari, American. I organize my project thematically (treason, citizenship, allegiance), temporally (postwar, Cold War, contemporary), and contextually (political and social structures). I focus on numerous kinds of literature: journalism, literary nonfiction, novels, political essays, prison letters, and creative anthologies. I read these works in tandem with legislation, human

rights statutes, trial transcripts, and personal letters. I combine historical and contextual analysis with formal literary readings, and I synthesize political theories, legal and human rights documents, and literary texts in order to parse the uses of literature in contexts of governmental or social oppression.

I examine literature “since mid-century,” which is to say, I am concerned with texts reckoning with the rapidly changing shape of the world in the decades following the Second World War. The 1940s to the present have been decades characterized by massive population displacements, the inauguration of the contemporary international human rights regime, a litany of independence movements, and decolonization on a grand scale. Both the Cold War and the apartheid regime have their beginnings in the immediate postwar years, and met their (officially recognized) ends four and a half decades hence. Literary and cultural scholars have increasingly used the end of the Second World War and attendant events in international relations as temporal markers for their lines of inquiry. The American Studies journal *Post45* got its start in 2011; Leela Gandhi and Deborah L. Nelson’s edited issue of *Critical Inquiry*, entitled “Around 1948: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Global Transformation,” came out in 2014; perhaps most recently, Allan Hepburn’s *Around 1945* was published in 2016. I join this body of scholarship in recognizing the events of mid-century as era-defining. Whereas Tony Judt defines “the years 1945-89... not as the threshold of a new epoch but rather as an interim age: a post-war parenthesis, the unfinished business of a conflict that ended in 1945 but whose epilogue had lasted for another half century” (*Postwar 2*), I contend that the “unfinished business” of mid-century events linger still.

My case studies can variously be categorized as postcolonial, global Anglophone, or world literature. Gurnah and Phillips most properly fit the postcolonial label, whereas Gordimer

and Serote write in a settler-colonial, postcolonial context. Six of my eight chapters focus on literature originally written in English. While I read both Havel's and Kundera's texts in translation, there is nonetheless a case to be made for their inclusion in a "global Anglophone" context. Their works were translated quickly and disseminated widely, even to the point where Kundera has been called "something of an intellectual celebrity in the West, where he has even been featured in *Vogue* magazine" (Kakutani np). Especially in the wake of his post-communist presidency, Havel, too, figures prominently in the western literary imaginary. According to Rebecca Walkowitz,

It has become more difficult to assert with confidence that we know what literature in English is... Anglophone works of immigrant fiction are not always produced in an Anglophone country; some immigrant fictions produced in an Anglophone country are not originally Anglophone; and some do not exist in any one language at all. These variations test the presumed monolingualism of any nation, whether the U.S. or England, and remind us that there is a (largely invisible) misfit between the national and linguistic valences of the tradition we call 'English literature.' (529)

Where "English literature" may be too precise a term for the variety of texts under its umbrella, "world literature" is a deceptively broad term. Bhabha has argued that "transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature" (12). Certainly several of my case studies, which feature and are written by migrants, exiles, colonized people, and refugees of various stripes, could fit under this rubric. As Gordimer points out, the moniker "world literature" lacks perspectival specificity: "in the all-encompassing sense of the term 'world', can any of our literatures be claimed definitively

as ‘world’ literature? Which world? Whose world?” (*Living* 18). “English” and “Anglophone” literary studies, then, might be more accurate for my case studies: these are works either written in English or directed, through translation, at Anglophone audiences.

While I discuss texts that could be classified in a number of non-national sub-categories, including postcolonial and global Anglophone literature, in this dissertation I favour the term “transnational” as the descriptor for my case studies. I aim, in taking a multi-disciplinary approach, to “problematize conventional understandings of homes and communities as stable, spatially fixed locations, from which migrants depart and in which they relocate ‘new’ homes” (Ahmed, Castañeda, et al. 3). Instead, I examine the ways in which communities are forged, and the reasons why members of those communities betray them. I use the transnational as a larger framework within which to examine postcolonial, postwar, and Cold War texts. In so doing, I follow the work of several contemporary scholars who synthesize these disparate but overlapping international arrangements. Cristina Sandru, in *Worlds Apart?: A Postcolonial Reading of Post-1945 East-Central European Culture*, couples “the two interpretive frameworks, the postcolonial and the post-totalitarian” (98), in order to examine the ways in which literature can respond to oppressive regimes. Peter Kalliney traces transnational literary associations in *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics*. Monica Popescu, Cedric Tolliver, and Julie Tolliver’s 2014 edited issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* on “Alternative Solidarities: Black Diasporas and Cultural Alliances during the Cold War” takes as its “point of departure the paradigm-shifting scholarship in black diaspora/Atlantic scholarship over the last two decades,” and their collection “offers a critical optic that insists on black cultural production as in excess of the nation and suggests the many ways that this excess challenges the smooth functioning of modern nation states” (Tolliver 380). This dissertation



brings together texts from and about England, Eastern Europe, and South and East Africa, and it focuses on texts relaying between national and international events, such as decolonization, the global Cold War, and apartheid. As Popescu argues, “researching at the intersection of black Atlantic, postcolonial, and Cold War studies can, therefore, highlight the full complexity of these cultural networks as well as make visible the historical reasons for their formation” (105). I constellate the work of eight authors writing in several distinct national or international contexts in order to parse the meanings of allegiance and citizenship from mid-century to the present.

“Necessary Treason” is a study of literature, and specifically of imaginative, literary prose. The authors on whom I focus mobilize literary form, genre, and narrative voice in the service of intersectional, treasonous social or political projects. While I use other literary or imaginative texts—political speeches and pamphlets, human rights documents, performances or plays, legal testimonies—the imaginative written word is my primary site of inquiry. More than half of my principal case studies are novels; the others are written by novelists or playwrights. Occasionally, “Necessary Treason” treats what have been described as bad novels. Muriel Spark’s *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) and Nadine Gordimer’s *A Sport of Nature* (1987), for example, are frequently cited as their authors’ worst-written books—a charge all the more damning when one considers that both Spark and Gordimer were prolific novelists. Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood* (1997) also received a fair amount of criticism for its convoluted literary style. While the charge of bad writing does not apply to all of my case studies—Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) are often considered his best—my focus on so-called bad writing is intentional. These texts are considered poorly written because they compound genres and confuse narrative voices. Chapter breaks are unclear or nonexistent; transitions from one narrator or narrative to another

are often jolting or dizzying. They are not, fundamentally, reader-friendly. The same can be said about my better-written case studies: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) repeats stories through competing narrators, and does not delineate shifts in narrative voice; Mongane Wally Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) abandons its first-person narrator-protagonist halfway through; Václav Havel's *Letters to Olga* (1984) veers from philosophical treatise to personal complaint and back, with little to no warning; Kundera's novels shift narrative registers, proliferate voices and meanings, and upset chronology; Rebecca West's collected trial journalism couples unlikely events and employs melodrama in place of legalistic summaries. Such imaginative, composite literary work demands a thoughtful, critical response. Debra Rae Cohen argues that "by employing multiple subject positions and generic lenses [Rebecca West] disrupts those readerly certainties that attach to genre and implicitly interrogates the cultural apparatuses that produce them" (151). The cohort of literary traitors assembled in this study writes back against oppressive "cultural apparatuses." Through imaginative prose, they elicit readerly engagement and condone seditious reading.

One primary reason why I focus on literary texts—as opposed to non-written verbal, visual, or other media—is the preeminence of language, especially the printed word, in totalitarian and other oppressive regimes. Such regimes falsify the record: they rewrite history—often literally in history text books and official records, as well as through literary cultural forms like the novel—and they manipulate language to serve their own ends. "Within the official discourse of apartheid," Paul Gready explains, "the definition of terms, such as 'communism' and 'terrorism,' were rewritten to the extent that they became nonsense" (8). German Nazism, Eastern European Communism, and other totalitarian systems propagandize and politicize history and society; their discourse is stark, Manichean, and unilateral. Conversely, imaginative

literary texts deal in nuance, contradiction, and multidirectionality. An imaginative literary mode “reveals how all forms of totalitarianism rely on versions of capitalised History, narratives of the ‘ends justify the means’ type which demand a recognition of their essential ‘rightness’” (Sandru 223). Against such History, literature explores histories—personal, suppressed, messy, inconsistent. Muriel Spark argues that, “literature, of all the arts, is the most penetrable into the human life of the world, for the simple reason that words are our common currency” (*The Golden Fleece* 26). The imaginative prose of necessary traitors explores “the human life of the world” against systems that render it static and inhuman.

About a decade ago, the interdisciplinary, emerging field of human rights and literature began to attract increasing scholarly attention. Three significant texts published in quick succession—Pheng Cheah’s *Inhuman Conditions* (2006), Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007), and Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights* (2008)—effectively inaugurated the field. Since then, there has been a considerable amount of scholarly work on human rights and literature. In addition to the growing collection of individual monographs on the subject—including, notably, Lyndsey Stonebridge’s *The Judicial Imagination* (2011), David Farrier’s *Postcolonial Asylum* (2011), and Elizabeth Anker’s *Fictions of Dignity* (2013)—there have been numerous journal special issues (*Critical Quarterly* 56.4: “Writing and Rights”; *Comparative Literature Studies* 46.1: “Human Rights and Literary Forms”), and edited collections. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore have edited two such volumes: *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (2012) and *Teaching Human Rights in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2015). 2016 in particular was a banner year for literature and human rights studies: essays by Matthew Hart, Janice Ho, Joseph Slaughter, Eleni Coundouriotis, Ariella Azoulay, David Palumbo-Liu, and others appear in collections edited by Allan Hepburn (*Around*

1945: *Literature, Citizenship, Rights*) and Sophia McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (*The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*). Such a surge in scholarship on literature and human rights is not coincidental. In their introduction to the special issue of *Critical Quarterly* on “Writing and Rights,” Potter and Stonebridge assert that, “if we are turning again to literature to help us think about rights today, this is not least because it seems that once more we are charged (like Jefferson and Kafka) with imagining something that is not there” (2). With the emergence of populist and nationalist movements across the globe in recent years, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, and innumerable other humanitarian disasters and civil rights movements, it is no wonder that scholars in a number of fields have turned toward human rights.

Often, human rights studies—literary or otherwise—appeal to empathy as a productive counter to human rights violations. Joseph Slaughter elaborates: “in our Enlightenment philosophical tradition, the problem of humanitarian action is typically posed as a problem of empathy, of entering into an affective relation of imaginative identification with ‘the agonies of distant others’” (“Enchantment,” 49). Literature in particular is often designated as that which combats human rights violations by empathy. With Azoulay and others, I view empathy as an inadequate framework through which to view literary and cultural modes of addressing human rights. Potter and Stonebridge contend that, “the problem is in assuming that more empathy leads to justice, and that only the kind of writing that produces empathy can have any significant role to play in the history—and future—of rights” (6). In this dissertation, I look for a different framework through which to articulate and understand the relationship between human rights and literature. In my readings, the framework that most consistently emerges is citizenship. Engaging with the burgeoning field of human rights and literature, this dissertation supplements the above

definitions of duty, allegiance, and citizenship. How does literature conceive or reconfigure the civil contract? What does literary citizenship entail? Literary traitors test and model approaches to citizenship in their prose; they broaden the scope of citizenship by reimagining its bounds.

There are reasons for critical reconsideration of the concept and rhetoric of citizenship, particularly in relation to human rights. Whereas the UDHR guarantees rights and protections for all individuals regardless of citizenship, it takes a state to bestow and enforce those rights and protections: human rights only exist as civil rights. Citizenship is supposed to guarantee civil rights, but often the official conferral of citizenship does not in fact guarantee full rights or protections. As Sassen explains, “most of the scholarship on citizenship has claimed a necessary connection to the national state” (176). Because in this scholarship citizenship refers only to government-sanctioned members of a state, such studies on citizenship disregard the citizen’s relation to the non-citizen, and the non-citizen’s relation to the state. In two examples, Azoulay illustrates the consequences of these gaps in citizenship studies:

Because Palestinians are considered stateless persons, they are absent(ed) from the discourse on citizenship; because women are considered full citizens, their susceptibility to a particular type of disaster does not tend to generate an examination of their civic status. Circumscribing the discussion of Palestinians in advance through the scandalous category of “stateless persons” amounts to accepting a narrow reading of citizenship as a “natural” privilege possessed by the members of a certain class that administers the distribution of the good known as citizenship as if it were its own private property. Excluding the discussion of women’s abandonment from the discourse of citizenship through the argument that it represents a factional issue overly narrowing the relevant “general”

political perspective amounts to accepting the incidence of rape as a natural disaster or an ahistorical conflict between the sexes, rather than an alterable consequence of impaired citizenship. (15)

Because human rights are meant to apply to everyone, citizenship as state membership is not an adequate framework; it excludes, in various ways, women, minority communities, refugees, asylum seekers, and other non-citizens. In “Necessary Treason,” I do not propose such a narrow definition of citizenship. Rather, I follow both political theorists and prose writers in redrafting what full citizenship might mean, and who might be entitled to it. Each literary text puts pressure on an aspect of citizenship that is not capacious enough according to their authors: West rejects unconditional loyalty, and draws bonds of affiliation that disregard the state, and Spark proliferates national affiliations and complicates indigeneity and inheritance across contested borders; Havel thinks through civic responsibility in the face of totalitarianism, and Kundera demands freedom from prescriptive social, political, and especially cultural forms; Gordimer finds a moral code that clashes with the apartheid regime, and Serote articulates a version of democracy based on increasingly broader inclusion; Gurnah advocates unconditional hospitality, and imagines transnational networks of affiliation, and Phillips envisions commonality among collections of strangers. Ariella Azoulay, May Joseph, Seyla Benhabib, Bonnie Honig, Sara Ahmed, and Aihwa Ong are among those I invoke in my explorations of literary texts, because they are part of an emergent group of contemporary scholars rethinking the meanings and boundaries of citizenship outside of traditional nation-state or state-centred structures. These writers and thinkers track both “the shifting meaning of rightful political authority” (Held 2), and the possibility of non-state affiliations, responsibilities, and citizenships.

In each of my case studies, the conceptions of citizenship that emerge rely on a broad

notion of democracy—not in the sense, necessarily, of government, but of human communities and human rights. From Rebecca West to Caryl Phillips, each author imagines inclusive communities and endorses human rights, without subscribing to a state-based notion of citizenship. In her rejection of “the still deep-going assumption that democracy is necessarily a national form,” Honig insists that, “democracy is not just a set of governing institutions” (13). Instead, it is “a commitment to local and popular empowerment, effective representation, accountability, and the generation of actions in concert across lines of difference” (13). Democracy is inclusionary, rather than exclusionary. It necessitates diversity, plurality, and inclusive community. According to Charles Tilly, a democratic regime entails a comprehensive set of entitlements: “does this regime promote human welfare, individual freedom, security, equity, social equality, public deliberation, and peaceful conflict resolution?” (7). If not, then that regime is not substantively democratic.<sup>6</sup> My case studies imagine communities that are substantively democratic, and they give the lie to governmental regimes and social systems that claim to be democratic or egalitarian without satisfying such criteria.

### **Necessary Treason**

Necessary treason is an impossible concept without the inauguration of the contemporary international human rights regime at mid-century. In 1946, the International Military Tribunal (IMT) at Nuremberg “laid down, for the first time in history, that when *international rules* that protect basic humanitarian values are in conflict with *state laws*, every individual must transgress the state laws (except where there is no room for ‘moral choice,’ i.e., when a gun is being held to

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<sup>6</sup> Tilly distinguishes substantive democracy as one of four main definitions of democracy. The others include constitutional, procedural, and process-oriented democracy (7-11).

someone's head)" (Held 7; original emphasis). Two years later, the UDHR's reformulation of duty—that is, duty to the community, rather than to the state—confirmed the IMT's proposition. In 1950, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms came to an agreement which, "in allowing individual citizens to initiate proceedings against their own governments, is a most remarkable legal innovation... it seeks to prevent its signatories from treating their citizens as they think fit, and to empower citizens with the legal means to challenge state policies and actions that violate their basic liberties" (Held 9). A litany of international and human rights declarations, resolutions, and conventions in the postwar and Cold War decades issued the selfsame pronouncements which favour human rights over state sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> In essence, the international human rights regime that comes into being at mid-century authorizes the individual citizen to commit treason when necessary. Traversing the latter half of the twentieth century into the first decades of the twenty-first, "Necessary Treason" makes a case for considering literature as a vital component in struggles against oppressive regimes and social structures because they perform and challenge state-sanctioned categories of belonging and civic duty. In the context of oppressive state formations, literature makes way for alternative citizenships and relationships of responsibility among individuals. Writers build inclusive communities and transnational networks by reconfiguring literary forms. In 1997, Nadine Gordimer reflected on "The Status of the Writer in the World Today," claiming that "our books are *necessary*" (*Living* 19; original emphasis). This dissertation aims to discern how

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the IMT at Nuremberg is widely regarded as having failed on this point. Because the trial only considered "'crimes against humanity' enacted 'during a period of years preceding 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1945... since 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1939'" (Bloxham 572), no crimes against humanity that were not also war crimes were prosecuted. Donald Bloxham notes, "it was therefore illogical to consider pre-war atrocities such as those against, say, German Jews or political opponents in the 1930s" (574).



imaginative literary texts might not only be necessary, but how they might be necessarily treasonous.

## MELODRAMATIC POTENTIALITIES

## CHAPTER 1: Rebecca West's Postwar Trials: Melodrama and Allegiance

Rebecca West returned to England from her third journey to Yugoslavia in 1938, just a little more than a year before war was declared. Her travels had revealed to her the foreboding atmosphere of interwar Europe. In the epilogue to her literary travelogue about Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1942), West reflected, "History, it appeared, could be like the delirium of a madman, at once meaningless and yet charged with a dreadful meaning" (np). This "dreadful meaning" saturates West's writing, both in *Black Lamb* and in her postwar publications. West was not the only literary figure who recognized the threat of Nazi Germany and, later, of Communist Russia. George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and others also foresaw the calamitous circumstances of mid-century Europe, and wrote and worked against them. Carl Rollyson argues, however, that while "George Orwell has often been lauded for his prescience about totalitarianism... Rebecca West was decades ahead of him and virtually everyone else on the Left" (11).

At mid-century, Rebecca West continually railed against totalitarian movements, both in writing and in action. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was in many ways both a warning and a call to arms, but West's anti-totalitarian activism was not confined to her work on this volume. She and her husband, involved in humanitarian efforts from the 1930s onwards, aided escapes and lent prestige and financial assistance in order to give refugees new lives outside Europe. In the war years, she housed refugees at her country estate, Ibstone House. With writer Margaret Hodges, she ran Red Cross classes from her home. In 1943 she published a story imagining "just how terrible the Third Reich would be" in the collection *The Ten Commandments: Ten Short Novels of Hitler's War Against the Moral Code* (Lassner 49). Following the war, she wrote

article after article on political developments and historical events, from the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg (1945-46) to the South African Treason Trial (1956-61).

In all West's works, political arguments sound clearly; politics are central to her fiction and nonfiction alike. While journalism "is extremely sensitive to how laws are enforced, what cultural norms and rules are followed, who wields economic power, who controls information, and so on" (Waisbord 126), West is especially alert to legal, cultural, and power dynamics within human relationships. For this reason, her Nuremberg journalism, published first in the *New Yorker* and reprinted as three separate chapters of *A Train of Powder* (1955), had a direct influence on public perception of the trial. West "not only had an immediate impact upon how British newspaper readers saw the trials at their conclusion, but also an ongoing influence in forming the events into the stuff of political and social history" (Stetz 230). But West is never, even in her journalism, only a reporter. Her articles on Nuremberg provide very few hard facts regarding the judicial proceedings, while providing an overabundance of seemingly irrelevant details. Character portraits of individuals both inside and outside of the courtroom—of the Nazi leadership on trial, the legal actors, the townspeople of Nuremberg and of Berlin, and more—take up a large portion of her reportage. West deploys novelistic techniques and literary language to affirm and to perform her politics in these nontraditional reports.

A preoccupation with the relationship between public and private realms characterizes West's writing. Throughout her career West traces the influence of personal betrayals on political and historical events. Many critics identify *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as West's greatest literary achievement on this front. Indeed, there is something hauntingly prophetic in her portrayal of German nationals and Balkan allegiances in this work. When *Black Lamb* fails adequately to warn and therefore to stave off the disastrous consequences of World War II, West

enters a new period in her career—a period that corresponds to a new phase in world history. In a letter to Bernard Kalb, West writes that *A Train of Powder* as a whole—including chapters on an American lynching trial, a British murder trial, and a British treason trial—“represents the second phase of a process which started when Hitler came into power” (Scott 289). Importantly, it is not just her Nuremberg essays, nor the chapters into which they evolve, that represent this second phase. West’s reportage on a number of postwar trials, as they are edited and collected in *A Train of Powder* and *The New Meaning of Treason* (1964), continues the work of *Black Lamb* by documenting and intervening in world historical events. In *A Train of Powder*, West feels “as if [she] stood in a train that was quietly running into hell” (3). That train, boarded in *Black Lamb* and running south to Yugoslavia, continues through *A Train of Powder* and *The New Meaning of Treason*, and finally reappears as the site of betrayal in the novel *The Birds Fall Down* (1966). West does what she considers her duty in writing the continuing story of that train journey: she brings a literary, critical eye and novelistic style to the political and historical events of mid-century.

### **Postwar Melodrama and the Law**

Rebecca West’s reportage, especially in *A Train of Powder*, does not conform to the standard generic conventions of journalism. Susan Hertog notes that West’s Nuremberg articles “were more like philosophical treatises on the human potential for good and evil than reportage” (284). West often privileges atmosphere and substance over factual accuracy—which led, in the 1960s, to a libel suit brought against her by a South African judge.<sup>1</sup> West lost that case. Yet she

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<sup>1</sup> In what would prove to be a prophetic passage in *The Meaning of Treason* (1949), West claims, “the good are so well acquainted with the evil intentions of the wicked that they sometimes write as if the wicked candidly expressed their intentions instead of, as is customary, veiling them in

does not, in the end, get history wrong. West makes the argument for her particular mode of journalism several times throughout her career. In a letter to the editor of *The Spectator* in October 1952, entitled “Tito and Mihailović,” West argues that, “history cannot be written simply from documents” (535).<sup>2</sup> In *The New Meaning of Treason* West bemoans the fact that “our pro-Bulgarian policy, which so disastrously endured for generations, was largely the work of a *Times* correspondent who travelled through the Balkans ceaselessly but without being able to hear a word that anyone said to him” (63). Journalism that takes into account only documents and facts, and not the human lives that contextualize those facts, is irresponsible. These reports miss something important, and their erasures have real political and historical effects. Harold Ross, West’s editor at the *New Yorker*, sent her to Nuremberg for exactly these reasons. The other *New Yorker* reporter at the trial was Janet Flanner, whose reportage was “intensely felt but very spare; she conveyed essential information unobtrusively” (Glendinning 208). Ross wanted something more visceral. According to Victoria Glendinning, “Rebecca West’s method was both more novelistic and more abstract. Her vignettes of the refugee camps are operatic, her eye picking out tragedy and comedy; she piled up her visual images of human squalor and human dignity, branching out into sweeping generalizations, jokes, and stories. Her language is rich, her evocations like canvases by Hieronymus Bosch” (208). West’s writing has a distinctive, edgy literary style. It is “operatic”—and opera is never incidental for West. In the chapter “Opera at Greenville” and elsewhere, she thematizes and performs opera: in exuberant, melodramatic,

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hypocritical dissimulations. This has on many occasions led to the award of heavy damages against the good in cases brought under the laws of libel and slander by the wicked” (reprinted in *New*, 53).

<sup>2</sup> Gill Plain argues that despite “the urge to document, to bear witness” which characterized the 1940s, “the war resisted straightforward inscription” (39). West extends this argument historically into both the prewar and the postwar.

novelistic prose, West invokes the “dreadful meaning” that permeates prewar, wartime, and postwar Europe.

To read *A Train of Powder* as a novelistic work, rather than as a collection of articles, is to acknowledge the political and social value of novelistic historiography. According to Paul Dolan, “politics cannot be understood only as the political scientist, the historian, the economist, the sociologist, the psychologist, or even the philosopher understands it. The novel provides its special kind of knowledge because it deals with the conscious and unconscious experience of politics as a human, moral, psychological and aesthetic phenomenon” (3). West, as novelist and as journalist, is exemplary in this. Writing on the same subjects tackled by contemporary historians, journalists, and philosophers, West’s prose offers something more. As Lyndsey Stonebridge notes, Rebecca West and Hannah Arendt cover much of the same ground in distinctive language: “Arendt thought there was something ‘profoundly hysterical about’ West. It is tempting to think of West’s writing on totalitarianism as a ‘hysterical’ version of some of Arendt’s observations” (45). West’s hysterical writing supplements the historical record, providing novelistic perspective and insight into the same political events.

In her nonfiction writing, West deploys novelistic techniques of temporality. She does not narrate events chronologically as they happen. She fractures single stories into parts, interweaving them with companion stories that might not ostensibly relate. She often gives the verdict in a trial at the beginning of her account of it. Peter Wolfe explains this strategy as “violat[ing] chronology to clarify the processes—legal, historical, and moral” (86)—that define guilt. In “Opera at Greenville,” West demonstrates this phenomenon by using the jury’s foreseen verdict as an example: “the jury had sounded its buzzer, which meant that they had made up their minds. This certainly meant that the accused persons had been acquitted of all charges... Yet we

knew too that it is not what happens that matters so much as how it happens” (107). In order to highlight the crucial, non-factual truths of the case, West disorders her narratives, foregoes expected suspense, and weaves together seemingly disparate narratives.

Despite its compound, amalgamated structure, West’s *A Train of Powder* coheres thematically. Harold Orel criticizes the form of *A Train of Powder*: “despite brilliant passages, the book lacks unity, occasionally employs a grim and heavy-handed humour, and reaches for significance in wild analogies that resemble nothing so much as seventeenth-century conceits” (108). Orel reads *A Train of Powder* as arbitrarily collected articles merely “taken as a whole” (120 and *passim*), not as chapters of an intentionally synthesized book. In novels, narrators can fracture single stories and spread them throughout the book. This technique in itself does not necessarily signal disunity. West’s novelistic approach, therefore, allows the possibility of unity where Orel sees only discord. The title of West’s book suggests continuity among chapters. It indicates imminent disaster: a train of powder ultimately combusts. Each of the chapters reflects this sense of impending doom. Furthermore, if one recalls West’s 1955 letter to Bernard Kalb, the apparent disunity dissolves: these chapters are not collected or organized arbitrarily. They represent intimately related iterations of the “second phase of a process which started when Hitler came into power” (Scott 289), wherein postwar personal and political betrayals degrade principles of law and loyalty.

The term “melodrama,” according to the *OED*, originally referred to “a stage play, usually romantic and sensational in plot, and interspersed with songs, in which the action is accompanied by orchestral music.” In his 1972 essay on melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser defends this original definition:

This is still perhaps the most useful definition, because it allows melodramatic



elements to be seen as constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive color and chromatic contrast to the story line, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue. The advantage of this approach is that it formulates the problems of melodrama as problems of style and articulation. (441)

Elsaesser does not define melodrama by any narrative conventions: he describes instead a mode of representation that gives “color and chromatic contrast to the storyline.” Style and articulation are Elsaesser’s key terms here: melodrama fashions the narrative, rather than constituting it fully. While some critics describe melodrama as a genre, with formulaic plot structures and character types,<sup>3</sup> Elsaesser describes melodrama as a mode. In “Melodrama Revised,” Linda Williams contends that, “melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures” (42). This does not mean that all American films are essentially the same genre. American films employ a melodramatic mode of expression. Williams elsewhere argues that the “designation ‘gratuitous’” concerning this mode of expression, “is itself gratuitous”: excess and gratuity are organizers of the “form, function, and system” of melodrama (“Film Bodies,” 268). This mode, Elizabeth Anker argues, “extends into political discourse and political action” (25). That is to say, the melodramatic mode is inherently political. Excessive, gratuitous writing yields meaning—political as well as moral—when pressed. Anker’s definition most aptly describes the mode of West’s prose. Melodrama becomes central to West’s politics. Beyond structuring her narratives in novelistic terms, she also employs novelistic melodrama to bring into relief the “experience of politics as a human, moral, psychological and aesthetic phenomenon” (Dolan 3).

If the Nuremberg chapters of *A Train of Powder* register as the most fully melodramatic instance of West’s writing, it is perhaps because the International Military Tribunal (IMT) at

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Steve Neale’s breakdown of the genre in *Genre and Hollywood*, 185.

Nuremberg was so widely expected and so widely reported to be the quintessence of melodrama.<sup>4</sup> It is also because the IMT failed to deliver: “It was one of the events which do not become an experience” (*Train* 246). The IMT was certainly an *event* on an international scale. Hundreds of people—journalists, lawyers, judges—interrupted their lives to participate in the trial. Newspapers across the world consistently dedicated space to covering it, even where newsprint was scarce. Yet there is no felt sense of relief or justice after the convicted men are hanged: the affective experience of justice never occurs. The underlying evil that prompted the trial in the first place—totalitarianism, imperialism, and racist ideology—were not expunged from the world, because no profound sense of the crimes translated to the audience of the trial. In fact, boredom reigns inside the courtroom. The evil that manifests in the pathetic, shrunken villains on trial continues outside the courtroom. West does not deny the Nazi leaders their villainy; Göring, for example, is a figure who “effortlessly slips into the role of melodramatic villain” (Stonebridge 28-29). But at times these villains and their trial miss the melodramatic mark. In melodrama, the nightmare ends with the sentence of the villain, but in Göring’s case it continues. When he stands to hear his sentence, his earphones malfunction: “On the faces of all the judges there was written the thought, ‘Yes, this is a nightmare. This failure of the earphones proves it,’ and it was written on [Göring’s] face too” (*Train* 59). In Peter Brooks’ view,

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<sup>4</sup> West complains that other reporters “tended to focus on instances when the defendants were impudent or uncooperative—that is, on the trial’s rare moments of drama. She was deeply skeptical of these narratives, which she saw as privileging the exceptions that had little to do with the rule of boredom that presided over the courtroom” (Reichman 109). For instance, in *A Train of Powder* West writes, “The newspaper reports inevitably concentrated on the sensational moments when the defendants sassed back authority” (30). Along the same lines, in their introduction to *Reassessing the Nuremberg Military Tribunals: Transitional Justice, Trial Narratives, and Historiography*, Kim Priemel and Alexa Stiller explain, “without denying its merits, the IMT-centered approach has led to a view of the Nuremberg stage which has preferred the spectacular over the profound, the big names and the drama at the surface over the intricate patterns and deep structures of analysis, narration, and interpretation” (2).

“melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era” (15). Nuremberg fails on this point. The trial does not clearly demarcate an “essential moral universe,” leaving its participants and audience with feelings of clarity and closure. As one example, the presence and behaviour of the Soviet judges foreshadows the impending Cold War. No essential moral universe makes sense if one of the victorious parties attempts to abjure democratic justice in favour of totalitarian legal process. Further, Nuremberg’s audience fails to play their part. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye explains “cultivated people go to a melodrama to hiss the villain with an air of condescension: they are making a point of the fact that they cannot take his villainy seriously” (47). At Nuremberg, the audience does not hiss and heckle the villains. They take the defendants’ villainy seriously, and in occasional horror: Göring’s earphone malfunction and Rudolph Hess’ distressing madness are not a matter for entertainment. Instead of hissing, they languish in utter boredom and anxiety, while waiting for the trial to end. West therefore attempts to recuperate melodrama to the Nuremberg moment in her reportage by detailing the appearances and gestures of the defendants in histrionic prose, and by looking outside of the confines of the courtroom.

Melodrama mediates legality in the postwar world. Rita Barnard argues that in a political context in which “the forces of disorder are often so potent as to overwhelm the state’s capacity for control,” it makes sense that legality might require “a highly theatrical, even melodramatic display of [the state’s] sovereignty” (“Tsotsis,” 566). In this sense, melodrama functions to restore state power and legality. For West, “the law is meaningful in so far as it dramatises the desires, transgressions and taboos of a community” (Stonebridge 29). Therefore the law must have something to do with melodrama: it ought to be an event that becomes an experience. At the same time, as an exploration of the relationship between law and melodrama, West’s writing

indicates that there are acceptable, as well as unacceptable, forms of melodrama in law. On the one hand, formulaic melodrama, as represented in legal terms by Stalinist show trials, is unacceptable. The totalitarian state deploys melodrama to reinforce illegitimate, undemocratic state power. Tony Judt elucidates the method and objective of these trials:

Why, after all, did the Soviet dictator need trials at all?... Trials might seem counter-productive; the obviously false testimonies and confessions, the unembarrassed targeting of selected individuals and social categories, were hardly calculated to convince foreign observers of the *bona fides* of Soviet judicial procedures.

But the show trials in the Communist bloc were not about justice. They were, rather, a form of public pedagogy-by-example; a venerable Communist institution (the first such trials in the USSR dated to 1928) whose purpose was to illustrate and exemplify the structures of authority in the Soviet system. They told the public who was right, who wrong; they placed blame for policy failures; they assigned credit for loyalty and subservience; they even wrote a script, an approved vocabulary for use in discussion of public affairs. Following his arrest Rudolf Slánský was only ever referred to as “the spy Slánský,” this ritual naming serving as a form of political exorcism. (*Postwar* 187)

Exemplary of the melodramatic form, these show trials depict a “world where what one lives for and by is seen in terms of, and as determined by, the most fundamental psychic relations and cosmic ethical forces... Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order” (Brooks 12-13). Melodrama hierarchizes cosmic ethical forces over individual human action.

Where totalitarian show trials provide an excess of melodrama, postwar treason trials might provide not quite enough. Although treason trials should be inherently melodramatic, these trials “give us back the law without melodrama” (Stonebridge 41). Many of these trials included only a guilty plea, with no evidence or testimony that could extend into melodrama. As Brooks explains, “the villain of classic French melodrama was commonly called *le traître*, no doubt because his villainy included a full measure of dissimulation and dupery” (169). Yet instead of a clear picture of these postwar *traîtres*, the public is given false stories of their idealism and humanitarianism. West rejects these narratives, which have been produced as automatically and thoughtlessly as the show trial scripts. Just as Nuremberg fails to deliver us from the nightmare, so does this propaganda. No real justice can be done when the truth does not come to light or is not felt as such. Justice, for West, requires both truth and the felt experience of justice.

Through the case of John Amery, West demonstrates how a lack of melodrama properly deployed in the courtroom leads to a failure of justice. West writes that after Amery’s guilty plea his solicitor, Mr. Slade, “answered [the judge], speaking with obvious fidelity to a prepared statement, ‘I can assure you of that, my lord. I have explained the position to my client and I am satisfied that he understands it.’ This passage has the quietness of the worst sort of nightmare” (*New* 127). Amery sentences himself to death in this manner, without a fair trial. West insists that the verdict in this case would not have been a foregone conclusion: “it was at first not thought that he was going to suffer the same fate as William Joyce. His case was postponed several times in order that evidence might be collected for his defence, which rested on a claim that he had become a naturalized Spanish citizen” (125). Yet even though his family members and his lawyers have worked to put together a case for his defense, Amery quietly and without question accepts death instead of justice. According to West, there should have been a public,

judicial negotiation of Amery's guilt or innocence, his citizenship and duty of allegiance. His confession aligns with the legal verdict—there is no way it cannot—but it may or may not align with truth, and does not align with justice. At Nuremberg, the Soviet judges “dissented from all three acquittals” (*Train* 66). They preferred guilty verdicts with no admission of shared responsibility or guilt. West argues against their position: “It would only have been possible to get [guilty verdicts in the three instances] by stretching the law, and it is better to let foxes go and leave the law unstretched” (*Train* 57). The same is true of the Amery case: the law should have been applied if it fit, and not if it did not. There is no fair legal arbitration, and no felt sense of justice inspired by melodramatic process: Amery's plea cuts short the possibility of justice.

In the place of this failure or lack of melodrama, West imagines an imperfect melodrama, one that does not conform to formulaic expectations but that acknowledges nuance and entails dialogue and understanding. The necessity of this kind of melodrama becomes clear in the example of Nuremberg. Although Nuremberg defies West's expectations, she notes its successes as well. Regarding the charge against the Nazi leadership of violating the 1936 Naval Protocol, she writes, “the tribunal acquitted them on this charge on the grounds that the British and the Americans had committed precisely the same offence” (*Train* 49). This is a moment where formulaic melodrama, which would have insisted upon the full guilt of the villains and the innocence of the heroes, would have been unjust. Instead, something like justice occurs. West goes on to explain the legal principle at work in this case, which she calls *nostra culpa*:

The Allies admitted this by acquitting the admirals, and the acquittal was not only fair dealing between victors and vanquished, it was a step towards honesty. It was written down for ever that submarine warfare cannot be carried on without inhumanity, and that we have found ourselves able to be inhumane. We have to

admit that we are in this trap before we can get out of it. This *nostra culpa* of the conquerors might well be considered the most important thing that happened at Nuremberg. But it evoked no response at the time, and it has been forgotten. (*Train* 49)

On the one hand, the principle of admitting guilt represents the triumph of justice: the acknowledgement of *nostra culpa*—which recognizes shared responsibility and guilt—is proof that the victorious Allies have justice on their side. Guilty verdicts on all counts are not guaranteed; this is the only way a trial can proceed in a just manner. On the other hand, the moment fails to make an impression. It needs melodrama to become an experience, but it needs to go through a process of dialogue and negotiation in order to be just. West attempts to achieve the marriage of these two principles in her work.

Besides her lavish prose and character portraits, West takes the principle of surface from melodrama: “to the melodramatic imagination, significant things and gestures are necessarily metaphoric in nature because they must refer to and speak of something else. Everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning, which can be expressed, pressed out, from it” (Brooks 10). West surely puts “a pressure on the surface—the surface of social forms, manners; and the surface of literary forms, style—in order to make surface release the vision of the behind” (Brooks 171). Contrary to the scene inside the Nuremberg courtroom, where Rudolf Hess “looked as if his mind had no surface, as if every part of it had been blasted away except the depth where the nightmares live” (*Train* 5), in the cases of the defendants in Greenville and of Mr. Setty and Mr. Hume, there are surfaces from which to press out meaning and truth.

In “Opera at Greenville,” West demonstrates the relationship between surface and depth in melodrama. Following the acquittal of the lynching party, she muses,

It is hard to say, now that all these defendants have been acquitted of all these charges, how the statements are to be regarded. They consist largely of confessions that the defendants were concerned in the murder of Willie Earle. But the law has pronounced that they had no more to do with the murder than you or me or the President. The statements must, therefore, be works of fiction, romances that these inhabitants of Greenville were oddly inspired to weave around the tragic happenings in their midst. (84)

On the surface, these statements must be works of fiction: the confessions do not align with the legal verdict, and the legal verdict is supposed to accord with truth. As in the case of John Amery, there is a gap between confession and justice. Whereas in Amery's case there is no surface to press—"the trial lasted [only] eight minutes" (*New* 126)—the trial in Greenville is full of operatic surfaces that yield meaning. West's description of the inconsistency between confession and judgment signals injustice. In her formulation, there is no grammatical perpetrator of the "tragic happenings in their midst." Yet there must be a murderer: West repeats the word "murder" twice before dismissing the event as an agent-less "tragic happening." The discord between the event—the violent and premeditated lynching of a man, which West describes elsewhere in visceral detail—and West's post-verdict description of them—"romances" which "inspire" the acquitted men—generates doubt. Once surfaces are pressed, there is no question that West does not believe her own assertion. These men are surely guilty of the crime to which they confessed.

In "Mr. Setty and Mr. Hume," melodramatic prose also yields the truth of the legal case—as distinct from the legal verdict—when pressed. When Donald Hume is acquitted for the murder of Sulman Setty, the case continues, in a manner of speaking: "Then came the last



strange feature of the case. It did not come to an end” (227). In a review of *A Train of Powder*, Sir John Squire chides West for leaving the case open: “The odd thing is that the one question lingering in my mind after reading this precise, judicial, searching examination of all sorts of cases is: who murdered Setty?” (1004). For the reader attuned to her melodramatic representations, West has answered this question. She details the process of why and how she has done so. Citing “the legal restrictions on crime-reporting in Great Britain” (171), West explains that even when a journalist knows for certain the facts of a case, she cannot print it if the trial has not (or has not yet) confirmed her story. If the journalist were to name the facts of the case, according to British law, she would be criminally prosecuted herself:

Therefore the veins swell up and pulse on the foreheads of reporters and sub-editors, and somehow their passion seeps into the newsprint and devises occult means by which the truth becomes known. The experienced newspaper reader can run his eye over the columns of newspapers which are paralysed by fear of committing contempt of court... and can learn with absolute certainty, from something too subtle even to be termed a turn of phrase, which person involved in a case is suspected by the police of complicity and which is thought innocent.

(*Train* 171-172)

These “occult means” are the surface details that yield meaning when pressed. Throughout the story, West provides personal, seemingly irrelevant details that lead the reader to the culprit. Both murdered man and accused are racialized, foreign figures: Setty is from Baghdad, and Hume “might have been a Turk or an Arab” (186). Both men are socially marginalized figures, who can be easily scapegoated. The police “remained quite calm” (170) and clearly lie to Setty’s family in the days before his body is found—behaviour that is unusual and therefore suspect. A

Scotland Yard pathologist not only “proved conclusively that a murder had been committed in a way which was completely impossible” (207), but his special knowledge of the means of murder strikes the reader, because of West’s prose, as suspicious: “The bones had been severed with a saw, and one of the pathologists assured the court that that must have been a very noisy proceeding, adding, ‘It is quite impossible to go on dictating to one’s secretary if human bones are being sawed through in the vicinity’” (209). The sawing of human bones is not something one would expect to have occurred within earshot of this gentleman’s office under normal circumstances; once again, suspicion falls upon the authorities. Hume’s story, “unsupported by any other evidence, that he had come into possession of Mr. Setty’s body through his meeting with three men” (190), at first seems implausible. Discounting Hume’s testimony, West concludes that “the three men he described as leaving the corpse with him, they too seemed to belong to the world of fantasy” (220-221). But West’s narrative eventually confirms Hume’s story and reveals the “three men, Mac or Maxie, The Boy, and Greenie” (227), to be agents of the police: “It was slowly realized that the description of Mac or Maxie quite closely fitted one of the policemen who were in the police station where Hume was examined” (227). In formulaic melodrama, “the villain is a shifting category populated most often by a foreign invader or a domestic subversive” (Anker 26), and yet the foreigners are not guilty of murder in this case. Melodramatic form is necessary for West to convey the truth, but the story she reveals cannot be formulaic melodrama: the police, despite being agents of the state, violate the law, as well as violate the contract they are bidden to uphold, namely the protection of individuals under the state’s jurisdiction.

### **“A Drop of Treason”: Allegiance and Contract**

In the postwar, a felt sense of historical change propels individuals and governments to build a new world order: the war turned the world, and especially continental Europe, on its head. In *A Train of Powder*, West reflects this change implicitly and explicitly. On the one hand, her sentences often formulate events unexpectedly or inversely. She describes her plane landing in Nuremberg in unlikely terms: “There rushed up towards the plane the astonishing face of the world’s enemy” (3). The plane does not descend; the ground rushes upwards instead.<sup>5</sup> The subject of the sentence—“the astonishing face of the world’s enemy”—appears belatedly at the end of the sentence, so that grammatically the reader rushes towards it as if hastening to a horrible surprise. In this formulation, larger-than-life historical forces have taken the place of human agents. On the other hand, West explicitly notes the moment Neville Chamberlain realized that “the ground was not solid beneath his feet” (149), or in other words, that the world had entered a new phase: “The Nazi rape of Czechoslovakia horrified Neville Chamberlain... because he found that the world had changed around him, and he had been doing business with people who did not keep their word” (148). West is clear about the consequences of this inversion of world order: “it is impossible for society to survive if the mass of men cannot be trusted to abide by their word” (149). The IMT at Nuremberg was a collective response to this problem: a return to law and order over the chaos of fascism and total war. West, too, insists on a return to the law, and in fact the focus in her later works on trials and traitors stems from this impulse towards legality and justice.

Yet the crimes of the Nazi government and the crimes and trials of postwar traitors and

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<sup>5</sup> This exact formulation recurs two more times in *A Train of Powder*: “The ground rushed up and stopped just in time, while ears popped and silted up with deafness” (140); “These two naturally flew in the same flight, in bad weather and poor visibility, losing their bearings and diving so deep that the waters rushed up at them” (222).

murderers hardly seem to be commensurate. Victoria Glendinning asserts that “West’s horror for the crime of treason grew out of her respect for the rule of law” (196), but what is it about the rule of law that encompasses both German fascist Hermann Göring and British traitor William Marshall? What legal tenet applies to the crimes of both Göring and Stephen Ward, a pimp whom West will not quite call a traitor, but about whom she says, “he mucked about with security in the shadow of the Soviet Union” (*New* 341)? The legal principle of contract—especially the contract between citizen, or subject, and state—connects the unnamed murderers of Sulman Setty, to the operative Southern American judge, J. Robert Martin, Jr., to Hermann Göring and his ilk. The new world order that West charts is fundamentally organized around the breach of legal contract, at both national and international levels, that Hitler’s invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia signaled to Chamberlain in 1938.

A legal contract requires fidelity from both contracting parties. Between citizen and state, this contract plays out in terms of allegiance and protection: “Allegiance is not exacted by the Crown from a subject simply because the Crown is the Crown... According to tradition and logic, the state gives protection to all men within its confines, and in return exacts their obedience to its laws; and the process is reciprocal” (*New* 12-13). This contract need not be a written one. According to United States law, for example, an American “national” may be “a person who, though not a citizen of the United States, owes permanent allegiance to the United States” (Immigration and Nationality Act, s.101.a.22). This allegiance may come from time lived within United States borders, which need not entail a written contract in order to be operative. In the case of William Joyce, the radio traitor, contractual allegiance is, in fact, legible: he signed his passport application as a guarantee of his allegiance in exchange for protection. In a letter to one of her sisters in 1945 about the Joyce case, West writes, “I was very much surprised that

nobody read the Jury the wording of the passport which specifically alludes to the protection of the King” (Scott 206). In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and nearly all of her later works, West returns to the contract of allegiance and protection over and over again, exploring its nuances.

West is fascinated by the shifting legalities and nationalisms that characterize William Joyce and his trial. Born in Brooklyn in 1906 to native Irish but naturalized American parents, Joyce moved with his family to Ireland in 1909. After some level of participation with the Black and Tan side of the Irish War of Independence, he moved to England in 1921. Joyce may have believed himself to be a British subject all his life, with only a little doubt: “He was the holder of a British passport; it was part of his lifelong masquerade as a British subject. He had declared on the application papers that he had been born in Galway and had not ‘lost the status of British subject thus acquired’” (*New* 14). It is not clear whether this was an intentional lie or something else. Joyce renewed his British passport on 24 August 1939. Consequently, “when William Joyce went to Germany he was the holder of a British passport which was valid until the beginning of July 1940” (*New* 15). The passport was the crux of the legal case. While technically not a British citizen or subject, since he had been born in America to American nationals and neither he nor his parents had gone through the formalities of British naturalization, Joyce nonetheless owed allegiance to Britain in return for the protection that his passport provided him. West’s narrative oscillates between legal points made by the defense and the prosecution, and finally comes down on the side of the law. At the same time, West calls Joyce’s capital punishment the “most completely unnecessary death that any criminal has ever died on the gallows. He was the victim of his own and his father’s lifelong determination to lie about their nationality. For had he not renewed his English passport, and had he left England for Germany on the American passport which was rightfully his, no power on earth could have touched him” (17). West does not argue

against capital punishment as such. In fact, she believes wholeheartedly that Joyce's execution is just; it was simply not necessary. For Joyce, the legal contract of protection-allegiance was signed into place on his passport application. The breach of contract—breaking allegiance through treason—rather than any specific action that Joyce committed while in Germany was the reason he was hanged.

Despite her support of the verdict in the Joyce case and her general disapproval of British traitors at mid-century, West believes that a particular kind of traitor is paradoxically necessary for the preservation of society and the state. She concludes *The New Meaning of Treason* by making “a case for the traitor”:

He is a sport from a necessary type. The relationship between a man and his fatherland is always disturbed if either man or fatherland be highly developed. A man's demands for liberty must at some point challenge the limitations the state imposes on the individual for the sake of the masses; and if he is to carry on the national tradition he must wrestle with those who, claiming to be traditionalists, desire to crystallize it at the point reached by the previous generation. It is our duty to readjust constantly the balance between public and private liberties. Men must be capable of imagining and executing and insisting on social change, if they are to reform or even maintain civilization, and capable too of furnishing the rebellion which is sometimes necessary if society is not to perish of immobility. Therefore all men should have a drop of treason in their veins, if the nations are not to go soft like so many sleepy pears. (361)

A traitor, by definition, breaks the contract of protection and allegiance, yet West insists on the necessity of treason. The reason for this may be found in her understanding of what she calls

“process.” Peter Wolfe explains that “process is [West’s] most encompassing doctrine” (12). According to Phyllis Lassner, “process for West is never linear, but recursive, questioning, and it even demolishes earlier conclusions whose pieties turn into dogma when taken for granted as truth” (44). West’s idea of process is akin to what Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), calls “thought.” In describing Adolf Eichmann on trial in Israel in 1961, Arendt explains that, “the longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*” (*Eichmann* 48; original emphasis). This fundamental thoughtlessness is not stupidity. Arendt insists that Eichmann, along with other high-ranking Nazis, “was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period” (*Eichmann* 287-288). Traitors in the dock at the Old Bailey display the same thoughtlessness that Eichmann does. Whereas Arendt’s theory of thoughtlessness indicates a lack of critical faculty and perspective, West’s concept of process indicates something more: the individual who goes through process possesses perspective, and puts that perspective to good use. Process is the productive deployment—through recursion, readjustment, and dialogue—of thought. Totalitarian obedience, from either Fascists or Communists, forecloses the possibility of process. The necessary traitor, the one who prevents the nations from going “soft like so many sleepy pears,” is reflective, thoughtful, and democratic. He subjects his nation and his nationalism to process.

West’s definition of nationalism contributes to her insistence on the necessary traitor. Marina MacKay argues that, “against Victorian empiricism and imperialism, West posits a different kind of national story: defensive rather than aggressive, self-scrutinising rather than expansionist” (*Modernism* 64). More than this, for West there is a split between a democratic,

patriotic nationalism—what the necessary traitor must have, aligned with process—and its opposite. The latter of these—present in the traitors and criminals that West details in her postwar reportage—is sometimes fanatic, sometimes not, but is always anti-patriotic and anti-process. Positive, democratic nationalism, West writes in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, is “simply the determination of a people to cultivate its own soul, to follow the customs bequeathed to it by its ancestors, to develop its traditions according to its own instincts” (np). In this nationalism, there is a healthy, dynamic relationship between individual and nation, as well as among citizens. West’s idea of nationalism mirrors her idea of justice in law. Stalinist show trials and instantly foreclosed treason trials do not have the right relation to melodrama: they are either formulaic or unfelt, and justice can be neither. Like justice, democratic nationalism requires flexibility and negotiation, and must be affectively experienced. The same principle of imperfect melodrama that West demands for law she also demands of nationalism. This nationalism surfaces in *A Train of Powder*, exemplified in the working women whom West observes in Berlin. These women represent nationalism at its most bodily and at its most democratic. At Nuremberg, “men had made a formal attack on the police state. But here these women had incarnated the argument”:

By tired feet and leaking shoes, and by the watering of mouths over missed meals, these women had learned with their whole being that justice gives a better climate than hate. Aching, they saw a vision of a state that should think each citizen so precious that it would give him full liberty to be himself, provided only that he did not infringe the liberties of others to be themselves; a government that would love the individual. This is the democratic faith, and it was to this they had learned allegiance. (159)



They do not pledge allegiance to their government, if that government abuses its citizens. Their allegiance is to democracy and nation, to their children and their fellow citizens. The breach of contract that the state has made turns them against it. They learn this principle under the Soviet occupation of Berlin: “it was the everyday violations of civil rights in the Russian Sector which enraged them” (158). Having broken allegiance with the state, they live a treasonous, bodily nationalism in their daily lives. William Joyce’s nationalism is not on a scale with this democratic iteration. While he may have been an occasion for pity, the women of Berlin “were a true occasion for love” (34).

Daily, lived democratic nationalism develops out of everyday experience and encounter. The Berlin women encounter the state and they encounter others governed by that state. In response to these encounters, they have synthesized an approach to living which is loyal to their fellow citizens. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay defines this kind of citizenship in terms of “civil contract”: it is a “new conceptualization of citizenship as a framework of partnership and solidarity among those who are governed, a framework that is neither constituted nor circumscribed by the sovereign” (21). Beyond lived experience, Azoulay contends that this citizenship is put into play by photography, but it can be seen at work in West’s prose as well. *A Train of Powder* reads as a series of encounters, and the encounter with the women of Berlin especially encapsulates Azoulay’s argument:

When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted upon others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation. This skill is activated the moment one grasps that citizenship is not merely a status, a good, or a piece of private

property possessed by the citizen, but rather a tool of a struggle or an obligation to others to struggle against injuries inflicted on those others, citizen and noncitizen alike—others who are governed along with her. (Azoulay 14)

While one can certainly appreciate West's prose for its aesthetic qualities, her recreation of the encounter with the Berlin women functions in the same way for its reader as the photograph does for the viewer in Azoulay's formulation. West encourages the "civic skill" of identification and understanding in her presentation of a civic relation unbound by sovereignty. Azoulay uses "the term 'contract' in order to shed terms such as 'empathy,' 'shame,' 'pity,' or 'compassion' as organizers of this gaze. In the political sphere that is reconstructed through the civil contract, photographed persons are participant citizens, just the same as I am" (17). West does not look at the Berlin women—themselves certainly "participant citizens"—with empathy, shame, pity, or compassion. Her narrative renders these women with love: a political love of identification. West shares their democratic nationalism even though she is not a citizen under the same regime, and so a civic relation not organized by any one sovereign is created.

In contrast to this nationalism is anti-patriotism in two guises: fanatical and professional. Joyce represents the former. He is ideologically committed to the Nazi cause; deluded, he works for glory and power and not for financial gain. A fanatic, according to the *OED*, is a person who is "frenzied, mad," and "characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm."<sup>6</sup> For West, Joyce's enthusiasm is mistaken in part because it is contradictory: what

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<sup>6</sup> West uses the term "nationalism" in a sense opposite to George Orwell's. Orwell aligns nationalism with fanaticism rather than patriotism: "By 'nationalism' I mean first of all the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled 'good' or 'bad'. But secondly—and this is much more important—I mean the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests. Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism" (np).

Joyce lacks in process he makes up for in obsessive commitment simultaneously toward fascism and toward England. (Joyce always maintained that a Nazi invasion and conquest would be for the greater good of the British nation.) He was “the apotheosis of the amateur, who was sustained only by his ideals and unsupported by any technique” (*New* 356). In *A Train of Powder*, West aligns the white supremacist Southerners of Greenville, South Carolina, with this form of nationalism: unreflective, single-minded, obsessed, and deluded. The Southerners are not without their operatic charm, but West’s chapter on the lynching trial, “Opera at Greenville,” is saturated with descriptions of a disconcerting Southern nationalism, against logic and against process. Even the judge is a member of this tribe. Mr. Culbertson, the defense attorney, “pointed to the press table and declared that because of this fussy insistence on the investigation of a murder there was now a trial to which Northern papers had sent representatives... [implying] that they had come for the purpose of mocking and insulting the South” (99). Justice J. Robert Martin, Jr., does not reject the implied Southern nationalism. Instead, he “pointed out that Mr. Culbertson had no evidence of the existence of these people and that they therefore could not be discussed” (99). The deranged greenhouse gardener from the “Greenhouse with Cyclamens” chapters in *A Train of Powder* is also this sort of nationalist. He is fanatic without political object; he has displaced his fanaticism onto the care of cyclamens. Despite the fact that the Nazis have fallen, West insists that this man is “a nightmare figure” (139). She fears that “his absorption in industry left a vacuum in his mind which sooner or later would be filled. If no religion or philosophy or art came to bind this man’s imagination to reality, then the empty space would be flooded with fantasy which would set him at odds with life” (248). This fanatical figure recurs over and over again in both *A Train of Powder* and *The New Meaning of Treason*: William Marshall, Donald Hume, Peter John Kroger, and others. This anti-patriot is shallow and gullible, and therefore

always potentially dangerous to democracy.

Contrary to the fanatic is the professional traitor or totalitarian spy. Where Joyce was “the apotheosis of the amateur,” this figure is “the apotheosis of the professional” (*New* 356). Stephen Ward, Colonel Abel, and George Blake fit into this category. In *The New Meaning of Treason* as well as in a series of newspaper and magazine articles published after the war, West details their techniques, their professional tricks, and especially their large salaries paid out by the Soviets. Professionals lack the obsessive commitment and allegiance that the fanatics possess; they are dispassionate specialists, highly skilled in techniques of acquiring and selling information. Fanatic or professional, all anti-patriots share certain qualities. There is, according to West, “a curious strain of silliness present in nearly all traitors” (*New* 86), as well as “excessive egotism” (*New* 88). Most of all, these individuals lack process: they are rigid, unchanging, unreflective. Formulaic fanaticism is the undemocratic iteration of dynamic nationalism. Dispassionate professionalism entails a sterile business transaction, the agent deploying tricks and betraying secrets in exchange for financial remuneration. These individuals approach their lives or their work by rote, instead of with democratic process and love of country, like the traitorous women of Berlin. According to West, the programmatic approach to life and work is inhuman, and unsustainable. In a letter to Lord Beaverbrook in 1947, she claimed, “treason is an attempt to live without love of country, which humanity can’t do” (Scott 219).

Individuals under the influence of totalitarianism represent a unique threat to democracy in the postwar world. Democracy encourages process, while totalitarianism enforces formula. In the age of the atom bomb, individual agents, such as Alan Nunn May and Emil Klaus Fuchs, possessed a destructive power that they never could have had before: “Now the insignificant human being and the unimpressive material object could inflict crucial danger on Britain” (*New*

293). The secrets divulged by these individuals could potentially deprive Britain of its ability to protect its citizens, thereby destroying the contract of protection and allegiance. West clarifies this point: “if ever Russia drops an atom bomb on Great Britain or America,” she says, “the blame for the death and blindness and the sores it scatters must surely rest in part on this gifted and frivolous man [Nunn May]” (*New* 157). Her objection to such power residing in the hands of an “insignificant human being” rests not on the individual personalities or character flaws of those human beings. Her objection is democratic in principle: when one man (for instance Hitler or Stalin or, in this new postwar phase of history, Nunn May or Fuchs) has a monopoly of power, democracy ceases to exist.

Totalitarian governments breach the contract between citizen and state, both within their borders and without. West tracks and resents the development of what she sees as a new totalitarian strategy: the sowing of suspicion and distrust among nations, through the deliberate and fantastic broadcasting of espionage. This strategy has the potential to breach two contracts: between citizen and state, and among nation-states. This plays out especially between the United States and Britain, whose close relationship the Soviets attempted to undermine many times over. West points to publicity on the defections of Bruno Pontecorvo, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Kim Philby as Soviet-orchestrated propaganda. West thinks that this principle is worth underlining, because the only story that repeats in both *A Train of Powder* and *The New Meaning of Treason* is that of William Marshall. Marshall is a naïve man, particularly unsuited for espionage because of his extremely distinctive physique. He is chosen by the Soviets because the British authorities would certainly catch him: “poor selfless William Marshall was put on a salver and served up to the Special Branch, with love from the Soviet Intelligence Service, and it was like robbing a child of its pennies on the way to the sweetshop” (*New* 263). West’s disdain

for the propagandistic sowing of dissent and subsequent breach of allegiance-protection contract extended to her view of American anti-Communism in the McCarthy era. She did not support McCarthy or his tactics, although many of her contemporaries assumed she did.<sup>7</sup> Yet West believed that the portrayal of anti-Communism in the United States as witch-hunting was just another version of the Soviet ploy to weaken the relationship between Britain and the United States, thereby undermining each country's ability to protect its citizens and breaking the protection-allegiance contract. She writes about this matter to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and J.B. Priestley in 1953 and 1955, respectively. She calls the Soviet strategy "the sabotaging of Anglo-American relations by the constant presentation of the United States as insane with anti-Communist hysteria and the Investigation committees as tribunals comparable to the Inquisition" (Scott 296). West understands this to be a particularly totalitarian tactic that blocks dialogue and understanding among individuals and states.

Beyond trying to destroy the contract of protection-allegiance in other nations, totalitarian governments betray their own citizens by failing to provide such protection. In the Marshall case, West contends that the Soviet agent to whom Marshall gave information, Pavel Kuznetsov, was following orders to be discovered by British intelligence agents. He claimed diplomatic immunity when he was arrested, returned to the Soviet embassy, and flew back to Moscow.

There is no guarantee, however, that his service and allegiance will be rewarded with protection:

The ways of Intelligence being what they are, there would be British and American observers in Soviet Russia who would have their eyes on Kuznetsov. If he was to be visible, at liberty and in good condition, then these observers would say, "What,

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<sup>7</sup> West received many letters accusing her of supporting McCarthy. To J.B. Priestley in 1955, West wrote, "you do say 'I do disagree with your defence of McCarthy,'" (Scott 295), before going on to defend her *Sunday Times* articles on American communism.

is that not Kuznetsov? Why is he walking about at his ease after he made that catastrophic blunder? Can it be that the Marshall case, after all, was not what it seemed?” There would be no simpler way for the Soviet government to convince them that the Marshall case was exactly what it seemed on the surface than by punishing Kuznetsov severely, by punishing him for a long time, by finding, if it were possible, a form of punishment which would lull foreign suspicions for ever. It is to be noted that when the Soviet government accuses persons of conspiring against it, such as Rajk, the witnesses who testify that they conspired with them are afterwards treated as if that evidence were true, however patently false it may be, and are punished accordingly. (*Train* 304-305)

Pavel’s allegiance may in fact be met with punishment. The principle of contract does not hold under the Soviet regime. This defect is not limited, however, to Soviet practice. West, who from the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact understood Soviet Communism and Nazi Fascism to be two iterations of the same totalitarian phenomenon, believes that the Nazis also breached this contract, and not just with its Jewish citizens: the cyclamen gardener in *A Train of Powder* is missing a leg and has no recourse to government support. His injury therefore “represents a more general tendency of his own government, which treated with brutality not just those it deemed ‘outsiders’ but also its ‘exemplary citizens’” (Reichman 128).

West capitalizes on the gardener’s disability as a narrative device. Disability in literary narrative works “as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (Mitchell and Snyder 47). It reveals, in this case, the usually concealed relationship between totalitarian state and subject. West puts to new use a melodramaic negotiation with disability and citizenship: whereas melodrama usually concentrates on a mute or deaf-mute character, West focuses intently on the figure of the

one-legged man.<sup>8</sup> In his essay on muteness in melodrama, Patrick McDonagh explains that “deaf-mutes could not be cured of their condition, but their state—moral, intellectual, and spiritual—could be ameliorated, bringing them more fully into the fold as citizens of the Republic” (659). In West’s narrative, the gardener’s state has not been ameliorated. Despite the fact that the gardener is a war veteran, the German government abjures all responsibility for the wounds he sustained fighting for his country. He has been excluded from full citizenship because of his disability, and it remains as evidence of his exclusion.

West’s solution to these problems is process: democratic, constructive process deployed by the citizens (and noncitizens) of the world and their governments would result in a harmoniously upheld contract of protection and allegiance. At the same time, when even her own country is host to a large number of propaganda-believers—both ideologically motivated and otherwise—West’s hopes for a quick resolution are not high. She does not think resolution is impossible: “If human beings were to continue to be what they are, to act as they have acted in the phases of history covered by this book, then it would be good for all of us to die. But there is hope that man may change” (*Black Lamb* np). The force that may effect that change, that “work[s] on him that might disinfect him,” is art. West’s own process of writing—she writes and rewrites, publishes, edits, and republishes, often rehearses publications in her private letters and conversations—models process.<sup>9</sup> Her generically mixed, linguistically intricate, and

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<sup>8</sup> Melodrama has “a cast of characters that often included mute, lame, blind, deaf, or simple people” (Frank 536). An excellent example of critical work on these characters is Janice Ho’s essay, “The Human and the Citizen in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*,” in *Around 1945: Literature, Citizenship, Rights*, which explores the implications on citizenship of the disability of “idiocy” (132) in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain.

<sup>9</sup> West never felt comfortable with her subject until she had immersed herself completely in it. For both *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and her “Greenhouse with Cyclamens” essays, West made three separate trips to Yugoslavia and Germany respectively. An early critic of West, Harold Orel, contended that West had not published her South African article series, “In the



melodramatically infused writings encourage process in her readers.

### **Postwar Globalization**

West's willingness to acknowledge complicated, unmelodramatic truths, revealed through melodramatic writing, also leads her to a rejection of imperialism. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, she writes that, "while I grappled with the mass of my material during several years, it imposed certain ideas on me. I became newly doubtful of empires" (np). Recognizing that some of the heroes of the World War II melodrama were also villains in a different context was a difficult admission, but one at which she arrived only through process. She also makes the anti-melodramatic admission in the postwar that the melodramatic villains of World War II are capable of behaving heroically: "they had lifted from us part of our moral guilt for the plight of the displaced persons and the refugees and expellees. In their reckless and speculative prosperity they had provided for these homeless people as we could not have done" (*Train* 248).

West's melodramatism occasionally clouds her usually crisp historical and political vision. In South Africa, the involvement of the African National Congress (ANC) with Eastern Bloc countries complicates what for West is a clear dichotomy between good and evil. She would have preferred if her melodramatic villain—the Communist agent—could have remained fully villainous. Yet she would not under any circumstances make a case for the apartheid regime. Similarly, West is shocked by Israel's aggressive behavior in 1956 because she aligns the Arabs, not the Israelis, with the melodramatic villain. In a letter to Harold Guinzberg in

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Cauldron of Africa" in *The Sunday Times*, because they were not the quality of her earlier work. In a letter to Alan Maclean in 1978, West disputes this claim: "Professor Orel also suggested that these articles were never published in book form because they were scamped work. They were not published in book form because I was not at all keen to return to South Africa" (Scott 464).

November of that year, she confesses her surprise: “I would have said that there was going to be some trouble in the way of Arab aggression. But here we have Israeli aggression—and a precipitate action afterwards. There must be some whacking great suppression of news—or everybody has gone mad” (Scott 316).

West remains committed to the contract of law as sacred throughout her life. In later years, she shifts her political focus to issues of immigration. Her usually prophetic vision had failed in regard to refugees<sup>10</sup>—in *A Train of Powder* she claims that “the displaced persons were a diminishing group” (129)—but after the war and for years subsequently she works to aid refugees and stateless persons, “helping them with both cash and influence to find jobs or educational opportunities in England and America” (Glendinning 169). By the late 1960s, she took a different stance on the inherent problems in a world with too many displaced persons. Britain, she claimed in a television interview with William F. Buckley, Jr., in 1968, should not let in more immigrants than it could responsibly support. Once again she returns to the sacred contract of the law: if Britain is to shelter these displaced persons—earning their allegiance—then it must be able to provide them the protections that allegiance demands. This argument paradoxically lends itself to both progressive and conservative politics. On the one hand, West advocates for the transformation of the refugee into the citizen: anyone within the borders of Britain should be afforded the rights and privileges of education, healthcare, and more. On the

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<sup>10</sup> This vision failed also in regard to lynchings in the American South. West ends the “Opera at Greenville” chapter optimistically: “The will of the South had made its decision, and by 1954 three years had gone by without a lynching in the United States” (114). West’s information here relies on documented lynchings only. Furthermore, the following year alone, several documented lynchings—including the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till—took place. Lynching, whether under the guise of police brutality or otherwise, continues to have a felt presence in Southern American life.

other hand, West's acknowledgment of the limits of Britain's resources could easily be deployed to support a conservative politics of exclusion, barring refugees entirely: any number of refugees may be too many refugees for the state to support responsibly. West never conclusively resolves this contradiction: too much is contingent upon the shifting definitions of citizenship, nation, and state responsibility in the decolonizing, heterogeneous, globalized postwar world.

Rebecca West's postwar writing is dedicated to discovering the nuances of the new world order following Hitler's betrayal of legality. She documents the new species of humanity that grows out of the ruins of World War II. Often she does this through recourse to botanical metaphors. Where "the cyclamens that flourish in Nuremberg do not call up images of a natural world gradually healing itself in the war's wake" (Reichman 130), to West the cyclamens represent the terrifying new citizens of postwar Germany: engineered, perfected, and with empty (and dangerously fillable) minds, like the greenhouse gardener who tends them. Yet these in fact *are* the natural outgrowths of the destruction of World War II, in the same way that the treachery of William Marshall—whom she describes as "like the rootless saplings that grow out of the crevices of bombed buildings" (*Train* 276)—emerges from the historical circumstances of the same war. West is not the only author who takes up the postwar world in botanical terms, however, nor in melodramatic ones. Muriel Spark's *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) also represents the human results of mid-century historical events through the flowers transplanted in a Jordanian garden—and yet none of her botanical specimens has a clear homeland, or a clear place to which they can belong. The postwar world is unmistakably and overwhelmingly characterized by displaced persons, mass movements of dislocated peoples, and shifting diasporas. Muriel Spark's novels responds to the challenge of representing such a world.

## CHAPTER 2: Jerusalem, 1961: Muriel Spark's Cold War Intrigue

In 1961 Muriel Spark went to Jerusalem to report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for the *Observer*. Her novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), has been widely cited as the literary fruit of that journalistic labour. It comes at the tail end of a flurry of novel publications for Spark. In the seven years between 1957 and 1963, she published seven novels: *The Comforters* (1957), *Robinson* (1958), *Memento Mori* (1959), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Bachelors* (1960), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), and *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). *The Mandelbaum Gate*, however, took over Spark's writing life almost completely from 1961, and her next novel did not appear until 1968. This novel broke her momentum, both because it was her longest by far, and because the subject exhausted her. After years of struggling with the narrative, she finally completed the second half of the novel in a single 56-hour stretch (Stonebridge 92). While *The Mandelbaum Gate* may be Spark's most explicitly political and international novel, it takes up themes that she already explored in earlier works and that appear again in later ones. Spark's Catholicism, which she cites as a propelling force for her career as a novelist,<sup>1</sup> surfaces as a point in tension with both her Britishness and her Jewishness. As a female, Scottish, half-Jewish, Catholic convert and British citizen, Spark understands from the first that national belonging is not always (or perhaps ever) straightforward or unambiguous. In *Robinson* and *The Mandelbaum Gate*, she rejects exclusionary social and national formations, and endorses connections across difference.

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<sup>1</sup> In a 1960 essay entitled "How I Became A Novelist," Spark described her conversion to Catholicism as "an important step for me, because from that time I began to see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings. It think it was this combination of circumstances which made it possible for me to attempt my first novel" (*Informed* 44-45).

Reflecting on and intervening in the specifically postwar, globalized, and decolonizing world, Spark investigates the meanings of community, nationality, duty, and betrayal across her oeuvre. In realist prose, *Robinson* renders exclusionary nationalisms absurd and encourages diversity and inclusion in community formation. Seven years later, *The Mandelbaum Gate* employs melodrama to parse the meanings of betrayal and belonging; it activates Cold War themes and interrogates Cold War ideologies. This hybrid tale of adventure and intrigue challenges notions of singular nationality or uncomplicated allegiance in light of the UDHR. In the context of the Cold War, national belonging and citizenship are politically charged endowments: conflicting memberships can only belong to double agents. In *The Mandelbaum Gate*, therefore, Spark's hybrid characters commit treason. Because protagonist Barbara—a British, half-Jewish, Catholic convert—does not swear fealty exclusively to Britain, Judaism, Israel, or Catholicism, she is seen as betraying each in turn. Spark ultimately formulates a new kind of citizenship in her prose style: the excesses of melodrama serve as a model for excessive citizens—overburdened with affiliations—rather like Spark herself.

### **Duties to the Community**

At mid-century, amid the final paroxysms of empire and massive postwar migrations and resettlements, questions about the nature of community—including what comprises a nation and a state—as well as the individual's relation to community were up for debate. After the watershed years 1947-1948, with the independence and partition of British India into India and Pakistan, the end of Mandatory Palestine, and the establishment of the State of Israel, a cascade of independence movements ensued. National belonging and state citizenship in the wake of empire were renegotiated across the globe: in Malaya, Sudan, Cyprus, Belize, Kenya, Nigeria,

Malta, and elsewhere. At the same time, fascist totalitarianism had proven that men could be coaxed away from their consciences, away from natural and diverse human communities, in favour of exclusionary and genocidal nationalism. Attuned to international political and human rights movements, Spark reflects the particularity of postwar, postcolonial heterogeneity in her novels. According to Allan Hepburn, Spark's novels "document the complexities of governance at a micro-social level" (*Grain* 24). Her character portraits test models of citizenship, and her novels fundamentally challenge claims of indigeneity and ownership that serve to exclude individuals from the communities in which they live.

During the drafting period of the UDHR in San Francisco, the relation between community and individual was a heated point of discussion. Joseph Slaughter pinpoints one particular debate on the relationship between community and the human personality:

During consideration of the UDHR's article 29, Alan Watt proposed an amendment that would fundamentally reconfigure the international legal character of the relation between the individual and society. As drafted, the article declared, "Everyone has duties to the community *which enables* him freely to develop his personality." Watt's amendment construed a more integral relation between human personality and society: "Everyone has duties to the community *in which alone* the free and full development of his personality is possible." Debate on this emendation centered on several problematics: its image of the human person, the terms of the individual's debt to the community for having developed what the UDHR elsewhere calls the "human personality," and the extent to which "the community" can take responsibility for the development of human personality. It was to clarify these issues that the delegates invoked *Robinson Crusoe*, and Daniel

Defoe took his official place among the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

(“Enabling,” 1405-1406; original emphasis)

Delegates went on to produce two distinct readings of the title character of *Robinson Crusoe*. On the one hand, Crusoe existed without community entirely and nonetheless developed his personality. On the other hand, the relics of human society from his ship, as well as his companion Friday, represented enough “human community” so that contact with these objects and this single companion developed his personality. The latter argument, and therefore Watt’s proposed amendment, won. In the final 1948 version of the UDHR, Article 29 clearly delineates that a person has duties to the community of which he is a part, and that his inclusion and participation in such a community are the enabling factors in his personal development. Even though the UDHR case was closed, a decade later Muriel Spark returns to the issue, using the same exact literary blueprint in her novel, *Robinson*.

Rewriting *Robinson Crusoe* as a twentieth-century plane crash and murder mystery, Spark revives the debate about community. In the novel, Robinson, Tom Wells, and the narrator January represent figures on a spectrum of inclusivity, development of personality, and expectation and performance of duty. Robinson, owner of the secluded island on which the plane crashes, offers the survivors hospitality. January, as one of the people who survives the crash, explains that she “could see that Robinson was making an effort to form some communal life for the period of our waiting on the island. I could see he conceived this a duty, and found it a nuisance” (44). Despite his self-imposed isolation, Robinson recognizes and performs duties to a community once he is implicated in it.<sup>2</sup> At another point in the novel, January relays the tale that

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<sup>2</sup> The community that Robinson constitutes for his ward, Miguel, enacts the principle of UDHR Article 29. Miguel’s personal development is conditioned by his community. January notices about Miguel that “although his pronunciation of English was good, his vocabulary was limited

Robinson tells about the island: it “was the southernmost part of Atlantis... The island had been a peninsula, famous for its pomegranate orchards, which had been planted by King Arthur” (133). Despite his isolation, Robinson clearly sees himself, if only through the cloudy lens of myth, as living on an extension of land colonized by the English. January embraces this notion and argues for the inclusion of Robinson in the human community. When Jimmie, another survivor and Robinson’s cousin, makes the claim that, ““no man is an island,”” January responds: ““some are... Their only ground of meeting is concealed under the sea. If words mean anything and islands exist, then some people are islands”” (22). Spark reverses the metaphor: a man who is an island is connected to the remainder of humanity by something fundamental though unseen, rather than isolated from humanity altogether. January, on the other hand, represents community formation and inclusivity. She searches for and articulates connections with the other people on the island, especially Robinson. She observes that he recites a Catholic prayer before dinner, and afterwards gives thanks “according to the form used by English Catholics” (45). An Englishwoman and a Catholic convert, January psychically bridges the gap between herself and Robinson by noting their commonality.

In contrast to January and Robinson, Tom Wells abjures duty and rejects the possibility of community on the island altogether. Described as a man who acts “as if the whole world consisted of the class of society with which [he was] familiar” (99), Wells is an Englishman to the nth degree. Intolerant of his new surroundings and companions, he “seemed to wish to reproduce about himself as far as possible the environment of his magazine office at Paddington” (66). He possesses a “lazy incuriosity” (66), in contrast to January’s self-described “curiosity... which did so indicate that these people were becoming part of [her] world” (39). Wells is an

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to what he had learned from Robinson” (52).



ideal British citizen without the markers of marginalization—especially gender, marital status, and religion—that January has. For this type of character, the only community worth engaging is narrowly defined: it is comprised of individuals exactly like himself. Wells does not recognize Robinson, Miguel, or the other survivors, who each display some marker of marginalization, as comprising a community. As he tells the others, ““being stuck on this island is bound to have a psychological effect on me. I feel it myself. It isn’t natural to live alone with Nature”” (87).

Contrary to the UN delegates’ reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, Wells interprets his remote island surroundings as entirely bereft of humanity, because the tokens of humanity surrounding him are not up to par. Spark’s verdict on the issue of community and duty—whether the former is changeable and the latter necessary—comes down clearly on the side of inclusivity and responsibility: Tom Wells is the villain of the piece. His rigidity and meanness ultimately earn him both bad press and a prison sentence.

In *Robinson*, Spark endorses a flexible theory of community against one that is exclusionary or static. January’s civic curiosity draws her not only to Robinson, but also to Jimmie: “I was curious to know where Jimmie had come from, why he had taken the Lisbon plane to the Azores with the purpose of finding his way to Robinson, how long he had known Robinson” (39). Unlike Robinson, Jimmie is not an isolated individual. Unlike Wells, Jimmie does not possess a fixed sense of national identity. January muses that “there was just enough of the element of rootless European frivolity in Jimmie to make any yarn about his connections seem possible, or, on the other hand, to make suspect his stories” (94). Suspicious because unmoored, Jimmie is nonetheless someone January conceives as part of her community. On Robinson’s island, January’s curiosity is radically inclusive: anyone, hailing from England, elsewhere, or nowhere in particular, is part of the community. In the last line of the novel, she

confirms this inclusivity: when she remembers Robinson's island, "immediately all things are possible" (176).

The negotiation of rootedness and community in *Robinson* reflects Spark's nonfiction thinking on the subject in the 1950s. Like Simone Weil, Spark was a national hybrid. T.S. Eliot writes of Weil that she "was three things in the highest degree: French, Jewish and Christian" (viii). Like Spark, Weil thematizes and interrogates these multiple, complex identities in their writing. Spark, in fact, had been reading Weil's work in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> In *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, written in 1943 in London but first published in 1949 in France, Weil anticipates some of the main points of the UDHR. She argues that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul... A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future" (44). Weil's argument was articulated from a specifically Second World War vantage point. She had left France in 1942, because she and her family had reason to fear for their safety. As a Frenchwoman unwillingly displaced, Weil's focus on "the need for roots" reflects a refugee sensibility.

Spark's postwar writing tests Weil's premise that rootedness is foundational and necessary to humanity. Challenging Weil's notion that "uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed" (44), Spark explores the possibility of a sort of uprootedness that does not, as Weil argues, lead individuals "either to fall into a

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<sup>3</sup> As evidenced by one of Spark's notes located in the Muriel Spark Papers at McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, as well as a 1953 book review, Spark was reading Weil. See Hepburn, "Interventions: Haiti, Humanitarianism, and *The Girls of Slender Means*" in *Around 1945*: 142-143.

spiritual lethargy resembling death, like the majority of the slaves in the days of the Roman Empire, or to hurl themselves into some form of activity necessarily designed to uproot, often by the most violent methods, those who are not yet uprooted, or only partly so” (44). Spark anticipates later postcolonial writers on the subject of roots, such as Salman Rushdie, who writes in *Shame* (1983), “roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places” (85). By setting *The Mandelbaum Gate* in Jerusalem in 1961, Spark highlights the latter part of Weil’s theory: the Israeli sections of the narrative portray a citizenry violently hurling itself against those who are not yet uprooted. Palestinians as a group remain absent from the narrative, but Spark puts the machinations of the recently rooted Israeli populace against them on display. Writing against both “spiritual lethargy” and settler colonialism, Spark searches for a cosmopolitanism suited to the postwar individual.

Spark and Weil hold divergent views on the importance of the state to individual and community identity. Writing in the middle of the Second World War, Weil argues that the state—what she calls the “nation”<sup>4</sup>—is the most important social organizer: “For a long time now, the single nation has played the part which constitutes the supreme mission of society towards the individual human being, namely, maintaining throughout the present the links with the past and the future. In this sense, one may say that it is the only form of collectivity existing in the world at the present time” (96). Spark’s works, on the other hand, question the supremacy of the state as organizer of human identity and relationships. While Spark inherits much from Weil, history sets these women apart. The establishment of the state of Israel, decolonization,

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<sup>4</sup> She clarifies her terminology as follows: “the nation, or in other words, the State; for there is no other way of defining the word nation than as a territorial aggregate whose various parts recognize the authority of the same State. One may say that, in our age, money and the State have come to replace all other bonds of attachment” (96).

and the ongoing Cold War—political events that occurred after Weil’s lifetime—have a discernible impact on Spark’s writing.

As imperial powers withdrew from former colonial outposts and as postwar refugee populations flowed across the globe in the postwar era, questions of indigeneity and inheritance became central to negotiations of citizenship and governance in postcolonial spaces. Spark’s novels not only reject Weil’s theory of roots, but also and especially the rootedness that new states like Israel attempt to claim. The Israeli government does not primarily grant citizenship according to the standard principles of *jus soli* (based on the physical locality of a person’s birth) or *jus sanguinis* (based on the citizenship of a person’s parents). Instead, Israeli citizenship proceeds by way of the international legal principle of the Right of Return.<sup>5</sup> In the UDHR, the principle appears alongside the right to leave: “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (Article 13). The Israeli government, citing 2000-year-old Jewish heritage, claims therefore that the Jewish people have the right to return to the geographical country of Israel (even if they themselves have never set foot there). Along with the Israeli Law of Return 5710 (1950), which claims indigeneity (and therefore citizenship) as a historical matter that crosses millennia rather than a personal one dependent on locale of birth, the Israeli government passed the Absentee Property Law in 1950. This law reconfigures property inheritance in former Mandatory Palestine. Taking advantage of internal displacements largely caused by the Israeli government itself, the Absentee Property Law sanctions the confiscation and retitling of property abandoned by Palestinians and other Arabs. This law disrupts standard procedures of property inheritance and authorizes further displacement and disenfranchisement of non-Jewish inhabitants of Israel and Palestine. In *The Mandelbaum Gate*,

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<sup>5</sup> The Israeli government simultaneously denies the Right of Return to Palestinian Arabs.

Spark challenges such claims of ownership, she chides the Israeli government for its abuses of power. The aggressive Israeli colonization of Palestinian land, and especially the irrigation of the Negev Desert, form its central intrigue. Furthermore, each character, state, and landscape in the novel reflects a distinct shade of nativity and inheritance in postcolonial Palestine. The primary Palestinian character, Suzi, ends up displaced to Athens. Protagonist Barbara, acutely aware of others' claims of Israeli indigeneity on her, attempts to decipher her own allegiances and identity as she crosses borders and encounters a diverse cast of characters.

Characters of mixed race, nationality, and citizenship animate *The Mandelbaum Gate*. Abdul and Suzi's maternal grandmother was "a Syrian of mixed Arab and Norman stock" (*MG* np). The mixed-race siblings represent two "of those chance relics of the Occupation" (*MG* np), just like the "child of tough honey-coloured skin and flaxen hair" (*MG* np) for whom Suzi provides patronage. Michael L. Ross contends that "alterity here turns out to be accommodatingly blue eyed" (151), but Spark never intends Abdul or Suzi as figures of pure alterity (as if such a thing were possible). Common ancestry, for Spark, does not necessarily determine community, affiliation, or inheritance. Barbara will forge the closest connection with Suzi, visiting her in Athens for years into the future because of commonalities the women discover during their travels, rather than because of Suzi's residual "Norman stock." Citizenship also fails to determine affiliation in *The Mandelbaum Gate*. Even though they share ancestry, Suzi and Abdul do not share *jus soli* citizenship: Abdul is Jordanian by birth; Suzi is Palestinian. At the same time, Abdul and Suzi have the closest bond of any characters in the novel. Despite distinct *jus soli* citizenships, the siblings display feelings of allegiance and duty towards each other.

Ancestry, birthplace, and citizenship all fail as singular or distinctive markers of

allegiance and nationality in *The Mandelbaum Gate*. Whether Palestinian Suzi or Jordanian Abdul, as mixed-race individuals with distinct citizenships, can ever be considered indigenous or endemic to Israel or Jordan, respectively, is a question left unanswered by Spark. Non-indigeneity, however, does not preclude the possibility of inclusion in a society distinct from one's birth, as the example of Ricky demonstrates. Even though Ricky is "of South African origin, having come to England on a scholarship" (*MG* np), Spark's narrator describes her as a "sturdy portion of English rib" (*MG* np). Participation in English culture and community, rather than place of birth, determines her nationality. In "Celebrating Scotland" (1999), Spark writes, "a 'Scottish' culture would be the natural expressiveness of everyone to whom the land of Scotland has actually contributed. Scottish Italians, for instance; Scots of West Indian origin; Scots of English and Irish descent. These, if they are Scottish by formation, all make up the sources of Scottish culture" (*Informed* 169). In this reconsideration of nationality, Spark endorses the inclusivity and malleability of community: non-Scottish origin, descent, or any other affiliation does not exclude an individual from Scottish culture, community, and nationality. As John Marx argues, "the most stable state is the one most capable of adapting its demographic criteria, designating new and changing populations, and increasing the detail of its census" (63). According to this model, Spark's community and cultural inclusivity signals stability, in contrast to the exceedingly unstable nationalisms, singular and exclusive, that Barbara encounters over and over again in *The Mandelbaum Gate*.

Spark's botanical specimens, like Rebecca West's before her, represent the outgrowths of mid-century world-historical and political events. Whereas West's cyclamens and "rootless saplings" (*Train* 276) signify specifically postwar individuals, Spark's potentially transplanted, nationally ambiguous flowers denote belonging and nativity in a later, postcolonial, and

globalized world. Joanna, a British character, populates her Jordanian garden with plants she considers native to Israel and Jordan, but the other English characters, as well as the narrative itself, challenge this version of indigeneity. Both Freddy and Barbara indicate that the plants are “not indigenous at all” (*MG* np); they suggest the plants, English by origin, are transplanted by British visitors to colonial spaces. The narrative, focalizing through Freddy and juxtaposing his thoughts with the actions of a young Arab boy who tends the garden, seems to confirm this suspicion. The boy waters the plants, “precious clumps in their dark, shady corner” (*MG* np). Freddy watches him intently, desiring but unable to speak to him. The narrator explains, “his Arabic lessons had not progressed so far as to enable him to say, as he desired to do: ‘You fellows are lucky being able to stand the sun direct on your skin in the heat of the afternoon. We English have to keep in the shade’” (*MG* np). Paralleling Freddy’s Englishness with that of the supposedly native plants, Spark’s narrative suggests (but does not confirm) a new national hybridity, wherein origin and place of residence—as a result of colonial history and ongoing colonial actions—conflict.

### ***The Mandelbaum Gate: Writing History***

Begun on the occasion of Muriel Spark’s visit to Jerusalem for the Eichmann trial in 1961 and published just two years before the Six Day War that would eliminate the two-state character of the city, *The Mandelbaum Gate* occurs at a nexus of three main historical and political fault lines: the Second World War, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and the Cold War. Situated at such an overwrought historical and political moment, *The Mandelbaum Gate* can occasionally seem scattered or schizophrenic. To Saul Ephraim and to the rest of the inhabitants of former Mandatory Palestine, “‘the war’ was the war of 1948” (*MG* np); at other points and to

other characters, “the war” is the war in Europe. There are repeated references to the Gestapo: by an Israeli guide, by Barbara, and by Rupert Gardnor. Barbara’s memories of the year 1939 include a German refugee orphan. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem—an Israeli reprise of the Nuremberg trials—figures prominently in the novel, and also affects its timeline: “Spark revised chronologies in the novel so as to align with the trial: ‘Change times to coincide with Eichmann trial,’ she noted on a slip of paper” (Hepburn, *Grain* 235n7).

The global Cold War also influences the events of *The Mandelbaum Gate*. In the real world tensions were high as the Israeli communist party was on the verge of splitting into a primarily Jewish anti-Soviet faction (Maki) and an Arab pro-Soviet one (Rakah). In addition to accommodating the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, 1961 was a tense political year within the United Arab Republic: Syria withdrew from the union, only three years after its establishment. From this point, the United Arab Republic, under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, was comprised of Egypt and the Gaza Strip until the Six Day War in 1967. The Cold War as it surfaces in the novel refers to both the war between superpowers and the global Cold War as played out in postcolonial spaces. The central intrigue of *The Mandelbaum Gate*—between the competing spy networks of Israel, Britain, and the United Arab Republic (under the control of the Egyptian military at this time)—represents the global Cold War in action. Freddy’s amnesia begins on the evening of 12 August 1961, which coincides precisely with Walter Ulbricht’s signing of the order to begin construction on the Berlin Wall; Freddy’s amnesia ends on 15 August 1961, the same day that Ulbricht declares, at a press conference, that there was no plan to build a wall at all. Ulbricht’s statement would have been closer to the truth had the events during the period of Freddy’s amnesia not happened. Even the priests of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre view a rogue English priest as a “communist agent” (*MG* np). *The Mandelbaum Gate* balances



precariously on the meeting point of various historical events. Where, according to Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge, “it is no wonder that the Second World War should be used as the century’s fault-line” (6), *The Mandelbaum Gate* is located where several fault-lines converge. Its setting is a seismic hazard, constantly on the verge of a world-wide tremor.

Melodrama provides the literary mode commensurate with the excesses of Spark’s geographical and historical setting in *The Mandelbaum Gate*. In Freddy’s terms, the “intensity at the gate was quite absurd” (*MG* np); the frenetic narrative replicates the “kind of delirium produced from the sheer effort of being in Jerusalem in 1961” (Stonebridge 84). Spark, using a composite structure, attempts to contain the historical excesses of Jerusalem in 1961. In 1950, Spark argued that “writing that adheres relentlessly to fact, faithfully recounting all that undoubtedly happened and nothing that perhaps happened, can give a terribly distorted picture of the subject and times in question, because facts strung together present the truth only where simple people and events are involved; and the only people and events worth reading about are complex” (*Informed* 95). In 1965, Spark foregoes fact and probability as the primary organizers of her story. Instead, the narrative wanders and repeats, and events are organized by myth and coincidence, in order that Spark’s narrator may “take the events as they happened, so far as is human” (*MG* np).

Both *The Mandelbaum Gate* and its real-life counterpart—the actual gate separating Israel and Jordan prior to 1967—exemplify what Peter Brooks calls the “melodramatism of modern politics” (203). According to Brooks, “melodrama may be born of the very anxiety created by the guilt experienced when the allegiance and ordering that pertained to a sacred system of things no longer obtain” (200). As a result of a number of historical events, the “sacred system” of allegiance that obtained during the war and earlier, bound to nation-states and

empires as the organizers of allegiance and belonging, certainly no longer applies. The Mandelbaum Gate, as a boundary between states and therefore a checkpoint where allegiances are tested, becomes the backdrop for Spark's melodrama. Wendy Brown contends that any landscape characterized by gates and walls on state borders "signifies the ungovernability by law and politics of many powers unleashed by globalization and late modern colonization, and a resort to policing and blockading in the face of this ungovernability" (24). Ungovernability in the context of Jerusalem in 1961 and in the context of Spark's novel in particular appears in the form of refugees and stateless persons, spies and traitors, shifting and unconfirmable allegiances of these and other individuals, and their forged passports and other papers. The Mandelbaum Gate represents a state-sanctioned attempt to tame, contain, and categorize this postwar, postcolonial, and Cold War ungovernability. Spark employs and revises melodrama in order to capture and to challenge this bursting historical present.

Melodrama serves as a strategy for Spark in order to reckon with the various and intersecting histories at play in Jerusalem in 1961. According to Marcie Frank, melodrama is "a tool for critical historical reading whose effectiveness derives ... from its maintenance of a melancholic relation to the past" (542). Melodrama does not merely linger over the past at the expense of the present. Rather, melodrama serves as the connective tissue between the lived present—in this case, postcolonial Palestine and the global Cold War—and the past that structures that present. Melodrama as a mode provides the avenues through which the colonial and wartime past of *The Mandelbaum Gate* punctures the postcolonial, postwar present of the narrative: "'post' indicates a very particular condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates a present... we use the term 'post' only for a present whose past continues to capture and structure it" (W. Brown 21).

As a melancholic medium—that is, a medium that never completes reckoning with the past but integrates it into the present—melodrama suits this “condition of afterness.” Spark capitalizes on this fact by illustrating a postwar, postcolonial, postnational, and postconflict present still harboring vestiges of the near and distant pasts. Conditioning the narrative of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, melodrama provides plot structures and narrative techniques, as well as an excessive mode of expression through which Spark communicates a complex socio-political and historical tale. “Grandiose events, unprovoked actions, hyperbolic language, ... thematic repetition, and associative montage” (Anker 24) characterize melodrama. From the heightened scenes of escape and disguise to Barbara’s physical assault on the traitor Ruth Gardnor, *The Mandelbaum Gate* includes and exploits each of these characteristics in turn.

With its dual characteristics of Manichaeism and excess, melodrama serves Spark’s characters as a pharmakon: melodrama poisons and melodrama cures. While “the world according to melodrama is built on an irreducible manichaeism” (Brooks 36)—and certainly the split city of Jerusalem at first glance appears to represent such a world—Spark’s worldview contains softer shading. Confronted by a Manichean world, Barbara struggles to identify in herself a singular desire, motive, or identity:

To Barbara, one of the first attractions of her religion’s moral philosophy had been its recognition of the helpless complexity of motives that prompted an action, and its consequent emphasis on actual words, thoughts and deeds; there was seldom one motive only in the grown person; the main thing was that motives should harmonize. Ricky did not understand harmony as an ideal in this sense. She assumed that it was both right that people should tear themselves to bits about their motives and possible for them to make up their minds what their motives

were. (*MG np*)

Ricky demands singularity and definitive choice from her associates. The traitor Ruth Gardnor insists on declarations of singular allegiance. Suzi complains to Barbara that Ruth “is now all at once my enemy because I don’t join with the nationalist party or this, that, party” (*MG np*).

Spark’s novel, however, does not suggest that Barbara or Suzi should simplify and identify “what category of person” (*MG np*) each of them is. Such a demand in itself is reminiscent of Nazi totalitarianism and the Nuremberg Laws. Barbara may be “a spinster of no fixed identity” (*MG np*), but choosing a single category for herself would only be an arbitrary and unstable solution. Instead, Spark invokes the melodramatic characteristic of excess to counter the Manichaeism demanded of Barbara. Barbara accepts the excessive quality of her identity and arrives at something like harmony. On the Jordanian side of the border in the melodramatic, hyper-tense world of Jerusalem, “she had caught a bit of Freddy’s madness and for the first time in this Holy Land, felt all of a piece, a Gentile Jewess, a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress” (*MG np*).

Barbara’s three primary organizations of affiliation each have overlapping national and international aspects. After the British Commonwealth was officially established in 1949 and throughout the era of decolonization, the concept of Commonwealth Citizenship marked residual British imperialism. Barbara’s citizenship—British without the “Commonwealth” caveat—connects her to an international community. Catholicism, which for Spark always “presents as foreign and alien” (“Muriel Spark,” 519) to the traditionally Anglican English, signifies an internationalism less moored to a state as such, although Vatican City certainly figures as an international state as much as is possible. Judaism, similarly cast as a foreign and non-state internationalism before and during the Second World War, becomes attached to territory and

state at the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. As a result of the Israeli Law of Return 5710, Barbara could conceivably claim Israeli citizenship. The competing nationalisms, citizenships, and legalities of these three organizations raise questions of allegiance and jurisdiction in *The Mandelbaum Gate*.

Barbara finds herself caught in a web of distinct legalities: Israeli and Jordanian law in regard to her pilgrimage and mobility across borders, potentially British and international law should she appeal to the British consul in Jordan, and Jewish and Roman Catholic law in regard to citizenship and marriage: “‘It’s a legal question, you know, like any other legal question’” (MG np). Her Jewish blood makes her a potential Israeli citizen, therefore under the protection and jurisdiction of Israel, yet “‘Barbara’s Jewish blood is outside of official range, in a sense’” (MG np), once she crosses the border into Jordan. A citizen of Britain, a convert to Catholicism, and a born Jewess, Barbara has no appeal to any single legality because of the nexus of legalities in which she is caught and over which she has little control. A privileged iteration of the stateless person as defined in Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Barbara proves the dangers of internationalism: while human rights are meant to be “‘inalienable’ because they were supposed to be independent of all governments,” Arendt explains, “it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them” (292). For the stateless, the possibility of justice is foreclosed by virtue of their being stateless. In order for a stateless person to be granted any sort of legal justice, that person must first be granted citizenship, which depends on the caprice of the nation-state and *not* on national or international law. The stateless person can never be a subject of the law, and can never be granted justice through it. Contrary to the stateless person, who is bereft of official belonging or status, Barbara

does not “lack [her] own government.” She does, however, lack a single one. Barbara thinks to herself, “it felt marvellous to be homeless” (*MG* np). The fact that her homelessness is a cosmopolitan one, characterized by multiple belongings rather than by none, does not mean that she is safe. The conflict between the organizations that lay claim to her leaves her in a position analogous to that of the stateless person: vulnerable and abandoned by the law. Barbara’s homeless cosmopolitanism is wrought with danger, for it may at any moment metamorphose into a refugee existence.

The confluence of Barbara’s multiple affiliations signals suspicion in regard to her allegiance, which results in her abandonment by each organization in turn. *The Mandelbaum Gate* displays what Carl Schmitt calls “the lingering fear of the incomprehensible political power of Roman Catholicism” (3): its sway over Barbara and its claims on her citizenship cast her as suspicious, both to Israelis and to her fellow Britons. An aggressive Israeli guide asks Barbara, “why have you made yourself a Catholic to deny your Jewish blood?” (*MG* np). Likewise Freddy, at the moment of his rescue (or kidnap) of Barbara from the convent, says, “‘the Catholics are rolling in money.’ It was as if he had said ‘the foreigners’ in one of those private exchanges between Britons” (*MG* np). Once she arrives in Jordan, Barbara’s Jewish ancestry provokes suspicion. Her British passport compounds this provocation: “‘Most of the people arrested as Israeli spies have got British passports... She’d be taken for an Israeli spy if they knew of any Jewish blood or background and arrived here by way of Israel,’” Joanna’s husband asserts (*MG* np). Barbara is a stranger in every locale, despite her affiliations with the local populace: British citizenship in Britain, Jewish ancestry in Israel, Catholic faith in Jordan.

Spark raises the question of whether Barbara’s perpetual exile or foreignness can be overcome, and she tests the possibility of doing so by placing Barbara in a number of disguises.

If, as May Joseph contends, “citizenship is not organic but must be acquired through public and psychic participation” (3), then it might be theoretically possible for Barbara to perform her way to a different mode of belonging. Barbara represents “nomadic citizenship” as Joseph defines it:

The political, legal, economic, and cultural nomad has been forced to perform citizenship across as well as within national boundaries, a practice referred to here as nomadic citizenship. As both an imposed condition and process of negotiation, nomadic citizenship suggests the ambivalent, lucrative, unconscious, and itinerant ways in which migrant subjects live in relation to the state. Nomadic citizenship delegitimizes the state as arbiter of identity and citizenship. (17)

Barbara, not exactly “forced” but quite nearly so,<sup>6</sup> performs various citizenships through her several disguises: a deaf-mute Arab woman under full veil, a high-up agent in a spy network based in Cairo, and a Catholic nun crossing the border into Israel with her escort, Abdul, as a Franciscan monk. None of these identities is sanctioned by a state, whether British, Israeli, Jordanian, Catholic, or any other.

In *The Mandelbaum Gate*, disguise serves as a form of muteness, both literal and figurative. Barbara’s muteness is enforced literally when she stands at Suzi’s side under the veil. She has to keep her mouth figuratively shut when pretending to be the spy that Ruth Gardnor believes she is. In melodrama, the mute character appears frequently. According to Patrick McDonagh, “the mute (deaf or otherwise) inhabited a land beyond communication, an unmapped

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<sup>6</sup> I apply Joseph’s theory here despite Barbara’s obvious privileges. Barbara is privileged in regard to wealth, emancipation, mobility, *de jure* citizenship, and other factors: Spark’s narrative points out Barbara’s privilege, particularly over her Arab counterparts, in several scenes. When she tells Abdul on the eve of their escape back to Israel, “I’m going to the British Consulate to give myself up. After all, what crime have I committed? I’m entitled to protection,” he retorts, ““And what about me? What of us?”” (*MG* np). His only option, he points out, is to become ““a Palestine refugee in a camp, thank you so much, Miss”” (*MG* np).

realm of unconfirmed hypotheses and imaginative reconstructions” (664). Imaginatively reconstructing herself as various characters with unbending and single allegiances, Barbara tests the possibility of becoming a different, singular kind of citizen. Each masquerade comes to an end in melodramatic fashion: Barbara dramatically faints under the veil at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as she succumbs to scarlet fever, she hysterically bashes Ruth Gardnor over the head with a set of radio headphones at the Ramdez residence in Jordan, and she hilariously flees the border crossing into Israel as “passers-by had stopped to stare at the astonishing thing, a running nun with a monk in pursuit” (*MG* np). The theatrical excess of melodrama surfaces as the symptom of Barbara’s excessive citizenship: she cannot be contained within any single allegiance or identity. She cannot escape her status as a national hybrid. While, over the course of the novel, she demonstrates what Joseph calls a “nomadic citizen,” in the end she is a melodramatic one.

### **Melodrama as Treason**

The exact referent of the term “community” in the UDHR is unclear; it may refer to a person’s state of citizenship, geographical locality, or a non-governmental, non-territorial group of affiliation. An individual’s predilection towards one community or another is not often as pronounced as Tom Wells’ exclusionary Britishness or January’s curious inclusivity in *Robinson*. According to Christine Geraghty, “national identity cannot be understood through outward signs but through inner feelings which are known to the individual concerned... Nationalism is thus not a public posture but a private negotiation within a given context” (234). After 1948, there are shades of ambiguity even in terms of official state citizenship for persons of Jewish ancestry. According to the Israeli Law of Return 5710, “every Jew has the right to come



to [Israel] as an *oleh*,” a Jew immigrating to Israel, and “an *oleh*’s visa shall be granted to every Jew who has expressed his desire to settle in Israel,” with exceptions made only for reasons of national security and public health. An individual must provide proof of Jewish heritage in order both to gain Israeli citizenship and to warrant assistance with immigration from the Israeli state. Any person with Jewish ancestry, therefore, is always already a potential Israeli citizen.

In the postwar and Cold War era, this potential dual citizenship signals suspicion: to which state do dual citizens owe loyalty? In *Kawakita v. United States* (1952), the United States Supreme Court answered this question definitively: despite the fact that the petitioner Tomoya Kawakita’s “statements at his trial [indicated] that he felt no loyalty to the United States” (1.c), and “notwithstanding his dual nationality and his residence in Japan, [the] petitioner owed allegiance to the United States, and can be punished for treasonable acts voluntarily committed” (2.a). Kawakita was sentenced to death for treason against the US.<sup>7</sup> During her visit to Jerusalem in 1961, Muriel Spark acutely felt the implications of her half-Jewishness, and therefore of her potential dual citizenship. Early in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, a distressing conversation between Barbara and an Israeli guide regarding her ancestry and religion provides evidence of Spark’s unease. The concentrated Cold War atmosphere of suspicion in Jerusalem intensified Spark’s negotiation of identity and belonging in *The Mandelbaum Gate*.

Spark’s excessive, melodramatic citizenship is necessarily treasonous: affiliations with entities in conflict signals betrayal. *The Mandelbaum Gate* is not Spark’s only foray into treasonous grounds: she captures the distinct ontology of the traitor in her repeated iterations of the Brodie figure—a figure, fashioned after Deacon William Brodie, who is betrayed by a person or object of his own making. Deacon Brodie, as his fictional descendant Miss Jean Brodie

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<sup>7</sup> His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 1953, and in 1963 he was pardoned.

explains, was “a man of substance, a cabinet maker and designer of gibbets... [who] died cheerfully on a gibbet of his own devising in seventeen-eighty-eight” (*Prime* 93). Of his own accord rather than out of necessity, the Brodie figure produces the instrument of his own demise. In the same way that a traitor must be a subject (and therefore, at least to some degree, a product) of the state, a betrayer of the Brodie figure must in some way be a product of that figure. While Miss Jean Brodie whines to Sandy Stranger that she has been betrayed, Sandy wonders, “what does she mean by ‘betray’?” (*Prime* 63). Stranger insists that, “it’s only possible to betray where loyalty is due” (*Prime* 136). While she denies that she owed Miss Jean Brodie this loyalty in the end—or “only up to a point” (137)—she is certainly a product of Brodie’s influence. In *Robinson*, the narrator’s brother-in-law, Ian Brodie, embodies the ironic turn inherent to Brodie-ism in his fanatical anti-fanaticism: he “lacerate[s] himself with the loathsome spectacle of an hysterical nation” (95), thereby fanning his own hysteria. In *Symposium*, Hurley Reed remarks ““those champagne growers, the Ferrandi family, one of the cousins was killed by his wife with a blow on the head from a bottle of his own brand of champagne. The French make their bottles very heavy. Especially champagne”” (88). These Brodies invite betrayal by making it possible, or by making it necessary. In the case of Jean Brodie, moral superiority is on the side of Sandy Stranger: fascism provokes necessary treason.

The Brodie figure appears in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, but not in the guise of the actual traitors, Mr. and Mrs. Gardnor. Instead, Ricky—who forges a birth certificate to prevent a marriage, but in so doing makes the marriage possible in the first place—stands as the Brodie figure. The level of loyalty that Ricky and Barbara owe each other is uncertain, but Ricky’s forgery, as her own creation, betrays her intended purpose. (Ricky devises the plan for the forgery on the advice of Abdul, her lover and future husband’s son. Spark’s narrative never

clarifies whether this advice was given in good faith or whether is another iteration of betrayal in the novel.) What distinguishes Barbara from Ricky is necessity: Ricky's revenge plot is selfishly motivated and it relies on an unequivocal view of the world. Ricky understands her relationship with Barbara—and the loyalty that she believes Barbara owes to her—in absolute terms. On the other hand, Barbara's treasonous melodramatic citizenship develops as a response to oppressive, Manichean dictates: does she represent a loyal Brit, or a Cold War traitor? A fellow-traveling Catholic, or a spying Jew? Barbara rejects single categories, claiming—and therefore betraying—they all in turn. Her multiple affiliations yield multiple betrayals: she is a necessary traitor to every community that demands her singular allegiance.

## **ANTI-POLITICAL POLITICS**

### CHAPTER 3: Coded Letters: Václav Havel's Anti-Political Writing

Loyalty is Cold War currency *par excellence*. When Warsaw Pact forces entered Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968, their invasion was in the name of loyalty. “The CPCz CC [Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Central Committee] Presidium and government of Czechoslovakia urge you to display maximum responsibility and patriotism,” the Soviet Politburo advised the Czech population: “every sincere patriot, every Czech and every Slovak, is well aware that the Soviet Union is the most reliable guarantor of the sovereignty, freedom, and independence of socialist Czechoslovakia” (Soviet Politburo Resolution 383). The Bratislava Declaration earlier in August and the Moscow Protocol signed less than a week after the invasion both affirm the obligation of allegiance. In Bratislava, nothing but “unwavering loyalty to Marxism-Leninism” (327)—which is to say, to the USSR—will do. In Moscow Czechoslovak leaders, under duress, “reaffirmed their loyalty to the pledge by the socialist countries to support, strengthen, and defend the gains of socialism” (477). In the ensuing decades of “normalization” and continued Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia, loyalty—or silence—was the only way to ensure civil protection and national belonging. According to Czech journalist and author Eda Kriseová, “people professed their loyalty during screening sessions and then retreated to their homes and gardens. Provocatively, they turned their backs on what was happening; those in power did as they pleased...The nation’s spirit never sustained a worse blow than during the following twenty years; we never stood in a wider or drier moral desert than we did during the twenty years after normalization” (77).

“Normalization” was the name for the Soviet recalibration of Czech culture, society, and government after the Prague Spring in 1968. While the 1960s had been a decade of loosening

social strictures and more inclusive and unrestricted cultural programmes, the censors returned in force during normalization and after. Cultural workers and scholars lost their jobs by the thousands, hundreds of authors were expelled from the official Writers' Union—475 of 590, to be exact—and 130 novelists, playwrights, and poets were banned (Rocamora 109). In the face of all this, a number of Czech citizens—many of them writers, artists, and intellectuals—resisted the totalitarian drives of the post-1968 regime. Among these was Václav Havel, playwright turned “dissident” under the Soviet regime. Post-1968 Czech communism produced different kinds of governance and social codes than earlier, Stalinist modes of totalitarianism. In “The Power of the Powerless” (1978), Havel describes the Czech situation as “post-totalitarian”: “the post-totalitarian system: a world of appearances, a mere ritual, a formalized language deprived of semantic contact with reality and transformed into a system of ritual signs that replace reality with pseudo-reality” (32). In the place of Stalinist show trials, expulsions, and executions, subtler forms of social control reigned in Czechoslovakia in the post-1968 era. Despite outward appearances, the totalitarian machinery was still at work, and individuals like Havel knew it. Havel’s description of the post-totalitarian state’s cultural and social practice aligns with Hannah Arendt’s earlier summary of totalitarianism: “totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty” (*Origins* 339). Railing against the regime of crackpots and fools that Gustáv Husák and his cronies embodied, Havel uses writing—in the form of plays, manifestoes, essays, even prison letters—to challenge totalitarianism.

Havel’s life and works demonstrate what Michael Žantovský calls “the strangely bookish tinge to modern Czech history” (79). When Havel, not yet known as a “dissident” in the West

(although already marked as a “reactionary” by the KGB<sup>1</sup>), issued international radio broadcasts during the first days of Soviet occupation, “he did not call for the intervention of NATO or the American troops deployed a few kilometres to the west, but summoned his colleagues and friends, writers and critics... to protest the abomination. It was a strange phalanx to mobilize in the face of an armoured military operation, but Havel had his reasons, citing the role played by writers and intellectuals during the Prague Spring” (Žantovský 116). Havel believes in the power of culture to bring systemic social and governmental change. The Soviet suppression of dissenting writers bolstered Havel’s belief, rather than stifled it. Havel’s works of the 1960s consistently critiqued communist social norms and obligations. His plays and political writings in the decades leading up to the Velvet Revolution upheld his commitment to anti-totalitarian politics and his faith in the power of cultural forms in pursuing them.

### **An Education in Dissent**

Václav Havel was born into a wealthy family in Prague in 1936. After the 1948 Communist coup d’etat in Czechoslovakia, Havel was denied entry into university because of his bourgeois upbringing. He found his way into the theatre instead. Havel was introduced early to the world of subversive, parallel social structures—what Václav Benda later termed “The Parallel Polis” (1978)—and this parallel world would become his province for decades to come. Havel’s country home in Hrádeček, a small village not far from Prague, served as a venue for unrestricted (if monitored) political and artistic activity in the 1970s and after. In “Last

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<sup>1</sup> Havel was listed by the KGB among the members of an “underground anti-party group” who had “set out to discredit the CPCz in the eyes of the Czechoslovak nation, to undermine the foundations of socialism in the ČSSR, and to turn the country gradually onto the path of capitalist development” (“Counterrevolutionary Underground,” 515).

Conversation,” Havel recalls the first days of his unorthodox political and philosophical education, when he was merely a stagehand at the Theatre on the Balustrade: “Ivan Vyskočil started bringing [banned Czech philosopher Jan Patočka] to the Theatre on the Balustrade, and there he would talk to us late into the night about phenomenology, existentialism and philosophy in general... These unofficial seminars pulled us into the world of philosophising in the true, original sense of the word: no classroom boredom, but rather the inspired, vital search for the significance of things” (242). Not many years later, even before he dedicated his “Power of the Powerless” to the memory of Patočka, Havel found himself a spokesman for the dissident movement Charter 77, a leading figure in the world of the cultural underground, and a target of state security and surveillance.<sup>2</sup> His own persecution at the hands of the state certainly inspired Havel’s literary activism. His trip to New York via Paris in the spring of 1968, fortuitously timed, encouraged him further.<sup>3</sup>

Until 1969, Havel’s anti-bureaucracy, anti-communist plays—including his two most

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<sup>2</sup> While the discovery of surveillance equipment in his Prague flat is often cited in scholarly work on Havel, it is worth noting another literary figure who was on the scene: in a 1990 letter to then-president Havel, novelist and former MI6 agent Graham Greene reminisces, “I often remember the evening we spent together in 1969 with a suspicious character in the old town the night that you had discovered a listening apparatus in your ceiling!” (Letter to Václav Havel, 5 October 1990. Graham Greene Papers, Box 21, Folder 74. Archives and Manuscripts Department, John J. Burns Library, Boston College).

<sup>3</sup> Havel and his wife happened to layover in the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris at exactly the right moment: John Keane describes the “bewilderment” of Havel’s publisher, Pavel Tigríd, when “at precisely that moment, the officials behind the Air France desk slapped a ‘Closed’ sign on the counter and began turning off lights, locking doors, picking up bags, and walking off the job. So did all the other officials in the nearby airport departments. Even the immigration section stopped guarding the arrival and departure gates. Suddenly the barriers between East and West collapsed. Travellers and well-wishers alike were magically free to move wherever they liked. Borders were meaningless” (*Václav Havel* 184). Carol Rocamora details how, just a few short weeks later, Havel “delayed [his] departure [from the US] and joined other writers and theater people to participate in the [Central Park civil rights] march, which protested segregation and honored [recently-assassinated Martin Luther] King’s memory” (93).



famous, *The Garden Party* (1963) and *The Memorandum* (1965)—were produced and performed in Czechoslovakia. When Tom Stoppard, in his 1980 introduction to *The Memorandum*, lauds the “joyous freedom of Havel’s imagination,” he qualifies his statement: “in 1965 joy and freedom seemed possible” (280). Havel thrived in the 1960s Czech theatre. His plays, to a large extent, defied classification: Havel was doing something new. While critics often try to categorize Havel’s theatrical approach as fitting into either the Theatre of the Absurd or Protest Theatre, Stanislaw Baranczak argues that “Havel the playwright cannot really be squeezed into either of the two familiar drawers” (49). Havel’s approach, instead, might be called radically—which is to say, both formally and contextually—anti-totalitarian. While sharing qualities with both Theatre of the Absurd and Protest Theatre, Havel’s plays parrot, parody, and fundamentally demystify “consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or cliché—all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarian thought” (Havel, “Anti-Political Politics,” 395).

The characters, scenarios, and timelines of Havel’s plays of the 1960s shed light on the workings of totalitarianism. Totalitarian bureaucracy and the human cogs in its machine are marked by vacuity, redundancy, and endless substitution. In *The Garden Party*, repetition confounds meaning. When the main character, Hugo Pludek, confronts the nameless Director of the Inauguration Service, absurdity ensues:

HUGO: What the hell are you doing?

DIRECTOR: What? Nothing. I’m liquidating—

HUGO: Come, come, old boy! You don’t really mean it, do you? You wouldn’t want to be liquidating at the very time the Liquidation Officer is being liquidated! Goodness, you’re a grown up man, you wouldn’t want to act

like a child now, would you? Or are you perhaps trying to make me report on you above? If you insist on digging your own grave in the name of sham heroism—by all means! But in that case I can't be expected to master myself!

DIRECTOR: It's the liquidation I'm liquidating—the liquidation! (41)

Who is liquidating what and why hardly becomes clear. What “liquidation” (a common Soviet euphemism for aggressive political repression) means in this context is just as opaque. Whether “liquidation” and “inauguration” are distinct processes (or whether they are concrete, enforceable processes at all) cannot be surmised. Throughout the play, Hugo and other characters speak to each other incessantly, volleying the same small set of bureaucratic words and phrases back and forth to no avail. At the end of the play, Hugo is assigned the “IMPORTANT TASK OF CONSTRUCTING ON THE RUINS OF THE FORMER LIQUIDATION OFFICE AND THE FORMER INAUGURATION SERVICE A GREAT NEW INSTITUTION, A CENTRAL COMMISSION FOR INAUGURATION AND LIQUIDATION” (48-49). Totalitarian bureaucracy is a closed circuit: self-fulfilling, self-perpetuating, and hermetically isolated from reality.

Totalitarian bureaucratic terminology comes to stand in for actual human connection and dialogue. As John Keane argues, “in Havel's hands, people do not communicate with each other. They do not even understand each other. They simply have nothing to say. They no longer even think. True, they talk at each other in prefabricated clichés that are repeated over and over again and sometimes twist and intertwine. They stride around the world, cushioned by words” (*Václav Havel* 162). In *The Memorandum*, as the nameless organization at the centre of the play institutes not one, but two new bureaucratic languages—Ptydepe and Chorukor—absurd relays of near-meaningless conversation recur, and close in on themselves. The office Managing Director, Josef

Gross, gets caught in a Ptydepe loop he, and the audience, cannot follow:

GROSS: In order to issue the documents, you require that a staff member have his  
 memorandum translated—

SAVANT [Ptydepist]: Rachaj gun.

HELENA [Chairman]: Gun znojvep?

STROLL [Head of the Translation Centre]: Znojvep yj.

SAVANT: Yj rachaj?

HELENA: Rachaj gun!

STROLL: Gun znojvep?

SAVANT: Znojvep yj.

HELENA: Yj rachaj?

STROLL: Rachaj gun!

SAVANT: Gun znojvep?

GROSS: Quiet! (*The Garden Party* 94)

In this instance, each new phrase in Ptydepe begins with the final word of the last, and it seems clear that this closed loop could continue ad infinitum. What Gross finally deduces, despite the cascading relay of nonsensical words, is that “any staff member who has recently received a memorandum in Ptydepe can be granted a translation of a Ptydepe text only after his memorandum has been translated” (*The Garden Party* 94). Havel’s *The Memorandum* makes grotesquely evident the absurdity inherent to totalitarian bureaucracy. The characters in Havel’s plays have been reduced to what Herbert Marcuse calls “one-dimensional modes of thought and behavior” (134). Bureaucracy cuts off the possibility of critical and complex thinking through circular logic and the compression of language into readymade clichés. The bureaucratic

impoverishment of language and thought is by design: “one-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and their purveyors of mass information” (Marcuse 16). In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt laments that, “what we traditionally call the state and government gives place [in totalitarianism] to pure administration” (45). Havel’s aimless bureaucrats and closed-circuit organizations reveal the insubstantial quality of such administration: totalitarianism proceeds only by inertia or paradox.

At the Theatre on the Balustrade, Havel was more than a playwright; he was intimately involved in the production of his plays from start to finish. When the lighting operator failed to show up for the 7 April 1965 performance of *The Garden Party*, Havel took things into his own hands: his stage manager notes for the evening describe how “it was necessary to break open the door to the lighting booth and I had to operate the lighting board myself” (qtd. in Rocamora 67). Only a few years later, with his removal from the Writers’ Union and official banning by the Husák government, Havel’s life in the Czechoslovak public theatre came to an abrupt end, at least until 1989. Only a very small group of individuals was able to see a Havel play produced in Czechoslovakia in the two decades following 1968. Despite the ban, Havel’s play *The Beggar’s Opera* (1975) was stealthily put on in a pub outside of Prague. Director Andrej Krob recalls, ““we negotiated with a pub in Dolní Počernice, a district on the outskirts of Prague, and sold a limited number of tickets... In the next room, drunks were roaring; we had muffled the doors with mattresses. In the audience were sitting three hundred wonderful, splendid, talented people whom the Communists had demoted to the nation’s boiler rooms”” (qtd. in Kriseová 92). Another performance in 1975—this time, at Havel’s country home—starred Havel himself in the central role: “then there was the premiere of *Audience*, directed by Andrej Krob. In the barn were a table and two chairs. [Pavel] Landovský sat in one of them; they dragged Vašek [Havel] to the

other and told him he would play [the central character] Vaněk. The script was on the table so they could read it” (Kriseová 148). Havel had not lost everything after all. Where Milan Kundera recognizes *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* as his “favorites among all [Havel’s] work” precisely “because [he] was still able to see them in Prague” (“Homage,” 17), the renegade performances of *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Audience* proved to Havel that he was not finished writing for the stage or writing against the regime, even if it took not a small amount of ingenuity and audacity in order for his work to be seen and heard.

The Czech performances of Havel’s post-1968 plays are a theatrical iteration of what Barbara Falk calls “open dissent” (320), a category that includes “production and distribution of samizdat, public protest, active involvement in independent groups outside the control of the party-state” (322). Perhaps more than any other public figure, Havel has been described as a “dissident,” but he was never keen on the label. He was not organizing a political opposition party, nor did he conceive his views as particularly uncommon or inflammatory. As Steven Lukes points out, “the term ‘dissident’ is misleading in suggesting that those... who speak out are a small and isolated minority *who think differently from the rest*. The point, rather, is that they are few and isolated just because they speak aloud, and reflect upon, what everyone thinks” (18; original emphasis). In fact, the popularity of Havel’s publicly performed plays of the 1960s confirms that his thinking and writing are not far from the mainstream; after all, audiences could laugh at the absurdities in *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* only because those absurdities were recognizable, too familiar, and plainly ridiculous. Havel resists the idea that his anti-totalitarian position is exceptional. In “Breaking the Ice Barrier,” he argues that the entire concept of dissidence does a disservice to the Czech populace: “how else can you keep up the pretence that the population at large is contented than by artificially keeping alive the impression

that it is only a handful of well-known and almost, you might say, professional grumblers, i.e. dissidents, who keep complaining about conditions in the country” (28). Havel’s plays, which, as plays, implied and necessitated an audience, became a form of communal dissent. The audience sanctions his message; their laughter confirms he is not alone in that dissent. Nonetheless, Havel understood that his voice resounded louder, particularly internationally, than the hushed voices of many of his fellow Czech citizens. As the theatre within Czechoslovakia became increasingly inaccessible to him, Havel turns outward. He addresses an international audience, and mobilizes international pressure against the regime.

Havel structures his plays around endlessly repeatable scenarios. He builds fully enclosed spaces and character arcs. He recognizes that, in a totalitarian system, words, titles, and expectations carry disproportionate weight, compared to actions or evidence. Ideology and language shape society, politics, and legality. According to James Pontuso, “since Marxist doctrine proclaimed that social strife would end after the Communist revolution, the ideology demanded that no discord exist” (58). Totalitarianism inverts causality. Discord is quashed because it should not exist, not because it does not exist. Charged with subversion of the republic in 1979, Havel tried to rationalize against this structure in his “Defence Speech.” The indictment against him, he argues, “is really based on the *a priori* assumption that in this country, no one can be unjustly persecuted” (300). Since the ideology says there is justice, his case is called just, despite the circumstances. This logic works both ways. When Havel and those charged with him are labeled “enemies” by the indictment—that is, when the indictment, from “its own claim... concludes that we are enemies”—they are treated as such with no further ado: the indictment concludes “that we cannot appeal to the constitution because article 29 of the constitution—as interpreted by the indictment—does not apply to enemies” (303-304). Try as he might, Havel

could not rationalize his way out of prison. He had developed a political philosophy in the years leading up to his prosecution, but his most successful writing against the totalitarian state had always been theatrical. Forbidden from writing plays and behind bars from 1979 until 1983, Havel had to develop a new mode of writing to fight totalitarianism.

### **Performing Political Writing**

Writing for the theatre, for Havel, had always meant a degree of freedom and social significance. “Theatres after all, cannot be private affairs,” Barbara Falk contends: “they depend upon performance and audience, which in turn implies a level of social and unpredictable engagement not easily subject to regime control” (321). The post-1968 Czechoslovak regime was invested in predictability and control. The performances of Havel’s plays—particularly the more subversive (because clandestine) performances of *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Audience*—fly in the face of such a regime. Theatre provides an opportunity for genuine, human, social engagement and interaction, as against the overly scripted, bureaucratically circumscribed lives the regime would prefer its subjects to live. On International Theatre Day in Prague in March 1994, Havel reflected on the particular social possibilities of theatre: “theater is not just another genre, one among many. It is the only genre in which, today and every day, now and always, living human beings address and speak to other human beings. Because of that, theater is more than just the performance of stories or tales. It is a place for human encounter, a space for authentic human existence” (*Art* 163). Because of its dialogic nature, theatre also “possesses a special ability to allude to, and to convey, multiple meanings” (Havel, *Art* 252). His expulsion from the public life of the Czech theatre was a great loss for Havel, who suddenly found himself needing to learn new ways to communicate what writing for the theatre had always provided for

him. In the 1970s and 1980s, Havel attempts to find a way to translate the theatrical qualities of social engagement and multivalence into his political writing.

Havel's Cold War era writing career can be conceived in three periods: writing primarily for the stage in the pre-normalization decades; formulating an anti-totalitarian philosophy and approach in the years following the Soviet invasion and leading to his long-term imprisonment beginning in 1979; and writing as and after having been a political prisoner under the waning regime in the late-1970s and 1980s. Havel became perhaps most famous during the second of these, for his involvement in "Charter 77," a title which refers both to an internationally circulated human rights document addressed to the Czech government from a group of its citizens, as well as to the collective of those citizens. Havel was a primary author of the document and one of the movement's original spokesmen. In Tom Stoppard's words, Havel and his fellow Chartists were "calling upon the Czech government to abide by its own laws" (279); in Milan Kundera's more provocative rendering of the Charter, "since the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech, [the Chartists] naively draw all the consequences. They conduct themselves as if words really mean what they are supposed to mean" ("Candide," 261). Havel's short imprisonment in 1977, which prefigured a longer stint in jail beginning in 1979, did not dissuade him, at least not for long. In 1978, Havel penned "The Power of the Powerless," an essay which circulated among his peers and finally appeared as the centerpiece of a larger collection of anti-totalitarian essays. "Charter 77" and "The Power of the Powerless" together represent Havel's post-theatrical, pre-incarceration<sup>4</sup> approach to the Czech problem.

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<sup>4</sup> While Havel did continue to write plays after 1968, and he had been imprisoned already, I nonetheless designate this period in his life as "post-theatrical, pre-incarceration" in order to distinguish the eras of his life by their primary influences. Theatre reigned in the 1950s and 1960s, his incarceration and its aftermath dominated Havel's thinking after 1979.



As he notes in “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel’s perspective on the political situation in Czechoslovakia changed in the post-1968 years. Before normalization, Havel believed that traditional political opposition—“forming an opposition party that would compete publicly for power with the Communist Party” (92)—was a viable approach. After the banning of his works, his removal from the Writers’ Union and effectively from the theatre as well, Havel’s outlook was less optimistic, although not less determined. The post-totalitarian system necessitated different forms of resistance because it required different forms of adherence from its subjects than Stalinist totalitarianism. Instead of fanatical devotion, the post-1968 regime demanded “moral torpor, mediocrity and an exclusive concern with minding one’s own business and cultivating one’s personal career, family life and other ‘private’ concerns” (Keane, *Civil Society* 4). Havel spent years formulating his idea of what resistance to such a regime looked like. In “Charter 77” and “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel articulates a response to this very specific socio-political situation. In both cases, dialogism and community, genuine engagement with ideas, morals, and other individuals, and a dedication to what Havel calls “living in truth” are central to his anti-totalitarian approach.

Charter 77 was a citizens’ initiative that aimed to call the Czech government to account. While freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and other fundamental human rights were on the books in Czechoslovakia, they were not guaranteed in practice. Havel’s own life is a testament to this fact: after 1968 he could not write or see his plays performed, and he was constantly, not even covertly, under police surveillance. Citing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—both signed and reaffirmed by the Czech government in 1968 and 1975—the Charter’s signatories issued “an urgent reminder of the many fundamental human rights that, regrettably, exist in our country

only on paper” (“Charter 77,” np). Ironically, Charter 77 gained international recognition and momentum primarily because of the government’s response to it; the words of a playwright and his associates would have had little international clout on their own. In early January 1977, the government arrested the primary authors of “Charter 77,” including Havel, then tried to turn the tables on their accusations of illegality. In an official diplomatic statement circulated in February 1977, the government contended that Charter 77 violated the constitution: “according to the Constitution, the citizen of Czechoslovakia furthermore has the duty to respect the interests of the Socialist state in all his activities” (qtd. in Hofmann np). Appealing to duty and, hence, to loyalty, the Czechoslovak authorities called attention to Charter 77 as an anti-Socialist movement, without providing evidence that the Chartists’ allegations were false. In an unprecedented move, the US State Department accused Czechoslovakia of “having violated the provisions of the 1975 Helsinki agreement,” citing as evidence the “series of arrests and harassment of human-rights activists” that followed the publication of “Charter 77” (Gwertzman np). Despite being reported three weeks after the Charter had been issued, this diplomatic escalation appeared in the same issue of the *New York Times* that printed the full text of “Charter 77” in English translation.

Calling for transparency and adherence to legality, “Charter 77” takes aim at a specifically post-totalitarian system. “Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss,” Havel argues in “The Power of the Powerless”: “while life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, in short, towards the fulfilment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline” (29-30). The Czech government’s public rebuke of the Chartists for dereliction of duty to the Socialist state is plainly a call for

conformity. Conversely, Charter 77 explicitly represents plurality and diversity: “Charter 77 is a free and informal and open association of people of various convictions, religions and professions” (“Charter 77,” np). Totalitarian and post-totalitarian systems require isolated, obedient, non-critical or non-thinking citizens. Charter 77, on the other hand, represents a different kind of citizenship—one that, Havel thought, had the potential to take on and even take down a totalitarian regime and society. The Chartists advocate for a citizenry that is engaged, critical, and perhaps most of all, responsible: “every individual bears a share of responsibility for the general conditions in the country, and therefore also for compliance with the enacted pacts” (“Charter 77,” np). Reframing the concepts of compliance and citizenship while claiming the authority to enforce the human rights covenants to which Czechoslovakia was party, Charter 77 issues a direct challenge to the post-1968 totalitarian regime.

In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel continues and elaborates on the Charter’s reformulation of responsible citizenship in the face of post-totalitarianism. Using the example of a Czech greengrocer who has placed “in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’” (27), Havel illuminates the concealed workings of the post-totalitarian system, even as he imagines its end. The regime does not expect the greengrocer to display a sign that reads “‘I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient’” (28), which would make evident the greengrocer’s position and would leave him “embarrassed” and “ashamed” (28). The greengrocer certainly has displayed the “Workers of the World” sign in his window because it is expected of him. More profoundly, he displays it because the socialist ideology it advertises “offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality” (28), while in actuality diminishing each to the point of meaninglessness. The “Workers of the World” sign disguises its implication through ideology. When Havel goes on to

imagine the greengrocer acting differently—not necessarily heroically or revolutionarily—his theory of anti-totalitarian citizenship reaches its conclusion. When “one day something in our greengrocer snaps,” Havel imagines,

he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself. He stops voting in elections he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support. In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living within the lie. He rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to *live within the truth*. (39; original emphasis)

In this conception, Havel formulates responsible citizenship in negative terms. The greengrocer need not do much of anything, in fact. He needs only to stop going along with the system. Not sanctioning ideological slogans, sham elections, and political inertia does not seem on the surface to constitute “revolt.” In context, however, when the post-totalitarian system operates only by individual and social sanction, these actions of withholding consent can throw the system into disarray. Havel prescribes no specific political program. He neither advocates nor outright repudiates capitalism, communism, or socialism as such. Instead, he encourages individuals to think for themselves instead of according to the post-totalitarian system’s dictates or its society’s expectations. “It seems that the primary breeding ground for what might, in the widest possible sense of the word, be understood as an opposition in the post-totalitarian system,” Havel argues, “is living within the truth” (41).

When individuals “live within the truth,” they fundamentally challenge the totalitarian

system. The post-1968 Czech regime requires its citizens to conform: the greengrocer must put up his “Workers of the World” sign, and others must commend him for doing so. Moreover, citizens must subscribe to—or pretend to subscribe to—the system’s description of itself as just, efficient, and generous, despite all evidence to the contrary. In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel describes the way in which “life in the system is so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies”:

Government by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his or her ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available; the use of power to manipulate is called the public control of power, and the arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code...

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must *live within a lie*” (30-31; original emphasis)

To “live within the truth” does not necessarily entail public disavowal of the regime or other forms of “open dissent.” Behaving and speaking as though things are what they seem may entail only small actions or quiet conversations. In the post-totalitarian context, however, “living within the truth” is a revolutionary gesture.

While Havel formulates the concept of “living in truth” in absolute terms—the greengrocer makes a single decision, and his entire existence and relation to the regime is changed—he does so in the service of clarity, rather than as a reflection of lived existence.

“Living in truth” is an ideal for which to strive, and the more Czech citizens achieve it in however small aspects of their lives, the less power the totalitarian system commands. “Living in truth” and “living within a lie” are not mutually exclusive concepts: individuals may do both simultaneously. Speaking at *The Academy of Humanities and Political Sciences* in Paris in October 1992, Havel reframes “living” as “waiting”: “living within a lie,” he argues, is akin to waiting for Godot—passive, inert, monotonous. Conversely, “living in truth” constitutes an active waiting, a waiting for potential (though not guaranteed) regime change. This sort of waiting is

based on the knowledge that it made sense on principle to resist by speaking the truth simply because it was the right thing to do, without speculating whether it would lead somewhere tomorrow, or the day after, or ever. This kind of waiting grew out of the faith that repeating this defiant truth made sense in itself, regardless of whether it was ever appreciated, or victorious, or repressed for the hundredth time. At the very least, it meant that someone was not supporting the government of lies. (*Art* 104)

To wait in tranquil passivity, accepting the regime’s lies either explicitly or by omission, is “living within a lie”: “I should make it clear that citizens of the communist world could not be divided into dissidents and those who merely waited for Godot,” Havel argues: “To a certain extent, all of us waited for Godot at times, and at other times were dissidents” (*Art* 104). Even Havel, the famous dissident playwright, admits intermittent inertia. The totalitarian system may not fall because one man, a greengrocer perhaps, stops believing its lies on occasion—but the sum of all parts of a citizenry’s combined occasional disbelief may be enough to jam the cogs in the totalitarian machine.

In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel rehearses his political philosophy and performs precisely what he preaches. Like the greengrocer in revolt, he speaks out against obvious injustice instead of looking the other way; he refuses to buy into the empty ideology that sanctions the regime’s lies; and he puts his ideas into dialogue with others. The Czech government is no defender of human rights. It merely stifles the humanity of its citizens and calls the result an achievement in human rights and social and political harmony. Havel disturbs the peace, because that peace is inhuman silence preserved by fear and ideology. In a polity wherein citizens feel responsible for each other rather than responsible to the authorities, political dogma, or the social system, “the self-sustaining aspects of the system, its presence within each individual, can be shaken off” (Keane, “Preface,” 9). In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel frames this kind of “living in truth” as fundamentally apolitical. A few years later, after having endured nearly four years in prison, Havel adjusts the idea of “living in truth” into something more pointedly political: “I favour ‘anti-political politics’ . . . I favour politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow-humans” (“Anti-Political Politics,” 396-397). These politics may be anti-political—which is to say, anti-totalitarian—but Havel still calls them politics. The performed naivety that Charter 77 represented—pretending to believe that the Czech legal code and international human rights covenants were more than a façade—was transformed in the 1980s into a more aggressive rejection of post-totalitarianism.

### ***Letters to Olga***

Havel’s years behind bars, from 1979 to 1983, emboldened him. The literary work that he wrote while in prison—namely, his *Letters to Olga* (1984)—was a prolonged experiment in anti-

totalitarian writing. Havel was not finally imprisoned for putting on a banned play, for his ongoing affiliation with and activities for Charter 77, or for publishing “The Power of the Powerless.” Along with eight others, he was arrested in May 1979 for his involvement with a group called The Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS, in the Czech acronym). In his “Defence Speech,” Havel reaffirmed the commitment to human rights and to an idea of shared human and civic responsibility that characterized his earlier political writings: “I feel that human dignity, freedom and justice are genuinely the business of all society, that all of us, without exception, are responsible for them and that all of us without exception therefore have the right to draw attention to cases in which these basic values are, in our opinion, threatened. Both my work in Charter 77 and my participation in the work of VONS are derived from that right and that responsibility” (305). Being unjustly prosecuted for protesting unjust prosecution, Havel found himself living a Kafkaesque reality that he had, years earlier, parodied in his plays and railed against in his political writings. Havel’s response to post-totalitarianism had always manifested most effectively in literary form. In prison, Havel would not be allowed to write, with the single exception of a weekly letter to his wife, Olga. The prison letters were highly policed: they had to conform to strict formatting guidelines and prisoners were prohibited from discussing any subject outside of what might be considered family business. Given these constraints, Havel had to work out a way of writing to Olga that would evade the censors, satisfy his need for a literary, creative outlet, and serve as an avenue of resistance to the post-totalitarian regime.

What constitutes family business, particularly between a man and wife like Václav and Olga Havel? Childless, intellectual, artistic, and politically active, the Havels did not have much to say that would qualify, to the regime and its censors, as innocuous family stuff. Supply lists



for parcels to send, veiled references to his recent infidelities, and complaints about his health were hardly enough to take up the 376 pages that now comprise *Letters to Olga*. Nonetheless, Havel filled each of his four weekly allotted pages to the maximum, in small, neat handwriting. In this context, Havel's writing for the theatre, more than his political works, became a great asset. As Havel describes it, "in theater, the immeasurable wealth and unfathomable complexity of Being are compressed into a concise code which, while a simplification, attempts to extract what is most essential from the substance of the universe and to convey this to its audience" (*Art* 252). In *Letters to Olga*, Havel takes up precisely this method: he compresses meaning into a code meant to convey big, non-family-related ideas to Olga, while evading the prison censors. From Olga, the letters circulated among Havel's friends and colleagues while Havel was incarcerated, and were published in full shortly after he was released from prison. *Letters to Olga* represents a special achievement among Havel's anti-totalitarian writings. Even while confined in prison—what, in 1983, he called "totalitarianism's test tube for the future... an atmosphere aimed at systematically breaking down one's personality" (qtd. in Freedman np)—Havel found a way of writing that put his anti-totalitarian political philosophy into practice.

Havel's prison writing engages in a literary technique more often employed in fictional literature of the same time and place. Cristina Sandru uses the term "overcoded fictions" to describe such work: "'overcoded fictions' [is] an analytic category I propose to explain certain underlying currents in the literatures produced under communism in East-Central Europe" (101). According to Sandru, the Soviet-dominated socio-political contexts of East-Central European countries, including and perhaps especially Czechoslovakia, demanded a sort of writing-in-disguise. Fictional literature of resistance applied "a language of allusion and ambiguity, that could escape a censure focused on identifiable linguistic units and which most often failed to

detect the diffuse images in the text. Virtuosity in the literary field came to mean the capacity to ‘camouflage’ the writing and build ingenious subtexts” (102-103). Havel overcodes his letters, and directs Olga (and other readers) to do the work of decoding them. Havel often complained that Olga did not write to him often or thoroughly enough, and that he therefore was always grasping for whatever bits of information he could lay hands on in order to have a sense of the outside world. In the thirteenth letter, written in November 1979, Havel took such an opportunity to code reading instructions: “I read about us in *RP* [*Rudé Právo*, the Communist newspaper] again today. Interesting. From various fragments of chance information you can begin piecing together a picture of the situation” (48-49). The second-person address Havel uses could easily be read as rhetorical: from news snippets, Havel himself is getting a sense of the world. At the same time, Havel clearly means to signal to Olga that his literary strategy will proceed by what seem to be “fragments of chance information” that can be decoded into “a picture of the situation” of what he wants (but is forbidden) to convey. Havel relies on the fact that his prison censors are not what Sandru calls “consumers of literature,” for whom “reading the lines was often abandoned by the much more challenging practice of reading between the lines” (103). The “lines” of his letters are often innocuous, redundant, even occasionally downright boring. Between them, however, Havel writes a fundamentally anti-totalitarian, life-affirming manifesto.

All that is publicly known about Olga’s letters must be surmised from Havel’s replies and their friends’ recollections: Olga did not keep copies, and the prison authorities confiscated all incoming letters after they were read. Not all of Olga’s letters were delivered to Havel, nor did all of Havel’s letters make it past the censors. When one of his own letters has been confiscated by the prison authorities, he often explains in the following letter his failure to code his writing adequately. After a gap in the summer of 1980, Havel explains, “as you’ve no doubt noticed,

there has been a three-week hiatus in my writing. There are various reasons for this, among them the fact that I'm still not quite able to write the way I should, that is, exclusively about family matters" (93). When one of Olga's letters is withheld, he chides her to be more careful and to couch her words more judiciously. Nonetheless, it is certain that Olga learned to read Havel's coded letters, and that she managed successfully to code some letters of her own. Havel often disguised messages for his friends in his letters to Olga, and she would disguise their replies back to him. In one instance, Havel and writer and translator Zdenek Urbánek have a philosophical exchange, through the letters, about the nature of coincidence. In 1987, Urbánek, recalls:

[Havel] had no difficulty in decoding the letter from his wife and discovering who it was that was denying the existence of coincidence. As it happened, he just then picked up a book at random from among a pile of reading matter left there for the patients [in the prison hospital ward]. The book he found himself holding was a novel called *In Search of Don Quixote*—whose author, in the 1940s, was none other than the man who was trying to persuade Havel that coincidence did not occur. And Havel, then, in his typical, concise but emphatic way ridiculed Olga's (that is, my) argument. (282)

Havel is forbidden from writing to or receiving letters from Urbánek, but he converses with him anyway. Unless a prison censor recognized Olga's coding and Havel's "coincidental" reading matter—one of the "fragments of chance information" he provides—as a direct address to a third party, there was no reason a letter bickering with his wife about "coincidence" should have been confiscated. In fact it was not confiscated by the censors: letter 123 on April 10, 1982, made it to its destination.

In his letters, Havel codes more than philosophical conversations with his friends;

appearing in coded form across *Letter to Olga*, Havel's political philosophy—as he developed earlier in his plays and in “The Power of the Powerless”—emerges as a dominant theme and mode of Havel's letter-writing. Themes such as personal responsibility, totalitarian language, and the paradoxical, self-affirming nature of the post-totalitarian Czech system recur frequently, nested between demands for more cigarettes and tea, and complaints about work injuries and the indecency of his fellow prisoners' banter. In letter 78, written on May 1, 1981, Havel buries a daringly explicit rejection of the Czech government's calls for blind loyalty in a lengthy meditation ostensibly arguing that Havel “never created, or accepted, any comprehensive ‘worldview’”: “perseverance and continuity,” he says, come from “a ceaseless process of searching, demystification and penetration beneath the surface of phenomena in ways that do not depend on allegiance to given, ready-made methodology” (190). Similarly, in letter 128, written in May 1982, Havel masks a harsh critique of the regime by couching it in an agreement with the party-sponsored newspaper: “I've read an article in *RP*... [which] confirms the main impression I've had from prison, which is that all forms of criminality are related somehow to the antientropic nature of life... In an ideally homogenous [sic] society there will be no criminality because there will be no human life” (314-315). Evading the censors, Havel is able to communicate his continued determination and conviction against the inhumanity of the regime. Powerless in the most radical sense because of his incarceration, Havel exercises precisely the power of the powerless by raising his voice.

Totalitarianism crushes “open dissent,” but it is radically unequipped to confront dissent in the coded mode that Havel employs. Post-totalitarian systems operate at the level of surface. Ideology and bureaucracy conceal the yawning void of the political system; “speech becomes indeed ‘mere talk,’ simply one more means toward the end” (Arendt, *Human Condition* 178),

and critical thinking becomes impossible. Coding, on the other hand, necessitates depth. The surface is irrelevant; only the layers beneath carry meaning. For Havel, encodedness thus functions as a specifically post-totalitarian tactic of dissent. Havel's literary technique demonstrates a fundamental truth: critical thinking—and reading—can, and does, undermine a post-totalitarian regime.

Havel dedicates a series of letters at the end of 1981 and into 1982 to the subject of the theatre. This thematic itinerary is not a digression. Rather, it confirms Havel's literary goal. Real communication, which is to say both exploring ideas as they come and writing in dialogue with others, characterizes the subversive effect of Havel's letter-writing. Theatre is his model for the kind of engagement he attempts to achieve in his letters. His conspiratorial readers, forced to engage beyond the letter with his writing, serve as Havel's theatrical audience: "in the theater, the work we are watching is not finished, but instead is being born before our eyes, with our help, so that we are both witnesses to its birth and, in a small sense, its co-creators as well" (255). Havel hopes, through the circulation of his handwritten letters and their later publication, to put into effect "a common participation in a particular adventure of the mind, the imagination and the sense of humor, and a common experience of truth or a flash of insight into the 'life in truth'" (250). Perhaps most of all, for Havel, "theater enables me to bridge—not superficially but very essentially—the gap separating me from the world of 'others'" (289). The letters as they are meant to be written—mundane, about family matters only, and insulated from any larger community—would constitute a superficial connection between a prisoner and "the world of 'others.'" How Havel writes his letters, however—coded, laden with hidden meanings, thought-provoking, and in conversation with a wide community of like-minded individuals—get Havel closer to the "essential" theatrical experience of connection.

When Havel first entertained the idea of publishing his letters to Olga, he thought it would be best to edit them heavily; he wanted his editor, Jan Lopatka, to “select the passages that were consistently philosophical and discard the parts that were private, intimate, technical (such as what should be included in a package etc.), and organizational (such as details of an upcoming visit)” (Kriseová 195). In the published letters, however, Lopatka has not cut the intimate or the mundane, a strategy that Havel, in the end, sanctioned. According to Lopatka,

‘When I read through the letters, I started—as I realized in retrospect—to work systematically *against* this tendency. I was afraid that if we published the philosophical parts without presenting a vivid picture of the circumstances in which they were written, without the delicate and complicated structures that determines this kind of writing, that makes it necessary to think about what can be sent in a package and how to communicate what is most essential, how to learn something without provoking the head censor into confiscating the letter—I was afraid that this kind of writing was pretty damned different from writing an essay with a library at hand and access to information and data.’ (qtd. in Kriseová 195; original emphasis)

*Letters to Olga*, therefore, retains the markers of its production. In letter 121 dated March 27, 1982, Havel admits, “I’ve written this letter in about 6 minutes flat and it probably looks like it” (304). At other times, he grumbles about noise, lighting, his inability to do yoga, or the exhausting nature of his required work. This strategy actually bolsters, rather than distracts from, Havel’s purpose. His life-affirming philosophical meditations are all the more compelling because they appear among descriptions of prison work, injuries, illnesses, dark moods, and unsatisfied desires. The reader understands how difficult it is for Havel to write: he cannot make

drafts or keep copies of letters, he has limited time and space to communicate his thoughts, he has to write with the censor always in mind, and often his writing environment is enormously distracting. Nonetheless, Havel writes passionately against apathy (235), and explains the “joyous identification with life” he experiences when feeling that his “life is fundamentally meaningful” (199). He maintains, despite his undignified circumstances, that “one can therefore defend one’s dignity anywhere, at any time” (302). In his final months in prison, Havel became dangerously ill. Despite his exhaustion and deteriorating health, Havel’s final letter, dated September 4, 1982, closes on a positive note: “In short, I feel fine and I love you—” (376). According to Michael Žantovský, “whatever difficulties the censors may have had with understanding Havel’s letters, they could see that it was not the writing of a beaten man” (240). Havel’s affirmations of life despite the circumstances are his declaration of victory over the post-totalitarian regime.

Havel was released from prison early. The regime did not want to face the international relations scandal that the death of a famous playwright and dissident in custody would represent. After his release, in the final years of the Cold War, Havel continued to work and to write against the regime. His essay “Anti-Political Politics,” which was “an address forwarded to the University of Toulouse in 1984, on the occasion of an honorary doctorate which, since he lack[ed] a passport, he was unable to receive in person” (Keane, *Civil Society* 381), takes aim at “the manager, the bureaucrat, the *apparatchik*... a cog in the machinery of state caught up in a predetermined role” (387-388). In the same year, his play *Largo Desolato*, essentially a post-prison iteration of his 1968 *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, hilariously parodies the improbable and unsustainable social contortions of an intellectual under the post-totalitarian regime. While John Keane calls the story of Havel’s life “a manual for democrats” (*Václav*

*Havel* 14), Havel's most successful anti-totalitarian activism always manifests in writing. He writes letters, plays, manifestoes, speeches, and articles, each of which reveals the lie at the centre of the post-totalitarian project, and each of which, by virtue of its existence and circulation, works to undermine that project. When his long-time translator, Paul Wilson, reflects on why then-President Havel continues to write his own speeches, he concludes: "unlike the generations of politicians who have ruled his country in the past—Havel has always insisted on speaking his own mind, in his own way, with his own voice. It is his way of staying in touch with his original calling, with a time when his calling card read simply: 'Václav Havel, Writer.' Writing is Havel's way of continuing to live in truth" (xvi).

### **Czech Destiny**

Havel's works from the 1960s to the 1990s were singularly concerned with encouraging truthful living and thereby defeating totalitarianism in all its manifestations—capitalist, communist, or otherwise. In a letter to Graham Greene in the early days of his presidency, Havel asserts that, "now I am very busy (to be a president is'nt [sic] a great job—if you have to destroy the totalitarian system during some weeks)" (Letter to Graham Greene, No Date. Graham Greene Papers, Box 21, Folder 74. Archives and Manuscripts Department, John J. Burns Library, Boston College). Anti-totalitarianism was the kernel of all of his works, theatrical and political alike. Havel also thought it necessary to stay put in Czechoslovakia, no matter the consequences. He was given the opportunity, before his imprisonment, to leave the country and work in New York. He chose jail. Other writers chose differently. One such writer, novelist Milan Kundera, had a history of disagreements with Havel. Ironically, it had been Kundera who had vehemently written, years before his own departure for Paris from Prague, against emigration. His essay



“Česky úděl” (“Czech Destiny”), published in *Listy* in December 1968, “warned against giving in to despair and advised caution to those who were demanding political guarantees from a government that had yet to undertake the severe crackdown many considered inevitable” (T. West 402). In February 1969, Havel published a vitriolic response to Kundera’s essay, accusing Kundera “of taking existing freedoms for granted” (T. West 402). Despite their disagreement, the two men came to terms with one another in later years; Kundera even wrote fondly and reverentially of Havel several times in the late 1980s and 1990s. This change of heart is due in large part to what Tim West calls the considerable “intellectual and moral distance travelled by Kundera after 1967” (427). It is also likely due to the fact that, in Kundera’s own assessment, “whenever I have wanted to make a prediction, a political prognosis, I’ve been mistaken. My sole certitude: in the realm of political forecasts there will inevitably occur the opposite of what I foresee” (Elgrably and Kundera 11). Less demonstrably political than Havel, and certainly less certain of his political bearings after the squabble with Havel in *Listy*, Kundera nonetheless develops a discernibly anti-totalitarian mode of writing in his novels of the late-1970s and 1980s.

## CHAPTER 4: Milan Kundera and the Radical Autonomy of Art

Milan Kundera was already famous when, in 1975, he emigrated from Prague to Paris. His first novel, *The Joke* (1967), had been published to great acclaim nearly a decade earlier. Only a few years after his emigration, on the occasion of the publication of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978), the Czech government revoked his citizenship: “one day I received a brief letter informing me that my citizenship had been taken away,” he told Jordan Elgrably: “the letter itself was written in a virtually illiterate manner, spelling mistakes and all! Quite an admirable document, for its barbaric quality” (Elgrably and Kundera 16). Kundera became a naturalized French citizen in 1981, but he never, in sense, recovered from his loss of nationality. He also never returned: “I’m an emigré from Prague to Paris. I’ll never have the strength to emigrate from Paris to Prague” (Elgrably and Kundera 12). While he adopted France as his home, he never stopped writing about the Czech situation. His most famous novels, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), both centre on Prague, even if from a distance. The narrator of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, self-consciously named Milan Kundera, narrates from a remove: “I am watching [the characters] from the great distance of two thousand kilometers. It is the autumn of 1977, my country has been sweetly dozing for nine years now in the strong embrace of the Russian empire” (176). Despite the space separating Milan Kundera—narrator and author, both—from Czechoslovakia, he still calls it “my country.” From afar, Kundera uses literature as a means of undermining the totalitarian system. He proclaims the “*radical autonomy*” (“Somewhere Behind,” np) of art from political programmes of any ideological stripe. He develops a theory of the novel form as fundamentally apolitical, and enacts that theory through his hybrid, complex, multivocal prose style in *The Book*

*of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

As a cultural worker during the Cold War writing from behind, and about, the Iron Curtain, Kundera was subject to a double politicization of his vocation: within his own country, writers, artists, and intellectuals were forced to fit the socialist cultural programme, or they were silenced; in the international arena, cultural workers were being employed like never before in a war for cultural supremacy. According to David Caute, “the ‘total’ physical war practised from 1939 to 1945 was followed by a ‘total’ ideological *and cultural* war between the victors. There was no precedent: Christians and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, revolutionary France and conservative Britain, had not dispatched their best ballerinas, violinists, poets, actors, playwrights, painters, composers, comedians, and chess players into battle” (5; original emphasis).<sup>1</sup> Kundera resisted the politicization of culture, both within Czechoslovakia and internationally. He was critical of any regime or party—his own as well as others—that prioritized political ends over cultural ones, or that treated culture as a means rather than an end in itself. His defiance of the cultural-political dictates of the Cold War surfaces in his literary technique, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera finds a literary mode of resistance to the overwhelming politicization of culture in the late Cold War years. In *The Art of the Novel* (1986), Kundera theorizes the novel form as radically apolitical. Where politics—totalitarianism as one of its most acute iterations—requires unitary meanings, perfect façades, and generic, kitsch

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Judt lists Milan Kundera as one of many authors and artists explicitly involved in this war: “The cold war was fought on many fronts, not all of them geographical and some of them within national frontiers. One of these fronts was established by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), inaugurated in Berlin in June 1950... [which] set out to challenge and undercut the intellectual appeal of Communism, whose own illustrious supporters and camp followers included... many of the best minds of the coming intellectual generation—including in those years François Furet, Leszek Kolakowski, and the youthful Milan Kundera” (*Reappraisals* 377).

artistic forms, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in true novelistic fashion, deal exclusively in complexity, unsightliness, and unformulaic genre mixing.

Carlos Fuentes, reflecting on a trip taken to Prague shortly after the 1968 Soviet invasion, writes, “I have shared—and I share more and more with the Czech novelist—a certain vision of the novel as an indispensable element, an element not to be sacrificed, of the civilization a Czech and a Mexican can have in common: a way of saying things that could not be said any other way” (165). Most of all, he means Kundera’s novels. In Kundera’s hands, the novel form is political because it rejects politicization, which is to say it is political only in negative terms. Kundera recommends no specific politics; he rails against politics as such—its grand narratives, promises of fulfillment, and dogmatic inflexibility. According to François Ricard, “what Kundera provides is a radical demystification, an immense burst of laughter, such as only literature can aim at politics or history in order to strip them pitilessly naked, to reduce them to *nothing*” (61; original emphasis). Kundera delivers no ready answers or political solutions in his writing. Instead, he concentrates on exploring “the possibilities for humanity in the trap that the world has become” (Kundera, “A Disappearing Poem,” np). He asks questions, observes meanings, and parodies those who think they have the answers. Kundera’s novels, as novels, embody his rejection of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and any other system that devalues art by putting it to political use.

### **“The Other K of Czechoslovakia”: Resisting Politics<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Carlos Fuentes refers to Kundera as “Milan K,” and “the other K of Czechoslovakia” in *Myself with Others* (169).

Born in Brno in 1929, Kundera lived through several defining moments of Czechoslovak history as an adult. Kundera, unlike Havel, had been an official member of the Communist party, twice. He had also, by the end of the 1960s, been expelled from the party twice. With Havel and others, he was removed from the Writers' Union in 1968, and he was flagged by the KGB as a counterrevolutionary ("Counterrevolutionary Underground," 515). The Prague Spring had given Kundera a great sense of optimism. In January 1968, he contends, "was born (without any guiding plan) a truly unprecedented system... I do not know how viable the system was or what prospects it had; but I do know that in the brief moment of its existence it was a joy to be alive" ("Paris or Prague?," np). When his hopes were dashed in the early years of normalization, Kundera took up an apocalyptic tone: "it is not simply a question of political subservience—politics is only one component of culture. In Czechoslovakia, it is culture *as a whole* in the largest sense of the word that is at stake: lifestyles, customs, artistic traditions, taste, collective memory, and daily morality" ("Candide," 258; original emphasis). From the Communist party coup d'état in 1948, to the Prague Spring and its violent suppression by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968, Kundera witnessed, wrote about, and participated in Czech politics and political movements. He understood the Prague Spring not as "a sudden revolutionary explosion ending the dark years of Stalinism," but rather as the culmination of "a long and intense process of liberalization developing throughout the 1960s" ("Paris or Prague?," np). He recalls having been "permanently dissatisfied and in protest, but at the same time full of optimism" during these years of liberalization ("Paris or Prague?," np). Until 1968, he was a "reform Communist" (Keane, *Civil Society* 2): a Communist party member, he nonetheless protested the rigidity and censorship of Communist cultural production and encouraged diversification. At the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers' Conference in 1967, Kundera spoke alongside other well-known writers—Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík, and Pavel Kohout—against "any

suppression of views... any interference with freedom of thought and words” (Proceedings 8).

Kundera did not hesitate to criticize his country or his party, either in public or in writing. His novels target the absurd and stifling nature of totalitarian Communism.

Because he writes as an émigré from Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, and because his novels do not shy away from historical and political subjects and critique, Kundera has often been read as a dissident—which is to say, political—writer. Particularly in the normalization years when he became a banned author in Czechoslovakia and moved to France, Kundera was labelled “political.” His works were read accordingly. When, Ricard contends, the West “created *dissidence*: a comfortable category in which to place writers from the socialist block,” Kundera was a likely, if ill-suited, candidate:

Its manifestations are by now well-known: political persecution, the inability to publish (except in ‘samizdat’), exile, and especially the fact, for a writer, of holding political positions other than those of the regime in place in his country. Now it happens that most of these characteristics apply to Kundera. So he too has been placed in the dissident category, to wit, writers who denounce Soviet Terror and take up the defense of their people against the military and ideological invasion of Czechoslovakia. This is obviously true. But only at one level, the level where those who give Kundera’s novels only a historico-politico-ideological reading are stuck.  
(59-60)

Even in recent years, fields such as law, political science, and others invoke Kundera’s novels as political writing *par excellence* when they consider human rights, citizenship, and totalitarian politics, even if they neglect actually to read or critically discuss those novels. For his part, Kundera resists being labelled and read as a “political” author. “People read me as a political document,” he

told Ian McEwan in a 1984 interview for *Granta Magazine*: “I was angry, and I felt offended” (np). Kundera is less insulted by the suggestion that he disagrees with the post-1968 regime in Czechoslovakia (which he does), than by the fact that reading his works exclusively as “a literature of opposition to the Soviet regime” (Elgrably and Kundera 14) misses the point. Such readings are “clichéd” and “schematic” (Elgrably and Kundera 14), and do not leave room either for the nuance that literature necessarily entails, or for Kundera to oppose other regimes in addition to the Soviet one. The enemy of Kundera’s enemy is not his friend, if that enemy subscribes to the politicization of culture. Kundera abhors the fact that his novels, as well as his nonfiction writing, were so often co-opted by political programmes. His 1968 essay “Česky úděl” (“Czech Destiny”) was claimed by President Ludvík Svoboda: according to Tim West, Svoboda, “whose readiness to capitulate would allow him to retain his post long after Dubček was forced to resign, was so pleased by Kundera’s tone that his staff called the journal, lauding the essay as a public appeal for calm” (415). Kundera’s essay, even if politically naïve, certainly did not aim to please or to serve the authorities. “I spent twenty years of my life in a country whose official doctrine was able only to reduce any and every human problem to a mere reflection of politics” (“Paris or Prague?,” np), he complained in 1984. Totalitarian political overdetermination cheapens culture. Kundera’s appreciation of literary form and his experiments with narrative, from his perspective, have nothing to do with politics, and he demands that his work be read as such: “he adamantly insists on the right of the East-Central European writer to be judged solely in terms of his artistic achievement, not in terms of the ‘political strength’ of his denunciatory rage” (Sandru 183). Paradoxically, Kundera’s anti-political use of literature is political to the extreme, precisely because it refuses politics. During the Cold War, states want to be able to claim writers and other cultural workers as their own in order to prove cultural dominance, as well as military and political supremacy: the more famous the author, the

more desirable she is to the major players in the Cold War. Kundera publicly rejects cooptation. The novelistic techniques that he employs in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—including the mixing of genres, repetitions and reframings, and an authorial first-person narrative voice—undermine political programmes on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

When, in his novels, he performs a “meditative interrogation (interrogative meditation)” (*Art* np), Kundera necessarily thwarts grand narratives and totalizing fantasies. Neither interrogation nor meditation suits glorious state histories or implausible, morally sure heroes. In demystifying grand narratives, Kundera follows in the footsteps of another Czech novelist: Franz Kafka. According to Kundera, Kafka “had no intention of unmasking a social system. He illuminated the mechanisms he knew from private and microsocial human practice” (“Somewhere Behind,” np). No political programme motivates Kafka’s writing, nor does he write to confirm or to justify history in any sense. Kafka merely explores and interrogates the world around him, and thereby uncovers fundamental truths about the workings of that world. The clear distinction between Kundera and Kafka, then, is situational: “Franz Kafka flooded, in luminous shadows, the world that already existed without knowing it. Now, the world of Kafka knows it exists. Kundera’s characters have no need of awakening transformed into insects, because the history of Central Europe took care to demonstrate that a man need not be an insect in order to be treated as such” (Fuentes 169). Kundera’s novels, like Kafka’s, illuminate a world, and in so doing they reveal something fundamental about it. For Kundera as for Kafka, “the monster comes from outside and is called History; it no longer has anything to do with the train the adventurers used to ride; it is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible—and it is inescapable” (Kundera, *Art*). Kundera reveals the lie at the centre of “History”: its singular, momentous, inevitable narrative is a sham.

That “History” is a fabrication Kundera learned early, by virtue of his nationality. He



comes from “the Europe made up of little countries,” which he calls “*another Europe...* completely at odds with the Europe of big countries” (“A Disappearing Poem,” np; original emphasis). Small countries, constantly subject to outside regimes and rarely the centre of world-historical movements, depend more on cultural continuity than historical fictions: “the Europe of little countries, insulated against the demagogy of hope, has had a more clear-sighted picture of the future than has the Europe of big countries, always so ready to become intoxicated with their glorious sense of historical destiny” (“A Disappearing Poem,” np). Big countries, empires, and totalitarian regimes, Kundera argues, thrive by, revere, and rely on “History” and its narratives of cultural, geographical, and ideological affirmation. “History” serves to justify the existence and dominance of big countries. “History” erases the conditions of its existence. Concepts like “destiny” make physical violence, cultural imperialism, and ideological suppression seem inevitable, just, even necessary. Therefore, they befit totalitarian regimes. Totalitarian systems generate a sort of mass delusion: they take to the extreme a process of self-justification that all states employ. Moments of inauguration and victory over chaos are of utmost importance to a totalitarian regime. Citizens are required to memorialize and publicly celebrate their liberation from “the unimaginable time of war from which the [totalitarian] state delivers [them]” (Baucom, “Afterword,” 714). Stories that undermine or complicate the state’s unconditional authority and moral rightness are not permitted; embarrassing missteps, mistakes of leading figures, and disproven ideology are erased outright. The totalitarian state enforces subscription to its grand narrative of “History,” and expunges any evidence against it.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera does not set out to demolish “History” as such, or even specifically Soviet historical impositions. Rather, he explores in prose the themes of “Laughter” and “Forgetting,” and the certainties of “History” and Soviet ideology are

undone as a consequence. As Michiko Kakutani explains, “by proscribing Czechoslovak writers and inhibiting artistic expression, the Soviet Union is trying to implement what [Kundera] calls ‘organized forgetting’—they are intent on erasing Czechoslovak traditions and replacing them with their own” (np). In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera illuminates such “organized forgetting.” The opening lines of the novel tell the story of a press photograph from February 1948. Klement Gottwald, the ascendant Communist Party leader, stands on a balcony, “flanked by his comrades, with [Vladimír] Clementis standing close to him” (3). The original photograph of this moment, wherein Clementis has lent Gottwald his fur hat, is widely circulated by the new regime: “every child knew that photograph, from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums” (3). The state or, more properly, the Communist Party propaganda machine, dictates History: the achievement of Communism is made momentous by a sort of compulsory, organized education. The photograph’s ubiquity ensures its importance. Kundera as narrator, however, points out that only “four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald’s head” (3-4). All of those children who had obediently learned the “History” of the photograph—that Gottwald had been supported by his loyal comrades at this historic moment—now were obliged to forget. Clementis, as well as the other man erased from the photograph Rudolf Slánský,<sup>3</sup> was a traitor; because his presence tarnishes the glorious occasion of the inauguration of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, he is erased.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Tony Judt, “following his arrest Rudolf Slánský was only ever referred to as ‘the spy Slánský,’ this ritual naming serving as a form of political exorcism” (*Postwar* 187). Clementis and Slánský were defendants in the same trial.

Kundera does not focus on the doctored photograph of Gottwald as merely a critique of Communist propaganda practices. Rather, the photograph becomes context for the story of Mirek, the protagonist of the first section of the novel, "Lost Letters." Years ago, Mirek had fallen in love with an ugly woman named Zdena. In the present time of the novel, Mirek is endlessly embarrassed by Zdena's ugliness, and by the fact that he loved her despite it. "But why did her ugliness matter, when he hadn't made love to her in twenty years?" (16), narrator Kundera asks: "It mattered: even from afar, Zdena's big nose cast a shadow on his life" (16). The main problem for Mirek, who could otherwise simply forget Zdena, is that she retains the love letters he wrote to her: evidence of the humiliating history he tries to wish away. Mirek attempts to author his own story: "it is an inviolable right of a novelist to rework his novel. If the opening does not please him, he can rewrite or delete it. But Zdena's existence denied Mirek that author's prerogative. Zdena insisted on remaining on the opening pages of the novel and did not let herself be crossed out" (15). The photograph of Gottwald appears in Mirek's narrative as paradigm:

He wanted to efface [Zdena] from the photograph of his life not because he had not loved her but because he had. He had erased her, her and his love for her, he had scratched out her image until he had made it disappear as the party propaganda section had made Clementis disappear from the balcony where Gottwald had given his historic speech. Mirek rewrote history just like the Communist Party, like all political parties, like all peoples, like mankind. They shout that they want to shape a better future, but it's not true. The future is only an indifferent void no one cares about, but the past is filled with life, and its countenance is irritating, repellent, wounding, to the point that we want to destroy

or repaint it. (30)

The impulse to rewrite personal history is a desperate one, rooted in regret and humiliation. In this sense, forgetting has something to do with laughter. The humiliation of schoolgirls (“archangels”) Gabrielle and Michelle and the futile attempt of Mirek to retrieve his letters from the hideous Zdena share a totalitarian drive: total control of history. Gabrielle and Michelle do not want to be laughed at; Mirek wants to expunge Zdena from his life by destroying the evidence. The impossibility of such things in retrospect (outside of the novelist’s purview, at least) begets the gruesome, screeching, desperate laughter of angels.

Mirek understands forgetting as a political manipulation, not a personal one. He himself insists that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (4). He is meticulous in keeping a diary as evidence of history in the face of the regime’s lies. Nonetheless, he tries to doctor his own story. According to Cristina Sandru, “if the state falsifies history and manipulates collective memory, it is also true that the individual’s response to this falsification—despite the often extraordinary acts of preservation and resistance—is one of similar, if smaller-scale, retouching and editing” (217). Zdena’s “extraordinary acts of preservation and resistance” include having saved the letters, and refusing to hand them over when Mirek shows up at her door to demand them. By narrating Mirek’s humiliation, Kundera reveals him as a fraud. His righteous refusal of the totalitarian regime’s historical fabrications is disingenuous. Whereas “people always see the political and the personal as different worlds, as if each had its own logic, its own rules,” Kundera argues, “the very horrors that take place on the big stage of politics resemble, strangely but insistently, the small horrors of our private life” (Kundera and McEwan np). Exploring the private lives of his characters, Kundera reveals larger historical processes, and discredits “History.” Just as the original photograph gives the lie to the

Party's disavowal of Clementis, Kundera's small-scale narratives—with their avowals instead of erasures—shatter the illusions of the totalitarian state.

Kundera's collapse of the private and the public in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* mirrors another strategy of control practiced by the totalitarian regime. "Totalitarian society, especially in its more extreme versions, tends to abolish the boundary between public and private domains," Kundera explains: "a citizen does not have the right to hide anything at all from the Party, or the State, just as a child has no right to keep a secret from his father or his mother" ("Somewhere Behind," np). Bereft of privacy, citizens under the totalitarian regime become like children. The abolition of public/private distinctions leads to what Kundera calls "Infantocracy: the ideal of childhood imposed on all of humanity" (*Art* np). Tamina, narrator Kundera's "principal character" and "principal audience" (*BLF* 227), provides the example of a citizen-made-child in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The dreadful island on which she finds herself near its end parodies the infantocratic totalitarian regime and society. Led, almost unwillingly, to a boat by the angelic Raphael, Tamina finds herself on an island populated only by children. The experience disturbs her. After the first day, realizing she has no way of returning to her real life, Tamina "felt a pang of fear" and "cowered on her bed" (*BLF* 235). Soon thereafter, Tamina adjusts her perspective: "she has decided to gain their friendship. To do that, she must identify with them, adopt their language... To identify with them she has to give up her privacy" (*BLF* 240). Tamina relinquishes her privacy and discards her modesty. She bathes openly in front of the children, and at night she lets them run their curious hands and mouths over her body. Soon, the children's physical attentions shift from inquisitive and sensual to jeering and menacing: Tamina "ran away, she tried to hide, but wherever she went she heard them calling her name: 'Tits, Tits, Tits, Tits...'" (*BLF* 253). Eventually Tamina drowns, unable to

escape the all-encompassing publicness of life under infantocracy.

Tamina finds herself at the mercy of Raphael and the infantocratic children because she succumbs to the temptation of the idyll: “all human beings have always aspired to an idyll, to that garden where nightingales sing, to that realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man and man against other men, but rather where the world and all men are shaped from one and the same matter” (*BLF* 11). In the Edenic world of the idyll, people lose individuality and forget their troubles. In Kundera’s definition, the idyll is “the condition of the world before the first conflict; or beyond conflicts” (*Art* np). Where there is no conflict, there is no dissent. Everyone subscribes to the same ideas, the same social practices, and the same politics. In other words, the idyll is totalitarianism realized. Totalitarianism inflects Kundera’s writing: Carlos Fuentes calls idyll “the terrible, constant, and decomposed wind that blows through the pages of Milan Kundera’s books” (167). Totalitarianism as idyll is a persistent theme in Kundera’s novels because it continues to characterize the world around him. The serenity of “that garden where the nightingales sing” is a callous, intolerant stillness: “Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning” (Kundera, *Art*). *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* reveals the conformist horror that idyllic serenity conceals.

### **The Anti-Politics of the Novel**

Where other modes of writing are formulaic, novels as Kundera understands them defy convention and generate new ways of narrating, thinking, and understanding their subjects. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera contrasts the novel form with explicitly political writing: “American or European political weeklies... all have the same view of life, reflected in the same ordering of the table of contents, under the same headings, in the same journalistic phrasing, the same vocabulary,

and the same style... This common spirit of the mass media, camouflaged by political diversity, is the spirit of our time. And this spirit seems to me contrary to the spirit of the novel” (np). Political writing adheres to a set of formatting guidelines that persist no matter the particular political leaning or affiliation. It is predictable, and it addresses its readers as a mass public rather than as distinct thinking, feeling individuals. The same is true, according to Kundera, for “novels published in huge editions and widely read in Communist Russia” (*Art* np). Despite being called “novels,” these texts are flat and propagandistic, and therefore not properly novelistic. “If a novel (or a poem or film) is just content poured into a form,” Kundera contends, “then it is nothing but a disguised ideological message; its artistic nature falls apart” (“A Disappearing Poem,” np). Kundera dismisses such writing on contextual grounds, as well as formal ones: a piece of literature qualifies as novelistic only insofar as it does more than “confirm what has already been said” (*Art* np). Traditionally, a “novel” is defined as “a long fictional prose narrative, usually filling one or more volumes and typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity” (*OED*). Features, formal or otherwise, that are often considered the markers of a “novel” do not enter the discussion with Kundera. Instead, he argues, “every novel says to the reader: ‘Things are not as simple as you think.’ That is the novel’s eternal truth” (*Art* np). Novels incite, provoke, and call into question; they encourage critical, introspective thinking rather than confirm platitudes.

In his own writing, Kundera employs several narrative techniques that enable him to realize the “spirit of the novel.” That is to say, Kundera’s novels use formal literary methods in order to raise questions, defy formulaic expectations, and embody complexity. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in particular exemplify what John O’Brien calls “Kundera’s penchant for asking questions instead of answering them, combined with an episodic structure and lack of temporal coherence” (118). These novels borrow from and build on Kundera’s

earlier *Laughable Loves*: the episodic quality and the separtite structure of both are reminiscent of the short story cycle, while they nonetheless cohere as single narratives rather than accumulations of disparate ones.<sup>4</sup> Kundera mixes genres of writing and switches registers from philosophical to magical realist. The Kundera-esque first-person narrators—or, the “intrusive and inimitable voice of Kundera as author” (O’Brien 116)—are interrogative and occasionally confrontational. The novels progress in fits and starts, with each of Kundera’s narrators variously “breaking off the narrative to deliver his latest ontological musings, inserting a sheaf of brief philosophical reflections between episodes, airily abandoning the fictional pretence in the interests of historical documentation” (Eagleton 49). Cumulatively, Kundera’s narrative strategies resist categorization.

According to Terry Eagleton, Kundera “give[s] the slip to the totalitarian drive of literary fiction” (49). Whereas propagandistic totalitarian narratives require deadly serious narrators, Kundera’s narrators are casual and ironic. When he includes an extended philosophical meditation, he does not merely import the essay form and place it between other stories. He suggests that in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “there is a great deal of reflection, experience, study, even passion behind [the philosophical meditation on kitsch], but the tone is never serious; it is provocative. That essay is unthinkable outside the novel; it is what I mean by ‘a specifically novelistic essay’” (Art np). Kundera adapts literary modes to his own specifications. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the tripartite “Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words” (89, 99, 108) is less definitional than demonstrational. It is rooted in the possibility of multiple connotations rather than invested in clarity of meaning. While it includes entries for seemingly unitary and definable concepts, such as “MUSIC,” “PARADES,” or “CEMETERY,” it also includes “THE BEAUTY OF NEW YORK,” “SABINA’S

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<sup>4</sup> According to Michael Carroll, “his very first work as a fiction writer, *Laughable Loves*... serves as the aesthetic prototype for *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and to some extent *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*” (93).



COUNTRY,” and (in homage, perhaps, to Václav Havel) “LIVING IN TRUTH” (92-112). Each definition consists of an elaboration of some aspect of central characters Franz and Sabina’s story. In this way, Kundera elucidates multivalence and encourages intellectual engagement with his terms rather than agreement or rote acceptance.

Whereas grand histories and moral platitudes rely on consistent narration, progressive chronology, and assured resolutions, Kundera’s novels proceed by polyphony, anachrony, and uncertainty. In a single section of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera combines “the story of Stalin’s son, a theological meditation, a political event in Asia, Franz’s death in Bangkok, and Tomas’ burial in Bohemia” (Art np). Narrator Milan Kundera of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* claims that his book is “a novel in the form of variations” (227) in the musical sense: the repetition of section titles “*Lost Letters*” and “*The Angels*” are evidence of that. Furthermore, narrator Kundera alternates between narrative modes: personal recollection mixes with metaphysical speculation. The narrative includes both a philosophical exploration of the “untranslatable Czech word,” *litost* (166), and the disturbing magical-realist end of Tamina (262). Nonetheless, Kundera’s incongruent narrative modes cohere thematically. Recalling “the day [he] finished Part Three of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*,” Kundera muses,

I confess I was terrifically proud, convinced I’d discovered a new way of constructing a narrative. That text is composed of the following elements: (1) the anecdote about the two schoolgirls and their levitation; (2) the autobiographical narrative; (3) the critical essay on a feminist book; (4) the fable of the angel and the devil; (5) the narrative about Eluard flying over Prague. None of these elements can exist without the others; they illuminate and explain one another as they explore a

single theme, a single question: What is an angel? (*Art np*)<sup>5</sup>

This description encompasses Kundera's novelistic technique, in both *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: in the same way that the sections within each part cohere around a common theme despite their formal differences, the seven parts of each novel coalesce thematically. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, they each introduce distinctions and nuance to the themes of "Laughter" and "Forgetting."<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 4 of Part Three, "(*On Two Kinds of Laughter*)," narrator Kundera explains that, "laughable laughter is disastrous. Even so, the angels have gained something from it. They have tricked us with a semantic imposture. Their imitation of laughter and (the devil's) original laughter are both called by the same name. Nowadays we don't even realize that the same external display serves two absolutely opposed internal attitudes. There are two laughs, and we have no word to tell one from the other" (87). His extended exploration of "The Angels" across two sections of the novel, then, serves as an explication of laughter: a way to distinguish the "two laughs" that he cannot simply call by different names.

Kundera's focus on "theme-words" (*Art np*) becomes a problem for translators. Synonyms, untranslatables, and colloquialisms complicate translation. Writing-style and narrative voice—especially when there are several of each within a single text—are subject to the translator's preference and literary skill, not to mention fluency.<sup>7</sup> "Translation is my nightmare," he tells Jordan

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<sup>5</sup> Kundera's claim of originality notwithstanding, the mixing of genres in his writing corresponds to what Fred Misurella calls "the Central European style": "if non-fiction is the arguable highwater mark in contemporary American prose, and if fantasy is the foundation of South and Central America's 'magical realism,' then it might be said that the Central European style combines the two, balancing fantasy with history, mixing science and philosophy with art" (41).

<sup>6</sup> Kundera's main themes are not often difficult to surmise. In *The Art of the Novel*, he explains, "I think it's a very good thing to name a novel for its main category. *The Joke*. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Even *Laughable Loves*" (np).

<sup>7</sup> Recalling his experience with translators of *The Joke* in the late 1960s, Kundera writes with horror: "Another country: I meet my translator, a man who knows not a word of Czech. 'Then how did you translate it?' 'With my heart'" (*Art np*).

Elgrably (18). Because he relies on small groups of exceptional words to “encompass the complexity of existence in the modern world” (*Art np*), any departure from the originals can be devastating to Kundera’s complex organization. Remarkably, Kundera reviews the translations of his novels in four languages, and, he says, he has “lived horrors because of it” (18). In the introduction to Part Six of *The Art of the Novel* (another septpartite text), Kundera reflects on what he considered to be the disastrous translations of *The Joke* and his subsequent decision to review future translations himself:

The writer who determines to supervise the translations of his books finds himself chasing after hordes of words like a shepherd after a flock of wild sheep—a sorry figure to himself, a laughable one to others. I suspect that my friend Pierre Nora, editor of the magazine *Le Débat*, recognized the sadly comical quality of my shepherd existence. One day, with barely disguised compassion, he told me: ‘Look, forget this torture, and instead write something for me. The translations have forced you to think about every one of your words. So write your own personal dictionary.

A dictionary for your novels.’ (*Art np*)

What follows is such a dictionary. Kundera highlights terms such as “Fate,” “Imagination,” and “Nonthought.” Many of his definitions include quotations from his novels. *Life is Elsewhere*, *The Joke*, and others crop up, but *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* appear most frequently of all. Kundera tries to isolate words and fix meanings, so that those singular words can go on in his novels to complicate stories and proliferate implications. The “Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words” in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is certainly an attempt at the same. Filled with such carefully parsed words, Kundera’s multivalent, polyvocal novels refuse singular perspectives. His thematic explorations are part and parcel of his anti-

totalitarian (and more broadly anti-political) method.

### **The Grand March of Kitsch**

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera's examination of idyll develops into a novelistic exploration of and exposition on the nature of kitsch. Kitsch, in Kundera's understanding, is both an attitude and an artistic product: "The word 'kitsch' describes the attitude of those who want to please the greatest number, at any cost. To please, one must confirm what everyone wants to hear, put oneself at the service of received ideas... the aesthetic of the mass media is inevitably that of kitsch" (*Art* np). In order to please the greatest number, kitsch art appeals to a mass sensibility: it deals in the currency of cliché and empty affirmation; it disavows discordance and idealizes sameness; it is uncritical, uncomplicated, and easy to process. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the word "kitsch" recurs in the text nearly four dozen times. Occurring on only one occasion in the early sections of the novel, kitsch appears as the *raison d'être* of Part Six, "The Grand March." Kundera's novelistic exploration of the concept begins from a personal and artistic perspective. Sabina, an artist, tells one of her lovers, Tomas, "'The reason I like you... is you're the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster'" (*ULB* 12). In the final analysis, however, kitsch is the lifeblood of politics, left or right, east or west. In its totalitarian iteration, political kitsch "is that discourse which banishes all doubt and irony, but it is not a grim-faced, life-denying speech: on the contrary, it is all smiles and cheers, beaming and euphoric, marching merrily onwards to the future shouting 'Long live life!'" (Eagleton 53). Meditating on and interrogating the manifestations of kitsch, Kundera rejects its totalizing, banal, and conformist project.

The term "kitsch" is conventionally an artistic one. The *OED* defines "kitsch" first of all

as “art or *objets d’art* characterized by worthless pretentiousness.” Kundera’s definition of “kitsch” in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* reverses causality: “the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called *kitsch*” (248). In other words, kitsch is the aesthetic formula of totalitarianism. Totalitarian societies refuse to acknowledge the “shit” in their midst; instead, in their oblivion, individuals under totalitarianism affirm the upbeat, vacant platitudes handed to them by the state. In cultural form, kitsch is formulaic and ideologically affirming. Kitsch art is repetitive and predictable. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera uses Sabina—“the one character in *Lightness* whose intellectual stance is most akin to Kundera’s” (Sandru 250)—to explain and to repudiate kitsch art. When Tereza comes to visit her studio, Sabina talks her through an early painting:

‘Here is a painting I happened to drip red paint on. At first I was terribly upset, but then I started enjoying it. The trickle looked like a crack; it turned the building site into a battered old backdrop, a backdrop with a building site painted on it. I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it. And that’s how I began my first cycle of paintings. I called it ‘Behind the Scenes.’ Of course, I couldn’t show them to anybody. I’d have been kicked out of the Academy.’ (ULB 63)

As a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, Sabina was expected to paint predictable, realistic scenes, rather than explore her own artistic inclinations. A mistake gets Sabina to the heart of things, closer to real artistry than rote replication. ““On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth”” (ULB 63), she tells Tereza. Whereas the politicization of art cuts off imagination and possibility, Sabina does what totalitarianism wishes she would not: she

wonders; she thinks. Like Kundera, she creates artworks that provoke their audience to do the same. For this reason, Sabina is dangerous to the totalitarian state.

Sabina stands in as the Kundera-figure in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Not only is the “rejection of kitsch ... programmatically inscribed in all her gestures, in her art as well as in her life,” but also, “her dismissal of political co-optation and anger at being made into a ‘dissident symbol’ once in the West bespeaks a similar refusal on the writer’s part, a desire to evade all forms of kitsch” (Sandru 250). Sabina detests the depthless façades of Czechoslovakia’s Communist state and its compulsory artistic modes. She is also disenchanted, like Kundera, with the political rhetoric of émigrés and others in the West. When she provocatively suggests, “go back and fight,” to a group of émigrés who have, “in the safety of emigration... come out in favor of fighting” against the Russians, she gets spitefully reproached: “a man with artificially waved gray hair pointed a long index finger at her. ‘That’s no way to talk. You’re all responsible for what happened. You, too. How did you oppose the Communist regime? All you did was paint pictures’” (*ULB* 95). But Sabina’s painting of pictures constitutes more a rejection of the Communist regime than her compatriots’ idea of fighting ever could. Sabina dismantles the “kingdom of kitsch” by refusing its artistic mandates and its ideological commands.

Like “forgetting” in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “kitsch” in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* becomes surreptitiously and treacherously personal. While Sabina is arguably the heroine of the novel, her nearest rival, Tereza, meets her end after having “finally succumbed to the illusion of the idyll” (Sandru 249). The idyllic life Tereza dreams for herself constitutes kitsch: it entails her complete disavowal of those parts of her life and relationship that she wishes to forget (namely, her husband’s countless infidelities, including his liaisons with Sabina), instead of an

acknowledgment of or coming to terms with those undesirable elements. Tereza's idyll is "the kitsch of love," which Sabina (like Kundera) associates "with the overwhelming kitsch of the Communist regime" (Bayley 24). Tereza "negates any natural and individual pattern of responsibility and weight in private life" (Bayley 24), and instead takes solace in a fabrication. Tereza and her husband, Tomas, attain "a glimmer of that paradisiac idyll" (*ULB* 296) when they move to a serene country village. Their lives end unremarkably: "from time to time they would drive over to the next town and spend the night in a cheap hotel. The road there wound through some hills, and their pickup had crashed and hurtled down a steep incline" (*ULB* 122). In the end, the idyllic countryside is what kills them.

The Grand March is the political iteration of kitsch: "the Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March" (*ULB* 257). That over 40 of Kundera's mentions of "kitsch" in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* occur in the section titled "The Grand March" is, therefore, no coincidence. The character most enamoured—or "intoxicated" (*ULB* 257)—by the idea of the march is Franz, another of Sabina's lovers. He, like Tereza, meets his end as a result of his submission to kitsch. When a friend invites him to be part of a march to Cambodia, Franz jumps at the chance:

Cambodia had recently been through American bombardment, a civil war, a paroxysm of carnage by local Communists that reduced the small nation by a fifth, and finally occupation by neighboring Vietnam, which by then was a mere vassal of Russia. Cambodia was racked by famine, and people were dying for want of medical care. An international medical committee had repeatedly requested permission to enter the country, but the Vietnamese had turned them

down. The idea was for a group of important Western intellectuals to march to the Cambodian border and by means of this great spectacle performed before the eyes of the world to force the occupied country to allow the doctors in. (*ULB* 258)

The march on Cambodia is a farce. Franz finds himself on a plane “taking off from Paris with twenty doctors and about fifty intellectuals (professors, writers, diplomats, singers, actors, and mayors) as well as four hundred reporters and photographers” (*ULB* 259). The “grandness” of this march certainly cannot be attributed to the numbers; the doctors and intellectuals make up only fifteen percent of the procession. Rather, the spectacular aspect—all those “reporters and photographers”—is what makes this march grand. The media loves a spectacle, particularly one with a righteous platitude at its heart. Franz’s Grand March—which unexcitingly fails to convince the Vietnamese authorities to open the border, in the end—demonstrates what Ian McEwan calls “the perils of systematizing human experience into dogma, especially political dogma” (Kundera and McEwan np). As well-intentioned as such a march might be, Kundera suggests that righteous intention (or rhetoric) joined with spectacle is the recipe for political kitsch. Kundera exposes the marchers as ineffectual, divorced from reality, and self-indulgent.

For Kundera, kitsch is not only a Communist problem, nor is it a problem of the political left or the political right. Just as the Prague Spring, in Kundera’s estimation, defied traditional political categories, so too does kitsch.<sup>8</sup> Kitsch, as the imposition of formula, cliché, and readymade structures to artistic works, can be deployed by any political party or for any purpose.

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<sup>8</sup> In “Paris or Prague?,” Kundera explains, “May in Paris was a revolt of the Left. As for the Prague Spring, the traditional concepts of right and left are not able to account for it. (The left/right division still has a very real meaning in the life of Western peoples. On the stage of world politics, however, it no longer has much significance. Is totalitarianism left-wing or right-wing? Progressive or reactionary? These questions are meaningless” (np).



The avowed affiliation is immaterial: kitsch is what Kundera opposes, not capitalist or communist ideas in themselves. According to Ricard, “it is all politics, not just left or right regimes, it is political reality itself that Kundera’s work impugns. ‘Political subversion’ is global; it does not only attack one or another incarnation but the idea itself, the *idol* of politics” (60; original emphasis). Kundera challenges any regime, society, or political system that directs its artists and intellectuals to fill in a formula. He rails against political ideology of any stripe, and advocates free speech, critical thinking, and unrestricted creativity. In his nonfiction prose, Kundera writes against “Manichean and ‘lyrical’ ways of thinking, which insist on the absoluteness and metaphysical necessity of their truths... Against these, Kundera upholds the wisdom of the novel, which in its very ontology is resistant to monolithic verities and dogmatism, and can therefore provide an antidote to the regimenting uniformity of political systems” (Sandru 185-186).

Kundera’s novels contest the possibility of absolute truth, and they staunchly oppose the politicization of culture. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are interrogative and dialogic. They reveal the perturbing coldness and sterility of totalitarian thought and social forms. They reject unitary meanings and encourage critical and complex ways of thinking. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* reveals angels as deranged through their laughter, and forgetting as an irresponsible, dishonest enterprise. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* exposes the lie at the heart of the totalitarian idyll, and explores “the unintelligible truth” behind the façade of kitsch. Kundera’s model for literary writing is Kafka: “if I hold so firmly to the inheritance of Kafka,” he contends, “if I defend it as my personal inheritance, it is not because I think it useful to imitate the inimitable (and to discover again the Kafkaesque) but because it is such a formidable example of the *radical autonomy* of the novel”

("Somewhere Behind," np; original emphasis). Kundera's radically autonomous novels provide a model for resisting the politicization of culture that manifests on both sides of the Cold War divide.

## THE CASE FOR REVOLUTION

## CHAPTER 5: A Writer of Conscience: Nadine Gordimer's Anti-Apartheid Prose

*I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal for which I hope to live for and to see realised. But, My Lord, if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.*

—Nelson Mandela, 1964

Nadine Gordimer's writing career, from the first short story she published in 1937 to her final novel in 2012, out-spanned by more than three decades both the South African apartheid regime and the Cold War. Gordimer wrote scathing critiques of both during this time. In her essay, "Living in the Interregnum" (1982), she issues a call to the West for responsibility to the Third World in the context of the Cold War: "In the interregnum in which we co-exist, the American left—disillusioned by the failure of communism—needs to muster with us of the Third World—living evidence of the failure of capitalism—the cosmic obstinacy to believe in and work towards the possibility of an alternative left, a democracy without economic or military terror... This is where your responsibility to the Third World meets mine" (*Essential* 283-84). Gordimer works toward such alternatives in her political essays and speeches, as well as in her fictional prose. She tests possibilities of future worlds or alternative histories in short stories and novels throughout her career. Responding in large part to the rise of Black Consciousness in the 1970s, she experiments with political doctrines and literary forms in novels such as *The Conservationist* (1974) and *Burger's Daughter* (1979). In the 1980s, writing against the South African apartheid government's issuance of an extended state of emergency, Gordimer turns toward the future: *July's People* (1981) and *A Sport of Nature* (1987) configure imagined post-apartheid futures as brought about by revolutionaries. These four novels comprise Gordimer's

response to the latter half of the apartheid regime, and they map her increasingly revolutionary politics. According to Dominic Head, “the Black Consciousness movement (rejecting all co-operation with whites)—which flourished in the 1970s before and after the Soweto riots of 1976-7—provoked Gordimer into a narrowing reformulation of her national identity: as a white South African complicit with a repressive system” (7). Gordimer’s politics, in light of this identity reformulation, veer radically left; as early as 1974, she tells Michael Ratcliffe of the *Times*, “I am a white South African radical. Please don’t call me a liberal” (21). Railing against white liberalism, Gordimer refuses fully to endorse any particular doctrine of leftist politics. Instead, in her works of the 1970s and 1980s, she tries to think and write a new revolutionary politics against apartheid.

While her works always focus on South Africa, at whatever temporal remove, Gordimer never presumes to operate in a vacuum. According to Rita Barnard, “at a time when many of her compatriots experienced South Africa as a large island, cut off from the continent and the rest of the world, Gordimer managed to be global as well as nationalist in her thinking” (“Keeper,” 936). Gordimer neither disregards the position of South Africa in global relations and economics, nor ignores local conditions and specifically South African politics. She borrows literary genres and political principles from both sides of the Cold War. Gordimer asks what political and aesthetic forms can accommodate the bursting South African situation. In fiction as well as in political essays, Gordimer challenges, adjusts, and expands political and literary forms to fit the specific national and international character of South Africa under apartheid. She rejects the Manichaeism inherent in Cold War rhetoric as well as the certainties attached to stable or single literary genres. Her politics and her prose align as anti-capitalist, anti-apartheid, and fundamentally anti-essentialist. She turns toward revolution. Ultimately, a defense of violence,

and specifically of the use of violence by Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), became implicit (and nearly explicit) in her work of the late 1970s and 1980s. As literary achievements in this regard, *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature* demonstrate Gordimer's experimentation with political thought and with literary form in the late years of the Cold War. She asks critical questions about citizenship, allegiance, and responsibility in these works. She employs literary modes to imagine alternative communities and to challenge the apartheid regime. In this chapter, I trace the increasingly revolutionary politics from *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* to *A Sport of Nature*. In these novels, Gordimer articulates an embodied politics of responsibility and collaboration across ideological and aesthetic lines.

### **Gordimer and the Global Cold War**

Although Gordimer claimed a separation between her politics and her prose, evidence of their mutual inflection is clear, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s. In fact, Gordimer's political prose constitutes an important aspect of her anti-apartheid resistance, wherein she often translates unspeakable, even treasonous political arguments—such as the defense of the use of violence against the regime—into fiction. She infuses her prose with historical fact while demonstrating significant literary abilities. Throughout the apartheid era and after, Gordimer's fiction complements other forms of activism: trial testimonies on behalf of anti-apartheid activists, political essays and speeches, support of organizations such as the ANC and the United Democratic Front (UDF). As Gordimer tends toward revolutionary politics, such revolution in her plotlines and narrative structures comes closer to the surface. In *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer explores the place and responsibility of the white anti-apartheid activist; in *A Sport of*

*Nature*, she crafts a defense of revolutionary violence. Her fiction cannot fail to mirror her politics; the twists and turns of twentieth-century South African history saturate her perspective, and therefore her prose.

South Africa's participation in international politics was fraught from the early postwar years. The National Party government, or the apartheid regime, came into power in South Africa in 1948. In the same year, South Africa's delegates to the United Nations abstained from the vote on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), along with only a handful of other countries, including the Soviet Union. In the following decades, South Africa lost its seat at the United Nations altogether, was excluded from the Olympic Games, withdrew from the Commonwealth, and became subject to international scrutiny and human rights inquiries. Following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, Amnesty International sent observers to political trials in South Africa. Much of this history invites comparison with the Soviet regime during the same period, but South Africa publicly aligned itself with the West by endorsing capitalism over communism. The Suppression of Communism Act came into effect in South Africa in 1950, with the ostensible purpose of banning the South African Communist Party and any other communist-affiliated organizations. In practice, the Suppression of Communism Act served as a convenient pretext for the suppression of anti-apartheid resistance.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time as it was losing its official place at the United Nations table, the South African government was vying for a permanent seat at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Performing anti-communism publicly was part and parcel of the government's strategy: Western capitalist countries would be more likely to invest in South African manufacturing and

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<sup>1</sup> Gordimer engages with the Suppression of Communism Act explicitly in her essay on lawyer and anti-apartheid activist Bram Fischer, "Why Did Bram Fischer Choose Jail" (*The Essential Gesture* 68-78).

to turn a blind eye to internal human rights violations if South Africa appeared on their side of the Cold War divide. While, through its nuclear program, the South African government appeared to participate in the Cold War schema—that is, the nonviolent confrontation between superpowers—on the ground its war was anything but cold, particularly for black South Africans. According to Andrew Hammond, “the ‘Cold War’ is an erroneous term for a global conflict which, spanning several continents and a multitude of coups, civil wars, insurgencies and interventions, was characterized by ongoing armed aggression... To designate the international conflict as ‘cold,’ with its suggestion of inertia and equilibrium, is to do more than falsify the record” (1). In South Africa, violent government-sanctioned anti-communism was one side of such an armed conflict. The repressive apartheid regime provoked a violent response from many South Africans. On the ground, the ideology is irrelevant; only its effects—increased police presence, growing numbers of unjustified detentions, escalated aggression of security forces, among others—register to many South Africans. According to Gordimer, “*repression in South Africa has been and is being lived through; repression elsewhere is an account in a newspaper, book, or film. The choice, for blacks, cannot be distanced into any kind of objectivity: they believe in the existence of the lash they feel*” (*Essential* 280; original emphasis).

Monica Popescu, citing Wole Soyinka, explains that “numerous African intellectuals and politicians could not bring themselves to support the Western world—the contemporary incarnation of cultures that had justified slavery, colonialism, and other forms of depredation—and preferred instead to find justifications for abuses taking place in the Eastern Bloc” (93). Gordimer is not among these intellectuals: she stands firmly against the apartheid regime and its capitalist backing, yet she does not, like many of her contemporaries, therefore embrace communism. Twentieth-century iterations of communism had, to Gordimer, demonstrated a



proclivity to human rights abuses and dangerous ideological dogmatism beyond justification. Her politics in opposition to this are firmly anti-racist, anti-white-supremacy, and anti-apartheid.

There is undoubtedly a hot war in progress in South Africa throughout the Cold War era: the government's active suppression of dissidence and its egregious human rights violations register from the first with Gordimer as aggressive rather than passive or static developments. Gordimer reframes the Cold War in the South African context, however, and suggests that the actual Cold War surfaces in South Africa not so much as the icy, nonviolent standoff of global superpowers, but rather as the insidious and often invisible causal nexus of apartheid legislation. In "Censored, Banned, Gagged" (1963), Gordimer refers to "the hot war of censorship," but also to the "cold war going on all the time, outside the statute books" (*Essential* 63). A sort of panoptic self-censorship represents the Cold War effect in this example, a result at a remove from the actions of the apartheid regime. As Barnard explains, Gordimer "was aware from the very start that overt censorship was only one aspect of the denial of expression to black South Africans: a lack of education, a lack of access to libraries, and, thereby, of 'the chance to form the everyday habit of reading that germinates a writer's gift' were even more serious factors" ("Keeper," 944). The effects of discriminatory legislation are compounded by social acceptance and sanctioning of that legislation and its underlying presumptions. Nelson Mandela made this argument in his famous "I am Prepared to Die" speech from the dock at the Rivonia Trial in 1964. According to Mandela, "the lack of human dignity experienced by Africans is the direct result of the policy of white supremacy. White supremacy implies black inferiority. Legislation designed to preserve white supremacy entrenches this notion" (np). White supremacy, especially in South Africa under apartheid, therefore appears as one iteration, and perhaps the iteration *par excellence*, of Gordimer's conception of a Cold War. Gordimer understands, at least partially

because of Mandela's speech, that government policy and cultural capital—just like the hot and cold wars occurring around the globe across the twentieth century—mutually reinforce each other.<sup>2</sup>

While remaining a staunch opponent of white supremacy, Gordimer rejects the dichotomizing framework of the predominant Cold War narrative—Eastern communism versus Western capitalism—and looks instead toward the complicated lived experience of individuals under South African apartheid. She blurs ideological lines in both fiction and nonfiction prose. Against critics like Eva Hunter, who claims that Gordimer “failed to write beyond the straightjacket of the patriarchal binary oppositions of good bad, chaste sexual, mind body” (44), I contend that Gordimer fundamentally challenges that Manichean order in her works. She writes about and from a Third World context—that is, South Africa during apartheid—although she cannot be said to occupy a Third World space herself.<sup>3</sup> In the language of apartheid South Africa, black and white are described as African and European, respectively: Third and First World. Against such rhetoric, Gordimer's politics and aesthetics are fundamentally hybrid; her texts mix

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<sup>2</sup> While legend often lists Gordimer as one of Mandela's speech editors, there is little proof that this is true. Nevertheless, Gordimer was familiar with his trial speech, as well as other high-profile trial speeches. Perhaps exemplary in this case is Bram Fischer's “What I Did was Right” speech from the dock at the Supreme Court in Pretoria in March 1966, which Gordimer translates into fiction in *Burger's Daughter*: “As craziness gave the crone license to shout at the police, the life sentence gave Lionel license to say it from the dock: I would be guilty if I were innocent of working to destroy racism in my country” (*BD* 133). Evidence of Gordimer's familiarity with and fidelity to Mandela and his political stances and arguments surfaces everywhere from personal interviews to her Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award keynote speech honouring Mandela in 2006. In response to the question of whether she considered Mandela and Oliver Tambo her leaders during cross-examination at the Delmas Treason Trial, where Gordimer was testifying on behalf of the defendants, she responded firmly: “I do” (Delmas Trial Transcript, M1.1, Vol. 460: 28,805. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).

<sup>3</sup> As a wealthy white woman in South Africa, and an internationally recognized writer, Gordimer sits squarely within a First World space.

bloodlines, ideologies, and genres. She questions the clear-cut rhetorical lines drawn from either side of the Iron Curtain. As one example, she issues a scathing critique of Western ideological and economic hypocrisy in “Living in the Interregnum”:

In South Africa’s rich capitalist state stuffed with Western finance, fifty thousand black children a year die from malnutrition and malnutrition-related diseases, while the West piously notes that communist states cannot provide their people with meat and butter. In two decades in South Africa, three million black people have been ejected from the context of their lives, forcibly removed from homes and jobs and ‘resettled’ in arid, undeveloped areas by decree of a white government supported by Western capital. It is difficult to point out to black South Africans that the forms of Western capitalism are changing towards a broad social justice... when all black South Africans know of Western capitalism is political and economic terror. And this terror is not some relic of the colonial past; it is being financed *now* by Western democracies—concurrently with Western capitalist democracy’s own evolution towards social justice. (*Essential* 281-282; original emphasis)

Gordimer fundamentally rejects any moral or ideological superiority that the West tries to claim; the material effects of capitalism, just as the material effects of certain iterations of communism, cannot be overlooked in the service of clarity or moral intelligibility. In her novels, she avoids prescriptive politics. She does not necessarily give her readers any clear sense of who the good and bad guys are, what politics they subscribe to, or how to address them. The most important political point for Gordimer, however, surfaces without her needing to choose ideological sides. In her own words, “If you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself”

(*Conversations* 83).

*Burger's Daughter*, published in 1979 and immediately banned by the apartheid government's censors, serves as an illustration of Gordimer's Cold War, apartheid politics played out at the level of the individual. It is a book about choosing sides during both apartheid and the Cold War, and about how to make that choice responsibly. The novel is largely historically grounded: Gordimer bases her protagonist's father on Abram "Bram" Fischer, a prominent lawyer and anti-apartheid activist in South Africa who was imprisoned in 1966 under the Suppression of Communism Act, and who died while in detention.<sup>4</sup> Fischer the man is transformed into the character Lionel Burger. His daughter, Rosa, over the course of the narrative, evolves from a barely adolescent girl visiting her father in prison to an "awaiting-trial prisoner" (*BD* 360), detained under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act (the same statute under which Mongane Wally Serote was detained, imprisoned, and tortured in 1969).<sup>5</sup> Rosa's navigation of the unstable and precarious political situation and her encounters with alternative politics, human rights violations, and even her own upbringing and political development, provide evidence of Gordimer's politics in the late 1970s: a politics more concerned with personally developed convictions than with perfectly presented political dogma.

From the early days of Rosa's childhood, the left-wing, anti-apartheid movement makes

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<sup>4</sup> Lionel Burger is clearly modeled on Fischer, but Gordimer also distances the character from the man. Bram Fischer makes several appearances throughout *Burger's Daughter*, and is referred to as one of "the few names unforgotten... [who] would get a mention in [Lionel's] biography" (*BD* 89). In regard to my use of the term "in detention," while Fischer was let out of Pretoria Central Prison in 1975 because of ill health, he cannot be said actually to have been released by the state: after his brief transfer to a hospital, he remained under house arrest until his death from cancer a few weeks later in April 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Serote, speaking to Rolf Solberg in 1995, described his experience as follows: "I was detained under what they called the Terrorism Act, Section 6, which means that you were kept in solitary confinement, incommunicado. You were entirely in the hands of the security police. I was harshly tortured, physically" (180).

claims on her because of the family to which she belongs. Gordimer's title alone confirms this: Rosa is Burger's daughter—the not-quite-eponymous protagonist of a story that, by all accounts, should bear her name. Rosa actively participates in the movement for years, including the most formative years of her life. Gordimer explains,

At eight years old Rosa could tell people the name by which the trial, in which her father and mother were two of the accused, was known, the Treason Trial, and explain that they had been refused bail which meant they couldn't come home. Tony perhaps did not realize where they were; Auntie Velma encouraged the idea that he was 'on holiday' on the farm—an attitude the parents would not have thought 'correct' and that their daughter, resenting any deviation from her parents' form of trust as a criticism and betrayal of them, tried to counter. (*BD* 54)

Rosa supports her anti-apartheid activist parents through their imprisonments and trials, and she poses as the fiancée of a prisoner in order to smuggle information. She presents the brave, stoic face of a loyal family member *and* political comrade when Lionel is delivered a life sentence, as opposed to her relatives who appear at Lionel's trial only because of "blood-loyalty" (*BD* 29), and not because of any political affinity or affiliation. Rosa, unmoored and newly skeptical of the movement's attempted use of her after her father dies, separates herself from her former comrades, travels to Europe, and undergoes a political transformation from indoctrinated leftist to critically minded, anti-apartheid activist. *Burger's Daughter* chronicles an appropriate response to Cold War indoctrination and to the South African apartheid regime.

Rosa's political evolution necessarily spans time, space, and narrative voices in the novel. The novel oscillates between third-person narration and Rosa's own first-person voice directed at a former lover, Conrad. Rosa travels outside of South Africa, to Europe, in order to separate

herself physically and psychically from the indoctrination for which Conrad has indicted her.

The narrative documents exchanges between Rosa and Conrad on the subject of the anti-

apartheid movement and her place in it. To each event Conrad's response is, in effect, the same:

"But isn't it true—you had your formula for dealing with that, too" (*BD* 52). Her narration,

addressed to Conrad after his death, makes the novel at least partially a defense of, or an

acknowledgement to, Conrad's claims. Rosa rejects her father's communist politics, leaves South

Africa, and returns much later. Upon her return, she takes up the mantle of anti-apartheid

activism, but in a new context. Determinedly against the dogmatic "conditioning, brain-washing"

(*BD* 52) that Conrad sees as inherent to the communist left, Rosa finds her place in an anti-

apartheid movement that has undergone massive shifts since her father's time. The Black

Consciousness movement, as well as her own introspection, has led to "Rosa's decision to take a

subservient role in her political recommitment" (Head 122). According to Robert Boyers,

"Rosa's politics emerge neither as an instinctual reflex of filial piety nor as an adventurist plunge

into dangerous waters. They are an authorization in the deepest and most valuable sense,

strenuously legitimizing a sense of indebtedness to those who have gone before and ratifying the

sense of irreducible particularity that must inform authentic transactions in the present" (145).

Such authenticity is at the heart of the politics that Gordimer advocates in this novel.

Gordimer insists on rights and responsibilities over stark ideological principles. Rosa

shifts from blind (and blood) loyalty to a seemingly treasonous betrayal of the cause and back

with a new formulation of loyalty. Lionel Burger serves as counterpoint in this schema. He

represents an unwavering commitment to the anti-apartheid cause, even past the limit of betrayal

of his own kind. Against "the heritage of his people that Lionel Burger betrayed" (*BD* 61), the

Afrikaner Burger is lauded for "the courage, the daring, the lack of regard for self with which a

man like Burger acted according to his convictions about social injustice” (*BD* 86). Gordimer certainly does not berate this kind of loyalty to a cause within its historical moment. In fact, she valorizes it: “At last [in the Burgers’ household] nothing between the white man’s word and his deed; spluttering the same water together in the swimming-pool, going to prison after the same indictment: it was a human conspiracy, above all other kinds” (*BD* 172). Unlike Conrad, to whom Rosa must justify her father’s commitment to humanity in this example, Gordimer sees value in the steadfastness of Burger’s commitment to the cause, but she does so only on two conditions. First, she accepts and endorses Burger’s unwavering loyalty because it has come through a betrayal of something else—his race, his heritage, and perhaps especially his own potential future within the apartheid regime if he had not made this betrayal: “Brandt Vermeulen did not need to tell [Rosa] that her father could have been prime minister if he had not been a traitor. It had been said many times. For the Afrikaner people, Lionel Burger was a tragedy” (*BD* 186). That is to say, his loyalty manifested itself through an introspective and fraught choice to betray what, in a traditional account, he should have adhered to. Gordimer borrows this model of loyalty from Bram Fischer, who articulated his own choice to treason in his Statement from the Dock:

I was a Nationalist at the age of six, if not before... I remained a Nationalist for over twenty years thereafter and became, in 1929, the first Nationalist Prime Minister of a student parliament. I never doubted that the policy of segregation was the only solution to this country’s problems until the Hitler theory of race superiority began to threaten the world with genocide and with the greatest disaster in all history. The Court will see that I did not shed my old beliefs with ease. (np)

Confronted with the clear parallel between the South African apartheid regime and the Third Reich, Fischer abandons familial and racial affiliations in favour of a broad understanding of human rights. Lionel Burger's betrayal of his ilk and subsequent loyalty to the anti-apartheid cause corresponds to the character arc that Fischer represents, and Gordimer does not deny either man his due heroism.

The second condition of Gordimer's valorization of Burger is historical. In the earlier years of apartheid resistance, there could still be white heroes. Fischer represents one of the best-known of them all. Affirming her reconfigured understanding of white complicity in the context of Black Consciousness, Gordimer maintains the impossibility—and in some ways, the undesirability—of whites taking positions of leadership and heroism in the new South Africa of the 1970s. Rosa, therefore, represents something else. Unmoored from political doctrine per se, she is a chameleon of sorts, and therefore a perpetual traitor to whatever cause she previously espoused. Nearly halfway through the novel, she addresses Conrad to explain this inherent traitorous streak:

What I say will not be understood.

Once it passes from me, it becomes apologia or accusation. I am talking about neither... but you will use my words to make your own meaning. As people pick up letters from the stack between them in word-games. You will say: she said *he* was this or that: Lionel Burger, Dhladhla, James Nyaluza, Fats, even that poor devil, Orde Greer. I am considering only ways of trying to take hold; you will say: she is Manichean. You don't understand treason; a flying fish lands on the deck from fathoms you glide over. You bend curiously, call the rest of the crew to look, and throw it back. (*BD* 171; original emphasis)



The point is not that Rosa wholeheartedly supported the cause at the beginning of her life and then arbitrarily rejected it later. Rather, her swings from one side to another occur only through deep introspection, personal acknowledgement of her own blindness in a previous loyalty, and a fundamental understanding of the key concepts and groups between which she moves. The sort of heroism that Fischer and Burger represent demands a certain kind of singularity of purpose across time, in the face of which the example of Rosa stands defiant. Near the end of the novel, while speaking to the academic Bernard Chabaliere, Rosa reflects, “‘Oppress’. ‘Revolt’. ‘Betray’. He used the big words as people do without knowing what they can stand for” (*BD* 276). Her conceptual grasp of oppression, revolt, and betrayal are not at the level of academic discourse. Her understanding is both more embodied than Chabaliere’s abstracted ideas—she has, at this point in the novel, already been interrogated by the police and released—and more theoretically capacious: she understands what these words “*can* stand for,” not what they *empirically do* stand for. Rosa, unlike her principled and steadfast father and her “abstracted peer” (*BD* 276) Bernard, is neither a hero nor an ideologue. She is a malleable citizen, proven in her support of a cause in the end, but without the valor or singular commitment that constituted white members of the movement in an earlier era.

Gordimer responds both to the global Cold War and to the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s in *Burger’s Daughter*. Rosa’s acceptance of a supporting role in the anti-apartheid struggle is Gordimer’s approach to the latter of these historical movements. The novel is Gordimer’s first to acknowledge that “the appropriation of revolutionary prestige by whites... is no longer possible [in and after the age of Black Consciousness] and a whole new way of being committed must be invented” (Barnard, “Keeper,” 945). Rosa is Gordimer’s political test subject. She transforms from born and raised leftist to detached, distant traveler and back to

recommitted activist. In so doing, she models how an individual should encounter political doctrine, which is to say, personally, thoughtfully, and according to one's own experiences and perspective. Writing in the context of the global Cold War, Gordimer refuses, like Rosa Burger when she leaves South Africa in an attempt to abandon her father's political legacy, to accept communism wholesale, or to defend it. Gordimer is not vocally critical of communist ideology because doing so would implicitly absolve its rival, and nothing is more abhorrent, to Gordimer, than the collusion between capitalism and racism in the South African context. In 1982 she writes, "*I am silent. I am silent because, in the debates of the interregnum, any criticism of the communist system is understood as a defence of the capitalist system which has brought forth the pact of capitalism and racism that is apartheid, with its treason trials to match Stalin's trials, its detentions of dissidents to match Soviet detentions, its banishment and brutal uprooting of communities and individual lives to match, if not surpass, the gulag*" (Essential 280; original emphasis). In the same essay, she explains that "black South Africans and whites like myself no longer believe in the ability of Western capitalism to bring about social justice where we live" (282). The politics necessary to counter white supremacy, the human rights violations of the global Cold War and the apartheid regime, and the political and economic terror perpetrated against people of colour both inside and outside South Africa will not come from the capitalist right, the neoliberal centre, or the dogmatic left. *Burger's Daughter* is Gordimer's literary pilot flight of an embodied, dynamic politics of anti-racist citizenship, and it ultimately leads her to a defense of revolutionary violence.

### **Bodily Politics and Crimes of Conscience in *A Sport of Nature***

The events following the publication of *Burger's Daughter* in South Africa, especially

the apartheid government's issuance of an extended state of emergency in the mid-1980s, pressed Gordimer's politics closer to revolution, and her prose followed suit. In October 1982 she gave the William James Lecture at the New York Institute of the Humanities, later published as "Living in the Interregnum," in which she delivers stark condemnations of both sides of the Cold War for shirking their responsibility to humanity. She issues a call, harsh and direct, for the human community jointly to muster the resolve to end the continued crimes against humanity perpetrated against formerly colonized peoples. "Without the will to tramp towards that possibility," namely, the ideal of "democracy without economic or military terror," Gordimer argues, "no relations of whites, of the West, with the West's formerly subject peoples can ever be free of the past, because the past, for them, was the jungle of Western capitalism, not the light the missionaries thought they brought with them" (*Essential* 284). This more radical and assertive political stance surfaces in Gordimer's fiction of the 1980s and early 1990s. In short stories from her 1991 collections *Crimes of Conscience* and *Jump and Other Stories* (both collections feature a majority of works originally written and published in the 1980s), she attacks apartheid sympathizers and anti-apartheid white liberals with the same vehemence. In *July's People*, she imagines a revolutionary future wherein black rebels have taken over the government and state infrastructure, and a family of white liberals flee the city and take shelter at the rural home of a (now-former) servant. *A Sport of Nature* appears as her crowning achievement on this front: Gordimer's narrative strategies, character constructions, and political implications in this novel correspond directly to her increasingly progressive politics. Published just three years ahead of the official end of apartheid, *A Sport of Nature* demonstrates Gordimer's experimentation with political thought and with literary form in the late years of the regime. Through palimpsestic prose, Gordimer articulates an embodied politics of responsibility

and collaboration across ideological and aesthetic lines.

What constitutes revolution in the South African context? In answering this question, Gordimer relies on Nelson Mandela's Leninist articulation of and justification for MK in his 1964 "I am Prepared to Die" speech. In the three-hour address, Mandela describes the thought process that led ANC leaders to form MK, and the principles that directed its violent actions. In response to the apartheid government's continued use of force against peaceful resistance, Mandela and other ANC leaders concluded that "as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable" (np). In essence, Mandela agrees with Lenin that, "the suppression of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution" (58). Political revolution does not entail incremental change through legislation, or even sudden and extensive replacement of government officials. Violence is part and parcel of the revolutionary idea—and black South Africans had been pushed to revolution. According to Engels, force "in history [plays] a revolutionary role... in the words of Marx, it is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one... it is the instrument with which social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilized political forms" (qtd. in Lenin 56).

Gordimer's first sustained consideration of this form of revolution—which is to say, total revolution—appears in *July's People*. In the novel, Gordimer traces the movement from the "chronic state of uprising" characteristic of South Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s, to full revolution well beyond the "riots, arson, occupation of the headquarters of international corporations, bombs in public buildings" that prompted the government's issuance of an extended state of emergency. The transition from one situation (a status quo of oppression and resultant unrest) to another (complete revolution and total reversal of power) happens in *July's*

*People* in the blank space beyond an ellipsis and between paragraphs:

Once again, for the hundred-and-first time, thousands of blacks were imprisoned, broken glass was swept up, cut telephone lines were reconnected, radio and television assured that control was re-established. The husband and wife [Bam and Maureen Smales] felt it was idiotic to have that money hidden in the house; they were about to put it back in the bank again...

When it all happened, there were the transformations of myth or religious parable... (np)

While *July's People* is therefore a step closer to revolution than *Burger's Daughter*, in which no full political revolution ever takes place, the critical event still occurs offstage. There is no description of how the revolution is actually accomplished, and no breakdown of what violences are committed, on what scale, or by whom. Not until the latter part of the decade, in 1987 with the publication of *A Sport of Nature*, did Gordimer really analyze the mechanics of revolution in her prose. The issue at the crux of that analysis, it turns out, is the issue of violence as the necessary component of revolution as such.

Nelson Mandela is far from alone in publicly defending the use of violence against the apartheid regime. Bram Fischer's "What I Did was Right" speech in 1966, while not a forceful defense of MK and its violent tactics, includes his approval of it: "I became aware of its existence, and I did not disprove [sic]" (np). In a similar rhetorical move, Gordimer's testimony at the Delmas Treason Trial in the late 1980s includes an implicit approval of MK's violent tactics, in her exchange with Advocate Fick:

Would you regard Mkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, as your Mkhonto we Sizwe? —Well as I say I myself am against violence but I can see

that in the circumstances that have been brought about in South Africa, the intransigence of the white establishment towards black aspirations a time had to come when there would be some military wing in a mass movement like the African National Congress.

Ja but please answer the question. Do you regard Mkhonto we Sizwe as your Mkhonto we Sizwe —Well I suppose if I approve of the policies of the ANC then I have to accept without taking part in it myself that this is part of the organisation that I support.

Do you support Mkhonto we Sizwe, is that what you are saying? —I support the African National Congress...

Please answer the question Miss Gordimer. —Do I support Mkhonto we Sizwe?

Mkhonto we Sizwe, yes. —As part of the ANC, yes.

No do you, and do you support Mkhonto we Sizwe? —Yes as part of the ANC.

(Delmas Trial Transcript, M1.1, Vol. 460: 28,807)

In this exchange, Gordimer endorses MK through associative logic. She refuses to admit outright, on the record, that she supports the use of violence against the apartheid regime; doing so would constitute treason, would be a punishable offense. A decade later in 1997, Gordimer highlights the necessity of armed resistance in a discussion of the UDHR, saying “for me, the most important Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has no number, is not an Article at all. It is a paragraph of the Preamble. ‘Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to *rebellion against tyranny and oppression*, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law’” (*Living* 172; Gordimer’s emphasis). While

Gordimer highlights rebellion as the most crucial term in this document, it happens seven years after the ending of apartheid and a full decade after the publication of *A Sport of Nature*. In the final years of apartheid, however, Gordimer commutes her defense of the use of violence during apartheid into fiction, which is, so-to-speak, off the record: in *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer justifies and condones the use of violence through the larger framework of bodily politics.

*A Sport of Nature* bursts with South African history, and much of it engages directly with the arguments Gordimer was making in political speeches at the time. As one example, the protagonist's cousin, Sasha, a young white liberal-turned-revolutionary, resists and ultimately refuses mandatory military service. Gordimer's focus on the issue of military service comes out of her political response to the 1983 South African Constitution. In "Letter from Johannesburg, 1985," Gordimer writes, "even after 1960 when the South African revolution may be said to have begun, the sons of liberal and left-wing families docilely accepted, *force majeure*, the obligation to do military service, if with a sense of resentment and shame... Now, young whites have at last found the courage to fulfill the chief provision blacks demand of them if they are to prove their commitment to the black cause: to refuse to fight to protect racism" (*Essential* 306). Gordimer calls this shift "the direct result of the new constitution" (*Essential* 306). Sasha's development from whiny liberal to imprisoned radical charts public, legislative, and social history alongside personal history, and this becomes a central point in the narrative: Sasha is, in fact, a traitor. As Gordimer notes in her "Letter," "it is a treasonable offence, in South Africa, to incite anyone to refuse" military service, or to refuse military service oneself (*Essential* 305-306). The UDF, whose leaders were the defendants at the Delmas Treason Trial, ran a campaign against mandatory conscription in 1983, called the End Conscription Campaign. Gordimer, in addition to testifying on behalf of the defendants at the Delmas trial, gave a poetry reading at an

End Conscription Campaign event (*Essential* 305). This is only one of many points of crossover between literature and politics in *A Sport of Nature*.

The novel provides a litany of examples through which Gordimer's policy positions are illuminated. The sheer range of historical and political content attests to the breadth of potential points of crossover from the fictional to the factual. Stephen Clingman details the range of historical events in the novel as follows:

We learn through the novel (in a far more exhaustive way than in any of Gordimer's previous works) of a whole chronology of South African developments, running from the 1950s right through to the 1980s. The pass-burning and Defiance Campaigns; the Alexandra bus boycott and the Sharpeville massacre; the All-in African Conference and the 1961 national stayaway; the exploits of Nelson Mandela underground, and the Rivonia and Fischer trials; the beginning of Umkhonto we Sizwe operations in Zimbabwe in August 1967; the Black Consciousness era of the 1970s and the death of Ahmed Timol; the Tricameral Parliament of the 1980s and the Detainees Parents' Support Committee: all these (and many other developments besides) become a sustained element of the narrative. (175-176)

Packed with historical details and decisively public information, *A Sport of Nature* contends with politics and society in what otherwise appears to be the personal story of a young white woman named Hillela. Hillela appears as an organizing presence throughout the novel, but the narrative is not fundamentally *about* her. She is, in Richard Smyer's words, "the name-bearing figure whose foregrounded presence provides the novel with a reassuringly stable focal point" (82). The novel is not only about Hillela's, or Gordimer's, personal politics, South African history, or



political conscience or revolution. Rather it is an amalgamation of these and other subjects as surrounding and grafted onto the life of one primary—and potentially exemplary—South African citizen.

Gordimer's inclusion of fact in fiction serves to critique and revise the strategy of the South African apartheid state, which constantly attempts to deploy fiction as fact to serve itself. In 1988, citing Mongane Wally Serote, Gordimer contends that "to be aware that the lie also can transform the world places an enormous responsibility on art to counter this with its own transformations" (*Living* 11). Instead of employing fiction as fact only, and instead of doing so for her own consolidation of power or unquestioning support of ideology, Gordimer co-implicates fact and fiction, and she does so in the service of a more comprehensive historical understanding and a more responsible citizenship.<sup>6</sup> According to Dominic Head, "the reference to actual figures such as Mandela, Tambo and Sisulu emphasize a link with history. But the reverse process of the dialectic—the influence of fiction upon history—is also implied in similar references to Gordimer's own fiction: Lionel Burger, for example, is mentioned alongside Bram Fischer, while Rosa Burger actually appears briefly in [*A Sport of Nature*]" (138). Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, Gordimer undermines prejudices that a contemporary white South African reader might bring to her novels. This opens the possibility of political engagement from an otherwise complacent population. For an audience ready to dismiss Bram Fischer, and therefore Lionel Burger, because of his conviction under the Suppression of Communism Act, Gordimer sows doubt as to whether Burger and Fischer are in fact the same

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<sup>6</sup> According to most critics, Gordimer achieved this in her oeuvre. Robert Green writes, "finally, when the history of the Nationalist Governments from 1948 to the end comes to be written, Nadine Gordimer's shelf of novels will provide the future historian with all the evidence needed to assess the price that has been paid" (563).

man. This approach, as well as other narrative strategies such as Gordimer's seamless and inconspicuous insertion of quotations from banned materials and banned persons, serves a progressive, revisable politics that bends towards justice.

With narrative strategies in place to destabilize certainties and unseat biases, *A Sport of Nature* goes on to formulate a theory of leftist, embodied politics, and of an intersectional, responsible citizenship. Gordimer achieves this through an articulation of bodily politics. The context of apartheid brings the body to the fore in a uniquely South African way. Details of bodies are the criteria of citizenship and of incomplete or non-citizenship, according to the Population Registration Act of 1950 and reinforced by the Tricameral Parliament instituted in 1984.<sup>7</sup> Bodies determine legalities: where an act may be legal with certain bodies—for instance, sex between a white man and a white woman—the same act is illegal with different ones—for instance, homosexual or interracial sex. In Gordimer's words, "I think there may be a particular connection between sexuality, sensuality, and politics inside South Africa. Because, after all, what is apartheid all about? It's about the body. It's about physical differences... The whole legal system is based on the physical, so that the body becomes something supremely important" (*Conversations* 304). It is no surprise, then, that when Gordimer looks to formulate a politics adequate to confront the apartheid regime, she begins with the body. Gordimer's radical anti-

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<sup>7</sup> The Tricameral Parliament was split into three chambers for three legally differentiated racial groups: White, Coloured, and Indian. The majority of the country, the black population, had no representation. The institution of the Tricameral Parliament, while attempting to appear inclusive at a time of crisis for the apartheid regime in South Africa, served to bolster the regime's hold on power. According to Rinaldo Walcott, "heterogeneity is most times elided by nation-state practices, but sometimes the nation-state asserts heterogeneity in fleeting moments of crisis when heterogeneity might be useful to stall or abort any attempt to rearrange national concerns. The contradiction of (post)modern national arrangements is the state's ability to recoup both heterogeneity and its opposite in ways that seek to reaffirm long-held practices of exclusion or marginalization" (5).

apartheid narrative develops from Hillela's body—a white, female body that procreates with a black man, and one that is promiscuous, diasporic, and alluring.

Hillela's sexuality propels the events of the novel, and begets the narrative. In the first chapter, Hillela is “seen with a coloured boy” (SN 12), and expelled from her school. Three chapters later, love letters she inherits from her mother disrupt the narrative. Licentious lines from the letters appear in italics, as the narrative voice shudders with pleasure:

*I can't tell you how I long for you. I put my hands where you do and pretend it's you.*

A rippling sensation up the back makes the shoulders hunch. The hand that wrote the word was like this one—the one that holds the paper: the same.

*When I got out of the bath this morning I saw myself in the mirror and thought of you looking at me and you won't believe me but my nipples came out and got hard. I watched in the glass.*

The same, the same. As a deep breath fills the lungs, so the hands open as if to do things they did not know they could, the whole body centres on itself in a magical power. It sings in the head, the sense of the body. (SN 48)

Pairing definite articles with indefinite articles—“a rippling sensation up *the* back,” “a deep breath fills *the* lungs”—does not identify the character about whom the narrator writes. The subject could be Hillela, whose hands are “the same, the same” as her mother's, or it could be Sasha, lusting after Hillela's “same” body. In the following chapter, Sasha and Hillela's incestuous relationship is discovered by Sasha's parents, Pauline and Joe, and the event upsets the family in a violent outburst: “Pauline had pushed past Joe that night, gone over to the bed and hit Sasha across the face, hit him for the first time in her life, hit him twice, jolting his head first

this way then that” (*SN* 91). Pauline’s actions are violent, and the language used to render them reflects her intensity: clauses pile on top of and contradict one another, mirroring the action they describe. Hillela is then expelled from the family home: “What could they be expected to have done about Hillela at that time?... there was nothing for it but to let a seventeen-year-old girl think she was the one who knew what to do” (*SN* 98). From then on, Hillela’s variably capricious, rash, or sexually motivated whims determine the course of the novel.

Martine Brownley, describing the novel as both a picaresque and a romance, understands Hillela and the novel in terms of courtesan historiography: “The figure of the courtesan exists at an intersection of the public and the private spheres, but because of the dearth of reliable information, no history written about such women by others can actually be personal history. And yet their narratives have traditionally been constructed entirely in personal terms, reducing their public political identities to private sexual ones” (148). From the beginning lines of the novel, Hillela is described in sexualized terms. On the first page she undresses for the reader: “The brown stockings collapsed down her legs, making fine hairs prickle pleasurably. She would dig sandals and a dress out of her suitcase and change without concern for the presence of other women in the compartment” (*SN* 3). Hillela oozes sexuality. She displays her increasingly sexualized body without concern for the presence of others, either women or men. Furthermore, the several men with whom she liaises throughout the narrative are explained in physical, and often racially charged, terms. Hillela’s initial encounter with Whaila, her first husband, is described as follows: “To eyes accustomed to the radiance above water his blackness was a blow, pure hardness against the dissolving light” (*SN* 140). Whaila’s “pure hardness” signals virility, and his blackness against “dissolving light” gestures toward the future biracial (and procreative) relationship with Hillela. Hillela may seem to be a courtesan, yet she is intimately

involved in a liberatory political movement. Rather than obscuring her public political identity, Hillela's private sexual identity bolsters it, even to the point where she arguably receives more credit than is due to her for her participation in the anti-apartheid movement. While the courtesan framework appears from one perspective to fit Hillela's story, the myriad particularities of Hillela's existence and involvement in the world around her exceeds its bounds.

Hillela's sexuality violates taboos. From her fleeting connection with the coloured boy she is seen with in school to her incestuous relationship with her cousin, from an affair with an Ambassador to her marriage to and child with a black man, no relationship that Hillela has upholds white apartheid conventions. As a heterosexual, phenotypically-white South African female, Hillela *should* represent apartheid South African nation and society straightforwardly.<sup>8</sup> Such a society needs Hillela and others like her to perpetuate its existence, through a monogamous marriage to a white man that produces white children. "The nation... is a nostalgic construction, one that evokes an archaic past and authentic communal identity to assert and legitimize its project of modernization," Gayatri Gopinath argues: "Women's bodies, then, become crucial to nationalist discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction of national collectivities, but as the very embodiment of this nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition" (262-263). Hillela's body, however, refuses to be contained within tradition, or even within South Africa. Her promiscuity and transgression of apartheid society

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<sup>8</sup> Hillela may herself actually qualify as biracial: early in the novel, she muses in a conversation with Sasha that her named father, Len, may not be her biological father:

—Sasha, would you say I look Portuguese?—  
 —How does Portuguese look? Like a market gardener?—  
 —My short nose and these (touching cheekbones), my eyes and this kind of hair that isn't brown or black; the way it grows from my forehead—look.—  
 He took her head in his hands and jerked it this way and that...  
 —But why Portuguese?—  
 —She [Hillela's mother] had a Portuguese lover. (SN 31-32)

taboos, her effortless flights across porous borders, and her easy willingness to adopt revolutionary politics position Hillela as dangerous to the apartheid state: “Women’s sexual agency... signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation. And because loyalty to the nation as citizen is perennially colonized within reproduction and heterosexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely, a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship or no citizenship at all” (Alexander 64). Hillela’s rebellion against the apartheid state may not be motivated, at least initially, by any supremely ethical political convictions, but her instinct not to be confined by such a state marks the beginning of a treasonous bodily politics in the narrative. If a body can undermine the apartheid state merely by instinct and almost by accident, what jurisdiction does such a state have over bodies at all? Barnard explains that “the erotic—always transformative and dangerous—stands against the conservative, racist, ideological imperative toward self- and social reproduction: it opens up the possibility of a new negotiation of the boundaries of self and other, of the body and the body politic” (“Keeper,” 940). Hillela’s bodily existence issues a challenge to apartheid legislation and social organization.

Under apartheid, the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal government enacts a “violent erasure of insurgent sexualities” (Alexander 86) in order to preserve its own power and to support social organization. The exclusively white, heterosexual family is the underpinning structure of the apartheid regime. Any deviation from this formula undermines the apartheid order. According to M. Jacqui Alexander, “heteropatriarchy is avidly mobilized [by the state] to serve many fictions... it enables a homosocial, homophobic, and in a real sense, a morally bankrupt state to position itself as patriarchal savior to women, to citizens, to the economy, and to the nation” (99). “Insurgent sexualities” challenge the heteropatriarchal order and therefore the

white supremacist state. In the context of apartheid, the heteropatriarchy was enforced according to specific legal codes: the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act in 1949 and the Immorality Act of 1927, extended in 1950—both anti-miscegenation laws—were in force until 1985.

Homosexual sex between men remained officially illegal in South Africa until 1998, in the Constitutional Court of South Africa's decision on the *National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality v Minister of Justice* case. Sexuality was quite literally policed under (and after) apartheid. Hillela's sexuality—her incestuous relationship with Sasha and her two later marriages to black men—flies in the face of a regime that cannot control her. The connections she forges with her body disprove the state's supremacy over it.

Stephen Clingman argues that the “ambiguities, ... inversions and reversions” of narrative in *A Sport of Nature* are shaped by Hillela's physicality: “Hillela's body—generates its own genre: the genre of this novel, which otherwise might appear inexplicable” (184). In addition to the genres of European Critical Realism and female *bildungsroman*, *A Sport of Nature* has been described as a historical novel (Clingman; Booker and Juraga), a picaresque (King; Winnett), and a romance (Brownley). As Graham Huggan notes, “‘prison literature’, ‘political manifesto’, the documentary modes of ‘socialist realism’: these three strands of committed art are woven into the texture” of *A Sport of Nature* (42). While each of these generic categories seems to fit in some way, none of them appears expansive enough to capture the entire novel. This generic confusion is integral to Gordimer's literary-political strategy: it rejects fixed categories and single-minded conventions in favour of a multivocal, politically capacious narrative.

Quite literally, Hillela's body and her deployment of sexuality challenge the white, heteropatriarchal order of the apartheid regime and society. As Hillela joins the ranks of exiles

and refugees outside of South Africa, the narrative emphasizes that her integration into this community is specifically physical: “James and Busewe were suspicious of her... But it was not as they had thought it would be: teach me, she said, not only in words but in her whole being, that body of hers. And as she had picked up protocol in an ambassador’s Residence she picked up the conventions to be observed, signs to be read, manoeuvres to be concealed in refugee politics” (SN 180). Her revolutionary knowledge, as this learning of protocols, conventions, and manoeuvres will soon become, is learned and maintained through her physical body. Throughout the novel, Hillela serves as the primary connector between bodies and politics. Even in one of the novel’s most explicit instances of anti-state resistance in which Hillela is in no way actually involved—that is, in Sasha’s treason trial—Hillela’s body is still the conduit for revolutionary rhetoric. Sasha is charged with high treason against the apartheid state, and the only evidence, the evidence that damns him, is what is described as a “love-letter” (SN 325) written to Hillela. He writes, “*what is there to say. The reasons I’m here are not negotiable (as Joe would put it). I’m where I have to be. Yes, Joe, I want to overthrow the State, I can’t find a way to live in it and see others suffer in it, the way it is or the way it revises its names and its institutions—it’s still the same evil genie changing shapes, you have to smash the bottle from which it rises... That’s the meaning of my life*” (SN 315). This “love-letter” is transmuted into evidence against Sasha’s case:

Sasha was accused with three others ... The ‘love-letter’, the Prosecution submitted, contained a clear statement of the accused’s intention to commit high treason. The passage was read out and the exhibit, numbered 14, passed to the judge: ‘Yes ... I want to overthrow the State ... that is the meaning of my life’. The whole tenor of the letter, the Prosecution continued, made clear that for the



accused the ‘solution’ to South Africa’s problems was revolution. (SN 325)

In the novel, Sasha can only articulate revolution in the context of a love-letter to Hillela—and, at that, he clearly feels he *must* write such a letter: the letter is one he writes to be smuggled out of prison. His sexuality in this sense is insurgent: why else would a love-letter have to be smuggled out of a prison cell, and why else would such a letter come to stand as evidence of his position against the state? The case of Sasha’s love-letter is one of many instances in the novel wherein the “insurgent sexualities” of Hillela and others serve as anti-state forces.

Gordimer’s bodily politics in *A Sport of Nature* extend further than the “insurgent sexualities” of Sasha and Hillela; the novel also serves as a robust defense of the use of violence to fight oppression. Mandela becomes a guiding presence in the novel, even in Hillela’s childhood: “no-one was allowed to record the speech [Mandela] made from the dock; so the schoolgirl Hillela, present when her aunt played a tape-recording of his speech made at Maritzburg, was one of the few people to hear the sound of Mandela’s voice for many years, and perhaps to remember it” (SN 65). The novel ultimately falls in line with Mandela’s justification of MK in his speech from the dock. Whereas many writers during apartheid represented gross human rights violations perpetrated by the state in order to defend the use of violence against the apartheid regime, Gordimer adopts a different strategy. She stages a scene 5,000 miles away from the immediate horrors of the apartheid state to make her case, and she does so through Hillela’s body. While working in Eastern Europe, Hillela encounters a relic of a different traumatic historical event, the Holocaust, in the office of an associate of hers named Karel. ““The label is still there,”” Karel tells Hillela, ““like a can of beans. It’s Zyklon B, the gas the Nazis used in their death chambers”” (SN 227). Hillela’s response is visceral and immediate: “An urge came upon her crudely as an urge to vomit or void her bowels. She began to tremble and flush.

Her eyes were huge with burning liquid she could not hold back... [Karel] knew she was not weeping for the man he had shot dead at his desk, or even for the innocents for whom death was opened like a can of beans. The kitchen floor; it was the kitchen floor” (*SN* 228). Hillela’s first husband, Whaila, was killed by agents of the state in their kitchen, in a single, sudden, traumatic shot (*SN* 212). Upon seeing the Nazi gas canister, Hillela psychically integrates personal and historical traumas; Dominic Head explains that “this grief is clearly associated with an emerging historical and political understanding: the violence of the holocaust, symbolically recontained in the transportable canister, is the violence of political struggle which, in another context, had found its way, fatally, into Hillela’s marital home” (139). The political significance of this historical and political understanding is a revolutionary one. For Gordimer, the lesson the gas canister represents is not one of nonviolence; the Nazis could not have been gently compelled to lay down their arms. Rather, the gas canister represents the urgent necessity of fighting back against totalitarian oppression: “Hillela is here coming to terms with the actuality of violence and death in her personal political commitment, something which Whaila had already tried to convince her of in theory, and which, in contrast, the liberal Pauline never fully accepts” (Head 139). Against a feeble liberalism that might imagine the gas canister as an appeal to nonviolence, Gordimer uses Hillela’s visceral body to advocate for a stronger form of resistance, one that accepts the violent realities and necessities of revolution.

As early as 1959, when she had as yet only published two novels, Gordimer was trying to understand and articulate the nature of loyalty and belonging in the context of apartheid. “Men are not born brothers,” she writes, “they have to discover each other, and it is this discovery that apartheid seeks to prevent” (*Living* 105). By the mid-1960s, however, Gordimer was less concerned with apartheid’s obstruction of human discovery than with what she called her “moral

code”: “I have no religion, no political dogma—only plenty of doubts about everything except my conviction that the colour-bar is wrong and utterly indefensible. Thus I have found the basis of a moral code that is valid for me. Reason and emotion meet in it: and perhaps that is as near to faith as I shall ever get” (“A Writer,” 22). In the following decades, Gordimer’s politics and her writing shift to advocate rebellion against the apartheid regime and society even to the point of violence. What guides her politics—plenty of doubts and an unwavering conviction against injustice—remains the same, but the circumstances that contextualize those politics change. In her address to the PEN Congress in New York in 1986, Gordimer contends that “the Writer himself knows that the only revolution is the permanent one—not in the Trotskyite sense, but in the sense of the imagination, in which no understanding is ever completed, but must keep breaking up and re-forming in different combinations if it is to spread and meet the terrible questions of human existence” (*Living* 193). Approaching the terrible questions of human existence, Gordimer models such a permanent revolution in her prose, and leaves open whatever possibilities might be necessary in order to combat injustice.

### **Toward Revolution**

Gordimer’s aesthetics, like her politics, borrow from Europe, both East and West. Her attitude toward aesthetics and politics is summed up in her claim at the end of “Living in the Interregnum”: “Let the West call us traitors once again, and the East deride us as revisionists” (*Essential* 283). Against capitalism, and against the oppressive, ideological dogmatism of certain forms of communism, Gordimer searches for “a Communism for ‘local conditions’” (*BD* 172). In her political writings, Gordimer makes a plea for “‘distinguish[ing]’ between communisms” (*Essential* 283), as opposed to Communism, in order to create a new leftist politics against the

apartheid South African iteration of capitalism, infused as it is with racist ideology and exploitation of human bodies. Parallel to this political hybridity, Gordimer's fiction amalgamates styles to create something new and at least potentially (if not actually) revolutionary; in Richard Smyer's terms, *A Sport of Nature* operates in "a mode of fiction more closely attuned to the resonances of a revolutionary age and a revolutionary aesthetic" (73).

Gordimer was certainly not alone in trying to write revolution as it happened in South Africa. She considers herself among only "a few white writers" to have "tak[en] upon themselves exactly the same revolutionary responsibilities as black writers... who make no distinction between the tasks of underground activity and writing a story or poem" (*Essential* 294). Among the black writers she cites in this 1984 essay, poet and novelist Mongane Wally Serote stands out for his dual commitment to literary innovation and revolutionary politics. Serote's three novels—*To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), *Gods of Our Time* (1999), and *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002)—demonstrate an anti-apartheid, pro-justice prose that parallels Gordimer's in political conviction translated into literary form. Serote writes, however, from a different vantage point. According to Tlhalo Raditlhalo, Serote's works "are a monument to the brutalization of the black body, and the ineluctable human spirit and will to triumph over adversity" (102). Serote writes as a black South African man who lived much of his life in exile after his activism within South Africa led to imprisonment and torture. His novels reflect this radical political subjectivity.

## **CHAPTER 6:** **Culture and Activism: The Novels of Mongane Wally Serote**

Born just four years before the official start of apartheid, Mongane Wally Serote became known in the 1970s for his poetry—of which he published half a dozen volumes during apartheid—and for his anti-apartheid activism. In the 1970s and 1980s, Serote was affiliated with and often took leadership roles in several anti-apartheid organizations and movements, including Mhloti Black Theatre, MEDU Art Ensemble, the Black Consciousness Movement, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and the ANC, in which he served as cultural attaché in London in the 1980s and head of the Department of Arts and Culture in the 1990s. For Serote both during apartheid and after, art and activism operate in tandem; in his writing and in his organizational roles he mobilizes the one as a means to achieve the ends of the other. Following his arrest, detention, and torture in 1969, Serote left South Africa to live as an exile and an anti-apartheid activist from without. As the movement changed, so did Serote's writing: Essop Patel explains that, "whilst in exile, the poet and his poetry underwent a transformation from resistance to revolution" (191). Events within the country, namely the Soweto Uprising and its swift and violent suppression by the South African Police (SAP) in 1976, deeply influenced Serote's art and activism. Patel describes Serote in this period as "profoundly dedicated to the culture of the oppressed and exploited, as well as being actively engaged in asserting the highest ideals of the revolution. The development of Serote's poetry is indeed consonant with the momentum of the liberation struggle against apartheid" (187). The same is true about his novels, though they are fewer in number than his volumes of poetry. Serote experiments with chronology and narrative perspective, and explores the physical spaces of township, exile, and state. Serote translates personal experience and stories within the anti-apartheid movement—of prison corridors, ANC camps, and township life—into

grander anti-colonial narratives.

Like Gordimer's, Serote's novels exemplify Cold War literature. As Monica Popescu points out, "a hallmark of American Cold War fiction, the fear of betrayal, duplicity, and espionage seeped into the thematic content of literature of the period across the globe" (97). Serote certainly focuses on betrayals, both personal and political—from Tsi Molope's infidelities in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, to the SAP-accommodating Lucas in *Gods of Our Time* and the treacherously promiscuous Sarah in *Scatter the Ashes and Go*—but he also highlights the reverse of that Cold War coin: allegiance. Serote's characters sacrifice their lives and livelihoods for the cause, which is to say, for the lives of others. They commit to the anti-apartheid movement, and in so doing they commit to the fight for black lives and for the principles of equality and social justice. Serote was a traitor to the apartheid order; he was and continues to be a tireless advocate for a broad-reaching, intersectional social justice. Especially in *To Every Birth Its Blood* and *Gods of Our Time*, Serote deploys the novel form against apartheid's policies, social organization, and legacy. He uses narrative to explore space and time in ways that challenge the apartheid regime's authority to regulate the lives of South Africans. In so doing, he indicts the regime for human rights abuses, and he imagines inclusive forms of community that carry the fight for equal rights into the present. During apartheid, in the early 1990s, and even following the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings (1996-1998), Serote underlines the pernicious legacies of apartheid legislation and social organization, while he pushes for their destruction.

### **Weaponized Culture: Art Against Apartheid**

For Serote, the question of how art and activism intersect is a personal one. In an

interview with Rolf Solberg in Cape Town in 1995, Serote describes the correlation as fundamental to his own development: “I was born in Alexandra, a highly politicized community. For one reason or another, I thought I wanted to write and I started writing at quite an early age. The two, politics and writing, have played a key role in my formation as a person: the two feed on each other” (180). Serote was conditioned by writing just as he was conditioned by the political circumstance of growing up in a black township during apartheid in South Africa. In his work both as a writer and as an activist and organizer in the anti-apartheid struggle, Serote took the mutual inflection of art and politics to its logical, and revolutionary, conclusion: because the South African political situation required a revolution, art needed to be revolutionary. This “double commitment, towards liberation and literature” (Patel 191), manifests in the experimental narrative structures and occasionally uneven prose that appear in Serote’s novels. That Serote uses similar revolutionary narrative strategies—especially subversive configurations of space, time, and community—in his later novels suggests that the political situation in the post-apartheid years is still in need of art’s revolutionary influence.

Serote, a committed communist beyond the official end of the Cold War, took a transnational, practical approach to literature and to justice.<sup>1</sup> His plotlines weave across borders, he translates culture into activism as a writer and as an organizer, and his activism borrows from parallel resistance and revolutionary movements across the globe. Priya Narismulu describes the influence [on Serote] of a range of anti-colonial activists, among them the Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau resistance leader Amilcar Cabral. Addressing UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) in

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<sup>1</sup> Serote was training in Moscow when the Berlin Wall fell, and he was devastated by the collapse of the Soviet Union (Popescu 100).

1972 on the critical role of culture in popular struggles for liberation, Cabral pointed out that during resistance a reciprocal relationship between culture and the struggle develops. Culture, as a foundation and a source of inspiration, begins to be influenced by the struggle; and this influence is reflected more or less clearly, in the changing behaviour of social categories and individuals as well... the engaged art of Wally Serote offers substantive evidence that cultural activity in the South African struggle did more than reflect or accompany the liberation process. (83-84)

In the context of a liberatory movement, culture is a vital source of revolutionary change. In the South African context, Serote puts this philosophy into practice in his activism for the ANC and, especially, the MEDU Art Ensemble. Through his work with these organizations, he does more, in Narismulu's terms, than foster mimetic artistic forms and a culture of reflection. Serote sought to weaponize culture, to arm artists—he calls them “cultural workers” (“Power,” 196)—to fight against apartheid and for liberation and justice. If, for Serote, “black music, poetry, and art contained not only a linked set of signifiers of racial tribulation but also the seeds of liberation” (Peffer 52), then the individuals creating such cultural objects are freedom fighters.

Networks of black South African cultural workers map onto networks of resistance and organization. Through the Mhloti Black Theatre, Serote had made connections to Molefe Pheto and Thamsanga “Thami” Mnyele. When the two men founded the MEDU Art Ensemble, a collective of exiled artists and activists, in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1977, Serote quickly added his name to their roster. In addition to producing anti-apartheid posters and newsletters, and sponsoring events like the Culture and Resistance festival in 1982, MEDU served, as John Peffer



points out, as “a think tank for cultural revolution” (77).<sup>2</sup> Serote and his MEDU comrades worked to coalesce artistic practices and political tactics. They strategized “how to ensure that culture becomes a weapon of struggle,” as Serote recalled in a 2015 television interview (“On Surviving the SADF 14th June 1985 Raid,” np). The organization was violently disbanded in 1985 when an early morning raid by the South African Defence Force (SADF) killed nearly a dozen people, including Mnyele. Until that point, however, MEDU facilitated artistic production in public and managed revolutionary violence underground.

The principles of liberatory struggle and creative cultural work came together in the organizational labour that Serote and colleagues coordinated for MEDU. Citing his memberships in the ANC and MK, Serote describes the same marriage of activism and culture in his own writing as well (Serote and Solberg 180). Despite the difficulties of exile and despite being an officially banned person within South Africa—Es’Kia Mphahlele explains that “South Africa issued a blanket ban in 1966 on all its black writers living abroad. This means that their writings are forbidden circulation in South Africa, a measure entrenched in the Internal Security Act” (45)—Serote was a prolific writer. Serote primarily deployed poetry, always a powerful force in resistance movements, in the service of the struggle. In the mid-1970s, though, Serote tried his hand at novel writing. Disturbed and distracted by the Soweto Uprising in 1976, Serote nonetheless completed and published his first novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, in 1981. It would be another twenty years before the publication of his second novel, *Gods of Our Time*, in 1999.

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<sup>2</sup> Nadine Gordimer was one of many attendees of this festival. Although MEDU was a separate entity from the ANC, she nonetheless saw the festival as participating in the larger ANC project. She told Karen Lazar, “I was also becoming more and more involved with the ANC, especially with its cultural side. I was one of the people who went to Botswana to the Culture and Resistance festival, as many of us did. Somehow things were really beginning to move. I also had quite frequent contact with Wally Serote overseas, when he was running the cultural desk of the ANC from London” (151).

In these works, Serote translates his own experiences, including imprisonment and torture at the hands of the police, into fictional literary prose. While both novels include grisly scenes of police brutality and torture, Serote does not aim only to shock or outrage with his writing. Viewing himself as an anti-apartheid, revolutionary activist engaged in cultural labour, Serote understands that his work comes with a responsibility to inspire as well as to educate: “we must as writers, arm the minds and hearts of our children,” he says, “with knowledge, with hope, with optimism, with courage that not one of them must be used to save apartheid. South African literature which does not address itself to these issues is irrelevant” (“Power,” 196). Serote fundamentally believes in the power of resistance writing. Narismulu calls literature “one of the few resources activists could use, to develop more effective and democratic strategies and dispositions for tackling the dangerous challenge of asserting basic rights” (84); Serote tests the capacity and the political force of the novel. Can the novel account for life in the black South African township, or in exile, or in the movement? If it can, how might such a narrative intervene in oppressive state and social formations? In answering these questions, Serote populates his novels with his own experiences: shebeens in Alexandra, illicit border crossings, dank prison hallways, and brutal state agents. His narratives testify to past persecution with the force of truth behind them—his choice to live in exile serves as powerful evidence of his mistreatment by state agents—without claiming facticity as such.

Serote’s novels invoke and incorporate nonfiction stories to challenge state narratives. In so doing, he makes a claim of veracity against the apartheid state’s refutations of excessive force, summary killings, and torture. His novels activate nonfiction stories in a way that other literary forms—human rights pamphlets, legal documents—cannot. In particular, *To Every Birth Its Blood* invokes at least two contemporary cases of egregious police misconduct: one explicitly—

in the case of Ahmed Timol—and one implicitly—in the case of Mohamed Essop.<sup>3</sup> When the protagonist of the first section of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Tsi Molope, undergoes interrogation at John Vorster Square, the man interrogating him, Captain Botha, threatens Tsi with Timol's name and story: "Have you heard of the famous window? ... You have not heard of Timol? ... Didn't you read that he went flying out of a window? ... this is the window he flew out of, this very window. He could not take it any more, so we gave him the choice. Talk or the window. You read what happened, hey?" (89). Serote's story indirectly confirms what was widely suspected about Timol's death in 1971: that he was murdered by the SAP—thrown out of a tenth-story window, just as Botha threatens Tsi—during interrogation. The official state story, only issued after public outcry for an investigation into Timol's death, is one of spontaneous and unforced suicide: "While the Security Police were interrogating him in a sound-proof room on the tenth floor of the new police headquarters in Johannesburg, Timol, according to General Stoffel Buys, head of the CID [Criminal Investigation Department], who investigated the incident, 'stormed towards the window and jumped through it'" (Bernstein 1). No one was held responsible for the death, and no mention of mistreatment by the SAP was mentioned in official reports.

Timol's story opens a 1972 International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) pamphlet, entitled *South Africa: The Terrorism of Torture*. In the pamphlet, Hilda Bernstein asks "for what reason" (1) Timol jumped. She calls the jump "an inexplicable act," and complains that an inquest opened on the case in November 1971 had been delayed indefinitely at her time of writing (1). In the case of Mohamed Essop, a young man assaulted brutally by SAP agents while

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<sup>3</sup> Timol's name also appears in *Gods of Our Time*, alongside the names of Steve Biko and Looksmart Khulile Ngudle (31).

in detention, an inquest was brought to resolution. The document itself is damning. An SAP Colonel, P.J. Greyling, is charged in the inquest with “show[ing] a singular lack of any concern about [Essop’s] condition,” even while claiming he had, before any assault on Essop took place, “particular concern about [Essop’s] welfare and frequently asked him whether he had any complaints” (Inquest, Case No. M. 1804/71: 18). The inquest concludes that Colonel Greyling’s testimony is false: “according to his evidence, he did not show that much interest [after the assault] to ask Dr. Kemp about the patient’s condition. On the balance of probability this cannot be true” (Inquest, Case No. M. 1804/71: 19). Both documents work to reveal contemptible and often illegal behaviour of by high-ranking members of the SAP and others (including doctors, lawyers, and other civilians). Both *South Africa: The Terrorism of Torture* and the Inquest on *Ismail Essop v. The Commissioner of the South African Police and Colonel Greyling* are critical of the South African regime. However, accessibility and audience are problems for these documents if they are utilized for the purposes of activism by exposure. Bernstein uses the form of the protest pamphlet—in this case, 54-pages of documentation, testimony, and legal assessment on various injustices and abuses of power by the SAP and the South African judiciary—in order to rally outrage against the apartheid regime and support for its opponents. Such a pamphlet, however, was unlikely to circulate among individuals not already to some degree sympathetic to the anti-apartheid cause. Similarly, the inquest—not an activist document per se, but a legal document presently held in hard copy at the Historical Papers Research Archive at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg—would not have been widely circulated or widely available at the time of its publication, and certainly would not have appealed to a casual reader of either fiction or nonfiction.

Serote’s approach targets the same activist ends that proponents of both pamphlet and

inquest seek, but he employs the novel form as his vehicle for that activism. The novel as a literary form is at least ostensibly more accessible and more widely disseminated in society at large than either other document. The novel, what Muxe Nkondo calls “a form which can produce imaginative models of the total society... and can endow each character, each scene, each image with [the author’s] own sense of value” (58), can present the same kind of information as the nonfiction autobiography, protest pamphlet, or legal inquest.<sup>4</sup> The novel adds, through narrative, an implicit—crucially, rather than explicit—value judgement of that information. *To Every Birth Its Blood*, for example, never makes an outright claim that the SAP’s official reports “cannot be true” (Inquest, Case No. M. 1804/71: 19). Nor does the novel make an explicit plea for individuals to “understand the implications of this challenge to our humanity,” “accept the necessity and the solemn responsibility of our reply” (Bernstein 53), or to accept, as factually true, its story. Rather, the novel form models human responses to the brutal security apparatus of the South African apartheid state.

In Part I of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Tsi Molohe serves as the primary example of a human response to apartheid. A flashback early on in the novel, narrated by Tsi, details two assault scenes which took place over the course of one evening. Tsi, at that time a newspaper journalist, and his colleague Boykie, a photographer for the same publication, are twice stopped by police en route home from covering a story. The first incident happens in just a few minutes, several of which the narrative conceals in a paragraph break while Tsi is unconscious:

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<sup>4</sup> In *Writing as Resistance: Life Stories of Imprisonment, Exile, and Homecoming from Apartheid South Africa* (2003), Paul Gready argues that nonfiction life narratives carry a particular and potent form of political currency in the South African context. Nonfiction autobiographical narratives serve “as a means through which the opponents of apartheid retained and regained agency and power” (1). In order to challenge the egregious manipulations of language perpetrated by the apartheid state, the authors of these subversive life stories reclaim truth and, Gready claims, some degree of power: “Power was the ability to determine truth” (8).

I turned and faced the cop next to me. That is when something hit me. I tried to hold on, not to fall. Something crashed again, right into my face. I heard myself hitting the earth, and felt a dull heavy pain in my stomach.

When I opened my eyes, I felt light pierce into them, straight, as if to dig the back of my head. I heard voices. Shouting. I realized I was lying on the floor.  
(*EBB* 50)

The two men are released the same night, worse for wear, and continue their drive home on a dark highway. As they approach another group of police officers, waving them over to the side of the road, Tsi recalls, “the horror clung to me, erased my speech. We were lost in the night and the drama of our time was this time set again. It was not just another story to be written and submitted at some deadline. It was us who were the issue of the drama, of the vicious hatred white people have managed to have against black people” (*EBB* 52). Held on no official charges, Tsi and Boykie are released after a week in detention—a week which, Tsi describes, entailed assault after humiliation after assault. Their release is also glossed over in the space between paragraphs:

For seven days I lay in the cell, alone, eating, drinking and dreaming. I lay in my cell preferring to be there and nowhere else.

Now we were driving again, along the same road that a night had not allowed us to travel on and finish. (*EBB* 55)

This traumatic experience shapes the first half of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, narratively and contextually.

Throughout Part I of the novel, from the very first page, the traumatic past continuously interjects and interrupts the present. Tsi has fallen into depression, he drinks heavily and wanders

aimlessly. Formerly a journalist, and formerly involved in an activist theatre group and vibrant community, Tsi gropes for meaning in a life continually threatened by the potential of both literal and psychic traumatic repetition. As a model of human response, Tsi's depression makes sense in the face of the trauma he himself has experienced and the ongoing anxieties he encounters regarding the detentions of his brother and other acquaintances. The novel also models his recovery and development, finally, into an activist ostensibly working at "McLean's College, heading a research unit which was aimed at compiling syllabuses for high school drop-outs, and investigating ways of effectively introducing the correspondence school to the blacks in South Africa" (*EBB* 86), while clandestinely "finding out how the college could be used, if it could be used at all" (*EBB* 88) in the larger context of the anti-apartheid movement.

Broaching the subject of black township life—and particularly the life of a man who might otherwise, in common parlance, be considered a hopeless degenerate—Serote reminds his readers "that the South African regime is illegitimate. That while we are not surprised that it maintains itself through terrorism, we are not expecting too much when we expect everyone to be outraged" ("Now," 15). Tsi's depression, drunkenness, and apathy early in the novel have a root in the abuses of an illegitimate regime. Serote emphasizes, in *To Every Birth Its Blood* and in *Gods of Our Time*, the human effects of state-sanctioned torture, intimidation, and murder. Tsi and others—Mlambo and Eddy in *Gods of Our Time* (123-127), for instance—are beaten brutally, some are killed. A young woman, Nolizwe, is remembered by her lover as "only one of the many, many people who were dying because there was no crisis in his country" (*EBB* 96). Conversely, the torturers—Captain Botha, or the relentlessly brutal Derek van Niekerk of *Gods of Our Time*—enlarge themselves through their violent deeds. As Sartre describes in his introduction to Henri Alleg's account of torture in Algeria, *La Question* (1958), the perpetrators

of torture “want to convince themselves and their victims of their invincible power: sometimes they present themselves as supermen who have other men at their mercy, and sometimes as men, strong and severe, who have been entrusted with the most obscene, ferocious, and cowardly of animals, the human animal” (20). Serote captures this phenomenon in vivid colour. Where Sartre explains that “the main thing is to make the prisoner feel that he does not belong to the same species” (20), Serote documents over and over again black characters’ feelings of dehumanization and animalization. Tsi remembers feeling “grateful for what [black township] Alexandra’s streets had taught me... they had taught me a kind of animal agility... a readiness to defend my life at all costs” (*EBB* 45). Even in civil situations—interactions between Tsi and the lift man in the newspaper office, for instance—the brutal mentality of the white man is immanent. The man “saw victory in what the article [detailing Tsi’s assault and detention] had said” (*EBB* 74). He quips to Tsi and a black colleague, ““ons gaan julle skiet, die hele lot van julle...” [“we’re going to shoot you, the whole lot of you”] (*EBB* 78). Fleshing out in fiction the lives of individuals who might otherwise remain nameless or inexplicable, Serote underlines the apartheid state’s flagrant disregard for black life and challenges state- and socially-sanctioned white supremacy.

### **Narrating In and Around the State**

While he draws intense character portraits and describes the minutiae of state structures of violence, Serote does not neglect to portray in detail the spaces in which these characters live and this violence occurs. Certainly the geographical space of the state of South Africa looms large in Serote’s narratives: many characters, including Tsi, for instance, cross the finite borders of the country for training, sanctuary, or both. Over and over again in his narratives, freedom



fighters clandestinely slink across South Africa's borders into MK encampments in frontline states and Eastern European training sites. The state, however, is not the only spatial organizer to which Serote attends. Spaces of township and exile especially come to the fore as settings that structure both characters' lives and the shape of the narratives that describe them. Building on Rita Barnard's configuration of South African space in *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, I contend that some of the more experimental literary aspects of Serote's novels are fundamentally conditioned by uniquely South African spaces, both spaces within the state and outside it. The rhythms of narrative, refigurations of personal and community development, and inflections of history in Serote's novels cannot signify outside the apartheid context.

Barnard's fundamental claim in *Apartheid and Beyond* rests on how she defines the apartheid system in terms of space: it "clearly represents an extreme and therefore starkly illuminating instance of the territorialization of power" (5). In fact, apartheid, in Barnard's understanding, would have been an unworkable enterprise without the legislative ordering of space and its violent physical enforcement. "The essential political features of South Africa's 'pigmentocratic industrialized state' were fundamentally space-dependent," she claims, "without such territorial devices as the black township and the bantustan, and the policing of these spaces by means of forced removals and the pass laws, apartheid would have been impossible to implement" (6). Serote's novels contextualize some of these spatial-legislative strategies. Pass laws hang over *To Every Birth Its Blood*. Tsi pays the fee late for his pass, and is threatened with even more restriction to his movements as a penalty: "My turn came, I gave them their ten rand, they warned me not to owe so much, threatened to cancel my permit if I did, they gave me a slip and I left" (*EBB* 38). The manufactured divides between city, suburb, village, and rural area

inflect the experiences of characters in *Gods of Our Time*: a coloured man, James, muses, “what is a village, what is a rural area?... Is this a village? He had not been to one, anywhere as he criss-crossed South Africa” (226). In both novels, the SAP contains funeral marches within strict boundaries, whether for Tsi’s assassinated nephew, Oupa, at the end of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, or for the scores of fallen and murdered children in *Gods of Our Time*.

Different spatial organizations yield different narrative constructions. Whereas a city might be conducive to one sort of protagonist or storyline, a rural farm might be conducive to another.<sup>5</sup> Both the township setting and the space(s) of exile animate narrative arcs that bend toward collectivity or connection. By rewriting South African spaces and spatial organization, Serote uncovers a revolutionary potential inherent within the state’s highly-regulated and disciplinary boundaries. The state’s control of definitions of space reaches its limit when it encounters the individuals who inhabit and traverse those spaces. According to Barnard, “the fact that the disciplinary space of the township became the crucial locus of resistance in the antiapartheid struggle suggests that we need to be suspicious of totalizing models of power, of descriptions of place that ignore the transformative and creative capacities of human beings” (*Apartheid* 7). Carefully planned infrastructure meant to facilitate state control gets retooled to promote, instead, both real and symbolic anti-state actions.<sup>6</sup> Wide lanes originally built to allow

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<sup>5</sup> This dynamic is one of the compelling aspects of Nadine Gordimer’s Booker Prize-winning novel *The Conservationist* (1974), in which protagonist Mehring, a successful businessman in the city, moves to the country to live on a farm.

<sup>6</sup> Barnard describes how “the very design elements that the planners advocated for functional, scientific, and aesthetic reasons—the broad streets, the ‘green areas’ between the cities and the townships, and the bold, graph-like patterns of the roads and houses—were simultaneously also strategic devices. The broad streets permitted access to armored vehicles (they were wide enough to allow a Saracen tank to make a turn); buffer zones and limited road access allowed the townships to be sealed off from the cities in times of unrest; and the orderly repetition of identical houses on a geometric grid facilitated surveillance by police and informers. The ‘modern’ solution to a housing shortage amounted, in short, to a mechanism of control”

police and military access become conduits for large-scale, emblematic marches, with enough space for masses of humanity to toyi-toyi in unison. The intense concentration of people within the township space fosters diverse networks of community and collaboration at the same time that it makes poverty nearly inevitable (a sure goal of the apartheid state). Tsi's fragmented description of Alexandra illustrates both outcomes:

Seven streets. Twenty-two avenues. Houses. Tin houses. Brick houses. Torn  
Streets. Smell. Dongas. Dirty water in street. Dark city. The devil's kitchen.  
Township. Alex. What is this mess? Our home. Our country. Our world.  
Alexandra. Permits. Police. Security police. Permit police. CID. South African  
police. Pass police. Murder and Robbery squad. Paying water accounts. Toilet  
accounts. House permit. Resident permit. Tax. Rent. Bus fare. Taxi fare. What is  
Alexandra? (*EBB* 36)

In this passage, the litany of disciplinary institutions and state-imposed injustices, many of them economic or infrastructural, read as an indictment of the state for human rights abuses. This passage therefore implicitly—although clearly—makes claims for fundamental human and civil rights.

In Tsi's rendering, Alexandra is not merely a government-enforced enclosure for a disproportionately large swath of the black South African community. Alex is "*our* home." The initial claim of ownership extends immediately to a more revolutionary one: South Africa is "*our country*," and the world is "*our world*" in which to live, presumably, with the full rights and privileges of humanity, citizenship, and belonging. The collective "*our*" is a byproduct, Serote makes clear, of the spatial enforcements of the apartheid regime. As Barnard explains it, "social

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(*Apartheid* 6-7).

segregation requires also a certain spatial aggregation... imposed divisions open up the possibility of new communities, new identities, new affiliations” (*Apartheid* 8). Individuals who may have been isolated in a different environment in the township are forced into interaction, and often into supporting roles or full membership and participation in the Movement. *To Every Birth Its Blood*, centered as it is on Alexandra, draws lines of connection among disparate characters. Everyone seems to be related to, to have worked with, or otherwise to know everyone else. For example, John, a minor character in Part I, becomes the centre of attention on the first page of Part II. In the first chapter of the novel, Tsi describes John and his “One Day Service Dry Cleaners” (*EBB* 11) in only two short paragraphs. John serves here more as a gloss on township weekends—“on Saturday people dress well. John was giving them their clothes” (*EBB* 11)—than as a participatory character in Tsi’s story. In Part II, we recognize him, generic name notwithstanding, by the third line: “He had just come back from his rounds, collecting clothes for dry cleaning” (*EBB* 95). By the end of the novel, John finds himself squarely within the movement. His dry cleaner delivery truck and uniforms, “white dustcoats and caps that announced: One Day Service Dry Cleaners” (*EBB* 171), get repurposed for transportation and disguise. John directly facilitates an attack on the police: he drives off as Mandla and Tuki, clad in said dustcoats, “opened fire” (*EBB* 172).

The space of the township inflects Serote’s narrative both formally and contextually. Conditioned by the close-quarters of township life, Serote’s narrative documents the nearly unending and unavoidable personal encounters, the clamor and tumult of the streets and shebeens, and the comprehensive sights, sounds, and smells of the everyday township. A particularly affective example of this is Serote’s use of music, to season and to structure the narrative. Jazz musician and scholar Salim Washington argues that, “music, especially African

American and South African jazz, form the primary narrative device [in *To Every Birth Its Blood*], showing us the consciousness and actions of Tsi when his alienation renders him effectively mute and impotent” (101). The first two chapters of the novel reverberate constantly with the sounds of Nina Simone (7), Buddy Miles (8), Miriam Makeba (9), Hugh Masekela (9), John Coltrane (16), Dollar Brand (17), and Max Roach (20). Tsi’s moments of greatest introspection are accompanied by “Miles Davis’ trumpet climbing, high, climbing high, high, cutting through distances, flying high, flying high,” and Coltrane “coming in with his battle, perpetual battle that must have at last killed him” (*EBB* 27). The air of the township space resounds with black music, specifically black music engaged in the (transnational) anti-racist struggle. Serote does not choose musicians at random. Washington calls those musicians Serote does include—Masekela, Makeba, Dollar Brand, Coltrane, and others—“musicians whose artistry rebelled against the artistic limitations or orthodoxy, and by implication (though often explicitly) with the political limitations that obtained in a racist, capitalist state” (116). The affective experience of township life, suffused as it is with poverty, violence, and the forward momentum of the movement, echoes across the landscape, and gives both ambiance and narrative rhythm to Serote’s novel.

Where *To Every Birth Its Blood* is primarily structured by the township, *Gods of Our Time* draws predominantly from the circuit between townships and spaces of exile. In a real sense in the novel, “each time the bell tolls the death of one person, several refugees spill across borders” (Mphahlele 30)—whether borders of neighborhood, township, or country. Characters aid and abet each other’s geographical movements as well as their movement forward through the chapters. Points of crossover between them propel the narrative. *Gods of Our Time* proceeds by associative logic: circuitous and contingent, the stories of characters build a coherent narrative

only in concert, occasionally literally. Individual voices rise to the surface momentarily, and are subsumed again in the crowd. During one of many funeral scenes in the novel, for instance, Lindi, a singer and old friend of the semi-anonymous narrator, emerges as “a single voice whose strength held this large, strong, angered crowd” (*GT* 171).<sup>7</sup> Her voice, although strong, cannot sustain the movement alone. The thousands gathered for the funeral follow and fortify her song: “There was movement. More song. Lindi took the song. Her voice sailed above the voices of the thousands of people. She led the song, increased the pace of the rhythm [sic]. The people began to dance the *toyi-toyi*” (*GT* 174). Emblematic of the anti-apartheid struggle, the *toyi-toyi* only works in a crowd. It is necessarily massive, and therein lies its revolutionary force. While Lindi leads the crowd in song, the narrator quickly broadens his focus:

A young voice intercepted the song; the crowd replied. Another song. I realised then that there were fathers and mothers in the crowd. I realised that I had not understood what it was when I kept saying the community, the community—everyone was here. They came from Natal, OFS [the Orange Free State], and the Cape—many, many shades of blacks. Young men, young women, singing in line, in rhythm [sic] with the chant, with the slogan. And these kept them close with old men and women. Workers, I thought, are here. They must be here because they are the community! For a while I felt safe. Just for a while. (*GT* 174)

The movement is necessarily diverse, intersectional, and collective. It draws from different age groups, genders, geographical points, and occupations. In the narrative context, individuals from these groups serve as links between them. Lindi herself connects story lines, from the funeral

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<sup>7</sup> We only learn the name of the narrator, Motsamayi, in passing in the antepenultimate chapter: “I was not really surprised that [a comrade] knew my name though I did not know his. It always happens like that in the underground” (*GT* 272).

marches to the bombing of the “Moscow” house in Alexandra (*GT* 195-197), executed by her former lover who has been manipulated by the SAP. Collectivity is a necessary device to *Gods of Our Time*, for narrative reasons as well as for political ones.

In both township and exile stories, forms of community structure narrative. In *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Tsi narrates the entirety of Part I in the first person, but he disappears almost completely from Part II. Yet the numbering of chapters continues without interruption. Part II does not begin again with a new chapter One; it opens with chapter Nine. The story continues without its protagonist, or, as Washington suggests, “the protagonist grows from a single person to a national community” (96). Serote reconfigures of the protagonist role, rather than rejecting it completely from the first page. In so doing, he signals two complementary developments. On the one hand, Serote’s abandonment of the individual protagonist registers as a rejection of Anglo-American individualism and hero-worship to which other South African authors, including Gordimer, often subscribe. The pride of place that Nelson Mandela and Bram Fischer hold in Gordimer’s work does not find parallel in Serote’s. *Gods of Our Time*, for example, is premised on the rejection of singular heroism. The “Gods” Serote follows are the everyday foot soldiers of the struggle: the children of Soweto (the year 1976 recurs with particular frequency throughout the novel), the old woman who, “when she heard that her house was called Moscow by the young people living in it... was touched” (*GT* 150), the white woman, ex-wife of a monstrous police agent, who betrays him. Serote argues, “Nelson Mandela is a symbol of struggle... when we talk about him, as he always said, we must remember that there were thousands of other people like him, who marched against great odds” (“A poetry Event to Mandela Day,” np). Reconfiguring the protagonist role to accommodate a community rather than a hero, Serote reminds his readers of the vastness of the anti-apartheid enterprise. In his own words, Serote

explains, “I don’t subscribe to the manner in which films are made in Hollywood where individuals can change the whole world, nor do I subscribe to the simplistic approach of some European novels where one person is a hero or heroine” (Serote and Solberg 182). The community at large is a more important focalizer of the principles of the Movement as Serote understands it—collaborative, inclusive, humanitarian—than any single individual. On the other hand, *Gods of Our Time* marshals “the democratisation of narrative perspective *and its accompanying recuperation of the individual self* within a communal subject” (M. Green 252; emphasis added). Tsi does in fact reappear in the final chapters, where he gives a speech at the funeral of his nephew, as a member of the movement. This reappearance, though, does not restore him as protagonist. Instead he, like each of the activists in the novel, is one actor among many, a conscientious cog in the larger machine of anti-apartheid resistance.

### **Keeping Time**

The spaces of township and exile ultimately fall under the larger categories of state and nation. The transnational flows of exiled individuals may lead to more expansive interests in world politics or more inclusive formulations of human rights. That is to say, exile can be a space free from solely national concerns. Serote cites his years in exile as the years when he “was also concerned with world power-politics, other liberation struggles” (D. Brown 148). At the same time, one’s state or nation of birth, belonging, or citizenship is difficult fully to eclipse. Homi Bhabha emphasizes “how fully the shadow of the nation falls on the condition of exile” (140-141). Nation and state, however, both function in more than spatial terms. They can be organizers of ideology, of culture, and, crucially for the narratives that constellate around them, of time and of history. Serote capitalizes on the temporal qualities of nation and state, employing



time narratively to recast histories and to bolster the anti-apartheid movement. As Nkondo contends, “his mission is to bring a new narrative order into South African history, and through his art he seeks to reset society’s clock by imposing upon it his own method of defining the times” (54). Serote formulates a compound narrative temporality capacious enough to address both historical traumas, individual and collective, and the future-oriented anti-apartheid Movement.

While nation and state are separate entities—sometimes cleaved together as the nation-state, other times oriented oppositionally—the temporalities they command correspond. Both nation and state claim the authority to determine official histories. Both claim a larger-than-(human)-life temporal schema. According to Yogita Goyal, “nation time is linear and developmental... nation time links past, present, and future in a march towards progress” (15). In the same way, state time requires a direct line of progress from the moment of its inception. In the South African context, there are several historical moments that could be considered the point of origin: 1652, the start of Dutch colonization; 1902, the end of the Second Boer War; or 1948, the beginning of the National Party regime. Each of these denotes a particular emphasis to the definition of nation or state: ethnicity, sovereignty, or policy. During the apartheid era, the latter of these definitions takes precedence, while still informed by previous iterations. In Ian Baucom’s conception, the state uses historical origin stories in order to set “itself off as guarantor of national culture and the sole measure of imaginable time” (“Afterword,” 714). In this formulation temporality becomes a form of social and cultural control. Culture and imagination are restricted within national bounds. Non-state stories, histories before the inauguration of the state, and imagined post-state futures are dangerous apocrypha. In the sense of temporality, then, Serote is a traitor to the South African state. His stories explore non-state temporalities, he

coopts national time for the anti-apartheid movement, and he envisions temporality transgenerationally, in contravention of the white South African state's temporal boundaries.

Aiming to disrupt and recast the temporality of the apartheid state, Serote often employs what Michela Borzaga calls "literary representations of phenomenological time" (65).

Phenomenological time—time as experienced, rather than time as historiographically or otherwise constructed—stands in direct opposition to the time of the state. It challenges the linearity and inevitability that state time represents, and it authorizes individuals to organize time differently. Tsi's narrative follows his consciousness rather than only his physical body: drunken moments blur together, recollections interrupt present time, unconsciousness—whether from sleep, intoxication, or battery—leaves gaps in the middle of otherwise coherent stories. Tsi's narrative reads as unauthoritative from the perspective of the state: it is incomplete and it lacks clearly intelligible causality or a sense of progress. Often, it is more concerned with the senses than with any grander historical narrative. Sentences split into short clauses and often return on themselves: "The smell of the dirty water in the streets—the water, full of shit and all imaginable rubbish—felt as though it had become my saliva; the noise of the children, mothers calling, salesmen singing about their products, the music from radios and grams, crowded my head and seemed to become the pulse which I could feel heaving on the side of my head" (*EBB* 23).

Flashes of sensory experience define Tsi's narrative style when he describes his life in Alexandra, which runs counter to a statist narrative of township life.

Phenomenological time suits the township narrative style; it also operates in a narrative trying to accommodate something like anti-apartheid resistance. While the movement is goal-oriented toward the future, a linear and simply forward-moving narrative cannot account for the temporal multidirectionality such a movement necessarily entails. Borzaga explains that, in the

context of South Africa, “being an activist, therefore, meant being able to project oneself into a notional future while simultaneously inhabiting what I call a ‘present in pain’: a present that instead of feeling spacious, safe or uninterrupted, bears the quality of the temporary and the traumatic” (69). Anti-apartheid activists and freedom fighters do not materialize out of an uncontested history or otherwise untraumatic circumstances. They are conditioned by the violations of body, community, and history that the apartheid regime requires to maintain supremacy. Therefore, the narratives that describe and participate in the anti-apartheid Movement employ compound temporalities, comprised of personal recollections and experiences, individual and collective traumas and traumatic repetitions, and a forward-moving, revolutionary hope.

Serote often anchors the phenomenological time of his novels in dates of particular historical and community importance in South Africa. The 1976 Soweto Uprising, in particular, has a central role in both *To Every Birth Its Blood* and *Gods of Our Time*. As Nick Visser points out, Serote composed *To Every Birth Its Blood* across the temporal chasm of Soweto: he began writing the novel a year or so before the event, and finished it after the fact (Titlestad 110; M. Green 250; Sole 53). The events of 1976 necessarily change and structure the completed novel. 1976 stands in the way of dates the apartheid regime would rather fashion its narratives. According to Kelwyn Sole, “in order to sunder the false time of white minority rule, Serote asserts the need for a new type of social order and a new, non-shameful (he opposes ‘shame’ to ‘respect’ throughout the novel) experience of self and time” (70). The movement’s dates, in Serote’s formulation, are the historical dates of importance. They do not represent victories of the apartheid regime, nor do they represent insurmountable traumas. Instead, they figure as instrumental moments in the progression toward apartheid’s abolition. In “Power to the People:

A Glory to Creativity,” Serote explains, “three hundred years of living under oppression and exploitation is a thorough process of generations upon generations being subjected to a systematic programme of dehumanization; and seventy-four years of being an organized people struggling to become part of the humanity is on the other hand a pointer to the size, depth and height of odds faced, also to the vastness of the wealth of experience gained” (194). Soweto contributes to the monumentality of responsibility that activists in the movement take on, but Soweto is not the only milestone in this regard. In *Gods of Our Time*, the narrator reflects, “it is August 9th—we have gone through March 30th, June 16th and 26th and have rapidly arrived at August 9th. Too many, just too many things have happened” (64). Soweto is one historical event among many: 9 August 1956, the Women’s March in Pretoria; 20 March 1960, the Langa March against pass laws; 26 June 1950, an ANC day of mourning and general strike. The challenge of a narrative working against the apartheid regime is to organize these “just too many things” coherently, and in such a way as to encourage and enable revolutionary change.

Improbably, Serote ultimately corrals the phenomenological and often traumatic time of his characters and anti-apartheid community back into a semi-linear narrative. Rather than accommodating the state time of the apartheid regime this strategy serves to bolster the resistance movement and lend it legitimacy and revolutionary force. The linear inevitability that state time entails gets repurposed, and points toward liberation. Sole argues that, “a linear perception of time, such as Serote works with in the second half of [*To Every Birth Its Blood*], is essential for the psychology and ideology of national liberation to operate... [There is] a presupposition of linearity and logicity to the time individuals in any defined nation possess” (70). Serote endeavors to define a new nation, and linearity lends coherence: the multifaceted Movement—comprised of nearly countless individuals, organizations, causes, and anti-apartheid

demonstrations large and small—is unified under the linear, national time of Serote’s resistance narratives.

The temporal logic of Serote’s anti-apartheid nation is fundamentally one of generations: he redefines historical moments, connects individuals personally and historically, and shows how the movement exceeds the state’s temporal (and geographical) boundaries. In *Gods of Our Time*, while sitting in a room in the “Moscow” house full of younger activists, the narrator muses, “Lindi and I came from another time. A time no-one here had been in. We were in ‘Moscow’ now, all of us” (166). The contemporaneity of the struggle connects generations past with generations present and future. The temporal disconnect no longer obtains in the face of ongoing oppression. Geographical space and historical time collapse into the all-encompassing here and now, which works, unendingly, for a more egalitarian future. The logic of Serote’s narratives relies upon generations of past struggle—back as far as the struggle of ancestors who fought for freedom from the European colonizers—recontextualized for the needs of the present. That the generations of black people in South Africa who fought against white colonizers and oppressors have not yet won is not, for Serote, evidence of futility. On the contrary, the generationality of the struggle is part and parcel of the reason it remains necessary and must, ultimately, succeed.

Serote traces the lineage of the movement alongside individual family genealogies. In *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Serote unfolds the story of Dikeledi, a young woman already working at odds with the regime as a newspaper writer who becomes radicalized, by way of personal lineage. Serote details the lives and histories of Dikeledi’s family: her sister Mpho, brother Morolong, mother Grace, and father Michael. The stories move from thread to narrative thread: her brother’s expulsion from the family home, her parents’ meeting, her father’s own revolutionary, anti-apartheid activism, and his speech from the dock at his trial (*EBB* 131). This

last story leads directly into Dikeledi's recruitment into the movement: when, following her father's sentencing to 15 years in prison, Oupa (Tsi's nephew) and John (of dry-cleaning fame) visit Dikeledi's home to express their condolences and solidarity, Oupa makes an explicit plea to her to join the cause: "The boers are fighting us, as simple as that. We have to pitch up a battle" (*EBB* 139). Almost immediately, Dikeledi finds herself hard at work, enmeshed in an intersectional, far-reaching movement: "she had fought, with her career at stake during inner conferences at the newsroom, for the right to talk about blacks, not 'non-whites', in her articles. One bright day she had won. Then some of the people who were fighting in hospitals, in classrooms, in those empty, dry, country schools, at conferences, had shown her that they respected her. They had shown her that she was one of them" (*EBB* 141-142). Dikeledi's present actions, and the actions of her co-conspirators in the struggle, will generate the future in the same way that her father's past actions have generated hers.

Serote sees a generational dynamic as the primary force at work in his own literary activism. Parallel to embodied forms of activism and legislative forms of progress—for instance, public acts of resistance and international human rights declarations—literature can be generative. Seyla Benhabib describes the latter as "jurisgenerative": "the 'jurisgenerative' effects of human rights declarations and treaties enable new actors—such as women and ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities—to enter the public sphere, to develop new vocabularies of public claim-making, and to anticipate new forms of justice" (*Dignity* 15). Similarly, literary forms facilitate intersections between groups working toward social and political justice. Serote models human responses to apartheid and he creates narratives that envision and endorse collaborative, forward-moving networks of resistance in his novels. He works for "democracy, rule by the majority," and demands that "the majority must consist of increasingly greater

numbers of people” (Serote and Solberg 182). Inclusion is a hallmark of Serote’s politics. In *Gods of Our Time* especially, he endeavors to represent the interconnections among a litany of socio-political actors and issues. Racial equality, women’s rights, gay rights, the issue of AIDS in South Africa, and poverty, among many others, feature as central to the main characters and plotlines.

When asked in a 2014 interview what he hoped for in the coming decades of South African literature, Serote replied, “I wish that it can bloom, it can create more new writers who are honest, who are uncompromisingly patriotic, who will always continuously evaluate what the struggle for liberation has gained, and how it should be taken forward” (“On the Role of Literature in the Struggle for Liberation,” np). Literature’s revolutionary potential is not spent when the apartheid regime ends, nor does it cease to be relevant following the 1994 election of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa, or following the TRC hearings and report. Crucially, Serote understands the revolutionary nature of literature to be employable in the name of patriotism. While he used literature as a weapon against the state—treasonously, some might say—he did so for his countrymen. Serote patriotically deploys art as activism in order to protest against an oppressive regime: he is, and encourages other writers to be, a necessary traitor.

## **TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES**



## CHAPTER 7: Ocean Currents: Abdulrazak Gurnah's Transnational Routes

On 20 April 1968, British MP Enoch Powell took the floor at a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham, England, to deliver his now famous “Rivers of Blood” speech. In politically incendiary rhetoric, Powell advocated immediate and drastic changes to British immigration law and practice. “We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependents,” he scolded: “in these circumstances nothing will suffice but that the total inflow for settlement should be reduced at once to negligible proportions, and that the necessary legislative and administrative measures be taken without delay” (“Rivers of Blood,” np).<sup>1</sup> A few months earlier, in late 1967, Abdulrazak Gurnah began the journey from his homeland—Tanzania, formerly Zanzibar—to England. Gurnah circumvented the complex and, Powell’s rhetoric notwithstanding, often exclusionary British immigration process. In a 2012 interview with Tina Steiner, Gurnah recalled his experience: “We came as tourists... we enrolled [in University] and after being accepted, only then did we apply for a visa. The immigration authorities weren’t happy about that and there had to be a little bit of acting and crying, but in the end they said alright” (“A Conversation,” 158). Elsewhere, he calls himself an “illegal emigrant” (qtd. in Chambers 122). In 1982 Gurnah completed a PhD at the University of Kent, where he is now a Professor in the School of English. Two decades after his arrival in England, Gurnah published his first novel, *Memory of Departure* (1987). Of his seven

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<sup>1</sup> Powell’s speech features prominently in the literature on Britain and Britishness in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987) and Ian Baucom’s *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (1999) are exemplary in this regard. Nadine Attewell, in *Better Britons: Reproduction, Nation, and the Afterlife of Empire* (2014), lists “Rivers of Blood” as one of several “narratives of engulfment,” which, she argues, “work to confine Britishness within sharply defined borders” (29).

novels published since, several have been shortlisted for prestigious literary awards, including the Booker Prize (*Paradise*, 1994) and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (*Desertion*, 2006). Gurnah's novels often focus on migrant characters, including refugees and asylum seekers, to challenge formulations of nationalism and citizenship both in post-Revolutionary Zanzibar and in the UK.<sup>2</sup> He documents what, half a century earlier, Hannah Arendt diagnosed as the peculiar plight of the refugee: "the natives," she says, "confronted with such strange beings as we are, become suspicious; from their point of view, as a rule, only a loyalty to our old countries is understandable" ("We Refugees," 118). Thinking through the experience of the asylum-seeking migrant, Gurnah critiques the exclusionary impulses of racist governments and corrupt government officials. In his novels, Gurnah offers alternative modes of affiliation as ancillary to or in place of traditional, state-sanctioned citizenship.

The aftermath of empire was not kind to its erstwhile subjects. According to Peter Kalliney, "by the late nineteenth century, the concept of Englishness had become so dependent on imperialism that it had become difficult to articulate a form of national identity without referring to it... The threat, and later the reality, of imperial decline forced the English to turn inward, to perform a thorough inventory of Englishness in the absence of an expansive imperial imaginary" (5). In their inventory of what comprises Englishness, individuals like Enoch Powell conclude that "Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants" do not qualify ("Rivers of Blood," np). In other words, many white English residents were imagining an exclusively white national community. Seeking to incorporate the figure of the migrant—especially the migrant of

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<sup>2</sup> Zanzibar was a British Protectorate (rather than a colony) from 1890 to late 1963. In early 1964, the Zanzibar Revolution deposed the Sultan of Zanzibar. Shortly thereafter, Zanzibar merged with Tanganyika. As part of Tanzania, Zanzibar remains semi-autonomous, governed by the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar.

mixed African-Asian-Arab heritage—into post-imperial British and Tanzanian spaces, Gurnah imagines transnational communities and traces transnational routes in his novels. He explains, “I’m very interested in the dynamic condition of being migrant... a dominant experience of the contemporary world. I think of it as living in one place, but having an imaginary as well as imaginative life somewhere else” (qtd. in Chambers 121). His characters variously traverse Indian Ocean space, navigate Eastern European landscapes, and settle in southern England, while retaining a memory of, and often connections to, the Zanzibari archipelago. They narrate complex networks of association across time and space, with the Swahili coast as a central point of contact. In *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *By the Sea* (2001), Gurnah challenges the conditional hospitality that nation-states offer to asylum seekers. He uses first-person migrant narrators to map transnational networks, and to contest nationalist and colonial narratives that cut off transnational flows and enforce homogeneity and dogmatic allegiance. He is critical of narratives and nationalisms employed to consolidate power or to clarify unitary identities. Felicity Hand explains that “Gurnah’s critique of the excesses of the revolution marks him as one of the few dissenting voices from Zanzibar to publish their opinions... he writes scathingly about the irrational despotism of African nationalist discourses” (78). Imagining communities both within state boundaries and across them, Gurnah’s narrators open up possibilities of connection in the face of exclusionary colonial, postcolonial, and nationalist state discourses.

### **Conditions of Entry: Hospitality and the State**

While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) guarantees both “the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution” (Article 14.1) and “the right to a nationality” (Article 15.1), it does not stipulate that every state must grant those rights to any

individual who claims them. Rather, states retain the power of decision over asylum and nationality within their borders. According to Seyla Benhabib, “most liberal democracies since September 11, 2001, and even before then, had already shifted toward criminalizing refugee and asylum seekers, either on the grounds that they were lying to gain access to economic advantages in more affluent countries or that they were potential security threats” (*Dignity* 95). Invocations of national security and suspicion of asylum seekers for dishonesty and criminality serve as justifications for states to deny individuals fundamental human rights. Therefore, the politics of membership—especially immigration, asylum, and naturalization—is a politics of conditional hospitality. The migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker is granted entry and provided service(s) only as part of a revocable contract. In exchange for admission, refugees often must guarantee—or at least convince border and immigration agents—that their stories of persecution are true, that they will be law-abiding residents in the host country, and that there is no other state into which they more reasonably could expect admission. If these guarantees are made convincingly enough, the state offers hospitality. Paradoxically, rather than signifying openness and inclusion, such hospitality serves to affirm strong borders and the legal power and jurisdiction of the state. For Jacques Derrida, “hospitality is certainly, necessarily, a right, a duty, an obligation, the *greeting* of the foreign other [*l’autre étranger*] as a friend but on the condition that the host... remains the patron, the master of the household, on the condition that he maintains his own authority in his own home” (4; original emphasis). Derrida goes on to describe “the current lexicon or the common semantics of hospitality” as confirming this side of conditionality: in order “to ‘welcome,’ ‘accept,’ ‘invite,’ ‘receive,’ ‘bid’ someone welcome ‘to one’s home,’” he argues, one must necessarily have absolute power over that home, as “master of the household, master of the city, or master of the nation, the language, or the state” (6). The power to accept is also the power

to reject. Hospitality hinges on the sovereign decision.<sup>3</sup> Subject to that decision is the asylum seeker who, in the act of appeal, confirms the power of the state to accept or to reject them.

Narrative is crucial to conditional hospitality: narratives judged to be adequate lead to admission, whereas insufficient narratives exclude their narrators from hospitality. The sovereign—or, more often, its representative—is “marked by the power to determine what constitutes a legitimate narrative” (Farrier, *Postcolonial* 157). “Legitimate” signifies both veracity and adequacy: the story must appear to be true, and it must represent a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article I.A.2). This meritocratic legal structure necessitates that the asylum seeker convincingly narrate his persecution: sensational stories of suffering and oppression, impressively emotional renderings of said stories, and the affective demonstration of fear and grief garner a hospitable state response. Gurnah himself had to perform “a little bit of acting and crying” for the immigration authorities (“A Conversation,” 158). According to Ana Elena Puga, “real suffering must be socially performed in order for it to be registered and responded to with empathy by audiences with the power to grant rights or to pressure for the granting of rights” (162). Puga, arguing against this structure, asks instead whether it is “possible to make the claim that all migrants deserve human rights, deserve residency rights or even citizenship rights, regardless of whether or how much they have suffered, how good or evil they may be, whatever their family, or lack of family status?” (160). The UDHR seems to answer in the affirmative: Article 13.1

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<sup>3</sup> David Farrier argues that “sovereign power is invested in keeping hospitality conditional, and thus the moment of the stranger’s arrival at the border becomes a contest between the stranger’s right to access, and the host’s right to deny it” (*Postcolonial* 167). In this formulation, the hospitality is conditional by sovereign design.

states that “everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.” There is no qualification in the UDHR: everyone has the right, without exception. In Gurnah’s novels, migrant characters test this right: seeking admission in bad faith, refusing to provide stories of suffering to immigration authorities, even lying to their new friends and neighbors, Gurnah’s protagonists reject the right of England and the English to withhold membership rights from them, on whatever grounds.

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah confounds the conditional, narrative-based hospitality of the state. The novel follows the lives of and the encounter between Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, both Zanzibari migrants to England. Each man takes a turn narrating the novel, and through those narratives, they demonstrate the insufficiency of the narratively-conditional model of state hospitality. During the Cold War, Latif traveled from Tanzania to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to train as a dentist, and soon thereafter traveled to England to claim refugee status. Latif’s life was not in danger. More than anything, he seeks refuge from the melodrama of his family in Zanzibar, their secrets, and the gossip that surrounds them. In fact, remembering his Guinean roommate, Ali, in the GDR, Latif recalls, “I feel embarrassed now to think that I might have told him stories of our ridiculous domestic melodramas in exchange for his terrible one of loss and oppression” (*BS* 121). Leaving the GDR with a German acquaintance, Latif explains that “Jan planned to escape, and I joined him because he was my friend and because I was young and did not know better, and did not care where I went or what happened to me” (*BS* 137). Because he arrives in England from the GDR, Latif needs no personal narrative of persecution. At the Police Station in Plymouth where Latif lands, a policeman named Walter listens to the “story of [his] time in GDR and the journey across Central Europe” (*BS* 139), neither of which includes persecution warranting the protections of asylum. Nonetheless, it is enough that Latif has been

behind the Iron Curtain. The Cold War narrative of Central and Eastern Europe stands in for Latif's own story and directs it.

Conversely, Saleh Omar, an asylum seeker arriving directly from Zanzibar, does not at first have the benefit of a clear-cut, larger-than-life narrative to guarantee the well-foundedness of his claim to asylum. Saleh does, in fact, have a well-founded fear of persecution in his homeland. Under the Revolutionary government, he was unfairly imprisoned for more than a decade after a summary ruling at Party headquarters. The family responsible for his imprisonment—Latif's family, in fact—blamed Saleh for their financial misfortunes. The return of Latif's brother, Hassan, immediately before Saleh's departure for England nearly guaranteed the repetition of this persecution: "when Hassan came back... he treated me as an obstacle to his full rights to the property. So he sought to make legal the ruling made at Party headquarters all those years ago, that I was guilty of fraud and so on... he threatened me with imprisonment or worse when his case was won" (*BS* 239-240). Saleh's story, which he recounts to Latif after being granted asylum, is certainly grounds for his admission into England. He declares, "I had no trust in our legal system, and no strength for more hurly-burly in my life, so I packed my casket of ud-al-qamari and left" (*BS* 241). While he shares his story with Latif and with readers, he refuses to use it as currency in exchange for legal protection. He pretends not to speak English upon his arrival at Gatwick Airport. "I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English," he explains, "I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it" (*BS* 5). The immigration official Saleh encounters at Gatwick Airport, Kevin Edelman, insists upon his own authority to decide on the adequacy of Saleh's narrative: "I will have to refuse you permission to enter. Unless you can tell me something about your circumstances" (*BS* 7). Saleh's refusal is a demand of the state to grant him a less-

conditional hospitality: he offers no guarantee of veracity, no proof of the adequacy of his suffering. Saleh does ultimately receive asylum without having to prove his endangerment: “for reasons which are still not completely clear to me even now... people who came from where I did were eligible for asylum if they claimed that their lives were in danger” (*BS* 10). His thrice-repeated refrain, “‘Refugee... Asylum’” (*BS* 9), to Edelman, fully constitutes his claim. Saleh’s silence is a challenge to the conditions of sovereign hospitality: he refuses to fulfil those conditions, but nonetheless asserts his right to admittance.

For migrants generally, even if not refugees or asylum seekers, conditional hospitality structures the politics of inclusion socially as well as governmentally. In contrast to Latif’s reliance upon Cold War political narratives and Saleh’s rejection of narrative as criteria for admission, the unnamed narrator of *Admiring Silence* attempts to use narrative as currency to secure social acceptance. Having already acquired a British passport—despite having used “a travel permit to Mombasa, a fake Kenyan passport, a tourist visa to England, and then secretly living in Ahmed Hussein’s college room for a year” (*AS* 80) before he could claim it—he fabricates stories of his past life in Zanzibar to impress and please his partner, Emma, and her father, Mr Willoughby. His stories to the latter—what he calls his “Empire stories” (*AS* 73)—are sensational, nearly unbelievable: “I told [Mr Willoughby] that the government had legalized cannibalism,” he explains, “I hold him that the President had syphilis, and was reliably reputed to be schizophrenic; he was practically blind and was drunk by about three in the afternoon every day” (*AS* 21-22). The stories confirm the narrator’s place in the English world: he was a subject of the Empire, he mourns for its loss, and his stories prove it. In his telling, “under the Empire we had firm and fair rule, governed by people who understood us better than we understood ourselves” (*AS* 73). These stories, despite the irony with which the narrator tells them, establish



him as a British colonial subject. They also provide Mr Willoughby assurance of his own identity as an Englishman—that is, as superior to the natives of the far corners of the earth. As the narrator fabricates more and more stories, Mr Willoughby demonstrates joy and camaraderie: “his eyes lit up as usual at the prospect of an Empire story” (*AS* 25). In the end, though, these Empire stories do not guarantee the narrator social belonging or acceptance. Emma in particular does not finally accept the narrator’s appeals to belonging through Empire. She chides him during their relationship for narrativizing in this way: “don’t tell them those kinds of stories. They’ll just lap them up and start up on their racist filth” (*AS* 72). Shortly after the narrator has his own encounter with British immigration authorities—he loses his British passport on the way back to England from Tanzania, and must prove he is “one of the good natives, not a drug-pusher or an arms-dealer or a white slaver” (*AS* 208)—Emma leaves him for another man. The narrator explains, “she told me her life was a narrative which had refused closure, that she was now at the beginning of another story” (*AS* 210). The hospitality granted to the narrator by the older, Empire generation, is not extended by post-imperial Britain. The conditions for admission and inclusion have changed in the postcolonial context, and Empire subjects are no longer welcome in Emma’s post-imperial national imaginary.

*Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* contest the conditions of British hospitality from complementary perspectives. Where the latter novel demonstrates how migrants can violate or evade the narrative conditions of hospitality and thereby thwart the system, *Admiring Silence* illustrates that the host may withhold or retract hospitality regardless of narrative appeal. In the face of what Wendy Brown terms “the effects of waning state sovereignty on the psychic-political desires, anxieties, and needs of late modern subjects” (107)—that is, the desire for stronger borders and more severely conditional hospitality, if any—Gurnah demonstrates both

the permeability of hard borders and the arbitrariness of British hospitality. For Gurnah, conditional hospitality as a framework for determining social and governmental inclusions and exclusions does not suffice. Conditional hospitality affirms national and state authority and has the appearance (because hospitality is *possible*) of fulfilling human rights obligations, but it remains exclusionary and effectively at the will and whim of state agents.

Gurnah's protagonists have to contend with more than narratively conditional hospitality: official residency and nominal inclusion—including the right to work, to receive welfare benefits, to reside without fear of deportation—do little to ameliorate exclusion from national belonging. Citing Jürgen Habermas, Benhabib argues that “since the nineteenth century, and extending to the state formations that emerged after decolonization and the end of communism, [the] ‘conceptual gap’ [in the legal construction of the constitutional state] has been filled by the ideology and practice of nationalism” (*Rights* 17-18). Nationalism and nationality imperfectly align in late-twentieth-century Britain. Whereas in the immediate postwar years and the early years of decolonization British nationality law favoured breadth over specificity, after several decades of decolonization England attempted to check the ambiguity of nationality along racial lines. Ian Baucom explains that, “once white Britons can no longer ignore the fact that they share their streets with the ‘strange races’ of the empire... a new principle of identity is discovered, or invented. In law the name of that new principle is ‘patriality’; in practice it is race” (*Out of Place* 23-24). Legislatively fulfilling Enoch Powell's dream of a whitewashed British polity, the 1971 British Immigration Act and the 1981 Nationality Act solidify the “purely genealogical principle of British identity” (*Out of Place* 13). The question of hospitality and admission aside, in the latter half of the twentieth century British nationality is reified as an exclusively white domain—

which is to say, as effectively a governmental iteration of white nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

Excluded by white nationalism from British national belonging, Gurnah's protagonists in England bear the brunt of racist aggressions and microaggressions. They learn, rather quickly, "how frightening England could be" (*AS* 83). In *Admiring Silence* especially, Gurnah illustrates the multifarious ways racial exclusion manifests. Speaking of his own experience, Gurnah explains, "when I came to Britain, it was a shock to find racism so much a part of the experience, and to meet it in such a casual, relentless way. Racism wasn't necessarily about abusive words; often, it was something subtler, such as abusive looks. It's hard to explain just how pervasive, ordinary, and constant this kind of response was" (qtd. in Chambers 123). The narrator of *Admiring Silence* details the pervasiveness, ordinariness, and constancy of this kind of racism from his earliest days in Britain. Seeing a "Staff Required" sign in a restaurant window, the narrator recalls, "my suspicion was that it didn't mean me. I had lost confidence in my desirability" (*AS* 56). When he does get a job as a dishwasher, he describes the racial hostility of his boss, Peter, particularly when Peter suspects the narrator is interested in Emma, a white woman. Peter's "metaphors attempted to evoke my degraded and uncontrollable lust" (*AS* 59). Even Emma, despite her avowed anti-racism, participates in (and perhaps borrows language from) the "hysteria in the newspapers about naked foreigners" (*AS* 80): when she and the narrator argue, he "usually finished up being called intolerant, ungrateful, a fundamentalist, a raging mujahedin, a pig and a bastard" (*AS* 14). Emma—herself included as part of the British nation by virtue of both place of birth and, more importantly, skin colour—attacks the narrator on the basis

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<sup>4</sup> As an example of white nationalism coinciding with British nationality, Paul Gilroy cites the case of "the South African runner Zola Budd," who "obtained British Citizenship within ten days of her application... Unlike black settlers and their children, Zola was recognized as being of 'kith and kin'—an important category in the folk grammar of contemporary racism" (62).

of his religious affiliation, and thereby reminds the narrator of his exclusion. This kind of white superiority, which thinks itself tolerant and gracious and its others fanatic and irrational, underpins both the British colonial project and postcolonial British nationalism.

Black civil rights and internationalist movements and ideas flourished in the last decades of the twentieth century, from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, to the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s, to Paul Gilroy's formulation of the Black Atlantic in the early 1990s. Gurnah's protagonists, however, cannot find a place among these configurations. When a doctor mistakenly calls him "Afro-Caribbean" (*AS* 9), for instance, the narrator of *Admiring Silence* muses, "I did not have the heart to tell him that I was not Afro-Caribbean, or any kind of Caribbean, not even anything to do with the Atlantic—strictly an Indian Ocean lad, Muslim, orthodox Sunni by upbringing, Wahhabi by association" (*AS* 9-10). Invoking the Black Atlantic, the narrator insists that this sort of black nationalism is not a solution for him, nor is it for Latif and Saleh. Their mixed backgrounds do not satisfy the normative criteria of international blackness or, as Gurnah explores in *By the Sea*, of black nationalism within the Tanzanian context. Tina Steiner explains that these men, "as African Asians... are doubly displaced. Since independence and the violent uprising in Zanzibar in 1964, East Africans of Asian and Arab descent are not regarded as 'African' enough in independent Tanzania" ("Mimicry," 302-303). The protagonists of *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* all eventually cope with this problem by leaving the country, legally or otherwise. Their narratives, particularly because rendered in first-person, continue to contest their racial exclusion. They testify to the injustices done to them and to others. In the case of Saleh, somewhat ironically, the status of asylum seeker grants his narrative additional legitimacy. The state has confirmed, even if "for reasons which are still not

completely clear to [Saleh] even now” (*BS* 10), that his story of persecution is true. The hesitations, clarifications, and admissions of culpability or complicity throughout the novel only serve to bolster the reader’s faith in his narrative. Saleh’s claim that he tells his stories of persecution “to display them as judgments of my time and of the puniness of our duplicitous lives” (*BS* 212) is more proof of their veracity than of their puniness. Saleh’s testimony ultimately rings true to the reader, and indicts the state for its abuses of power.

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah brazenly criticizes post-Revolutionary Zanzibari and Tanzanian black nationalism. In his understanding, in the Tanzanian context “one colonial discourse attempts to supplant another. European colonialism established itself by asserting that Muslims were simply slavers, and it’s somewhat surprising to hear the same discourse being picked up now by Africans” (qtd. in Chambers 125). In the violent revolutionary years and after, Tanzanian nationality is refigured as an exclusive, and exclusively black, province. Identity markers of Arab or Asian ancestry or affiliation meant marginalization, persecution, and occasionally expulsion. *By the Sea* provides a litany of examples of this sort of exclusion. When Saleh is imprisoned in one of several “detention camps, supervised by soldiers and only occasionally suffering punishment or brutality” (*BS* 231), those incarcerated with him are exclusively Muslim—which is to say, are individuals excluded from the pure blackness that the Tanzanian state imagines. While Saleh himself never explicitly accuses the government of exclusion on the basis of religious affiliation, his narrative clearly indicates that those subject to persecution in post-Revolutionary Zanzibar are targeted because they are Muslim: “At times I felt such hatred that I have no words to describe it. I shook with it, could have destroyed myself with the rage of it, thrown myself into a fire, or off a ledge of a cliff or on to the gleaming blade of a sabre or the point of a bayonet. Instead we prayed: every day, five times a day, as God commanded” (*BS* 231-

232). Muslim practice unites the prisoners, even while it excludes them from membership and participation in the newly independent polity. Similarly, Saleh's fellow inmates at the island prison are marked by an Arab—and therefore, according to the government, non-black—ancestry. Saleh describes how the government “rounded up whole families of people of Omani descent, especially those who lived in the country or wore beards and turbans” (*BS* 221-222). These individuals are incarcerated with Saleh as they await deportation: “they were being held on the island until word reached the Omani authorities of their plight, and some means of transporting them *home* could be arranged. In truth, they were no more Omani than I was, except that they had an ancestor who was born there... they were indigenes, citizens, raiiya, and they were sons of indigenes” (*BS* 225; original emphasis). Generationally, these men belonged on the Zanzibari archipelago, but the post-Revolutionary Tanzanian government's reconfiguration of nationality does not take residence, place of birth, or other means of connection as evidence of belonging. Instead, they “[make] it seem that a citizen could be described in terms of their appearance or in terms of their claimed or, in some cases, foisted ancestry. Even if you didn't claim this ancestry, you were given it whether you wanted it or not” (Gurnah qtd. in Nasta 360).

Gurnah and his protagonists reject the authority of the state to implement what Giorgio Agamben, in a different context, calls “the mass denaturalization and denationalization of large portions of their own populations” (132). Saleh, in the post-Revolutionary years but before his own imprisonment, attempts to make claims on citizenship for his family: “when our daughter came, I wanted to call her Raiiya, a citizen, to make her life an utterance, a demand that our rulers should treat us with humanity, as indigenes and citizens of the land of our birth” (*BS* 150). His wife, Salha, refuses, for fear of provoking the authorities: they name her Ruqiya instead. Regardless, Saleh continues to refer to his daughter as “my daughter Raiiya, my daughter

Ruqiya” (*BS* 203). His “demand” to be treated as citizen is rejected outright: Ruqiya dies in infancy during the first year of Saleh’s imprisonment. Meanwhile, Saleh recounts, on the prison island “every night, the commanding officer’s radio broadcast speeches by one personage or another, haranguing and hectoring, rewriting history and offering homespun moralities that justified oppression and torture” (*BS* 228). Demonstrating a hallmark of nationalism more generally, the government eliminates the differences amongst citizens that have come to define the Indian Ocean coast across centuries, through the dual process of physical removal and historical erasure.

### **Transnational Networks**

As discourses and practices of homogeneity and hierarchy, nationalism and colonialism excel in historical erasure. Writing in regard to the Sudanese context, Mahmood Mamdani notes “the remarkable continuity between two kinds of historiographies—colonial and nationalist” (14). Whereas actual histories entail complex networks of encounter, exchange, and integration, colonial and nationalist histories favour broad-strokes reductive histories of decisive conquest, uncomplicated genealogy, and moral certainty. Neither nationalism nor colonialism can countenance Benhabib’s suggestion that “the lines separating we and you, us and them, more often than not rest on unexamined prejudices, ancient battles, historical injustices, and sheer administrative fiat” (*Rights* 178). Foregrounding connection, mixed heritage, and moral uncertainty, Gurnah’s novels critique the British colonial project as well as post-imperial nationalism in both Britain and Tanzania.

There is an inherent appeal to colonial and nationalist stories. They are straightforward, unambiguous, and certain in their moral righteousness; they draw clear lines between the good

and the bad, and they present a sense of destiny or historical inevitability. Their trademarks are clarity, consolidation, and hierarchy. In their introduction to *Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances*, Seyla Benhabib, Ian Shapiro, and Danilo Petranović argue that “the aggressive imperialisms of Britain, France, Spain, Germany, and Belgium in Africa, Asia, and Latin America had more to do with consolidating their own national political identities than with the societies that came under their tutelage” (3). Colonial and nationalist stories accomplish this consolidation imaginatively. Even Gurnah’s narrators are occasionally drawn to simple, identity-affirming stories. Latif, for instance, laments the “messiness of that story” (*BS* 207) when discussing his ex-girlfriend. The narrator of *Admiring Silence*, on the other hand, relishes his Empire stories and rewrites his own history for Emma: “I had embellished my story to make it less messy, and had fabricated details where these had escaped me” (33). He does so, he tells us, in order “to straighten out my record to myself, to live up to her account of me, to construct a history closer to my choice than the one I have been lumbered with” (*AS* 62). At the level of the individual, he believes, these stories “above all... could do no harm” (*AS* 33). Of course these stories do in fact cause harm, even on the individual level: Mr Willoughby’s racism, for example, perpetuates a dangerous white nationalism and xenophobia that often leads to real physical violence. Gurnah ultimately rejects these narratives, even if his characters sporadically indulge in them. *Admiring Silence* is, after all, a telling of the narrator’s fuller, messier story. *By the Sea*, also, contains the messier story: against the triumphant narrative of post-Revolutionary Zanzibar and the celebration of African blackness at the expense of its others, Saleh and Latif narrate a complex network of cross-pollinated histories and corrupt, disorderly governance at the end of empire. According to Emad Mirmotahari, Gurnah’s omission of “national symbols, names, and figures” in both *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*, serves as “a sort of retribution for the nation-



state's attempted elision of the eastern African coast's heterogeneous cultural fabric" (*Islam* 66). The compound, interweaving structure of Gurnah's novels also achieves this purpose. Homi Bhabha demands that, "the Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity*" (6; original emphasis). Gurnah extends this argument: he calls both the Western metropole *and* the newly independent Tanzanian state to account for having elided the heterogeneous elements of their histories.

Nationalism and colonialism are world historical impositions perpetrated by individuals and states attempting to consolidate their own power, wealth, and importance. Therefore, they are fundamentally in contradiction with a larger sense of humanity, human rights, equality, and democracy. They are also fundamentally in contradiction with the way the world actually is, and has been, organized. While scholars often treat globalization as a contemporary phenomenon, instances of global encounter and exchange predate contemporary globalistic modes. Colonization, certainly, is one example of pre-twentieth-century globality, but there are others. In Gurnah's work, several distinct networks of transnational encounter and exchange, both historical and contemporary, emerge, and these tend to dominate his narratives. Gurnah's novels are structured by what Aihwa Ong calls "transnationality—or the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space" (4). Furthermore, transnationality is generative: "this side of the psychosis of patriotic fervour," Bhabha contends, "there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities" (5). In and through translation, communities across borders and across racial, national, and other differences can develop. Gurnah's hybrid, migrant narrators create "new forms of political and cultural belonging... anchored in multi-local ties" (Ahmed, Castañeda, et

al. 3). Characters connect to each other across and because of difference. Their points of contact reflect the contemporary globalized world in a more accurate, natural, democratic, and human way than constructed nationalist or colonial narratives allow.

Several modes of transnational organization surface in *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*, including colonization, the black diaspora, and the global Cold War. Gurnah's novels illustrate how disparate forms of transnationality often overlap or intersect, and also how they sometimes contradict or undermine each other. For example, historically speaking, transoceanic travel and exchange was no longer exclusively ordered by the seasons in the Cold War era. As Meg Samuelson describes, "with Arab dhows displaced by cargo ships from Russia, China and the GDR—ships that defy the monsoon regime and the entanglements it elicits—the streets of Stone Town [in Zanzibar] stand silent" (86). Conversely, because "the Eastern Bloc is a constitutive part of the contemporary diasporic routes taken by black intellectuals" (Popescu 91), the larger organizers of black diaspora and Cold War politics often correspond, even if they also exist in isolation. Latif's detour through the GDR is put in motion by such Cold War politics: as the narrator of *Admiring Silence* explains, "at that time, scholarships to study in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, China or Cuba were easily available since our new state had aligned itself verbosely with socialism" (77). Getting to England, on the other hand, often requires more subversive itineraries.

Gurnah's novels connect spaces and places across borders and over oceans. Even the title of *By the Sea* has a touch of transnationality. In the opening of the novel, Saleh states, "I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though for most of it it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here" (BS 2). The sea connects his Zanzibari homeland and his southern English settlement, even if he traveled by air to get from one to the other. Moreover, the connective

tissue of the sea, throughout the novel, gives Saleh a sense of home. Recalling a visit to Kenya, Saleh explains “being back on the coast was like being at home or more than that, like recognizing that here I had a place in the scheme of things” (*BS* 175). The sea becomes a signifier of belonging, for Saleh. Despite being grounded elsewhere—either in a small coastal English town, at a friend’s residence in Malindi, Kenya, or on the Zanzibari archipelago—Saleh feels connected and at home, by the sea.

As a structuring principle, the ocean, and specifically the Indian Ocean, dominates Gurnah’s novels. The heritage of his protagonists, as well as many of the stories that determine their fates, is inseparable from the musim trade routes across the Indian Ocean. Describing the historical, transnational effects of these trade routes, May Joseph explains,

Arab, Muslim, Jewish, Chinese, Hindu, and Persian influences in pre-British Indian Ocean culture during colonialism traveled across neighboring island states through *dhow* (Arab sailing boats) traders, generating a local hybridized ecology of Afro-Indo-Arab culture with Anglophone, Lusophone, and Francophone inflexions. *Taarab* music, Swahili Muslim culture, Islamic artisanal details by Indian craftsmen in Zanzibari and Mombasa architecture, and a trade in textiles and spices that predated European colonial penetration offered a complex network of syncretic influences within East African coastal cultures. (74)

Gurnah maps these “complex networks of syncretic influences” through the personal relationships, memories, and objects his protagonists latch on to. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator’s step-father—a man he splits into two characters, a father and a larger-than-life uncle, in his fabricated life story to Emma—finds work “on a dhow tramping along the coast towards the Gulf and Persia” (139) when business was bad at home. In *By the Sea*, the trader Hussein (known

to Latif as Uncle Hussein), whose malicious trade deals and clandestine seduction of Latif's brother Hassan are the propelling forces behind the entire narrative, arrives and departs according to the musim. Hussein and Saleh make a trade: an ebony table (which, later, occasions Latif and Saleh's first meeting, in Zanzibar) in Saleh's furniture shop in exchange for a small mahogany casket of ud-al-qamari—the same ud-al-qamari that Saleh later packs up and brings to England. From Saleh's now-English vantage point, the ud-al-qamari functions as a “repository of stories about another time and place—Zanzibar, and an East African coastal space interlinked with the Indian Ocean littoral through travel, trade and culture” (Lavery 118). The ud-al-qamari is from Cambodia, purchased in Bangkok by Hussein's father, shipped through Bahrain, and carried across the Indian Ocean on a dhow in Hussein's hands (*BS* 29). It ends up, finally, being confiscated by Kevin Edelman at Gatwick Airport. Representing an intricate web of encounters, people, and places, the ud-al-qamari does not generate a straightforward narrative. No single national framework or colonial history can contain the ud-al-qamari or the stories into which it is weaved. Indian Ocean currents and monsoon winds make this network of stories possible. Gurnah uses the labyrinthine journey of the ud-al-qamari as a model for his novel, with its interweaving stories and multiple points of contact.

Gurnah's, and especially Saleh's, focus on the ud-al-qamari, as well as the recurrent ebony table, also signals another transnational mode of organization at work: *The Thousand and One Nights*. According to Samuelson, “as a story revolving around property and things—of people possessing objects and being possessed by them—and seeking to account for their enthralling effects, *By the Sea* again reveals the influence of the *Nights*” (82). The *Nights* as intertext is a particularly useful framework for thinking through the way Gurnah configures transnational communities imaginatively and narratively. Whereas many of his characters have

been influenced by the Euro-American literary canon—references to Shakespeare, Dickens, Kipling, Tolstoy, Hemingway, and Melville arise in *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*—the *Nights* functions as more than a thematic intertext or a reference to English imperialism. As a powerful force on the imaginations of Gurnah and his narrators, the *Nights* signifies connection across national and geographical difference:

It's as though the ocean creates islands of culture along a broader archipelago, which are linked together by the sea and by mercantile connections... I was surprised to read tales in a book of *The Arabian Nights*, because these stories were told by my mother and grand-mother, and so on, and it felt as though they were our stories. It also never occurred to me to ask why we told each other stories about China, Persia, and Syria, but these places existed in our imaginary world, because the sea routes made us part of the wider world. (Gurnah qtd. in Chambers 129)

Like the *ud-al-qamari*, the *Nights* connect individuals across the Indian Ocean arena. The stories create a collective, transnational imaginary unmoored from any single location or national context. Furthermore, the *Nights* also, Mirmotahari suggests, “provid[e] the very narrative structure of the novels. The unnamed narrator of *Admiring Silence* and the two narrators of *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, ascribe their own need to tell stories to the ubiquity of this same practice in their youth” (*Islam* 56). Notably, the “Empire stories” shared by the narrator of *Admiring Silence* are reminiscent of scenes from the *Nights*: “in my father’s house,” he tells Mr Willoughby, “all the beds were made of gold, and until I was sixteen, servants bathed me in milk and then rinsed me in coconut water every morning” (22). Drawing himself as a *Nights*-esque prince, the narrator confirms Mr Willoughby’s imagined exotic images of the foreign other. In so

doing, the “Empire stories” parallel one of the main functions of the *Nights*, and particularly Richard Burton’s famous translation of them into English: these Orientalist (and Orientalized) stories serve primarily to affirm the English imperial imaginary.

While he does not mention the *Nights* by name in reference to his “Empire stories,” the narrator of *Admiring Silence* does make explicit reference to them in another context. After several decades in England, he temporarily returns to his home in Zanzibar to visit his family. Night after night, he elicits painful and complicated stories from his mother about his father. Condensing multiple conversations into a coherent story for the reader, he explains, “I have been writing about the conversations with my mother as if nothing else was happening between them, as if we were Scheherazade and her monstrous Shahriyar, living the day in a blur before returning every evening to narratives that were really contests of life and death, to stories that neither of them wanted to end” (*AS* 134). The narrator would prefer to live his life in the twilight of stories, crossing oceans and imagining romance and tragedy, than in the harsh reality of a relatively isolated, socially-exclusionary, post-Revolutionary Zanzibar.

Where the narrator of *Admiring Silence* only makes explicit reference to the *Nights* on one occasion, the narrators of *By the Sea* collectively refer to the text—including Burton’s translation of it—over half a dozen times.<sup>5</sup> The *Nights*, for both narrators, inflects story, imagination, and memory. Latif winds the *Nights* into his childhood memories, describing the large jars he used to hide in as “mak[ing] me think of stories of jinns rising out of them, of young women abducted in them, of the young prince having himself conveyed in one to his beloved’s

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<sup>5</sup> Latif remembers that “there was a section of the library which was out of bounds... I imagine they could have been the dodgy end of a gentleman’s library, like Burton’s translations of *The Arabian Nights* or something like that” (*BS* 105). I owe much of my reading of Burton’s *Nights* to the doctoral work of Omar Qaqish.

chamber” (BS 84). For Saleh, the *Nights* pervade even more recent, and English, memories. Recounting his “first walk through English streets,” he tells us, “I imagine it like this: that to get here I had wriggled through a passage that closed in behind me. Too many *A Thousand and One Nights* stories when I was younger perhaps, that image of the passage” (BS 63). A storyteller in his own right (despite his narrative silence to the immigration authorities), Saleh cannot help but invoke the *Nights* at the varying levels of words, images, and entire stories, even if his audience will not recognize the reference. In an exchange with Rachel, his English refugee organization case worker, Saleh unconsciously invokes the *Nights*: “‘What did you call those two men? The commissionaires. What was that word?’ she asked. ‘Bawabs,’ I said. ‘Doorkeepers, an indispensable article in any civilised and prosperous culture. When at the end of his first journey Sindbad returned to Basra with a fortune, he bought himself a house and then a bawab’” (BS 201). Saleh takes this reference as a given, and it serves as a form of cultural connection between him and Latif. In conversation with Saleh, Latif has already described Saleh’s former workman as “‘like one of those scowling bawabs you read about in the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*, a big fleshy black man guarding his master’s doorway’” (BS 152).<sup>6</sup> The men bicker over which story “has the stillest, shiftest jinn in the whole *A Thousand and One Nights*” (BS 170). Connecting them to each other as well as to a wider world—simultaneously signifying Zanzibar, Indian Ocean spaces, and their translation and migration to England—the *Nights* defies national categorization and affirms commonality across time and space.

One of the most distinctive—and, especially in recent years, contentious—transnational organizers in Gurnah’s oeuvre is international Islam. When Emma calls the narrator of *Admiring*

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<sup>6</sup> Latif also recounts this moment in his own narration to the reader: “I wondered whether he was smiling because I was so ridiculous there beside him or whether he was laughing at himself for having to act like a rudderless eunuch in a story out of *A Thousand and One Nights*” (BS 100).

*Silence* “a fundamentalist, a raging mujahedin” (14), she is not alone among the English in vilifying Muslims. Not dissimilar to the situation of European Jews in an earlier era, today Muslims are often treated as suspicious by governments and white nationals (especially white nationalists) in Euro-American contexts. Such suspicion stems from the fact that Islam, like Judaism, is both a subnational and a transnational community. In Paul Schiff Berman’s terms, “*subnational communities*... include commonalities that derive from a purported ethnic identification that is not coterminous with the nation-state, such as Basques in Spain, Sikhs in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka, or even white supremacist militias in the United States,” whereas “*transnational communities*... cut across nation-state boundaries” (149). Viewed as self-isolating within national boundaries and harbouring allegiances that threaten the supremacy (and, conservatives contend, security) of the sovereign nation-state, Muslim communities in Europe and the United States are often scapegoated and excluded. Islam is certainly one of many factors that contributes to the exclusion of Gurnah’s narrators from both British and Tanzanian national belonging. Instead of securing space for individuals within these national imaginaries, however, Islam creates transnational networks and cross-cultural affiliations.

Gurnah’s is not the first name to arise when discussing Islam in contemporary literature, nor even in the context of contemporary British literature in English. Salman Rushdie, surely, is the more famous author, and even Zadie Smith, whose Muslim protagonist in *White Teeth* (2000) wants “desperately to be wearing a sign, a large white placard that said: ‘...I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH, I’M NOT SURE’” (48-49), might be a more prominent name. Gurnah, however, “is one of the earliest anglophone writers to have charted the experiences of Muslims living in Britain and their connections elsewhere” (Chambers 120). His novels feature Muslim narrators and protagonists, portray their various movements and



emplacements around the globe, and incorporate Qur'anic stories. Claire Chambers insists that Gurnah “was discussing Muslimness, religion, race, gender, class, and their complex intersectionality before Salman Rushdie controversially brought these issues under the spotlight during the furore over the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988” (120). In *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*—both published years after the infamous fatwa was issued against Rushdie—Gurnah incorporates Islam into his novels contextually as well as structurally. *Admiring Silence* finds a narrative rhythm in the Islamic Salah. The narrator cites Islamic prayer on five occasions throughout the novel, echoing the Salah’s five calls to prayer.<sup>7</sup> In *By the Sea*, some intertextual references are only available to readers familiar with Islam. Mirmotahari argues that “because Gurnah’s novels both inhabit and reproduce a cultural sphere to which Islam is so important, they invite readers to meet them on these specific terms” (*Islam* 59). To a reader unfamiliar with the history of Islam, there is no more to the story of Latif’s brother Hassan and the trader Hussein than an illicit affair. This story becomes “controversial and satirical,” however, when one does have knowledge of Islamic history: as historical figures, Hassan and Hussein “are vital to the distinction between Sunni and Shi’a Islam” (*Islam* 59). Parallel to the connection Latif and Saleh share through *The Thousand and One Nights*, Gurnah creates an opportunity in his novels for possible connection across national borders through the stories of Islam. Representing international Islam in novels narrated from England, Gurnah appeals to a transnational narrative sensibility.

Islamic elements of the narrative represent moments of particular transnationality and interpersonal connection in *By the Sea*. Describing his two closest friends from his time at

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<sup>7</sup> The narrator of *Admiring Silence* does not replicate Salah exactly. Where the Salah includes prayers at dawn, midday, afternoon, evening, and night, the narrator lists his various prayer times as sunset (45), dawn (128), midday (135), evening (144), and again midday (167).

University in Uganda, Sefu Ali from Kenya and Jamal Hussein from Tanzania, Saleh recalls, “we strolled to the town together, played football, loafed under the enormous fig trees, broke fast at the end of each day of Ramadhan, celebrated Idd together. Everything... we had a kind of fellowship which we expected to last a lifetime... the kind of fellowship you had with a brother” (*BS* 171-172). In this story, Islam creates fraternity despite geography and nationality. The moment when Saleh crosses into England—when he seeks, effectively, to change his nationality through asylum—is also one narrated through Islam. Explaining the origin of the name on his passport, Saleh tells us,

My name is Rajab Shaaban. It is not my real name, but a name I borrowed for the occasion of this life-saving trip. It belonged to someone I knew for many years. Shabaan is also the name of the eighth month of the year, the month of division, when the destinies of the coming year are fixed and the sins of the truly penitent are absolved. It precedes the month of Ramadhan, the month of the great heat, the month of fasting. Rajab is the month which precedes both, the seventh month, the revered month. It was during Rajab that the night of the Miraj occurred, when the Prophet was taken through the seven heavens to the Presence of God. How we loved that story when we were young. (*BS* 41-42)

Saleh continues to elaborate on this story for nearly another page before returning to his narrative of the refugee detention centre in England. As Saleh moves from Zanzibar to England, the Prophet travels from Mecca (“Makka”) to Jerusalem (“al-Quds”) and back again (42). The name “Rajab Shaaban,” with all its Qur’anic inflections, is also the reason behind Latif and Saleh’s meeting. The man whose name Saleh borrows, who Saleh “knew for many years,” is Latif’s late father. Latif’s curiosity when he hears of a refugee with his father’s name compels him to seek

out Saleh, and therefore opens the possibility of a new kind of relation—familial rather than national—between the two men.

International Islam often intersects or overlaps with other modes of transnational organization. Whereas in the post-Revolutionary Zanzibari context, blackness and Islam are mutually exclusive identity markers, according to Mirmotahari, “Islamic consciousness, like black internationalism, is global, at once porous and manifold *and* binding. At times these two ‘imagined’ communities overlap. They both offer the terms and the language for resistive communities that are not racial, ethnic, or national in nature” (“From Black,” 24; original emphasis). Gurnah envisions recombinations and productive intersections among transnational communities and organizers in both *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*. As one example, Gurnah weaves both Kiswahili and Arabic into his English-language novels. In so doing, he invokes international Islam, British imperialism, and the transnationality inherent in Zanzibari culture and the Indian Ocean arena. On their first meeting, Saleh and Hussein fumble between languages until they settle on English: “He spoke to me in Arabic, offering courteous salutations, asking after my health, wishing me prosperity in my business, perhaps a little over-salted by and by. I apologised for my Arabic, which was scratchy at best, and spoke to him in Kiswahili. He smiled ruefully, saying, *Ah suahil. Ninaweza kidogo kidogo tu*. I can do little, little only. Then, surprisingly, he spoke to me in English” (*BS* 21). Characters often—but not always—communicate in English because of a shared imperial history: “English meant school” (*BS* 21) Saleh declares. At other times, Gurnah’s narrators signal when characters speak to each other in Kiswahili or in Arabic, often indicating switches between languages mid-conversation. When he visits the Zanzibari Prime Minister’s office, a guard speaks to the narrator of *Admiring Silence* in both Kiswahili and Arabic: ““So what was that speaking to me in English, some kind of disguise?

Karibu, bwana, welcome. I hadn't heard that you were back, or I'd have come round to greet you. Alhamdulillah, it's good to see you again'" (198). It is hard to say what the narrator has already translated for his reader. The Kiswahili, "karibu, bwana," translates to "welcome, sir"; we do not know whether the "welcome" that follows is "karibu" repeated and translated for us, or if the men are speaking English; the past-tense of "what *was* that speaking to me in English" would suggest they are not. At the end of the sentence, "Alhamdulillah," Arabic for "praise be to God," may signal that the guard speaks Arabic, but the expression also has currency in specifically Muslim, not only Arabic, usage. A similar incident occurs in *By the Sea*: when Saleh leaves the refugee detention centre in England, he explains, "I shook hands and shared smiles with all the others. Maasalama, they said, go with peace. Kwaheri, I said, may good times befall you" (48). Both words—the Arabic "Maasalama" and the Kiswahili "Kwaheri"—mean the same thing: goodbye. The usage of both between these men signals transnational connection: Kiswahili and Arabic (whether Islamic or not) are both common currency. Through varying degrees of translation, Gurnah's narrators reveal a web of linguistic and cultural connections through their inclusion of English, Arabic, and Kiswahili.

### **Anti-Authoritarian Connectivity**

Gurnah's variously transnational networks challenge homogeneous formulations of nation and belonging. *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* chart routes between Zanzibar and England, while condemning the exclusionary nationalisms of both. Where restrictive black and white nationalisms characterize the post-imperial Zanzibari and British landscapes, respectively, Gurnah represents characters, objects, and stories with multiple affiliations and complex histories. "Dealing with contradictory narratives," he contends, "has come to me to seem a

dynamic process... Out of it came a way of accommodating and taking account of difference, and of affirming the possibility of more complex ways of knowing” (“Writing and Place,” 28). That is to say, differences and intersections can be productive, rather than confrontational. Gurnah’s characters challenge the conditions of and the authority that grants state hospitality, and they narrate alternative modes of affiliation and points of transnational connection. For J.A. Kearney, the “liberating effect of Gurnah’s fiction... is the consequence of his resistance to an authoritarian polemic, closed to negotiation or dialogue” (57). Gurnah’s novels model dialogic connections; the entire narrative structure of *By the Sea*, after all, hinges on the meetings and conversation between Latif and Saleh. Gurnah’s novels extend this anti-authoritarian strategy beyond the conversation. Latif and Saleh’s meeting cannot be reduced to a meeting of two diametrically opposed individuals: ““We’re related it seems,”” Latif concludes (*BS* 194). Gurnah is rarely interested in the intersection between only two distinct elements—Zanzibar and England, Eastern and Western sides of the Cold War, and the like. Instead, Gurnah combines and connects: his protagonists are black, Asian, Arab, Muslim, Zanzibari, English. They speak multiple languages and make contact—themselves or through objects—with a vast network of international points. Recognition of connection, of relationality, across a multiplicity of differences invalidates the authoritarian, nationalist ambition of uniformity and exclusion.

Gurnah’s novels address and confront racism in Britain and in post-Revolutionary Zanzibar. His migrant characters demand entry into England, and they navigate permanent residence in England while maintaining lingering connections to the Tanzanian coast. What Gurnah’s novels allude to, however, is a question of generations. What constitutes “home” or “homeland” for Amelia, the daughter of the narrator of *Admiring Silence*? To what degree can she claim “Englishness”? Enoch Powell, of course, claims that people of African descent should

be excluded from Englishness on a generational basis: even the “native-born” represent a foreign element (“Rivers of Blood,” np). Amelia was born in Britain, she has never visited Zanzibar, and she is half white. Does the addition of whiteness to the African-Asian-Arab heritage, or the UK address on her birth certificate, distinguish her experience of being mixed-race in England from her father’s? Looking forward to the birth of Amelia, the narrator of *Admiring Silence* describes his and Emma’s optimism: “in our lifetime we were going to lay low all the nasty mythemes about bastards and mestizos, expose the cruelty that attended the figure of the mulatto and the half-caste (our child)” (84). As Amelia grows up, of course, these ambitious civil rights victories do not materialize. Nonetheless, against the racist ramblings of Powell and his ilk, many young, black, England-born Britons in the 1970s and after begin to “demand rights in Britain as Brits. This was their home, they were here to stay” (Joseph 91). Their *jus soli* citizenship grants them the confidence to claim citizenship and its attendant rights. Claiming, however, does not necessarily mean receiving. As May Joseph argues, “what the new generation of Black British inherited and would have to contend with was a legacy of racism and discrimination in education, housing, employment, cultural misrepresentation, and institutional delegitimation” (92). While Gurnah merely touches on the precarity of black citizens in Britain, the work of another contemporary writer delves deeper. Caryl Phillips, drawing multidirectional lines between historical figures and eras, oppressed racial and other groups, and geographical locations, places the life of the black British citizen at the centre of his work. In *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), Phillips rethinks citizenship and belonging, using literary modes to insist on a more inclusive state.

**CHAPTER 8:**  
**A Declaration of Rights: Caryl Phillips' Anthologies of Belonging**

When he sailed with his parents to England from St. Kitts in 1958, Caryl Phillips was only an infant. Despite the untimeliness of their landing—"within a few weeks of our arrival both Nottingham and London's Notting Hill exploded in scenes of racial violence" (Phillips, "Border Crossings," 215-216)—his parents entered Britain with a notion of belonging. By the late 1950s, St. Kitts had been part of the United Kingdom for nearly two centuries; Phillips' parents had been Commonwealth citizens since birth. In his essay, "Border Crossings," Phillips writes, "tucked away in the inside pocket of my father's only jacket were the British passports which not only suggested, but confirmed, that they belonged" (215). In the era of decolonization, however, when British Islanders were grappling with their shrinking sphere of influence and ownership across the globe, Commonwealth affiliations were tenuous. A decade before Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, Phillips' family and others like them were not welcomed by white English residents, British passports notwithstanding. In an interview with Maya Jaggi, Phillips describes this hostile English environment in relation to his work: "there's no other society on earth that can... make a nigger out of you in eight hours, before you've even left Terminal 3. That society is the society I grew up in, and it'll always be the touchstone of what I write" (qtd. in Nasta 122). Phillips uses literature to rehash Englishness and to rethink notions of community and belonging outside of racial, geographical, and national bounds. Phillips merges modes of fiction and nonfiction in order to write against legal and social marginalization and violence, and he advocates instead for lines of communication and affiliation across difference.

Unlike Gurnah, whose Indian Ocean roots (and routes) preclude him from an Atlantic affiliation, Phillips subscribes to an idea of the Black Atlantic. Many of his narratives link points

in Africa—most often, Elmina Castle—with European and American locales. They give evidence to James Clifford’s claim that, “enslavement and its aftermaths—displaced, repeated structures of racialization and exploitation—constitute a pattern of black experiences inextricably woven in the fabric of hegemonic modernity” (318). At the same time, Phillips is interested in connecting the Black Atlantic to other histories of migration, diaspora, and oppression. In *The European Tribe* (1987), *Higher Ground* (1989), and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Phillips narrates Jewish stories in tandem with black stories.<sup>1</sup> Finding common ground between Jewish and black experiences of displacement, diaspora, and persecution, Phillips tries to understand more deeply formations of community and belonging as such, as well as the violences done to enforce their limits. His writing reveals the ways in which law and society exclude and do harm to individuals they deem strangers. Phillips traces characters along sometimes circuitous transnational routes, and formally reproduces in his prose some of the complex and shifting legalities and social norms that regulate citizenship and belonging. While he often synthesizes disparate histories within texts, he also creates networks of connection across his oeuvre.

Looking at two texts in particular—one fiction, one nonfiction, one focused primarily on Jewish characters, one primarily on black characters—I analyze the way Phillips integrates disparate histories. Against contrived exclusionary logics, in *The Nature of Blood* and *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), Phillips collects, collates, explores, and challenges stories of marginalization, forced displacement, homelessness, and state-sanctioned violence. Jacqueline Nassy Brown argues that “the quest for ‘emancipation, justice, and citizenship’ characterizes black diasporic political culture” (294). Phillips’ writing makes clear that the

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips’ own heritage may explain the genesis of this parallel: in his interview with Maya Jaggi, Phillips says, “I don’t have to be a Jew who survived the Holocaust to have survivor guilt—although my grandfather was a Jew” (qtd. in Nasta 123).



search for “emancipation, justice, and citizenship” constitutes the diasporic experience generally, racial, historical, and geographical contexts aside. Where *Foreigners* is “full of outrage about the way British people and institutions treat the black men and women whose enslaved and sweated labour built the British Empire” (Hart 262), *The Nature of Blood* catalogues different sets of people and institutions—in Nazi Germany, fifteenth-century Portobuffole, early-modern Venice, and contemporary Israel—to stoke the same such outrage in several other directions. Actively participating in the diasporic political project, Phillips imagines communities within and among his texts, and in so doing, he constructs a fundamentally anti-racist, anti-authoritarian literary aesthetic.

### **Multidirectional Writing**

A prolific writer, Phillips has published nearly two dozen fictional texts, anthologies, stage plays, and nonfiction books. What many of these have in common, Rebecca Walkowitz argues, is “their consistent borrowing from a single genre—the anthology—whose structure and strategies Phillips uses to shape each of his novels and many of his nonfiction works as well” (537). Two of his publications are anthologies: *Extravagant Strangers* (1997) and *The Right Set* (1999). Julia Stapleton calls the former “so rich and imaginative a volume of literary reflections on what it is to be a foreign resident in Britain... the book represents a striking contrast with anthologies which appeared during the interwar period and which, typically, included the work of solidly ‘English’ authors like Milton, William Ernest Henley, Ruskin, Wordsworth, Cowper, Addison, Arnold, and so forth” (126-127). Conceiving of a cohort organized by strangeness, Phillips includes writing from across two centuries by a diverse collection of authors including Olaudah Equiano, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, C.L.R. James, Doris Lessing, Salman

Rushdie, and Ben Okri, among others. In this and in his other literary works, Phillips breaks protocol and collects stories into anthologies of a different kind. Whereas anthologies historically have often been used to codify sameness—in Walkowitz’s terms, “to affirm the expressive cultures of national or micronational communities” (537)—Phillips draws lines of connection across, and because of, difference. As an organizing principle, the experience of being a foreigner—or, more accurately, being *made into* a foreigner—governs many of Phillips’ texts. Phillips takes seriously Paul Gilroy’s claim that “racism does not, of course, move tidily and unchanged through time and history. It assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations” (11). His anthologies and his anthological writing, including nonfiction texts and fictional novels, chart the multifarious shifts of racism and its attendant legal and social manifestations: criteria for belonging, penalties for nonconformity, and violence against outsiders.

Walkowitz ventures that “the anthology form is an odd choice for a writer committed to literary classifications that exceed or abjure the nation” (537); for Phillips, nationality, if anything, serves as only one organizer among many. While Phillips often uses a national framework to organize his anthological works, perhaps Britain most of all, he also thinks in both subnational and transnational terms. His works generate a litany of affiliations, as well as disjunctures. In *Foreigners*, two of the three central protagonists are born outside of England, but the third was born in Leamington Spa. Two of the three are black, while one is mixed-race.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the men are yoked together across time and space for their having been made foreigners by their white countrymen. Phillips forges connection through exclusion: in his own

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<sup>2</sup> Curiously, in Phillips’ account two of the three protagonists (Barber and Turpin) marry a white woman and have children, while the third (Oluwale) is not said to be married or a father. In actuality, all three men married white women, and all three had children.

words, he endeavors to write “history from a different angle—through the prism of people who have nominally been written out of it, or have been viewed as the losers or victims in a particular historical storm” (qtd. in Nasta 115). Phillips fills in the gaps of the historical record. Often relying heavily on archival documents even for his fictional works, Phillips serves as archivist and historiographer for the forgotten, the marginalized, and the forcibly displaced.

Phillips understands oppression neither as limited to spectacular historical moments, nor always attributable to a single cause. There is nothing particularly historic—at least not to the level of the Holocaust—about David Oluwale, the third protagonist of *Foreigners*, but Phillips does not dismiss his persecution as trivial. Oluwale is harassed and repeatedly attacked, institutionalized against his will, and made homeless before finally being murdered by police. Within the narration of Oluwale’s story, Phillips demands that his reader “REMEMBER OLUWALE” when he cites and offsets “graffiti on the wall by the Hayfield pub” (233). When Phillips narrates deaths in Nazi concentration camps in *The Nature of Blood*, he reveals oppression as intersectional: Margot Stern, a young Jewish woman and the sister of the protagonist, is doubly vulnerable. After she has gone into hiding, she is raped by the man who had consented to hide her, “her hiding father” (175). When she screams, the Nazi authorities she had skillfully evaded finally capture her: “both she and her hiding parents were escorted down the three flights of stairs and emptied out into the street... One year later, in a country to the east that was not her own, she died on a cold grey morning, naked among naked strangers” (175). Margot dies in a concentration camp not only because she is Jewish, but also because she is a woman. Within a single character—and within and among entire novels or anthologies—Phillips signals connection across different experiences of marginalization and violence.

The point and purpose of Phillips’ anthologizing is generative: collecting stories invites

the imaginative work of comparison. How are disparate stories connected? How do they represent distinct facets of the same idea? How might those distinct facets be contradictory? Phillips' works perform what Michael Rothberg terms "multidirectionality." In *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg uses the example of Phillips' Jewish work—that is, *The European Tribe*, *Higher Ground*, and *The Nature of Blood*—to articulate "an anachronistic aesthetics" (153). Anachrony, as a common anthological device, unifies. Across time, disparate elements meet: anachronism "brings together that which is supposed to be kept apart" (Rothberg 136). Phillips' connections of distinct histories of oppression do not hierarchize: in his vision, neither the Holocaust nor the Middle Passage cancels out or lessens the other. Where, according to Tony Judt, "the 'common' interpretation of the recent past is thus composed of the manifold fragments of separate pasts, each of them (Jewish, Polish, Serb, Armenian, German, Asian-American, Palestinian, Irish, homosexual...) marked by its own distinctive and assertive victimhood" (*Reappraisals* 4), Phillips draws unhierarchized relationality. He understands victimhood as a shared human experience across time and space. When he thinks of forced migration, no single history dominates his memory: instead he cites the West Bank, Lebanon, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, among others ("Border Crossings," 221). According to Phillips,

If you live in a world in which you are perceived or viewed in some way as being an outsider, on the margins in some way, then of course you therefore become interested in people, male or female, black or white, who occupy a similar role of being an outsider, either by migration, or by their religion, or by their ethnicity, or their race, or their gender... you are interested in other people who share the same condition... whether it's, you know, Native Americans, Jewish people, men, women, blacks, Hispanics, there is a natural connection. (qtd. in Pulitano 376)

Phillips narrates and anthologizes the “natural connections” among marginalized individuals. In so doing, Phillips’ writing “has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice” (Rothberg 5). Phillips’ writing challenges histories of oppression that serve to excuse other kinds of violences, sometimes on a smaller scale. What the story of Margot Stern teaches, and what reading *Foreigners* and *The Nature of Blood* together demonstrates, is that all forms of oppression—whether racist, sexist, or any other kind—are equally harmful and must be resisted.

### **Stranger Danger: Narrating Homelessness**

Phillips’ casts of characters, including both actual historical figures and fictional ones, generally share one quality above others: each protagonist is in some way a stranger. Either genealogy, skin colour, place of birth, homelessness, or some other factor or combination of factors has led to their being marked as outsiders in the societies in which they live. Their ‘strangeness’ is not innate; it is contextual and artificial. Societies decide, whether their members realize it or not, on essentially arbitrary criteria for social inclusion. In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed argues that “the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities” (6). Phillips’ writing foregrounds these processes of exclusion and expulsion in particular, and it examines the ways in which social norms and legalities enforce, and reinforce, hard borders at the levels of neighborhood, community, city, and state.

By combining individual stories with larger histories of community and state, as well as with historically and geographically separate stories, Phillips confronts what Ahmed terms “stranger fetishism.” Stranger fetishism, Ahmed explains, “invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of its determination” (5;

original emphasis). To individuals within a given community, the strangeness of the stranger seems given; mechanisms of exclusion are hidden or naturalized. When Phillips, in *Foreigners*, narrates the history of the city of Leeds alongside the story of David Oluwale, he demonstrates how the present exclusion of immigrant and black individuals is not without precedent. In so doing, he shows the changeability of criteria for inclusion, and therefore reveals its ultimate arbitrariness. Historically excluded populations in Leeds, Phillips' third-person narrator indicates, include the working class (179), the Irish (193), and the Jews (191). Regarding the latter, the narrator explains that, "despite the fact that over 2,000 Jews volunteered for service during the First World War, Jews [in the interwar years] continued to be regarded as 'foreigners'" (191). Military service would appear to be confirmation of allegiance to and formal belonging within a state, but as Phillips' narrative indicates, such service does not negate the arbitrary standards of community inclusion—which is to say, in this case, whiteness. This example proves to be one of the anthological "microseries" (Walkowitz 539) within *Foreigners*: both Francis Barber (27) and Randolph Turpin (89) served in the military as well, and remained excluded from society nonetheless. According to Rinaldo Walcott, "belonging is a taken-for-granted strategy of nation-states, intended to foreclose crucial and critical questions concerning national and state arrangements. Belonging is therefore a site for the contestation of the ethical reordering of the nation-state" (4). Refusing to take the criteria for belonging as natural and inevitable, Phillips draws attention to mechanisms of stranger-making, and thereby raises critical questions about the constructed nature of belonging.

In the case of Eva Stern, the most central protagonist in *The Nature of Blood*, the process of being made strange is literalized. Before the camps, she says, "there was humiliation. There was the daily anxiety of being easy prey for groups of men who ran through the streets yelling

slogans. There was the torment of their cruel laughter. There was the fear of being betrayed by a gesture, a slip of the tongue, or an accent” (85). Stifling her words and gestures, trying to hide her difference so as not to be mistaken for a stranger—that is, a Jew—Eva lives in fear of assault daily. By the time she leaves the camps after the war, she has been made stranger still. Where earlier she is not recognized as belonging by the slogan-shouting Nazis, after liberation she has been made a stranger to herself: “I wait for a few moments and then move across to the mirror. A stranger’s face, with large puffy eyes. I do not want this anguished expression. How can this stranger be me?” (47). In this case, the mechanisms for exclusion are literal and deadly. Eva recounts the relocation of her family to a ghetto, their rounding-up by Nazi soldiers, their train ride to a concentration camp, and the daily horrors and indignities of the life she led there. Phillips’ narrative does not skimp on gruesome details: there are chilling echoes in Eva’s story of traumatic nonfiction accounts, such as Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* (1947). Through this traumatic narrative, Phillips makes it clear that Eva and others like her have been made into strangers from humanity.

In *The Nature of Blood* and *Foreigners*, Phillips’ narratives reveal legal, historical, and social structures of national and community determination and domination. Ahmed describes the way in which, as part of the process of making strangers strange, communities often ascribe a particularly shadowy danger as emanating from the outsider. This ascription is part and parcel of the creation of community: “the projection of danger onto the figure of the stranger allows violence to be figured as exceptional and extraordinary—as coming from outside the protective walls of the home, family, community or nation. As a result, the discourse of stranger danger involves *a refusal to recognise how violence is structured by, and legitimated through, the*

*formation of home and community as such*” (Ahmed 36; original emphasis).<sup>3</sup> The creation and scapegoating of strangers is no passive or innocuous project. Attaching notions of danger and suspicion to the figure of the outsider is a violent act. In one of the central stories in *The Nature of Blood*, focused on fifteenth-century Portobuffole, Phillips narrativizes this process. Giving the background on what will turn into a gruesome murder trial, the third-person narrator describes an atmosphere of suspicion: “after raging for almost a full year, the plague had mercifully ceased, but the old suspicion of strangers remained. So, even as they looked for their men, the women also kept a sharp eye open for those they did not recognize” (48). This suspicion of outsiders becomes both the reason for, and evidence in, a murder trial. Suspicious of and repulsed by the Jewish residents of Portobuffole, the other townspeople look for reason to exclude them further (they already live separately in a ghetto at the edge of town). Because the townswomen are on the alert, they can be certain that they see an unknown little blond boy enter the Jewish quarter of town. When they fail to see the same boy exit—“the innocent beggar child with blond hair and a sack on his shoulder... was never seen again” (58)—a horrific story of his murder at the hands of the Jews is invented. Phillips’ descriptions of the trials of the Jews, their confessions secured through torture, and their executions (93-105; 149-155) affirm Ahmed’s claim: violence in this case has not been perpetrated by those marked as strangers, but on those strangers. Strangeness doubly convicts the Jews on trial for the imagined boy’s murder: they are accused because they

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Judt, in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, corroborates Ahmed’s claim: “some members of the European Left,” he argues, “have latched quite effectively onto the idea of protecting the *exclus*: but they still think of them as just that—excluded from the norm, which remains that of fully employed, wage-earning, socially integrated workers. What needs to be grasped is that men and women in precarious employment, immigrants with partial civil rights, young people with no long-term job prospects, the growing ranks of the homeless and the inadequately housed, are not some fringe problem to be addressed and resolved, but represent *something grimly fundamental*” (429; my emphasis).



are strangers, and false evidence against them is corroborated by the townspeople's fear of strangers.

Phillips' focus on characters-made-strange is part of a larger consideration across his oeuvre on the subject of homelessness. Strangers, even when housed, are (at least metaphorically) homeless. Always excluded from the social worlds of their neighborhoods, communities, cities, and states, often migrants, sometimes literally homeless, Phillips's strangers do not have "a place in the scheme of things," in the words of Gurnah's Saleh (*By the Sea* 175). When asked by an aid worker if she intends to go home, Eva muses, "how can she use the word 'home'? It is cruel to do so in such circumstances. I cannot call that place 'home'. 'Home' is a place where one feels welcome" (37). Homelessness, like strangeness more generally, is in large part the result of legal, social, economic, and political norms and pressures, rather than a result of individual irresponsibility or indigence. As Kathleen Arnold contends, "more often than not, homelessness is studied as a sociological problem and the dynamics of power on the part of the homeless on the one hand, and policy makers and full citizens on the other, are not examined" (1). The erasure of the national- and social-scale causes of homelessness leads to a circumstance in which the bodily existence of the homeless person, even if he resides in a democratic state, is surveilled and regulated according to authoritarian power structures:

The homeless are often seen as untrustworthy, dirty, lazy, pathological, and dangerous. Their condition is viewed as natural rather than political or economic. These attitudes, as manifested in various sites of political power, take the individual as the unit of analysis and structural factors are ignored. Consequently, the problem is depoliticized and reduced to a binary mode of self/other, clean/dirty, responsible/irresponsible, and independent/dependent. This binary

mode exposes an authoritarian power structure that has created an asymmetrical relation between the mainstream and the homeless and thus, citizen and noncitizen. (Arnold 7)

The making-strange of the homeless person is part of a violent, biopolitical, and authoritarian process of community-creation.<sup>4</sup> Defining its outsiders according to reductive binaries, societies authorize (even if by omission or ignorance) force against their strangers, be they made homeless by violent removal or by invisible economic and social forces. When Gilroy identifies the transformation of “the ‘thin red line’ of troops in the colonial front line, standing between us and them, between black and white” into “the ‘thin blue line’ of police, personifying the law” (110), this is the biopolitical state mechanism he means. Quoting a young British police officer in *Foreigners*, Phillips confirms that police authoritarianism is intended, rather than the product of a few bad apples: “one officer said that I had the attitude of a social worker on the job, which was not thought to be a good thing” (199). Gilroy also insists that authoritarian policing is a *nation-building*, rather than safeguarding, process. “The development of increasingly authoritarian state intervention in the fields of policing and criminal justice,” he argues, “has invoked an appeal to the British nation in terms of a common racial sensibility” (76). The devils are inside the walls: violence is not being done from the outside of the nation-state, nor by the homeless individuals on the margins of society. As a constitutive element of British and other

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<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben indicts democratic states for their perpetuation of authoritarian biopolitics. He points to “the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with which this century’s totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies” (122). Agamben describes the modern condition globally as “a context in which for quite some time politics had already turned into biopolitics, and in which the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life” (122).

forms of nation-building (particularly Euro-American varieties), violence is perpetrated from the inside out.

The stories of Eva Stern and David Oluwale are exemplary of the authoritarian condition characterizing homelessness. Both characters are forcibly displaced and incarcerated, and thereby made literally homeless. Both are subject to gross human rights violations and authoritarian military and police tactics. Phillips' narrative approach to both is eerily similar which, I contend, is no accident. Parallel to the way in which Rothberg describes *The Nature of Blood* as borrowing from the earlier *The European Tribe* (164), *Foreigners* replays generic combinations and narrative strategies that *The Nature of Blood* had employed a decade earlier. This composite narrative structure reflects and contests authoritarian governance. In *Foreigners* and *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips intervenes in theoretical and social-scientific conversations about the nature of home and homelessness through performative, archival, and fractured literary narratives.

The authoritarian power structure that controls the lives of homeless individuals proceeds according to an established disciplinary protocol: "homeless individuals are treated as criminals and subjected to prerogative power, just as foreign enemies are, on the one hand, or individuals needing guidance (such as children and the insane), on the other" (Arnold 88). Whether deemed criminal or dependent (or both), the homeless person has no recourse through judicial or other state channels. According to Arnold, both the judiciary and the welfare state "must rely on a whole network of experts—psychiatrists, criminologists, educators, doctors—in order to evaluate the individual's pathologies and corrigibility" (107). Rather than examine the larger political and socio-economic factors that lead to and perpetuate homelessness, state agents defer to predetermined sets of personal pathologies. Phillips' works put this practice into literary terms,

rendering the stories of Eva Stern and David Oluwale as extended narrative networks of state and civil agents. Making this “network of domination and objectification” (Arnold 88) manifest, Phillips challenges the adequacy of predetermined pathological categories to address homeless individuals.

Phillips employs narrative strategies to illuminate the social and contextual networks that define homelessness. Caroline Levine contends that novels—or, at least, literary narratives—are uniquely equipped to map and clarify socio-political networks. Borrowing from Bruno Latour’s characterization of networks, Levine contends that “we can understand networks as distinct forms—as defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience. Though they are not self-enclosed totalities, networks have structural properties that can be analyzed in formal terms. And an attention to the patterns governing networks will allow us to think in newly rigorous ways about political power and social experience” (113). Levine connects the aesthetic and the social-scientific through network. Aesthetic forms, especially literary narratives, can help us to analyze their attendant social forms. Citing Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853) as case-study, Levine demonstrates how narratives can illuminate overlapping patterns of governance:

In order to capture these many contending networks, Dickens expands the usual affordances of the novel. Depending on how you count them, between fifty and seventy characters populate *Bleak House*. To investigate far-reaching and overlapping networks—disease, urban streets, global philanthropy, the lawsuit, and so on—the novel needs to present lots and lots of nodes, and to link them along multiple pathways. Such layered interconnection would simply not be possible with the ordinary number of novelistic characters. (125-126)

Dickens' particular mode of narrative—one that proliferates social encounters and intersecting social strata—reflects the complexity of Victorian socio-politics. Reading the interactions between characters, Dickens makes evident the “social, economic, and institutional networks” (Levine 126) in which they participate (or, from which they are excluded). In *The Nature of Blood and Foreigners*, Phillips replicates Dickens' strategy, although instead of an abundance of major and minor characters, he writes through an abundance of archival and testimonial sources. Replicating in prose the “network of experts—psychiatrists, criminologists, educators, doctors” whose testimonies are meant “to evaluate the individual's pathologies and corrigibility” (Arnold 107), *The Nature of Blood and Foreigners* evaluate administrative practice, invite readers to navigate cognitively the tenuous terrain of homelessness, and demand a more just system of governance and social support for those who have been made homeless.

While *The Nature of Blood* employs a multi-sourced, multi-vocal narrative throughout, the story of Eva Stern stands out as unfolding in a particularly labyrinthine and disciplinary manner. Rothberg explains that the novel as a whole, “employs more than a dozen different narrative voices and shifts perspective several dozen times. It also mobilizes a markedly interdisciplinary set of cognitive genres” (164). Eva's story especially crosses into and between each of the others, and contains the most diverse, interdisciplinary collection of genres. The Israeli section of the novel is narrated by Eva's uncle; her relocation to the Jewish ghetto echoes back in time both to early modern Venice and to fifteenth-century Portobuffole; her suicide stands in for the unnarrated suicide of Phillips' Venetian Othello figure. Her story is variously narrated unchronologically in the first-person by Eva herself, by first-person witnesses to and specialists on her condition, by a third-person narrator who provides historical and technical details, and by transliterated dictionary definitions of key terms, such as “Ghetto” (160) and

“Suicide” (185). The eleventh of the thirteen unmarked chapters of the novel in particular condenses disparate narrative elements. The quick and jarring shifts between narrative modes make their points of connection more readily apparent, but they also reveal each one’s fundamental inadequacy in describing Eva’s condition. The informational third-person narrator, for instance, explicates “the process of gassing” down to the smallest details, including the labels on gas canisters: they are “marked *Zyklon B—for use against vermin*,” the narrator tells us, “a product of a Hamburg-based company” (176). Nevertheless, this third-person account fails to address Eva’s story completely. Where hers is the only narrative thread in the novel to which this section can apply—her uncle has left for Palestine before the camps, and the Venice and Portobuffole strains predate the Holocaust by centuries—Eva herself is never gassed. She is forced to witness and to participate in the process at different points, but this narrative section cannot encompass her experience. Neither can the psychiatric condition that Eva comes to exemplify fully incorporate her story. A psychiatrist who has created a clinical diagnosis largely based on his single interview with Eva testifies: “*eventually, of course, we found a name for the collective suffering of those who survived. These unfortunate people have to endure a multitude of symptoms which include insomnia, shame, chronic anxiety, a tendency to suicide and an inability to communicate with others*” (156; original emphasis). According to Alan Liam McCluskey, the psychiatrist’s “‘explanation’ of Eva’s behaviour nevertheless fails to bring us closer to the character as an individual because it continues to employ strategies that attempt to ‘understand’ the individual by using prefabricated models of human subjectivity” (219). These “prefabricated models of human subjectivity” are prescriptive, rather than conclusive. They do not indicate, or even attempt to address, the specific causes of the pathological condition, which Eva’s sections of narrative narrate in disturbing detail. Instead, they merely diagnose and

recommend treatment. The psychiatric diagnosis serves as one of many mechanisms of biopolitical control; the homeless are diagnosed in order to justify their incarceration and further exclusion.

In *Foreigners*, black male characters are defeated by state-sanctioned racism: Francis Barber's inheritance is swindled from him; Randolph Turpin's life ends in ruin; David Oluwale dies at the hands of brutal police officers. At different points in their stories, the protagonists of *Foreigners* attempt to claim citizenship and to counter oppressive state forces. Paralleling Dickens' character count and echoing the eleventh chapter of *The Nature of Blood*, the final section of *Foreigners*, "Northern Lights," is broken into over seventy separate sections, with a range of narrators and source documents. The sections are only demarcated by an extra space between paragraphs and a distinct narrative voice in each, and they come together to narrate the life and circumstances of Oluwale. This collage includes his journey from Lagos, Nigeria, to Leeds, England, as a stowaway, his internment for eight years at the West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum (which is forced rather than necessary), his return to Leeds and ensuing homelessness, and his continual harassment by police. At times, first-person narrators detail their memories and encounters with Oluwale: "I remember he always used to wear a big black coat" (151), a young West Indian British girl recalls. At other times, a third-person narrative voice interjects with historical information about the city of Leeds, or about the trial of the police officers charged with Oluwale's murder (159; 208). As Matthew Hart describes, in *Foreigners* "we witness Oluwale's encounters with coercive state power in the form of the police, prison service, and courts. We also bear witness to the disciplinary practices of psychiatric hospitals and government departments of health and social security. Finally, we read evidence of Oluwale's interactions with, and posthumous significance to, a wide range of civil society and para-state agents such as

charity workers and community activists” (267). Phillips collects narrative fragments to encompass, in as close to totality as the historical record will allow, a single life. His narrative therefore replicates the “network of domination and objectification” (Arnold 88) that characterizes the lived experience of homeless individuals.

Two distinctive narrative strategies that Phillips employs in *The Nature of Blood* recur in *Foreigners*: a second-person narrative voice directed at the homeless protagonists after their respective deaths, and the use of factual, archival, and clinical documents. In *The Nature of Blood*, the haunting words of Eva’s sister, Margot, are directed in the second-person at Eva: “(Did you think of me that morning as I stumbled naked and shivering towards my death? Did you think of me?)” (175-176). Phillips puts these words in parentheses and in italics; they are characterized by repetition and regret. In *Foreigners*, an unidentified second-person narrator speaks to a, by now, long absent Oluwale: “where the Hayfield pub would have stood, now there is nothing. Nothing at all. It is gone. (Like you, David. Gone)” (196). This narrator recurs throughout “Northern Lights,” and echoes the same repetitive, questioning, remorseful cadence as Margot in *The Nature of Blood*. When describing the “Lunatic Asylum” in which Oluwale is unwillingly incarcerated, this narrator interjects with insistent questions: “(My friend, you spent eight years from 1953 to 1961 in this asylum. Doing what? What were they doing to you? Were there others like you?)” (174). He repeats, “(What were they doing to you? Were there others like you?)” (174) only four lines after this first interjection. Ultimately, these echoes of *The Nature of Blood*’s narrative composition draw connections between two differently-homeless individuals and the societies that contain them. In so doing, Phillips critiques the social, political, economic, and legal structures that sanction stranger-making and perpetuate cycles of oppression against those individuals that have been made strange.



In *Foreigners*, official medical documents (180), testimonies of medical professionals (201-202), and prison records (215-216) echo the dictionary definitions and psychiatric evaluations that infiltrate Eva's story. Kathie Birat explains that Phillips "allows David Oluwale's story to emerge along the borderline between the points of connection and similarity that the witnesses express and the nodes of difference and divergence" (64). Throughout the novel, we are invited to examine closely the documents that Phillips weaves between testimonies—we need to be detectives if we are going to get the story right. In Oluwale's prison records (215-216), there is evidence to be found, if one is looking for it, that Oluwale's citizenship rights are violated. If we combine evidence like these records with the testimonies of other British citizens, the official record is caught in a lie.<sup>5</sup> Oluwale is twice convicted of assaulting a police officer—on 27 April 1953 and 4 September 1968. Against such convictions, a civil rights activist testifies: "once I went to court and David was in the dock with a bruised right eye, yet they were convicting *him* of assaulting a police officer if you can believe it" (185; original emphasis). The prison record signals to readers another violation of rights: the gap between entries two and three—from 27 April 1953 and 22 September 1962—was the period of Oluwale's eight years in West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum. Phillips' second-person voice echoes through a section describing the asylum: he repeats the question, "*did they sedate you into submission?*" (175) twice within a single paragraph. Several witnesses corroborate this narrator's suspicion. Where David was described, before 1953, as "smartly dressed" (166), "a great dancer" (168), and "known for reading educated newspapers" (169), afterwards he had "put on a lot of weight and the bounce had gone. It was just no longer there. And the light had also gone from his

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<sup>5</sup> This narrative strategy echoes Rebecca West's in *A Train of Powder* (1955). See Chapter 1 for a detailed reading of West's version.

eyes” (184). In a memo dated 1962-67, the Senior Medical Officer at HM Prison in Leeds testifies that his “assessment of Oluwale’s intelligence is that he was a ‘dullard’” (202).

Connecting the stories, it is clear that Oluwale was forced into the asylum, systematically abused and drugged for eight years, and released without money, lodging, employment, or the mental faculty to acquire or sustain any of them.

### **Claiming Citizenship**

Before their deaths, what positively characterizes the lives and personalities of Eva and David is an insistence on belonging in the face of such overwhelming exclusion. When Eva, emaciated and gaunt, is attacked by children after liberation, she maintains her composure: “and then another pebble. And another. I turn now and walk back along the top of the grassy bank, careful not to break into a run, careful not to betray any panic. I walk slowly, but with purpose and dignity. And I feel the pebbles fly past, the occasional one striking me in a bruise-inflicting blow. But I do not hurry. I will not run” (26-27). This determination not to cede her composure is a sign of Eva’s claim on life and citizenship. Civilized in the face of barbarity, she remains calm. The Nazi regime curbs, and finally cancels out entirely, Eva’s right to participate; she is “forbidden to ride on a trolley-car. Forbidden to sit in a park. Permitted to breathe. Permitted to cry” (85). After the war, Eva nonetheless claims her right to life and liberty: “I have every right to sit in this park and enjoy the afternoon breeze” (31). She has the right of place and of enjoyment; the pursuit of happiness is perhaps the right most evidentiary of actual civic belonging.

David Oluwale also—and others like him—never stops making claims on citizenship. A civil rights activist describes him, even after years of harassment, wrongful imprisonment, and

institutional abuse, as claiming his rights: “he knew the safe areas, but he also knew that if he took Step A then Step B would follow. He made a rational decision to take Step A, which was to go back into Leeds city centre and claim his right to be in the city” (197). British citizenship, for Oluwale, has not been enough. He has not been subject to deportation, certainly, but he has never been what David Farrier calls “a citizen—that is, a body invested with the right to belong” (“The Other,” 405). Phillips’ anthology creates linkages beyond the obvious. In *Foreigners*, by virtue of the book’s makeup, Oluwale and his fellow black protagonists Francis Barber and Randolph Turpin share a sense of foreignness and exclusion from full citizenship. Extending the collective of the disenfranchised, the third-person narrator includes stories of others marked as foreign and excluded. He explains that, in the Victorian era, “the disenfranchised of Leeds were refusing to go anywhere. They insisted on being heard, and they demanded that they be allowed to participate” (179-180). In the 1930s, as well, the same narrator tells us, “like the Irish before them, the Jewish population of Leeds refused to move on. They were going nowhere. This was their home” (193). This differently-configured collective, with Oluwale at its centre, reframes how we understand Britishness. As Bonnie Honig contends, “it is important to rethink democracy in non-kinship terms, as a politics among strangers” (72). Focused on the city of Leeds, Phillips demonstrates commonality not only through race or economic status. What emerges is a less racist, classist, nativist sort of citizenship than Enoch Powell and his ilk imagine. Instead, what stands out in these British lives is precisely their insistence on being British. Like Eva, these are citizens who claim the right to occupy space, to participate socially and politically, and to be at home. Phillips therefore writes against the brutality of state-sanctioned racism and xenophobic, exclusionary nationalism.

With the stories of Eva Stern and David Oluwale, *The Nature of Blood* and *Foreigners*

take up “the case of those who are full citizens yet not recognized as political subjects” (Sassen 190). Before being made homeless, each protagonist insists that they belong: David tells another Nigerian man, “‘I’m from a British colony and I’m British’” (172); Eva sits with her father in what she calls “our country, in a café in our city, at our table” (82). Each is officially, legally a citizen of the country in which they reside. Nonetheless, each individual is identified as not belonging for reasons beyond their control, and each is forcibly displaced and persecuted. Having been made strange by larger than life social and political forces, Eva and David ultimately surrender to their exclusions. In David’s story, Hart argues, Phillips narrates the ways in which “state institutions propagate a definition of Britishness that distinguishes between merely juridico-political identity and true national belonging. In other words, state institutions promulgate and enforce a vision of black British subjects as unworthy of social citizenship in the sense of full and dignified participation in society” (276); the same is true of Eva’s story in a different context. State institutions, as well as their social, political, and economic outgrowths, enforce the stranger’s exclusion from public life. Phillips’ narratives represent and work against repressive social and political structures. He rewrites histories, challenges social understandings of nation and belonging, and works to broaden the scope of citizenship.

## CONCLUSION: Uses of Literature<sup>1</sup>

“All men should have a drop of treason in their veins,” Rebecca West contends, “if the nations are not to go soft like so many sleepy pears” (*New Meaning* 361). The works considered in this study lay the groundwork for a theory of literary treason. The central characters in my case studies—Barbara, Sabina, Hillela, Saleh, and others—work against orthodoxy and exclusion. They reject blind nationalist or dogmatic political allegiances and imperatives, and they forge connections across national, state, ideological, and other borders. They are traitors in the literal sense of the word: each is, in some way, “false to his allegiance to his sovereign or to the government of his country” (*OED*). Sovereignty and government matter less to these traitors than diverse transnational communities and a commitment to humanity and human rights. Several characters and their authors are literally charged with treason or its judicial counterparts—in the Czech context, “subversion of the republic according to article 98 of the criminal code” (Kriseová 168), or the South African Terrorism Act, 1967, which punished any person “with intent to endanger the maintenance of law and order in the Republic” (Section 2.1.a). These authors and literary characters are not fanatics, but they are, in a sense, patriots. They condemn abusive regimes, enclosed communities, and uncritical politics, but none denounces her country or countrymen per se. Kathleen Arnold argues that “the love for country that has characterized nationalism in the modern nation-state is an impoverished one. It is the sort of love that takes for granted rather than the unconditional love that keeps some distance

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this conclusion, “Uses of Literature,” is borrowed from a workshop at the 2016 American Comparative Literature Association Conference held at Harvard University. I owe thanks to Joseph Slaughter and Sarah Brouillette for chairing what was a provocative and productive session. “Uses of Literature” is also a reference to Rita Felski’s 2008 book of the same name.

from and respect for the love object” (132). My case studies prove the exception to this rule: their love for country and countrymen is unconditional, unmoored from political program or national duty.

How might literary works serve democratic ideals and ends? To what do literary works or their authors owe allegiance? This study has approached these and other questions across national borders and literary modes. Over the course of “Necessary Treason,” several conclusions in regard to literature, democracy, and allegiance have emerged. Literature is most democratic when most multivocal: literary texts that imagine manifold, even conflicting perspectives and employ several narrative voices or literary genres model a democratic citizenry. Each author considered here favours connection and democratic citizenship. Furthermore, such composite, multifaceted writing challenges the absolutism inherent to totalitarian, nationalist, and other oppressive regimes. Literary prose can, in fact, be necessarily treasonous: through structural and stylistic literary techniques, imaginative texts reconfigure social and governmental relationships, and envision new possibilities of citizenship and responsibility outside of state or national boundaries. In so doing, I conclude, such texts contribute to making those new possibilities manifest.

Since mid-century, literature and literary authors have figured prominently in movements against oppressive regimes: totalitarianism in Central Europe, apartheid in South Africa, repressive and exclusionary nationalism in postcolonial Tanzania. I read literary texts as potential vectors of inclusive, intersectional non-state citizenship. They are also sites of negotiation regarding allegiance: literary texts parse responsibility and complicate singular affiliations. According to Morton Grodzins, “all patriots are potential traitors” (213). The literary patriots and necessary traitors in this study formulate a different kind of citizenship, allegiance,

and patriotism, bound to humanity and human rights rather than to national or state logics of belonging.

Literature is a world-building enterprise. Novels and plays immerse their audiences in constellations of characters and conflicts; histories and biographies contextualize contemporary socio-politics; political manifestoes and journalistic accounts offer critique and comment. Literary criticism provides frameworks through which to understand and mobilize all of these literary activities. Cumulatively, literary forms give way to imagined communities, and they bolster world-political movements. In the Victorian context, Deirdre David argues, literature “created that nation-defining construction on which the sun was never said to set: the British empire” (4). While literature never builds an empire on its own, it does collaborate with and strengthen imperial military and political colonization. Literature’s “textual labor” (4), however, may not always serve imperial purposes. Where “Victorian writing about empire imaginatively collaborates with structures of civil and military power” (David 14), literature of other historical and political contexts can collaborate differently. As I contend in this study, literature devises new possibilities for social and political organization, it sanctions or censures nationalisms, and it invites readers to (re)imagine themselves and others.

What happens when literature works against the ambitions of the state? Literary forms that imagine revolution, subversive communities, defectors, and dissidents rarely reinforce imperial and nationalist causes. Caryl Phillips describes such imaginative writing as “radical” and “revolutionary”: “the notion of being able to imagine another story—a parallel narrative that challenges state authority—is always going to be a problem for the state. If you are doing the job correctly, you are always going to be oppositional to orthodox power or received wisdom... The kind of work that comes with the imagination is critical” (qtd. in Pulitano 385). Running counter

to the Victorian fictions that David describes, the imaginative writing that Phillips conceives dismantles empires and forges new, more equitable networks of relationality. Where nationalist and state narratives tend toward platitude and ahistoricism, imaginative literary modes demonstrate discrepancy, undermine singular grand narratives, and uncover historical erasure. According to Erin G. Carlston, literary texts are “a useful record of and response to the rhetorical investments of nationalism, prodding at inconsistencies in nationalist narratives and calling them to account for their blind spots” (10). “Deliberate fictions” (10), in Carlston’s terms, have the ability to capture and communicate what is beyond the grasp of the state—namely, multiple and supranational allegiances and figures like the refugee, the exile, the foreigner, and other non-state actors. They are uniquely “suited for imagining what it means to be a modern person—with and without entitlements—in ways that are socially and politically visible” (Potter and Stonebridge 5). Imaginative literary modes provide models of allegiance and citizenship that exceed state logics of belonging. They reframe what it means to be a patriot, and what it means to be a traitor. Such literature seldom deals in certainties: moral ambiguity, personal and political betrayal, and manifold, conflicting loyalties characterize imaginative fiction and creative nonfiction.

Does literature always serve democratic purposes? Certainly not. More often, literature reflects the world its readers, or authors, want to see: Manichaeian, hierarchized, with clear moralities and safely enclosed nation-spaces. How, then, can literature serve democracy? How can it work against demands for unswerving allegiance to political or state systems, nations, or moral or political principles? I conclude that there are four primary modes of literary resistance to such demands. First, literature often issues direct challenges to hegemonic state and national arrangements. Political manifestoes, prison letters, and activist speeches most readily fall into this category, although there are others. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977),



for instance, so provoked the state that then-Kenyan Vice-President Daniel arap Moi immediately ordered Ngugi's arrest.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, literature challenges hegemonic constructions of nation or state by imagining utopian or dystopian futures, alternate realities, or eventualities. Rex Warner's *Aerodrome* (1941) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) imagine fascist and surveillance states; Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) portrays an infertile future turned totalitarian; Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) creates a female-run utopia following a devastating war. Thirdly, literature replicates social constructs and legalities in prose. Charlotte Perkins Gilman reflects constrictive patriarchal social domination in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892); Kafka conjures closed circuits and faceless bureaucracy in *The Castle* (1926); Beckett's *Comment c'est* (1961) reproduces the scene of torture in experimental prose in response to offenses by the French army in the Algerian war.<sup>3</sup> Finally, literature can uncover concealed structures of domination in canonical stories and histories. The early interventions of postcolonial scholars, namely Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said, perform this task explicitly. Spivak's postcolonial reading of Charlotte Brontë reveals "that circles of solidarity and kinship are usually drawn in ways that not only include but also always exclude as one of their enabling conditions" (Honig 114). Fictional works such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969), and Salman Rushdie's *East, West* (1994) reimagine canonical stories and thereby take them to task. Rushdie's retelling of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas transforms what is often described as a

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<sup>2</sup> Years later, Moi demanded the arrest of Matigari, the eponymous and, needless to say, fictional protagonist of Ngugi's *Matigari* (1987). When Moi learned of his mistake, he had the book banned. See: <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/04/12/kenya-in-another-tongue-ngugi-wa-thiongo/>

<sup>3</sup> See Adam Piette's skillful reading of torture and human rights in Beckett's text in "Torture, Text, Human Rights: Beckett's *Comment c'est* / *How it is* and the Algerian War."

triumphant, civilizing colonial mission into a petty, personal drama entitled, “Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship” (105).

My case studies compound literary modes of resistance. Formal narrative techniques combined with subversive subjects undermine the supremacy of the state. Rebecca West and Václav Havel code nonfiction prose to challenge Soviet totalitarianism and other governmental abuses of power (often, they challenge them openly, as provocation); Nadine Gordimer imagines post-revolution, post-apartheid South Africa, while Milan Kundera parodies the totalitarian idyll; Mongane Wally Serote and Caryl Phillips narrativize networks of domination and trauma surrounding black subjects in South African and British contexts, respectively; and Abdulrazak Gurnah and Muriel Spark issue warnings against singular, imperial, and nationalist conceptions of the world. Together these authors produce novels, plays, prison letters, political speeches and manifestoes, journalistic works, biographies, poetry, short stories, and literary criticism. Their texts often operate in tandem with embodied activism, sometimes circulate covertly, and more often than not are directed at national as well as international audiences. These authors challenge the constrictive social and political structures that organize their worlds. They fight against dogmatism, exclusionary social forms, and human rights violations, and they advocate for a non-prescriptive, democratic, and human-oriented politics.

### **Supplementary Disciplines**

How does literature intervene in social-scientific, legal, historical, and political discourses? It is often cited that law and legal writing are factual where literature is fictional; legalism is objective, and literary studies are subjective. This summary conclusion appears to sound from both sides of the disciplinary divide, uttered either in laudatory terms or pejorative

ones. The same is true for other literary-interdisciplinary junctures: political science is reality-based, history is factual, and social science is empirical, all in contradistinction to the presumed whimsy, emotionality, and ephemerality of literary studies. Addressing one such context, John Marx contends that “social scientists who acknowledge literary efforts tend to think of fiction as giving crisis a human face... But fiction does not always collaborate on these terms” (48-49). Instead, he argues, novels “shape a counterdiscourse. They may offer a humanizing counterpoint to the cold facts of statistical calculation, but they also portray life in the failed state as an education—the sort of education, in fact, that might make one more expert than the experts” (49). Literature and literary studies importantly intervene in the social scientific, political, historical, and legal disciplines with which they connect. They recalibrate these fields of intersection, casting a distinct set of characters as experts and actors counter to those that political and social science, law, and history imagine. Literary texts do more than provide subjective context and colour to interdisciplinary concerns: they authorize alternative subjects as specialists and participants, imagine (often correctly) possible social, political, legal, and historical scenarios and futures, and therefore provide a substantively different approach to the worlds they and their interdisciplinary associates consider.

“Fiction has an investment in the state’s future,” John Marx argues (47). Writers of fiction and other kinds of imaginative literature have a stake in the subjects and objects of their narratives. Often, such writers have more of a stake in the states at hand than the disciplinary- and internationally-sanctioned experts, who generally work at a geographical, social, or cultural remove. Saleh Omar in *By the Sea* gets to the heart of the matter when he sardonically complains that the “expert” that the refugee organization is sending him is “an expert in my *area*, someone who has written books about me no doubt who knows all about me, more than I know about

myself” (65; original emphasis). Saleh has extensive and intimate knowledge about his *area*—about Zanzibari government practice, shifting social codes, and human rights abuses—but he, and others like him, are subject to surveillance, silencing, and representation by the sanctioned experts to the point of exhaustion, or annoyance. Saleh’s story puts Marx’s claim into practice: “when fiction imagines competing authorities and authorizes competing readings of state failure, it suggests the mentors and trustees endorsed by the United Nations and by international relations scholars may not always know best” (65). *By the Sea* does not aim to take down UN experts or discredit scholarly work. It does, however, broaden the horizon of what counts as expertise, and who qualifies as an expert.<sup>4</sup> It also brings a critical perspective to non-literary analyses. Readers of literature are accustomed to discovering whether their narrators are credible, biased, omniscient, or unreliable. Readers of other disciplines would do well to learn the same.

Literature and literary studies contribute to the valuable social and political analytics often considered the province of less frivolous disciplines. When Caroline Levine describes her literary-critical method as “deliberately taking a fictional text as a model for understanding the social... apprehending society through—and as—multiple contending forms” (122), she acknowledges that her method thwarts expectations: “if this seems like literary criticism turned upside-down, that is certainly part of my purpose” (122). Levine’s refashioning of literary studies is important more for its articulation of literary use-value than for actually changing the discipline. Literary criticism right-side-up has, for quite some time, “invit[ed] us to think in new ways about power” (Levine 122), whether or not the fact is acknowledged interdisciplinarily.

In my case studies, power emanates in multiple directions and on multiple levels: from

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<sup>4</sup> See John Marx’s thorough detailed reading of expertise in literature in his chapter on “How Literature Administers ‘Failed’ States,” in *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011* (47-88).

governmental regimes and international movements, to individual citizens and revolutionaries. Power also stems from works of literature, and the authors of that literature, in themselves. The censor is a looming figure in transnational twentieth-century contexts. In half of my examples, authors were banned outright, whether writing novels, plays, poetry, or nonfiction: Havel, Kundera, Gordimer, and Serote all became literary *personae non gratae* in their respective contexts. Milan Kundera explains that, in the Czech context,

after the Soviet invasion, writers, playwrights, historians and philosophers were swept off the scene. They were deprived of the right to exercise their professions. They were hard put to find a means to make a living, and so were forced to emigrate. And, once they left the country, all bridges were burnt behind them. This is why the regime wanted to take my citizenship from me; they were waiting for the first pretext. If your citizenship is revoked it means that, according to the law, Czechs must not have anything to do with you. Suddenly, all contact with Czech nationals becomes illegal. You no longer exist for them. (Elgrably and Kundera 17)

The writer wields power, and when a writer and her writing rejects the authoritarian imperatives of state or nation, she is marked as dangerous and unwelcome. The erasure of such literary figures and works proves their importance and their potential subversive power. According to Rebecca West, “men must be capable of imagining and executing and insisting on social change, if they are to reform or even maintain civilization, and capable too of furnishing the rebellion which is sometimes necessary if society is not to perish of immobility” (*New Meaning* 361).

Employing literary modes, the authors in this study do what is necessary. They may be traitors to

totalitarian, racist, or otherwise exclusionary states or nations, but in West's terms, they and their works are the defenders of civilization.

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