

PRESENT JUNCTURES
WORLD LITERATURE, TRANSLATION, AND THE LIMITS OF
CONTEMPORANEITY

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Present Junctures approaches world literature from a translational and comparative perspective by asking, for a situated “we,” who, in the world, shares “our” time, and who is excluded from “our” framings of the present? *Present Junctures* reads works of contemporary world literature that figure these boundaries between who is and who is not considered “contemporary.” Reading works by writers as diverse as Geoff Dyer, J.M. Coetzee, Maryse Condé, Edouard Levé, and Ivan Vladislavić, it argues that the literary work of de-limiting the now is structurally analogous to the work of translation. Just as translators merge literary cultures by producing translated texts, each framing of the present generates intercultural links. And just as translation is unidirectional and asymmetrical, producing a text first and foremost for a target readership, making the originating context available in an altered form, and not the other way around, so is contemporaneity a determination of relevance and urgency for the benefit of a limited receiving context. The four chapters of *Present Junctures* illustrate different critical aspects of contemporaneity, showing it to be *generative*, *limited by opacity*, *provisional*, and *secular*. Each chapter also explores a different scale of worldliness at which contemporary world literature attempts to operate: the world city, the trans-national, the inter-national, and the global.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jan Steyn is a scholar and translator who specializes in contemporary literature in Afrikaans, Dutch, English, and French. He holds a Ph. D. (2018) and MA (2014) in Comparative Literature from Cornell University, an MA in Cultural Translation (2010) and BA in Comparative Literature (2009) from the American University of Paris, and a BCom in Finance and Economics (2004) from the University of Cape Town.

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Introduction

TIME IS NOT A GUEST

‘Contemporary’ is, at base, a critical and therefore a selective concept: it promotes and it excludes. To claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present – a claim over and against that of other things, some of which themselves may make a similar claim on contemporaneity.

– Peter Osborne, *Anything or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, p. 2.

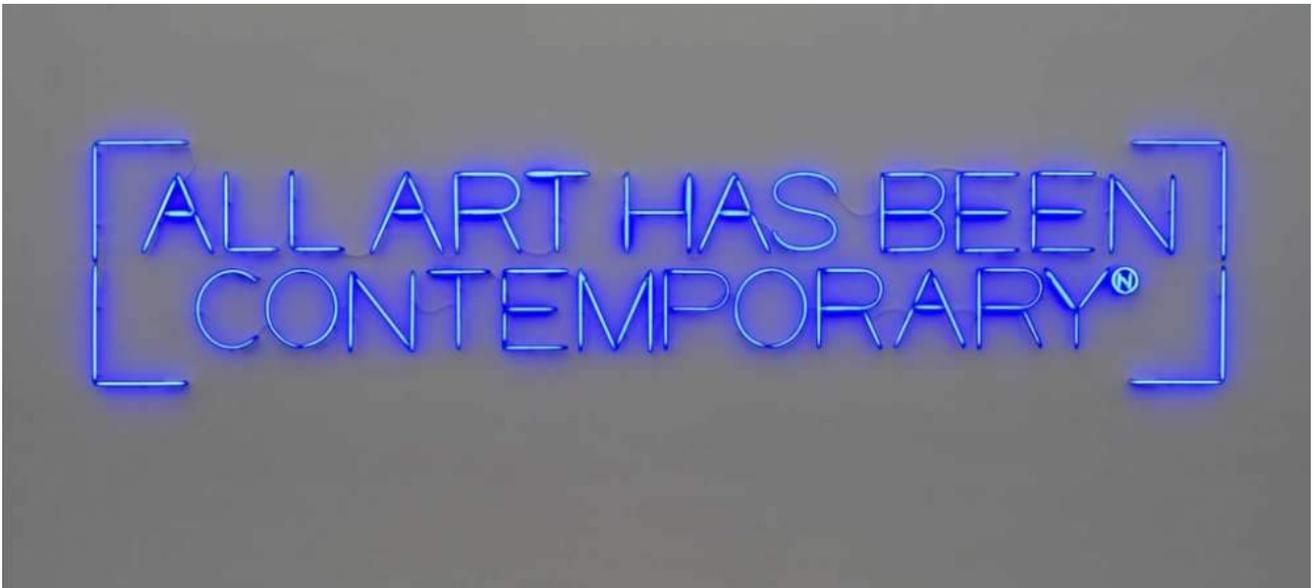


Figure 0.1 Maurizio Nannucci, *All Art Has Been Contemporary*, 1999 (fabricated in 2011)

In 2009, the British novelist and essayist, Geoff Dyer, published *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*. In the first half of that novel, Dyer's alter ego, Jeff, frantically chases after sex, fleeting intimacy, and the most exciting new artworks at the Venice Biennale; in the second, an unnamed protagonist, who may or may not be Jeff, remains at rest in Varanasi, India, contemplating death, ritual, and his limited access to local epistemologies. The two parts of this book conjoin Venice and Varanasi, contemporary art and ancient theater, Eros and Thanatos, inhuman acceleration and superhuman duration. The novel leaves the reader questioning whether Venice and Varanasi, which display the same epiphenomena of global capitalism (airports, hotels, fashion brands, fast-food chains), but which also display the brutal inequalities of global development, could actually be *contemporaries*.

Present Junctures investigates how contemporaneity is produced and posited by works of literature like *Jeff in Venice*. Over the course of four chapters, each considering literary works alongside other art forms, I argue that contemporaneity – conceived of relationally, as entailing at least two entities united through a sense of shared time – is produced in a manner analogous to translation, which is to say by constructing a space in which elements (including people, nations, cultures, languages, landscapes, or places) are joined together asymmetrically. I call each space that results from this translational work, a “present juncture.” Surrealist techniques have taught us that the random juxtaposition of elements may produce surprising and interesting meanings; present junctures, however, are non-random determinations of relevance, or, at least, determinations of relevance that are experienced *as* motivated. It is important to distinguish between a coincidence (co-appearance in time or place) of events, and noting the coincidence. Even if events are truly coincidental (causally unrelated), pointing out that coincidence, bringing the events into the same frame of reference, is always experienced as motivated if only because it is selective, choosing to group *these* events and not *those*. I argue that, in order to understand emergent and politically important trends in the

contemporary arts, it is important to see these present junctures in their plurality and in their constructed-ness, as competing versions of what is important or urgent right now, from a determinate location. So, to recap: certain literary works, acting in a manner analogous to translation, produce spatio-temporal constructs that I call “present junctures,” which bring together elements, positing them in a relation of relevance and urgency.

Seen as “present junctures” the works of contemporary world literature that I discuss, and many that I do not discuss, make more sense and become more interesting. It is a claim of this dissertation that a growing body of contemporary work asks how distant entities share time and become pertinent to one another. I offer no proof; the works that I read in these pages are far too few to be “representative” in the statistical sense. Nor is it a claim that can be disputed with counterexamples. The value of this claim can only be measured against critical practice; I will be satisfied if some readers find that *Present Junctures* reveals and provides a vocabulary for the hitherto under-examined junctural dimension of recent works of world literature.

By “world literature” I intend simply those works that travel beyond their original context of production. There is, in this figure of travel, of course, already a sense of juncture: a joining of the local and the foreign, the origin and destination, along a trajectory of travel. Most theorists of world literature have explored this juncture in its geographic sense; I here join the smaller subset of world literature theorists that think of this juncture also in temporal terms, as a joining of times.

Mine is a descriptive rather than a normative project. I aim to describe how the works I have selected in each chapter produce and posit contemporaneity.¹ That said, I could have selected different literary works. The works discussed in the following pages are either ones directly concerned with global inequality or ones that are useful for thinking global inequality. Logically supplementary to my

¹ I examine how they do this as literary texts as opposed to physical objects. This is not to say that the material circulation of these works in paper or digital format are irrelevant; as others have argued before me, it is in fact a characteristic of contemporary world literature that circulation becomes relevant *at a thematic level*. See Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015). I refer to Walkowitz’s provocative book often throughout *Present Junctures* but for my most in-depth discussion see chapter 4.

formal claims about the construction of contemporaneity in *Present Junctures*, but far more central as a signal of its commitments, is the claim that thinking about literary works as present junctures helps us think about their political interventions in an unjust and unequal world. Present junctures can actively *exclude* endogenous elements deemed passé, or, more violently, exogenous elements deemed primitive. I take it as an article of faith that tracking these exclusions, naming them, giving them form, is a necessary prerequisite to combating or reversing them. It is more difficult but equally important to fathom what is *occluded* or unmentioned in these versions of the contemporary, as well as the new constellations of elements they produce and the new possibilities for collectivity and action they promise. Especially today, when the global market and the Internet fuel fantasies of a singular present acting as the total agglomeration of all events and all subjects in all places, literature reminds us that any lived now is necessarily limited. In this sense, I am inspired by the Marxist concept of “conjuncture,” which sifts through the overwhelming present for its salient features and historical continuities that are most pertinent to materialist analysis and tactical intervention. Unlike most Marxists, however, I am not interested in understanding the world qua total system; rather than disputing the attributes of a singular modernity,² I am interested how works of art and literature construct a plurality of overlapping and competing contemporaneities. And unlike Marx, I only aim to interpret the world, not to change it, or contest its shape, even when that is precisely what the objects I study attempt to do.

1. Contemporaneity

² See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso Radical Thinkers, 2013) and “The Aesthetics of Singularity.” *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 101-32.



Figure 0.2. J. R. and #NotABugSplat collective, #NotABugSplat, 2014

In 2014, the French artist, JR, led the collaborative installation #NotABugSplat, which made images of children’s faces visible from the air in areas of Pakistan where U.S. military Predator drones operate: a trans-national project that puts drone operators face-to-face with their potential victims, the objective being to make their co-existence in the same global present inescapable. While certainly unique, JR’s work exemplifies the critical turn to reflexive contemporaneity in contemporary art. By “reflexive” contemporaneity, I mean contemporaneity actively thematized within the artwork. The nature of the “contemporary” is disputed within these artworks each offering its own version.

The French theorist of contemporaneity, Lionel Ruffel, almost in passing makes a useful distinction between “modal” and “epochal” contemporaneity,³ upon which I add my own gloss here, aided in no small way by other places in Ruffel’s work where the modal/ epochal distinction is not explicitly named but clearly operative. Epochal contemporaneity is characterized by a sense of

³ Lionel Ruffel, “What is the Contemporary?: Brief Archeology of a Question.” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 48, no. 1 (2014), 129.

successivity. One epoch follows another. As do moments, generations, ages, and periods. When people speak of the “contemporary” in an epochal sense they tend to mean either the period following modernism, or that following post-modernism. The epochal view is in essence an avant-gardist view of art or literature. Taken in its modal sense, however, “contemporaneity” is a relation between entities, a sharing of time. In its modal version, “contemporary” functions primarily adjectivally, qualifying at least two nominal entities, which are posited in a relationship of contemporaneity. This relationship can itself be nominalized, as in the phrase “they were contemporaries,” where the “contemporary” status is premised on the qualifying attribute or modality of sharing time.

Conceived epochally, it is difficult to determine when exactly the “contemporary” period begins. The majority of works discussed here were written after 2001 (and the 9/11 attacks), but other candidates for beginning of the “present” era abound. Obvious ones include 1945, 1989, and 2008.⁴ Each date refers to a specific “world historical” event – the end of the Second World War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the financial crash leading to the most recent international economic recession. Each event resonates differently in different places. There is no guarantee that dates by themselves will have anything like a universal meaning, or will have the same importance everywhere. A Nigerian might take “May 1968” to refer not to the Paris student riots but to the capture of Port Harcourt. A South African may find 1994 a more appropriate start to the present era than 1989. As Eviatar Zerubavel points out, there “are an infinite number of temporal reference frameworks within which one might anchor the present,” but for them to be useful at the collective level, they require *standardization*.⁵ What is “useful” for collectivization is equally useful for capitalist exploitation.⁶

⁴ Peter Osborne, in the context of “contemporary” art, argues for another possible crucial date: the 1960s – the moment of conceptual art, and 1968 in particular as a date that has marked a crucial political turn (or has been taken to represent the turn in fact taken earlier) in art. See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso, 2013), 19.

⁵ Eviatar Zerubavel, “The Standardization of Time: A Sociological Perspective,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 88, no. 1 (1982).

⁶ Fredric Jameson notes that, even when compared to societies depicted by modernism, “no society has ever been so standardized as this one ... the stream of human, social and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously.” One result of this is that “the contemporary period has its own secret ‘ruse of history’, its own inner

The standardization of global dating practices – one Roman calendar for the whole world; the same division of years into months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds; the division of the world into time zones with Greenwich Mean Time at its center – is perhaps the single most successful exportation and universalization of “Western” practice. But the closer one examines the variety of meanings attached to these standardized dates, the clearer it becomes that, from the perspective of “lived time,”⁷ there are a plurality of presents making nonsense of narrowly periodizing approaches for the global.⁸

Most uses of the term “contemporary” combines its epochal and modal dimensions. The modal sense is obvious in the word’s etymology, stemming from the Latin: “*con-* together + *tempus*, *tempor-* time, *temporarius* of or belonging to time.”⁹ Whether that “time” which is modally shared is also epochal, characterized by successivity, is left indeterminate. In the *OED*, the first three definitions, each with a slightly different emphasis, hinges around a sense of togetherness in time: “**1. a.** Belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time. [...] **2.** Having existed or lived from the same date, equal in age, coeval. [...] **3.** Occurring at the same moment of time, or during the same period; occupying the same definite period; contemporaneous, simultaneous.”¹⁰ In each of these cases, the use of terms like “age,” “period,” “moment,” or “date,” indicate the linearity and serialism we associate with historical time: one thing after another. But in

function and concealed world-historical mission; namely, by destroying traditional societies (not merely the Church and the old aristocracies but above all the peasants and their modes of agricultural production, their common land and their villages), to sweep the globe clean for the manipulations of the great corporations: to prepare a purely fungible present in which space and psyches alike can be processed and remade at will with a ‘flexibility’ with which the creativity of the ideologues busy coining glowing new adjectives to describe the potentialities of ‘post-Fordism’ can scarcely keep up.” Fredric Jameson, “The Antinomies of Postmodernity,” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (New York: Verso, 1998): 59, 56-57.

⁷ For an overview of clock time as against lived time, see Jimena Canales, “Clock / Lived,” in *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, ed. Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

⁸ “the present is characterized by attempts to curtail the powers ranged on the side of what might be called Western time, or the time of modernity, in particular its powers to control, quell and consume other times and time-scales in the dominative presentness of the temporality of progress or development.” Steven Connor, “The Impossibility of the Present: Or, from the Contemporary to the Contemporaneous,” in *Literature and the Contemporary*, ed. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), 15.

⁹ “contemporary, adj. and n.” *OED Online*. June 2017. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40115?redirectedFrom=contemporary&> (accessed November 09, 2017).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

each of these cases, there is also the lingering possibility of a more phenomenological, lived sense of time that could be shared. The repeated non-exclusive “or” of dictionary entries makes both experiences of “time” possible constitutive parts of the sharing of time that is contemporaneity.

It is only in the fourth and final *OED* definition that the sense of contemporaneity that has been dominant up until very recently in art and literary scholarship, a definition that is *necessarily* epochal, appears: “4. a. Modern; of or characteristic of the present period; *esp.* up-to-date, ultra-modern; *spec.* designating art of a markedly *avant-garde* quality, or furniture, building, decoration, etc., having modern characteristics.”¹¹ Noting that this last definition of the contemporary was only added in the 1972 edition of the *OED*, Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks in their introduction to *Literature and the Contemporary* (1999), a rare and essential collection in the study of literary contemporaneity, declares that it is this fourth meaning they wish to investigate: “the *contemporary* contemporary, as it were.”¹² *Present Junctures* will do the opposite, which is to say focus on the first three relational definitions of contemporaneity in their relation to literature. It is however my claim that these first three definitions have become newly pertinent in the light of a trend in recent literature, and so, to that extent, I too am arguing for an *avant-garde* of sorts, at least in as far as “*avant-garde*” can be reduced to “emergent trend,” though the emergent trend in question is explicitly anti-modernist, anti-successivist, and anti-*avant-garde*.

In the fourth, “modern” definition, the contemporary is tied to the present; it is a deictic shifter marking the “now” of its enunciation, one that may be named variously. The various names of the present epoch, carrying varying (conflicting) claims about its nature, include “modernity,” “ultra-modernity,” “post-modernity,” “neoliberalism,” “globalization,” and “late capitalism,” among others. In epochal contemporaneity, there is always an implicit question about *who* participates in the contemporary epoch. There can be no “*avant-garde*” without others lagging behind. “Modernity” can

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, “Hurry up please it’s time: introducing the contemporary,” in *Literature and the Contemporary* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), 1.

be conceived as a universal feature of life across the globe (in all its difference and inequality),¹³ but for most people it is a feature of life that exists in certain places and not in others, the spread of which is something to be strived for,¹⁴ or to be resisted as a false ideal.¹⁵ “Post-modernism” as it has been practiced as an aesthetic, despite some of the global thinking by those promoting the concept,¹⁶ has tended to be a largely American and European phenomenon. “Globalization” and “late capitalism,” however, implicitly claim a present epoch that includes everyone, or at least where global spread is the asymptote its trajectory tends toward. One way of differentiating versions of what constitutes “our current epoch” is by asking who is included in this second-person plural. Who are “our” contemporaries? Who are the “we” that share time? Who is present in our present? And to what epoch do those excluded from our present belong? To a different time altogether? To some version of “our” past? Or “our” future? What relation between “us” and those “we” deem passé, outdated, primitive, out of synch, behind, ahead, or advanced?

There is a tension between, on the one hand, a modernist, avant-gardist, epochal, successivist sense of contemporaneity – whereby what is “contemporary” would be the latest in a series of groundbreaking, ahead-of-its-times, utterly new movements – and, on the other, a more pedestrian, phenomenological (first-person experiential), modal sense of contemporaneity as the relation of sharing time. But in both the modernist and the sharing-of-time account, there is an important sense in which the contemporary is conceived of as *deictic*. The fact that contemporaneity works deictically,

¹³ For a defense of a Jamesonian version of a singular modernity that is not “the same form everywhere” but rather something that is “everywhere irreducibly specific” – based on Ernst Bloch’s idea of the *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* [same-timed-ness, or simultaneity, of the non-same-timed, or non-simultaneous] – see Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015), 12.

¹⁴ See for example the conception of modernity held by Zambian copper workers in James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁵ For an argument against the mythos of progressive modernity embodied in utopian revolutionary thinking, and for coming to terms with a situation of being “stranded in the present,” living in a “ruined time,” see David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 90; and David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 70-71.

¹⁶ Jameson points out that he first promoted the idea when teaching in China in 1985, and that postmodernity was conceived as “a kind of new global culture corresponding to globalization.” Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” 104.

signaling a “here,” a “now,” and an “us,” each of which extend only as far as the deictic field, is an active theme in the trend of reflexive contemporaneity in contemporary art.

At the 2005 Venice Biennale, the British-born artist Tino Sehgal produced *This Is So Contemporary* (a work conceived in 2003) for the German pavilion. Critics seem to find this work to be either the most hilarious commentary on contemporary art or the most annoying example of it. The work is a conceptual performance piece in which performers, or “interpreters” as Sehgal calls them, move around in a white cube art space repeatedly chanting, “Oh, this is so contemporary! Contemporary! Contemporary! Oh, this is so contemporary! Contemporary! Contemporary!” Whether amused or annoyed, we have to admit that there is something pertinent about Sehgal’s use of the deictic, “this,” in “*this* is so contemporary.” Deixis refers of course to those parts of language that require a context for their meaning to be determined. Deictics are therefore grounded by the space and time of their enunciation or situation of utterance. The crucial point in the context of contemporary art, and contemporaneity more broadly, is that the deictic field – the space in which the deictic is operative – is one with limits. Beyond a certain context, at a certain distance, past a certain time, the field of contemporaneity ceases to be relevant. Contemporaneity only reaches as far as the “this” repeated in “this is so contemporary.” Sehgal conceives of his artworks as “exploring technologies of interconnection,”¹⁷ which seems to indicate that he is not only interested in pointing out the range of the deictic field making up contemporaneity, but in fact in producing such fields. Present at one of the performances of Sehgal’s work, we may be prompted to think about how utterly limited the “this” which is “so contemporary” is – a time shared only between the people in the room. We may then see someone filming the performance with a portable phone and ponder the extension of the “this” to mediated repetitions in other times and places. At some point it may then occur to us that in addition to learning from the artwork in this way, contemplating the range of its contemporaneity, we as

¹⁷ Kelly Huang, “This is so contemporary!” *ART 21 Magazine*, Oct 28, 2009, <http://magazine.art21.org/2009/10/28/this-is-so-contemporary/#.WgX82EzMyHo>

viewers become part of it, constitutive parts of the “interconnection” that Sehgal produces and, in producing, explores.

The art historian, Terry Smith, reads Sehgal’s performance in terms of its setting:

Like many of his contemporaries, [Sehgal’s] art takes the form of staging “situations,” which are calibrated to raise awareness of an often-overlooked quality of the situation in which they are encountered. In this case, he dramatizes the question of how strongly a setting, such as an art gallery, and a set of expectations, such as those we assume when entering an art gallery, might shape the context of our experience in such a place, perhaps overriding anything new or previously unseen in that space. This is *so* contemporary: an immediate, instantaneous yet infinitely repeatable event, an intensely felt, personal *and* shared experience, one that is evidently open-futured yet instantly readable, and singular while also, apparently, resonant of a world much larger than that of art.¹⁸

Smith is right to tie the “this” of *This Is So Contemporary* to a “situation,” in this case the exhibition space. Crucially in this formulation, a “space” is not the same thing as a “place.” While places are experienced as singular, tied to history and events, spaces are experienced as abstract and generalizable. Smith reads the “setting” of Sehgal’s work, rightly, as spatial: “an art gallery.” The white cube is entirely generic, a space that could be anywhere. It is what the anthropologist Marc Augé calls a “non-place.”¹⁹ The opposite of a site-specific artwork, Sehgal’s conceptual work relies on its iterability in different contexts, contexts that would be, in a generic sense, always the same space, that of the gallery or museum. This emphasis on space rather than place changes the way in which we conceive of the deictic field; the “this” that is so contemporary, in Smith’s account, extends beyond the moment and place of its utterance to contemporary art spaces in general and to every time that they are visited. As a work of *conceptual art*, *This Is So Contemporary*, posits contemporaneity

¹⁸ Terry Smith, “Contemporary, Contemporaneity,” *Keywords Project*. Accessed January 29, 2017. http://keywords.pitt.edu/pdfs/contemporary_and_contemporaneity.pdf.

¹⁹ See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1997)

qua idea, and is therefore, in a sense, timeless. Presumably, as long as museums and galleries of “contemporary art” exist, the work could be repeated and lives on in its repeatability.

If we accept that the artwork’s deictic field is limited to the white cube space, what becomes of Sehgal’s interest in “technologies of interconnection?” What precisely is interconnected by this work? What is rendered contemporary? Taking the “contemporary” of Sehgal’s piece to refer to epochal contemporaneity, it appears to confirm the title expression in Maurizio Nannucci’s *All Art Has Been Contemporary* [fig. 0.1]. If all it takes for an artwork to be contemporary is for it to have been produced in the present epoch, and if the history of art is the history of a succession of epochs, then yes, all art has been contemporary. The problem with “All Art Has Been Contemporary” as a proposition is that it is belied by the work’s status as conceptual art. As conceptual art, the work is said to date from 1999 (its moment of conception) with its fabrication in 2011 noted as an aside. Similar to Sehgal’s piece, Nannucci’s concept is expressed as a signature of thought, in its iterability across different contexts. By its nature, conceptual art resists unique settings: it resists dates and becoming datable; it resists place and becoming locatable. In order to distinguish Sehgal’s “contemporary” from Nannucci’s, we have to understand it as expressing a modal relationship; only in this way can we begin to see how Sehgal’s piece might be a “technology of interconnection.” In sharing the experience of the artwork, viewers and “interpreters” share time. It is true that forging an interconnection between those who already attend international arts biennales hardly seems world changing; the insularity of the art world, despite its global pretensions, is the reason that Sehgal’s piece has often been “interpreted” (by performers and critics alike) as sardonic,²⁰ scornful of the patrons and producers of contemporary art. But it need not be this way. The more radical potential for art as technology of interconnection is visible in J. R.’s entirely modal focus on contemporaneity in

²⁰ For a sense of the ironic, or even sarcastic “tone” of the interpretation/ performance, see this video of *This Is So Contemporary* performed in 2013 at the Romanian pavilion of the Venice Biennale, 10 years since its conception, and 8 years since its first performance in Venice. Tino Sehgal, “This Is So Contemporary,” filmed 2013, video, 2:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb6CQ3F8xKY>

#NotABugSplat, a work that is uninterested in epochs and avant-gardes, focusing entirely on relations instead.²¹

Terry Smith notes that from the perspective of contemporary artistic practice, the fourth dictionary definition of “contemporary” as “modern” or “avant-garde” seems “odd, even anachronistic,” going on to argue that when

a contemporary conception of being in time has not only reached parity with the modern one, it has eclipsed it. *It is in our own time* that the two concepts have finally exchanged their core meaning: contemporaneity has overtaken modernity as the fundamental condition of *this* “time, age, or period.” Modernity is now our past; this is how it remains present to us, as a residual postmodernity. It is, however, no longer an ambiguous, “always already,” perpetually atemporal interzone, nor is it a quasi-modernity awaiting a new direction (both options were suggested by varieties of “postmodernism” during the 1970s and 1980s). Rather, it is a strand within contemporaneity, not vice-versa.²²

If one wants to provide an adequate theory of contemporary art, it is a mistake, today, to think of “the contemporary” in epochal terms as a period following “the modern” (or perhaps “the postmodern”), and the reason why this is a mistake is because it is the logic of modernity that insists on linear, progressive chronology broken by ruptures is in excess of (though not incompatible with) the logic of modal contemporaneity that relies on no such figure. Nevertheless, in a dialectical twist, this modal sense of the contemporary is what defines the artworks of our current epoch. This is not to say that the shift in perspective is one marked by rupture; to see it in terms of rupture would be to once more revert to a modernist logic of successivity. Our rootedness in a modernist outlook accustoms us to finding a (cataclysmic) event that has ushered, or rather violently thrown, us from the previous era into the present one. The logic of modal contemporaneity, however, is agglomerative, including even

²¹ In this way J. R. and Sehgal are both heirs of the relational aesthetics of the 1990s. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002).

²² Terry Smith, “Contemporary, Contemporaneity.”

oppositional and disjunctural entities within a single frame: modernity (like postmodernity) “is a strain within contemporaneity, not vice versa.”

As Lionel Ruffel argues, contemporaneity is precisely “the suspension of time as an arrow” – thus the suspension of the linearity of epochs.²³ Ruffel works in a department of comparative literature, but his view of contemporaneity is founded on the visual arts – museum architecture and curatorial practice in particular.²⁴ This is not at all an unusual situation; art historians and philosophers of art have done far more to theorize the emerging conditions of contemporaneity than have literary scholars. It may or may not be the case that present global art practices and institutions call for such theorizations more urgently than do contemporary literature and literary institutions, but the archive of literary works discussed in *Present Junctures*, while small, demonstrates that such theorizations can be very useful in literary studies too. Rather than a break from the modern, either historically or in terms of artistic practice, the “contemporary” signals a democratization, a question of open access, of anti-distinction, a co-presence relying on horizontality and the “simultaneous presence of people in one place,”²⁵ as Ruffel has it, or, in my own modulation, the co-temporal (as distinct from simultaneous) presence of nameable entities (which include people) in one space (as distinct from, but also including place). Contemporaneity is inherent in its intended reception and audience (which, of course, in turn occasions changes in artistic form). This obviously applies to the “center of contemporary art” (which will be discussed in chapter 2 as an institution supplanting the modern art museum and providing the model for contemporary *literary* institutions), but even more powerfully when the “one place” in question becomes “one space” as is the case with mass-produced literary texts, never more so than in the age of the Internet and near instantaneous downloads.

²³ Lionel Ruffel, “Displaying the Contemporary/ The Contemporary on Display,” *The Drouth* 52 (2015): 7.

²⁴ “Generally the ‘shift’ from the modern to the contemporary was not so much a chronological issue than an institutional one. To put it simply, it was a question of transforming museums in art centres, that is transforming the public space of art from a sacred space devoted to contemplation (the museum) into a new multifunctional space devoted to experience (the art centre).” *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

In the academic discussion of contemporaneity, a lot of terminological confusion, and attempts to clear up that confusion, has followed from the publication of Giorgio Agamben's opening lecture to his 2007 seminar at the European Graduate School, "What is the Contemporary?"²⁶ Agamben's exemplary figure of "the contemporary" is a person rather than a period: the poet or philosopher in the best position to understand his age.²⁷ Contemporaneity,²⁸ in Agamben's definition, then becomes:

a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.²⁹

This person, the "contemporary," occupies and surveys the "now," characterized as a break ("disjunction or anachronism") that divides and structures historical time. Agamben initially draws his images of traumatic rupture from Osip Mandelstam's poem, "The Century," where the *vek* (age or century) is figured as a living, dying beast. The contemporary is here the "poet who must pay for his contemporariness with his life, is he who must firmly lock his gaze onto the eyes of his century-beast who must weld with his own blood the shattered backbone of time."³⁰ Agamben's definition of contemporaneity in terms of rupture – the idiom of modernism *par excellence* – is frustrating to theorists such as Ruffel who approach the problem of contemporaneity with a view to institutions and works that are assembled in contradistinction to modernism (and, given contemporary art's regular

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2009), 39-54.

²⁷ I use the masculine pronoun since the exemplary "contemporaries" of Agamben's essay – Paul of Tarsus, Friedrich Nietzsche, Osip Mandelstam, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault – are all men.

²⁸ "*Contemporaneità*" in the Italian is translated in the English edition as "contemporariness." In the 2007 lecture at the European Graduate School, Agamben also uses the word "contemporariness." For the sake of consistency, I will stick to "contemporaneity" throughout. See Giorgio Agamben, *Che cos'è il contemporaneo* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2008), 7.

²⁹ Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," 41.

³⁰ Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," 42.

rejection of Euro-centrism and linear historical progress, also in contradistinction to *modernity*). One such theorist, Pedro Erber, goes so far as to suggest that Agamben's entire discourse is reactionary, displaying an "anxiety and disquiet with contemporaneity" and ultimately amounting to a "denial of contemporaneity."³¹ Equally critical of Agamben's take, Terry Smith characterizes it as "a replay of Baudelaire's conception of *modernité*," one that is "inadequate to the contemporary situation."³² Smith recognizes the appeal of Agamben's formulation to art historians who are sanctioned by it to recycle their theories about modernism (or postmodernism) as theories about contemporaneity, but he ultimately rues the spread of "such pervasive mindlessness" and blindness to present trends in art.³³

What, one may ask, has changed since modernism to solicit such negative reactions to Agamben's formulation of the contemporary qua modernist? In a word: globalization. It is my contention that the much commented-upon false note struck by Agamben's words on rupture is accompanied by another note equally out of harmony and out of synch with contemporary artistic practice, that struck by mention of "distance," which is repeated in Agamben's essay several times as the visual metaphor of a required distance necessary for seeing an object clearly. On the surface, Agamben's is a spatial analogy for time: the distance that we need to have from an object in order to see it clearly is *like* the time that needs to pass before we can understand an epoch in its historical significance. But the distance metaphor is dissonant in an era of globalization in which, as the curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor points out, it has become a commonplace assumption that "there are no vantage points from which to observe any particular culture because the very processes of globalization has effectively abolished the temporal and spatial distances that previously separated

³¹ Pedro Erber, "Contemporaneity and Its Discontents," *Diacritics* 41, no. 1 (2013): 37.

³² Terry Smith, "Defining Contemporaneity: Defining Planetary," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 49-50 (2015): 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

cultures.”³⁴ Enwezor goes on to argue that this assumption is unfounded because even a so-called sophisticated sphere such as the art world routinely does separate cultures and deny their contemporaneity in the “postcolonial constellation” within globalization. Agamben’s metaphor of distance denies the ideal of globalism as one world united in time and space without lags or gaps, but it does not do so in order to show what distance (and time) still has to be breached in order to attain this ideal. For Agamben, rather, distance (and time) is required to “grasp” the present (as historical).

Perhaps in the global art world illusions of globalism are easy to believe (therefore necessitating critiques such as Enwezor’s) because of the form of the art experience: people gather together in one space where works originating from all over the globe are *experienced as present*. It is in fact a major trend in contemporary art and contemporary museology that the consumers of art, those who visit galleries and exhibitions, are being sold an *experience*.³⁵ The focus becomes less on the works themselves than on the art show. Experiencing art in this way requires *being there* at a specific time and place. Amy Hungerford has written about an emergent trend in contemporary literature whereby novels designed for digital platforms require the reader to be physically present in certain places and times in order to “unlock” parts of the narrative in a literary equivalent of geocaching.³⁶ While this kind of experiment raises interesting new possibilities for ways to interact with novels (including as co-author of a broad narrative), the “experience” is not what I here consider to be a *literary* one. Literary experience as I conceive it in *Present Junctions* is almost precisely the opposite: it is the experience of *not* being there. Even if you read a novel at the place that it was set, you are imaginatively transported to a different space/time. The literary thus conceived has an in-built (formal) distance and an in-built non-simultaneity with the world; the contemporaneity it posits is, for

³⁴ Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a Permanent State of Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2008), 207.

³⁵ See Matti Bunzl, *In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde: An Anthropologist Investigates the Contemporary Art Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

³⁶ See Amy Hungerford, “GPS Historicism,” in *Making Literature Now* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2016), 93-118.

this reason, more explicitly than the contemporaneity posited by gallery artworks, one of juncture: a joining across time and space of a reader and a time/space (to varying degrees) different to the one she is reading from. Translation repeats the non-simultaneity and distance that is constitutive of the literary, adding another layer. Since a translation is never quite “born” (to use Rebecca Walkowitz’s term) at the same time as its original, and since it is always, spatially if not in terms of actual place, displaced from its original context, it exaggerates and makes us more aware of the temporal and spatial disjunction that is already there in any literary work. Literary contemporaneity is always, therefore, in at least this formal sense, translational and disjunctive.

Despite its constitutional disjunction or untimeliness, contemporaneity, today, is not characterized by finding the *avant-garde* trends of a single culture: the “distance” in question is neither civilizational, nor modernist, but rather formal.³⁷ The problem of the contemporary is a problem of conceiving the globe’s mutually impacting cultures as sharing time and of the limits to that sharing of time. It is, in Erber’s terms, a question of “contemporaneity as the coexistence and interspersing of a multiplicity of traditions in the same here and now.”³⁸ To which I would add that it is also a question of the multiplicity of such contemporaneities, each constructed with a different deictic field governing the “here and now” – the “here and now” is not always the same. *Present Junctures* studies the promise and desire for, as well as the limits and dangers of such frames. Its primary focus is on contemporaneity as the temporal relation between cultures constructed in literary works in a manner analogous to the work of translation, which is to say, asymmetrically, oriented toward the receiving culture. But this formal definition of contemporaneity will always retain a trace of the word’s epochal, chronological, periodizing sense, because it is now, in the current historical moment, that contemporaneity finds expression more than ever before. Yet, as Peter Osborne warns, focusing on the contemporary as a periodizing category could, ironically, cause one to miss what is

³⁷ In a deconstructive idiom, the distance or spacing is one reflection of the inability of the present to coincide with itself, or of representation and presentation to ever amount to an ontologically full presence.

³⁸ Erber, “Contemporaneity and Its Discontents,” 41.

“distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades,” which is rather

best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of con-temporaneity, a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but of times: we do not just live or exist together ‘in time’ with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of different but equally ‘present’ temporalities or ‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times.³⁹

This (oxymoronic) disjunctive unity of (a plurality of) present times conjures what Marc Augé refers as the “contemporaneous worlds” of a post-Eurocentric age.⁴⁰ The similarity in Osborne and Augé’s view on the contemporary derives from their mutual insistence on the supersession of the Eurocentric by the global as the reference for the current age. The present epoch is marked by the dual and conflicting imperatives to recognize disjunction and unity, difference (including differences in how the world itself is imagined) and the consequences of billions of human beings occupying one globe.⁴¹ One globe, human difference, and many worlds: that is the challenge of being together in time today. *Present Junctions* seeks to identify a series of such disjunctive unities presented in literary and artistic works – frames that bring together a plurality of experiences of time under the sign of togetherness in time.

In light of this challenge, Terry Smith implores us to remember that

“the contemporary” is an adjectival phrase missing its noun. Ask always, “The contemporary ... what?” In most cases, you will find that the speaker is using an abbreviation for “the contemporary world,” “our contemporary situation,” “the contemporary condition,” “the contemporary experience,” or some such. ... The real “blank,” now, is the void in the place that should be being filled by a full

³⁹ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 17.

⁴⁰ Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, trans. Amy Jacobs (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999).

⁴¹ “The contemporary as the time we now inhabit, as our own historical time, has become inextricable from the increasing contemporization of *difference* – to the extent that, in denying the latter, it is the present itself that one refuses to recognize.” Erber, 43-44.

consciousness of our connected planetarity. World picturing is becoming the preoccupation of artists everywhere. The contemporary question is: How can we shape our differences into the connections that the world requires?⁴²

Present Junctures is an extended meditation on how “contemporary world literature,” as opposed to the world-picturing artists of Smith’s ken, can and cannot shape differences into connections. These connections are rendered under the sign of “our connected planetarity” but at a variety of scales. The ones I study here include: the *world city* as a meeting point where languages and cultures coincide; the *trans-national* as spatiotemporal connectivity between entities posited together across (an abstract rather than physical) distance; the *inter-national* as co-constituted and co-figured relations maintained by fictions of contemporaneity; and the *global* as a frame, not of totality, but of relationality without reference to national, linguistic, cultural borders.

As a modal form determining a sphere of relevance and urgency, contemporaneity can also function across historical time. This trans-historical contemporaneity is the kind that Jan Kott has in mind with the title of his classic of Shakespearian performance studies, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964).⁴³ Kott’s claim is crucially *not* that Shakespeare as a writer of timeless classics is our contemporary because the truths that he espouses are universal for all times and places (though this claim to universal contemporaneity commonly made on behalf of canonical works is one that I will examine in detail in Chapter 4, on J. M. Coetzee’s late works), *nor* is it that we live in a post-Shakespeare world whereby our very conception of the human is forever marked by Shakespeare,⁴⁴ but rather that certain aspects of Shakespeare’s feudal view of history, and certain scenes of Shakespearian cruelty, are contemporary to him in Poland of the 1960s.⁴⁵ The “Shakespeare” that is

⁴² Terry Smith, “Defining Contemporaneity: Defining Planetarity,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 49-50 (2015): 167.

⁴³ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974).

⁴⁴ For an argument along these lines see Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999).

⁴⁵ For example, in analyzing *Richard III*, looking at the scenes between the King and Lady Anne, Kott writes, “This scene should be interpreted through our own experiences. One must find it in the night of Nazi occupation, concentration camps,

“our” contemporary is not an a-historical timeless phenomenon, nor is he a world-changing event to which all of humanity needs declare their fidelity for all times henceforth; this “Shakespeare” is rather a concatenation of *relevant* features to the present situation in the body of Shakespeare’s work. To be contemporary in this sense is to be historically significant only in as far as we accept that all history is selective. In the quotation with which I began this chapter, Peter Osborne writes, “‘Contemporary’ is, at base, a critical and therefore a selective concept: it promotes and it excludes.”⁴⁶ This selection can happen across historical time, as I hope to demonstrate in my first chapter that reads Maryse Condé’s *Story of the Cannibal Woman* from 2003 experienced as contemporary in 2015 when read from the city in which it is set. To be sure, this trans-historical sense of contemporaneity is counterintuitive and goes against our ordinary language sense of the word. It is valuable, then, as a reminder that what is at stake in this dissertation is not the fact that works happen to belong to the present historical age but rather the operations of selection and determinations of relevance within works that unites those elements readers are asked to consider as pertinent to their own time.

2. *The Literary*

Thus far I have predominantly discussed examples and conceptions of contemporaneity arising from the art world. For a literary view, I now return to Geoff Dyer’s *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*. Dyer’s novel is in many ways *about* the art world, depicting both the social scene around the contemplation (or, less generously, “consumption”) of art at the Venice Biennale and in India, as well as several specific artworks, in great detail. It may, for that reason, not be surprising that Dyer offers a novelistic solution to the problem of the contemporary posed by the reflexive contemporaneity of artworks and by art historians, philosophers of art, and art critics.

mass-murders. One must see in it the cruel time when all moral standards are broken, when the victim becomes executioner, and vice versa.” Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 44.

⁴⁶ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 2.

Jeff Atman, the protagonist of *Jeff in Venice* has a more than passing resemblance to Geoff Dyer, its author. Both are tall, white, middle-aged British men. Both have been employed as writers for magazines and periodicals, covering cultural events such as the Venice Biennale (though it must be said that Dyer has never worked for a publication whose name is as on the nose or kitsch as the fictional *Kulchur Magazine*). And they share at least some interests and sensibilities. Geoff Dyer is a meticulous *devoté* of creative non-fiction as well as fiction, and so his novel ends with clarifications and disclaimers:

For the record, my wife, Rebecca, and I attended three Biennales, in 2003, 2005 and 2007. Weather-wise, 2003 was the scorcher. The geography of both Venice and Varanasi in these pages is fairly reliable, I hope, but I have taken some liberties with the art, only one example of which was in the 2003 Biennale: the Africans selling knock-off bags near the Arsenale ticket office were actually part of Fred Wilson's installation at the American Pavilion, 2003. Other stuff mentioned in the Venice part of the book – Gilbert & George, Ed Ruscha, the red castle and the blue space of light – is from 2005; the rest is from 2007. [...]

Needless to say, Jeff's opinions about art are not Geoff's, or not consistently at any rate.⁴⁷

The distinction between fact and fiction is important in the context of a contemporaneity between people that is based on a shared idea of what the world is actually like. If the world in question is our world, as opposed to say Narnia or Middle Earth, then only a certain degree of accuracy can guarantee that we share in it simply by reading about it. The question of the limits to our ability to share in a *factual* world, and of *fiction's* capacity for making us aware of those limits (cognitive, linguistic, affective, and institutional), especially in as far as we rely on international news for our image of the world, will be the subject of chapter 3. Here, in *Jeff In Venice*, it is already evident that the claims of fiction go deeper than a claim to providing information about the world, as becomes clear in the

⁴⁷ Geoff Dyer, *Jeff In Venice, Death in Varanasi* (London: Vintage, 2009), 294-95.

context of this typical fragment of Jeff Atman's interiority delivered through close third person narration:

People say it's not what happens in your life that matters, it's what you think happened. But this qualification, obviously, did not go far enough. It was quite possible that the central event of your life could be something that didn't happen, or something you thought didn't happen. Otherwise there'd be no need for fiction, there'd only be memoirs and histories, case histories; what happened – what actually happened and what you thought happened – would be enough.⁴⁸

If the “central event of your life” could be something made up, then fictions matter. One of the ways in which fictions matter, is in the affect and perspective they carry, ones which can be highly subjective and go unshared – this is one of the lessons of Dyer's novel – unshared not only between distant people living in, say, Venice and Varanasi, but also between lovers, spouses, fanatics of the same art, and espousers of the same taste. At least some of the fictions that matter most to us, Dyer suggests, are private ones. In as far as contemporaneity always relies on externality – on an experience of time that can be externally clocked, measured, or at the very least, referenced – this privacy, or, using Edouard Glissant's term, “opacity,” is a problem for contemporaneity. How can we claim to share time with someone whose experience of time remains closed off to us? Human interiority poses a radical limit to contemporaneity and literary fiction is a privileged form for making that limit discernible.⁴⁹ This will be a major topic of chapter 2.

Sent to Venice to cover the Biennale by *Kulchur Magazine*, Jeff, once there, like Gustav von Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* before him, meets his love interest. Like Aschenbach he is immediately overcome with erotic desire; unlike the teenage Polish aristocrat, Tadzio, of Mann's novel, however, the witty, beautiful, and aptly named American, Laura Freeman of Dyer's novel is a

⁴⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁹ Literary fiction is not the only form to allow this, but it is an important one. It could certainly be argued that certain techniques of film – voiceover and point-of-view shots, for example – also allow for the figuring of interiority.

suitable match for the protagonist. Laura's appearances are as fleeting and ephemeral as everything else at the Venice Biennale, but Jeff finds her far more desirable than any of the other "attractions." Counter to his sense of self and counter to the spirit of the frenetic world city, Jeff finds himself wanting to slow down, to hang on to Laura, to make her stay: Laura herself, in this way, becomes a figure for the fleetingness of time. After an appropriately suspense-building number of missed encounters, surmounted obstacles, and consumed bellinis, the lovers unite in a remarkable sex scene, which has become the subject of several reviews as well as more than one interview with Dyer on the craft of writing sex.⁵⁰ Scanning the Internet for commentary (by critics and general readers) on Dyer's sex scenes reveals a mix of the puritanical, prurient, and admiring; some commentary is focused on writerly technique, some on sexual technique, many are concerned with character tropes like "likeability" or "hotness," and very little of it actually considers these scenes in the context of the novel's concerns.

Among the exceptions is a review by Tim Parks, for whom Dyer's sex scenes are unrealistically entertaining: "so perfect is the sex and so brilliant, polished, and savvily cinematic the dialogue (these two are incapable of a dull moment) that the reader quickly appreciates that Laura is hardly a character at all."⁵¹ It is my contention that Parks here, uncharacteristically in what is an otherwise sensitive and insightful review, completely misses the point. He is right that Laura is what E. M. Forster would have called a "flat" character, but he omits to discuss the novelistic mechanism that makes her so. In *Aspect of the Novel* (1927) Forster writes,

Flat characters were called 'humours' in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form they are construed round a single idea or quality. [...] All of us, even the sophisticated, yearn for permanence, and to the unsophisticated permanence is the chief

⁵⁰ See, for example, Ligaya Mishan, "Adult Only," *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2009, and "Let's Read About Sex," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2013.

⁵¹ Tim Parks, "In the Kangaroo's Pouch," *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2009.

excuse for a work of art. We all want books to endure, to be refuges, and their inhabitants to be always the same, and flat characters tend to justify themselves on this account.⁵²

Laura is not exactly a type or caricature, but she is not far from it. Before we are introduced to Laura, before Jeff even lays eyes on her, he considers the apparently universal truth that “at a party full of nice-looking women” there is guaranteed to be “one woman who was stunningly gorgeous, who was radiant in a way that only one man at the party – Jeff hopefully – could properly appreciate. And so it proved.”⁵³ She is introduced *as a type*, and only later becomes somewhat individuated, or “rounded” as Forster would have it. For Parks her flatness is attributable to Dyer’s avowed preference for non-fiction over fiction, making her less of a character than “an exemplum in an essay.”⁵⁴ It is particularly striking however that she should appear flat not just to us, the readers of *Jeff in Venice*, but also to Jeff who reads her as pure surface *within* the novel. It is “Junket Jeff,”⁵⁵ always already onto the next assignment, who “yearn[s] for permanence” and finds this liberating trait in the reassuring flat-ness of Laura Freeman.

Consider the following, much commented upon, but for my purposes entirely typical sexual encounter in *Jeff In Venice*, which takes place in a bathroom to which Jeff and Laura had escaped to do cocaine (drugs being imbued with the capacity to speed up and slow down time in both parts of the novel):

‘Actually, I need to pee.’ Unsure whether she was asking him to leave or simply making an announcement, Jeff said, ‘Let me watch.’ She pulled up her dress and pulled her knickers down to her knees. Unconcerned by his being there, she began pissing immediately. Jeff held his hand between her legs, feeling her piss run hotly over his hand while she did so. He was on the brink of asking her, later on, when they were back at the hotel, to piss on his face but, even in the midst of the rush of coke,

⁵² E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 105-07.

⁵³ Dyer, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, 30-31.

⁵⁴ Parks, “In the Kangaroo’s Pouch.”

⁵⁵ Dyer, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, 15.

worried that this might lie outside the realm of her sexual enthusiasms – on reflection, he wasn't even sure it lay within the realm of his. He ran his hand under the tap. They came out of the toilet together, sniffing, glowing, unnoticed.⁵⁶

Rarely here, or ever, do we receive any glimmer of Laura's interiority beyond what she dramatically reveals through gesture and speech. What is striking, then, about this scene in the context of *Jeff in Venice* is the phrase, "Unconcerned by his being there...." I propose that this slippage in the narration from Jeff's perspective to Laura's lack of concern ought to be attributed to Jeff. It is Jeff who, in the blurring of self that he hopes to achieve through sexual intimacy, reads Laura as "unconcerned," a reading that may or may not be correct. Without access to Laura's interiority, with her presenting in her flatness, Jeff (and we) can only guess. A close reading of any of the scenes featuring both characters will reveal this same asymmetry of information; Jeff is our only focalizer, the only character whose perspective colors the language and description, and while Jeff is often glib and superficial, Laura is pure surface. Jeff is "unsure" what Laura intends by her declaration, "Actually, I need to pee," and we are unsure right along with him. Jeff's uncertainty about the borders of "the realm of her sexual enthusiasm" and his, more profound, uncertainty about the borders of his own sexual enthusiasms, is also ours. What these sex scenes teach us is that there is a limit to what can be shared with others, including a limit to how much of the experience of time can be shared, how densely conjoined the present juncture between people might be. This limit is marked by the opacity of others, a limit that applies to the well-trodden novelistic and ethnographic ground of putative East-West encounters in the Varanasi section of the novel, but also to the most intimate and vulnerable moments Jeff cannot be sure he shares with Laura. As they part ways he reflects to himself on the contemporary state of (international amorous) affairs: "A strange, modern form of intimacy – not

⁵⁶ Ibid., 118.

Victorian at all – that made it easier to lick someone’s ass than to ask when you might see them again.”⁵⁷

At the beginning of *Jeff in Venice*, Jeff keeps remarking on the breakneck speed of modern life. For example, when he reads Mary McCarthy’s observations about an earlier Venice, the one depicted in Mann’s *Death in Venice*, which forms the most obvious running intertext to Dyer’s novel,⁵⁸ it strikes Jeff that the “leisure” of that earlier time, the leisure experienced by holiday-goers in Venice, simply no longer exists.

Like everything else leisure had changed with the times, had sped up. So there was actually a kind of urgency about these wives of investment bankers and hedge fund managers negotiating the brief interval between lunch and picking up their kids from the lycée or the American School. They had learned the lesson of leisure, the importance of contriving things so that there wasn’t time to be unhappy.⁵⁹

At the end of the novel, the narrator of the second half that is set in Varanasi, India, a narrator who perhaps also is Jeff Atman, but who is never explicitly named, begins to experience time differently. He falls into a daily routine, every day different and every day the same. The master metaphor for this is the ever-changing never-changing river Ganges, the waters of which keep flowing by and yet is always there. At this point we read, “I bathed every morning in the Ganges, which kept passing through and staying, passing through and staying put. [...] Time passed, or maybe it didn’t. All of time is here, in Varanasi, so maybe time cannot pass. People come and go, but time stays. Time is not a guest.”⁶⁰ Between these two experiences of time – that of Venice, where time is fleeting, and that of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁸ Tim Parks argues, convincingly I think, that the writings of D. H. Lawrence, to whom Dyer has dedicated an entire book, *Out of Sheer Rage* (1997), is an even more important intertext to *Jeff in Venice*. Parks, “The Kangaroo’s Pouch.”

⁵⁹ Dyer, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 290.

Varanasi, where time stays, not as a guest but permanently – we are left to ask, is there a shared time? Is there contemporaneity?

From a certain perspective, the flurry of activity in Venice is not entirely different from the flow of the Ganges. At one point Jeff remarks:

That was the thing about the Biennale: it was a definitive experience, absolutely fixed, subject only to insignificant individual variation. You came to Venice, you saw a ton of art, you went to parties, you drank up a storm, you talked bollocks for hours on end and went back to London with a cumulative hangover, liver damage, a notebook almost devoid of notes and the first tingle of a cold sore.⁶¹

This would seem to be in accordance with the sense of contemporary art conveyed by Maurizio Nannucci's conceptual sculpture, "All Art Has Been Contemporary," if we take that to mean, "All Art Is Historical." Every piece of art is of its moment, marked by that moment, and consequently contemporary to every other piece of art of that moment. Every piece of art (or literature) carries a date, marking its difference to artworks with different dates, and its similarity to artworks dated in the same epoch (however that is defined – by decade, generation, artistic movement, or technological medium); but in their difference, every piece of art (or literature) is similar – they are *all* dated, *all* "contemporary" at some point. This question of dated-ness, which will find its fullest exploration in chapter 4 of *Present Junctions* with respect to the deliberately dated and purposely ephemeral works of J. M. Coetzee's global period, is one that is present from the very opening of *Jeff in Venice*:

On an afternoon in June 2003, when, for a brief moment, it looked as if the invasion of Iraq had not been such a bad idea after all, Jeffrey Atman set out from his flat to take a walk. He had to get out of the flat because now that the initial relief about the big picture had worn off – relief that Saddam had

⁶¹ Ibid., 27.

not turned his non-existent WMD on London, that the whole world had not been plunged into a conflagration – the myriad irritations and frustrations of the little picture were back with a vengeance.⁶²

2003. Saddam. Weapons of Mass Destruction. All art was once contemporary. All books too. This was once our present. The date literally dates it.

But this version of contemporaneity, a contemporaneity of the timeline, is not what is most important in the works I study in these pages, and it is not what is most important in *Jeff in Venice*; the novel may begin with a delimitation of its present moment in history, but by the end it is very much about different experiences of time and the (im-)possibility of sharing time across those differences, of rendering, to once more cite Peter Osborne, “a disjunctive unity of present times,” which is to say a present juncture that unites heterogenous elements, elements that remain heterogenous and disjunctive even in their putative unity. Steven Connor suggests that “*literary* texts may provide some useful *examples* of the way in which this contemporality [Connor’s term for what I call “contemporaneity”] or holding-together in representation of different, competing temporalities, may useful disturb the identity-principle of the impossible [to experience, global] present.”⁶³ In addition to literature’s ability to act as example, or to disturb a presumed but impossible (total) present, I see literary works as *producing* contemporaneities, joining together elements in a present juncture. I will discuss what I mean by a “present juncture” in due course, but for now I would simply like to note that Dyer’s book asks us to think about the limits and possibilities for sharing time with others, about contemporaneity in its modal form, as a relation that is constructed by bringing people and places into a single deictic field, a single sphere of relevance. It is a book about literature’s ability to map interiority and about the limits of language and interpersonal communication of sharing that interiority. It is a book, in other words, that attempts to do what purely visual art cannot do: to show the depth behind the surface and to show the lonely fact that depth, in others, is sometimes simply unknowable.

⁶² Ibid., 5.

⁶³ Connor, “The Impossibility of the Present,” 31, my emphases.

3. Translation

Literary works often, especially realist ones, produce images of relational constellations between cultures closely resembling the ones we take for real. I see the creation of such intercultural (con)figurations, the joining of cultures in a present juncture, as the translational aspect of literary works. In *Present Junctions*, I am interested in translation in its most literal and literary sense, because without translation there can be no literature, or indeed culture, shared across languages. But I am also interested in translation as a model for joining entities (individuals, nations, cultures, or languages) across (abstract or geographic) distance. My investigations into translation in *Present Junctions* therefore range from accounts of my own methodological choices as a literary translator, critique of the work of other translators, and an extended engagement with aspects of translation theory as a basis for understanding contemporaneity.

Translation, traditionally conceived, following its Latin etymology, involves a “carrying across” of something (usually “meaning,” but sometimes “form,” “sound,” or “affect”) between two previously established entities (usually “languages” or “cultures”). Most translation theory concerns the best way in which this to be done. But the central figure of translation that I am concerned with here, the figure that provides a useful analog to the fabrication of contemporaneity, is translation as *poiesis*, or making. My central question here is not how to translate best, but what does translation *produce*, what impact does it make? More specifically, beyond the production of translated texts as (un-)original works, I ask, what relationship between source and target and what conception of source and target is produced by translation?

The condensed version of my claim is this: translation produces joints; it conjoins entities resulting in their juncture, a juncture that makes all these entities *present* in the sense of pertinent to the current moment, defined asymmetrically as the site of receiving culture or language.

My base assumption is that as opposed to the act of “carrying [something] across” between pre-existing units that we designate “source” and “target,” translation is the act that establishes the unity of those entities and their (formal) distance from one another in the first place. In this, I am inspired by and indebted to Naoki Sakai. Sakai makes clear the need to distinguish between two kinds of difference: 1) the “radical difference of discontinuity that does not render itself to spatialized representation,” and 2) the “measured difference in continuity that is imagined in terms of a border, gap or crevice between two spatially enclosed territories or entities, figuratively projected as a distance between two figures accompanying one another.”⁶⁴ Translation would be the act that transforms the “radical difference of discontinuity” into the “measured difference in continuity.” Translation, therefore, occurs (positing a distance) “between” so-called languages, cultures, or nations, but it logically precedes those entities. Translation is the establishment of measured difference, an act that can be exceptionally violent, especially under colonial circumstances.

The establishment or positing of contemporaneity that is the subject of this study does not work at the grand scale of the historical institution of distinct languages, cultures, and territorial borders, but rather at the more micro scale of contesting and shaping those relations within a limited sphere of relevance. Nevertheless, I claim that the positing of contemporaneity is productive in the same way as translation is.

If we consider translation in its everyday literary sense, this dynamic remains. The first thing that a translator does is choose which works to translate, from where. This is not always simple. Publishers and the market place a limit on what can be translated. Copyrights are not always available. Personal connections and friendships play a role. Whatever the circumstances, translation is a slow and painful process, and so the choice of text to translate and the investment in creating this mediation

⁶⁴ Naoki Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language? Translation and Discontinuity,” *Translation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009), 86.

between cultures or languages is significant. Translation, in this sense, can be said to have a phatic (as opposed to informational) function: the mere fact of a translation says, “this is important to us here and now; this is contemporary!”

Once a text is chosen, an act as seemingly innocuous as naming the source language can have implications for how it constructs the entity its readers imagine coming into contact with. “Translated from the French” can sometimes mean that the existence of creole has been occluded (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of Richard Philcox’s translation of Maryse Condé). “Translated from the Acholi” can obscure the fact that the translator speaks no Acholi and has in fact worked from other translations (see Chapter 2). “Translated from the Italian” can hide the existence of vernacular and dialect (see chapter 3 for a discussion of Ann Goldstein’s translation of Elena Ferrante).

Once the text has been chosen and the source language selected, the translator makes a series of choices, major and minor, at the broad level of theme down to the level of specific words, the sum of which determine the relationship that the translation implicitly posits between the receiving and originating cultures, as well as implicit images of precisely what those cultures are. We need only to look at texts with multiple translations into a single language to recognize this is true. For example, the implied readers belonging to an English-speaking culture reading Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* in Charles Lam Markman’s 1967 translation (readers interpellated through Markman’s choices as potential revolutionaries living in revolutionary times) are different to those belonging to the English-speaking culture reading it in Richard Philcox’s 2008 translation (which thinks of its readers as university students hoping to understand a text from a context now truly past); and the image of Fanon and the Francophone culture he represents varies too. (See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Richard Philcox’s translation). And even when a machine does the translation, the mere fact of translation renders *this* text and *this* part of a culture available to readers. Cultures, languages, authors, and readers are joined through translation, joined in asymmetric and varied relationships, but joined

nonetheless. More than just a new work, translations produce claims to contemporaneity: deictic, context-specific claims that *this* work is relevant for *this* present.

In this project, then, translation functions both as an *analog* for modal contemporaneity – a figure of juncture that reveals some of the limits to the ways in which contemporaneity can be manufactured – as well as a cross-cultural and trans-lingual *instance* of it. Translation is both the means and an image of sharing time. Our ability to share distant experiences is facilitated by translation; and theorizing the act of translation yields a schematic for contemporaneity itself (a simultaneous positing and joining of two nodal points, purportedly in a relation of equivalency).

In addition to the overarching theory which translation qua joining provides for my conception of modal contemporaneity, as well as the analysis of particular instantiations of junctural contemporaneity through the work of particular translations, I will be doing a fair number of more pedestrian analyses of literary translation in these pages. In Chapter 1, I track the passage from Maryse Condé’s French *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003) to Richard Philcox’s English *Story of the Cannibal Woman* (2007).⁶⁵ Chapter 2 considers Ivan Vladislavić’s fable of literary translation, “The Reading” (2015), which centers on the translation of distant suffering (a survivor’s memoir) for local audiences, outlining what *cannot* be translated due to the formal characteristics of traumatic (non-) experience, as well as what *should not* be translated out of respect for what Edouard Glissant calls a culture’s “right to opacity.”⁶⁶ Chapter 3 is centered on a novel called *Journal* (2004) – *Newspaper* (2015) in English – by the French writer and artist, Edouard Levé, the English-language appearance of which I am partly to blame for.⁶⁷ *Newspaper*, true to its title, takes on formal characteristics of daily broadsheets. I translated *Newspaper*, together with the American novelist,

⁶⁵ Maryse Condé, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (Paris: Folio, 2005); Maryse Condé, *Story of the Cannibal Woman*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Washington Square Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ Edouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 190.

⁶⁷ Edouard Levé, *Journal* (Paris: P.O.L., 2004); Edouard Levé, *Newspaper*, trans. Jan Steyn and Caite Dolan-Leach (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015).

Caite Dolan-Leach, by focusing not only on words, sentences, paragraphs, or the effect of the novel as a whole, but also on distinct norms and cultural cachet of newspapers in Francophone versus Anglophone contexts. There is much in the text of *Journal* that does not translate formally or culturally; Chapter 3 levers these “untranslatables” (which, yes, I do go on to gloss, or culturally translate) to produce a broader reflection on the distinct ways in which newspaper readers and readers of experimental novels such as Levé’s, in the age of “citizen reporters” and “fake news” can come to “know” the world depicted in a newspaper’s “International” section. And Chapter 4 contests Rebecca Walkowitz’s claim about J.M. Coetzee’s late works that they are “born-translated.”

4. *Juncture*

Present Junctures, in the plural, seeks to de-familiarize and revitalize the cliché of “the present juncture” by exploiting the spatio-temporal metaphor of juncture in order to emphasize important and often overlooked aspects of contemporaneity. Etymologically, a juncture is a place of joining and therefore also a place that marks the possibility of disjointedness. In phonetics a juncture is a pause that separates two phonemes, allowing us to distinguish “a rose” from “arose” for example. Combining these spatial and temporal senses yields sense of the present juncture as a “now” and a “here” with limits, a con-temporaneity or gathering of time that extends only so far and lasts only so long. Contemporaneity, then, becomes not merely a question of determining the latest cultural trends, and not merely a question of establishing or denying coevalness between cultures; it is also about establishing fields of *relevance*.

A literary variant on the concept of a present juncture might be the classical element called “setting” if a setting is also conceived spatio-temporally as the limited range and time that the reader or audience is asked to care about. Setting is the backdrop to action, action’s enabling ground. In jewelry a setting will act as a container, holding, for example, a gemstone in place; in fiction a setting

is the container for the plot. A setting may unite many conflicting forces, opposing characters, and unlikely events. A juncture can similarly unite any number of disjunctive elements, the relations between them of many kinds. In the chapters that follow, I will care about the precise nature of the elements and their relations that are brought together and joined through the translational work of contemporary literature, but the larger point is that the fact of their assembly and agglomeration indicates them to be of interest (and indicates elements that are excluded or occluded to not be of interest). In the context of the overwhelming global sensorium that characterizes the present age, this primary determination of readerly attention is easy to ignore, being less spectacular than for example character or action, but it is absolutely crucial in determining what version of contemporaneity a literary work advances.

In focusing on the spatio-temporal limits of present junctures, I hope to contribute to current debates about world literature by emphasizing the several scales at which the “world” can be constituted by literary works. Pheng Cheah in his influential critique of recent theories of world literature has accused its theorizers of spatializing the temporal, thereby denying literature’s normative dimension, one that he characterizes, following Derrida, as giving the “gift of time.”⁶⁸ “World” in its etymology is primarily a temporal rather than spatial – a fact that has also been recently pointed out by Cheah, but also Djelal Kadir and Eric Hayot among others. I too want to emphasize that this temporality of the “world” is in fact phenomenological, designating human lived time. One consequence for me is that the world viewed phenomenologically does not admit an easy division between space and time, life being always lived along spatial as well as temporal coordinates. Even without the etymological basis of “world” (more about which in chapters 2 and 3), I believe a single spatio-temporal conception is more salient to the study of world literature than a purely temporal one precisely because what is at stake in studying a work *as* world literature is often precisely its setting,

⁶⁸ Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2016).

whether that be for its depiction of a unique place (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of David Damrosch's definition of world literature as "windows on the world") or whether that be for its depiction of the interrelatedness of places, or distant others, depictions that mirror the complex and far-ranging settings (backdrops to complex far-ranging actions) in contemporary life. In restoring temporality to the "world" of world literature, I propose therefore that we not make a fetish of time but keep place and space also in mind.

Each of the four chapters of *Present Junctures* illustrates a different aspect of critical contemporaneity, showing it to be *generative* (possessive of the *poietic* force to instantiate new links and establish new fields of relevance), *limited by opacity* (recognizing that not all people or places can or should be comprehended or rendered transparent), *provisional* (open to new framings of the present), and *worldly* (rooted in this-worldly experiences even when proposed in an idiom of religious transcendence). Each of these chapters also explores a different scale at which contemporary world literature attempts to operate: the *world city* (as singular place that persists through time, but also a meeting place for diverse cultural trajectories), the *trans-national* (as lateral relation between specific spaces), the *inter-national* (part of the co-figured nations that make up the world system of nation-states), and the *global* (defined, not as totality, but as that which is in excess of the calculus of local or national specificity).

Chapter 1

SETTING, AN EXAMPLE

On (Richard Philcox's translation of) Maryse Condé's *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*

(2003... 2008... 2015)

Does one have to be from South Africa, or Angola, to receive attention?

– Maryse Condé, “Pan-Africanism, Feminism, and Culture”

I just hope that my translations of Maryse Condé and Fanon in English don't sound the same.

– Richard Philcox, interview with Celia Britton



Figure 1.1. The Cecil John Rhodes statue removed from the University of Cape Town on April 9, 2015

This chapter is structured around a series of coincidences: I was teaching at the University of Cape Town (UCT) when the Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé was named on the shortlist of the Man Booker International Prize at a ceremony on campus in March of 2015; that same place, that same month, saw the beginning of the #RhodesMustFall movement, inspired and sustained by the works of Frantz Fanon (in the English translations of Condé’s husband Richard Philcox). I had been teaching Condé’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003), or rather Philcox’s English version of that novel, *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* (2008), a novel set in Cape Town more than a decade earlier, to students who were, coincidentally, coming of age at the same time as South Africa’s young democracy. Condé’s novel tells the story of a woman, Rosélie, who survives her murdered husband, Stephen. Perhaps not coincidentally, like Condé, Rosélie is black and Guadeloupean; like Philcox, Stephen is white and British. While using modernist techniques of fragmented narration (reflecting the narrator’s traumatized psyche) Condé’s novel also engages substantially with that genre where coincidence has been explicitly banned: the murder mystery.¹ Stephen’s death at first appears to be a coincidence: just another in the series of violent crimes that Rosélie reads about in Cape Town newspapers. But, true to the genre (and true to South African murder statistics), Stephen’s death is revealed to be motivated – he knew his killers, two young men, one a former lover, the other the former lover’s current lover. Solving Stephen’s murder turns out, however, to be merely a subplot of *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* – a red herring

¹ See “Introduction to *The Best Detective Stories of 1928-29*,” in Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1976).

of sorts – the true mystery being Rosélie’s decades-long relationship with this man and how (and whether) she will learn to live on in this (foreign to her) setting.

Coincidence: “**1.a.** [...] the occupation of the same place or part of space [...] **2.** Occurrence or existence at the same time [...] **3.** Exact agreement or correspondence in substance, nature, character, etc. [...] **4.** A notable occurrence of events or circumstances having no apparent causal connection.”² Coincidence connotes juncture (in time and space), correspondence (revealed through comparison of salient features), and chance. Coincidences cannot be planned for, only accommodated, and it is often by coincidence rather than choice that we interact with others, some of which, especially in a city like Cape Town, hail from distant lands. Rosélie happens to end up in Cape Town, but it could well have been any of the other places she and Stephen have lived or visited: London, Tokyo, Paris, New York, Pointe-à-Pitre, or a fictional West-African city called “N’Dossou.” The setting just happens to be South Africa; it is South Africa almost by accident, a mere coincidence. Bonnie Thomas adapts the four sections of a speech given by Maryse Condé to the Alliance française de Perth in 2005 into four subjects of Condé’s quasi-autobiographical literary production: 1) “Peau noires, masques blancs” (after Fanon’s first book) captures Condé’s early development, a time in her life that is covered only later in autobiographical works such as *Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer* (1999) and *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006); 2) “What is Africa to me?” captures Condé’s years in Africa after decolonization, where she lived for a decade with her first husband before meeting Richard Philcox there, covered in *Hérémakhonon* (1976), in *Une Saison à Rihata* (1981) and the two volumes of *Segou* (1984 and 1985); 3) “Cahier d’un retour au

² “coincidence, n.”. OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36005?redirectedFrom=coincidence&> (accessed May 04, 2018)

pays natale” (after Césaire’s epic poem) captures Condé’s years after returning, with Philcox, to her Caribbean origins, exemplified by *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989); and 4) “Imagine there is no country,” which deals with the time later in Condé’s life when she was living in the United States and France, characterized by a freedom from the attachments of place.³ According to this schema, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* can be seen either as a late entry into the second category – “What is Africa to me?” – or as belonging to the final one, “Imagine there is no country.” Of course the choice is somewhat specious and the categories or themes in Condé’s novels are not mutually exclusive; nevertheless, these poles are useful for orienting the intervention of this chapter. Anne Gulick gives a sensitive and convincing account of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* as working out some of Condé’s earlier preoccupations with Africa, and privileges the status of Césaire and Fanon in this novel in as far as they too signal this earlier African moment, tracing the ongoing influence of negritude in Condé’s late work, as well as its difference from *Hérémakhonon*, thereby placing *Histoire de la femme cannibale* firmly in the first category, “What is Africa to me?”⁴ Natalie Melas similarly sees *Histoire de la femme cannibale* as a late entry in the series of Condé’s African novels, one that ought to be read alongside its predecessors for echoing their disappointment in the postcolonial condition.⁵ I will here be concerned with the ongoing imperative to “decolonize” issued by the #RhodesMustFall activists in Cape Town, and in their dissatisfaction with South Africa’s present, which finds resonance in themes from

³ Bonnie Thomas, “Maryse Condé: Practitioner of *Littérature-monde*,” *Small Axe* 33, vol. 13 no. 3 (2010), 82-83.

⁴ Anne W. Gulick, “Africa, Pan-Africanism, and the Global Caribbean in Maryse Condé’s *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*,” *The Global South* 4, no. 2 (2010).

⁵ Natalie Melas, “Témoignage de la femme somnambule: L’Ironie du postcolonial au féminin,” in *Genre et Postcolonialismes*, ed. Anne Emmanuelle Berger and Eleni Varikas (Paris: Editions des Archives Contemporaines, 2011), 122.

Condé's early African works and certainly in the renewed (less critical) interest in Pan-Africanism displayed in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*.⁶ But my reading of Condé will for the most part focus on its global status, on the way that Cape Town is not always rendered true to its specificity, while its function in the novel is more than anything to stand in as an *example* of a world city in the global south, a place where, where foreigners, immigrants, and refugees from all over the world, but mainly its poorer countries, cross paths such that what Philcox calls Condé's "novel of globalization" can unfold.

In those parts of Condé's novel that are specifically about South Africa, it refuses to take what was the dominant view in 2003, after the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that the South African transition from apartheid would go better than those of countries transitioning from a colonial to a (temporally) post-colonial state. Rather than painting the tourist-friendly picture of a country finding accommodations between all parts of its society, thriving economically under neoliberal policies based on preventing the outflow of direct foreign investment through inflation-targeting, growing the economy in a way that (so it was believed) would surely eventually translate into better employment figures and a shrinking of the wealth gap, Condé's novel focuses on persistent racism, casual neocolonial plunder, poverty, violence, and, above all, ongoing rage and human misery as a result of the crimes of the past. She warns that South Africa may be repeating earlier post-colonial failures at a time

⁶ Less critical: "Condé exercises some discretion – more discretion, we might note, than she does in her earlier Africa novels – when it comes to exposing the shaky ground on which Negritude's original contexts get translated into a South African present. Perhaps this is due to the fact that a critique of Negritude as a political program is less urgent or fraught in 2003 than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. By the early twentieth-century, after all, Condé is hardly the only critic to have decried the negative consequences of a politics that essentializes race." Gulick, "Africa, Pan-Africanism, and the Global Caribbean," 63-64.

when its then-president was triumphantly declaring the dawn of an “African Renaissance.” Condé turns out to be prescient in her desire to see South Africa undo larger colonial structures (referring often to the history and legacy of slavery and colonialism), as opposed to simply reversing apartheid-era legislation. Her occasional misreading and mistranslation of South African specificity (an effect amplified by Philcox’s translation of Condé’s text into English) is useful for today’s South African student readership: to those students who hope to escape the prejudice of South African exceptionalism, to turn from a post-apartheid to a de-colonial paradigm, and to institute a movement that makes material interventions in specific historical locations but that is nevertheless, through social media, born global. Condé’s text brings relevant historical moments and diverse perspectives (especially African and Caribbean) into a generative juncture with the South African present, their combination producing new meanings and possibilities. Condé’s text is world-literary not because it transcends place (its “country of origin”) but precisely because of its attachments to place (its setting perceived from a unique outsider perspective). Reading Condé, in 2015, in Cape Town, in effect creates not only a new, South African, *perspective* on contemporary world literature (the broader category that the Man Booker International Prize seeks to represent), but in fact a new *version* of contemporary world literature as such: the general category being defined by the example as much as the other way around.

The reach of the general category – “contemporary world literature” – here also implies the limits of contemporaneity, of places and literatures that can be experienced as sharing time. The Man Booker International Prize was, after all, in 2015 awarded to a “living writer” for his or her “overall contribution to fiction on the world stage,”

requiring only that the work be published originally in English or be “generally available in translation in the English language.”⁷ The prize manufactured a contemporaneity between all living writers who had been translated into English: they were all, in the eyes of the Man-Booker International Prize jury, part of the same literary moment, their life’s work, or “contributions,” comparable and tractable to evaluation. The putative contemporaneity of this set of authors is produced by acts of translation, in this case, linguistic, literary translation. In order to appear (to co-appear at the same time as their compeers) before the jury, authors need to be living and readable (assessable) in English. In 2015 when the Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai was declared the winner, the £60,000 prize was accompanied by an additional £15,000 translator’s prize, one that Krasznahorkai decided to split between his two translators, George Szirtes and Otilie Mulzet. This, of course, requires that the translator(s) also be counted among the living. So, living writers and translators: *all contemporaries in English*.

But what of those outside English? Some might argue, with cause, that it would be unfair to expect one literary prize to be *all-inclusive*. There are, of course, other literary prizes, even literary prizes for other languages. Nevertheless, the “International” label of the prize lays claim to the kind of broad, even if not-quite-universal, inclusivity that has come to be associated with the resurgent category of world literature over the past two decades. English is the world’s dominant vehicular language and has been for some time. One unfortunate effect of this “special status” of the English language is that it naturalizes the aesthetic judgments of its speakers, sometimes even while they decry this very asymmetry. Susan Sontag, for instance, acknowledges the prestige gap between

⁷ “History of the Man-Booker International Prize,” Man-Booker Prizes, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://themanbookerprize.com/international/history>

literary languages and its bolstering by the utility gap between world languages under capitalism. In the context of a discussion about the dominance of English as a literary language, Sontag brings up the example of Indian call-center workers encouraged to put on American accents and adopt American-sounding names like “Bill” and “Nancy.” She writes, “Would ‘Nancy’ and ‘Bill’ prefer to be a real Nancy and a real Bill? Almost all say – there have been interviews – that they would. Would they want to come to America, where it would be normal to speak English all the time with an American accent? Of course they would.”⁸ Gayatri Spivak evokes the same figure – that of the Indian call-center worker – in her 2011 keynote discussion with David Damrosch at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, held that year in English-speaking Vancouver, Canada.⁹ Defending and elaborating on her call to read world-literary texts and authors as “singular, universalizable, but never universal,”¹⁰ Spivak argues that it is insufficient to take an author working outside of English and to read him or her in translation and in conjunction with other world-literary authors (her example is the Indian Nobel winner, Rabindranath Tagore, read alongside Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in an anthology of world literature theory co-edited by Damrosch). Instead we should go further and “regionalize” or “singularize” such figures, placing them in geopolitical context in order to avoid being “selectively worldly:”

⁸ Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2007), 173.

⁹ Statistics Canada’s 2011 census breaks down the languages spoken by people living in Vancouver as follows: English only – 87.2%; French only – 0.1%; English and French – 7.2%; neither English nor French – 5.6%. “Visual Census – Language, Vancouver,” Statistics Canada, accessed November 13, 2017, http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/vc-rv/index.cfm?LANG=ENG&VIEW=D&TOPIC_ID=4&GEOCODE=933&CFORMAT=jpg

¹⁰ David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 4 (2011), 468.

You really have to think about singularity in a collectivity and put geopolitics over against this. Not only the secession of the global elite, not only the globetrotting preservationists, whom we haven't talked about at all in terms of a "world" supporting the unexamined culturalism of the metropolitan migrant elite, but also the call-center workers about whom Shehzad Nadeem has written: "Workers must be able to pass as American or British."¹¹

South Africa, while not a popular location for calls centers, is like India a former British colony. The country's complex relationship with English is one that was brought newly into the limelight by the #RhodesMustFall protests. And, as I will discuss below, one of the questions raised by the announcements of the Man Booker International Prize on the UCT campus is which works are excluded by the prize, but also excluded from "world literature" more broadly for want of translation into English. The status of Condé's French, coming from the overseas "département" of Guadeloupe, is no less politically charged, and her husband's translation of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* into an English that re-presents a South African vernacular raises its own set of geopolitical problems.

Specifically speaking – and part of what is at question here is what is *specific* and what is *general* about a world literary work's reception – I will end this chapter by considering Philcox's translation of Maryse Condé's novel as read from Cape Town in March of 2015. But, before doing so, I will spend the first half of this chapter providing context for that reading by discussing the #RhodesMustFall movement.

1. In Front of Jameson Hall, March 2015

¹¹ Ibid., 478.

The self-proclaimed, de-colonizing international movement that goes under the hashtag #RhodesMustFall, which has one of its origins in the defacement of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the UCT Campus in March of 2015, is in many ways anarchic, de-cephalous, and poly-vocal, therefore resistant to easy definition or representation. But it would be fair to say its origins and goals find their nexus in university life: #RhodesMustFall has and, at the time of writing, continue to publish pieces of collective writing, hold seminars, organize reading groups, question canons, debate institutional structures, and propose alternative forms of intellectual engagement which, while differing from the university as it already exists, are always proposed with reference to it. It has been my experience – and here I must acknowledge my slippage between archival and anecdotal modes of documenting #RhodesMustFall – that discussions among members more often than not feature Frantz Fanon, the chapters in common being “Concerning Violence” and “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in *Wretched of the Earth* (French 1961, English 1963 and 2004) and “The Fact of Blackness” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (French 1952, English 1967 and 2008). Electronic copies of these chapters appear in their most recent translations, those by Richard Philcox, who is also Maryse Condé’s translator (and husband), as part of the movement’s ever-expanding “official reading list” of texts that keep getting added and removed from dropbox.com. In their common reception, Fanon inspires a theory of revolutionary violence, a critique of the current post-apartheid government as neocolonial elite, and, in a popular reading, a theory of black pain that is phenomenologically inaccessible to non-black subjects who are consequently ethically barred from pronouncing on it. Gone is the non-racialism of the African National Congress (ANC), or, in an academic context, the deconstruction of

race as a category; this latest (doubtful) interpretation of Fanon returns us to the brute race essentialism and race-based solidarity and action of an earlier age, which these students claim as still (or again) contemporary with the South African present.

In translating *The Wretched of the Earth* in 2004 and *Black Skins, White Masks* in 2008, Philcox actively sought to modernize:

I am in a postcolonial context translating for a readership, mainly of university students, who are far removed from that historical context. Unlike the French or the British of the 1960s who were all feeling the effects of the anticolonial struggles, the war in Algeria, and the decline of the empire, today's readers have to be introduced to the world of colonialism and its realities with a vocabulary that is not reminiscent of Hollywood movies, but rather be made aware of who the colonized of today really are. Who are the contemporary equivalents of the colonized?¹²

#RhodesMustFall would respond that the contemporary equivalents of the colonized are ... the colonized! Forwarding a decolonizing (as opposed to post-apartheid) temporal paradigm, these South African students are probably not the ones Philcox had in mind, but they are the ones who have taken up his translations most loudly. Declaring himself to be a “reader-friendly” translator,¹³ Philcox specifies which contemporary readers he does envisage picking up Fanon:

I cannot think that anyone outside the academic community in the Anglophone world would now bother to read Fanon. He is quoted constantly as a theorist of decolonization and, wrongly, as an advocate of violence. But few people have actually read him from

¹² Richard Philcox, “Frantz Fanon: Retrieving a Lost Voice,” interview by Celia Britton, *Translation Review* 71, no. 1 (2006), 5.

¹³ “As I am a reader-friendly translator, perhaps I have made a more accurate translation, but only in the sense that the reader, and probably a young reader, will gain better access to Fanon’s thinking and understand not only the colonial context but also his prophecies of things to come.” *Ibid.*, 6.

cover to cover, and in many people's minds, from the kids from the "banlieue" to right-wing activists, he has become a stereotype, someone to quote. Any new reader of Fanon would be a student introduced to him by his teacher.¹⁴

This characterization of Fanon's place in the popular imagination where "few people have actually read him from cover to cover" rings true for the South African campus situation. Fanon is a key text on the Fallist reading list, which is meant to act as a counter-cannon to the Eurocentric one taught on campus (more of which below). And yet Fanon is not exactly untaught in South African universities. Among the chief complaints of academics who do teach Fanon in South Africa is that he is precisely taken as a "stereotype, someone to quote," this despite the efforts of someone like Achille Mbembe, who came to UCT at #RhodesMustFall's invitation to lecture on Fanon, cautioning explicitly against such facile and misleading readings, but who has subsequently fallen afoul of the Fallists on his own campus at the University of the Witwatersrand.

One of the reasons that Fallists – or at least the ones that I have come in contact with – give for their impatience with fine-grained distinctions and careful reading that their teachers (including, I admit, myself) desire from them, is that analysis of this kind can be endless – a stalling strategy that effectively postpones action. The point, they claim, is to act *now*, not "*now now*,"¹⁵ and in their quest for action comrade Fanon is enlisted as their contemporary. Writing against Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* in "The So-Called Dependency Complex of the Colonized" – another chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* posted on the Fallist "official" reading list – Fanon inveighs against Mannoni's relativization of racism, insisting

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ A South African expression that effectively means "in a little while" or "later."

unambiguously and uncompromisingly that all “forms of exploitation are identical... Colonial racism is no different from other racisms.”¹⁶ Emboldened by Fanon’s tone, and by such expressions of absolutism, these students have little patience for distinctions. What the ellipsis in this quotation hides, however, is Fanon’s actual reasoning: “All forms of exploitation are identical *because they apply to the same ‘object’, man.*”¹⁷ This question of the human and the denial of humanity – the prospect of a “new humanism” that runs through Fanon’s oeuvre – is not a popular topic for Fallist debate.

The movement began when a student at UCT, Chumani Maxwele, took a bucket of human feces from Khayelitsha and dumped it over a statue of Cecil John Rhodes. The statue overlooked Cape Town from its central perch on the UCT campus, right below the university’s principal gathering place and the steps leading up to them, “Jameson Hall” and “Jameson Steps” respectively (the same venue at which I heard Sontag speak all those years ago). This was an act, as was obvious from the start to supporters and detractors alike, for which contexts, settings, and proper names were highly significant. Khayelitsha township is a large hybrid formal/informal settlement bordering other vast shanty towns, working class townships and lower-middle class enclaves on the Cape Flats, which, despite the (late) “rollout” of post-apartheid government housing remains as a highly visible reminder of the brutality of urban planning under apartheid. Earlier in 2015, the residents of Khayelitsha had protested the lack of waste and sewage disposal infrastructure, and, especially, the local (Democratic Alliance) government’s stopgap measure of supplying the township with plastic portable toilets. Part of these so-called

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

“poo protests” entailed launching excrement at tourists at the Cape Town International Airport. Whatever one might think of the motivations behind this strategy, one has to grant that it was effective in getting both the media and the government’s attention. Chumani Maxwele was a resident of Delft, a suburb lying kitty corner from Khayelitsha, on the other side of an intersection of two major highways. For him the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, along with other tributes to colonial figures on campus, came to symbolize the “pain and hurt” that black students were made to feel on a daily basis on a campus where they were excluded and offended in myriad ways, large and small.¹⁸

Inspired by the Khayelitsha protests and fearing interference by the police or campus security, Maxwele decided to use a large annual arts festival called *Infecting the City*, which took place in several locations across Cape Town simultaneously, as occasion and cover for soiling the statue. While the idea to frame his action as “performance art” began as a pretense in order to avoid a vandalism charge, by the time the appointed day arrived, Maxwele took his artwork quite seriously:

I would say that, as an artist, I did not need to be on the formal list of performing artists to produce art works that speak directly to the university’s challenges of racism. With this sound justification, my fear evaporated. My placards were to read, “Exhibit White Arrogance @ UCT” and “Exhibit Black Assimilation @ UCT”. I borrowed a drum from one of the very few black lecturers at UCT’s music school. I had my pink makarapa (hard hat) and a whistle. I decided to perform topless in running tights and running shoes. This had to be a true performance.¹⁹

¹⁸ “Newsmaker – Chumani Maxwele: No regrets for throwing faeces at Rhodes statue” in *City Press* 2015-03-29.

¹⁹ Chumani Maxwele, “Black Pain Led Me to Throw Rhodes Poo,” *Business Day*, MARCH 16 2016.

A *true* performance, perhaps, in the sense that it required the costume and props of a professional performance. But also in the sense of effective performativity, a performance that makes something happen, that institutes something in the world. This performance, however, was open-ended, not one for which the script was already written; no pre-existing convention dictated what it would achieve. There is a sense of surprise in Maxwele’s account.²⁰ Even though Maxwele had planned his performance with the help of other students, this did not amount to a “movement” until the performance itself. It is only later that a terminology, “Black Pain,” and a social media tag, #RhodesMustFall, would come into being.²¹ The thinking, the initiatory gesture, was the performance itself, which was site-specific, saturated with context, but also conceptual, open to a movement, the form of which remained to come.

Maxwele’s choice of target, which would attach a name to the movement, leading to sympathetic vibrations in Oriel College, Oxford, and at Harvard University, was to some extent contingent. It could just as easily have been the bust of the former Boer General and Prime Minister of South Africa, Jan Smuts. Or it could have been the steps or Hall named for Rhodes’s crony, the Scots physician, politician, and colonial adventurer, Leander Starr Jameson. But the Rhodes statue was chosen for its central location and because students had already demanded that the statue be taken down the previous year. And Cecil John Rhodes does make for a fantastic emblem of colonialism. He was, at one point, the richest man in the world, an English robber baron, mining magnate, arch colonialist, who aligned his acquisition of vast personal wealth with what

²⁰ “*Suddenly*, the Cape Times and e.tv were there, and people started gathering around, asking questions about the political art.” Ibid., my emphasis.

²¹ “It was a performance that was to last the whole day. By midday, other black students had joined me and there, on that day, March 9, 2015, the #RhodesMustFall student movement was born out of pain and frustration – what we later called Black Pain.” Ibid.

he and his contemporaries framed as a ‘nobler’ cause: the expansion and stabilization of the British Empire. His fervently espoused belief in colonialism, produced, among other odious quotations, this oft-cited, lapidary gem from a text Rhodes wrote in his 20s and shared with his friend and sometime-executor of his will, W. T. Stead: “I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.”²²

Any number of statues, buildings, or artworks, not to mention policies or individuals, on the UCT campus are objectionable, or protest-able, from the viewpoint of “Black Pain.” The Cecil John Rhodes statue was chosen *as an example*, as illustrative of a greater principle: the university’s ongoing colonial heritage. There is tension between, on the one hand, a Platonic tradition of exemplarity whereby example, or exemplar, is taken as a paragon, model, archetype, or a standard from which particulars are instantiated, and, on the other hand, an Aristotelian tradition whereby examples function in series, which, through a process of induction, allows for universals to be inferred. Alexander Gelley points out that the rhetoric of exemplarity frequently aims to alternate between these two philosophical traditions, “to mingle the singular with the normative, to mark an instance as fated.”²³ Was #RhodesMustFall, as many of its detractors in the media claim it was, taking the Rhodes statue as the exemplar, the *nec plus ultra*, of the university’s and the country’s colonial heritage, risking making a mountain of a molehill? Or was the movement, as it has regularly claimed, proposing the Rhodes statue simply as a particular, a part of the whole, a visible instance of the university’s colonial legacy,

²² Cecil John Rhodes, *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes with Elucidatory Notes to which Are Added Some Political and Religious Ideas of the Testator*, ed. W. T. Stead (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1902), 58-59.

²³ Gelley, Alexander, *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 2.

which also, more urgently, but less iconically, entails a number of other facets which #RhodesMustFall have protested and advocated against? Whatever the intentions were, once the Rhodes statue was chosen, a name (or rather a hashtag) was assigned. There on March 9 under the aegis of *Infecting the City*, the die was cast: what may have been meant to be an exemplary instance, intended to lead from the particular to the general was nevertheless infected with singularity; Rhodes became an example, but also *the* example, of what the movement decreed “must fall.”

One of the ironies of the debate about the statue that ensued is that those who argued the statue be retained, usually through some sort of compromise – the addition of a contextualizing plaque, its displacement to a less central location on campus, its removal to a museum, etc. – did so, by and large, as a caution against forgetting history.²⁴ And yet one of the consequences of #RhodesMustFall is that people, and especially journalists, are writing about Cecil John Rhodes more now than they have for decades. Given the frequency with which his name is evoked, Rhodes’s life, his beliefs, the legacy he intended to leave, and the legacy he in fact did leave, should be under at least some critical scrutiny. Instead, the same potted biography is repeated in article after article.²⁵

²⁴ After Maxwele’s protest and before the removal of the Rhodes statue, the former anti-apartheid activist and South African constitutional court judge, Albie Sachs, for instance, suggested: “Instead of extinguishing Rhodes, we should keep him alive on the campus and force him, even if posthumously, to witness surroundings that tell him and the world that he is now living in a constitutional democracy.... Instead of trying to obliterate our history, we need to honour those who had struggled for justice, and transform the area by setting up a dialogue between the past and present.” Albie Sachs, “The Rhodes Debate: How We Can Have the Last Laugh,” *University of Cape Town News*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.uct.ac.za/dailynews/?id=9064>.

²⁵ To give a negative example – an example of a bad trend – always seems unfair, like an act of scapegoating. What follows is Mark Gevisser’s entirely typical description of Rhodes. Gevisser is no better or worse than most commentator’s in this respect. I choose him as an example on the same principle as the implicit rule of satirical commentary: always punch up. Gevisser’s well-earned reputation can take the punch. “The British-born Rhodes, who died in 1902, is the father of the modern South African state and its most identifiable symbol of colonial depredation. As an industrialist, he pioneered the diamond and gold industry; as a politician, he codified the system of racial domination that would become known as apartheid. This was the man who said of the British that ‘we are the first race in the world’ and who wrote

For instance, while Rhodes's racism is undeniable, it is perhaps, from a 21st-century post-apartheid viewpoint, surprising in its character. Of course, in pointing this out I risk dallying with those fine historical distinctions that prevent action; furthermore I risk denying the Fanonian tenet that all "forms of exploitation are identical."²⁶ So be it; consider me forewarned.

In a newspaper interview, Chumani Maxwele argues for the appropriateness of his chosen target: "It is not just a statue, as many claim – Rhodes didn't want black people. Remember that, at some point, UCT also didn't want black people."²⁷ While Maxwele, a student of South African History and Politics, probably knows better, it is easy to take him to be implying that Rhodes didn't intend UCT to have black students. In fact, it was only in 1928 that UCT moved to its current site on the slopes of Table Mountain, which Rhodes never explicitly intended for a university, instead leaving his executors to determine its use on the condition that "any buildings which may be erected [on this property] shall be used exclusively for public purposes."²⁸ He does address education in his *Last Will and Testament*, extensively so in his stipulations for the Rhodes scholarships. But there he explicitly decrees: "No student shall be qualified or disqualified for election to a Scholarship on account of his race or religious opinions."²⁹ The archive of Rhodes's racism primarily come through two sources: 1) other people's records of his conversation, and 2) his actions. The latter, his racist actions, revealed

that if there were a God, 'he would like me ... to paint as much of the map of Africa British Red as possible.'" Mark Gevisser, "South African Students Must Take Movement to Society for Real Progress," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0419-gevisser-rhodes-20150419-story.html>.

²⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 69.

²⁷ "Newsmaker – Chumani Maxwele: No regrets for throwing faeces at Rhodes statue," *City Press*, March 29, 2015, <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Newsmaker-Chumani-Maxwele-No-regrets-for-throwing-faeces-at-Rhodes-statue-20150429>.

²⁸ Rhodes, *Last Will and Testament*, 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

largely, but not exclusively, in his colonial and mining concerns, speak louder than his racist words. But as Jacques Derrida reminds us in the context of apartheid, “there’s no racism without a language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word.”³⁰ So what were the words and what was the language of Rhodes’s racism?

While Rhodes has over the last year been regularly accused as a founder of apartheid *avant la lettre*, his racial vocabulary is distinct from that of the latter half of the 20th century. Earlier I quoted a snippet reported by his friend W. T. Stead, which has been repeated in a slew of newspaper articles and on Rhodes’s Wikipedia site, out of context, as the *quod erat demonstrandum* of his racism: “I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.”³¹ One may be surprised to find that the “first race” in question, this exemplar of races in whose charge are the world’s hopes for lasting peace and prosperity, is primarily defined by tongue rather than skin; it is the “English-speaking race,” which, according to Rhodes’s thinking, at least as reported by Stead, made a tragic misstep in allowing itself to become divided during the American war of Independence. In a fuzzy combination of misunderstood Darwinism, Biblical sentiment, an odd anti-Jingoistic version of Imperialism, and the militancy that derives from an Aristotelian ideal of Virtue espoused by British public (private) schools, Rhodes set himself, and after his death the secret society he bequeathed, the task of re-uniting this English-speaking race for the grandiose purpose of world peace. Often decried or defended as (merely) a man of his times, Rhodes was rather a man living in a mythical past, where those who spoke English could

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 292.

³¹ Rhodes, *Final Will and Testament*, 58-59.

be thought of as a homogenous group. He did not consider the possibility of a monolingualism of the other,³² which is to say a decoupling of, on the one hand, employing a language, knowing its codes and contexts, being capable of making utterances that are taken as meaningful, and, on the other hand, possessing a language or belonging to it. He did not, that is, understand the linguistic experience of the colonial subject (for example) or the *generic* tendency of language to defy and defer questions of origin. Rhodes's racism makes for a poor example. The words of Rhodes's racism are failed words, seeds that never found purchase; they are outdated, of course, in the sense that there is no obvious current group of racists espousing *these* ideas (which is not to say that there are no current racists who evoke his name), but they are also at once too nostalgic and too visionary to be said to belong to, or have been effective in, their own time. The same cannot be said about the medium of their expression, the language they aim to advance, which has, by all accounts, flourished. Could it be that, in the age of the "global Anglophone," Rhodes's simultaneously melancholy and proleptic linguistic racist project has finally been achieved, albeit in a manner he would find hard to recognize? And what would this mean for #RhodesMustFall, and especially for Fallism's instantiations outside of UCT?³³

Setting Rhodes as the (bad) example means submitting to the logic of the example, one which, as Derrida argues in a piece on "The Law of Genre," is "a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy," which is to say one whereby

³² See Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998).

³³ Take, for example, #OpenStellenbosch, a movement at Stellenbosch University, an institution which has, until very recently, been taken to *exemplify* higher education in Afrikaans. #OpenStellenbosch was directly inspired by #RhodesMustFall and, in fact, initially bore the rather awkward name, #MatiesMustFall. At its inaugural meeting, at the urging of a Senior Lecturer in the *English* department of a traditionally Afrikaans university, an Afrikaans-speaking Shakespeare expert, it was determined that for the movement it would be the Afrikaans language that would act as "our Rhodes statue."

the singularity of the example always relies on but also threatens to overwhelm and infect the category it exemplifies.³⁴ It prompts questions about the role of English, often taken as a language of national unity, as against Afrikaans, the infamous “language of the oppressor” in terms of the anti-apartheid struggle, and against other African languages. It suggests a return to colonialism as a category, which may be part of the driving force behind (re-) readings of Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, and Walter Mignolo with their very different senses of what de-colonization might entail. Doing so, it displaces the focus on “apartheid” and “post-apartheid,” turning attention to persistent material inequalities, which both pre- and post-date apartheid, rather than the formal legal ones unique to it. It informs which parts of the world the movement might find resonance. In short, it participates in (is an example of) what Alexander Gelley calls the “scandal of example,” whereby the reader or listener is forced to judge in the absence of a clear principle but on the basis of “the instance in its particularity” alone, therefore “continually and inescapably called upon to make judgments on insufficient grounds.”³⁵

The choice of setting and example clearly has a determining influence for a political project such as Fallism. In the age of the hashtag, this logic of political exemplarity has been generalized (if not quite universalized). The hashtag is derived from its use in social media where placing the noughts-and-crosses grid, usually called the “number” or “hash” sign, directly in front of a word or phrase (written without spaces or punctuation) makes that word or phrase searchable. This allows entries, or posts that contain this searchable “hashtag” (the phrase plus its hash sign), to be grouped together as part of a larger (open) textual unit. So a search for #RhodesMustFall on a social media

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no.1 (1980): 59.

³⁵ Gelley, 14.

platform will yield all the instances of people using that hashtag. In terms of sheer functionality, then, hashtags differ from both proper and common nouns, signifying neither a unique entity nor a class of entities. Hashtags have no unique, or even definite, referent (as would a proper noun); the referent of a hashtag is the history of its collective usage, which is always open to change. Rather than being *deduced* from a dictionary definition, and then applied to a phrase or word in its context (as one might do with a common noun), the meaning of a hashtag is *induced* from its many uses. They are for that reason not precisely declarative, stating, “This is” (RhodesMustFall, for example). They are instead cumulative, stating, “This *also* is” (RhodesMustFall, for example). Hashtags are by their nature too new to have fixed meanings; their malleability, reframe-ability, and reuse-ability is made operational through the hash before the phrase. Hashtags masquerade as examples, suggesting themselves as instances of a ruling principle. But there is no ruling principle, only the hashtag and its repetitions; we are always left to judge their meaning on insufficient grounds.

In a South African idiom, the “must” of “MustFall,” carries a valence that is somewhat different to its British or American counterparts. Possibly through linguistic interference from Afrikaans, the modal “must,” while retaining its senses of obligation, necessity, and logical or deductive certainty, is above all used to express a strong recommendation bordering on a command. And South Africans are not shy of dispensing pushy advice: “must” is often heard in the second person. The uncanny thing about the hashtag wars over the past year is how effective they have been in making the thing that “must” happen actually happen. #RhodesMustFall almost immediately became a national

talking point and soon we saw other things that must fall: #HeynekeMustFall (in reference to the former South African rugby coach), #DrinksCarriersMustFall (in reference to the dearth of black players in the South African national cricket team), #FeesMustFall (in reference to the national university fees protest of 2015 and 2016), and #ZumaMustFall (in reference to the president), for example. The Rhodes statue was taken down in a cathartic and carnivalesque scene on April 9, 2015. The Springbok coach resigned. The cricket team soon found two extremely promising young black players who immediately put in match-winning performances. The government agreed not to increase university fees in 2016. And as for #ZumaMustFall, we'll have to wait and see.... But he *must*. Or at least he could. He could be recalled by the ANC; parliament could evoke section 102 of the Constitution and call for a motion of no confidence; the Constitutional Court could begin impeachment proceedings; or he could even, unlikely as it seems, resign of his own volition. In any of these cases we could in a fairly straightforward sense say, "Zuma has fallen." However, as Shakespeare and Derrida remind us, after the fall, the haunting begins; after demise or destruction, there is the question of how to inherit.³⁶

An altogether stranger and perhaps more revealing instance of the recent "MustFall" hashtags is #MandelaMustFall. Not attached to one statue or object in particular, and never clear on what exactly Mandela's fall would look like after his death, this hashtag has been used for diverse purposes. On the one hand, the hashtag has been appropriated by relativist trolls proposing that statues commemorating Nelson Mandela in the United Kingdom should be subject to the same critique as are those commemorating

³⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 8.

Cecil Rhodes, on the grounds that they were both, in some undefined sense, violent men. The more serious and compelling argument advanced under that hashtag is that Nelson Mandela's legacy is one of compromise, justice foregone, and betrayal in the name of reconciliation,³⁷ moreover that there is nothing sacrosanct about his presidency, which could do with some de-mythologizing.³⁸ The latter critique, which is by and large generational, and which has been advanced in the name of #RhodesMustFall and of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), was perhaps foreshadowed by Chumani Maxwele in his initial comments on his performance. The South-African online newspaper, *The Journalist*,³⁹ reports Maxwele saying, "We acknowledge our parents' achievements fighting against apartheid but we are saying now it is about time for us to reflect on our pain, our suffering collectively."⁴⁰ In this spirit, to say #MandelaMustFall is to say the urgency of inequality, of injustice, and of the black subject's pain requires us to look past, or be willing to critique the ideals of, non-racialism (a liberal tool for keeping the status

³⁷ Ian Glenn notes that among "young educated urban African people" – i.e. the primary constituency of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall – a "common motif is a suspicion of the Constitution ('an instrument of repression') and of Mandela's compromise and Mandela as compromiser." Glenn, "Rhodes Must Fall," 89. Mark Gevisser, writing after Maxwele's protest performance but before the statue's removal, attributes the #RhodesMustFall movement even more directly to Mandela: "South Africa's negotiated settlement between blacks and whites, led by Nelson Mandela, meant that Rhodes and many other colonial- and apartheid-era figures could remain on their plinths. Twenty years later, it is indeed time for this society to reconsider their presence on the South African landscape." Gevisser, "South African Students Must Take Movement to Society for Real Progress." From this perspective, the attack on the Rhodes statue was always already an attack on Mandela (whose own statues, all over South Africa, now dominate communal and commercial spaces alike).

³⁸ Already in 2004, Grant Farred and Rita Barnard guest editing a special edition of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* dealing with (as the subtitle indicates) "A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa" opted for the telling title, "After the Thrill Is Gone." Farred in his contribution to that volume notes that this title is meant to take "the narrative of 'progress' from a racist past to a nonracial present (and future)," which had been "a critical modality [with] significant purchase in the post-1994 society," and displace that narrative with "a ruptured, critical, discontented relationship to the present." Grant Farred, "The Not Yet Counterpartisan: A New Politics of Oppositionality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 4 (2004): 592-93. More than a decade later, the South-African present remains "post-apartheid" (though "de-colonial" has become an important alternative formulation), and the narrative of progress, tied to the figure of Nelson Mandela and his "Madiba magic," has become even less credible.

³⁹ The newspaper's slogan is perhaps worth mentioning here: "Context Matters."

⁴⁰ See: <http://www.thejournalist.org.za/spotlight/we-love-uct-says-student-who-covered-rhodes-in-shit>

quo intact) and reconciliation (which has only ever protected white privilege) that Mandela has come to stand for, to be *exemplary* of. Mandela: a leader who has left his people materially worse off in the name of liberal principle. This characterization of Mandela still has quite some way to go before matching in sheer villainy of Rhodes in his most recent potted mini-biographies (meant, of course, to counterbalance the imperial heroism of his statuary representations);⁴¹ even given his failings, it seems bizarre that Mandela and Rhodes should be subjected to the same censure, condemned to the same “fall.” And yet Fallists are not the first to decide to group these two men together: *The Mandela Rhodes Foundation* has been offering scholarships since 2005 for “candidates who identify with the values set out by Mr. Mandela and Mr. Rhodes.”⁴² Mandela and Rhodes would seem to have mutual admirers as well as mutual detractors.

Those of us untimely souls who still care about distinctions, who wish to keep the legacies of Rhodes and Mandela firmly distinct, however, could do worse than turn to Jacques Derrida’s “Admiration of Nelson Mandela, Or, the Laws of Reflection.” Derrida’s text focuses on Mandela’s testimony at his 1962 and 1964 trials, speeches that come to Derrida in written form, as texts or testaments which he inherits and from which he asks others to inherit. There is a long gap between Mandela’s 1962 and 1964 speeches, Derrida’s 1986 text, and the #MandelaMustFall hashtag, but read together now they seem especially responsive to each other, even against the flow of time, each posing the

⁴¹ This one, for example, distorting and defamiliarizing Rhodes’s own racial discourse: “Cecil Rhodes belonged to *the race of men* who were convinced that to be black is a liability. During his time and life in Southern Africa, he used his considerable power – political and financial – to make black people all over Southern Africa pay a bloody price for his beliefs.” Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, my emphasis.

⁴² “Guiding Principles,” *The Mandela Rhodes Foundation*, Accessed May 18, 2017, <http://mandelarhodes.org/the-scholarship/guiding-principles/>

question of legacy and inheritance: colonial inheritance and Mandela's own legacy. For Derrida,

There are at least two ways of receiving a testament [...] One can inflect it toward what *bears witness* only to a past and knows itself condemned to reflecting that which will not return: a kind of West in general, the end of a race that is also the trajectory from a luminous source, the close of an epoch, for example that of the Christian West (Mandela speaks its language, he is also an English Christian). But, another inflection, if the testament is always made in front of witnesses, a witness in front of witnesses, it is also so as to open and to enjoin, it is to confide in others the responsibility of a future.⁴³

When Mandela becomes a lawyer and inherits the law,⁴⁴ he has to ask whether the law is “essentially a thing of the West” or whether “its formal universality retains some irreducible link with European or even Anglo-American history.”⁴⁵

This can also be framed as a *specific* case of a more *general* problem of how to inherit in the (ex-) colonies from the (former) colonial powers without attributing to them the status of being “ahead,” of originating concepts and practices that the (ex-) colonies must always be condemned to mimic . (Or, in terms of the introduction of this study, how

⁴³ Derrida, “Admiration of Nelson Mandela,” 82.

⁴⁴ In South Africa there is a distinction between two kinds of lawyer: advocates and attorneys. While Mandela passed the admission exam to practice as an attorney in 1952, he did not in fact obtain his LLB degree (which qualified him to act as an advocate) until almost forty years later. In his excellent piece about Mandela's long legal education, Adam Sitze writes, “Between 1939, when Mandela began studying administrative law at the University of Fort Hare, and 1989, when Mandela finally received his LLB degree through correspondence from the University of South Africa (UNISA), Mandela would enroll in no fewer than fifty courses in law at four different universities. For fully half a century, Nelson Mandela was, in a sense we yet have fully to comprehend, a student of law.” Adam Sitze, “Mandela and the Law,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, ed. Rita Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 134. There is an important sense, then, in which Mandela was not only, as Derrida would have it, a “*man of law*” both “*by vocation*” and “*by profession*.” Derrida, “Admiration of Nelson Mandela,” 18. Mandela was also, for half a century, a *student of law*, a student in university systems far more colonial and unjust than those currently under protest.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

to be contemporary with “the West” rather than looking to it for an avant-garde). Framed this way, the problem also becomes one of (post-) colonial translation:

The notion of the colony as a copy or translation of the great European Original inevitably involves a value judgement that ranks the translation in a lesser position in the literary hierarchy. The colony, by this definition, is therefore less than its colonizer, its original. So how were the colonies, emerging from colonialism, to deal with that dilemma? How might they find a way to assert themselves and their own culture, to reject the appellative of ‘copy’ or ‘translation’ without at the same time rejecting everything that might be of value that came from Europe?⁴⁶

For Derrida, Mandela, faced with this dilemma, solves it by *admiring* the law, both valuing it and casting a reflective gaze on it, but without accepting it as entirely foreign or entirely ideal.

What [Mandela’s] fascination seems to bring into view here, what mobilizes and immobilizes Mandela’s attention, is not only parliamentary democracy, whose principle presents itself *for example but not exemplarily* in the West. It is the already virtually accomplished passage, if one can say this, from parliamentary democracy to revolutionary democracy: a society without class and without private property. We have just encountered, then, a supplementary paradox: the *effective* accomplishment, the fulfillment of the democratic form, the *real* determination of the formality, will only have taken place in the past of this non-Western society [...].⁴⁷

It is this manner of reflection, in the future perfect, strikingly lacking in the Fallist perspective, that we can learn to inherit from Derrida and Mandela. Like the so-called

⁴⁶ Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, “Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals, and Vernaculars,” in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

“West,” Derrida’s South Africa also “presents itself *for example but not exemplarily*,” it is both “the most singular” place and just one part metonymically standing for, and “*deciding*,” the whole. This form of reflection, which is also a form of admiration, avoids the peril of narcissism that haunts every inward looking act. While some readers of Derrida would agree with Tom Cohen that Derrida’s later texts reveal a “closet affirmation of Eurocentrism,”⁴⁸ and that future scholars looking back will be “pissed, and probably dismissive about the moaning about legacies, mourning, ghosts, and so on,”⁴⁹ an attentive reading of “Admiration of Nelson Mandela” would suggest otherwise. The response that Derrida finds to Eurocentrism, to European law (or rather, in this case of that hyphenation Rhodes would universalize, to “Anglo-American” law) in Mandela’s admiration is one that manages to inherit and critique at the same time. It is an approach to de-colonization that disaggregates brute interest and repression from a humanist legacy that was never exclusively proper to Europe, or Anglo-America, in the first place, and whereby “places,” like “South Africa” (for example), stand in metonymic relation to a yet-to-be-determined, larger, global whole.⁵⁰

#RhodesMustFall has militated against current and ongoing colonial structures, bound together by the experience of “black pain” and the group-affirming rhetoric of taking offense, politically mobilized as a collective body in the physical destruction of symbolic vestiges of an older colonialism found in the form of statues and artworks. All

⁴⁸ Tom Cohen, “Reading: Derrida and the Non-Future,” in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. Claire Colebrook (London: Routledge, 2014), 154.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p155

⁵⁰ “Some would be tempted to see in Mandela a witness or a martyr to the past [...] But the contrary can be said: his reflection allows us to glimpse – in the most singular geopolitical conjuncture, in that extreme concentration of the whole history of humanity which today are places or stakes named, for example, ‘South Africa’ or ‘Israel’ – the promise of what still has never been seen, nor heard, in a law that has presented itself in the West, at the limit of the West, only to slip away from it just as soon. That which will be decided in these ‘places’ so named, – which are also formidable metonyms – would decide all, if there were still that – some all.” Derrida, “Admiration of Nelson Mandela,” 27.

of this requires emphasis on a group identity derived from embodied experience of a singular history and a singular place. But as a hashtag, and as a now-international movement whose strategies and discourse exist in relation to a network of other international hashtag movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter (for example), #RhodesMustFall already has to think of itself as also existing in a context other than the one suggested by the narcissistic closure of singularity, inaccessibility, and untranslatability, i.e. as one example among others and as being in relation to the world, including the Western world. Nelson Mandela's admiration, in Derrida's reading, gives the possibility of seeing the seeds of an African philosophy in European/Anglo-American law and of seeing the flourishing of those seeds as taking place in the future, on African soil (for example), cultivated by future generations. As a response to the world to which #RhodesMustFall is also a response, it is exemplary.

As I've already intimated, Derrida's concern, in "Admiration of Nelson Mandela" as in *Specters of Marx*, is with inheritance. In this light, Derrida's reading of Mandela's testimony at his trials in the early 1960s becomes one that takes testimony about the past and present to also be a testament for the future. The "law of reflection" in Derrida's subtitle indicates a reflexive relation to the law, one that denies a model whereby the law originates in Europe, is then translated to a South African context, finding there a secondary, derivative form as "copy" or "translation" (in its pejorative sense). It is instead in Mandela's admiration of the law that the law – "what still has never been seen, nor heard" – is "decided" in light of the culture of Mandela's ancestors *for the very first*

time.⁵¹ We can also read into this dynamic a model of translation whereby the true original is expressed in the translation, with reference to the target culture, *for the very first time*. Such translation would be unfaithful, differing from the letter of the original as Mandela's interpretation differs from the letter of the law, but it would also be faithful, espousing a potentiality in the original that only in the target context can find its true expression. It is, as I will discuss below, what Richard Philcox identifies (following Susan Bassnett) as a *cannibalistic* form of translation: one that assimilates the source into the target without the slavish loyalty to the primacy of the original that marks most other translation theories (and practices). It is a form of translation that bridges distinct spatiotemporal units, provoking the experience of what Derrida calls "disjuncture" and that Shakespeare's Hamlet refers to as a time "out of joint."⁵² Unlike in *Hamlet*, disjunctive (because different) times and places can also be consciously (as opposed to unconsciously) conjoined – produced in an act of what Richard Philcox calls faithful/unfaithful translation.⁵³ Mandela opts to be selective in his admiration of (European) law, bringing the purest strands of it to bear on his South African present; he translates the law into a felicitous present juncture. This is perhaps the right response to a sense we might have from Sontag's lecture from 2003 that the novel, like the law, is a *European* form expressing *universal* humanity: to be selective and see which aspects of the novel can be expressed in a specific context, like Cape Town for example, *for the very first time*. And, of course, in choosing to re-read Derrida reading the Mandela of the Rivonia trial, I too am being selective in bringing what I believe is most pertinent about him into juncture

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 8.

⁵³ Richard Philcox, "Fidelity, Infidelity, and the Adulterous Translator," *The Australian Journal of French Studies* 47, no. 1 (2010), 33-35.

with the South African present. Fanon’s texts, more so than Mandela’s, are actively haunting the South African academy, also selectively, also forming a present juncture between two contexts of “decolonization,” but here the selection seems unfortunate; it “must” be contested.

2. *The Story of the Cannibal Translator*

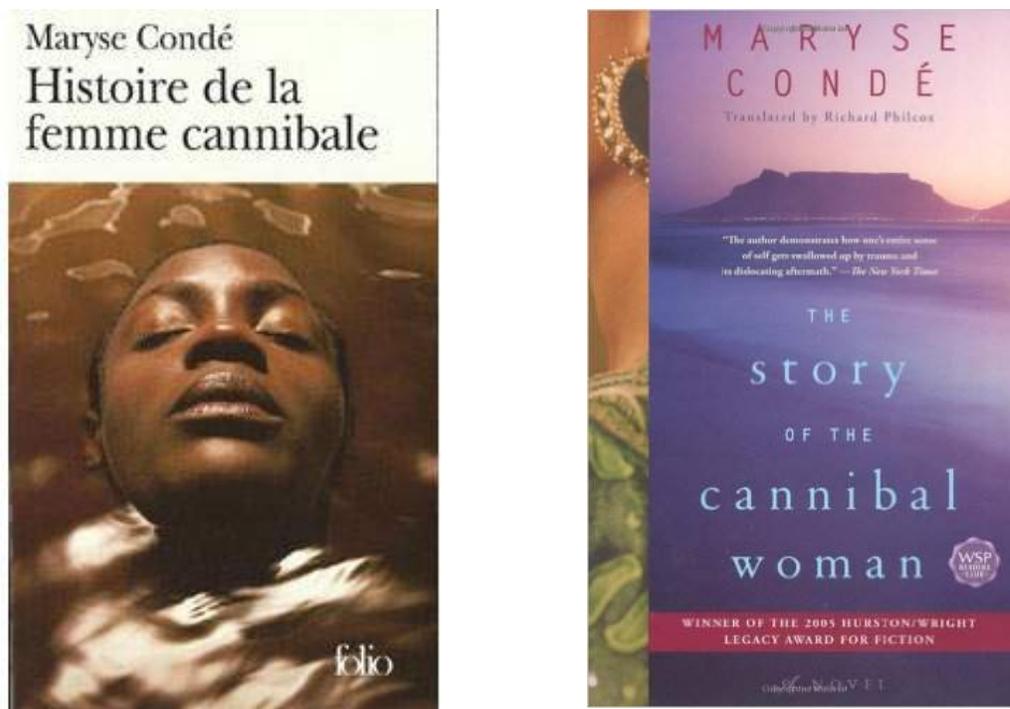


Figure 1.2. Covers of Maryse Condé’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2005 Folio edition) and *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* (2008 WSP Reader’s Club)

The cover of the 2005 Folio edition of Maryse Condé’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale* contains an image of a black woman’s face surrounded by a body of water; the rest of her head is submerged in the dark liquid, only her ears visible below the surface.

The woman is wearing make-up and lipstick. Her skin's sheen is matched by the water's glimmer. Her eyes are closed. It is a disturbing image. Upon first glance, and without reading the book, one cannot help but think *this* is the cannibal woman of the title: exoticized, eroticized, and utterly opaque. The Washington Square Press Reader's Club English-language version, entitled *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, instead goes for the most cliché post-card image of Cape Town, South Africa, where the greater part of the novel's action takes place: a shot of Table Mountain on a clear day, taken from across False Bay. There is also an accompanying image, spreading from the left-most inch of the front cover, over the spine and to the back cover, of a black woman's face in profile, cropped just below the eyes and going down to just below the shoulders. She is wearing a dress of magnificent green fabric and a large, crenelated, golden loop earring. For the English-language cover, location is privileged over the feminine figure, whose outfit and jewelry also emphasize the African setting. I am here interested in the possibilities for its reception in 2015, at the moment of the founding of #RhodesMustFall, when Fanon was being widely read, and Condé was being also read (far less widely) in Richard Philcox's English from exactly that setting: the University of Cape Town campus looking back at the photographer across False Bay from the foot of Table Mountain.

Take the standard paradigm for world literature: a work transcending its local or national audience, usually by means of linguistic translation. According to this "standard" model, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* would be the "local" or "national" version, while *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, translated into English by Condé's husband, Richard Philcox, would elevate it to the status of world literature. In a published conversation

with Condé, Philcox makes the well-worn claim that “it is through translation that we read the masterpieces of universal literature.”⁵⁴ Condé grants that she has benefitted from reading such “masterpieces” in translation, but as far as the translation of her own works go, she is far more ambivalent:

The editor is obliged to sell a book, an object that today has lost a lot of its appeal and is consequently governed by commercial considerations. [... A translation] widens the author’s readership and guarantees access to his work for readers throughout the world. It offers a promise of immortality. But, for an author, on the contrary, what is the task of the translator? It consists of using words belonging to another idiom, i.e., different words from those preferred by the author after a long selection process. The translator turns the musicality of the text upside down and in the end destroys the lovingly elaborated score. In the course of this annihilation the author’s voice disappears and here he is excluded from the text so passionately produced. What voice then prevails and replaces the author’s? It can only be that of the translator’s. In a word, the author is close to seeing the translator as the most formidable enemy he has ever crossed paths with, more formidable than the journalists, readers and editors.⁵⁵

The standard celebratory view of world literature – by which a work is elevated from its *specific* context and given *general* (some, like Philcox, say “universal”) importance through its translation into a major language – is attributed here to editors and the market. For the author, who cares about the *singularity* of her text, the translator is “the most formidable enemy.”

The standard model of world literature is further confounded by the fact that Condé hails from Guadeloupe, an overseas *département* of France, a non-metropolitan

⁵⁴ Maryse Condé and Richard Philcox, “Intimate Enemies: A Conversation Between an Author and Her Translator,” in *Intimate Enemies : Translation in Francophone Contexts*, ed. Kathryn Batchelor and Claire Bisdorff (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

part of the republic, while her novel is set largely in post-apartheid South Africa and also contains scenes taking place in Tokyo, New York, and a fictional African city called “N’Dossou.” The work – one of what Philcox calls Condé’s “novels of globalization” –⁵⁶ is already worldly in its setting, worldly in a way that has nothing to do with its circulation. This work is, then, non-paradigmatic, a poor example of the reigning paradigm. Or, alternatively, *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* is an example that calls for a different paradigm of world literature. Reflecting histories of diasporic movement and transnational attachments, this novel, like so many Caribbean works and post-colonial works more generally, is worldly in its ambit *before* it undergoes translation. It is, in Rebecca Walkowitz’s phrase, “born-translated.”⁵⁷

Maryse Condé is married to her English-language translator and consequently kept thoroughly aware that her works will, at some point, be translated, even though she claims never to read the translations.⁵⁸ The celebrated French critic and translator, Claude Mouchard, has described the relationship between writer and translator as “conjugal,” a state where one partner “forgives the other nothing.”⁵⁹ The Condé/Philcox conjugal relationship seems to be a deeply forgiving one, however, with Condé in particular overlooking her partner’s regular trespasses and betrayals, which range from the banal and accidental to the motivated and committed. Philcox openly admits his textual

⁵⁶ Philcox, “Fidelity, Infidelity, and the Adulterous translator,” 34.

⁵⁷ “Born translated” works are, among other things, a category of works where “translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device. These are works *written for translation*, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often *written as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed.” Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 4. See my discussion of J. M. Coetzee (who is Walkowitz’s primary illustration of the category) as a poor paradigm/example of a “born-translated” author in chapter 4.

⁵⁸ Condé and Philcox, “Intimate Enemies,” 91.

⁵⁹ Cited in Alix Cléo-Roubaud, *Journal*, trans. Jan Steyn. (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010): 19.

philandering, in the case of *Célanire Cou-Coupé* (2000, translated in English as *Who Slashed Célanire's Throat*, 2002), for example:

Knowing full well that no English reader, (and by the way, very few French readers) would get the reference to Apollinaire or Césaire (“soleil cou-coupé”), I made a deliberate choice to make it sound more like a thriller, and thus more commercial, more reader-friendly. It was being *deliberately unfaithful* to detach the text from the French-speaking world and open it up to an English-speaking readership. I am one of those translators who is constantly thinking of the readership, and placing the language in the twenty-first century. A vivid example of this is my new translation of Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* and *Peau Noire Masques Blancs* where I have modernized the vocabulary for the twenty-first-century reader.⁶⁰

Philcox justifies his infidelity precisely through his conjugality. He is deeply familiar with Condé’s Caribbean settings, was present with her during moments of inspiration, knows the secret models that her characters are based on, in short has experienced “the bond between author and translator as wife and husband ... a permanent interaction between two people living in harmony, traveling and living together.”⁶¹ And this familiarity gives him license to be unfaithful, or rather to be faithful to the higher principle that he, following Gayatri Spivak, calls “the rhetoricity of the original.”⁶² But how does one prevent this higher principle, which Spivak frames as “more erotic than ethical,”⁶³ from simply becoming a cover for the translator’s own projected desires? If Philcox were to translate Condé’s novel not into English but into “reader-friendly” French, would he also have changed her title? How unfaithful is too unfaithful?

⁶⁰ Philcox, “Fidelity, Infidelity, and the Adulterous translator,” 34, my emphasis.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000), 372.

In the case of *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, it is difficult not to see in the protagonists a (distorted) mirror image of the author and translation: to see in Rosélie-Stephen a doubling of the Condé-Philcox, in Stephen's infidelity a doubling of Philcox's betrayals. Rosélie is, until well after Stephen's death, (willfully) oblivious to Stephen's infidelity, just as Maryse Condé claims ignorance of Philcox's renderings of her works. *Traduttore, traditore*, the translator is a traitor, or so the saying goes. Whether this commonplace equation of the act of translation and the act of betrayal, especially sexual betrayal, is a useful one is up for debate; but the metaphor is clearly one that Philcox himself uses to conceive of his translation practice. A question worth asking, though perhaps impossible to answer definitively, is whether Rosélie's suppressed rage at Stephen's betrayals could also stand in for a certain dissatisfaction the author feels regarding the translator's liberties. Feelings of betrayal aside, what is more important in this chapter is the way in which our discourse of loyalty to an original (source) or loyalty to a receiving context (target) posits the unity of source and target. In this thoroughly global story, with its several hybrid characters, mixing several languages and cultures, it is not clear precisely what either the source or target is meant to be. Condé's "original" is already in several places a translation into French (consisting of several registers plus Creole) of speech and thoughts that take place in other languages. Philcox's English does not attempt to purify this hybridity into one strain of English. Sources and targets are plural in both Condé's (cultural) and Philcox's (linguistic) translations.

Kerry Lapin-Fortin, writing about the author-translator couple, finds *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* to be one of the "most harmonious," least unfaithful, of Philcox's translations, because of the way that the global theme and the setting in cosmopolitan

hybrid cities in Condé's original is echoed by Philcox's English.⁶⁴ What Lapin-Fortin has in mind is the way that Philcox oscillates between British and American dialects, between the language of the place where he grew up and that of place where he lived with Condé later in life, sometimes employing a British-inflected term like "bedsitter," sometimes employing American-inflected term like "death row." The consequence is that "pour le lecteur anglophone, cette oscillation entre codes linguistiques devient à la fois déroutante et fascinante; dans cet univers condéen, l'absence de frontières désoriente autant qu'il libère."⁶⁵ What Lapin-Fortin never explicitly considers is how Philcox's translation comes across to a particular subset of Anglophone readers: those versed in South African English. Much of the original novel is given to us in close third-person narration focalized on Rosélie, or from a perspective that intercuts with this dominant third-person flow of a first-person narrator who sometimes explicitly is Rosélie (stating Rosélie's feelings, or even some of her possible dialog, distinguished from most of her speech by an absence of quotation marks and an ambiguity in the context) and sometimes explicitly is not Rosélie (but rather a more literate and knowledgeable narrator who has read what Rosélie claims not to have read and who knows what Rosélie claims not to know). There is no reason for this part of the text, which contains French of a variety of registers as well as the occasional Creole phrase, to find a specifically South African translation. Most of the middle chapters of the novel take place, framed as Rosélie's recollections, in several locales outside of South Africa, and so there is no reason for these to find a specifically South African translation either. And many of the characters that do appear in

⁶⁴ Kerry Lapin-Fortin, "Les Quatres voix du duo Condé-Philcox," *French Review* 86, no. 3 (2013), 544.

⁶⁵ "for the Anglophone reader this oscillation between linguistic codes becomes simultaneously disconcerting and intriguing; in this Condéan universe, the absence of borders disorient as much as it liberates." *Ibid.*

the South African setting are from outside of South Africa, some of whom would be communicating with Rosélie in French to begin with. But Philcox's mix of American and British idioms fall flat in those instances when the characters are South African, their words silently translated into French in the original and then translated back into an English that is not theirs, or when descriptions are of South African places that appear in a language that would be unfamiliar to locals. Some of these problems are explicit. There are those that are glaring (though, ultimately minor) and inherited from Condé's text; for example, the historically "coloured" suburb, Mitchell's Plain, is referred to over and over as "Mitchell Plains." Others are subtler (and possibly even more minor), such as, for example, what locals mean by the phrase "on the other side of the mountain" when uttered from specific locales. But the less explicit, or at least harder to point at, problem is the absence of local inflection. Other than an abundant repetition of local racist slurs (repeated from Condé's original) there is practically no South African idiom used by the South African characters in the South African scenes; the target readership seems to be broad, even global, and certainly hybrid, but a South African readership seems not to have been targeted at all.

Philcox claims that Condé's "novels of globalization" is where his infidelity stops. Unlike the novels set in Guadeloupe, these speak "to the reader of a world with which he is already familiar with" – the "world" of globalization.⁶⁶ Having closely read his rendering of *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, I cannot quite agree. On the one hand, the English version seems to be riddled with small errors and word-for-word infidelities. On the other hand, Philcox is clearly aware of and often quite adept at the particularly strenuous task of in turning Condé's prose about a specific place into prose in one of the

⁶⁶ Philcox, "Fidelity, Infidelity, and the Adulterous translator," 34.

languages of that place without losing the sense that this place is foreign to Rosélie, the book's protagonist and main focalizer. For example, Condé's place-, culture-, and gender-specific racial vocabulary of "métisse,"⁶⁷ and "mulâtre,"⁶⁸ become Philcox's "the coloured woman,"⁶⁹ and "what you'd call mulatto,"⁷⁰ thereby transforming a Guadeloupean racial term for a South African subject into a not-exactly-equivalent but recognizable South African one, and responding to the need for an Anglophone audience to have the Guadeloupean local-ness of terms like "mulatto" reinforced for them. Nevertheless, on many an occasion, one cannot help but feel that perhaps many of the small infelicities stems from Philcox's (and not necessarily Condé's) mental substitution of "Cape Town" (the primary setting despite brief mentions of New York, Tokyo, and N'Dossou) for "globalization." Philcox at one point in "Fidelity, Infidelity, and the Adulterous Translator," mysteriously remarks that he and Condé had "survived two journeys to South Africa, and lived through the experiences that came to be portrayed in *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*" (this in a novel about a white British academic who commits adultery and pedophilia before being murdered and leaving his Guadeloupean wife stranded in Cape Town).⁷¹ And yet, despite having "lived through" whatever part of the experiences portrayed in the novel, one gets a sense from his translation, one that doesn't quite pertain to Condé's original, that Cape Town is not so much a "place" as a "place-holder."

⁶⁷ Maryse Condé, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (Paris: Folio, 2005), 14. [Hereafter *Histoire*].

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁹ Maryse Condé, *Story of the Cannibal Woman*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Washington Square Press, 2008), 3. [Hereafter *Story*].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷¹ Philcox, "Fidelity, Infidelity, and the Adulterous translator," 31.

Sometimes it seems that Philcox is too faithful to the letter of Condé's text, giving calques rather than interpretations. Condé's "Jérôme Bosch" does not become "Hieronymus Bosch" in the English,⁷² instead Philcox gives us "Jerome Bosch."⁷³ The newspaper that Condé renders as the "*Tribune du Cap*" does not go back to being the actually existing *Cape Times* or *Cape Argus* but rather becomes the "*Cape Tribune*."⁷⁴ And in the opening sentence, setting the scene, Condé tells us: "Le Cap dormait toujours de la meme façon, couché en chien de fusil."⁷⁵ Instead of selecting a phrase describing the bodily posture that the French original connotes, a phrase like "in the fetal position," Philcox gives us a literal gloss: "Cape Town always slept in the same position, curled up in the muzzle of a gun."⁷⁶ Of course it is important at moments such as this, especially given that it is the first sentence of the book, to note that what could all too easily be seen as a "mistake" is more likely to be a deliberate interpretive choice. It may be important to Philcox's interpretation that the newspaper, which plays a large role as the story progresses, be fictitious, just like the city of "N'Dossou." And, in the case of the opening sentence, it would seem that Philcox chose to forego Condé's ease and elegance in order to retain the image of a gun, perhaps in order to emphasize the codes of the detective genre that Condé playfully evokes and frustrates. He opts for familiarity rather than ominousness, interpreting "toujours" as "always" rather than "still," yielding "Cape Town always slept in the same position." Yet given that English is one of the languages of Cape Town, his translation has the effect of introducing a foreign element absent from (or perhaps merely invisible in) the original. In English translation (some of) the subjects

⁷² Condé, *Histoire*, 19.

⁷³ Condé, *Story*, 7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁵ Condé, *Histoire* 11.

⁷⁶ Condé, *Story*, 1.

of the novel now become its potential readers, and these readers, unlike the readers of the French original, are excluded from the community familiar with the idiom employed at the book's opening.

What Philcox translates is already a translation. Firstly, it is a translation of the dominant plots of Africa's earlier post-liberation moments – plots of corruption, neo-colonialism, and xenophobia – to a new setting: post-apartheid South Africa. In this way, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* is a late entry in a series of post-liberation African novels by Maryse Condé, including *Heremakhonon* (1976) and *Une Saison à Rihata* (1981). Condé, who has lived in Africa with her first husband (an African), and has a long history of political engagement in the postcolonial African context, clearly has a stake in South Africa after apartheid. Apartheid itself was a clarion call to arms for pan-Africanists, affording the country an outsized importance as the *exemplary* site of the struggle against racism and global inequality, an importance that sometimes meant that other, smaller, parts of the world, such as Guadeloupe, went unnoticed.⁷⁷ After apartheid, in this novel that features several black immigrants to South Africa, South Africa becomes entirely unexceptional: just another example of failure: the failure to decolonize, the failure of non-racialism, the failure of pan-Africanism. The novel's protagonist, Rosélie, has a far from warm welcome in South Africa (much like the also Caribbean protagonist of *Hérémakhonon*, Veronica Mercier, has a far from warm welcome in the unnamed West African country she chooses to move to in a novel set four decades earlier). After Rosélie's husband's murder, she is encouraged by her maid-turned-friend, the "coloured" woman ("*métisse*"), Dido, to set herself up as a clairvoyant and provides psychic

⁷⁷ See Maryse Condé, "Pan-Africanism, Feminism, and Culture," in *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, ed. Sydney J. Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley (New York: Verso, 1994).

assistance to Capetonians, primarily to other foreigners struggling to make it in South Africa's stubbornly racist and stubbornly unequal society. Through these characters, and in her many references to anti-colonial texts, Condé, like the #RhodesMustFall movement, finds resonance in an earlier moment of African decolonization, both as a diagnosis of the failures South Africa seems bound to repeat, and as a diagnosis of the social and political ills that need remedy.

What Philcox translates is already translation in a second sense: it is a cultural translation of Cape Town for a Francophone readership. While Condé's book is not a typical example of world literature moving from a local to an international audience through translation, it does have a lot in common with ethnography or its older cousin, travel writing. The book in fact begins by citing Henri Michaux's 1933 travelogue, *Un barbare en Asie*: "Supposez trente Anglais en tout et pour tout, de par le monde. Qui les remarquerait?"⁷⁸ Condé's engagement with this potentially fetishizing genre and its foreignizing gaze is mordant and highly ironic. Valérie Loichot argues convincingly that the trope of cannibalism in the novel – a trope itself based on an historical error when Christopher Columbus misheard the shouts of *Carib* Amerindians, "Caríba!," as "Caníbal," thereby mistaking them for the "the dog-headed anthropophagous ape of Greek and Roman mythology or cynocephalus" –⁷⁹ points exactly to Condé's commitment to pastiche and counters what Loichot calls "literary colonialism:" "the practice of European or colonial writers... subjugating landscape, flora, fauna, humans

⁷⁸ "Imagine a total of just thirty Englishmen in the entire world. Who would notice them?" Cited in Condé, *Histoire*, 11.

⁷⁹ Valérie Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back: Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), vii.

and texts to an imperial gaze and desire.”⁸⁰ Condé gets past the impasse of merely opposing (instead of providing a positive counter to) “literary colonialism” by exaggerating and emphasizing the elements of cannibalism. The former, given its hallucinatory history, is for Loichot a trope for textual incorporation distinct from plagiarism and assimilation rather than simply a literal reference to the eating of human flesh. In Condé’s text, according to Loichot, the cannibal is simultaneously “everywhere and nowhere” making the novel into a “farce of cannibalism.”⁸¹ Despite all this ironic distance, hyperbole, and hyper-citationality, however, it remains far from clear whether Condé, writing about a distant and exotic location, successfully avoids repeating the literary colonialism she sets out to undo. And if her original does manage to fall on the side of satire rather than gaffe, this does not guarantee the same fate for the English-language version.

Loichot’s description of literary cannibalism as she finds it in Maryse Condé’s novel accords with the discourse on cannibalism that Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi find within translation studies:

The cannibalistic metaphor has come to be used to demonstrate to translators what they can do with a text. Translation, says the great Brazilian translator Haraldo de Campos [...] may be likened to a blood transfusion, where the emphasis is on the health and nourishment of the translator. This is a far cry from the notion of faithfulness to an original, of the translator as servant of the source text. Translation, according to de Campos, is a dialogue, the translator is an all-powerful reader and a free agent as a writer.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid., 141.

⁸¹ Ibid., 168.

⁸² Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, “Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals, and Vernaculars,” in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1999),

Writing before his translation of *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, Philcox admits a similar cannibalistic approach to translating his spouse: “I feel so attuned to Maryse’s way of thinking and seeing the world, that I do take liberties and refuse to become a slave to the text. [...] I feel free to cannibalize it.”⁸³ The cannibalized *Story of the Cannibal Woman* is certainly closer than Condé’s original is to repeating the colonializing gesture of appropriating and incorporating a foreign place – not, in this case, a cannibalizing of the colonizer’s canon, but rather a case of South-South cannibalization of locality.

While Condé throughout her oeuvre gives a scathing critique of the touristic gaze, this novel set in South Africa featuring a Guadeloupean woman dealing with the death of her British husband itself has at times a rather touristic feel. She occasionally commits errors of fact – often exacerbated in the English version by her husband’s sometimes-lackluster translation of the work – though these are for the most part trivial: minor points of geography, the spelling of local business names, place names, etc. Condé is as sharply critical of oblivious tourists in this novel as in any. Consider, for example, the following description:

All around her the furniture chosen by Stephen shook itself and gradually cast off the disturbing animal shapes it took on in the dark, night after night. It had been her obsession since that weekend she had spent with Stephen two years earlier in the Kwa Maritane game park, close to the capital of a former Bantustan, Sun City, transformed into an international holiday resort including casino and hotels for stars. She hadn’t expected the animals, so harmless during those three days, dozing in the shade of the

⁸³Richard Philcox, “Translating Maryse Condé: A Personal Journey,” *The Journal of Twentieth Century/Contemporary French Studies* 5, no. 2 (2001), 280.

bushes in the immensity of the veldt, to come alive at night as wild beasts and charge straight at her. What did frighten her were the men. White men. Guides, game wardens, local visitors, foreign tourists. All wearing boots and safari hats, sporting double-barreled guns, playing in a Western without a hint of bison or Indian now massacred or defeated, herded toothless into their reservations.⁸⁴

A reader familiar with South Africa's game parks might have to really work at suspending their disbelief at the prospect of Kwa Maritane allowing guests to carry guns, or having its wardens and guides for some reason carry "double-barreled" ones. Sun City was never the capital of Bophutatswana, the former Bantustan in question, it was in fact always, specifically because its location in a Bantustan made it exempt from apart South Africa's anti-gambling laws, "an international holiday resort including casino and hotels for stars" – there was no transformation required after apartheid for it to become so. And so in this vignette critiquing the touristic gaze, we find several casual, touristic misperceptions. But while the local detail may be wrong, the passage pays off with its comparative breadth: the link suggested between the colonizing dress-up in African form and its North American equivalent is a striking one.

It is not precisely that Condé doesn't care about the South African setting, or that she doesn't find it to be in some way exceptional: *exemplary* in the sense of the paragon or *nec plus ultra* rather than *exemplary* in the sense of a representative or average sample. Like Derrida before the end of apartheid, Rosélie now after apartheid, still, finds South Africa to be the last word in racism: "She hated Cape Town as soon as she left the airport [...] No place had been more marked by its history. Never had she felt so denied,

⁸⁴ Condé, *Story of the Cannibal Woman*, 2-3.

excluded, and relegated out of sight because of her color.”⁸⁵ But *Histoire de la femme cannibale* has a healthy disdain for South Africans claiming exceptional status.

Take, for example, crime. After a white character tells her that South Africa is a “tough place,” Rosélie thinks,

The whole world is a tough place. They take potshots at you on the sidewalks of Manhattan as well as in London’s Chelsea. You’re not safe in the deadly Twin Towers, symbol of American capitalism. Almost three thousand dead, killed in a single morning. They rape old ladies in the east of Paris. They tell me that even my little Guadeloupe is keeping up with the times.⁸⁶

Violence is a marker of “the times,” and it is a global one. The contemporaneity that Condé posits between global cities (North and South alike) is that of “tough”-ness, terrorism, and violent crime. South Africa, despite the persistent claims of its citizens (and its national statistical bureau) has no special claim to be “ahead” or “behind” these bad new times.

At the same time, Cape Town is also, according to Rosélie, “more marked by its history” than anywhere else, specifically its racist history, a history that clearly, repeatedly throughout this novel, is shown not to be confined to the past. It is Stephen who proposes that the couple move from New York to Cape Town, and when he suggests the move he makes his case in terms of time travel:

After seven years in New York, he argued, seeing South Africa after apartheid would be like going back in time. Going back to when the United States had just finished muzzling

⁸⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 30.

its police dogs and the fight for civil rights was over. They would have a front-row seat to observe how communities, once bitter enemies, learn how to live together. Apparently, in South Africa the experience was particularly remarkable. Not the slightest drop of blood spilled. But no agrarian reform either. No redistribution of land. No Africanization along the lines currently meant. In Durban, Jo'burg, and Cape Town the statues of the colonials remained firmly in place on horseback, just like in the good old days.⁸⁷

The statue of Cecil John Rhodes that was removed from the UCT campus in 2015 did not have him seated on horseback, but the Rhodes Memorial statue that still resides slightly higher up the mountain, near the campus, does. The discomfort registered in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* with this kind of seamless continuity in class and wealth divisions along racial lines from colonialism, through apartheid, to the post-apartheid present is precisely what would come to a boil in the Fallist movement. The Fallist call for such statues to be removed and with them all the ways in which South Africa is stuck in the racist and colonial past that they represent. And in Condé's novel these statues are interpreted too as a retrograde longing for the (not so) "good old days" of the past, despite all the talk of a "new" South Africa.

The Fallists are inspired by Frantz Fanon, who is equally an important touchstone (or, following Loichot, source for literary cannibalism) for *Histoire de la femme cannibale*. Fanon appears both as a focus of Condé's critique of Fanon's diagnosis in *Black Skin, White Masks* of the so-called "lactification complex" in Mayotte Capecia's writing – a familiar critique in the Condéan oeuvre, here especially pertinent with a black female protagonist married to a white man – and as a focus of Condé's affirmation of the ongoing relevance of Fanon's thoughts on violence and neocolonialism in *The Wretched*

⁸⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

of the Earth. The Fanonian lesson regarding violence is not one that a heteroglossic novel such as *Histoire de la femme cannibale* can univocally embrace – it is a novel that regularly has some character pose a counterargument for almost every argument posed by another – but it is one that is raised by one of the few other Caribbean women other than Rosélie that we encounter in its pages, a Martinican called Simone:

But above all, unlike Rosélie, she [Simone] had an opinion on politics and just about everything else: underdevelopment, dictatorship, democracy, Kofi Annan, Muslim fundamentalism, homosexuality, terrorism, and the India-Pakistan conflict. Belonging to the same people as Aimé Césaire, the inspiration of Caribbean Consciousness, she naturally had the right to teach everyone a thing or two. She dared make negative comments about Nelson Mandela, the untouchable. She believed his influence had not allowed the South African people to purge their frustration and be born again in a baptism of blood under the sun. See Fanon: “On Violence.”⁸⁸

The explicit referencing of outside texts – “See Fanon: ‘On Violence’” – is a repeated gesture in this text that cannibalizes other texts. But the general idea, of which Fanon’s statement in the anti-colonial and de-colonial context is a specific instantiation, the idea that violence is required for the “purging” of past wrongs, is a major leitmotif of the novel. All the major acts of violence recounted in this wide-spanning novel, from murder to genocide, seem to be in response to a prior wrong. Whether this violence, either personally or nationally, is effective at purging the past (as Fanon suggests it might be in the specific case of decolonization, and as some of the Greek tragedies evoked by Condé suggests it might be in specific cases of familial violence), is left unresolved. But the absence of political violence (or retribution) in the postapartheid context (of “forgiveness

⁸⁸ Ibid., 51.

and reconciliation” represented by Nelson Mandela) is staged as frustrating and foreboding. Simone’s opinion on South Africa finds many resonances within Condé’s text, and some further ones in present-day South African politics. These opinions, it must be noted however, never lets South Africa stand apart from global concerns; they are dispensed in parallel with her judgments on other global issues, and they are inspired by a Martinican source (the same that inspires #RMF). Her pronouncements on South Africa are comparative.

3. *Coincidence, Comparison, and Conflation*

Contrary to Condé’s own appellation for the stage in her life and work to which it belongs – “Imagine there is no country” – *The Story of a Cannibal Woman* is a “novel of globalization” (in Philcox’s phrase) not because nations and cultures have disappeared but because they are framed in relation to one another. In the world city, people and events with different cultural and linguistic horizons coincide. A central and important question running through this novel is whether that coincidence, or sharing of time and place, is, or ought to be, considered in comparative terms. The act of comparison, especially in academic fields, has been taken to indicate a number of distinct operations. For the purposes of this final section of this chapter, I will limit my discussion to some senses of the word suggested by Condé’s novel itself.

The first instance is that of a literary comparison in a scholarly context. Stephen is a lecturer at UCT specializing in Irish literature, working on a new book:

At present he was preoccupied with his critical study of Yeats. He would start discussing it at breakfast, as if nothing else mattered, describing a thousand research possibilities.

“And what if I compared Yeats and Césaire? That’s a bold move! What do you think?”

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.⁸⁹

A comparison between Yeats and Césaire could be provocative and well-grounded: they overlap in period and genre; both are immensely important to modernism; both are poets of nations whose poetry was forged through resistance to colonialism; both espouse versions of nationalism and internationalism that have been important. But Condé’s sympathy is not with Stephen and his “critical study;” in fact the vacuity of intellectuals and their discourse is a repeated theme. These ineffective creatures are themselves, to Rosélie, eminently comparable, all examples of the same general phenomenon: “Another Professor! [...] English, French, Oriental Studies, they’re all the same. Same arrogance. Same conviction they belong to a superior species. The intellectual species.”⁹⁰ She tacitly grants these professors’ premise that they belong to the same species in declaring they are “all the same,” but she clearly doesn’t think of them as “superior,” citing a Guadeloupean television broadcast on the theme of the “role of intellectuals” where nobody could think of one.⁹¹ Stephen’s comparative project may be interesting and justified on intellectual grounds, but his bloviating makes little impact on Rosélie. The motive for Stephen’s study, and perhaps for similar real academic studies, Condé seems to suggest with her characteristic acerbic wit, has more to do with the academic’s ego than with anything else. Stephen’s own assessment of his scholarly prowess – “That’s a bold move!” – comes across as nothing short of ridiculous. What may (in 2003) be bold in an academic field that is still accustoming itself to the idea of “global” modernisms is decidedly not

⁸⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 305.

⁹¹ Ibid., 306.

bold in the globalized world where Ros  lie lives, one where her cultural consumption (of music, food, art, literature, and cinema) and her personal relations in a global city at the southern tip of Africa brings her into contact with works and people from all the world’s continents on a daily basis. An Irish poet and a Martinican poet considered together hardly seems daring to this Guadeloupean painter living with a British academic in South Africa.

The second instance of comparison is one that returns as a question several times in the novel before Ros  lie finally gives an answer: are a white man and a black man comparable in bed? This is a question that the world poses to Ros  lie, or that she imagines people secretly would like to ask her, in the light of her inter-racial marriage. This specter of sexual-racial comparison haunts her encounters with men and women of all races. It is a species of comparison that not only brings two entities – the sexual performance of white and black men – into relation, putting them in the same frame for consideration, but also demands, Ros  lie imagines, that they be evaluated and ranked, preferably numerically. Toward the end of the novel, Ros  lie finally gives her definitive refusal of this type of comparison: “For me, sex has never been a feat or a performance. It has always simply rhymed with love. That’s why I wouldn’t know whether one black is better than two, three, or four whites. I’ve never compared my men.”⁹² This refusal to compare – in as far as comparison entails measurement and ordering – is an ethical stance. For Ros  lie, sex “rhymes with” love, which, if we assume the transitive property of sexual objects would mean that the men in her life, different as they are, “rhyme with” one another in at least this one sense. A relation of rhyming connotes a similarity without

⁹² Ibid., 288.

evaluation. It is a simple, positive form of comparison that counters the competitive one that the world seeks to impose.

In terms of writing a globalized novel, putting places in juxtaposition, noting their rhymes without having to resort to measurement, might be the method of comparison that Condé champions. But her characters cannot always quite manage the same level of equanimity; sometimes when they make comparisons, they like to know who are the best (or worst). At a “coloured wedding” that Rosélie attends, she cannot escape patriotic South Africans who believe their own jazz, their own gospel music, and their own reggae, to be the best in the world; when conversing with a Nigerian transplant with a white Caribbean wife who has become a headmaster in Cape Town’s townships, Rosélie learns that he stands in awe of Haiti, the first black nation to abolish slavery, and without a thought for Haiti’s subsequent troubles, and that he holds it up as a model for South Africa; an American couple espouses the American model of democracy as the best in the world (to Stephen’s amused disbelief). In each of these cases, it is easy to see those making the comparisons, usually in a manner that is self-important or self-aggrandizing, as figures not to be taken too seriously. These are what Anne Gulick calls the novel’s “cautionary lesson about the possibilities and problems of comparison.”⁹³ Comparisons in the novel are often specious, or downright silly. Occasionally, they are explicitly warned against: “One can only compare what is comparable. Can one compare the guilt of an individual with the collective guilt of the supporters of a political regime?”⁹⁴ At a certain point of dissimilarity, phenomena can no longer be usefully compared, or usefully discussed in terms of their likeness. But comparisons are also the engine that drives

⁹³ Gulick, “Africa, Pan-Africanism, and the Global Caribbean,” 62.

⁹⁴ Condé, *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, 292.

Condé's rendering of the globalized world: "For Condé, comparativism is itself a form of globalization, the creative construction of connections across space and time that *enables* the type of critical practice in which she herself is so heavily invested."⁹⁵ Without its steady flow of comparisons, a novel like *Histoire de la femme cannibale* simply cannot exist.

A particularly thorny comparison concerns the perpetrators of apartheid: the Afrikaners who at times are rendered almost as cartoon villains, or the bad guys of 1980s blockbusters: two-dimensional, driven by nothing other than their racism and hatred. Rosélie imagines Stephen admonishing her for these overblown representations:

"What are you afraid of? What are you going to invent now? They are preoccupied by the same fears that haunt every human. The same fears as yours. Fear of death, fear of life, fear of the known, and fear of the unknown. Of the foreseeable and the unforeseeable. Must we constantly blame people for what they once were? Must we forever hold it against the English, the Americans, the French, the white Creoles in Guadeloupe, and the *békés* in Martinique for the crimes of their slaveholding ancestors? We must move forward."

In this imagined "tirade," Rosélie attributes to Stephen two series of comparisons: 1) the Afrikaners as specific examples of the genus "human being," grounded on their common human fears, 2) the Afrikaners as comparable (though not necessarily equivalent) to the English, the Americans, the French, etc. The first comparison would see a dissolving of boundaries between Rosélie and the Afrikaners, uniting them under a common category; the second would group the Afrikaners with all the other perpetrators of racism we see throughout this novel. Rosélie is more inclined to cede the latter than the former as valid,

⁹⁵ Ibid., 70.

but ultimately finds Stephen's insistence on comparability to be another in a series of instances whereby he negates and sows doubt on her experiences of racist hostility. In the end, this form of gaslighting features more prominently as a cause to Rosélie's subdued rage and sense of betrayal than does Stephen's sexual indiscretions.

Stephen was unfair. She didn't deserve these reproaches. She wouldn't have asked for anything better than to make peace with everyone, to live free and die. Was it her fault if the other camp didn't lay down their weapons? They could never forget the Good Old Days, and despite the passing of time, their prejudices remained intact.⁹⁶

The Afrikaners, for her, belong to the "other camp," and they cannot be accommodated in the same field of comparison, nor, notably, in the same present. The Afrikaners are not Rosélie's contemporaries: they are throwbacks who belong to the past and will not let go of it. In as far as they do become contemporary to (share their lived time with) Rosélie, they violently pull her into this racist past too: a contemporaneity she means to refuse.

In the Afrikaners, and especially in the Afrikaans men, of this book, we find an undifferentiated atavistic tribe stuck in a perpetual racist past that cannot join with the times. Their time is disjunctive with that experienced by the rest of this new South Africa, but this disjunctive time cannot be isolated and quarantined: the Afrikaners make their version of time felt in Rosélie's present. The Afrikaners become conflated, not individuals with human fears as Rosélie believes Stephen might insist, but a homogeneous force of racial hostility, finding their exemplar in the owner of the farm that Dido grew up on and where Dido's mother still works: Jan. Rosélie first sees Jan,

⁹⁶ Ibid.

whom she expects to be “a hairy, one-eyed, long-haired beast, evil personified,”⁹⁷ but instead to be frail man on his death bed, reminiscent (comparable even) to Rosélie’s own late mother in her final years. But this impression of Jan’s frail humanity doesn’t last:

It was then that Jan opened his eyes and she received his gaze full in the face. A bluish green gaze, stained in places by fibrils of blood, floating on the white of his cornea like clumps of seaweed. Bluish green like the ocean at the farthest end of the earth, at the extreme end of this Cape they call Good Hope. Wrongly. For the dismal cargo of the East Indies, Madagascar, and Mozambique, the sight of these jagged, rugged cliffs signified in fact the end of all hope.⁹⁸

There are not many “jagged, rugged cliffs” around Cape Town, but fidelity to the local landscape is less important here than the sense of menace that Cape Town held for the slaves that were brought to its shores. (It did not go much better for the local inhabitants after the Europeans arrived, it might be added). These arrivals, centuries ago, experience the same hostility as does Rosélie, a new arrival, in the present. Jan (standing in for Afrikaners, and Afrikaners standing in for all racist whites) has the power to transport Rosélie, at least briefly, mentally, imaginatively, back to the brutal days of slavery: “It seemed he was sending her back to former places, to a previous role [...]. For Jan, time had stopped still. Today meant yesterday. There was no tomorrow.”⁹⁹

The sense of being stuck in the past is attributed to Jan, and more generally to those whites who cling to the “good old days” of slavery and colonialism (apartheid being only the most recent racist blip on the radar in Rosélie’s assessment). On the one hand, this is all projection. Jan never speaks. Jan is conflated with Rosélie’s fantasy of a

⁹⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 95.

racist past complete with “jagged, rugged cliffs.” Jan is not even differentiated from Jan Van Riebeeck, the Dutchman and original colonialist who founded Cape Town. In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* they are both simply “Jan,”¹⁰⁰ as if it were Jan Van Riebeeck himself staring at Rosélie from the past. On the other hand, this is how Rosélie experiences Jan’s gaze; to postulate, like Stephen does, that she is overreacting or inventing is to miss the point: projection or not, this is her present reality, one that informed by history and experience as much as by creative imagination.

Conflation is what happens at the limit of comparison, when the likeness is so great that the terms are collapsed. The conflation of Jans (those most distant to Rosélie) finds its obverse in a final conflation, this time of Rosélie herself, whose anger at her husband was never expressed, with Fiela, the husband killer. Condé’s commitment to emphasizing distant connections over fidelity to the local is most developed in Rosélie’s and Fiela’s imagined inner dialog, a dialog in which Fiela remains silent, since after murdering her husband and cutting him into pieces, Fiela refuses to talk, at all. The cannibalism hypothesis – as with Columbus – turns out to be a red herring, a projection, which is eagerly repeated by the press: we ultimately learn that Fiela, most likely, never planned to eat her husband, Adriaan. It is no coincidence that Rosélie learns about Fiela by reading the newspaper – the fictional/non-fictional “*Tribune du Cap*.” Benedict Anderson famously argues in *Imagined Communities* that the newspaper is a privileged place for the formation of national communities, whereby each reader can imagine a host of other readers receiving the same news at the same time.¹⁰¹ Here this national

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 256.

¹⁰¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 33.

community would in fact include Rosélie, Dido, and the Afrikaners alike, all of whom eagerly follow the latest salacious crime stories. (In chapter three I will discuss how the newspaper is also a privileged place for the imagining of transnational communities and even the contested object called “the world”). Rosélie, an artist and creator, departs from the communal image South African readers have of Fiela, a local woman accused of cannibalism, and begins to address her directly in several paragraphs, almost as if in a letter, thus adding an epistolary thread to the complex weave of this generically hybrid novel. For a reader with a background in Romance languages, the word “Fiela” is bound to evoke “fidelity” and, in the context of this novel, infidelity. For a South African reader, however, Fiela is an Afrikaans name most famously associated with the protagonist of Dalene Matthee’s 1985 best-selling novel, *Fiela se Kind* [*Fiela’s Child*]: a Coloured woman who adopts and raises a white boy in the Cape Colony of the 19th century. *Fiela se Kind* might not be directly referenced in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* and it is entirely possible that Condé has never heard of Matthee’s novel. As it turns out, however, in Condé’s novel, like in *Fiela se Kind*, it is imagination and compassion rather than exacting fidelity that allows Rosélie to translate the woman on the pages of the newspapers into the filled-out personage that becomes her constant if spectral companion. Ultimately, in the book’s final passage, as Rosélie’s own face merges with Fiela’s face on the canvas she is painting, she translates Fiela into a version herself, to translate herself into a version of Fiela.¹⁰² The title of the painting: “The Cannibal Woman.” Again, like Jan, on the one hand this Fiela, the silent woman that Rosélie renders and furnishes with background and opinions is entirely a projection; on the other hand, Rosélie’s version,

¹⁰² Condé, *Story*, 311.

unfaithful as it might be, gives (through ventriloquism) a voice to an otherwise voiceless woman – it is, as with most translations, the only version we are capable of reading.

In her autobiography detailing her African years and artistic development up until she met Richard Philcox and became a published author, *La Vie sans fards* (2012), Condé talks about her personal invention of Africa in *Héremakhonon*: “L’Afrique enfin domptée se métamorphoserait et se coulerait, soumise, dans les replis de mon imaginaire. Elle ne serait plus que la matière de nombreuses fictions.”¹⁰³ While the 2003 Cape Town that Condé manages to “tame” in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* may be no less fictional or distorted, no less unfaithful than the other parts of Africa in her imagination, far too forgiving for “conjugal” comfort, it is nevertheless one that is now pertinent. By making South Africa *submit* to generalization, conferring on it a status as (mere) example in 2003, Condé created a text that has grown in contemporaneity, becoming timelier and timelier for its South African readership.

¹⁰³ “Africa, finally tamed, would metamorphose and sink, subdued, into the folds of my imagination. It would no longer only be material for many fictions.” Maryse Condé, *La Vie sans fards* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 2013), 334.

Chapter 2

TRANSLATION AND OPACITY

On Ivan Vladislavić's "The Reading"

The contemporary is not "our time" because of its heterogeneity and opacity, and it is not "a time" or period because it is defined by antinomies. The contemporary present is a conjuncture of times that takes time.

– Amy Elias and Joel Burgess, from "Introduction" to *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*

Interpretation reached such proportions that the real vanished.

– Erich Auerbach, from *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*



Figure 2.1. David Goldblatt, "She told him: 'You'll be the driver and I'll be the lady', then they grabbed the car bumper and posed, Hillbrow, 1975", from the series, *TJ: Johannesburg Photographs 1948-2010*. Black and white photograph.

This chapter explores the limits to translation that is posed by the opacity of others and the asymmetry in their relative geopolitical and lingua-political positions of power. These limits are also, I argue, limits posited in our literary constructions of contemporaneity in the modal and translational sense I develop throughout this dissertation. How can you share a world with people when their experience of the world is unavailable to you and when the purported “sharing” is ultimately a one-sided affair? Specifically – following Lionel Ruffel’s insight that the “sharing of time” implied by contemporaneity is “sharing” [*partager*] that has less to do with “agreement” or “consensus” but rather one that means “taking part, participating” –¹ what would it mean to take part when a part remains obscure, to participate in a collectivity when one of its constituent parts remains unknowable, and to do so when what is “shared” is shared unidirectionally, possible even appropriatively? In the Introduction I discussed how we cannot presume that a world (an experience of time and space) is shared between even the most intimate of people; here I focus on the linguistic, cultural, and economic distances that translation ostensibly bridges, but which it also posits or constructs. Or, to put it the other way around: I focus on translation as the establishment of a “joint” that is simultaneously an imposed measurement of distance and a link between those who the translator frames as occupying a shared present. This “sharing” is doubly asymmetrical: both being present to the translator, he hopes to make the source culture present to the target, not the other way around; and whether translating UP (from a less prestigious to a more prestigious literary culture) or translating DOWN (from a more prestigious to less prestigious literary

¹ Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha: Worlds of the Contemporary*, trans. Raymond N. MacKenzie (Minneapolis MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2018), 3.

culture),² the status of the source and target texts are rarely the same, and even that UP-ness and DOWN-ness is something that can be reiterated and reinforced by translations.

I will tease out these asymmetries in this chapter, not by examining real-life cases of translation, but rather by closely examining the figures of translation in the short stories by Ivan Vladislavić in his 2015 collection *101 Detectives* and especially the story, “The Reading.” Specifically, in order to think questions of distance, access, opacity, and translation together, I wish to bring new critical pressure to bear on that classical, fundamental, and yet under-examined literary element where they all come together: setting.

Relegated by Aristotle to the status of least important element of tragedy, defined in specifically extra-literary visual language as *opsis*, from which develop later ideas of *mise-en-scène* and spectacle, and today most often seen as a given fact, more or less corresponding to real places in contemporary realist literary fiction and corresponding to “world-building” in so-called genre fiction, setting is an unpopular term among literary critics. Thinking of setting in classic narratological terms as a bounded spatiotemporal container, the *time and place* within which the actions of characters that constitute the plot are meaningful, I find in the construction of setting a problem that goes to the heart of literary translation. The everyday task of literary translation (and the “world literature” that it produces) is usually framed as one of matching the context of production to the context of reception, finding equivalents in the language, literary traditions, and culture of the latter that can be rendered as close to equivalent as possible to those of the former. In literary works that are set in some version of the real world, setting provides an additional problem that complicates this view: not only do the “contexts” of production and

² See David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

reception have to be “matched,” so does the “value” of the setting in its original and translated renderings. When settings correspond to real-world places, the importance (or interest) that those settings have in and of themselves differs between their point of reception; and yet part of the cosmopolitan dream of world literature is that *all* settings should matter (at least from the point of reception shared by the cosmopolitan dreamers). Activists for literary translation into English who publish in vital online sites such as “Asymptote,” “Three Percent,” “The Quarterly Conversation,” and “Words Without Borders” often speak of the necessity to rid readers of national narcissism and encourage them to care about the entire “world.” The sometimes explicit and sometimes hidden assumption is that all settings should matter *to us*, which is to say a pre-defined Anglophone community of readers who have been at fault for not reading more literature in translation. I find in Vladislavić a model for creating *trans-national* settings, ones that have the potential to disrupt the position from which the relevance of a setting is determined, alongside a healthy skepticism about the power of these settings to have an impact beyond what it has in a small subset of readers.

1. Setting

Ivan Vladislavić is a great writer of setting: of “setting” as noun and “setting” as verb. Over the past three decades, his works have endlessly explored the importance of what places are depicted from where. He is also a writer that is acutely aware that some places, some settings, even the “global” setting as such, can be produced by the imagination and by works of the imagination.

Vladislavić has a knack for mediating the world he depicts and constructs

(constructs *as* depictions of the real world) through characters to whom that world remains opaque, characters who have not, as yet, unlearned the art of getting lost. Take Aubrey Tearle, the retired proofreader who is the protagonist of *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), still Vladislavić's most ambitious work to date. Aubrey is obsessed with a fresco of "Alibia" on the wall of his regular bar, the "Café Europa," and in his reveries lets the fresco transport him to a magical (vaguely "European") elsewhere. The name suggests that "Alibia" is an elsewhere or other place,³ one that notably acts as alibi, allowing Aubrey to avoid his contemporary circumstance and his guilt as an aging white South African just after apartheid, in short willfully to ignore the changing landscape of post-apartheid Johannesburg and to ignore his complicity in helping construct and maintain the apartheid order he now sees crumbling before him. Sensing his long-assumed role under threat in his contemporary "this-place" and "this-time," the fast-changing suburb of Hillbrow, when it is announced that the Café Europa is facing closure, Aubrey diverts his psychic energy toward defending this "other place" from impending collapse. The passages in *The Restless Supermarket* describing the Alibia painting – though the novel never explicitly confirms this and no other critic seems to have gathered the same impression – to me seems to depict a fairly typical vista of Cape Town, a real place on the other end of the country.⁴ Whether it in fact (or in fiction) represents Cape Town or not, this painting functions for Aubrey, who has never traveled, as a pure allegory, making readers wonder whether the version of Johannesburg that *The*

³ From the "classical Latin *alibi* elsewhere, in another place." "alibi, n., adv., and adj.," *OED Online*. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/4978?rskey=ZH3SuA&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed November 16, 2017).

⁴ Ivan Vladislavić, *The Restless Supermarket* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001), 10-11, 20-22, 169, 300, 303.

Restless Supermarket renders should also be read allegorically despite its vivid and scrupulously documented detail.

This oscillation between the documentary impulse (evident in the documentary genres that Vladislavić depicts or incorporates into his texts such as photography, memoir, and witness statements which claim to truthfully represent facts) and the (often illusory) verisimilitude of the realist novel, especially in its so-called “postmodern” mode, is characteristic of Vladislavić’s work, which teaches its readers to be ever alert to slippage between the sense we have of a setting (noun) as a real context for a fictional work, and the work of setting (verb) that makes real and cognitively accessible to us the places that it construes. Even in these broadly realist fictions, settings do not always coincide with real history and geography. In making this disjunction between a spatiotemporal location and its image in a fictional setting explicit in his works, in showing how characters imagine settings (do the work of setting, gathering the elements that are deemed pertinent to a time and place), Vladislavić makes us aware of the way in which all representations are selective, teaching us to separate the map from the territory.

I have so far discussed settings as experienced by Vladislavić’s characters. When these settings are viewed from the perspective of readers, a new dimension, most present in Vladislavić’s most recent collection of short stories, *101 Detectives*, is revealed, namely the pertinence of setting to theories of “world literature.”

101 Detectives has stories set in and around Johannesburg, but also Mauritius, the American West, and Germany. It contains characters and objects that have traveled from Japan, France, the Netherlands, Central Africa, Sweden, or “everywhere:” as a

memorable phrase from the title story has it, “between here and Timbuctoo or maybe Poughkeepsie. Somewhere else’s somewhere else.”⁵ The collection also contains a proliferation of what the French anthropologist, Marc Augé, has called the “*non-places*” of globalized life: airports, corporate buildings, business lobbies, hotels, industrial warehouses, and conference centers.⁶ Non-places are those generic spaces that could be geographically located anywhere; the “white cube” version of a gallery space (see the Introduction) is another example. Vladislavić’s work has featured non-places such as artist’s studios, malls, the interiors of airplanes, or supermarkets, often imbued with one or two distinctly local details that emphasize their embedding in a specific setting. And he has equally shown a persistent fascination with the way in which features of singular places become generic markers of a trans-portable, trans-latable style, with “Italianate” architecture appearing in his Johannesburg,⁷ or the sea around his Isle of Capri appearing as the “colour of Tassenberg.”⁸

By 2015 when *101 Detectives* was published the old but resurgent category of world literature had become hard to ignore. By that time Vladislavić had also gained a more international readership, having been reviewed and interviewed in international publications, having had several of his works picked up by American presses (not to mention those translated into other languages), culminating in him winning the prestigious (and lucrative) 2015 Windham-Campbell Literature Prize. Vladislavić had become contemporary world literature.

⁵ Ivan Vladislavić, “101 Detectives” in *101 Detectives* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2015), 40.

⁶ See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1997).

⁷ See *The Exploded View*.

⁸ Ivan Vladislavić, “Isle of Capri,” in *Propaganda by Monuments & Other Stories* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), 137. Tassenberg is a particularly cheap South African red wine.

There are several stories in this collection that could be read as providing astute if elusive responses to the world literature paradigm. One such story, “Report on a Convention” entails an international traveler, Mr. Wu, at a “Trade Fair” in an unnamed city of an unnamed country, writing home to a colleague (or perhaps lover or secretary) called “Fei” to report on his travels in “these backwaters.”⁹ To the traveler’s mind, at least, there is a prestige gap between his own sophisticated culture (and language) and more primitive location in which he finds himself. The traveler is confused when he discovers his destination is a monarchy and that, as trade ambassador, he has been granted an audience with its “King” at the “palace.” He writes to Fei:

I had thought, from your thorough briefing documents, that the only palace in the destination was the Palace of Justice, but apparently we were mistaken. Our information-gathering capacities may have been outpaced by developments. Any further guidance you can offer, diligent Fei, would be welcome. Upload to my memory. I understood that Papa was the Father of the Nation i.e. Democracy. Have I missed something? Time is short, which is why I have paused in my room to file this interim report.¹⁰

This is, notably, an “interim report,” a report in the meantime, neither originary nor final but *in media res*, written by a character trying to get his bearings. In this story – through the tele-graphic medium of the time-stamped “report” home –¹¹ we have two distinct presents, two implied settings: the one occupied by Fei back home and the one of the country hosting the trade fair. In order to function effectively as a mediator in the global market, the narrator needs to know the essentials of the place in which he finds himself,

⁹ Ivan Vladislavić, “Report on a Convention” in *101 Detectives* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2015), Kindle edition.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Each section in the story begins with a time-stamp: “Day 1, 17:30” ... “22:45” ... “Day 2, 09:00” ... “18:10” ... “23:00” ... “Day 3, 23:45” ... “Day 4, 6:10” ... “18:30.” We are lead by textual evidence to consider these local times. Ibid.

and needs the image that he has of it to be an informed one. But it seems that his company's (or government's – the line in the age of multinational mega-corporations is blurred) information “may have been outpaced by developments.” He has no access to the present of the setting he finds himself in; all his ideas about it are vague, distorted, or out of date. He is repeatedly confounded, finding the local language and culture opaque and in need of translation, a situation that Vladislavić exploits for its comic effect.

One of the many sources of cultural confusion for Wu is the proliferation of Papas: lookalikes of the King that seem to be everywhere, sightings of Papas being more frequent in this city than sightings of Elvis in Las Vegas. He reports:

Got an intern to watch the stand in the mid-p.m. lull, with strict instructions about pilferers, and slipped up to the second floor to attend a session of the Convention. Interest piqued by ‘When Impersonators Intermarry: Type and Taboo’ but missed start so caught instead ‘The Ethics of Impersonation: A New Approach’. Wordy elaboration on basic dos and don'ts. Very lifelike Papa at the lectern. ‘It takes more than a hat and doublet.’ He had neither.

Sensed animosity between ‘professionals’ and ‘amateurs’ in the questions from the floor, especially on the subject of surgery. Some jibing about stand-up versus stand-in which I could not follow. Wish you were here to puzzle it through with me. You know the second of the languages so much better than I do. Sure you might have enjoyed: ‘Where are the Mamas? Challenging Patriarchy.’¹²

Here the trade fair begins to resemble an academic conference and it begins to become clear that the multiplicity of Papas, the “impersonators,” are also interpreters or translators, their performance producing distinct versions of the original “father of the nation.” Wu's business at the trade fair is to promote a series of standard household

¹² Ibid.

products, but also “a new line of Papa leisurewear on a guerilla-warfare theme.”¹³ A government official reveals to him that they are “committed to keeping Papa’s memory alive,” letting all current orders stand unchanged, but because “new values demand new symbols” they plan to commission a “new range of official merchandise in the image of the King” including “plastic figurines, bronze sentinels, at least one stone colossus.”¹⁴ The point, he is told, is to “establish a likeness.” Read as an allegory of translation, Wu is caught in the translator’s dilemma: the original demands absolute fealty – all standing orders must be kept – but there is also the “new values” of the target culture to consider; a successful translation must be faithful and innovatory at once.

When the narrator is granted an audience with the “original” – “there is no substitute for empirical observation, for the eye” he is told – he is tied to a chair and fitted with a bridle and carried into the king’s audience chamber where he is moved around so as to observe the king from several angles before being carried out.¹⁵ Seeing is believing, so the saying goes. But there is of course no guarantee that the Papa he saw was the original after all. In an age of mass-production, where Papa-products and Papa-imitators are everywhere, there is no aura that clings to the original, no reason to make a pilgrimage when the relic can be replicated.

On his final night in the country, after hours of fruitlessly looking for local music (having not, that is, given up his search for an “authentic” experience after his bizarre meeting with Papa), the narrator is assaulted on his way home by one of the “pseudo-Papas” who reaches into his taxi cab and grabs hold of him: “His thumbs pressed into my eye sockets, his forefingers burrowed into my ears, the other fingers sank into my cheeks

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and probed the flesh below my jaw [...] as if he wanted to tear my face from my head.”¹⁶

The pseudo-Papa finds his non-Papa face offensive, and at this point what had hitherto appeared exotic and attractive, though opaque and inaccessible, begins, for Wu, to seem repulsive and barbaric. The desire for understanding a different setting, the land of Papas, a desire that manifests itself both commercially and aesthetically as a desire to “share” time (in the appropriative and asymmetric sense forwarded by Lionel Ruffel), to be caught up with recent events (and not, like Wu, constantly behind the times, planning his visit based on outdated “conditions on the ground”), turns into an alterity fatigue that reveals the hitherto nascent racism and civilizationism that is the obverse of Wu’s apparent benevolent capitalist cosmopolitanism. At this point Wu, who had been working at being included in the present shared by these Others, now violently excludes them from a present that is *his* (and to his mind more advanced than *theirs*), relegating them to a timeless realm of barbarism and cannibalism: “I wonder if all the traveller’s tales about this destination might be true. You know the ones I mean – I must not say too much – that they lie on principle, and eat their young, and fry strangers like us in the streets. I can well imagine it. They keep insisting that they are warm people, but their hearts are cold.”¹⁷ This story can be read as an allegory of the contemporary world literature industry, where the overlapping of market and aesthetic logics become confluent to produce a commodity fetishism that also makes a fetish of cultures, a fetish that in its reification of the Other as object of knowledge paves the way for the hatred of the Other associated with xenophobia and racism.

Taking this story as an indirect commentary about contemporary world literature

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

– which is admittedly not the only possible object of this story that combines several aspects of cultural and commercial production, reproduction, trade and mediation into an intriguing and ultimately horrifying constellation – it appears that Vladislavić is cautioning us about two things at once. The first is the fetishizing of originals. In all the performances, imitations, likenesses, and copies of Papa, in the homages and tributes to Papa, and in the academic and quasi-religious exegesis of every aspect of Papa-ness, the “original” Papa is ever assumed and never seen. In *Literary Translations and the Making of Originals*, Karen Emmerich argues that the “textual condition” of literary works is one of “variance” rather than “sameness” and that translation is just another moment of variance, another textual manifestation of a work alongside others; translation discourse however posits “originals” as unchanging and eternal. Her point is that “a particular text becomes an ‘original’ only when another, derivative text comes along to make it so.”¹⁸ Vladislavić’s story shares Emmerich’s perspective on originals. Papa clearly preceded his copies; his historical priority is not under doubt. But it is through the copies that Papa accorded the status of being the original, and the more copies exist, the higher his status. One of the consequences is that the meaning of “Papa” is no longer determined (if it ever was) by Papa himself – Wu laying eyes on Papa in his inner chamber does nothing to alter his impression of him. In terms of world literature, the lesson seems to be that, given the textual condition (with variant drafts, editions, versions), we should avoid fetishizing the original. By the same token, the lesson seems to be that the many copies will be interpretations, imbued with a creativeness and energy of their own, with varying effects.

The second thing that Vladislavić seems to be cautioning us against (if we take “Report on a Convention” to be indirectly about contemporary world literature) is that

¹⁸ Karen Emmerich, *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 13.

behind the mask of mutual exchange and the free flow of cultures and ideas often lurks a desire to appropriate or acquire cultural knowledge by reading foreign literatures, a curiosity and acquisitiveness that can quickly morph into ennui and disgust. This psychological dynamic where cultural curiosity turns into alterity fatigue revealing *idées fixes* of racism and culturalism always ready-at-hand for the global traveler is by no means unique to literary exploration; but understanding it allows for a healthy skepticism of some of the more triumphalist humanistic praise for what world literature achieves. The premise of contemporary global art, in at least some of its more prominent biennale manifestations, has been that the synchronicity of capitalism has prompted us to explore and construct a genuine lived global contemporaneity, one whereby our “shared time” will be genuinely (symmetrically) shared, especially in making common cause against impending global disasters such as climate change, or international terrorism, or refugee crises. In Vladislavić’s story, however, contemporaneity has its limits. Wu wishes to achieve the synchronicity that would enable the smooth running of his international capitalist enterprise, and that synchronicity require a certain level of linguistic and cultural expertise that allows him to mediate between cultures as trade ambassador, but when push comes to shove, he reverts to civilizational stereotype and in his mind converts cultural difference into temporal difference, the difference between here and there into a difference between now and then.

The title story, “101 Detectives,” which also features an international convention is even more explicitly an allegory for the world literature industry (both academic and publishing). These allegories of world literature (finding its limits in the opacity of cultures) accommodate a world literature readership. While being *about* the opacity of a

singular locale, there is no reason for a story like “Report on a Convention” to be inaccessible to an international readership. The setting has elements in common with South Africa. There are for instance Zulu names and the Zulu appellation “Buthi” (meaning “brother”). And the fetishistic cult of Papa resembles some of the excesses of the commodification of “Madiba Magic” around the figure of Nelson Mandela, who was also, like Papa, a “goatherd, guerilla, prisoner of state, Father of the Nation.”¹⁹ But there are many non-South African markers, making this setting appear as foreign to South African readers as it does to any other reader: the setting is equally inaccessible across a broad geography; it is a setting that can connect to, or form a juncture with, any setting.

2. *Accessibility and Opacity*

The question of cultural *opacity*²⁰ is thrown into sharp relief when combined with the contemporary discourse on *accessibility*. Consider the following description of contemporary architecture from “The Reading,” another story in *101 Detectives*:

Hans Gunther’s eyes wandered to the glass wall that ran down one side of the room. There had been quite a bit of argument about that between the board and the architect. It would make the space cold, they said, especially in the winter. But the architect had argued that a place like the Literaturhaus needed to be open to the world, it was part of the symbolic logic of the building, and she was right, people often passed by outside during a reading and that sense of life going on, of the city outside, made the words on the page seem more vital. Not that there was anyone out there now: just the cold square

¹⁹ Vladislavić, “Report on a Convention.”

²⁰ The question, that is, of the difficulty and, perhaps especially when capitalism and cultural curiosity coincide to produce cultural difference as product, what John and Jean Comaroff call “Ethnicity, Inc.” also the ethical undesirability, of comprehending the Other’s culture. See John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago IL: U of Chicago Press, 2009).

covered in snow and the avenue of beeches with their skinny trunks and naked limbs.²¹

The building in question is contemporary not only in the sense of being an innovative and therefore “modern” structure, but also because of its twin concerns of openness and efficiency that marks a major trend in contemporary architecture. In *The Art-Architecture Complex* (2011), Hal Foster complains bitterly about openness in particular, epitomized by Norman Foster’s buildings, which have become a dominant in contemporary architecture under the aegis of “transparency:”

How can architects continue to sell this line? Or, more saliently, why do we continue to buy it? Is it out of a sentimental attachment to the old virtues of transparency, and the wistful hope that appearing so will make it so? In any case, such transparency is subject to different interpretations: open office spaces might appear nonhierarchical and democratic to the architect or even to the boss, but panoptical and oppressive to the employees. Then, too, as suggested, what once seemed transparent can now appear spectacular, whereby light and glass no longer signify civic accountability so much as mass attraction. [...] A spectacle society invites it, of course, and these architects can hardly be blamed for the society – but must they comply so brilliantly with its problematic desires?²²

A glass wall is no doubt pleasing to behold, but in 2015 when “The Reading” was published, glass walls were a prominent feature of contemporary architecture, especially in Germany, which may be where the Literaturhaus is located (Austria and Switzerland are also likely German-speaking locations), after Foster + Partners (Norman Foster’s architecture firm) was commissioned to renew the Reichstag in Berlin and gave it a new glass dome making the connection between the new aesthetic of transparency (or

²¹ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 116-117.

²² Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2011), 48.

“lightness” in the vocabulary of another prominent contemporary architect, Renzo Piano) and the ideal of transparency in governance ever more transparent. Foster’s (Hal’s not Norman’s) critique that this is an architectural style suited to a spectacle society is salient to Vladislavić’s story where the question of spectacle (*opsis*) vs. setting is played out in terms of an ethics of translation.

In the mini-drama that introduces us to the Literaturhaus, the setting for our story, the architect cares above all about the “symbolic logic of the building,” a concern that clashes with the board’s desire for heat efficiency. The symbolic logic of the Literaturhaus is similar to that of the other contemporary cultural institutions I’ve discussed, from the founding of the ICA through to the contemporary museums that are the subjects of Matti Bunzl’s ethnography:²³ they all hope to reach the public; they all wish to be inclusive; they all wish to be transparent (at least in the sense of responsible and accountable). The Literaturhaus even has an event coordinator who reports to a board of directors and is concerned about such things as squeaky chairs; there is also, in this story, an editor present primarily concerned with marketing. But for a literary institution, one that we learn in the course of the story promotes foreign literature in translation, the symbolism of transparency is particularly salient. In its context, appearing in a work of world literature that is about works of world literature, this window (on the world) seems particularly significant.

In one of his definitions of the term “world literature,” David Damrosch speaks of

²³ Bunzl’s fieldwork is done primarily at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, but his discussion of the art world and its institutions ranges far more broadly.

works that present a series of “windows on the world.”²⁴ This definition is given in contradistinction to two others: world literature as body of classics, and world literature as a series of masterpieces. Unlike works of world literature under these other definitions, those acting as “windows on the world” need not have been accorded any measure of canonicity through traditions of reading, extensive translation, scholarly debate, prizes, or anthologization; their status as “world literature” refers simply to the “very individual” way readers of literary works can obtain “a sense of what is going on in the world, what another culture is like.”²⁵ Less verifiable than a survey, less factual than a newspaper report, less researched than a history, less accountable than a contemporary ethnography, part of the value of such works is nevertheless tied to the way it informs its readers about a part of the world of which they might be ignorant. I will bracket for the moment the question of whether knowing more about other cultures is always an inherent good, or whether, as in the case of Wu wanting to learn about the land of the Papas, such knowledge could be instrumentalized. Assuming only that, to the reader, knowledge of distant cultures is desirable, Literature is in competition with Anthropology and the Social Sciences (as well as, as I will discuss in the next chapter, journalism and travel narratives), hoping to offer something that cannot be conveyed by mere facts or quantitative analysis. Specifically, with regard to informing its readers about foreign cultures – and here the “Western,”²⁶ and above all Anglophone, bias of world literature

²⁴ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003): 15.

²⁵ “The idea of literary works as windows on the world is very significant today. Readers can approach world literature just to get a sense of what is going on in the world, what another culture is like. To me a work can function as world literature on a very individual basis for a reader who read it and who is opened up to part of the world. And this work may be something I chance upon; it may be little known and it has not yet been made a canonical work.” David Damrosch, “What is World Literature,” interview with Wang Ning, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 42, no.1 (2011): 178-79.

²⁶ For a history and analysis of the production of the concept of “the West” in contradistinction to “the Rest” and of its consequences, see Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” in

as a category must be kept in mind – this claim for literature goes against what Naoki Sakai identifies as an *humanitas/anthropos* binary that, while theoretically outdated and certainly superseded within contemporary Anthropology, remains unchallenged in some of the basic approaches and institutional divisions within the academy.²⁷ According to this pernicious binary, the Latinate term, *humanitas*, applies to producers of knowledge capable of both data gathering and reflexivity or, as it is often labeled, “theory.”²⁸ The Greek term, *anthropos*, applies to producers of knowledge who are confined to acting as “suppliers of raw data and factual information” whose best hope within the academy would be to act as “informants.”²⁹

It is under this schema, a product and pillar of colonial modernity, that the capacity for theorization is given a cartographic projection; and it is precisely this schema that is resisted in claims by scholars such as John and Jean Comaroff, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Achille Mbembe and others that the Global South is no longer a laboratory for theory but the place from which theory is thought and produced.³⁰ Looking at the subset of world literature theories that subscribe to the “window on the world” paradigm,

Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996): 184-227.

²⁷ Naoki Sakai, “Theory and Asian humanity: on the question of *humanitas* and *anthropos*,” *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 441-464.

²⁸ These are people who are assumed to reside in the putative “West” and to represent it. They “necessarily engage in the collection, evaluation, comparison, or analysis of raw data, but, more importantly, they are continually involved in the critical review of the existing means of knowing and the invention of new means. Their concern for their subjective conditions in knowing carries the weight of an almost moral imperative. For them, knowledge about humanity and human nature must not only consist of the variety of particular cases but must also entail a commitment to the project of changing and creating the means of knowing about humanity and human nature.” Naoki Sakai, “The West—A Dialogic Prescription or Proscription?” *Social Identities* 11, no. 3 (2005): 181.

²⁹ Ibid. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

³⁰ See, for instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the Global South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).

which includes all theories that believe “contemporary world literature” can be a way to learn about the “contemporary world,” we have to ask certain questions. In the theorizations of world literature that have multiplied over the past fifteen years, are these “windows on the world” merely ones that allow “us” from the observatory of the “West” or “Global North” (from the Literaturhaus for instance) to reflect on the raw data presented to us by authors from “the world?” Are postcolonial authors, or authors from the global south, according to these theories, reduced to the role of native informants – capable of producing data but not capable of analyzing it? Or do these theories of world literature see postcolonial authors as fellow theorists?

I propose to, in the spirit of an experiment, take Damrosch’s casual conceit of the “window” seriously, reading it as more than facile shorthand for a touristic and voyeuristic relationship to the places depicted in the fictions we read. The conceit of the window makes a sound analogy for letting literature instruct us about the world if one remembers that, barring aircrafts and space stations, most windows are located somewhere on earth and yield only a limited view of even that location (in this case, onto the snow-covered public square). To state the obvious: windows have frames, are framing devices. They are constituted by a field of transparency within a field of opacity. One virtue of fictional representations of reality is that we never lose sight of the frame; we rarely mistake the window for the world. But the window conceit makes for a poor analogy insofar as we live, as Edouard Glissant reminds us, in a post-discovery age where all writers write “in the presence of all the world’s languages.”³¹ We may not recognize

³¹ Edouard Glissant, “Introduction to a Poetics of the Diverse,” trans. Pierre Joris, *Boundary 2* 26, no. 1 (1999): 119.

the presence of the world's languages in the ethical sense that Glissant intends, but in the age of the Internet it is increasingly difficult to be unaware of them. It is a function of our contemporary digital age that the frame is always already broken; the imbrication of the world's languages and cultures means that no present-day representation can truly claim to depict only one place or people – no land or culture today escapes the global web of mutual influence. With the exception of very few places on earth, everywhere that is depicted is a place where locals are also aware of the world in its global dimensions, one that is locally experienced as embedded in a vast network of trans-national relations. When reading about an Acholi woman in Northern Uganda, captured by soldiers of Joseph Kony's Lords Resistance Army, hiding away a store of sugar that belonged to her family before her capture, for instance, we are reading about an experience of someone made to physically cross national borders (from Uganda to Sudan), but also an experience where national borders are crossed in the production of the sugar, by the inter-national circulation of the soldiers' weapons, and by the protagonist's imagination in her awareness of the United Nations, of Europe as possible refuge, as well as the languages and cultural products from distant lands that she has been exposed to in her life. Every place glimpsed through a literary "window" is one that has views on other places.

For better or for worse, while it is certainly true that we write in the presence of all the world's languages (several of which are represented inside the Literaturhaus), and while it is laudable to try to actively remember this, the presence of some languages are felt more keenly than others. Specifically, with the dominance of international English or "Globish" in Science and the marketplace, there are many more "windows" in the mansion of English than elsewhere. From this place of dominance, it is all too easy to

assume that the views we obtain on other cultures through reading world literature – if you can excuse one more twist in the tortured metaphor of the window – are direct views of the thing itself. In other words, it is all too easy to forget the mediation of translation, the way in which “translation” means not only transportation but also transfiguration.³² There is no “direct view” onto a culture whose languages and practices are opaque to us without the intermediary figure of the translator guaranteeing that what he interprets is the “real” story of these places. In the case of “The Reading,” however, forgetting translation is unlikely. This is a story that actively thematizes translation, making the invisible art visible.

In the passage where we are introduced to the Literaturhaus there are certain parallels and distinctions to be drawn between contemporary world literature (with its windows on the world) and contemporary architecture (with its windows that makes both inside and outside visible). I do not mean to say that Vladislavić’s ekphrastic descriptions of art (here architecture) act as allegories of the literary as such but rather that qua alternative modes of aesthetic production they provide parallels and juxtapositions to those of the literary work in which they are embedded, and that the way in which these ekphrastic artworks are positioned and discussed are also, in Vladislavić’s works, applicable to the literary. Inside the window-wall, an author reads from her memoir in its original Acholi after which her German translator reads from his translation. Outside the window-wall is a cold public square, empty of humans, but one in which at a point when the author is reading aloud to her audience in Acholi, a language that is only understood by one other person inside the Literaturhaus, “the trees stood aghast behind the glass with

³² On the concept of translation as transfiguration see John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington IN: Indiana UP, 2002).

their feet in the snow.”³³ As the window-wall is intended to connect inside and outside, letting the public have a clear and undistorted view on the arts and letting the arts keep the public firmly in view, so is the translator meant to act as a transparent medium between the worlds of the author and reader. Or at least that is the commonsense understanding of the roles of translators and cultural institutions. But literary translation is asymmetrical, a one-way window that is only meant to give the reader a view of the world of the author, not the other way around. And the public square is empty, the interested members of the public being already inside the Literaturhaus, leaving only the trees to respond to the horrible true tale being told inside. As this setting adumbrates, “The Reading” takes up ideals of transparency and access, but as we will see, it also challenges these ideals by adopting a highly realistic, some may say skeptical, view of the limitations to translation’s ability to make opacities transparent and the obscure accessible. Not only does the possibility of rendering foreign opacities transparent begin to seem doubtful in this story, so does its (ethical) desirability.

3. Translation

“The Reading” has a *mise-en-abyme* structure: there is a tale within the tale. The outer narrative tells of an author reading from her autobiography to an audience at a literary event; the inner narrative consists of the memoir itself. But rather than having the outer narrative simply provide a setting for a character to deliver the inner narrative, as happens in, for example, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* – one realist narrative giving readers a steady perspective on another realist narrative – Vladislavić writes his outer frame in rapidly shifting close third-person narration, a strategy which yields a number of

³³ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 120.

disparate perspectives on the inner narrative, adding up to a fragmented whole, or, to borrow the title of Vladislavić's third novel, an "exploded view." More pertinent to this chapter, the framing of "The Reading" is complicated by its depiction of linguistic plurality and of translation within a story written entirely in English. The memoir is first read aloud in Acholi, its original language of composition (though not publication), before being read in German translation. We find out that the German text is mediated by English and French translations. All of this, including the unvoiced thoughts of the predominantly German-speaking audience, appears to us in English. The story's confident expression in English gives to the fragmented close third-person narration a sense of omniscience that goes beyond the standard of omniscient narration: not only does the invisible omniscient narrator have access to private thoughts and hidden events, she is also equipped with all languages, familiar with all cultures, able to translate seamlessly between them.

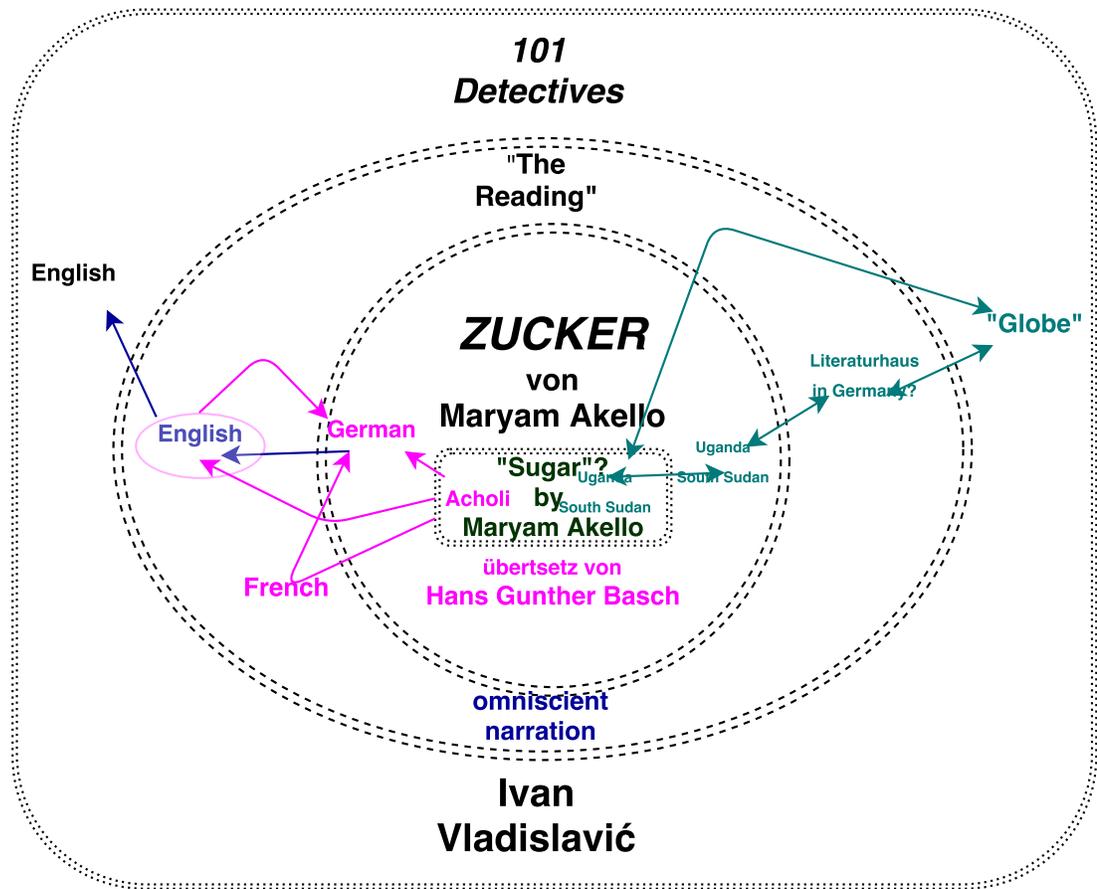


Figure 2.2 Mise-en-abyme structure of “The Reading” in the context of its place in *101 Detectives*

The scene opens on Maryam Akello reading aloud from her memoir, *Sugar*, to an audience of “practised listeners, mostly, lovers of literature and keen observers of political developments in the South, two hundred and fourteen of them according to the receipts at the door, gathered together in the Literaturhaus.”³⁴ As it turns out, Maryam Akello reads in her first language, Acholi. Acholi is spoken in Northern parts of Uganda and in South Sudan, a region that has seen major human rights violations since the days of Idi Amin (not to mention extreme colonial violence for a century before that) and has

³⁴ Ivan Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 109.

for the past three decades been mainly associated, in the “International News” at least,³⁵ with the war crimes and terror of the Lord’s Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony. None of this background is explicitly mentioned in “The Reading,” but one imagines these “practised listeners” who keep abreast of “developments in the South” would be *au fait*, or would at least know to research the facts before attending the launch of the German edition of *Sugar*.

“The Reading” consists of two parts: the first (longer) part sees the writer reading in Acholi to her largely German-speaking audience; the second (shorter) part sees her German translator reading from his German translation. Vladislavić narrates all this in English. When Maryam Akello reads, we (the presumptive “we” of a general readership, that is), like most of the audience, do not follow the narrative that is being read. Instead Vladislavić takes us on a tour around the “Literaturhaus,” performing close third person and stream-of-consciousness narration of the varied, and, occasionally, momentarily shared, preoccupations of a select cast of characters in the audience. They include: the translator, Hans Günther Basch; Professor Horst Grundmann, Basch’s “fellow Africanist” who gives the introductory talk;³⁶ a young man who had never been to a public reading but came to this one in order to impress a new girlfriend, “to demonstrate the sincerity of his interest in her interests;”³⁷ the girlfriend in question; Steffi Ziegler, a professor in “twentieth-century American theater at the University of Cologne” who works on the “all but forgotten” American playwright, Edward Sheldon;³⁸ Annemieke Vogel, a bored newspaper reporter; Rolf Backer, an editor at the publishing house responsible for *Zucker*

³⁵ See chapter 3 for a discussion of the difference between the totality of human life on planet earth and the “world” made in (a version of) its image in the “International News” section of newspapers.

³⁶ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 110.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 110-11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

(the German translation of *Sugar*), and his companion, Theo Van Roosbroeck; Karolina Fischer, the “events coordinator at the Literaturhaus;”³⁹ and Florence Lawino, the author’s companion, a fellow survivor and Acholi speaker.⁴⁰ The one perspective that we never get is Maryam Akello’s own. She is described, sometimes for entire paragraphs, but, despite the tell-all nature of memoir, remains opaque to everyone, including even, to some extent, Florence Lawino.

The memoir that constitutes the innermost frame of “The Reading” is entitled *Sugar* and is described as “the sorrowful story of Maryam Akello’s life.”⁴¹ We receive part of its narrative by gloss as we flit from consciousness to consciousness while Akello reads; we receive the key fragment, the part of the story from which the memoir derives its name, from Basch’s reading in German, to which we are, by a convention of silent translation, given access in English. *Sugar*, as a memoir, performs an important function in documenting real events, traumatic events, the traces of which are deliberately covered over by the perpetrators in a bid to keep them out of the historical record and global awareness.⁴²

The passage of *Sugar* read aloud by Hans Günther Basch begins: “I keep the days

³⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 109.

⁴² Vladislavić, having worked as an editor on numerous non-fiction projects, including Antjie Krog’s celebrated memoir of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (1998), and having produced, in *Portrait with Keys*, an award-winning work of non-fiction of his own (see previous note), is entirely conscious of the sometimes conflicting and sometimes overlapping drives behind writing that seeks to document the real and writing that seeks to fictionalize. In response to interviewers asking whether, in light of his project in *Portrait with Keys*, it would be fair to call him a “reporter” or “a journalist” in some sense, Vladislavić says, “No, I think being a reporter, a journalist, carries different demands and responsibilities. When I was writing that particular book, I began to think of myself as a documenter of some kind. I still refer to the book as a ‘documentary’. But what that means is less clear to me now than it was then. The book does document things, but then *fiction documents too*.” Ivan Vladislavić, “Ivan Vladislavić – A Tale in Two Cities,” interview with Peter Beilharz and Sian Supski, *Thesis Eleven* 136, no. 1 (2016): 25-26, my emphasis.

in my pocket. Each day is a stone and so far there are only three of them, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. It is easy to hold three days in your head, but it will not be easy in a week or a month.”⁴³ The shifting of stones in a pocket has a Beckettian resonance. A rich sense of the phenomenology (first-person embodied experience) of lived time – the feeling of being severed from the reassuring normalcy of standard homogenized calendric time, and by extension from the world that keeps this time; of the life-giving power of futurity, even when speculation can only reflect on further difficulty; of remembering the past, finding meaning in acting as the self-assigned guardian and protector of familial and communal memory – makes Akello’s story immediately gripping. While Akello keeps these stones in her one pocket, she uses the other pocket to store sugar furtively pilfered from a heavy bag that the soldiers who kidnapped her and her sister from their village are forcing her to carry as they trek for weeks across vast and rugged terrain, their destination unknown to the prisoners. The sugar came from Akello’s family larder: “It is our sugar. It belongs to my family. The soldiers took it from our larder when they took us.... It gives me a purpose here. I am watching over our things.”⁴⁴ But this is not the way the soldiers see it: “I must be careful not to let them see what I am doing or to tear the opening in the bag. If they think I have stolen from them, they will kill me. Even though the sugar is actually mine.”⁴⁵ The climax of Akello’s story, or at least of the part read by Basch, tells of her sister’s, Anya’s, death. Her narrative is told in the present tense, describing events that are, in a psychic sense, still happening, a tense that also makes her sister still present, haunting the Literaturhaus from afar.

Unbeknownst to anyone in the audience, save Akello, Florence Lawino, who is

⁴³ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 129.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

Akello's "guardian" despite being the younger of the two women, "had a life story every bit as harrowing as her charge's. But she had never spoken about it outside the counseling room, let alone written it down."⁴⁶ The public work that Akello does in bearing witness to the atrocities that has befallen them both is, then, also done on Florence's behalf (and, by extension, in the name of other survivors who have not desired or have not been accorded the same public limelight). But far from recognizing this act of witnessing as an obvious good in and of itself, Florence is at best ambivalent about Akello's narrative:

She had heard Maryam speak or read at scores of briefings, conferences and workshops. In the beginning, the telling of the story, which was so like her own, left her feeling exposed, sometimes angry, but she got used to it and these days it hardly bothered her. She thought every day about what had happened to her and these memories were more vivid than any scene that could be conjured up in words by someone else. In any event, it was different here, on this evening, with Maryam reading in Acholi while the trees stood aghast behind the glass with their feet in the snow. It was as if Maryam was speaking only to her. As she listened to the story, so familiar she could recite parts of it by heart, her hand moved along the livid blanket stitch of scar tissue. With her middle finger she followed the ridge from her navel to her hipbone, tracing each of the eleven stitches, first the part above the slash and then the part below, while in her mind she passed down a corridor, trying the doors on one side and then the other, and found them all locked.⁴⁷

These present-tense narratives are also all-too present to Florence Lawino, who is the only person who understands Acholi. United by a language and a commonly traumatic past, they are, in a sense, barring the trees that stand "aghast," the only two people sharing a common experience, and a common temporality – the time of the narration and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

interruptive time of trauma – at this point: in this sense, they are each other’s only contemporaries.

Unlike the appropriative one-sided “sharing” we saw in “Report on a Convention,” this is a genuinely bi-directional sharing: a togetherness in time that, while not asserting an identity between the lived times of Akello and Lawino, does posit their overlap. But this sharing too has its limits. Listening to Akello’s narrative, Florence doesn’t precisely “relive” her own trauma; her “vivid” memories are instead something she thinks about daily, to which she gives verbal form in the “counseling room,” quite independently of Akello’s memoir. But she does, at least at first, feel “exposed” and even “angry” by Akello’s public airing of their (secretly) shared trauma, and she does, in this instance at least, “touch” her scars, those traces of both trauma and healing, both on her body and in her mind. The trauma remains, in its physical traces, despite the “working through” of the therapist’s office, as an event that is never fully present and never fully past.

It is through this concept of “traces” (tracks, marks, footprints, writing: inscriptions that last beyond their making and thus serve as evidence of the past in the present) that “The Reading,” with a (fictionalized) trauma memoir at its center, becomes generically interlaced with the detective story, and takes its place among the texts that constitute *101 Detectives*. *101 Detectives* ends with something – a chapter? a story? a feature? – called “Deleted Scenes,” which operates analogically to the “deleted scenes” of a DVD, containing parts left on the cutting room floor (or whatever the digital or textual equivalent of that would be – the wastepaper basket icon on your desktop perhaps). These disjecta are themselves traces, re-presenting the texts from which they were excluded.

Reading the “Deleted Scenes” is an odd experience, since, far from simply giving a “behind the scenes” look at the process of writing and editing, it lets the worlds and characters of the collection live on, in slightly altered form, and brings them before the mind’s eye in quick succession. Sticking with the film metaphor, the pacing is more like a montage than like a succession of scenes. The effect is one of gestalt; a series of dislocations, unsettling and un-setting, seems to add up to a whole, where a sense of getting lost and finding one’s way – locating and mapping – gives the impression of tying together these stories written over more than a decade, to the extent that, even if just for a moment, I (“the reader”) wondered whether I had just read a novel rather than a collection of short stories. The “deleted scene” corresponding to “The Reading” is entitled “Locked Room Mystery” and reads, in full:

The square outside the window was empty. Along the avenue, the snow lay crisp and even. Scanning that blank sheet for signs of life, Hans Günther Basch remembered the dog-eared Ellery Queen on his bedside table, and thought about the enduring appeal of the locked-room mystery. How often the riddle turned on a footprint or its absence. There were no footprints beneath the window, a single set of footprints led away from the ledge, only two sets of footprints were visible in the snow. A locked-room murder did not always happen behind closed doors, of course. More often than not, it was out in the open and in full sight of the world.⁴⁸

The affinity between the traces left by writing and the traces left by a murderer, here joined in the metaphor of the “blank sheet” of snow/paper, is what makes the detective story so fascinating for writers of experimental fiction, including the originator of the genre: Edgar Allan Poe. But when also linked, as it is here, to the traces of violent

⁴⁸ Ivan Vladislavić, “Deleted Scenes” in *101 Detectives* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2015), 197.

personal trauma (the wound, the scar, the scarred and wounded psyche), and historical trauma (the survivor as witness), the reflexivity of the medium becomes both more powerful and more dangerous.

Theodore Martin, whose *Contemporary Drift* (2017) is a landmark work for bringing literature and film to bear on critical contemporaneity studies, argues for a version of the contemporary that would be both epochal and modal. For Martin, the contemporary is an ever-shifting category and genre fiction is a privileged vantage from which to observe this movement or “drift.”⁴⁹ One would imagine that in order to gauge the “drift” or “historical drag” of genre, the best strategy would be to read several typical, representative works of genre fiction from several periods and mark the differences on aggregate; Martin’s approach is often however to read atypical works of avant-garde “literary” fiction (Zadie Smith and Bret Easton Ellis as writers of the “novel of manners;” “crime fiction” by Michael Chabon and China Miéville; the “post-apocalyptic” fictions of Colson Whitehead, Ben Marcus, and Cormac McCarthy). Ivan Vladislavić’s *101 Detectives* as detective fiction would not be out of place.

In his reference to the classic detective fiction of Ellery Queen, Vladislavić could be imagined to be, like Martin’s authors, engaging with the history of the genre to mark the novelty of the present, which for Martin is measured by innovation *within* a genre: the novelty set off against the backdrop of genre’s “historical drag.” But the stories of *101 Detectives* could also be read as “superficial pastiches of dead styles” that Martin

⁴⁹ “Genre, as I understand it in *Contemporary Drift*, describes how aesthetic forms move cumulatively through history.... Genres lead distinctly double lives, with one foot in the past and the other in the present; they contain the entire abridged history of an aesthetic form while also staking a claim to the form’s contemporary relevance.” Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York, Columbia UP, 2017), 6.

associates with “postmodernism” rather than “earnest attempts to contribute to the history of a genre” that Martin associates with “the contemporary.”⁵⁰ For Martin, modernism is characterized by its elitist disdain of genre, postmodernism by its non-serious mix of genres combined with a residual elitism, and the contemporary by its respect for popular forms. We might say, following a contemporary art idiom, that genre is *accessible and therefore contemporary*; as Martin quips regarding literature, “Isn’t *contemporary* just another word for *popular* anyway?”⁵¹ If it is then we might well question whether Vladislavić is a writer of contemporary fiction at all; if one accepts, as I do, that Vladislavić is a writer more “contemporary” than “modern” or “postmodern” then one has to question Martin’s categories.

It is instructive, in interrogating this disjunction between Martin’s sense of the contemporary-qua-accessible (one that, as we have seen, finds strong resonance in the institutions of contemporary art, if not contemporary literature) and my sense of the contemporary as a “sharing” of time with (sometimes severe) limits, to consider the other reason why Vladislavić might stand out among Martin’s authors: the fact that he works in and from South Africa.⁵² It is here that the question of 1) *where an author works from* and 2) *the settings an author depicts* interact with whether they are considered “contemporary.” To his credit, Martin recognizes the U.S.-centric character of his canon and does include non-U.S. authors and filmmakers to create “transnational pairings,” which seem to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

⁵² Leon De Kock sees Vladislavić’s writings in a specifically South African context marked by a market turn to “true crime” non-fiction and crime fiction doing the work of what De Kock calls “social detection.” Against this background, Vladislavić “engages directly with the challenge that a ‘surface’ form such as documentary photography poses to the power of fiction as a meaningful or purposive agent in postapartheid mediation.” Leon De Kock, *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality, and Fiction in Postapartheid South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2016), 181.

suspend national difference in favor of formal resonance. In doing so, however, they also remind us of the uniquely contemporary pressures being exerted on the category of the nation itself: the pressures of globalization. The geographic centrifuge that is genre is perhaps the quintessential cultural technology of an era of globalization, in which art (no less than other made objects) bears the increasingly visible imprint of the tension between local particularity and the global economy. In this way, an internationally comparative view of genre offers a window onto the current conjuncture of globalized capitalism, even if such a view continues to be framed by U.S. hegemony.⁵³

What Martin aptly calls the “geographic centrifuge” of genre is undeniable, but to my mind this is a reason why genre fiction is of limited interest to critical contemporaneity. Contemporaneity as I conceive it is translational, not just modal; it is a relation between at least two entities that is mediated (therefore selective) and asymmetrical (conceived *from* a perspective). Contemporaneity in this sense can happen at any scale. But in the context of our globalizing present, a U.S.-centered contemporary it is not a very interesting one, not ethically, not politically, and not aesthetically. In fact, in as far as Martin’s “centrifugal” model of contemporaneity risks becoming a “first the West, then the Rest” model, it also risks being an outright “denial of contemporaneity.”⁵⁴ And modernist difficulty, while certainly in some cases willful and annoying, is also the difficulty of foreignness.⁵⁵ A rally to “contemporaneity” based on a rally cry of accessibility that is nationally motivated excludes more than it includes. Any version of contemporaneity worthy of the name in our age of everyday trans-national relations needs

⁵³ Martin, *Contemporary Drift*, 12.

⁵⁴ Pedro Erber, “Contemporaneity and Its Discontents,” *Diacritics* 41, no. 1 (2013): 37.

⁵⁵ This is clear from the institutional history of the first arts institute to be called “contemporary” rather than “modern,” the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. See *The Institute of Contemporary Art, ‘Modern Art’ and the American Public* (Boston MA: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1948), and Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013), 206.

to account for living with the opacity that contact with foreignness brings.

While we learn, first piecemeal and then in a more sustained (translated) narrative, the details of Maryam Akello's "sorrowful story," the listeners are each occupied with their own thoughts. Despite being brought together in the same physical space – the "open," hyper-visible space of the Literaturhaus – these listeners are only in the rarest moments united in their attention. Steffi Ziegler spends most of the lecture thinking about poor, blind, Edward Sheldon who had spent the past twenty years of his life bed-ridden and yet maintained active friendships and social relations. Horst Grundmann, after delivering his properly edifying opening remarks – a speech that the translator characterizes as "calculated to assure the funders that they had spent their money wisely and the audience that they had taken a small but meaningful stand against tyranny" –⁵⁶ spends his time wondering whether his friend, Basch, who appears visibly ill while reading from his translation, has fallen off the wagon. Karolina Fischer, the events coordinator, is mainly preoccupied with the noisy (and, she thinks, tacky) chairs, wondering when they could be suitably replaced without seeming wasteful. Theo Van Roosbroeck contemplates whether his friend Rolf Backer "might not find it easier to market someone who gave the impression of being less resigned to her fate."⁵⁷ The young man who is attending his first reading tries to impress his new girlfriend by saying that it was "fascinating," leading her to grow suspicious: "how could you enjoy something that was so sad, even if you couldn't follow the exact words?"⁵⁸ Later, however, she sees him squirming in his seat, looking visibly uncomfortable, and decides that he might be more

⁵⁶ Vladislavić, "The Reading," 110.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

sensitive than she first thought; in fact he is simultaneously trying to hide his erection and wondering whether he should ask Marayam Akello after the talk whether there is good surfing to be had in Zanzibar since she is “from that part of the world.”⁵⁹ These characters are people lost in their own private worlds, their interiority made visible to us by a technique of narration but utterly opaque to each other. They are physically together during both Akello’s and Basch’s dramatic performances (their “readings”) and in that sense share the same time. But Vladislavić’s narration reveals to us the disjunctive-ness of the collectivity that literary and performance critics traditionally render homogenous by nominalizing them simply as “the audience.” This inherent heterogeneity of the audience of the “reading” is one that I take to also “stand in” (in Vladislavićian fashion) for the literary community, that is to say for the heterogenous group we render homogenous when theorizing about “the reader.”

As the story begins to take on this Dostoevskian, carnivalesque slant, we are kept anchored by Akello’s narrative, which continues despite these interjections, and by the inner thoughts of her translator. Lawrence Venuti in his now-canonical 1994 history of translation into English, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, argues that there is an “illusion of transparency” demanded of the contemporary translator’s work, which

is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁰ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, 1.

This demand for invisibility is still very much a dominant theme in the Anglophone publishing world. Recently, however, the translator has arguably become a more visible figure, with contemporary champions of literature in translation, including several flourishing small presses and literary websites dedicated to translation, energetically advocating the presence of more translated literature in English and greater recognition for literary translators.⁶¹ Hans Günther Basch, translating into German rather than English, seems to not mind claiming his humble share of credit for the “rewriting” that goes into every work of translation.⁶² He is first described sitting “on the podium, with his chair pushed back from the table and angled ever so slightly towards the lectern where she stood reading, his faceted crew cut tilted deferentially, deflecting the audience’s attention to [Akello] and capturing a modest portion of it for himself.”⁶³ He is the contemporary translator *par excellence*: not stealing the limelight or distracting from the author too much, but not quite invisible either.

The visibility of the translator is here literalized (or, perhaps rather, dramatized) by Basch appearing onstage, visible to the audience in the double role the translator performs, which is to say first as a listener, then as a reader aloud (or, in literary terms, first as reader and then as writer). Traditionally the translator is conceived as mediator or

⁶¹ There is a growing community of publishers, reviewers, and readers, dedicated to solving the “three percent problem:” the low proportion, by international standards, of translations published in English against books published written originally in English. Notable (predominantly non-profit) publishers of literature translated into English include Archipelago, The Dalkey Archive Press, Deep Vellum, Europa Editions, Fitzcarraldo Editions, Open Letter Books, Seagull Books, and Two Lines Press. Websites, blogs, or magazines with online components dedicated to reviewing and discussing, or with a significant focus on, literature in translation include Absinthe (<http://absinthenew.blogspot.com>), Bookslut (<http://www.bookslut.com/blog/>), The Quarterly Conversation (<http://quarterlyconversation.com>), Three Percent (<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepcent/>), Translationista (<http://www.translationista.net>), Words Without Borders (<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org>), World Literature Today (<http://www.ou.edu/wlt.html>), and World Literature Forum (<http://www.worldliteratureforum.com/forum/forum.php>).

⁶² “Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text.” Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, General Editor’s Preface, in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995), viii.

⁶³ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 109.

messenger: Hermes shuttling back and forth between the Gods, the interpreter collecting and delivering news and stories from village to village. But here Basch is not only *between* the writer (or speaker) and reader (or listener), he *is* both, occupies both those positions, exemplifies both at the same time: he is trans-lational, trans-cultural, trans-national, blurring and resetting boundaries between entities, acting as the link that joins them, rather than shuttling back and forth between them. The translator establishes the distance, the “appropriate” distance (be it the familiarity of *les belles infidèles* or the strangeness of a foreignizing, possibly exoticizing translation), between reader and writer, target and source. But the translator himself is allowed no distance. Basch feels an overwhelming nearness to the text, an inability to dissociate from it, an affliction not shared by anyone else in the room, not even Marayam Akello. And to some extent this makes sense, because Basch, in his capacity of translator, is representing (standing in for) the author who wrote the text, an author that is fixed to another time and place, not the author sitting opposite him, older and different. He can (or perhaps must) identify with this author more than the author has to identify with her own past. This scene in Vladislavić’s story is strikingly reminiscent of something said by the translator Richard Philcox about reading his translations of Maryse Condé (the subject of the previous chapter) aloud:

Nothing gives me more pleasure than to read my translations in front of an audience and become the actor I always wanted to be. I then become the author and my translation becomes the text. I thus become Maryse Condé – “Maryse Condé, c’est moi” – and perform the greatest ventriloquist’s act there is, taking over from the author and playing to the gallery. There she sits on the stage beside me, silent and composed, while I can reach an English-speaking audience with a translation she does not recognize of a text she

once wrote in another language.⁶⁴

Hans Gunther Basch seems to share something of Philcox's experience – Maryam Akello, c'est moi – but being Maryam Akello seems a less enjoyable experience than being Maryse Condé. Identifying with an author qua creator is one thing; identifying with a memoirist recounting her personal (but also public and historical) trauma is something quite different. In this case, it means losing touch with the other figure the translator is meant to embody in his miraculous act of double-ventriloquism: the audience (or reader).

The story's title is "The Reading," in the singular, but there are in fact two separate "readings," or performances, one in Acholi and one in German. And if we extend "reading" to mean interpretation (another word tied to performance), it soon becomes clear that there are as many readings as there are people in the Literaturhaus. The title can therefore be read ironically, de-familiarizing or making strange the casual term, "reading," by which we refer to events such as the one in the Literaturhaus. The many readings are not entirely disparate; they do sometimes converge. At several points (largely in moments of spectacle), the audience begins to act and think as a group before "the hold of a crowd relaxes and releases them back into their separate bodies."⁶⁵ And many of the regular "identity" categories – race, gender, language, nationality, and sexuality – that loosely group people in solidarity make an appearance. The solidarity between Maryam Akello and Florence Lawino is certainly profound and it is this solidarity (and the lack of attention paid to it) with which the story ends.

⁶⁴ Richard Philcox, "Translating Maryse Condé: A Personal Journey," *The Journal of Twentieth Century/Contemporary French Studies* 5, no. 2 (2001), 277.

⁶⁵ Vladislavić, "The Reading," 121.

Ultimately, however, the Literaturhaus contains what the translation theorist Naoki Sakai terms a “nonaggregate” community, which is to say one where “it is impossible to assume that one should automatically be able to say what one oneself means and an other able to incept [take in] what one wants to say.”⁶⁶ In Sakai’s model there can be no standard for interpretation (no “homolingual community”) pre-inscribed into our address, no guarantee that communication will succeed or that our intentions will be understood. The presumption of a homolingual community (one where the unity of the language and the unity of the community are both taken for granted), and the corollary concept of countable (unitary, usually “national”) languages,⁶⁷ is a feature of the standard communicative model of translation, one that is inadequate to the situation in the Literaturhaus. According to Mezzadra and Sakai, drawing on Sakai’s earlier work, this presumption of a homolingual community – the “homolingual attitude” – is also a presumption of transparency:

homolingual attitude assumes that, within the same language – the sameness of which is in dispute – transparent communication is somewhat guaranteed, whereas the heterolingual attitude sees the failure of communication in every utterance, so that every interlocutor is essentially and potentially a foreigner.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis MN: Minnesota UP, 1997), 7.

⁶⁷ “To the extent that the unity of national language ultimately serves as a schema for nationality and offers the sense of national integration, the idea of the unity of language opens up a discourse to discuss not only the naturalized origin of an ethnic community but also the entire imaginary associated with “national” language and culture.” Naoki Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?: Translation and Discontinuity,” *Translation Studies* 2, no.1 (2009), 73.

⁶⁸ Sandro Mezzadra and Naoki Sakai, “Introduction,” *Translation – a transdisciplinary journal* 4 (2014), <http://translation.fusp.it/issues/issue-4>

Clearly, in “The Reading,” as in any setting of the contemporary age of trans-nationalism, the “heterolingual attitude” is the appropriate one. Whenever we take Glissant’s injunction to consider ourselves in the presence of all the languages of the world, the heterolingual attitude prevails. Akello’s text asks its readers, here the audience of the two readings, to care about its trans-national setting (already trans-national before being translated): to care about the elements it selects and the violence that it indexes in the “world.” But it is a setting that is re-constructed in the translation and re-constructed again in each listener’s interpretation. Communication is not guaranteed.

In this context we can employ Sakai’s model of translation as a key to understanding what Peter Osborne calls the “fictional” and “disjunctive” nature of a contemporaneity that “projects a non-existent unity between coeval times.”⁶⁹ “Disjunctive,” that is, because the “will to contemporaneity” (that becomes visible in artworks) *forces* a “multiplicity of coeval social times together.”⁷⁰ “Fictive,” that is, in the Kantian sense of a regulative idea, one that *produces* categories. Translation is for Sakai, similarly, is a *poietic* act, one that brings into being something that did not exist before: “a form of political labour to create continuity at the elusive point of discontinuity in the social.”⁷¹ In this conception, it is translation that is anterior to (countable) languages, not the other way around: translation does not cross (pre-existing) borders; it inscribes, erases, retraces, and contests them.⁷² And this is why translation, as (geo-) political act, is essential to the functioning of contemporaneity: because, according to Osborne,

⁶⁹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso, 2013), 23-24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷¹ Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?,” 72.

⁷² “translation can inscribe, erase, and distort borders; it may well give rise to a border where there has been none before; it may well multiply a border into many registers; it may erase some borders and institute new ones.” Mezzadra and Sakai, “Introduction.”

the fiction of the contemporary is necessarily a geopolitical fiction. This considerably complicates the question of periodization: the durational extension of the contemporary ‘backwards’, into the recent chronological past, at any particular time. This durational extension of the contemporary (as a projected unity of the times of present lives) imposes a constantly shifting periodizing dynamic that insists upon the question of when the present begins. But this question has very different answers depending upon where you are thinking from, geopolitically.⁷³

For such a disjunctive geopolitical contemporaneity to be expressed in aesthetic form – as it is, increasingly, in the arts and in literary fictions such as Vladislavić’s – it must go beyond the Euro-centricity still inherent in the neo-avant-guardist aesthetics of postmodernity. And this cannot be done on a centrifugal model of contemporaneity such as Theodore Martin’s; it has to be a contemporaneity that accommodates heterogeneity *in principle*, as an *attitude*. Contemporaneity, like translation, must assume the *heterolingual attitude*, one by which “transparent communication” is not guaranteed in advance; it must, in other words, allow for opacity.

Basch, however, is not such a translator. He is haunted by opacity, driven by a need to *comprehend* (in its Glissantian sense of both grasp and appropriate) Maryam Akello. As a translator, *poietically* rendering the joints between source and target, he has to *be* the connection, *touching* both. But the harder he presses on the opaque surface that Akello (both author and text) presents, the more in danger he becomes of losing touch, becoming out of touch, with his readers.

⁷³ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 25.

In the performance of translation and the performance of reading alike, Basch feels that the important passage that he has selected to read has to be “perfect,”⁷⁴ that he must “do it justice.”⁷⁵ This, for him, means accurately rendering the literary effects as much as does accurately conveying the facts and events. It is a passage that he has worked and reworked: “Even after every second word had been changed and changed again, he wondered whether the *tone* was right, whether he had *captured* the original, whether the depths of feeling in it had found some *resonance* in his own language.”⁷⁶ This sentence enacts what it describes, trying on different standard English metaphors for the same process of translation, cycling through paraphrases before settling on the most adequate: tone... capture... resonance. “Resonance” has the same musical connotations as “tone,” and thus reminds us that to work between languages is to work with sounds as well as letters; it also has some of the precision of “capture” since strings (or concepts) will only resonate within a narrow spectrum. But ultimately “resonance” wins out (and here I am really “reading into” as opposed to pretending to be a general “reader”) because of the etymological and semantic association between motion (vibration) and emotion allowing the entry of “depths of feeling” into the sentence.

Whatever else translation is for Basch, it is also a question of creating affective equivalence: conveying the “depths of feeling” that he senses in the original. This is, of course, archly ironic given that Basch, not understanding a word of Acholi and working from the French and English translations, in fact, has no access to the original. However – and this is the dirty secret of literary translation – there is no one “original” as such, no *Ding an sich*, to which *any* translator has access; there is only the effect that a text has on

⁷⁴ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 124.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 124, my emphases.

the translator, an effect that she tries to reproduce in the reader of the translation: one that has several dimensions, including meaning, pacing, sound qualities such as rhyme and assonance, and, less tangibly but no less importantly, affect – those “depths of feeling.” Every translation is the product of the translator’s reading. The ideal of contemporaneity as unmediated accessibility – the one we see advanced in the context of the visual arts – proves to be as illusory as the ideal of transparency when it comes to literature in translation. When “contemporary literature” appears in translation, its mediation is signaled (or hidden) through the visibility (or invisibility) of the translator; but signaled or not, the contemporaneity produced through works in translation is always mediated.

Vladislavić’s strategy is again to literalize (or dramatize). Despite hoping to approximate “the original,” Basch does not have access to it, not only because each reader and each reading is different, but because he does not speak Acholi. More than that, this text truly is born-translated: there is no version of this text published in Acholi, no market for or recognition of Acholi originals. Vladislavić here begins to draw our attention to the material and institutional inequalities of “world literature” more directly than he does in “Report on a Convention.” Basch’s translation is prepared with reference to the already published English and French versions in collaboration with the author, who does not speak German, but with whom he (and the audience at the Literaturhaus) can communicate in English, which happens to be the language in which “The Reading” is composed. On the face of it, this story seems readable, revealing only its English surface to us behind which we guess at the opaque depths of the German, and French, and different English, and, deepest down, Acholi. But what rises to the surface is dictated by the laws of commerce, the market for literature, which is, like every contemporary

market, dominated by English. In “Report on a Convention,” Wu, after having his face attacked by a local whose face he momentarily mistook to belong to the revolutionary leader turned King, Papa, makes his final report: “No one was any the wiser. Are they used to seeing a face like mine in ruins? Or are they too polite – or dishonest – to say anything? This much our trade has taught me: appearances are everything.”⁷⁷ Sur-faces are what is most important in trade: “appearances are everything.” Does a face “in ruins” make Wu unsuitable for the world of exchange, in a land where all faces look like Papa, and in a racist logic, all look alike, fungible, exchangeable, translatable? Ultimately, he longs for “home” where, exhausted by the opacity of others, his own depth and interiority can be restored when he is “scoured outside and in.”⁷⁸ But coming, as it does, after “The Reading,” one cannot help but notice that Wu’s language is also probably given in silent translation, the “original” language of his reports covered over by an opaque sheet of English that promises but cannot deliver absolute transparency. Still, does this matter in a market for literature in translation where “appearances are everything?”

There is a strangeness to Vladislavić’s strategy of having Basch’s German translation of the French and English versions of a text written in Acholi appear to us in English: a strangeness that consists in the fact that we are constantly forgetting and then being reminded of this linguistic slight of hand, invited to reflect on the literary convention of silent translation alongside the text that is passed over in silence – Maryam Akello’s Acholi. Basch’s anxiety over his performance (both as reader and as translator) invites us to contemplate his expertise in the craft and the felicity of his choices,

⁷⁷ Vladislavić, “Report on a Convention.”

⁷⁸ Ibid.

especially the specific ones to which he himself draws attention. But the fact of this “German” text appearing in English unsettles the normal knee-jerk evaluations we might render. Silent translation is a standard convention in fiction but it becomes marked here because translation is precisely what is at stake in the narrative. The text of Akello’s story reads smoothly (in as far as we can tell through these multiple linguistic relays), as if it were originally composed in English (which of course it was). But is this a sign of “domestication?” And, if so, whose – Basch’s or the silent translator’s? Not being able to perform the usual moves of translation critique, we are forced to contemplate other less textual, more political and cultural, translation questions. It directs us to think of translation, as Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere have it, as “rewriting:”

Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulative processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us toward a greater awareness of the world in which we live.⁷⁹

More specifically, of this particular rewriting we are prompted to ask, if there is no “original,” what is the source of the “depth of feeling” that Basch hopes to convey? What makes this quality so important to him that he believes he absolutely has to get it right? In translating her memoir and hoping to “capture” her, beyond what he can manage from the English and French alone, is Basch attempting to render Akello more transparent than she is willing to become? What is the value of witnessing distant trauma if the listeners fail to

⁷⁹ Bassnett and Lefevere, General Editor’s Preface, vii.

connect their setting (the time and place in which they find themselves) with another setting (the time and place where the trauma took place), or themselves with another? If only he, Basch, is transported (trans-lated) to the setting of Akello's narrative, if only he feels the urgency and pertinence (the contemporaneity) of that other setting, has he failed to produce a present juncture (of "here and now" with "then and there") for his readers?

When Basch moves to the lectern and prepares to read the passage that he has selected, he removes his spectacles and sees a ghost:

Without his glasses, the room looked shapeless and steamy. He thought he saw Horst and Sylvia with their heads together, and then Maryam in the front row. No, of course, it couldn't be Maryam who was on the podium, it was Anya. No, no, not Anya, what was he thinking? Anya was in the book, she was dead, or rather translated from the dead. It was Florence.⁸⁰

In this moment, worlds that had been kept separate collapse. Despite being a short story of a mere twenty-nine pages, there are many "worlds" competing for our attention in "The Reading:" the "academic world" that Basch shares with Horst Grundmann;⁸¹ the "post-9/11 world" that calls for "us" to "celebrate difference and create dialogue" on a global scale;⁸² the "theatre world" that Edward Sheldon remained part of despite being bed-ridden;⁸³ the "world" outside that the architecture of Literaturhaus keep it "open to;"⁸⁴ the "part of the world" that, in the mind of the young man attending his first

⁸⁰ Vladislavić, "The Reading," 124.

⁸¹ Ibid., 110.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 112.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 116.

reading, would encompass both the best surfing spots of Zanzibar and the parts of Uganda and South Sudan described in Akello's memoir;⁸⁵ the "world of flawless signs" constituted by the printed text of Akello's memoir;⁸⁶ and, most importantly, Akello's "world," one that Basch "felt he knew his way around,"⁸⁷ at least enough to tell her story in German, which is also "another world" to which he hopes to "open [his audience's] minds."⁸⁸ In this agglomeration of worlds in the short piece of world literature (on world literature), it is this last world, the one from which Akello's dead sister, Anya, hails, that is invited to haunt the Literaturhaus. It is a world that Basch knows only from the page, but one to which he feels acutely attached.

Here, in the performance, the reading aloud, of his translation, a truth about its production is revealed. Translation here is a collapsing of worlds: a geographically distant, and recently past one, where the dead may dwell, and a proximate, present one, where the dead may be given new life. Translation is an act of time-bundling, and space-compression, that creates an experience of contemporaneity, even between the living and the dead, but it is an experience that exists only for the "target" culture. Translational contemporaneity consists of a relation between (at least) two entities where their mediation appears as a third term: the act of translation and its agent, the translator. But the translator is not only the medium of the relation, the path along which meaning is related and trans-lated, she is also *poietically* the maker of the relation. The relation is asymmetrical rather than speculative: the frame of reference is always the present; the dead and the distant are always contemporaneous to "us," not us to them. In this

⁸⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 115.

asymmetrical and mediated relation, everything passes through the middle term, the translator, who is asked to, like a transparent window, make everything perceivable, unaltered and undistorted. Looking at the translation (or translator) we often get the sense of looking through it (or her) at the original (or author). Creating this illusion is what many consider to be the task of the translator. But Richard Philcox's confession about the supreme act of ventriloquism in reading aloud from his translations of Maryse Condé – "Maryse Condé c'est moi" – and the situation in "The Reading" where the author is absolutely opaque and the translator is only surface the audience has to read, shows that in practice the translator's actual task might be chameleonic rather than transparent: to present a surface that is highly visible and which blends seamlessly into its context. The translator presents a sur-face; the projection of depth is all on the reader's part.

But translation is a fragile thing and while Basch lets Anya haunt him, he is not able to convey this experience to the audience. Basch's reading climaxes at the place in the text he found most difficult to render into German. It is a passage that he worked on with the author's guidance when she visited him in his home. A solution to Schleiermacher's conundrum (whether to bring the source to the reader or the reader to the source) is decided upon: the author, Akello, travels to the reader, in the Literaturhaus, and before that to the translator, in his house, literally (dramatically). After the author leaves Basch's house, the translator is left with a series of notes, literary traces of her former presence:

'Resurrected?' it read in his blue pen. And then in pencil the word she had suggested: 'translated'. And then in blue again: 'brought back, raised, revived?' He always had other ideas. That was the problem with translation: there was always another possibility. Which

made her suggestion doubly difficult. Why had she said ‘translated’? Translated from the dead. As if death itself were a language, the source language, and translation a matter of faith. Suddenly the whole enterprise felt hopeless. He opened the English version and read the phrase to himself again: brought back from the dead. It made more sense. Then he picked up the French version but did not open it. It had one of those unfussy French covers of clean white board upon which floated a picture the size of a playing card; a cross section of sugar cane in close-up, cut off between the earth and the sky. He gazed at it in despair.⁸⁹

It is this impossible task of translating between “death itself” and living language that finally exhausts Basch, leaving him “in despair;” death is not a position the translator can occupy, even in the imagination.⁹⁰ And yet, translation *does* make the dead (uni-directionally) present to the living. To call this presence that that dead have for the living, the presence colloquially described as “haunting,” a relation of “contemporaneity” is counterintuitive to be sure, but, following the insight I develop from Jan Kott in the Introduction, that is nevertheless what I will call it. We have seen Peter Osborne insists that “the fiction of the contemporary is necessarily a geopolitical fiction” and that it matters “where you are thinking from, geopolitically” in delimiting the contemporary.⁹¹ To Osborne I must add that when thinking the present geopolitically, and in constructing the “fiction” of a sharing of presents across geopolitical space, a fiction of contemporaneity between these spaces, we must also consider how these presents contain within them traces of their distinct pasts. It is not enough to think of the disjunctive conjunction of presents experienced by the geographically dispersed living, we must also

⁸⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the alternative view, advanced by J. M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello who claims, “for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse.” J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 74.

⁹¹ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 25.

think of their relationships to the geographically dispersed dead.

This necessity to think of the possibility of death (and “sharing” their time) is inherent to translation as it is to all writing. The lag between original and translation implies that, in principle, the author could always be, possibly unbeknownst to the translator, already dead. Not only can the writer be dead – the survival of death being after all, as Derrida reminds us, the condition of writing, one revealed by Benjamin writing on translation, even before the author’s biological death –⁹² but so can the people described in non-fictional genres like memoirs. Translations are even done out of “dead” languages. Basch is right: the problem with translation is that there is always another possibility. This is why translation is an excellent figure for the *selectiveness* of contemporaneity, every act claiming: *this* is contemporary, *this* is urgent, *this* is a propos. Even the dead can, in this sense, be contemporary, but not all the dead, not all the time.

It is not translation itself – the play of possibilities between languages – that arrests Basch and drives him to despair, but rather a confrontation with the surface of the visual: the image of cut sugarcane. The cut of the sugarcane is echoed a few pages later, inside Akello’s narrative, with a threat that the soldiers abducting Maryam and Anya make that, if they refuse to cooperate, the soldiers would not even waste a bullet on them, instead they will be “cut loose like a vine,”⁹³ which is what in fact happens to Anya a few pages after that when a child soldier brings down the blade of his “panga” (machete)

⁹² “To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live *after* death. When it came to translating such a notion [*A propos de la traduction*], Walter Benjamin emphasizes the distinction between *überleben*, on the one hand, surviving death, like a book that survives the death of its author, or a child the death of his or her parents, and, on the other hand, *fortleben*, *living on*, continuing to live. All the concepts that have helped me in my work, and notably that of the trace or the spectral, were related to this ‘surviving’ as a structural and rigorously original dimension. It is not derived from either living or dying. No more than what I call ‘originary mourning,’ that is something that does not wait for the so-called ‘actual’ death.” Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascal-Anne Brault (Brooklyn NY: Melville House, 2011), 26.

⁹³ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 125.

“again and again.”⁹⁴ This kind of echo within the text – cut, cut, cut “again and again” – performs its own kind of time-bundling, pulling together moments, through translation and traumatic repetition, lifting them out of chronology to create a disjunctive contemporaneity – “a conjuncture of times that takes time” –⁹⁵ analogous to the one created between reader and distant other. When Basch finally comes to the crucial passage, the “inspiring part” that is “painful but uplifting,”⁹⁶ he manages to make it to Akello’s decisive phrase marking her promise to her sister: “As I crossed over into the future, I made a promise. I said that if I lived, I would tell this story, so that she would not be forgotten. Your breath is in these words, Anya. I have translated you from the dead.”⁹⁷ But shortly after this, Basch falters, unable to read the final lines: “He did not need to see them written down. They had been sounding in his head for months. He opened his mouth and what came out was a sob.”⁹⁸

Basch wanted to get the affect of this passage “perfect,” but it is he who is most affected by his own rendering. The translator is his own perfect reader. But he is not his own perfect writer; the author literally has to travel to his living room to insert a phrase – “translated from the dead” – which he would not have chosen himself, in order for this otherwise smooth text to become truly infected with otherness and therefore truly affecting, evoking those “depths of feeling” that now rise to the surface.

In her sustained reflections on war photography in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), Susan Sontag warns that

⁹⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁹⁵ Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias, “Introduction.”

⁹⁶ Vladislavić, “The Reading,” 129.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

it is not necessarily better to be moved. Sentimentality, notoriously, is entirely compatible with a taste for brutality and worse.... But if we consider what emotions would be desirable, it seems too simple to elect sympathy. The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers ... and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power.... Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering.⁹⁹

Basch's overflow of sympathetic affect does no one any good. While he begins the event by claiming some modest visibility, he now becomes a spectacle: his face collapsing – a premonition of Wu's "ruined face" later in *101 Detectives* – "from the top down, like an expertly imploded building."¹⁰⁰ He begins to openly weep into his handkerchief "as if he would never stop."¹⁰¹ Rather than translating (carrying across) Akello's text, it is Basch who is translated (transformed). Again, this is reminiscent of Richard Philcox, who asks,

am I not the one in the end who has been translated? As a white, English-speaking male, brought up in the narrow confines of a parochial English family, belonging to a culture used to dominating the world and, at the time, grappling with a fading sense of superiority, I have had to undergo serious translation to confront the worlds of a black, female writer from the French-speaking Caribbean. [...] I have been translated into many things: a woman, a Caribbean, an African, an African-American, I have changed colors and sex, I have crossed borders and cultures.¹⁰²

For Basch, however, the translation is too much; he is made of too brittle stuff and rather

⁹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 102.

¹⁰⁰ Vladislavić, "The Reading," 135.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰² Philcox, "Translating Maryse Condé," 280-81.

than shapeshift, he shatters.

Maryam Akello is at first puzzled since she cannot see Basch's face from her position on the podium, but once she realizes what is happening is left with only "a residue of cold indifference,"¹⁰³ residues, of course, collecting on the surface of things. As the spectacle of Basch's weeping grows in intensity, Akello exchanges a look with Florence Lawino, the one exchange entailing a true sense of *recognition* in this story, one that is "worth preserving for the record," but no one sees it as the cameraman, along with everyone else, is "focused on Hans Günther Basch, stooped over the lectern with the broken pieces of his face in his hands."¹⁰⁴ The audience, no longer united as a crowd, breaks into individual reflection and emotion, none of which is concerned with the story anymore – the nonaggregate community *par excellence*, not because of their multiple nationalities but because of their human heterogeneity – their Dostoevskian dialogic polyphony echoed by the chairs shrieking "like a chorus of demons."¹⁰⁵

There arose, like a squall on the surface of a lake, a murmur made of many parts – surprise, curiosity, sympathy, dismay, glee – emotions that encircled one another or clashed like waves, causing flurries of turbulent conversation, muttered exclamations and undertones, chasing into every corner.¹⁰⁶

Gathered to look at Maryam Akello's life, the audience sees only fragmented reflections,

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 135. The nonaggregate community to which heterolingual discourse is addressed cannot be fixed or defined in advance: it is not merely an address to two or more separate and distinct communities, it is rather an address that questions the very "bordering" that encloses and delimits community in the first place. We see a possible figure of such a nonaggregate community referenced here (and elsewhere) by Vladislavić, in his evocation of a Dostoevskian "demonic" polyphony. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994).

¹⁰⁶ Vladislavić, "The Reading," 135.

of themselves and the world, as one would of the troubled surface of a lake during a squall. The translator produces a ghost, an other-worldliness in this world, but one that is invisible, too transparent and not opaque enough, to be recognized by the audience. Anya is present to him, but not to them, and here translation reaches its limit.

Chapter 3
The World, Today
On News and Fiction

Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle. [...] I really look with commiseration over the great body of my fellow citizens, who, reading newspapers, live & die in the belief, that they have known something of what has been passing in the world in their time; whereas the accounts they have read in newspapers are just as true a history of any other period of the world as of the present, except that the real names of the day are affixed to their fables.

– Thomas Jefferson, correspondence with John Norvell, 11 June 1807



Figure 3.1. Edouard Levé, untitled, from the series, *Rugby*, 2003. Color photograph, $39 \frac{3}{8} \times 39 \frac{3}{8}$ inches.

Le Monde (The World); *Die Welt* (The World); *El Mundo* (The World); *The Boston Globe*; *The Globe and Mail*; *Die Zeit* (The Time); *The Times*; *The New York Times*; *The Economic Times*; *El Tiempo* (The Time); *The Age*; *Al Ayam* (The Days); *The Daily Mirror*; *Beeld* (Image); *The Sun*; *The Baltimore Sun*; *Die Son* (The Sun); *Il Sole 24 Ore* (The 24-Hour Sun); *Herald Sun*; *The Vancouver Sun*; and let's not forget Clark Kent's *The Daily Planet*: is it not remarkable how many newspaper titles refer to world and time?

In English, as in other Germanic languages, the idea of a “world” already contains a temporal dimension. The *OED* gives its primary meaning as “**I.** Human existence; a period of this,” followed by “**II.** The earth (also the universe) or a part of it; a natural environment or system,” and then “**III.** The inhabitants of the earth, or a section of them;”¹ at least in this dictionary,² the phenomenological definition comes first, then the cosmological, the anthropological last. This ordering accords with the word's etymology, “originally lit. ‘age of man,’”³ which it shares with the German *Welt*, Dutch *Wereld*, and Danish *Verden*: “The Germanic etymon is a compound word that combines an element signifying ‘man’ (from the Latin *vir*) and a second element signifying ‘age’ (cf. English ‘old’). The resulting meaning would be something like ‘where man finds himself as long as he is alive.’”⁴ The Germanic, phenomenological, definition construes the world on a

¹ “world, n.” OED Online. December 2016. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/230262> (accessed February 06, 2017).

² I hear follow the “word police” of the Oxford English Dictionary, but take note that other etymologies have been suggested, including the one in Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (see below) and the one suggested by Heidegger discussed there. One of the counterintuitive effects of Colbert's truthiness monologue (and the work that follows from it) is that it instills in the viewer (the in-formed viewer) both a healthy respect for the value of certain forms of intellectual elitism (an aspect which Lippmann might have enjoyed) and a healthy skepticism about their authority (hence the multiple dictionaries).

³ “world, n.” OED Online. December 2016. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/230262> (accessed February 06, 2017).

⁴ Pascal David, “Welt,” *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin et al., (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2014), 1217-24.

human timescale, an attribute that leads to its several religious senses differentiating between a “temporal,” “secular,” or “earthly” world, as opposed to an “eternal,” “holy,” or “otherworldly” realm.⁵ Newspapers are entirely “worldly” in this sense, as is captured by Hegel’s oft-cited aphorism: “Reading the morning newspaper is the realist’s morning prayer.”⁶ The world of the newspaper is that of the (according to Hegel) naïve “realist” who orients himself and puts his faith in worldly events. It is a temporal, passing, even ephemeral world, not one that aspires to the eternal truths of ideas. Newspapers lay claim to historical facts, not eternal truths.

A world privileged by newspapers is the inter-national one – a fact signaled by the standard “International” section. Newspapers have a long tradition of rendering the world as a drama where the principals on stage are nations or their synecdochic stand-ins, world leaders. Inter-national news (I use the hyphen to keep in mind that it is in the relation *between* these recurring characters called “nations” that the so-called international realm is posited) does not, of course, make up the bulk of the newspaper. The newspaper form however implicitly renders an image of the world whereby each nation will have its newspapers reporting on events of “domestic” relevance, while “international” news is common to all. One may think, then, that the inter-national realm depicted in international news would be one place that one could find a broadly-shared “communal image” of the world. Reading literary works including Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Quartet*, Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*, Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, and above all Edouard Levé’s *Journal* (2004), reveals however that works of fiction can teach us to see provisionality where broadsheets proclaim the facts of the matter with absolute certainty.

⁵ “world, n.” OED Online.

⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. Jon Stewart (Chicago IL: Northwestern UP, 2002), 247.

1. *The Problem of Imaging the World as Revealed through Italian Newspapers*

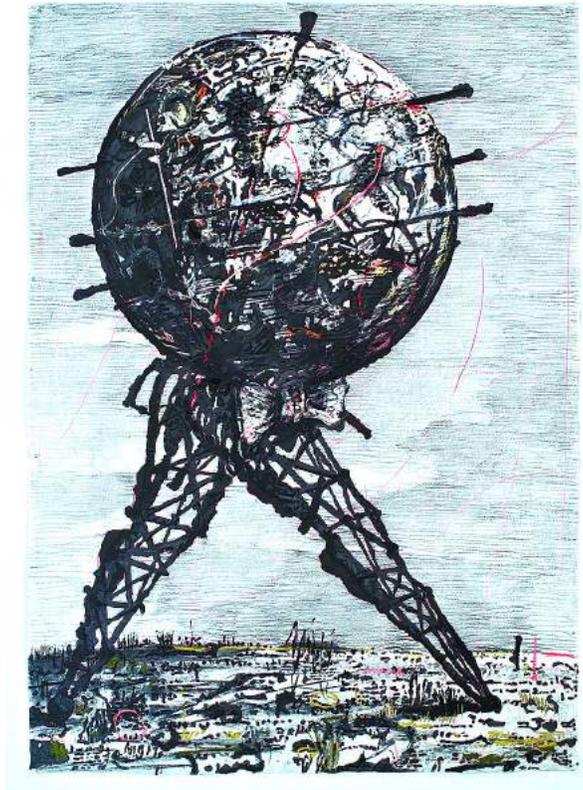


Figure 3.2. William Kentridge, Drawing for *Il Sole 24 Ore (World Walking)*, 2007.

World Walking (fig. 3.2) is a drawing in charcoal and pastels produced by the South African Artist, William Kentridge, for the Italian newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore* (The 24 Hour Sun) in 2007. Readers of the Italian daily would have seen this picture of a globe walking through a barren landscape on a pair of inverted electricity pylons, imagining that meanwhile other readers were seeing the same picture. Immediately the question of perspective is raised: this is not the world seen “from below;” it is not the world of the

subaltern; it is a world visible from a distance, a distance that marks a privilege (of being literate, of being able to afford a newspaper, of being educated enough to understand its contents), a privilege that enthusiasts of modernization and globalization would have us believe should be disappearing soon, but which the structurally *uneven* nature of development under capitalism has kept in place.⁷

Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Quartet* attests to the power that Italian newspapers have in granting and signaling class privilege. In the first novel, *L'Amica geniale* (Italian 2011, English 2012 as *My Brilliant Friend*), which is mostly set in in the 1950s, the “brilliant” Lila (who is surprisingly not the “brilliant friend” of the title – *that* honorific is bestowed by Lila on our narrator, Elena, known by all as Lenù) “learned how the alphabet worked from the sheets of newspaper in which customers wrapped the old shoes and which her father sometimes brought home and read to the family the most interesting local news items.”⁸ Her precocious literacy for some time gains her the respect of classmates, teachers, and denizens of the tight-knit poor “neighborhood.” Later, Donato Sarratore, a local train conductor and father of the boy, Nino, with whom both girls will at various times fall in love, reads aloud an article about trains that he had penned and gotten published in the newspaper, *Roma*, rendering him a “far from ordinary man” in the girls’ eyes. He was “a conductor on the railroad but also a poet, a journalist.”⁹ (This man would later, in a complicated scene of force and seduction, deflower Lenù, a teenage girl younger than his son, a girl whom he had previously sexually assaulted in her sleep, on

⁷ “The multiple modes in and through which this ‘coexistence’ manifests itself – the multiple forms of appearance of unevenness – are to be understood as being connected, as being governed by a socio-historical logic of combination, rather than as being contingent and asystematic... To grasp the nettle here involves recognising that capitalist development does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course.” Deckard et al, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015), 12.

⁸ Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012), 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

the beach at the isle of Ischia. This event would become material for Lenù's breakout work of "fiction"). Lenù soon learns that, unlike the novels she spends her time reading (or the novels she will later write), newspapers imbue their readers with an ability to speak "concretely, impersonally, citing precise facts."¹⁰ We learn, however, in the second volume, *Storia del nuovo cognome* (Italian 2012, English 2013 as *The Story of a New Name*), that not all newspapers are equal: not only is it shameful, from the perspective of the educated classes, not to read newspapers at all (which is the situation in Lenù's family), it almost equally shameful to read the wrong newspapers. Once Lenù does start reading newspapers (given to her by her teacher – she could not afford them herself), they not only give her an image of what is going on in the world, they also provide her with a new set of social tools: phrases gleaned from the correct dailies open doors that would otherwise have remained shut. At the same time, this new vocabulary of stock phrases and *idées reçues* alienate her from others in the neighborhood, even Lila,¹¹ who has no regard for the newspapers Lenù loses sleep studying.

By the time we get to the third book, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (Italian 2013, English 2014 as *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*), Lenù has become an author in her own right and is no longer awed by journalists and newspapers; she now

¹⁰ Ibid., 323.

¹¹ "I would articulate, in good Italian, statements I had memorized from Professor Galiani's books and newspapers. I would mention, let's say, 'the atrocious reality of the Nazi extermination camps,' or 'what men were able to do and what they can do today as well,' or 'the atomic threat and the obligation to peace,' or the fact that 'as a result of subduing the forces of nature with the tools that we invent, we find ourselves today at the point where the force of our tools has become a greater concern than the forces of nature,' or 'the need for a culture that combats and eliminates suffering,' or the idea that 'religion will disappear from men's consciousness when, finally, we have constructed a world of equals, without class distinctions, and with a sound scientific conception of society and of life.' I talked to her about these and other things because I wanted to show her that I was sailing toward passing with high marks, and because I didn't know who else to say them to, and because I hoped she would respond so that we could resume our old habit of discussion. But she said almost nothing, in fact she seemed embarrassed, as if she didn't really understand what I was talking about." Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2013), 133-34.

disparages their formulaic ways of reviewing books, especially her own: “The articles in the newspapers seemed superficial, they confined themselves to applying either the enthusiastic matrix of *l’Unità* or the ruinous one of the *Corriere*.”¹² Goldstein’s translation of Ferrante’s metaphor for the generic stamp (in form and opinion) of a particular newspaper, “schema” (tactic, method, diagram, or schema) as “matrix” is inspired: in a quartet of novels where maternity is always a question, where daughters struggle to break free of their mothers and mothers struggle to keep their daughters (respectable, at home, or simply alive), the wombs of production and re-production are indeed conflated. The “big” men of the neighborhood (with links to the *camorra*) grow rich off the mechanical reproduction of shoes of Lina’s design: conceived in Lina’s mind, the shoes are produced in a mechanical matrix. Lenù’s novels, similarly, are products of her genius, but it is impossible to forget that, in the context of the quartet with its proliferation of factories and storefronts, books are mechanically reproduced objects sold in bookstores. Both women turn the same creative vigor toward having and raising children, with less brilliant results. The matrix (etymology: “classical Latin *mātrīc-*, *mātrīx*, female animal kept for breeding, in post-classical Latin also womb, source, origin”)¹³ of mechanical reproduction is true to the concept. The biological passage from conception to birth, to formation, is less assured; for one thing, it is never entirely clear when the product can be said to be final. Children can, perhaps, escape the strictures of their matrix; they might, on occasion, like Lenù, become something unforeseen by their creators. Newspaper articles less so. To be clear: the newspaper “matrix” (“**II. 6.**

¹² Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2014), 58.

¹³ “matrix, n.”. OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115057?rskey=ijrWbk&result=1> (accessed November 21, 2017).

a. In *Printing*: a metal block in which a character is stamped or engraved so as to form a mould for casting a type; the paper squeeze of a form of type, serving as a mould for a type-metal cast.”)¹⁴ that is of relevance here is not the creative capacities of the journalist; it is the space and vocabulary that newspapers set aside for articles “of that type,” the ideological position of the newspaper relative to other newspapers (which permeates aesthetic as much as political “sections”), and the norms of what balance between information, summary, and judgment must be achieved. These are the limitations that Lenù finds frustrating.

The movement and tension between concept and creation, (frequently figured in maternal terms as conception and giving birth) – also visible in the antinomies of conceptual and performed art within Edouard Levé’s work, discussed below – amounts to a deliberate blurring of mechanical and biological (ultimately thanatological) processes. The globe figured by William Kentridge in *Il Sole 24 Ore* also figures this tension between the organic and cyclical, on the one hand, and the mechanical and potentially terminal on the other. And the news itself is caught in this tension: providing a pre-set *schema* for whatever events the day may bring, but also, in order to maximize the importance and *currency* of those events, to keep readers reading, insisting that it is in fact a *matrix* out of which the unforeseen and the unprecedented can emerge.

The newspaper where Kentridge’s image was published, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, is a widely circulated national daily broadsheet. It is the result of a 1965 merger between two newspapers, the *Il Sole* (The Sun) and *24 Ore* (24 Hours), resulting in the delightful concatenated name suggesting a sun that never sets, recalling the still dominant Platonic

¹⁴ Ibid.

equation between light and truth, and the (increasingly doubtful) equation between newspapers and truth. The classic metaphor is important to Kentridge who in several works ties it to the violence of *certainty* in Enlightenment thinking, which finds its obverse in the shadows of colonialism.¹⁵ It is a vision of truth that Kentridge finds suspicious and this wariness makes its way into *World Walking*. In the drawing, the horizon is curved, from which we can infer that the globe is in fact walking on (around) another globe. 24 hours: the time it takes for the world to turn around itself. Those familiar with Kentridge's work should recognize the legs of the world as pylons; they are typical of the landscape around Johannesburg, the megalopolis built over (now largely abandoned) gold mines that Kentridge calls home. The price of gold would also have appeared somewhere in the pages of *Il Sole 24 Ore* that day, and it would have been the same price, speculative, specular, and spectral as it may be, all over the world. The uninitiated would be forgiven for confusing these pylons with oil derricks, cell phone towers, or even, inverted dilapidated Eiffel Towers.¹⁶ The landscape itself, again for those familiar with Kentridge's oeuvre, is clearly the Highveld of South Africa. But, in this image at least, there is no internal reason that it couldn't be Texas, or Southern Italy, for example. So, what we see is the world, figured ref/using a region-specific visual vocabulary, in motion, in translation.

¹⁵ In this regard, Kentridge's Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University, *Six Drawing Lessons* (2012), in particular "Lesson 1: In Praise of Shadows," which directly critiques Plato's allegory of the cave and the metaphor of light in the "enlightenment," is particularly instructive. William Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2014).

¹⁶ I owe the Eiffel Towers to the keen eyes of Grant Farred. Though, in retrospect, given: 1) that Kentridge spent years in Paris training as an actor at the *Ecole Jacques Lecoq*, 2) that he has compared Johannesburg and Paris in his artworks before – notably in the short film, *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989), and 3) that his work regularly examines the violence of colonial Enlightenment – see, for example, his version of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which brings together light and shadow, enlightenment rationality in Europe with colonial violence in Africa – I feel like I should have recognized these twin structures tearing up the countryside as doubles for a privileged icon of European modernity from the beginning. There are several simulacra of the Eiffel tower in the world; why not two more?

The problem of perspective remains, and is in fact a problem for any image that dares to figure “the world” as such. Not until 1946 was it possible to photograph the planet from space, and not until much later could these photographs reveal more than a curved horizon. Even then a photograph could only show one side of the planet. *World Walking* brings the problem of imaging the world back to earth, where all pictures of the globe are local; it demonstrates the impossibility of stepping outside the world to grasp the world. We live in an age when much of the world constantly being photographed, enough so for Google maps to have a “street view” function for much of the populated globe.¹⁷ Kentridge, acknowledging this contemporary fantasy of total coverage, points out that

The nature of human perception and photographic perception are absolutely different. In the crassest sense, you’re limited. When you are taking a photograph, you can choose one focal distance, zoom or wide angle. But when we look we do both at the same time; we have a relatively wide-angle view but our focus is zoomed in on a different part of the view. We try to simulate this sense of ‘looking’ in the movies by cutting between wide angles and close-ups and going between a point of view that is both widely and narrowly focused. In order to approach an approximation, we move deeper into the world of artifice, whether it’s through the editing or through the choice of lenses. And then, of course, part of what we’re seeing is not what’s in front of our eyes but the images in our head that are thrown up by what we see – a memory, something that triggers a memory. That’s a visual image that goes backwards and forwards.¹⁸

¹⁷ A game called GeoGuessr piggybacks off this availability of images: the player is “dropped” somewhere unspecified on earth and must make use of the Google map images to guess where in the world they are. The extent to which the world is imaged is astounding; at the same time, a good strategy entails guessing somewhere where Google will have invested resources in photographing extensively. In the case of image density, much like the case of recognized works of “world literature,” the world is one but uneven. <https://geoguessr.com>

¹⁸ William Kentridge and Rosalind Kraus. *That Which Is Not Drawn: Conversations* (New York: Seagull Books, 2013), 99.

In the case of *World Walking*, a drawing rather than a photograph, the “artifice” is exaggerated: rather than simply mimicking the hardwired human (but not necessarily only human) cognitive process of focus and attention, it makes that process into its subject. The production of global images usually operates through either abstraction or synecdoche; either the whole world (the globe on stilts) is figured at the expense of local detail, or a more detailed locale (the damaged Highveld landscape) stands in for the world. Kentridge’s drawing illustrates, combines and juxtaposes both techniques. We are given an extreme wide angle, the widest imaginable, so wide that the entire planet is in view; and we are also given a view “from below,” a view of a particular landscape. What we end up seeing when we look at the landscape is, again, the result of a cognitive process and will depend on what “triggers a memory.” This is why we might fail (or succeed differently) at Kentridge’s miniature game of GeoGuessr: the Highveld; Texas; Southern Italy; anywhere the image causes you to imagine. While it may seem like a neat trick, a clever demonstration of the brain’s use of stereotype to construct reality,¹⁹ the subject and the site of publication renders *World Walking* more complex and more political. The “reality” under construction is our image of the globe today: a geopolitical image in the place of 24-hour truth. This is not just *a* world, one of many possible worlds that exist in the realm of fiction; it is *the* world, the singular place that we must inhabit, even if we can never fully know it. To claim that the world is fundamentally contingent on who is looking at it and where they are looking from has far-reaching consequences that this chapter can only begin to explore. The lesson I wish to take from Kentridge here is not how to find new ways to become certain what the world is *actually* like (though

¹⁹ For a more direct demonstration of this point see Kentridge’s multimedia performance piece, *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, the script of which, along with images, is published in *October*. William Kentridge, “I am Not Me, The Horse is Not Mine,” *October* 134 (2010): 28-51.

that is a laudable goal for scientists and newspapers), but to learn to live in doubt, to think of the world as constructed, and to think of our constructions as limited. *World Walking* images the globe, in the age of the anthropocene, as always moving, changing, driven by the brute force of technology, gathering and delivering scars as it progresses. This globe/planet is a figure of destruction and of what is being destroyed, of both globalization and the earth. It shows the world on its last legs, powered by crumbling monuments to modernity, figured as a whole, all of it belonging to the same homogenous, empty standardized circumambulation, but it does so in a local setting, rich with particulars. It refuses the tripartite division between real world, mimetic image, and other-worldly fiction; *World Walking* is all three at once.

Ferrante too, in her own, literary, way, makes us aware of how the contemporary world is imagined, then imaged, then reproduced. In the first book, inspired by the financial success of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which the girls read in translation, the precocious Lila writes a short novel called *The Blue Fairy*, a text that is never described in any detail throughout the quartet, but which lives on vividly in Lenù's mind, providing the model of creative writing towards which she will aspire. Lenù's actual writing, however, is far from fairy tale: starting with the thinly disguised account of the night she chose to seduce a man who had previously sexually molested her, and ending with an equally thinly disguised novelization of the tragic disappearance of Lila's daughter which causes the rift between these two friends that, according to the frame narrative, prompts the writing of the entire quartet – a ploy that, upon publication, would flush Lila out of hiding – Lenù's writing, part of a dominant trend in contemporary literary fiction, conflates reality with fiction, and collapses the world-creating and world-depicting functions of literature.

After the first novel, *L'Amica geniale*, each title begins with *Storia*. In English we lose this important emphasis, partly because Anne Goldstein opts for *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, rather than the more clunky *The Story of Those Who Leave and that of Those Who Stay*, but mostly because *Storia* registers slightly differently to the English *Story*. While it is certainly true that “stories” can be factual – we do after all speak of newspaper stories – the dominant connotation in English is of fiction. In Italian, *storia* is far more ambiguous, standing for any narrative, whether story or history. The fact that the quartet’s reception has been so dominated by speculation over the author’s identity, the implicit assumption being that her reason for choosing anonymity could only be because her books are at least partly autobiographical, alerts us to the readerly desire for Ferrante’s works to be world-depicting and referential, and in that sense similar to newspapers. The fact that these novels give a far fuller and a *far more novel* sense than do newspapers of a place, a community, an age, as well as the entanglement of human lives with inter-national events, global forces, and each other, alerts us to its world-creating powers and ability, like Kentridge’s visual images, to go “backwards and forwards.” These are novels fascinated by newspapers and the world they depict, but in their broader sweep, tracking inter-generational dynamics over decades, registering a sense of one place always defining itself against other places far and near, adjusting and readjusting its borders as necessary and as possible, they provide a far more capacious sense of contemporaneity and a richer present junction.

Ferrante’s novels are certainly not the only ones to incorporate and reflect on newspapers, allowing the novel’s more capacious form and more complex realism to stand out all the more crisply thanks to the comparison. I now turn to a much more

directly experimental novel Edouard Levé's *Journal*, which pushes this contrast to its limit.

2. *Levé's Newspaper*

The novel is called *Newspaper* and is written by a Frenchman, Edouard Levé. You open it up, skip to page 6, and find this: "FOUR MEN IN POSSESSION of industrial quantities of cyanide and maps of various embassies throughout the capital have been arrested. In the course of the raid, the police found a map of the city's water distribution network."²⁰ Flipping forward, you see that, "ACCORDING TO A SURVEY, 73 percent of parents of schoolchildren are in favor of transferring Saturday morning classes to Wednesday morning, leaving Saturday entirely free."²¹ Page 74, under the heading "SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY," contains this sobering paragraph:

THE ARMY IS PLANNING to implement an underwater listening device that would span the entire globe. Just four marines will be able to measure the data, provided that powerful sonar pulse technology is used. The sonar technology affects whales and other marine animals, which lose their bearings and find themselves beached onshore, unable to return to the water. Ecologists are attempting to block usage of the device, but recent international conflicts have expanded the military's room for maneuver, requiring delicate negotiations between supporters and detractors of the device.²²

In a section called "CLASSIFIEDS," you read:

²⁰ Edouard Levé, *Newspaper*, trans. Jan Steyn and Caite Dolan-Leach (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²² *Ibid.*, 74.

FOR RENT: Studio apartment bathed in light, with kitchen, bathroom, shower, fifth floor, south-facing, clear view.

FOR SALE: Studio apartment, twenty-four square meters, five minutes from the subway, on eighty square meters of green space. Garden, trees, downtown countryside.

MUST SELL: Due to immediate relocation, selling two bedroom balcony apartment, sixth floor, elevator, parking, great view. Urgent.²³

Skipping to the end of the book, you discover that the final section contains television programming:

10:55 News bulletin.

11:00 Game show.

11:05 Drama series (rerun). A man is emotionally overwhelmed by another man's kidnapping. Indicted in the case, a third man counsels him to wait for further news from his abductors.

11:10 Animal documentary.²⁴

The colophon tells you that the book is an English translation of a French text called *Journal*. The object in your hands resembles a newspaper in that it contains article-length chunks of text assembled under section headings such as "Politics," "International," and "Sport." But at 5.9 x 0.6 x 9.8 inches it feels distinctly book-like. Its "articles" appear sequentially, as paragraphs, rather than being dispersed over the page. There is no "fold." There are no titles or bylines. You see no proper names or adjectives indicating proper names. You wonder whether, given this lack, there is anything like a setting. But as you pour over its idiosyncrasies of form and content, you begin to realize that, setting or no, this "newspaper" could only ever have been French.

²³ Ibid., 77.

²⁴ Ibid., 121.

Or this is what I imagine your response might be. I imagine you as an Anglophone reader, but one who regularly reads literature in translation and who is, perhaps, something of a Francophile. You recognize the details of the “domestic” political system, the “Saturday morning classes,” the grouping of sports that *Newspaper*’s readers are asked to care about, and the “News-In-Brief” section (which, correctly, you surmise to be an infelicitous gloss of “*Faits divers*”) as traces of the French national specificity of the project. This despite the fact, you learn as you start Google-ing, that its writer has on numerous occasions insisted on the dictum: good writing should be translatable without remainder. In *Autoportrait*, for example, you discover that he promotes and espouses “prose that will be changed neither by translation nor the passage of time.”²⁵

As one of Levé’s translators, I can confirm that, despite his intentions, his prose does in fact change with translation *and* with the passage of time. In addition to *Newspaper* and several published photographic series, he is the author of three novels: *Works* (2002, English translation 2014), *Autoportrait* (2005, English translation 2012), and *Suicide* (2008, English translation 2011). This small body of work has a remarkable consistency of tone and purpose. Lorin Stein, the English-language translator of *Autoportrait*, has remarked that Levé emulated a concise and almost lapidary style that he (Levé) associated with American stylists, which makes him very easy to translate into natural English, whereas he sounds a little odder in French.²⁶ Having translated Levé myself (*Suicide* and *Works* on my own, *Newspaper* with Caite Dolan-Leach), I have found this, with few exceptions, to be true: from *Works* to *Suicide*, Levé’s descriptive

²⁵ Levé, *Autoportrait*, 87.

²⁶ See “Deconstructing Edouard Levé: Jan Steyn and Lorin Stein in conversation with Scott Esposito.”

deadpan is deployed in sharp and concrete French sentences that seem to already contain felicitous English counterparts. Beyond his stylistic regularity at the level of the sentence, and more pertinent to the concerns of this chapter, is his consistent challenge to conventional forms for narrating the world. My co-translator and I have had to choose whether to render his seemingly universal *Newspaper* into an American, or perhaps British, national format (which would require changes of content), or whether to do a “straight” translation, allowing the Anglophone reader to see through the translation an essentially French newspaper form. (We eventually opted for the latter). And we have had to decide whether to update the content of his articles in order to make them more transparent to a contemporary audience. (We did not). Above all, translating *Journal* into *Newspaper*, I was reminded time and again of the pernicious local, national, regional and linguistic biases in the way we conceive the contemporary, even when talking about so-called “world-historical” events. But while national bias and stereotype keep creeping into *Newspaper*, there emerged for me an equally strong and persistent sense of the ineluctability of assuming (or hoping) that something about the present moment *does* operate at a planetary scale, or at the very least an inter-national one. Translation is a name for what makes this broader frame possible, but also for what might cause cultural, local, national, and regional difference to collapse into homogeneity; conversely, I will show, the limits and failure of translation are also a figure for the limits and failures of inter-national contemporaneity.

3. *First Context: Fiction, Fakery, and Falsehood*

The concept of the “informed citizen” comes to us from democratic theory; *representative* democracy notwithstanding, rule by the majority requires most citizens to

understand the implications of the decisions with which they or their representatives are tasked. Never has it been easier than now, in the age of the Internet, to access information, and never has it been more difficult for citizens (national or world-) to have an accurate image of the environment (local or distant) in which they act. This technologically underwritten simultaneity of world-events makes the quantity of events vying for the attention of the aspiring informed (world) citizen larger than ever before. And the potential global effects of every action, including apparently thoughtless acts of consumption, can have global consequences – choose the wrong scarf and she might be supporting child slavery somewhere far away – making the imperative for her to be informed all the stronger. There is no way to follow all the news from everywhere; determinations of relevance must be made. She has to decide what is pertinent, and the world of advertising, news, entertainment, and art are all scurrying to help her decide.

Works of art, including works of literature, are not primarily concerned with conveying information as propositional content; they do not, or at least not primarily, communicate “messages.” Contemporary literary fiction is not the best resource for its readers to become better informed about current events. But where literature fails as a source of information it succeeds as a vessel for formation: it can suggest, model or critique ways in which readers think and feel their way through the massive plurality and overwhelming informational storm of the contemporary world.

In 1920, Walter Lippmann, the man who would, for many, come to serve as the model of an intellectual newsperson, co-authored a special report with his friend and fellow journalist Charles Merz examining *The New York Times* coverage of the Russian Revolution. The document begins by making a case for its existence:

It is admitted that a sound public opinion cannot exist without access to the news. There is today a widespread and a growing doubt whether there exists such an access to the news about contentious affairs. This doubt ranges from accusations of unconscious bias to downright charges of corruption, from the belief that the news is colored to the belief that the news is poisoned.²⁷

In 1920, as today, many were skeptical about the veracity and completeness of news reporting. Those who read Lippmann and Merz's tract did not find much cause to change their minds. Lippmann and Merz, without pretending to know, or to be able to know, the "whole truth" about Russia, simply noted instances where articles in the *Times* do not describe a select set of "definite and decisive happenings about which there is no dispute."²⁸ The results were damning: "The news as a whole is dominated by the hopes of the men who composed the news organization."²⁹ If not downright fake, the news was certainly slanted. The implications of this were not lost on Lippmann, who argued in three books over the next five years – *Liberty and the News* (1920),³⁰ *Public Opinion* (1922),³¹ and *The Phantom Public* (1925) – that if the news is not a reliable way to know the world, and cannot be turned into a reliable way to know the world, then the world is simply not reliably knowable by the public at large.³² *Liberty and the News* opens with the conundrum of a citizen attempting to understand the world well enough to be able to

²⁷ Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, "A Test of the News: An Examination of the News Reports in *The New York Times* On Aspects of the Russian Revolution of Special Importance to Americans March 1917—March 1920," supplement, *The New Republic* 23, no. 296 (1920), 1.

²⁸ Lippmann and Merz, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰ Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).

³¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1992).

³² Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993).

effectively act in it and on it, through newspapers;³³ by the end of *The Phantom Public* there can be no doubt that Lippmann believes such a citizen is doomed to perpetual failure.³⁴

Today things do not look much better. In 2016, the term “fake news” became big news.³⁵ If it’s not too oxymoronic to refer to a *locus classicus* of a very contemporary phenomenon, then the “classic” go-to spot of the present fake news discourse – the example that defines the genus – is Pizzagate: the unsubstantiated yet widely reported story linking prominent members of the United States Democratic Party to a child sex ring run out of a series of restaurants in Washington D.C. On December 4, 2016, a young man from North Carolina, believing this story to be true, entered one of those restaurants, Comet Ping Pong, the owner of which had already received hundreds of threats following the fake reports, and fired three rounds with his (legal) assault rifle. The Pizzagate example is particularly apt because it illustrates that fake news has real consequences. This story, like other fake news stories, are only “reported” in the loose sense made possible by the advent of social media. As recently as 2004, when the French writer, photographer and conceptual artist, Edouard Levé, wrote *Journal*, this kind of “reporting”

³³ “Everywhere to-day men are conscious that somehow they must deal with questions more intricate than any that church or school had prepared them to understand. Increasingly they know that they cannot understand them if the facts are not quickly and steadily available. Increasingly they are baffled because the facts are not available; and they are wondering whether government by consent can survive in a time when the manufacture of consent is an unregulated private enterprise. For in an exact sense the present crisis of western democracy is a crisis in journalism.” *Liberty and the News*, 4-5.

³⁴ “It was believed that if only [the voter] could be taught more facts, if only he would take more interest, if only he would read more and better newspapers, if only he would listen to more lectures and read more reports, he would gradually be trained to direct public affairs. The whole assumption is false. It rests upon a false conception of public opinion and a false conception of the way the public acts. No sound scheme of civic education can come of it. No progress can be made toward this unattainable ideal.” *The Phantom Public*, 136.

³⁵ A survey of 1,002 U.S. adults by the Pew Research Center from December 2016 found that 23% of Americans have either knowingly or unknowingly shared a fake news story on social media. 64% of the respondents believed that fake news cause “a great deal of confusion about basic facts of current events.” Barthel, Michael, Amy Mitchell, and Jesse Holcomb, “Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion.” Pew Research Center, last modified December 15, 2016, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/12/14154753/PJ_2016.12.15_fake-news_FINAL.pdf

was unthinkable. The media landscape in general, and journalism landscape in particular, have undergone radical and irreversible changes between the publication of *Journal* and its English translation, *Newspaper*. Today everyone with a cellphone is potential source, cameraman, journalist, editor and even publisher. The business of news has become significantly less profitable.³⁶ News consumption has become disaggregated,³⁷ with 62% of Americans (to take one, admittedly over-represented, national example) getting their news from social media, one article at a time.³⁸ Under these circumstances, the number of news sources has dramatically climbed leading to a corresponding decrease in accountability. While leading national newspapers such as *Der Spiegel*, for example, may still be embarrassed to be caught out in perpetuating falsehoods and may even experience a decrease in circulation if readers lose faith in their reliability, there are no similar consequences for the plurality of practically anonymous news sites offering “click bait” calculated to generate the maximum number of views and accompanying advertising revenues. According to a report from the BBC (presumably a creditable news source), many such fake news stories emanated from Veles, a small town in Macedonia where a number of teenagers profited from the partisan spirit of the 2016 U.S. national elections

³⁶ In the new preface for the 2014 third edition of their canonical textbook for aspiring journalists (the previous edition having appeared in 2007), Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel note that the news as an industry has all but collapsed in a few short years – familiar 20th-century brand names have disappeared; newsrooms have shrunk; revenues have dwindled. “To a significant degree, in less than half a decade, digital disruption has overturned the economic model that sustained news reporting and presentation for more than a century.” Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers, 2014), x.

³⁷ Under the newspaper model, readers only interested in, say for example, sports news would have to buy the entire newspaper in order to read the sections that they are interested in. Newspapers, while traditionally divided into sections, would scatter articles over multiple pages, the effect being that a reader wanting to follow one thread would have to page through the paper, spotting different adverts along the way. With social media, advertising revenue has now shifted from a print display model to a search model. See Emily Bell, “It’s Time We Fought Back,” *British Journalism Review* 26, no. 1 (2015): 34.

³⁸ This does not imply that social media are the *only* news source for the people surveyed. Still, it is striking that 44% of Americans read news stories on Facebook. Gottfried, Jeffrey, and Elisa Shearer, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016,” Pew Research Center, last modified May 26, 2016. http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/05/PJ_2016.05.26_social-media-and-news_FINAL-1.pdf

(and the willingness of the electorate to believe stories that support unfavorable views they already hold about politicians) by “putting up sensationalist stories, usually plagiarized from right-wing American sites” on their own websites, paying Facebook to promote these stories, and then receiving revenues from per-click advertising. Notably, this trans-national swindle doesn’t require the same linguistic competence as the creation of original content or its translation in the traditional sense would. Instead, this “plagiarism” through cut-and-paste technology only requires its operators to be able to read the foreign language (English) and decide which stories are likely to fire up their American audience. It’s a curatorial and editorial rather than strictly creative practice, but one that requires an aesthetic or at least a model for producing affect (and consequently turning U.S. dollars into Macedonian Denars).³⁹ For such sites, the news does not need to be factual, but it does need to be believable. The requirement is not truth but verisimilitude. The techniques of literary realism have found a new market.

In this sense, fake news comes uncomfortably close to fiction; or rather, from the perspective of literary studies, contemporary fiction, and especially fiction such as Elena Ferrante’s realist novels (which many readers, mistakenly it turns out, took to be thinly-veiled autobiography), is located uncomfortably close to the phenomenon of fake news and its fictions about our contemporary age. One may object that fictions are original creations while fake news stories are mechanical reproductions, and this would be true of most fictions and most fake news stories. But every fake news story, wherever it may appear, however removed from its original paranoid context, no matter how many times it has been cut and pasted and copied, has at least one “original” author somewhere. And

³⁹ Kirby, Emma Jane, “The City Getting Rich from Fake News,” *BBC News*, December 5, 2016, accessed January 11, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38168281>

some of the most interesting, especially experimental, fictions today are unabashedly and self-avowedly *un-original*.⁴⁰ A particularly relevant case in point would be Kenneth Goldsmith's gargantuan 840-page book, *Day* (2003), which he produced by typing out the text of the September 1, 2000, edition of *The New York Times*, making no distinction between headings, articles, or advertisements.⁴¹ Goldsmith announces his intent in terms of a tradition of conceptual art that follows from works and texts by Marcel Duchamp, John Cage and Andy Warhol, and a practice of "uncreative writing:"

I'm interested in a valueless practice. Nothing has less value than yesterday's news (in this case yesterday's newspaper – what could be of less value, say, than stock quotes from September 1, 2000?). I'm interested in quantifying and concretizing the vast amount of "nutritionless" language; I'm also interested in the process itself being equally nutritionless. ... The book as object: conceptual writing; we're happy that the idea exists without ever having to open the book.⁴²

Goldsmith considers the language of *Day* to be "valueless" or "nutritionless" with the book representing the accrual of labor in typing up the newspaper (and the subversion of that capitalistic accrual by his scanning and using OCR recognition software to be able to cut and past large chunks of text) rather than the accrual of meaning. While this may be true of its production, it is not necessarily how *Day* is experienced by readers. Goldsmith repeatedly, as if in a verbal tic, declares himself to be "interested in" various ideas and practices. This transitive form of "interest" is a useful deictic, pointing the reader at details and dynamics, creating interest where interest is declared. But what Goldsmith's

⁴⁰ See Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010) and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011).

⁴¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures Press, 2003).

⁴² Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as Creative Practice," Electronic Poetry Center, accessed January 11, 2017, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>

description of his work does is precisely what the work itself rigorously eschews; *Day* contains no indication whatsoever about what parts, or indeed whether any parts, are more important than any other. All is foreground and so all is background; there are no rhetorical or diegetic devices that single out a “figure” against the “ground.” The *Publisher’s Weekly* review, for instance, after recapping the flattening effect of Goldsmith reducing all the newspaper’s fonts to size 9 Bookman and of him ignoring instructions to follow stories onto new pages, gives the following assessment:

The book taps into the deepest strains of Pop Art’s leveling of artistic and social hierarchies: Andre Agassi’s third round loss to Arnaud Clement in the 2000 French Open runs up against Wall Street’s still zoomy numbers (by far the most pages here), Ecstasy use at the Nile Night Club in New Jersey, ads for children’s clothes, strike planning by workers at Bridgestone/Firestone factories in Illinois and Tennessee, “wireless LAN products with direct-sequence systems,” “GARDEN CINEMA NORWALK ISAAC STREET 838-4504” and many other narratives and notices.⁴³

This list of texts might be intended to illustrate the flattening, leveling, non-hierarchical smoothness of the text; yet it cannot help but, like *Day* itself, deliver *punctum* after *punctum* of piercing detail:⁴⁴ the Agassi tennis match; the buoyancy of pre-9/11 financial markets; the age of night clubs and ecstasy.... Newspaper journalists are intensely conscious of their role as the “first drafters of history.” Even among the ephemera, there is much here to evoke interest, nostalgia, or to fit into the larger story of an era. More

⁴³ *Publisher’s Weekly*, review of *Day*, by Kenneth Goldsmith, 21 July, 2003, accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-930589-20-9>

⁴⁴ Punctum: “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 27.

pertinently, the novel qua novel doesn't function as a found object;⁴⁵ if it is "found" it is likely to be either read or put away in a place where it could be retrieved to be read later. The novel as object appears to us in its readability; and its newer electronic forms do nothing to alter this fact. For an *objet trouvé* to work it requires the context of a museum; its meaning resides in the disjunction between the object and this valorizing context.⁴⁶ There is no museum for *Day*. Goldsmith might have aimed for (and succeeded at) "conceptual writing," but for the stubborn reader who decides against counsel to go ahead and "open the book" the results are far closer to those achieved by Edouard Levé whose deliberate shuttling between concept and creation (as well as exhaustion) will be one of the topics of this chapter. For the moment, it suffices to note that if there is something that distinguishes fiction from fakery, it is not an attribute like creativity, innovation, or originality.

In *How to Do Things with Fictions* (2012), Joshua Landy gives a compelling definition of the term "fiction" in contradistinction to "lies" and "mistakes:"

[Fiction is] a verbal performance in which the events depicted never happened, and in which everyone knows they didn't. If I believe the story I'm telling and you know it's

⁴⁵ Goldsmith is known as a poet rather than novelist, but from the perspective of the unwitting reader who picks up a book the size and density of *Day*, the "novel," that famously capacious container, the genre of mixed genres, seems to be the right descriptor for what she hold in her hands. To be sure, it would be a novel more along the lines of *Finnegans Wake* than *Pride and Prejudice*, but a novel nonetheless.

⁴⁶ The original object of course has an ordinary market value in the world before it is imported into the museum space. The urinal used in/ as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) had to be ascertained somewhere, whether it was purchased from Mott Works, given to him by a female friend using the pseudonym "R. Mutt" (which then becomes the famous inscription on the urinal), or obtained in some other way, it remains an object that was originally produced for the mass market. A subset of found object art, trash art, uses only discarded items, giving value to what society considers worthless. The Museum of Modern Art in New York's car collection does the opposite: take objects with very high ordinary market value and transfigures them into object with high aesthetic value. Of course, the world of museums and the realm of the market are complexly imbricated. I'll have more to say about these overlapping spheres of value below.

false, I'm making a *mistake*; if you believe what I'm saying but I don't, I'm telling a *lie*; but if neither of us believes it, and both of us knows neither of us believes it, then the chances are that I'm spinning a *fiction*.⁴⁷

While it may easily be dismissed as simply an attribute of Landy's clear and engaging conversational style, the fact that this is an *interpersonal* definition of fiction is crucial. Much rests on what "you" and "I" know and believe. There are several missing possibilities: the case where I believe the story I'm telling you and you believe it too but it is in fact false (a joint delusion); the case where I don't believe what I'm saying but you know it to be true (inadvertent truth-telling); the case where neither of us believes the story, but neither of us knows whether the other believes the story (a mutual test of gullibility); not to mention all the cases where there is uncertainty about the truth or falsehood of the story that cannot be determined by either you or me (mystery). Notice that the actual definition of a fiction – a story told to someone who doesn't believe it, by someone who doesn't believe it, when both people know that neither person believes it to be true – does not rely on the story actually being false. Fictionality, according to Landy's breakdown, resides in intent and reception, not in the content. This would seem to exclude fake news: the intent behind fake news is not to tell a story that is not true; the intent is to tell a story that will get a lot of clicks. Truth is beside the point. As is lying, at least in Landy's sense. And the reception of fake news seems to be removed from normal epistemological criteria for belief. 23% of Americans report having at some point shared fake news on social media; 14% of Americans report having *deliberately* shared fake news on social media.⁴⁸ This goes beyond confirmation bias – the cognitive tendency to

⁴⁷ Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 3.

⁴⁸ Barthel, Mitchell and Holcolmb, 4.

believe claims that support other beliefs one already holds – to a fully conscious re-shaping of the world (for oneself and for others) according to preference, fancy, or affective pay-off. Rather than truth or fiction, fake news seems to partake in what Harry Frankfurt, with equal parts playfulness and seriousness, calls “bullshit.”

When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.⁴⁹

Bullshit, for Frankfurt, is agnostic about the truth and entirely instrumental: bullshit must have a purpose, even if that purpose is simply diversion. The purpose of the bullshit that is fake news is profit (for those who create real-seeming sites and promote it as they would a product), political gain (for those who knowingly forward falsehoods or write these stories in the first place), or nasty affective payoff (for trolls).⁵⁰

If fake news is bullshit, what of contemporary literary fictions? Could fictions not be mobilized to a purpose?⁵¹ Must fictions be disinterested? Cannot fictions contain facts

⁴⁹ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2009): 56.

⁵⁰ Possibly of the most prevalent affects in online life, and certainly one of the most discussed affects, is the odd mixture of obstinacy, spite and glee associated with “trolling.” A “troll” will post stories or views with no regard to their (factual) truth or (subjective) authenticity but merely in the hope of provoking others; a vampiric affect, trolling glee feeds off the frustration and anger expressed by the victims of the troll. The epistemological status of the troll’s discourse is entirely beside the point: true or false, it makes no matter. Like the Macedonian teenager who hopes only to maximize revenue, the troll hopes only to maximize negative affect, or, more accurately, expressions of negative affect (for the troll can never know for sure that he has hit his target with those who suffer and stew in silence). Like many behaviors born on the Internet, trolling has graduated to real life.

⁵¹ I do not wish to give the impression that Landy is entirely unaware of the shortcomings of his initial definition of fiction. On the contrary. The plurality of purposes to which fiction can be, but do not

and lay claim to verity of the facts they contain? What of autofiction? The Franco-Lebanese writer, Chloé Delaume, for instance, begins her autofictional manifesto, “Self-writing: A How-To Guide,” thus:

My name is Chloé Delaume. I am a fictional character. I say it again and again; endlessly and everywhere, I affirm it. I write myself in books, texts, audio plays. I decided to become a fictional character when I realized that I already was one. Except that then I didn't used to write myself. Others took care of that. I was a supporting character in a family romance [*fiction familiale*] and bit part player in the collective fiction [*fiction collective*]. I chose writing in order to take back my body, my story and my deeds, and to take back my identity.⁵²

Delaume approaches “the world” (and its “facts”) from a phenomenological perspective, that is to say the first-person perspective of a human subject who finds herself always already embedded in the world, or to put it in Heideggerian terms, the perspective of *Dasein* finding itself “thrown” (*geworfen*) in the world.⁵³ She also, here and elsewhere, employs a psychoanalytic vocabulary (“family romance” and “collective fiction”) to strongly oppose traditional boundaries between truth and fiction. For her, fictions are

necessarily need to be, marshaled is in fact one of the subjects of Landy's quite excellent book. He does not, however, explore the possible uses of fiction enumerated below.

⁵² “Je m'appelle Chloé Delaume. Je suis un personnage de fiction. Je le dis, le redis, sans cesse partout l'affirme. Je m'écris dans des livres, des textes, des pièces sonores. J'ai décidé de devenir personnage de fiction quand j'ai réalisé que j'en étais déjà un. A cette difference près que je ne m'écrivais pas. D'autres s'en occupaient. Personnage secondaire d'une fiction familiale et figurante passive de la fiction collective. J'ai choisi l'écriture pour me réapproprier mon corps, mes faits et gestes, et mon identité.” Chloé Delaume, “S'écrire, mode d'emploi,” last modified July 7, 2008, <http://classes.bnf.fr/ecrivelaville/ressources/delaume.pdf>

⁵³ The reason why a Heideggerian vocabulary, despite its unwieldiness, is pertinent here, is that the thrownness (the concrete situation) of *Dasein* (the stripped-down version of the human that is the fulcrum of experience) grounds and limits understanding and knowledge. And yet, despite thrown-ness, through understanding, which is an activity, *Dasein* has the potential and possibility for action. The present is a bridge, or the fractural meeting point, between past and future, between what is already cast and what is being cast forward. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 182-88. Peter Osborne points out that this implies that the “concept of the contemporary is thus inherently speculative, not just because it is epistemologically problematic in its application to history, but because it is structurally anticipatory, as such.” Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 23.

effective in the world, they render the world that they describe, and they are unavoidable: if we do not write our own fictions (harnessing the power of language and conforming to the strictures of narrative), then others will write them for us. Her autofictions often treat fantasy, dreams, delirium, psychosis, and other breaks with “reality” at the same level as “factual” experience, making it impossible to discern between what is subjective and objective, personal and interpersonal. The “fiction” of her autofiction is the formal process of linguistic construction that applies to reality and fantasy alike.

Or consider Edouard Levé’s *Autoportrait*, which begins thus:

When I was young, I thought *Life A User’s Manual* would teach me how to live and *Suicide A User’s Manual* would teach me how to die. I have spent three years and three months abroad. I prefer to look to my left. I have a friend who gets off on betrayal. The end of a trip leaves me with a sad aftertaste, the same as the end of a novel. I forget things I don’t like. I may have spoken, without knowing it, to someone who killed someone. I look down dead-end streets. I am not afraid of what comes at the end of life.⁵⁴

The “portrait” of *Autoportrait* is painted one sentence at a time, each stroke depicting the painter, in (representational) content and in style. Each sentence is in the first person.

There are no paragraph breaks. There is no obvious chronological or other ordering.⁵⁵

There are declarative statements about facts in the world, which purport to be true; there are sentences in the conditional, the truth of which can only be measured as a question of possibility; there are statements about the author’s interiority, his preferences, his affects,

⁵⁴ Edouard Levé, *Autoportrait*, trans. Lorin Stein (Urbana-Champaign IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 5.

⁵⁵ As I write elsewhere, “It is a novel without subordinating structures; banal facts and incidental tastes belong to the portrait as much as life-changing events: all are equal under the heading of personality. This has the effect of intensifying the reader’s experience, not allowing her to skip or drift, but drawing her in and riveting her to the details.” See Jan Steyn, review of *Autoportrait*, by Edouard Levé, *Words Without Borders*, September 4, 2012, Dispatches, <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/autoprotrait>

which could be true or not, though he would be the only “source” who can corroborate them. Edouard Levé ended his own life in 2007. Does that fact (in the world) give credence to the claim (in the book) that as a child he thought Claude Guillon and Yves le Bonniec’s *“Suicide A User’s Manual”* would teach [him] how to die,” or that he is “not afraid of what comes at the end of life,” or even that he does, truly, “look down dead-end streets?” It has been the instinctive response of many critics, in the light of his suicide, to insist on a strict line between Levé’s life and his fiction; it seems almost immoral to do otherwise. Frustrated they ask, especially in France, are we not supposed to have long since moved past the “intentional fallacy” and the “death of the author?” And even if we haven’t, how could we, in good conscience, *condone* reading an author’s oeuvre as an extended suicide note?

And yet, these critical reactions fail to account for Levé’s work in its own terms, in as far as *Autoportrait* (and, as I will demonstrate, his final novel, *Suicide*) conform to the ideals of autofiction. The classic autobiographical equation of “author = narrator = protagonist” is undone by the twentieth-century critical orthodoxy that insists on the literary work as an autonomous object, its overlaps with “reality” entirely coincidental and non-essential, and the creative “I” entirely separate from the biographical “I” who “visits the real world.”⁵⁶ Autofiction reinstates the autobiographical equation, but without the claim autobiography has to truth telling. Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the term “autofiction,” insists on an experimental, active poetics:

Autobiography? No, that’s a privilege reserved for the big shots of this world, in the dusk of their lives, and in an elevated style. Fiction, rather, of strictly real events and facts;

⁵⁶ Henri Delangue, “Autobiographie ou autofiction chez Amélie Nothomb ?” *Cedille: Revista de estudios franceses* 10 (2014): 130.

autofiction if you will, having accorded the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, beyond the wisdom or syntax of the either traditional or new novels [roman traditionnel ou nouveau]. To encounter strings of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing from before or after literature, “concrete” like *musique concrète*. Or, again, autofiction: patiently onanistic, now hoping to share its pleasure.⁵⁷

Notice that in this formulation “events” and “facts” are “strictly real,” and yet they are secondary to the “adventure of language” that the makers of autofictions embark on in gathering “strings of words” full of sensual, sonic, and semantic properties that might entirely overhaul the standards of the novel (or the then-already residual *nouveau roman*).⁵⁸ This real-ness (belonging to the “real” world) is material to be sculpted in the making of “fiction.” In this respect, the analogy to the composer Pierre Schaeffer’s *musique concrète* (concrete musique) is fascinating: the “concrete-ness” of this music that makes use of sounds recorded from the “real” world, is in opposition to the “discreteness” of annotated music intended to be played by standard instruments. The word, “concrete,” finds its etymology in the Latin “*concrētus*, past participle of *concrēscere* to grow together;” however the “frequent antithesis of *concrete* and *discrete*, appears to be influenced by a notion that the word represents Latin *concrētus*, past participle of *concernere*, in the same way as *discrete* is derived.”⁵⁹ It is in this latter, mistaken, genealogy, that the opposition between discrete notes and concrete sounds is founded.

⁵⁷ “Autobiographie? Non, c’est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l’on veut autofiction, d’avoir confié le langage d’une aventure à l’aventure de langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontre, fils des mots, alliterations assonances, dissonances écriture d’avant ou d’après littérature, concrète, comme on dit musique. Ou encore, autofiction, patiemment onaniste, qui espère faire maintenant partager son plaisir.” Serge Doubrovsky, *Autobiographies de Corneille à Sartre* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1977), 69.

⁵⁸ I intend “residual” in the sense used by Raymond Williams in his distinction between emergent, dominant, and residual aesthetic trends at any given cultural moment. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 121-22.

⁵⁹ “concrete, adj. and n.” OED Online. December 2016. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/38398?rskey=Z2hFEP&result=1> (accessed February 03, 2017)..

The materials of autofiction – the “facts” and “events” of the “real” world – are concrete in the same way; yet the emphasis is on their composition, not on their indexical or referential function with relation to the world. Autofictions are of the world; they contain its traces; but they are free to distort its image. Its facts are, in a trivial sense, “true;” they correspond to the best-corroborated versions of reality available. But their “truth” is not the point: it is a means toward a creative end.

Autofiction is not alone in this instrumental relation to facts; historical fiction, literary rapportage, and autobiography (J. M. Coetzee’s term for writing the self-as-other, a genre which I will consider in the next chapter) all worry the boundaries between truth and fiction. There is also the dominant trend in contemporary literary fiction to blur the lines between literature and history. Add to this the existence of truths that cannot be told within the rationalist, communicative, interpersonal model that Joshua Landy sketches – unconscious truths, aesthetic truths, or cultural truths – and the division between a real world consisting of truths, the betrayal of that world with lies, and a world that has no bearing on truths or lies, begins to seem shaky at best.⁶⁰ The relationship between fictions and the (real) world cannot be translated into a question about the intentions of the author (whether truth-teller, liar, or bullshitter). Cannot fictions be believed in, even with a feeling of certainty, by those who tell them as well as those who read (or hear) them? What of Goldsmith’s *Day* – is it not a fiction even if it is also (in a far more banal sense than autofiction) “true” (and we know it)? The category of “bullshit” will not save us from having to ask these questions.

⁶⁰ “Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial – notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.” Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 67.

The Oxford Dictionaries, in 2016, declared its word of the year to be “post-truth.”

Defined as an adjective, the full entry reads:

Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief:

‘in this era of post-truth politics, it’s easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire’

*‘some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age’*⁶¹

From this definition, the post-truth age seems precisely the one already heralded by Walter Lippmann in the 1920s, and one has to wonder, when exactly was the truth age? The phrase “post-truth” comes from Ralph Keyes’s 2004 book, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, a book less concerned with the difficulty of establishing truth and more with the “the loss of stigma attached to telling lies, and a widespread acceptance of the fact that lies can be told with impunity” in the contemporary age.⁶² It is perhaps not surprising that the word was used with unprecedented regularity during the 2016 U.S. elections given that one of the chief examples in Keyes’s original formulation of the “post-truth” problem involved one of the presidential candidates:

When *Trump: The Art of the Deal* was published, Donald Trump claimed that 200,000 copies had been printed, that *The Today Show* planned to interview him five times, and that the issue of *New York* magazine with an excerpt of his book was its biggest seller ever. In fact, 150,000 copies of Trump were printed, Today interviewed him twice, and *New York*’s sales figures were not available at the time he made his claims. In his book, Trump called this kind of braggadocio “truthful hyperbole.” After *The Apprentice*

⁶¹ “post-truth, adj.” Oxford Dictionaries Online. December 2016. Oxford University Press.

⁶² Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2004), 9.

became a hit, Trump claimed his television show was the season's ratings leader (when it was actually #7) and said he was America's highest paid television personality. A *Fortune* reporter who debunked these claims, and many others, concluded that Trump's boasts about himself were, at best, "loosely truth-based."⁶³

From Keyes's perspective, however, the nature of public truth and the mechanisms for fact checking remain secure; the problem is rather the cultural erosion of accountability. If someone like Donald Trump can get away with calling naked lies "truthful hyperbole," and if reporters let him off the hook with concessions (however ironic) that his statements are "loosely truth-based," what hope can there be for an honest public discourse? Keyes goes on to deliver an evolutionary and ethnographic account of the development of lies and truth telling rather than an ethical one.⁶⁴ From an evolutionary principle (guaranteeing the proliferation of the group and its gene pool) of "honesty for insiders, whatever works for anyone else,"⁶⁵ Keyes argues that all societies have to deal in one way or another with the "fact that lying is socially toxic,"⁶⁶ deteriorating bonds of trust and thereby threatening the benefits inherent to social cooperation, but that it is only under modern conditions, with truly massive populations, new technological possibilities for anonymity, greater isolation, and the breakdown of community,⁶⁷ that lying has reached epidemic proportions.

⁶³ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁴ "Historically, terms signifying truth and truthfulness have had more to do with Charles Darwin's concept of fidelity to our own than with Immanuel Kant's conviction that we should never lie, or even with the scientific need for factual accuracy. The Moroccan term *haqq* signifies not just "truth" or "reality," but "duty" and "obligation." In German, *wahr* refers to that which is factual, while *treu* refers to a kind of truthfulness that's based more on loyalty. For English speakers, the word *truth* does double duty. Just as the word sound can refer both to something we hear and to someone who's dependable, the word true has multiple meanings: reliable, on the one hand, factually accurate on the other." Ibid., 23.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁷ "[C]ommunity members are less likely to lie." Ibid., 37.

The place where the truth and facts are most sacred, and therefore also the place where they are most under attack, is contemporary journalism. Not only do the people who are “sources” for news stories lie; reporters themselves distort the truth. And, if Keyes is to be believed, it is literature that is to blame: “Those who mingle fact with fiction and call it creative nonfiction argue that they aren’t writing news copy. Unfortunately, it’s hard for those who are reporting news to resist picking up the beat. They’d like to be creative too.”⁶⁸ Railing against every form of embellishment that has become acceptable in the reporting of facts since the 1960s (in America, which is solidly the focus of Keyes’s book throughout), from Hunter S. Thompson’s “gonzo journalism,” to the “literary non-fiction” of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), to the “new journalism” of Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe, Keyes attributes much of the post-truth condition to the (market-driven) need journalists feel to emulate fiction by providing “ongoing drama with through lines and backstories and denouements.”⁶⁹ For Keyes, there is a place for admixtures of fact and fiction, but only if it avoids dishonest and irresponsible labeling:

Everyone knows that Philip Roth plays games by mingling facts with fiction. That’s part of this author’s appeal. But Roth’s not trying to fool anyone. He has enough integrity to call his blends of fact and fancy novels. So why don’t more writers follow Roth’s lead and call their fusion works fiction? For two reasons (at least). One has to do with the marketplace: on average, works of nonfiction sell better than ones of fiction. The other is more intangible. Nonfiction writers who fictionalize, then wrap themselves in the mantle of “narrative truth” or “larger truth” or “emotional truth,” get to have it both ways. They

⁶⁸ Ibid., 163.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 181.

enjoy the freedom to make things up while retaining the credibility that comes from calling their work nonfiction.⁷⁰

A fiction by any other name smells not as sweet. But what about the inverse argument? What about works labeled as “fictional” that then contain “factual” elements? Does this not also (though perhaps not with equal force) shatter the compact between reader and writer that Keyes sees as both analogue and constituent part of the social contract?⁷¹ Is it conceivable that a reader comes to a book hoping to receive “emotional truth” but are disgusted when they discover “factual truth?” Is it conceivable that a reader comes to a book and starts reading before firmly deciding what the terms of the author/reader “contract” are? Certainly not to Keyes. The biggest weakness of his argument is his repeated insistence that the *enjoyment* of fictions (at least those purporting to be in some way fact-based) lies entirely on the side of its creators;⁷² that most readers *do not enjoy* it when authors play fast and loose with the truth.⁷³ At best, he can conceive of some readers enjoying Philip Roth because his works are clearly marked as “novels” and of some readers enjoying Lauren Slater’s book, *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (2000), because its title contains a warning that it may not be entirely factual, though we receive precious little evidence that Keyes himself is such a reader. Any more radical probing of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction is met with only with opprobrium and scorn. Keyes would certainly be mystified by those readers of Ferrante who are thrilled by the fact that they cannot discern whether the quartet is a series of *romans à clef* or pure invention.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁷¹ Ibid., 167.

⁷² Ibid., 75, 87, 90, 132, 169.

⁷³ Ibid., 163, 167.

Keyes's book, while certainly growing increasingly timely since its publication, does not by itself account for the Oxford Dictionaries definition of post-truth. In particular, it does little to account for the "appeals to emotion and personal belief" that oppose "objective facts." This aspect is most influentially, though perhaps not originally, reflected on in Stephen Colbert's news satire show that ran on Comedy Central from 2005 until 2014. On the show's opening night, in the inaugural edition of a repeated monologue segment called the "The Word," Colbert defined the concept of "truthiness:"

I will speak to you in plain, simple English. And that brings us to tonight's word. 'Truthiness.' Now, I'm sure that some of the word police over at Webster's are going to say, 'Hey, that's not a word.' Well, anyone who knows me knows that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist: constantly telling us what is or isn't true, what did or didn't happen....⁷⁴

As it turns out, the "word police" at *Merriam-Webster's* declared "truthiness" their "word of the year" for 2006. Even if the Colbert persona was not a "fan of dictionaries or reference books," they were certainly fans of him. How could they not be when his show carried on such a tireless assault on the anti-elitism and anti-facts stance associated with the George W. Bush presidency? There is already a cottage industry of academic works, one that I will not attempt to add to here, that catalogues the political and cultural importance, as well as the perceived shortcomings, of *The Colbert Report*. For my purposes it is sufficient to note two elements of the contemporary situation illuminated by Colbert's concept of truthiness. The first is that we live in an age where truth and fiction

⁷⁴ Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Pilot Episode (New York: Comedy Central, October 7, 2005), Television.

are not as easily separated as Ralph Keyes or Harry Frankfurt would like. As Benedict Anderson argues in the context of people imagining communities larger than any they have directly experienced, even from exemplary genres of objectivity such as newspapers, “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity.”⁷⁵ In addition, truth can be manufactured from fiction to the extent that the world can be changed by it, and in this (strict) sense truth is performative. While “truthiness” may not have existed as a word in a dictionary when Colbert first described it, his very description brought about the “official” recognition of the word. What was a fiction became a fact. Colbert’s show, often referred to as a “fake-news” show before that term acquired an altogether different meaning, passes Joshua Landy’s test for fiction: its viewers and producers are in accord that this show, aired on a comedy channel, with obvious jokes and exaggerations, lays no claim to empirical truth and is not in any way masquerading as “real news.” Keyes could not object because the “contract” between the show and its audience remains in tact. It is, in many ways, a new iteration in the honored literary genre of satire. And yet, as media commentators endlessly noted for the duration of the show’s run (and before that when Colbert was still working on Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*), “fake news” shows such as Colbert’s became a primary news source for at least some people. This partly has to do with the medium of television: while Colbert would never step out of character, and while any discerning viewer (and to give credit where it is due – this show, as much as any good work of art, taught its audience how to read it, and by extension, gave its audience tools for reading the world – most of its viewers *were* discerning) would not mistake Colbert’s pronouncements as straightforward propositions about the world, the show did cite

⁷⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 36.

extensively in the form of video clips from “real” news shows. The show’s satire was more often aimed at the news presentation or selection than at the news content, but viewers would nonetheless often learn of the content from (and form a picture of the world based on) these clips together with their framing. All of which is to say, a fictional frame does nothing to prevent a viewer, or, as I will argue, a reader, from forming a world picture based on a work.

The second thing I will note is the way in which Colbert’s work makes us aware of a slippage between cognition and affect:

I don’t trust books. They’re all fact, no heart. And that’s exactly what’s pulling our country apart today. ‘Cause face it, folks; we are a divided nation... between those who think with their head, and those who know with their heart.... That’s where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen: the gut. Did you know you have more nerve endings in you stomach or in your head? Well, look it up. Now, somebody’s going to say, ‘I did look that up and it’s wrong.’ Well, mister, that’s because you looked it up in a book. Next time, try looking it up in your gut.... Now, I know some of you don’t trust your gut. Yet. But with my help you will. The ‘truthiness’ is anyone can *read* the news *to* you. I promise to *feel* the news *at* you⁷⁶

Colbert’s (implicit) claim – that personal feelings and confirmation bias competes with cognition and facts when we construe the world and that the news (that we receive in its various media) is calibrated to appeal to affect and bias as much as, if not more than, reason and knowledge – is not original to him and by 2005 is already very familiar to psychologists and media experts. But it is one thing to make the claim and quite another to give an *education* in the way contemporary news operates through a fictional frame.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Beyond delivering entertainment,⁷⁷ the tactics of Colbert's satire (which is always an "engaged" form) seems to be homeopathic: to inoculate his audience by exposing them to small doses of the poison, prompting them to develop ways to expel it. It would be too simple to claim that truthiness defined is truthiness combated. Too simple because truthiness – the realm of affect (from the gut) and bias – cannot be argued against in purely cognitive terms. Countering truthiness requires an education of the senses, or, more accurately, an education of the way affect can become imbricated in language, which is a realm where fiction excels.

Here is a different definition of "fiction," this time from someone very much concerned with "facts" and "informed opinion," the newspaperman, Walter Lippmann:

For certainly, at the level of social life, what is called the adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions.

By fictions I do not mean lies. I mean a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself. The range of fiction extends all the way from complete hallucination to the scientists' perfectly self-conscious use of a schematic model, or his decision that for his particular problem accuracy beyond a certain number of decimal places is not important. A work of fiction can have almost any degree of fidelity, and as long as the degree of fidelity can be taken into account, fiction is not misleading. In fact, human culture is very largely the selection, the rearrangement, the tracing of patterns upon, and the stylizing of, what William James called "the random irradiations and resettlements of our ideas." The alternative to the use of fictions is direct exposure to the ebb and flow of sensation [...] For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal

⁷⁷ It is a singularly unhelpful argument that explains away the cultural influence and aesthetic project of *The Colbert Report* and all other works in the medium of television by drawing a division between "art" and "entertainment" whereby the former maintains a level of autonomy and the latter is completely subservient to market forces. This is not to say that debates around the autonomy of the artwork are entirely without interest, but policing works such as Colbert's for their lack of purity does nothing to explain their form or function; it is mere and thoughtless genre snobbery that adds nothing to our understanding.

with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world.⁷⁸

Clearly Lippmann has a broader idea of “fiction” in mind than the one ordinarily connoted with literary fiction. And yet literary fiction is not excluded from Lippmann’s category; alongside scientific models, social terminology, and newspaper articles, literary fictions help us grapple with a world “altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” In the context of a discussion of publics and their opinions, Lippmann’s insight is not entirely different to that expressed by Benedict Anderson sixty years later: “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.”⁷⁹ The world in its totality is an impossible object for direct experience; our knowledge of it relies on mediation and reduction: “fictions” in Lippmann’s sense. This version of fiction is not opposed to facts; its relationship to the world is not a matter of discrete binarism: true or false. It is rather a question of degrees of “fidelity.” This is, as Lippmann’s metaphor makes explicit, fiction as cartography; or, to put it the other way around, cartography as fiction. The point is not that the world is unknowable but rather that our “knowledge” of the world is a representation that is only accurate to a certain degree.

Despite Lippmann’s theories being coopted and distorted by the then-emergent field of Public Relations, he was most decidedly opposed to any form of “conscious intervention and manipulation of demagogues, propagandists, or commercial

⁷⁸ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1992), 15-16.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

tricksters.”⁸⁰ He coined the phrase “the manufacture of consent,”⁸¹ made famous by Chomsky and Hermann’s classic of media studies, *Manufacturing Consent*,⁸² but he certainly did not try to advance the science of it. Some commentators have assumed that “fictions” – a term which Lippmann rarely uses after *Public Opinion* – is a marker of opprobrium similar to “propaganda,” “phantom,” and “stereotype.” It is a characterization that is not entirely without merit, since it *does* imply a world represented with some distortion (or loss of fidelity). Sue Curry Jansen, for instance, uses the term in parallel to other terms Lippmann uses to indicate misrepresentation in our worldviews:

“Pseudo-environments” are “fictions,” “counterfeit realities” that are inserted between people and their environments, whether as a result of individual eccentricities or psychosis, cultural traditions, or by the conscious intervention and manipulation of demagogues, propagandists, or commercial tricksters. Like stereotypes, they cultivate “pictures in our heads,” which do not accurately represent the world outside.⁸³

A careful reading of Lippmann’s works of the 1920s makes it clear, however, that “fictions,” much like “pictures in our heads,” are for him entirely inescapable: the best we can do is aim for the highest degree of fidelity possible.

Peter Osborne makes similar use of the term “fiction” to describe the nature of (global) contemporaneity, which for him is

⁸⁰ See Sue Curry Jansen, “Semantic Tyranny: How Edward L. Bernays Stole Walter Lippmann’s Mojo and Got Away With It and Why It Still Matters,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1102.

⁸¹ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*,

⁸² Though Chomsky and Herman take their title from Lippmann, they mention him only briefly on the very first page of the preface: “Lippmann himself, writing in the early 1920s, claimed that propaganda had already become ‘a regular organ of popular government,’ and was steadily increasing in sophistication and importance.” Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), lix.

⁸³ Jansen, “Semantic Tyranny,” 1102.

a productive act of imagination to the extent to which it performatively projects a non-existent unity onto the disjunctive relations between coeval times. In this respect, in rendering present the absent time of a unity of present times, all constructions of the contemporary are *fictional*, in the sense of fiction as a narrative mode.... It is the fictional ‘presentness’ of the contemporary that distinguishes it from the more structurally transitory category of modernity, the inherently self-surpassing character of which identifies it with a permanent transitoriness, familiar in the critical literature since Baudelaire. In this respect, the contemporary involves a kind of internal retreat of the modern to the present.⁸⁴

There is no subject that can experience the disjunctive totality of present times; these times (gathering and congealing anticipated futures and remembered pasts) are only imagined to be “present.”⁸⁵ Contemporaneity is a regulative idea, a necessary fiction. It is important, however, to be able to tell the difference between useful fictions such as critical contemporaneity – a fiction that allows a prominent logic driving contemporary cultural production to become visible – and fictions that obscure or distort reality.

Lippmann introduces into our vocabulary the now very familiar concept of the “stereotype” – preconceived notions that blind us to reality, but also make reality easier to process – as a cognitive mechanism for reducing the complexity of the world. In contemporary usage, “stereotypes” are most often taken to apply to groups of humans defined by “identity:” race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, etc. This is the use of the term that applies in various national debates about police use of stereotyping to identify and apprehend suspected criminals. In Lippmann’s original usage, however, the

⁸⁴ Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 23-24.

⁸⁵ Osborne follows Heidegger (or Augustine) in indicating that the present in fact “only ex-ists as the differentiation or fractured togetherness of the other two temporal modes (past and future), under the priority of its futural dimension” and hence is “*structurally anticipatory*, as such.” I will argue in the next chapter that contemporaneity, both in logical structure and in its expression in contemporary art and literature, also acts as a capacious container of the traumatic past: the past that is still present (and never quite experience as present). Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 23.

sense of “stereotype” is far more general. So, for example, when we look at the photographs from Edouard Levé’s *Rugby* series [fig. 3.1], we can witness the operation of stereotype. With limited information (before looking at the photograph’s title) rugby fans immediately associate these configurations of bodies and postures (as well as the way the camera frames them) with the game of rugby. At the same time, the fact that the men in the picture are all wearing formal business attire signals that we are not seeing a rugby game. The stereotype only becomes visible because of this disjunction. And the stereotype only works for (and in fact defines) a *community* of rugby followers. (Colbert’s show functions similarly, creating disjunction through by means of satire, and appealing to a, national, community). Levé’s image conjures a rather banal stereotype, of no large political or social importance, but the example is illustrative of the role art can play in rearranging our “partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world.”⁸⁶

In his discussion of community (united and differentiated by stereotypes they hold) Lippmann, as we’ll see Anderson later also does, places particular emphasis on the role of the printed word. The key for him is not a hermeneutical exegesis of the text, but a study of its reception. Communities grounded in foundational texts – America grounded in its Constitution, Marxism in the writings of Karl Marx, Christianity in the Bible – are better defined by the simplified, distorted, mediated beliefs they hold about those texts than by the texts themselves:

Marxism is not necessarily what Karl Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, but whatever it is that all the warring sects believe, who claim to be the faithful. From the gospels you cannot

⁸⁶ Rancière, “The Politics of Literature,” 152. See Introduction for a discussion of Rancière’s articulation of art and politics.

deduce the history of Christianity, nor from the Constitution the political history of America. It is *Das Kapital* as conceived, the gospels as preached and the preachment as understood, the Constitution as interpreted and administered, to which you have to go.⁸⁷

Lippmann gives an even weightier example of a stereotype in his discussion of American ideals of “progress” and “perfection,”⁸⁸ which may have been filtered down from writings by Spencer and Darwin, and which certainly has been inflected with various national forms of imperialism, but which in its “American version” culminates in a singularly rapacious vision of the human in relation to the environment: “the country village will become the great metropolis, the modest building a skyscraper, what is small shall be big; what is slow shall be fast; what is poor shall be rich; what is few shall be many; whatever is shall be more so.”⁸⁹ The result is a concatenation of “an extraordinary range of facts in the economic situation and in human nature” into an ideal of progress that finds its manifestation in human “victory over mountains, wilderness, distance,” alongside a Weberian, Protestant, variety of “human competition” that accords with “religious feeling which is a sense of communion with the purpose of the divine.”⁹⁰ The resulting “pattern” is, Lippmann notes, so successful that “any challenge to it is called un-American.”⁹¹ This stereotype is both derived from and expressed in a large variety of written texts, but its final “pattern” exceeds them. Lippmann’s remedy to the “blind-spot” – yet another term that Lippmann established in its current use –⁹² created by the stereotype of progress is *more* written text, his own “critical” text:

⁸⁷ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 105.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Another, later, very influential term we owe to Lippmann is the concept of a “cold war.”

And yet, this pattern is a very partial and inadequate way of representing the world. The habit of thinking about progress as “development” has meant that many aspects of the environment were simply neglected. With the stereotype of “progress” before their eyes, Americans have in the mass seen little that did not accord with that progress. They saw the expansion of cities, but not the accretion of slums; they cheered the census statistics, but refused to consider overcrowding; they pointed with pride to their growth, but would not see the drift from the land, or the unassimilated immigration. They expanded industry furiously at reckless cost to their natural resources; they built up gigantic corporations without arranging for industrial relations.⁹³

Presumably the text of *Public Opinion*, especially in moments such as this when it makes specific assertions about the state of the world, is itself meant to emend the “partial and inadequate” representation with a more holistic and adequate one. It functions at two levels simultaneously: first as a social *theory* of cognition and community; second as a corrective *critique* of pernicious flaws in commonly held worldviews. Lippmann never abandons his theoretical enterprise, but already in *The Phantom Public*, and certainly in later works, including *The Public Philosophy* (1955), Lippmann grows increasingly skeptical of the ability of an informed, “guiding” class of “experts” or intellectual elites to perform such a corrective critical function.⁹⁴ (This anti-elite elitism is, in no small measure, what alienates him from public intellectuals and academics alike, resulting in his decline, from being considered one of the world’s foremost thinkers, to his present status as a footnote in contemporary Media Studies textbooks).

⁹³ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 110.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Lippmann’s critique in *The Public Philosophy* of philosophers in general, and Sartre in particular, as intellectuals with some influence on public opinion – “while they may not cause traffic to move, they can stop it and start it, they can direct it one way or the other” – who yet squander that influence by treating “as superstition, as obscurantism, as meaningless metaphysics, as reactionary, as selfseeking rationalizations” the rationalist principles of a “public philosophy” (opposed to both “popular impulses” and the selfish desires of “private selves”) which, for the later, conservative Lippmann, constitute the only path to a “good society.” Walter Lippmann, *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and James Lare (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1963), 208-10.

If the written word can provide better fictions to replace the fictions we live by (but only have efficacy in the shape and proportion of their reception, which is to say, to the extent that they are read and in the form in which they are understood), what then of literary fictions? In explaining his concept of “fictions,” Lippmann in fact turns to the literary work of his friend, the then-not-yet-Nobel-Laureate Sinclair Lewis, in order to disillusion his readers of the “fiction” of what he terms the “pseudo-environment:”

Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie [from Lewis’s novel, *Main Street*] is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield. Pictures of French and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them, and the professionals do not try. They think of them as, say, two hundred divisions. But Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and so if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon [General Joseph] Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were in a personal duel. Perhaps if you could see what she sees with her mind’s eye, the image in its composition might be not unlike an Eighteenth Century engraving of a great soldier. He stands there boldly unruffled and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind.⁹⁵

Lewis’s novel is about the relative isolation and ignorance of small-town Americans about global affairs during the First World War: ignorance about events that, despite occurring far away, have very real consequences “at home.” It is then, in Lippmann’s terms, a novel about the pseudo-environment constructed through local fictions of the global. In this regard, Miss Sherwin is no exception in having an inaccurate “picture of the world” in her head. *Main Street* was published in 1920, which puts the readership “in the know,” able to appreciate the characters’ ignorance as a case of dramatic irony, at least in as far as it concerns the true import of events on the European “stage” of the

⁹⁵ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 12-13.

1910s. But there is another level of ignorance in *Main Street*, another incorrect or incomplete “picture of the world” that doesn’t assume the reader’s complicity. Rather than the “world” of men in trenches, it concerns the “world” inhabited by the novel’s protagonist, Carol Milford:

She sat in the living-room, glancing across the hall at the men as they humped over the dining table.

They were in shirt sleeves; smoking, chewing, spitting incessantly; lowering their voices for a moment so that she did not hear what they said and afterward giggling hoarsely; using over and over the canonical phrases: “Three to dole,” “I raise you a finif,” “Come on now, ante up; what do you think this is, a pink tea?” The cigar-smoke was acrid and pervasive. The firmness with which the men mouthed their cigars made the lower part of their faces expressionless, heavy, unappealing. They were like politicians cynically dividing appointments.

How could they understand her world?

Did that faint and delicate world exist? Was she a fool? She doubted her world, doubted herself, and was sick in the acid, smoke-stained air.

She slipped back into brooding upon the habituality of the house.⁹⁶

Lippmann, the journalist, gives us the theoretical framework and critical vocabulary to analyze our constructions the “world” as we receive it in the “international” section of the newspaper as well as “public opinion” as it appears on a smaller community (and predominantly national) scale. But in Lewis, the novelist, we find a more sensitive instrument for registering worlds. It may be that small town women such as Miss Sherwin know little of international war and have to construct their image of it synthetically, from limited fragments of experience and from reports (both verbal and written). But this “world,” which is also the “world” of “politicians cynically dividing

⁹⁶ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Signet Classics, 2008), 258.

appointments,” is presented as absurdly masculine, mechanical, and out of touch – the purely phatic repetitions of “canonical phrases” can hardly yield any true insight into the (real) world. Opposed to the public realm of whispers and cigars from which she is sundered by “the hallway,” is the “faint and delicate” world that she inhabits. It is a material world of carefully rendered domesticity, but also fragile cognitive construct that she herself doubts: a “dwelling” in both its mundane and Heideggerian senses. The novel (Lewis’s and novels in general) contains worlds, in the plural. In Lippmann’s terms, this implies that, for the novel, the singular “environment” – the physical reality, to which we are all ultimately subject, even if our stereotypes allow us to temporarily avoid (cognitively) acknowledging it – is inaccessible; we have only our “pseudo-environments,” constructed by fictions told to us by other people and (as Chloé Delaume hopefully affirms) by ourselves. For Lippmann, pseudo-environments lay competing claims to reality. In Lewis’s novel, worlds can exist side by side, and can have importance in and of themselves. The world, in the novel, is *not only* a question of representation, or *mimesis*, but also one of making, or *poiesis*. The multiplicity of worlds here does not mean that a singular, material, globally public reality does not exist; on the contrary, Lewis’s critique of provincial ignorance is ringing throughout. But it does mean that, borrowing from Hamlet, “There are more things in heaven and earth... Than are dreamt of in [materialist] philosophy.”⁹⁷ Carol Milford’s doubt is, in this context, entirely laudable. As Lippmann argues: if people were more aware of the blind spots caused by stereotypes, and “if the imperialist dared to doubt his own inspiration,” there would be more skepticism and less jingoistic nationalism, or, in Lippmann’s own terms (evoking

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 1.5.167-68.

literary stereotypes in his argument for awareness of our stereotypes), “there would be more Hamlet and less Henry the Fifth.”⁹⁸

4. Context 2: Levé’s Non-narrative Realism (From Concept to Object)

Edouard Levé began his career as a painter but destroyed most of his paintings when he embarked on a career of writing and photography, the media for which he remains known today. He produced his earliest photographic series, the surrealist-inspired *Rêves reconstitués*, in 1998. He gave his last novel, *Suicide*, to his editor early in October of 2007 and killed himself on October 15 of that year. Levé’s work can thus be said to be “contemporary,” at least in the banal epochal sense of belonging to the “contemporary” period that follows the “modern” period according to the schemes and divisions of literary and art historians. His photography is managed by the small, fashionable, contemporary art gallery, Loevenbruck, in Saint Germain, Paris. His novels are published by Editions P.O.L., a cutting-edge publishing house, favoring experimental literature, established and run by the former Flammarion editor, Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, also situated in Saint Germain, Paris. Levé’s work can thus also be said to be contemporary in the equally banal sense of emanating from, if not necessarily a fashionable place then, a place of fashion: the left bank of Paris. In addition to the “contemporary” that appears as a historical period after modernism (or perhaps after post-modernism) and the “contemporary” that functions as synonym to “fashionable” (with all the authority and privilege of place implied by that term), Levé’s work lays claim to contemporaneity in at least two further senses: 1) it is contemporary because he excavates the present, laying bare the present generic range of our artistic and narrative gestures

⁹⁸ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 114.

(the stereotypes we live by) – his realism troubled the present over the course of his ten years of active production and continues to do so today; and 2) it is contemporary because it is occupied with contemporaneity as a form of relation: the (im)possibility of breaching solipsism and narcissism in order to connect and share time with others.



Figure 3.3. Edouard Levé, “L’Accord”, from the series, *Actualités*, 2001. Color photograph, 27 ¼ x 39 ⅜ inches.

Levé’s first book of prose, *Works*, consists of a numbered list of 533 works of art that the author has conceived of but not yet brought into being, which is also the description of the first work: “1. A book describes works that the author has conceived but not brought into being.”⁹⁹ Of course, by the time the reader holds the book in her hands, the first work *has* in fact been “brought into being,” fulfilling the promise and short-circuiting the futurity in these present-tense descriptions. Other items on the list

⁹⁹ Levé, *Works*, 3.

also mark and excavate the ground between *concept* and *execution, project* and *completion*:

54. *Modern Ruins*. Color photographs show modern places and objects that have become dilapidated without ever being used.

An incomplete highway, reclaimed by vegetation. The monorail with its concrete pillars decorating the fields of Beauce. A bus station in the middle of nowhere, never inaugurated. The prototype for a racing car, never on the market, left in the back of a garden. A pop garment, dusty and moth-eaten.

[...]

225. A monochrome painting represents the gradual shading from white to blue. It is painted over three years using a paste that is applied the first day and kept fresh with successive additions of oil. The two colors, situated on opposite sides of the canvas, are joined by a series of lateral sweeping strokes, going as far as possible to delay covering the gap that separates them. The completed painting, upon first glance, does not justify the time that went into its making.

[...]

325. A voice describes an unrealized work as if it had been completed: a pile of pipettes in the Sahel desert.

[...]

402. A completed painting is shown to twenty people, whose commentary is recorded. The painting is then corrected following the suggestions given during these interviews to the letter.

[...]

527. A book describes the life of its author in the present tense. It is a factual recollection up until the moment of writing, then fiction up until the author's death. Both of the book's parts, separated as they are by the weeks of its writing, have the cold style of an official statement. Later the author can decide to live what he had foretold.

[...]

529. *The Sickness Unto Death* is read aloud in its entirety by sucking in words rather than expiring them. At the beginning, the voice sounds exhausted. By the end, it truly is.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 16, 56, 74, 86, 104.

The present in these works is one with exhaustion as its horizon, exhaustion occurring once all the potential and futurity of the concept has been transformed into the materiality and finality of the object. Sometimes this exhaustion is permanently held in abeyance, perpetually deferred, troubled by injections of the conditional and the haunting impossibility of completeness; sometimes this exhaustion is confidently asserted – “By the end, it truly is.” The short-circuit between future (the project), present (the making), and past (the product) is supplemented by a short-circuiting between provisionality and finality.

Then there are works that Levé did in fact execute after the book’s publication, including this description of what was to become the photography series, *Amerique* (2006):

20. In the United States a voyage is undertaken to photograph towns with names that are homonyms of towns in other countries. The itinerary, which connects them by passing only once through each town, goes around the country in thirteen thousand kilometers. The trajectory commences in New York, follows the coast to the South, heads West up to the Pacific, climbs back up North, and follows the Canadian border to the North-East before returning to the starting point. The route is traversed by car. The towns crossed are, in alphabetic order:

AMSTERDAM, BAGDAD, BELFAST, BELGRADE, BELLEVILLE, BERLIN,
BETHLEHEM, BETHUNE, BRISTOL, CALAIS, CAMBRIDGE, CANTON,
CARLSBAD, CARTHAGE, CLERMONT, CUBA, DELHI, DUBLIN, FLORENCE,
FRANKFORT, GLASGOW, HEIDELBERG, JERICHO, JOHANNESBURG, LIMA,
LIVERPOOL, MACON, MADRAS, MADRID, MANCHESTER, MELBOURNE,
MEXICO, MILAN, MILO, MONTEVIDEO, NAPLES, ODESSA, OXFORD,
PANAMA, PARIS, PEKING, POTSDAM, ROME, ROTTERDAM, SAINT-CLOUD,
SEVILLE, STOCKHOLM, STUTTGART, SYRACUSE, TORONTO, TOULON,
VERSAILLES.

In these towns photographs are taken of places that are ‘common’ in the double sense of being banal and being gathering spots for the community. Each photograph is accompanied by a title: *Cuba’s Town Hall*; *A Bar in Berlin*; *Supermarket in Rome*; *Hairdressing Salon in Paris*; *A Street in Versailles*. Descriptions that are misleading without being false.¹⁰¹



Figure 3.4. Edouard Levé, “Monument aux morts de la Seconde Guerre mondiale à Berlin”, from the series, *Amérique*, 2006. Color photograph, 15 ¾ x 15 ¾ inches.

In addition, there are works that are by their nature impossible to complete. There are works that are so general that they might already exist before the book’s publication, with or without the author’s knowledge. And, of course, the book’s publication might have inspired, or might yet inspire, further iterations, echoes or afterlives. Like all of Levé’s writings that follow, *Works* explores the tension between depicting the present of creation, in all its potential and contingency, and the finished or actualized product,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 9.

making the work, in that sense, belong to the past. They are works, then, that give extension to the vanishing present, that open up space for the transitional moment. Levé's present is an expansive one that borrows from the potential of the future and the exhaustion of the past in order to take center stage. But the (formal) sense in which Levé's art is about the present needs be distinguished from the sense in which it opens up onto (relational) contemporaneity.

In 2009, Levé's friend, the writer, Gérard Gavarry, published a book called *Expérience d'Edward Lee, Versailles*, consisting of fragments "amputated from their beginnings and ends" accompanying 100 of Levé's *Amérique* photos. "Edward Lee" is the name of a real American whom Levé met while shooting the *Amerique* series, a man he immediately took to be his American double. Gavarry's fragments ponder the other doubles for Levé that might exist in towns like Versailles, Illinois; or Versailles, Kentucky; or Versailles, Indiana; or Versailles, Pennsylvania; or Versailles, Missouri (all real American doubles for Versailles, France). In his introduction to the book, Gavarry describes Levé's photographs in the following terms:

At first sight, they are urban landscapes and portraits, some always frontal, inexpressive, others strange because of their own banality and because of the towns names: Florence, Berlin, Oxford, Delhi, Baghdad... However, looking closer at this *Amérique* it becomes clear that it is for the most part a staging of a premonitory obsession with death and that in reality they are self-portraits by the artist as someone else, or as décor, or as an object, all fixed in some way between presence and absence, something and nothing.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Gérard Gavarry, *Expérience d'Edward Lee, Versailles* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009): back cover. My translation.

Gavarry's observation that the photographs of *Amérique* amount to a type of indirect self-portrait of the artist as dying man goes doubly for the descriptions of artworks in *Works*. While eschewing conventional narrative – a beginning, middle, and end – Levé's first novel (and he did call it a "novel") does subscribe to a version of mimesis, delivering a portrait of the artist stuck between possibility and actuality. I believe that this is what Zadie Smith is responding to with her oft-repeated claim that the adolescent aesthetic is at the core of Levé's art.¹⁰³ But Levé's work is entirely inassimilable to such an aesthetic if adolescence is conceived of as a stage, a period of experimentation and becoming, or a last test of elasticity before the inevitable hardening into adulthood. By recuperating Levé's work into this "adolescent aesthetic" (the aesthetic Smith herself enjoyed as an adolescent and that she now finds almost irresistible for its nostalgic value), she inscribes it into a kind of narrative of progress or development that he shows absolutely no interest in avowing or even rebelling against. His portrait of the artist is neither bildungsroman nor anti-bildungsroman. Not thread but snippet, not music but photography, not progression, movement, counter-movement, tension and resolution, but flash and *punctum*: Levé, in his writing, practices a kind of pointillist portraiture that is modular, cumulative, curated, and non-narrative. His works provide an exercise in the gathering of disjunctive times and perspectives necessary for constructing contemporaneity. This gathering is left to the reader (or viewer). Ultimately Levé's works do not deliver a pre-constructed image of the real as much as educate and develop our capacities for conceiving future and past, potential and actuality, within one capacious present.

¹⁰³ See Zadie Smith, "New Books," *Harper's Magazine*, May 2011, 66-70.

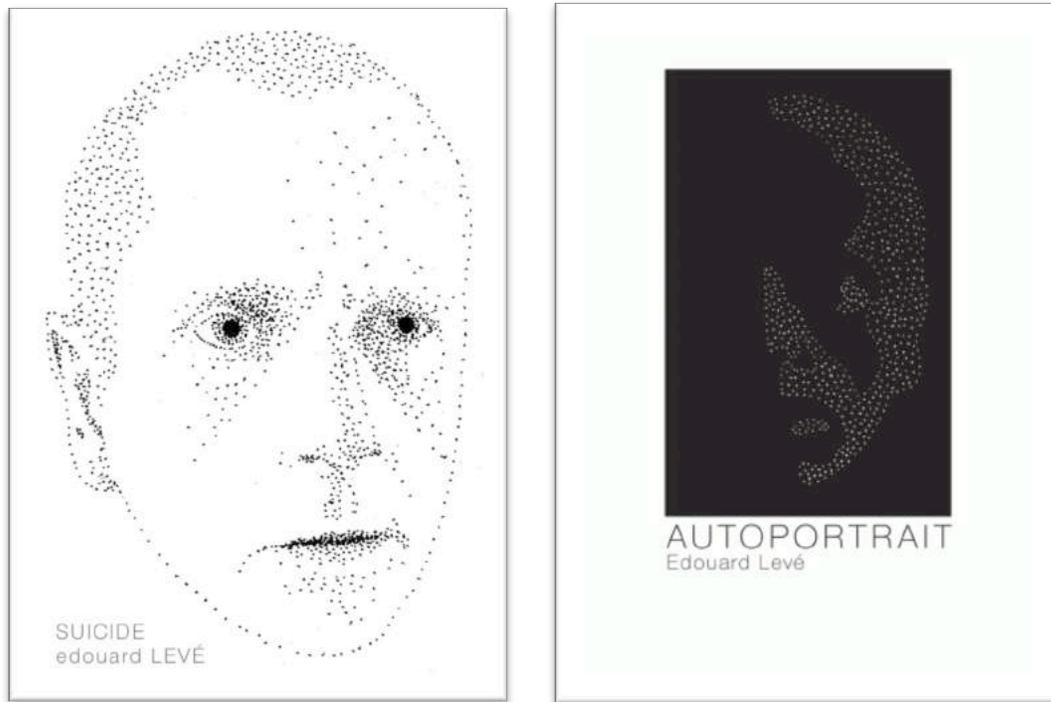


Figure 3.5. Levé's minimal pointillist self-portraits on the English-language covers of *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*

Levé's last two novels, *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*, form a diptych that is no less formally innovative or resistant to plot than *Works* or *Newspaper*. Both concern ostensibly real subjects – *Autoportrait* is a collection of statements about the author, written in the first person; *Suicide* is a collection of statements ostensibly addressed to a dead friend, in the second person. Neither book seems to possess a governing principle of ordering; yet both give the impression that if one were to change the order of the sentences it would only serve to mar the whole.

On the cover of the English-language editions of *Autoportrait* and *Suicide* we find self-portraits by Levé drawn with white dots on black background and black dots on a white background respectively [figure 3.4]. Levé's literary self-portrait is similarly atomized. As is his portrait of the dead friend. Each sentence is like a dot, not revealing

much by itself, while the assemblage gives us a nuanced picture of the person. But our mental construction of the literary picture in fact runs in the opposite direction to our construction of the cover image. When we look at the cover we spontaneously see a face as a gestalt; only later do we consider the dots individually, removed from the ensemble. When we read *Autoportrait* or *Suicide*, we first experience the sentence-dots and the whole is only constructed later, steadily, incrementally. In *Suicide*, Levé describes the process of memory that informs the structure of the book:

You used to read dictionaries like other people read novels. Each entry is a character, you'd say, who might be encountered on some other page. Plots, many of them, would form during any random reading. The story changes according to the order in which the entries are read. A dictionary resembles the world more than a novel does, because the world is not a coherent sequence of actions but a constellation of things perceived. It is looked at, unrelated things congregate, and geographic proximity gives them meaning. If events follow each other, they are believed to be a story. But in a dictionary, time doesn't exist: ABC is neither more nor less chronological than BCA. To portray your life in order would be absurd: I remember you at random. My brain resurrects you through stochastic details, like picking marbles out of a bag.¹⁰⁴

This passage gives a rationale for the substance and order of episodes in *Suicide*: they are all memories of “you,” and they come to the narrator “at random.” By insisting that a dictionary more adequately represents the world than a novel, the narrator makes a powerful artistic statement about the contingency of narrative. If I flip through a dictionary, I am likely to come up with plots, even multiple ones, that will be different to those you find flipping at random through the same book. Yet there is much in *Suicide* that is not random. The novel begins with the friend's death and ends with a poem by the

¹⁰⁴ Levé, *Suicide*, 34.

friend – the only words we ever read that come directly from the friend. The transition between passages have a certain rhythm, occur because of certain associations, would frequently not work as well in reverse order, and appear, at least to some extent, to be *motivated*.

By renouncing chronology, the narrator disavows the meaning that a narrative arc endows, a meaning that often gives undue emphasis to the end. Simon Critchley, responding to my description in the afterword to *Suicide* of Levé’s prose as “stark and austere,”¹⁰⁵ claims that this coldness of tone “cannot conceal the fact that the book is a love letter,” though it is not clear whether the letter is addressed to the unnamed dead friend, or whether it is “*from* the author *to* the author, from an older to a younger version of himself” – “a kind of narcissistic loop.”¹⁰⁶ Notice also the transfer between the friend’s habits – reading dictionaries in random order – to the narrator’s account. Who is it that believes “the world is not a coherent sequence of actions but a constellation of things perceived?” As it turns out, the collapse between author, narrator and addressee has been irretrievably confirmed in the minds of readers by Edouard Levé’s own suicide, 10 days after submitting the manuscript of his final novel. But, bio-thanato-graphic details aside, this conflation is already ever-present in the text of *Suicide*, especially when read alongside *Autoportrait* such that it becomes evident how the “you” of the former takes on attributes of the “I” of the latter. In *Suicide*, the narrator’s narrative praxis and the friend’s narrative theory have become intermingled, confused: the world-ordering function of grammatical person seems to dissolve here. Both “you” and “I” take on the rational, cold, abstracted and mathematical feel of ABC or BCA. While the formal

¹⁰⁵ Jan Steyn, Afterword to *Suicide*, by Edouard Levé (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010): 125.

¹⁰⁶ Critchley, Simon. *Suicide* (New York, NY: Thought Catalog, 2015), Kindle e-book.

comparison here is to dictionaries, where objects or events exist in parallel rather than in sequence, Levé could also have been talking about his earlier experiments in the newspaper form, where entries are united not by the mysterious grouping mechanisms of individual memory but by virtue of entering the public record on the same day.

5. Context 3: The International News

Here's the thing about newspapers: their representations of the world today are incomplete by design. There is an old Jerry Seinfeld joke: "It's amazing that the amount of news that happens in the world every day always just exactly fits the newspaper." Needless to say, despite the more-or-less consistent size of newspapers, not every day's news is equally newsworthy. But the wry observational humor works because of whatever "happens in the world every day," only a subset makes it into the newspaper, and only that subset is considered, almost by definition, and certainly according to common sense, to be "news." So while we may speak of slow and busy news days, the brute "amount of news," when measured in column inches, rarely changes significantly. The format is limited by generic constraints on the total number of articles in each section and subsection, on the placement of articles between images (photographs, tables, graphs, cartoons) and advertisements, as well as on the length, organization and style of the articles themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, the dawn of the digital age has not changed this as dramatically as one might think. There are more in-depth features or think-pieces that go under headings like "the long read," and there is more blog content, but the quantity of actual news stories posted on the website tends to be precisely the same as that in the paper copy, signaling that perhaps the limit is not column inches but reader minutes. Whether physical or digital in its constraints, all of this has very little to do with the

singularity of the events of the past twenty-four hours. The world image that appears to newspaper readers is partial and subject to radical formal, linguistic and market constraints – global totality rendered in a form that actively forgets its limits.

In 2014, the popular philosopher, Alain de Botton, published a book called *The News: A User's Manual*, which, like Levé's book, employs familiar newspaper section headings like "Politics," "World News," and "Economics," and which reflects on the place of news in modern life with the author's signature mix of erudition, pat self-help advice, and genuine philosophical perceptiveness. His fundamental insight (not dissimilar to that of Walter Lippmann) is that newspapers *create* the world for their readers:

The news knows how to render its own mechanics almost invisible and therefore hard to question. It speaks to us in a natural unaccented voice, without reference to its own assumption-laden perspective. It fails to disclose that it does not merely *report* on the world, but is instead constantly at work crafting a new planet in our minds in line with its own often highly distinctive priorities.¹⁰⁷

This impression of a "natural unaccented voice" is the product of newspapers valorizing key terms such as "facts," "accuracy," "neutrality," and an "unbiased" style. This makes it easy to forget that the language, idiom, and ideology of the newspaper are in fact partial and positioned. Newspapers craft "a new planet in our minds," but they do not do so disinterestedly. The internal, invisible "mechanics" and "assumptions" that limit this mental world-portrait are laid bare by the abstraction and de-familiarization in Levé's *Newspaper*, which ironically, despite its zero-degree journalistic style, make us painfully

¹⁰⁷ Alain de Botton, *The News: A User's Manual* (New York NY: Pantheon Books, 2014): 11.

aware of the *impossibility* of an entirely abstract or universal position of enunciation, and that every voice is accented, none more “natural” than any other.

Despite its limits, the newspaper has been, for centuries, a privileged place for the world to be imagined, its “salient” features selected and determined, its multiple locations, processes, and actors, put into (sometimes contested) relation, its geographically disparate events united under the sign of contemporaneity. The newspaper presents an image of the world by gathering, juxtaposing and sometimes even linking, events, trends and processes across the globe, taking place at the same time. And yet this “at the same time” is an expansive concept, with some stories being truly ephemeral and others taking years to unfold. As Lenù from the *Neapolitan Quartet* discovers, the plurality of stories and timeframes contained in a newspaper can be frustrating:

Sometimes it was *Unità*, sometimes *Il Mattino*, sometimes *Corriere della Sera*, but all three were difficult for me, it was like having to follow a comic strip whose preceding episodes you didn’t know. I hurried from one column to the next, more out of duty than out of real curiosity, hoping, as in all things imposed by school, that what I didn’t understand today I would, by sheer persistence, understand tomorrow.¹⁰⁸

For Benedict Anderson this disjunctive plurality of presents has the “date at the top of the newspaper” as its most important emblem; the date is what connects seemingly heterogeneous events by virtue of their belonging to the same moment in what he, putting his own spin on what is originally Walter Benjamin’s phrase, calls “homogenous empty time”:

¹⁰⁸ Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*, 133.

Within that time, ‘the world’ ambles sturdily ahead. The sign for this: if Mali disappears from the pages of the *New York Times* after two days of famine reportage, for months on end, readers do not for a moment imagine that Mali has disappeared or that famine has wiped out all its citizens. The novelistic format of the newspaper assures them that somewhere the ‘character’ Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next appearance in the plot.¹⁰⁹

One date gathers “stories” from diverse places and of diverse duration. Habitual readers of the newspaper, like readers of a comic strip (often also published in newspapers), follow these narratives in serialized form. Anderson’s reference to the “novelistic format” of the newspaper’s international news section here is particularly striking. The newspaper is “novelistic” because its readers assume that its “characters” (in this case a nation) continue to exist even when they are not featured in the present moment of the “plot.” This is precisely what Walter Lippmann has in mind with his claim that we can only know the world through fictions: at the time Anderson is writing, the inter-national world (nations being, after all, a differential construct) is accessible to most people only through the mediation of a “novelistic format” where the exemplary work is more like *The Adventures of Tarzan* than *Finnegans Wake*.

Anderson’s classic study is, of course, *not*, or at least not predominantly, about “the world” ambling sturdily ahead,¹¹⁰ but rather about the nation as an imagined community of geographically dispersed strangers. We may ask, as Rita Barnard does, whether “global thinking is an extension of national thinking,” and, if the answer is “yes,” whether Anderson’s work on the nation might not provide a model for thinking

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 33.

¹¹⁰ This phrase – “‘the world’ ambles sturdily ahead” – would make for a fantastic caption to William Kentridge’s *World Walking* as it appeared in the Italian newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, described in my Introduction.

about “the global novel.”¹¹¹ One way that fiction can image the world today, in a stronger sense than merely through its distribution in the international market for world literature, is by describing or producing a global community.¹¹² In as much as “fictions of the global” (Barnard’s phrase) attempt to represent a community of strangers dispersed over space, they are not entirely different from the so-called national novel. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson outlines the problem in a way that, despite decades of debate and barrels of spilled ink, remains compelling. He famously asserts that the novel, by depicting the *simultaneity* of actions by different members of a social group who have never met each other – actions taking place “in the meantime” – represents “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time [that] is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.”¹¹³ Anderson’s other privileged site for “the meantime” is, of course, the newspaper, which compresses and sharpens the experience of perceived simultaneity by being dated and by circulating broadly through market mechanisms. The novel and the newspaper are “technical means for re-presenting the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation,”¹¹⁴ which is to say an imagined community premised on *simultaneity* as “measured by clock and calendar.”¹¹⁵ It remains a question, to which Anderson only begins to respond in the added chapter to the 2006 reprinting of his classic text, how the trans-national and the global fit into this picture. Is

¹¹¹ Rita Barnard, “Fictions of the Global,” *Novel* 42, no. 2 (2009): 207.

¹¹² Of course the difference between “describing” and “producing” is large, one that I will be addressing later in this chapter. For now, however, the important thing is that an image of the world qua community be produced, whether that image is affectively and ethically subscribed to or not. I.e. it is less important for this part of my argument whether the imagined global community translates into an effective version of cosmopolitanism than are the literary possibilities and limitations for imagining that community in the first place.

¹¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006): 26.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

the global, or can the global encompass, the same “*kind* of imagined community” as the nation?

Simultaneity of course qualifies as a species of contemporaneity, but it is a narrowly defined and technical one. More importantly, as Michael Silverstein points out, Anderson’s nationalism is a version of contemporaneity that assumes a level of homogeneity between subjects:

Anderson clearly believes that there is something common to the cultured phenomenology of the nationalist subject, itself in a way a condition perduring through global time and space. Everywhere it is a cultural order corresponding to an inclusive political entity that provides each social being with the essential property of national identity. And the cultural phenomenology of nationalism operates, Anderson theorizes, by projecting and constructing a homogeneous space-time of distinctive, differential membership. In this space-time every individual in a national population can be simultaneously located in relation to any other; and such bounded groupness as a habitable space-time both synchronically and diachronically, as it were-is to be contrasted with that of any other such groups imagined to be included in other possible groupings of this overall cultural order (as one can note in the phrase, “the community of nations,” for example, denoting that higher order, overall space-time of space-times). Nationality is a taxonomy of differentiation of individuals as members of such groups, together with essentialized nondifferentiation of individuals within group boundaries.¹¹⁶

This kind of community (which would include any group defined by its homogeneity and simultaneity, not just nations) is experienced as “a metaphysical sense of the primordially of one’s membership.”¹¹⁷ The national community is, of course, constructed differentially, or as Naoki Sakai elegantly puts it, co-figuratively, as one homogenous

¹¹⁶ Michael Silverstein, “Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality,” in *Regimes of Languages: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2000), 110-11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

group defined against another (itself, simultaneously, defined against the first), a process that can be historically followed.¹¹⁸ The nation is nevertheless experienced, subjectively, as timeless, giving rise to the plethora of unexamined essentialisms, notably including the assertion of a *natural* national language. It is *within* this subjective schema, with its presumption of homogeneity and linguistic unity,¹¹⁹ where a good deal of literature (and film) that Rita Barnard ascribes to the category of “fictions of the global” can be situated. Unlike Barnard, I reserve the term “global” for fictions that move beyond the realm of relations between mutually constitutive difference between homogeneous national containers, which is to say, beyond the *inter-national*. Barnard begins her stimulating essay in the conditional – “If global thinking is an extension of national thinking....”¹²⁰ My starting assumption is that global thinking, unlike inter-national thinking, is precisely not an extension of national thinking. Turning to Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is a productive move if the goal is to map out the dynamics of inter-national literature (or the newspaper). But the global, for me, remains by definition in excess of this schema (see Chapter 4).

Far from arguing for a sort of emerging cosmopolitan structure of feeling shared by a new global community – something which the early Goethian version of “world literature,” for instance, would aim to recognize or inculcate – I am interested here in a very thin inter-national version of community, a commonality in the way the world is imagined today: the world, less as *imagined community* than as *communal image*. So, in thinking about the international news and the inter-national novel, I employ Anderson’s idea of “the meantime” as a textually constructed sense of simultaneity and community

¹¹⁸ See Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 3.

¹¹⁹ See the previous chapter for a discussion of what happens when a community addressed by an artwork is presumed to be inherently heterogeneous.

¹²⁰ Barnard, “Fictions of the Global,” 207.

between readers who might never meet each other. However, for the purposes of this study, I remain agnostic about the loyalties, patriotism, or other communal affect experienced by those readers. It may well be the case that these readers share pride, shame, anxiety or fidelity, but this affective dimension is largely beyond the scope of my inquiry. Nevertheless, while I am primarily concerned here with the formal limitations and distribution of inter-national narratives or images, rather than definitively bracketing out the cosmopolitan question, I hold to the position that the question of possibility and technics of a communal image is, to borrow a term from Heidegger, “equiprimordial” with that of the imagined community: the image and the community are two sides of the same coin since cognition and affect arrive simultaneously. If we don’t have the same idea of what the world is, however minimal, broad, or fuzzy that idea may be, we cannot meaningfully speak of belonging to it together. But no communal image that we *are* able to conceive would be innocent of communal affect.

The image of the world that emerges from newspapers is standardized and differentiated according to the actually existing mechanisms of gathering, translating and distributing world news. The most obvious way in which these stories are rendered either homogenous or different has to do with the historical rise and current dominance of news agencies. How often do we read a story about Kenya filed from Johannesburg, a story about Malaysia filed from Manila, or a story about Uruguay filed from Buenos Aires? While newspapers will employ reporters to cover local news, they are increasingly outsourcing international stories to a handful of news agencies, with Reuters and AFP foremost among these. Foreign correspondents are dwindling in number and regional bureaus are expected to cover wider and wider areas. Correspondents are human beings,

with limited language skills and regional knowledge, who can only be in one place at a time, and who, like ethnographers, often make use of a number of intermediaries, including native informants and interpreters.

In the case of ongoing regional stories, as with the 2015 terrorist attacks and elections in Nigeria, reporters will often, to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz's compelling ethnography of foreign correspondents, "parachute in" to be physically present as witnesses to the events in question.¹²¹ But this physical presence can be misleading. As Susan Bassnett and Esperança Bielsa point out in their comprehensive study, *Translation in Global News*,

The constant flow of international news around us hides the real difficulties that are part of reporting from remote areas, where the problem of not speaking the local language is added to those of access and background knowledge, while the issues involved in covering news about a foreign reality become in fact reduced to one of mere presence.¹²²

"Being there" is not enough. The limits imposed by language and access on "parachutist" reporting is illustrated by the title of Edward Behr's autobiographical account of his time as a foreign correspondent: *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?* The correspondent's access to both the facts and their local meanings is limited by factors such as language skills, gender, and ethnic or religious identity. But the problems don't end there. International news entails several further levels of distortion and, above all, omission, when correspondents act as translators and editors, tweaking their local stories for global interest, as Bassnett and Bielsa reveal:

¹²¹ Ulf Hannerz, *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 29.

¹²² Susan Bassnett and Esperança Bielsa, *Translation in Global News* (New York NY: Routledge, 2009): 59.

The need to deal with linguistic diversity in news production and the simultaneous circulation of news in different languages make translation an important part of news agency work. But news agencies do not tend to employ translators as such. This is because translation is not conceived as separate from other journalistic tasks of writing up and editing, and is mainly assumed by the news editor, who usually works as part of a desk, where news reports are edited and translated and sent to a specific newswire. Both processes of edition and translation imply the tasks of selection, correction, verification, completion, development or reduction that will give texts the final form in which they appear in the newswire.¹²³

While the paucity of foreign correspondents and the dominance of news agencies might lead to a standardized picture of world events, with more or less the same version appearing in newspapers on different continents, there is also a series of edits and translations that adapts these stories for local markets.

In *Newspaper*, there are no bylines, no dates, and no place names. The result is that this sense of foreign news produced and adapted for a local readership is, at least on the surface, undone, and pleurably so. In order to locate herself with respect to each story, the reader has to take into account other factors, such as the length of the article, the level of detail, and the implicit ideological positioning despite the veneer of neutrality and focus on facts. Consider, for example, this lengthier than average story out of Levé's "International" section:

A SEPERATIST REGION has been crushed by the army, while the international community looks on indifferently; global forces are more concerned with currying favor

¹²³ Ibid., 57.

with the ruling government and less worried about human rights in this territory devoid of economic incentives. The rebels' accounts confirm statements made by humanitarian associations: the government's ethnic cleansing operations have intensified in the wake of a series of attacks that, according to the authorities, justifies a severe crackdown. Within the region, international observers are forbidden to move around freely. A woman recounts: "They said they would come back and they would kill the rest of the family if we spoke up. So we left. [...] The villagers who are left don't dare look you in the eye, because they distrust informers. No one knows what the others have said while they were with the torturers." Two months earlier, she was trapped in her house for an entire week with the remaining members of her family, while the house next door served as an interrogation and torture chamber. She only heard the screams. [...] The first temporary torture chamber was unveiled three years ago, in the presence of several generals. One of these generals posed on television in front of corpses, which he referred to as "bandits executed with weapons in their hands." He justified the fact that innocent civilians had been impacted by stating, "It's necessary to make residents understand that they are suffering because of terrorists. It would be better for them to cooperate."¹²⁴

The fact that this terribly violent report is so generic, that its "separatist region [...]" devoid of economic incentives," "international observers," "authorities," civil war, torture, and bloodthirsty army generals cannot be easily identified as belonging to one specific country, is a sad indictment of the state of the world. But one *can* recognize the brand of journalism; it is a shock piece, taking care to give both the broad sweep and a personal account in order to maximize horror and outrage. We, as readers, are firmly positioned on the side of "human rights;" it is a story about the "developing world" for the "developed world," a story for a "stable" nation about an "unstable" one. It is affecting despite the anonymity of the region and its people, and the fact that it works as a story despite the lack of concrete details creates a deep sense of unease, for it reveals the fictional form (or at least the narrative form commonly associated with fiction) by which

¹²⁴ Levé, *Newspaper*, 7-9.

we are exposed to distant lives. Levé manages to give a generic image of the state of world affairs, evoking “global forces” and an “international community,” an image that, by virtue of its instant recognizability, we must admit to ourselves we already share, even if we do not “believe” in it. But, through his strange experiment in abstraction, he also draws our attention to the generic forms for fabricating such a communal image and to its inherent limits. The most important limit is that while the image is rendered at a global scale, it is not meant for everyone on the globe; the community that the image depicts (the inter-national world) is larger than the community in which the image is intended to circulate (the local: city, region, nation). And even among the world’s literate and well-heeled citizens, this image will not find equal appeal everywhere, despite it being produced and broadly distributed by the same few international news agencies.

While the world’s news outlets share many of their sources – and this goes for photography as much as prose – thereby establishing a common (even if locally differentiated) cannon of world events, there is also another, more basic, way in which newspapers encourage its readers to think of the world as a totality. Consider this reflection by Ulf Hannerz on a rather strange story about the ongoing existence of an originally Irish Protestant fraternal society in Ghana:

The presence of a lodge of the Orange Order in Accra may come as a surprise [...] These are our contemporaries out there, in bowler hats in Accra, disco fashions in Beijing, or frock coats in Jerusalem, not people living in some entirely separate and distant temporal order. The correspondents seem to avoid, that is to say, what has been identified as a problem in the classic construct of an “ethnographic present,” the distancing that goes

with placing people elsewhere in some different time altogether. That also seems like a contribution to cosmopolitanism and to the sense of the world as a single place.¹²⁵

What this kind of news story aims at, with its “sense of simultaneity” and its rendering of “the world as a single place,” is nothing less than a contemporaneous inter-national realm. Contemporaneity, in this sense, would entail avoiding what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian famously called, “the denial of coevalness.” Fabian argues that there is a radical break between anthropological fieldwork and ethnographic writing: the fieldwork relies on the anthropologist sharing time with the ethnographic subject;¹²⁶ the writing places them in radically different times. Fabian critiques the discipline of anthropology for its “*denial of coevalness... a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.*”¹²⁷ This follows from a tendency to spatialize time, denying the shared inter-subjective time of anthropological fieldwork in favor of an allochronic discourse instituted by colonialism that divides the so-called modern “West” from the so-called traditional “rest.” Elizabeth Povinelli points out that this violent form of differentiation has done more than situate cultures in different times, it has assigned to them “different *tenses*,”¹²⁸ such that, for the Other, “contemporary lives were reduced to a set of ancient needs: the durative unfolding present was narratively transfigured into a

¹²⁵ Ulf Hannerz, *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 20.

¹²⁶ A common critique of Fabian is to point out that there is no shared time even at the moment of fieldwork. Marc Augé, for example, claims, “it is the investigation circumstances themselves that create a temporal hiatus between observer and observed” (47). See Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999): 45-51.

¹²⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002): 31. Fabian’s emphasis.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011): 26. Povinelli’s emphasis.

frozen past perfect.”¹²⁹ This allochronic discourse, or confinement of entire groups of people to the past perfect tense, is not limited to the discipline of anthropology but forms part of the “broader social tenses of late liberalism” currently operative.¹³⁰ The persisting relevance of this discourse is what allows Pedro Erber to extend Fabian’s critique of anthropological theory to a critique of contemporary theorists of contemporaneity (above all, Giorgio Agamben), detecting in them, at precisely those moments when they purport to seek out contemporaneity, a “denial of contemporaneity.”¹³¹ Despite their many flaws, newspapers, at least sometimes, manage to affirm the global contemporaneity between cultures that old-school anthropologists and new-school theorists frequently deny. Sometimes, but not always. One would imagine that a distant people consigned to “different tenses,” whose contemporaneity is denied by those who write about them, by definition couldn’t be newsworthy. And yet, even in newspapers a certain mode of doublethink can apply when reporting from places that are relevant and therefore “contemporary” but also simultaneously portrayed as somehow stuck in the past. This was long the case with the Soviet Union; it is currently the case with North Korea; and it has almost always been the case with most of Africa in European and American news. This is why Hannerz, writing about journalists, still has to make the argument for acknowledging the coevalness of the “foreign” place whence the “foreign correspondents” of his title write.

6. *Provisional Through-lines*

¹²⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹³¹ Pedro Erber, “Contemporaneity and Its Discontents,” *Diacritics* 41, no. 1 (2013): 30.

One of the chief complaints that Alain de Botton makes about the news today is that it is (unnecessarily) boring. The problem, as he sees it, is that newspapers don't provide sufficient context, nor do they embed stories in the larger and more interesting narratives of which they in fact form part. A dull story about a town hall meeting could be an exciting story about class struggle or the role of subsidies in society, so we are told, given the proper framing. The problem is one of scope and duration:

News organizations are coy about admitting that what they present us with each day are miniscule extracts of narratives whose true shape and logic can generally only emerge from a perspective of months or even years – and that it would hence be wiser to hear the story in chapters rather than snatched sentences.¹³²

Andrew Pettegree, in a less speculative, more scholarly work from the same year, *The Invention of the News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (2014), arrives at the same conclusion. Citing the historical divergence between news pamphlets, which offered coherent narratives about a single topic, and newspapers, which offered, and still offer, “an undigested and unexplained miscellany of things,”¹³³ Pettegree harbors doubts whether the best form won out:

Pamphlets and news broadsheets allowed the discerning reader to dip in and out of the news as they chose. They also reflected accurately one great truth inimical to the periodical press: that news was actually more urgent at some times than others. Two centuries of regular daily papers and news bulletins have trained us out of an appreciation of this. Yet when we turn on a news bulletin and hear, as the first item, that a committee

¹³² De Botton, 26.

¹³³ Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of the News: How The World Came to Know about Itself* (London: Yale UP, 2014): 364.

of legislators has reported that some government activity could be accomplished a little bit better, then perhaps we could conclude that our ancestors had a point.¹³⁴

Flipping through a newspaper, especially a foreign newspaper, or a local paper from a district that is not one's own,¹³⁵ it is hard not to sympathize with this conclusion. News stories without context, and without ties to larger narratives, can be frustrating. De Botton makes the point that even a great novel such as *Anna Karenina* would be infinitely boring if reduced to the dry and fragmentary style of a newspaper. But, of course, newspapers *do* have stories or story lines that stretch over weeks, months and sometimes even years. Foreign correspondents, especially, are acutely aware of their role in establishing historical record, and their patterns of deployment reflect a desire to follow longer narrative arcs from certain parts of the world. The end of apartheid was such a story, prompting the long term presence of a host of reporters producing a series of stories that together added up to a bigger picture than any individual article. Those who read the newspaper regularly have an experience far closer to the "novelistic" one Anderson describes, where, if Mali doesn't appear in today's paper, we assume it is "awaiting its next appearance in the plot." And of course, at the extreme end of the spectrum are novels, such as those by Dickens and Dostoevsky, published in newspapers in serialized form. In fact, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was just such a novel, published in installments in the periodical, *The Russian Messenger*, between 1873 and 1877. The catch was that one had to keep paying for the periodical over a period of four years in order to read it.

One of the striking things about *Newspaper* is its paucity of such longer storylines, or the way in which they become obscured by the removal of proper names

¹³⁴ Ibid., 365.

¹³⁵ Of course, one of the measures of when a district becomes "not one's own" is when the local news begins to seem irrelevant.

and adjectives that would indicate proper names. M.A. Orthofer of *The Complete Review* goes so far as to claim there “are no feature pieces here, [...], only small, summary ones, as all the news is presented in bite-sized pieces.”¹³⁶ While it is not strictly true that there are no “feature pieces” or pieces that might form part of a sequence, where longer story lines do exist in *Newspaper*, Levé’s abstraction from what Orthofer calls “identifying markers” such as “personal names” and “places,” often make these continuities hard to discern, as is the case in the following entry:

A poll carried out on the day of legislative elections indicates that the prime minister would be elected in the first round with 50 percent of the votes, if the presidential election were held on that day. [...] His popularity, which was at less than 1 percent at the time of his surprising nomination by the president, gradually climbed following his decision to send troops into a separatist region, where he fiercely quashed the first attempts at an uprising. After several months of violent combat, he had become the idol of the citizenry. After Islamic attacks and bombings, which left over one hundred dead, the pundits suggested, “The country needs a hero to save it from the terrorists.” He then replaced another former leader of the intelligence service as the head of government, a man who no longer answered to the president or his entourage, neither on internal political nor on military matters. He has earned his fervent popularity through a series of spirited and occasionally off-color comments and gestures, like his promise to “wipe out terrorists even in the shithouse,” or giving these same terrorists the finger on-camera.¹³⁷

The personage in question is the Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose colorful promise to hunt down Chechen separatists, then in his capacity as Prime Minister, appeared several times in French newspapers including *Figaro*, *Le Monde* and *Libération* as “buter les terroristes jusque dans les chiottes” – the exact phrasing of Levé’s original.

¹³⁶ M.A. Orthofer, “*Newspaper* by Edouard Levé.” *The Complete Review*, 9 March 2015. <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/modfr/levee4.htm>

¹³⁷ Levé, *Newspaper*, 18-19.

The problem for an English-language translation of Levé's text is that the press conference in question was far less reported in English-language newspapers, with the *New York Times* for instance, using the press agency Interfax, deciding to instead quote other Russian figureheads such as the then-head of the country's domestic security agency, Nikolai Patrushev, in its coverage of the then-ongoing Chechen bombings.¹³⁸

In addition, when this speech was reported or referred to later, when Mr. Putin became more prominent in Russian politics, no standard translation took hold. Andrew Jack of the *Financial Times* opted for tactful circumlocution: "Earlier yesterday, Mr. Putin said there was still room for negotiation, but Russia would destroy rebel positions wherever they were located."¹³⁹ Sebastian Smith of *The Times*, four years later, opted for a more literal but still mild version: "We'll follow terrorists everywhere. We will corner the bandits in the toilet and wipe them out." The "wipe" and "toilet" pun is absent from the Russian, but this translation does capture something of its epigrammatic feel, or at least so I am told. Speaking no Russian whatsoever, I have relied on the generosity of friends and colleagues to give me a gloss of the original. Of course this puts me in same position as *every* reader of a newspaper, whose sense of the global is always largely taken on faith. Richard Pevear offered: "We'll pursue the terrorists everywhere. If we catch them in the toilets, we'll *zamochet* them on the shitters (or crappers, or some other vulgar word for toilet seats)," adding that the (vulgar) tone is emphasized by the use of *zamochet*, a "gangster word for 'kill' – do in, knock off, rub out, blow away, polish off,

¹³⁸ See "Russian Planes Bomb Chechnya for 2nd Day," *New York Times*, September 25, 1999.

¹³⁹ Andrew Jack, "Grozny airport raid marks shift in Moscow tactics," *Financial Times*, September 24, 1999, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA55846921&v=2.1&u=nysl_sc_cornl&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&asid=7178380ca2a476a7304c1fa7d32a0bde

stamp out...”¹⁴⁰ Sergei Kolalev, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, renders Putin’s phrase as a promise to “bury [the terrorists] in their own crap,” commenting on a shift in the register of Russian political discourse around the turn of the millennium toward the “argot of the criminal world” – a tactically successful shift, given that it “was after saying this that Putin’s rating in the polls began to rise astronomically.”¹⁴¹ John Russell, in the wake of Kolalev’s piece and after consulting with Anna Politkovskaya who suggested his translation mirror “the language (jargon) of the ‘barrack room or prison’ (*serzhantsko-ugolovnyi*),” opts for “we will waste them even in the shithouse,”¹⁴² which has the virtue of carrying across the vulgarity and slang of the original.

Ultimately, after long discussion about the likely reception of alternatives such as “waste,” “kill,” “rub out,” “bury,” “plant,” “shitter,” “crapper,” “toilet,” and “outhouse,” my co-translator and I opted for “wipe out terrorists even in the shithouse.” However, following Eugene Nida’s well-known distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence, one might say that while we managed to identify important elements in the original (an interpretative process that is always selective and limiting) and to produce an approximation of “formal equivalence” between those elements in Putin’s original statement and the our English version, we have been incapable of producing a “dynamic equivalence” of reception between Levé’s French and our English. One possible effect of the French text, due to its date of publication and due to the standard translation and better coverage of this event in French newspapers, is that a contemporary French reader would recognize Putin simply from his infamous statement. Ten years later, and in English, this effect is far less likely: Levé’s prose is impervious to neither translation nor

¹⁴⁰ Richard Pevear, personal correspondence.

¹⁴¹ Sergei Kovalev, “Putin’s War,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 10, 2000, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/feb/10/putins-war/>

¹⁴² John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia’s War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2007): 69-70.

time. (In the next chapter I will consider the aesthetic possibilities of writing *deliberately* ephemeral texts explored by J. M. Coetzee). In a more radical translation we might, of course, have opted for an event that is more current or more reported in the English-language presses – the now-iconic image of Putin bare-torso on a horse perhaps. Or we might have chosen a different and more recognizable figure entirely. But what interests me in this context is less the appropriate norms for literary translation than the way in which this translation puts into relief both the convergence and multiplicity of worlds constructed by global media. One might think that events like this one, those items of “international news” deemed to be of global importance, would be the basic units from which a common, trans-national and trans-cultural world picture is constructed, and that the newspaper format, now adopted (nearly) all over the globe would determine its shape and constraints. But what the translation of Levé’s novel (his de-contextualization of our mediated world-image – his abstraction of an abstraction) reveals is the divergence and competition between world-images (in form as well as in content) at least as much as their unity: the limits of a communal image at the inter-national scale.

Like newspapers, contemporaneity is positioned and selective: things are always contemporary *to* somewhere or *from* some place and not all things can be made effectively contemporary (at least not to humans with limited cognitive capacity). Yet while it may not be possible to experience the overwhelming spread and simultaneity of everything, it can be suggested or figured in fiction, and it is here that the newspaper takes on what Benedict Anderson calls its “novelistic format.” Inter-national contemporaneity can be experienced only partially – in a limited way and from a given national position, or set of positions – but it is nonetheless imagined as a totality, one called into existence at the moment of address, extending across the globe, and therefore,

in an important sense, both depicted *and* created, mimetically represented *and* performatively brought into being by its figurations. Remember de Botton's newspapers, which in addition to "reporting" from the world are also "constantly at work crafting a new planet in our minds."¹⁴³ Mobile, fluid, and responsive to new revelations, effective in the world, these representations are more than *mere* fictions or simple falsehoods. Projected, imagined or extrapolated from limited experience, they are fictions or inventions nonetheless. By casting the contemporaneity constructed by newspapers in an *explicitly* fictional context, Levé sheds new light on the fictionality of the inter-national contemporary as such, implying that, as a consequence, we ought to attach a level of provisionality to world images and acknowledge our power to actively construct them: to temporize as we contemporize.

¹⁴³ De Botton, 11.

Chapter 4

AFTERLIVES

Timeliness, Untimeliness, and Timelessness in Coetzee's Global Period

Does it make sense to him? Yes. No. He came here to talk about death, the prospect of death, his mother's death and how to plan for it, but not about her afterlife.

— J. M Coetzee, "The Old Woman and the Cats"

No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife — which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living — the original undergoes a change.

– Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"



Figure 4.1. Berlinde de Bruyckere, *Cripplewood*

This chapter is about J.M. Coetzee's late global fictions, beginning with *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and ending with "The Old Woman and the Cats" (2013). Reading these works (alongside their echo in the work of Claudia Rankine), I argue that literary assertions of lasting value, even when delivered in the literary-religious language of "canon" and "afterlife" are predicated on secular, worldly contemporaneity. Alongside Coetzee's formal experiments with fleetingness – works that are intended to become dated, superannuated – his late work repeatedly returns to the thematic question of the enduring value of the "Classic." These are works that illustrate a crisis point in literary history, when the global and the digital inflict on authors an imperative to be timely while older institutional literary values demand that they be timeless. While the national, trans-national, and inter-national frames for contemporary world literature are still operative here, these works are also riddled with specters of the global. The global appears as a frame for contemporaneity (for determining who shares the same time) that is marked less by its claim to totality (the globe that admits no exterior, that en-globes all) than it is by its skepticism regarding the calculus of nations (or languages, or cultures): countable, internally homogenous entities, co-constructed in a differential relation to one another. The global contemporaneity that emerges in these works is simultaneously modal and epochal; it is a relationship of *relevance* (distinct from one of equality) between people across the planet, that is simultaneously a relationship that becomes historically possible only in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries (most obviously because of the reach and penetration of global capital into all facets of life, and the spread of the Internet). It is a contemporaneity, then, that despite its claim to "globality," has limits. Or, to put it in terms of my conception of the "present juncture:" the "global" version of this juncture is

not a concatenation of all objects, actors, and events on the planet in this historical present; it is rather the joining together (or gathering in the same frame) of a select set of elements in a manner that refuses to take for granted the hitherto naturalized borders between cultures, nations, and languages. The present juncture constructed by Coetzee (and by other writers inspired by Coetzee) is one especially attentive to disjunction. Joined together in one present we find threads of timeliness (actions and ideas that are *a propos* of the moment), untimeliness (actions and ideas that are retrograde or avant-garde, out of joint with the times or, from the perspective of the untimely one, that reveal time to be out of joint with itself), and timelessness (intimations of ever-lasting, extra-temporal, permanence). This final category, of timelessness, is modulated by literature, philosophy (of ideas), and religion (mainly Christian). “The Old Woman and the Cats,” the work this chapter ends on, is a transitional work in Coetzee’s oeuvre, one where the global (which is to say the relationship of relevance, whether causal or analogical,¹ between far-flung identifiable real-world places) is still of central concern, but the twin figures of Plato and Jesus Christ, emblematic of a metaphysical tradition that becomes a dominant theme in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), is already present.

1. After-Liver

In her 2004 book, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine references J. M. Coetzee twice, giving his works an afterlife that re-contextualizes them in an American national space while also breaking that national frame and giving it a global dimension. It would be stretching even the most capacious definition of

¹ See my discussion of relevance and the present juncture in the Introduction.

“translation” to think of literary allusion or citation as instances of it, even though they are in an obvious sense ways in which literary works are carried across (trans-lated) into a new context. Nonetheless, some of Walter Benjamin’s comments on translation may be applicable here. Benjamin begins from the apparently unremarkable observation that translations come *after* originals (in composition if not always in publication) and in this sense give them a “continued life.”² Much ink has been spilled over the biological and religious metaphors in Benjamin’s suggestive but enigmatic essay; my interest here is more pedestrian. Broadly speaking, in Benjamin’s conception, the translatability of a work is a potentiality that inheres in the original, one that emerges *in relation* to its “afterlife.”³ Often neglected in the discussion of Benjamin’s essay is the commonplace literary attribution of “life” and “afterlife” to books, and the equally commonplace religious association of “translation” with the transference of a person from one place to another, paradigmatically Enoch’s translation to heaven in the book of *Genesis* (a primary source for Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator” and “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”). Translatability in these senses means containing the potential for an afterlife, but a potential that only becomes visible once the afterlife ensues.

This conflation of the religious, literary, and biological that is formulated in terms of translatability continues to have currency today, as is demonstrated in the field of world literature, where David Damrosch speaks of “works so closely dependent on

² “a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life.” Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Random House, 2007), 70.

³ “*Translatability* is not simply a property of the original work, but rather a *potentiality* that can be realized or achieved, and that therefore has less to do with the enduring life usually attributed to the *work* than with what Benjamin calls its “after-life” or its “survival” (*Nachleben, Fortleben, Überleben*) [...] translatability is never the property of an *entity*, such as a *work*, but rather of a *relation*.” Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s – abilities* (Boston MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 90.

detailed, culture-specific knowledge that they can only be meaningful to members of the originating culture or to specialists in that culture” never managing to “achieve an effective *life*” in translation.⁴ The implicit analogy between the biological circuits that sustain life and a text’s circulation between “non-specialist” or “general” readers in the receiving culture is far from unusual.⁵ A text that is unlikely to achieve healthy circulation can be considered moribund, and in that sense, untranslatable. An even more recent iteration of the life imagery can be found in the metaphor of natality in Walkowitz’s category of the “born-translated,” which attempts to account for a contemporary “age of world literature” where, contra-Benjamin, translations do not necessarily come after originals.⁶ Samuel Weber, in a chapter on Benjamin’s concept of translatability, points out that the contemporary digital world poses unique challenges in the history of translation, whereby the original and afterlife become difficult to distinguish:

The status of this *terminus ab quo*, the original, has been radically transformed by the spread of electronic media, and in particular, by the development of digital modes of presentation and transmission. The very notion of “medium” is changed by this extension of digitalization. Aristotle, for instance, defined a medium (*metaxos*) as a diaphanous interval that allows a certain transmission to take place. The medium was thus construed as an intermediary between two places. Movement through the medium was –and in most people’s minds still is – defined through implicit reference to and contrast with the fixity of the places between which it moves.⁷

⁴ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 158, my emphasis.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 158, 161.

⁶ For Walkowitz’s take on Benjamin’s “afterlife” see *Born Translated*, 113, 119.

⁷ Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities*, 81.

The *distance* between original and copy (or translation) is, of course, temporal as well as spatial. If this distance is now collapsed, bringing original and copy into a single time and place, then “born-translated” is perhaps a misnomer since it is precisely translation – transformation and transference across time and space that constitutes the present (as) juncture – that has disappeared. From this perspective, works simultaneously issued in multiple places and languages might be more accurately called “born-multiple.” Be that as it may, the master-metaphor of mortal works, ones with fixed lifespans but desires for immortality, or perpetual “fame,”⁸ is still with us.

The first expression of Walkowitz’s concept of “born-translated literature” is an influential, provocative, and I believe ultimately flawed, essay from 2009, extended in her 2015 book, about Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), which she takes as the exemplar of what she calls “comparison literature.”⁹ Coetzee’s novel is shown to be paradigmatic of this “emergent genre of transnational fiction,”¹⁰ on the one hand by virtue of “distribution” (its global circulation) and on the other because of its “production” (Walkowitz’s catch-all category for typography, formal experimentation, and thematic content).¹¹ Comparison literature is defined against national and comparative literature, both of which, so the claim goes, rely on “national categories” and the “ontological integrity of a given text.”¹²

⁸ “The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests it is called fame.” Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 71.

⁹ Walkowitz. “Comparison Literature.” *New Literary History* 40.3 (2009): 567-82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 568.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 567.

¹² *Ibid.*, 568.

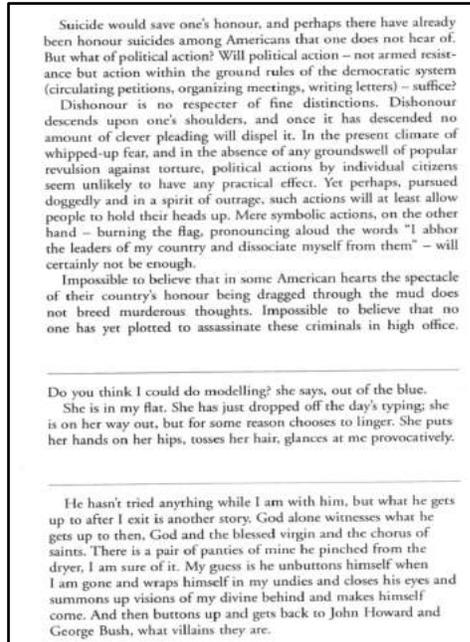


Figure 4.2 Screenshot of J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*

As such, this new genre of literature and new approach to literary studies respond to the material conditions of the present, with its “global literary marketplace,” as well as its “flourishing of migrant communities, and especially migrant writers, within metropolitan centers throughout the world.”¹³ Above all, for Walkowitz, such literature, and such a theoretical approach,¹⁴ as seen in *Diary of a Bad Year*, is sensitive to the translational turn in cultural production of the past two decades, producing what Judith Butler has called a “non-nationalist or counter-nationalist mode of belonging,”¹⁵ something which Walkowitz associates with the translation theories of Naoki Sakai, Lawrence Venuti, and Rey Chow, which challenge received notions about the given-ness and constitution of national language categories, emphasizing “internal variety and a complex mixing of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Though it is never entirely clear in Walkowitz’s text, the empirical claim about a new kind of literature and the theoretical claim about a new approach to literature seem to go hand-in-hand, the former occasioning the latter.

¹⁵ Ibid., 567.

local, regional, and global idioms.”¹⁶ Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, with its invocation of Coetzee, as well as her *Citizen: An American Lyric*, with its reproductions of James Turner’s *The Slave Ship* on the final page,¹⁷ can, despite the national affiliation avowed in their identical subtitles, be seen to also belong to this “transnational” genre.

As for *Diary of a Bad Year*:

Treating comparison at the level of typography, language, genre, and theme, *Diary of a Bad Year* anticipates its own future as a work of world literature. It is therefore a novel that does not simply *appear* in translation but in important ways has been *written for translation*. To adapt Matthew Kirschenbaum’s phrase for artworks that begin on the computer (“born-digital”), we might say that Coetzee’s novel is *born-translated* in a diegetic and nondiegetic sense.¹⁸

We can tell that the novel is “born-translated,” or “*written for translation*,” then, not only because many of its translations appeared at the same time as the original, with the Dutch translation appearing even before the English version, but also because its typographic layout [fig. 4.4], for Walkowitz at least, “invokes historical practices that emphasize comparison between source and target,”¹⁹ because Coetzee’s language (and not only in *Diary*, I would add) is practically devoid of local idiom, because the novelistic genre itself crosses national boundaries, and because translation actively features in its plot. It is easy to see why Walkowitz would choose *Diary of a Bad Year* as her paradigm for the

¹⁶ Ibid., 568.

¹⁷ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (New York: Graywolf Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Ibid., 568.

¹⁹ Ibid. 567. This typographical similarity to bilingual editions is weak from the beginning, since the two, and later three, streams of text in *Diary* are rarely anywhere near the same length. It becomes weaker when sentences in some of the streams begin to run over onto the next page and others don’t.

contemporary genre of “comparison literature.” But what gets lost in Walkowitz’s account is its contemporaneity, which is also, now, its historicity: the way it belongs to and shapes its era, the way in which *Diary of a Bad Year* (which contains dated entries discussing current events of 2005 and 2006) is in fact temporally born-untranslatable.

There is version of contemporaneity that I believe gets lost in Walkowitz’s account of *Diary of a Bad Year* and, oddly, one of its best descriptions is given by Walkowitz herself in *Born Translated*. So: Walkowitz contra Walkowitz. One of the most intriguing aspects and most valuable contributions of Walkowitz’s book is her sense of the contemporary: among other things, *Born Translated* is a pretty decent chronicle of the literary *avant garde*, tempting its readers to explore its archive of important current authors as well as “independent websites and small coterie presses.”²⁰ The result is that when she speaks of the ways in which literary production anticipates its circulation, one gets the feeling that she is drawing from a larger set of contemporary works than those she presents in the book. Contemporaneity does double work in Walkowitz’s book, signifying both works belonging to the present age that Walkowitz has immersed herself in, as well as ones that explicitly inscribe their situation in history, reflexively showing themselves to be dated in a system that puts them in historical relationship with other dates. The latter idea of contemporaneity is for Walkowitz tied to translation, which (as a theme) is “contemporary because it allows us to consider that the work we are reading includes subsequent editions as well as previous ones.... That is translation’s paradox: it is contemporary, above all, because it is historical.”²¹ This sense of contemporaneity relies on an awareness of a work’s moment in time that in turn relies on an awareness of

²⁰ Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 235.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

both its past and future, something which comes as a corollary to being aware of translation. Thus, writing about Sharmila Cohen and Paul Legault's online "Manifesto of the New Translation," Walkowitz presents their argument, which is also, in translated form, her argument:

an artwork enters the world through translation because only through translation do we know 'what it's like that it's there.' This is not simply a phenomenological argument, in which the work exists because there is someone to interpret it. Rather, it is an argument about history and comparison, in which the work has meaning because we place it alongside other works in other languages; we give it history and form by claiming it for the present.²²

This may well apply to the inter-position of Coetzee's works in Rankine's strange "lyric." But when it comes to *Diary of a Bad Year*, Walkowitz seems perilously close to a caricature of the "international reader" of Coetzee's global novels,²³ eschewing *Diary's* relation to its present, failing to "give it history."

Rita Barnard, responding directly to Walkowitz in her own article about the novel, points to the way *Diary of a Bad Year* is responsive to its historical moment.

I found *Diary of a Bad Year* compelling, especially at first reading, because it echoed my own sense of outrage and dismay at the predicament of the world – and the USA in particular – in the era of George W. Bush. It seemed to offer such a powerful critique of the pervasive fetishism of the market, an aspect of the text that Walkowitz's reading barely touches on.²⁴

²² Ibid., 236.

²³ See Imraan Coovadia for a discussion of Coetzee catering for an international, as opposed to a South African, readership. Imraan Coovadia, "Coetzee In and Out of Cape Town," *Kritika Kultura* 18 (2012): 103-115.

²⁴ Rita Barnard, "On Public and Private in J. M. Coetzee," *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2013): 440.

It is notable that, faced with Walkowitz's article, Barnard is compelled to use the past tense, to reconstitute her "first reading" of the book as a South African living in the U.S. in the "era of George W. Bush." This, I believe, is more than an incidental effect of *Diary of a Bad Year*. While both Barnard and Walkowitz deal with the contemporary as periodizing category – the age of born-translated works and comparison literature for Walkowitz; the age of neoliberal reason, and of brutal competition between individuals and nations alike for Barnard – neither accounts for the contemporaneity of its global readers *implicit in its address*, which, following Naoki Sakai (writing in a different context), I take to be "heterolingual," a mode of enunciation where "every interlocutor is essentially and potentially a foreigner," evoking a "disaggregate community" that, despite their disjunctive experiences of the text, shares time in reading it.²⁵

Claudia Rankine does not refer to *Diary of a Bad Year* in her twin American Lyrics, but she does reference *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*. In Rankine, or rather the first-person voice in the lyric who stands in for Rankine, we have a different kind of "international reader" to Walkowitz. While brief, these readings are exemplary for avoiding a false sense of mastery and for approaching Coetzee's novels as ones that speak to their readers as always potentially foreign. Picking up on the same desire to speak across national and linguistic borders that Walkowitz finds in Coetzee, Rankine does not assume that the result of this born-translated-ness is easy comprehensibility.

²⁵ Sandro Mezzadra and Naoki Sakai, "Introduction," *Translation – a transdisciplinary journal* 4 (2014), <http://translation.fusp.it/issues/issue-4>. For a discussion of Naoki Sakai's concept of the heterolingual address, see the my second chapter.

The second of Rankine's two mentions of Coetzee – her “translations” giving him (and his character, Elizabeth Costello) an “afterlife” – occurs in a small paragraph that stands alone on the page:

Or, well, I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness. The world moved through words as if the bodies the words reflect do not exist. The world, like a giant liver, receives everyone and everything, including these words: Is he dead? Is she dead? The words remain an inscription on the surface of my loneliness. This loneliness stems from a feeling of uselessness. Then Coetzee's Costello says in her fictional lecture, “for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse.”²⁶

The reference is brief and enigmatic, but significant, I argue, for two reasons: 1) it is a prominent entry in a series of images, references, and metaphors, that Rankine uses, through a strategy of paratactic accretion, to thematize mortality in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, and 2) it takes Rankine's purportedly national lyric beyond national concerns. The value of Coetzee's Costello in this work, then, is her ability to signify simultaneously the temporal finitude of the dying animal and the geographical unbounded-ness of the global. Rankine's deadpan endnote about the passage simply reads, “Elizabeth Costello is the title character of J. M. Coetzee's 2003 novel (his first published subsequent to winning the Booker Prize in 1999 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003). She is an aging novelist who is struggling with a writer's greatest fear, a loss for words.”²⁷

Liver images recur throughout *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. Rankine is worried about hepatotoxicity, which comes to be a metaphor for what poisons the nation as much as the individual.

²⁶ Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (Minneapolis MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

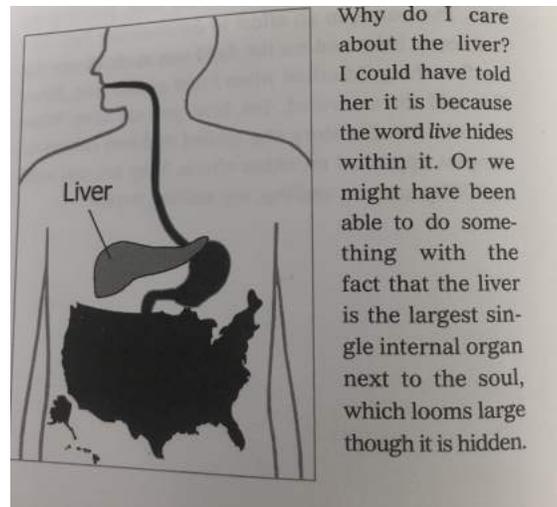


Figure 4.3. Claudia Rankine, from *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, p54.

Rankine writes about her own liver, the drugs it has to metabolize, advertisements for these drugs, promises made by the advertisements, warning labels, lists of side-effects, the kind of subject implied by the discourse of pharmaceutical companies in the USA, the role of these same pharmaceutical companies in the rest of the world, and the role of the market and the media in how organs and bodies are conceived. Tracing these paths with Rankine, we see how something as personal and radically internal as an inner organ is already imagined in a complex relation with things as large and external as nations or even the world. One of the book's most striking images is a hybrid of geographic and biological representation [fig. 4.5]. Its biological component outlines a human body, showing the digestive tract running through the mouth, down the esophagus, to the stomach and beyond. Floating just above the stomach lies an area, enclosed in a black line, shaded in grey, and with a label attached reading, "Liver." The geographic component consists of a dark area below the liver and the stomach, still contained by the human outline, in the shape of the United States.

The second time this image appears it is in the context of a conversation between the Rankine and a taxi driver. The taxi driver is from Pakistan. The Rankine persona of the book is acutely aware of being a black American, though when her father has to return “home” for a funeral, it is somewhere that may or may not be located on that black spot below the liver. Their conversation is about race.

So tell me this, have you noticed these white people, they think they are better than everyone else?

Have I noticed? Are you joking? You are not joking. Where are you from?
Pakistan.

I see. It’s only a few months since 9/11. They think you’re Al Qaeda.

I know. But the things they say to me. They don’t know anything.

Be happy you can’t read their thoughts, I want to say to him. I smile into the rearview mirror instead. Why with such a nice smile are you trying to weep? He asks as we pull up to my building.²⁸

Rankine here simultaneously plays the native informant and the comrade in arms.

Because she is American, she is able to interpret what “they” think, but because she is black, she can position herself in solidarity with the driver against “these white people.” She belongs and doesn’t belong to “them.” She marks her difference by keeping “them” in the third person, but she is close enough to “them” to intimate (to the reader, if not to the taxi driver) that she can read “their” thoughts. Later she will confess, “In third-world countries I have felt overwhelmingly American, calcium rich, privileged and white.”²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 89-90.

²⁹ Ibid., 108.

Her solidarity with the Pakistani driver is sundered as she turns inward, wanting to say rather than saying. It is after this scene, as if in response to the driver's question about her attempt to weep with a smile, itself in response to her multiple belongings, fractured identity and the plurality of cognitive and affective resonances she finds in a situation that is simultaneously intimate and political, that the image of the United States as organ or Liver as country recurs. The body and body politic are brought together and in relation. The body, normally contained by the body politic, is here the container, hinting at an infinitely recursive structure. Both are rendered scientifically, schematically, conceptually, as an abstract relation. But these abstractions are thought and felt equiprimordially with the fleshed out material manifestations of political and individual bodies that punctuate *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* throughout.

Like the Pakistani cab driver, Coetzee enters the text of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as a foreign element. Within the logic of Rankine's master metaphor, foreign elements are either to be assimilated or to be eliminated and excreted (after passing through the liver and kidneys). In an earlier scene, the speaker in this "lyric" meets a friend, both of them American, over pizza. And here the foreign element, Coetzee, is ingested into the body of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, where it would either have to be incorporated and assimilated, or resisted and set apart:

Our conversation drifts until she says, I didn't like Coetzee's *Disgrace*. I recommended this novel to her so I smile because I feel accused of some wrongdoing, but I am also amused because it really doesn't matter, does it? He's not for everyone, I say. There's always another book to read. I recommend Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. This friend won't be shrugged off. She wants to know why so many intelligent people like *Disgrace*. I want to tell her that if she stopped thinking about people as intelligent she might know why. I

say instead something about nobody learning anything from history and that South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is being critiqued perhaps. I don't know. I try again by claiming Coetzee is suggesting the land is what survives. In the end he is a naturalist. In don't know I think this before I say it. I chew on my pizza and wonder what a naturalist is, what the word means beyond its obvious commitment to natural laws. Does it have anything to do with euthanasia? She sits across from me in silence, she doesn't respond, doesn't initiate. Did you know Petrus means rock? I ask. Petrus is the name of the major black character of the novel. As if I hadn't spoken, she asks emphatically, what woman hasn't been raped? In the novel Petrus ignores a rape. I make no response.³⁰

The two women respond to *Disgrace* very differently. The speaker is learned, has done some research, knows about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, about the importance of land in South Africa's *plaasroman*-inflected novels,³¹ about the etymology of "Petrus." But each of these failed conversational opening gambits mark her as an interested outsider, as someone for whom this South African reality that is important and contemporary to her, is not something she can speak about with authority. In this, under conditions of a complex, inter-related, cognitively too-vast-to-grasp global situation she reflects the value of uncertainty that Coetzee espouses (see below). Her refrain, even as she essays her insights, is "I don't know." Her friend, however, doggedly latches onto a single, trans-local, issue: "what woman has hasn't been raped?"³² Together the two women form a disaggregate community of two, presenting us a picture of international

³⁰ Ibid., 72.

³¹ See J. M. Coetzee, "Farm Novel and *Plaasroman* in South Africa," *English in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1986): 1-19.

³² I use "doggedly" advisedly. Dogs are a running theme connected to violence and determined concerned in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. The reference to "euthanasia" is also a reference to the euthanized dogs in *Disgrace*. "**Worry 1. A dog's action of shaking and biting an animal so as to injure and kill it, spec. a hound's worrying of its quarry; an instance of this. 2. A state or feeling of mental unease or anxiety regarding or arising from one's cares or responsibilities, uncertainty about the future, fear of failure, etc.; anxious concern, anxiety. Also an instance or cause of this.**" Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 41.

readers of quite a different kind to the theory-minded academic set usually associated with Coetzee.³³

2. *The Timely and the Untimely*

“In 2003, the South African writer J. M. Coetzee won the Nobel Prize in literature. But since then, his fiction has strained mightily to repel any reader who might be interested.”³⁴ So begins a typical review of Coetzee’s *The Schooldays of Jesus*. For this reviewer, *Elizabeth Costello*, published in 2003, but with chapters, or “Lessons” as they are called in the text, published from as early as 1997, falls just on the “right” side of the Nobel. Nevertheless, in *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee’s perverse mission to “repel any reader who might be interested” is well underway. It is a difficult text: a novel of parts, without sustained action, plot, or animating question; a novel that contains several occasional speeches, many of which had in fact been read aloud (as fictions about occasional speeches) in lieu of (actual, unframed) occasional speeches by the author; a novel that is thematically difficult, dealing with death, religion, classics, canonicity, animal rights, and ethics, some of which are hot topics for the “international” academic audience, marking Coetzee as the “trendiest” of writers, some of which are instead entirely passé, outdated, never to be taken up in any journal article, marking Coetzee as reclusive and stubborn. *Elizabeth Costello* inspired as many as 64 articles listed by the MLA International Bibliography between 2008 and 2014, a number second only to the 174 articles on *Disgrace* published during the same period. Most of those articles have

³³ See Coovadia, “Coetzee In and Out of Cape Town.”

³⁴ Ron Charles, “*Schooldays of Jesus* Continues Coetzee’s Puzzling, Irritating Saga,” review of *The Schooldays of Jesus*, by J. M. Coetzee, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 5, 2017, http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20170305__Schooldays_of_Jesus__continues_Coetzee_s_puzzling_irritating_saga.html

focused on the book's formal difficulty, or on its explicit (though opaque) interventions in ongoing academic debates. Few have speculated on the book's "global" setting,³⁵ though this has become an important theme for work on Coetzee's later novels. It is against this "global" backdrop, I believe, that the more familiar themes for Coetzee scholarship – authority, authorial personae, the status of the canon, "lateness," neoliberalism, animal ethics, the limits of sympathy – stand out most prominently. It is also here in this first "global" novel that the conflicting figures of *timeliness*, *untimeliness*, and *timelessness*, become major, rather than passing, concerns.

The "Lessons" of *Elizabeth Costello* take place: 1) at a university in Pennsylvania; 2) on a cruise liner taking passengers from Auckland, New Zealand, to Cape Town, South Africa; 3) at a fictional college in Massachusetts where Elizabeth's son, David, teaches; 4) at a university in South Africa where Elizabeth's sister, Bridget 'Blanche' Costello, receives an honorary degree, and the missionary hospital in "Zululand" where she works; 5) at an academic conference in Amsterdam; 6) in Melbourne, Australia (in recollection); 7) in an allegorical "too literary" afterlife riddled with clichés; 8) in Wiltshire, England. The first six settings are all, with the exception of the rural hospital, trans-national spaces where the cosmopolitan elite gather. These six "Lessons" (two of which take place at "Appleton College" in Massachusetts) contain, in whole or in part, the texts of speeches delivered to audiences during "events" announced and planned in advance: events in the everyday sense (foreseen, anticipated, routine) that

³⁵ Notable exceptions include David Atwell who writes about *Elizabeth Costello* in terms of "the poetics of place... the ways which place comes to define what is possible for the subject of writing," and Elizabeth Anker who reads the novel against "a global culture in which [universal, human] rights discourses often yield an automatic truth status with transnational and transcultural appeal." Anker, Elizabeth Susan, "Elizabeth Costello, Embodiment, and the Limits of Rights," *New Literary History* 42, no. 1 (2011): 169; David Attwell, "Coetzee's Postcolonial Diaspora." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 1 (2011): 9.

is precisely opposed to the “events” that preoccupy theory (unforeseen, stretching the boundaries of the possible). These are “occasional” addresses. They are *timely* in the banal but important sense of marking their occasion (tied to their place, context, and likely audience). But these speeches are not, for the most part, *so* timely that they cannot be recycled and used for other, similar occasions. They are speeches that travel, that can be adapted to fit new conditions and limitations. In a broader sense, the speeches in *Elizabeth Costello* (five by Elizabeth Costello, one by a Nigerian writer called Emmanuel Egudu, one by Elizabeth’s sister, Blanche) are very timely indeed, responding to debates that seem urgent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of which still seem urgent today.³⁶ And pertinently to this chapter, their timeliness is actively thematized, with the fashionable prize-winning novelist *du jour*, Elizabeth Costello, creating her own force field of relevance: the speeches are timely, because she is, by virtue of being invited to give these addresses and of audiences showing up for them, someone who determines what is of the times, a maker of fashion.

The figure of Costello as trendsetter (a figure one imagines she would reject) throws us immediately into the next category: the untimely. In “What is the Contemporary?” Giorgio Agamben suggests that “being in fashion... entails a sense of ‘ease,’ [‘*agio*’, also “leisure” or “comfort”] a certain quality of being out-of-phase or out-of-date [*sfasatura*, also “lag,” “bewilderment,” or “displacement”], in which one’s relevance includes within itself a small part of what lies outside itself, a shade of *démodé*,

³⁶ For example, Evy Varsamopoulou sees Coetzee as focused on “*relevance* of the European traditions of literature and the humanities *today*.” See Evy Varsamopoulou “Timely Meditations: Reflections on the Role of the Humanities in J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*,” *Humanities* 3 (2014): 379, my emphases.

of being out of fashion.”³⁷ Agamben, I think perversely, links this sense of fashion (which is for him also a *kairotic* structure) to contemporaneity, and while I do not agree with “the contemporary” as an appropriate label for the theological fashionista, it does serve as a useful description of the *untimely*. Elizabeth Costello is fashionable precisely in this sense: at the top of her field, a setter of trends, a judge of relevance, at ease, comfortable in her own judgment (however tentative it may be), utterly uninterested in being a follower of the times, but also bewildered by the present, out-of-joint with it, lagging behind, and racing ahead.

This question of judgment, judgment of and against the present, is at the heart of *Elizabeth Costello*. In this, Coetzee drinks deep from the well of Nietzsche, who ends the first of his four *Untimely Meditations* [Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen] – having delivered the most damning of judgments on “David Strauss, the confessor and the writer” and on his contemporaries for embracing and condoning Strauss’s pale imitations of “classic” style –³⁸ with a “confession of faith:”

It is the confession of an individual; and what can such an individual do against all the world, even if his voice is audible everywhere! His judgment would – to leave you with one last genuine feather from the Straussian plumage – be only ‘of as much subjective truth as without any objective power of proof’: – is that not so, my dear friends? So continue to be of good cheer! For the time being at least let it rest with your ‘of as much... as without’. For the time being? That is to say, for as long as that for which it is

³⁷ Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 45.

³⁸ “I believe I have made it clear how I regard Strauss the writer: as an actor who plays at being a genius and classic.... I could wish that Strauss the writer were more honest, for then he would write better and be less celebrated. Or - if he absolutely must be an actor - I could wish he were a good actor and knew better how to imitate the style of naive genius and the classic. For it remains to be said that Strauss is in fact a bad actor and utterly worthless as a stylist.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 48.

always time, and which the present time has more need of than ever, continues to count as untimely – I mean: telling the truth.³⁹

There is, of course, as has often been observed, an irony here: the “untimely” is revealed to be both timeless (“that for which it is *always* time”) as well as timely (that for “which the present time has more need of than ever”). This “truth” that is rejected by the times, that is, in a Shakespearean/Derridean vocabulary, “out-of-joint” with the times,⁴⁰ stands or falls depending on the subject who speaks it: the untimely subject.

Like the “classic,” the “untimely,” for Nietzsche can be a text, a style, or a person (especially himself). For Agamben, the untimely “contemporary” is an heroic, modernist iconoclast on the model of Nietzsche (who is at once innovator and philologist, original and classic): “the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present grasps a light that can never reach its destiny... also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times.”⁴¹ Both paradigm (to be imitated) and exception (inimitable), both model and outcast, the untimely one relies on a self-authorizing gesture: going against “public opinion,”⁴² armed with the conviction that “anything truly productive is offensive,”⁴³ he issues a *subjective* judgment which he believes will, in the fullness of time, be revealed as truth. It is here that the tension between the qualities that Agamben attributes to being in fashion – “a certain” *agio* [ease, leisure, comfort] and “a certain” *sfasatura* [lag, bewilderment, displacement] – come into play. The untimely one (Agamben’s “contemporary”) is comfortable with his truth, at

³⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁰ See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 1.5.210; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 20.

⁴¹ Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 53.

⁴² Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

ease, certain. And yet, when faced with his contemporaries, there is a bewildering sense of disjointedness, his certainty is destabilized, displaced from its ground.

The untimely one is not a hermit. He stands apart from his contemporaries, but he must speak and can speak only to them. Costello, shaken up by her disjuncture with the times, reciprocates: she “spends a lifetime shaking people.”⁴⁴ Nietzsche addresses his non-contemporaneous contemporaries: “is that not so, my dear friends?” And Agamben (who clearly thinks of himself as another untimely hero alongside Nietzsche, Mandelstam, Benjamin, and Barthes) addressing a classroom of students gathered under the rubric of “The Contemporary,” implies contemporaneity with his audience through his tic – “a *certain*” [*un certo, una certa*] – that is the verbal equivalent of a wink and a nod. This “certain” is synonymous with “particular” but it conveys an extra-semantic knowingness and complicity that amounts to certainty: certainty founded on the shared present of dialogue, and on a familiarity with the addressee.

In the course of Coetzee’s novel, Elizabeth Costello makes several pronouncements (pronouncements which in the end she refuses to recognize as judgments) that run counter to public opinion, but she does not share Nietzsche’s (or Agamben’s) certainty that she is engaged in truth telling. These pronouncements are made, sometimes in private conversation, finally before a Kafkaesque tribunal, but for the most part in rooms on university campuses or conference centers, occupied by fellow cosmopolitans, the academic elite. (I will bracket the constitution of this audience – the question of who is excluded from it – noting only that its trans-national make-up is an insufficient condition from which to make a claim to “global” representation.) In these

⁴⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 5.

rooms, Elizabeth Costello's ideas are always on the fringe: she turns to modernism for a lecture on realism; she likens the slaughter of animals to the holocaust; she avows an antiquarian belief in the infectiousness of evil, which, she asserts, can be spread through reading and writing. We see several characters express doubts about her competence, her assumptions, and even her motives. We do not see a single character agree with her wholeheartedly (though her son, David, defends her out of filial duty). While conflicting viewpoints are a useful device for the dialogic novel of ideas, it is striking that in this novel Elizabeth Costello meets *only* antagonists, characters who relentlessly contradict each and every one of the ideas to which she gives voice. (Her inner antagonist often contradicts those she keeps silent). Despite her being a trendsetter in her field, or perhaps as an enabling condition for that sense of being on "the cutting edge," there could not be a more "untimely" character, a character more in opposition to her times, than Elizabeth Costello; and yet, what animates her to continue despite this endless resistance is not unshakable belief. On the contrary: she shakes and can be shaken. She is often tired, unsure, fragile, and above all, mortal: "for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse."⁴⁵ James Wood observes that despite consisting of what on the surface might seem like re-treaded public lectures that Coetzee gave in the late 1990s and early 2000s (delivered as pieces of fiction wherein a character, usually Elizabeth Costello, gives a public lecture) there *is*, in fact, a shape to this novel: "it inclines towards death."⁴⁶

Both Nietzsche and Elizabeth Costello find themselves opposed to popular opinion and to its (until recently) dominant expression: the newspaper. But while

⁴⁵ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 74.

⁴⁶ James Wood, "A Frog's Life," review of *Elizabeth Costello* by J. M. Coetzee, *The London Review of Books*, October 23, 2003, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n20/james-wood/a-frogs-life>.

Nietzsche rails splendidly against the “ceaseless drip of the same locutions and the same words... the slime of this newspaper language,”⁴⁷ Elizabeth Costello finds, when a Melbourne newspaper runs a “report under the headline PRIZE-WINNING NOVELIST ACCUSED OF ANTI-SEMITISM and reprint[s] the offending paragraphs from her talk, riddled with faulty punctuation,” that it is “she, all at once, who [is] on trial,”⁴⁸ a situation that inspires weariness rather than defiance. The fourth lesson, “The Lives of Animals,” ends with David driving his mother to the airport, declaring himself to be perplexed that she has “become so intense about the animal business.”⁴⁹ She responds that her true reason is formed in words “so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground, like King Midas:”

It’s that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.... Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?⁵⁰

Costello’s own sense of her untimeliness is linked to a lack of orientation, perhaps a lack of belonging: “I no longer know *where* I am.” Madness is a condition of deviance from the norm, and norms (unlike universal laws) are rooted in place. There is madness to Nietzsche’s untimeliness, and there is madness here in Elizabeth’s perception of the meat-eating world. While the untimely figure acclaimed by Agamben remains steadfast

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 49.

⁴⁸ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 152.

⁴⁹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 111.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 111-12.

in believing himself to be the only sane one, Elizabeth is inclined to doubt, feebleness, and resignation; if she is sane, perhaps it is *elsewhere*. For David, in this scene, who indeed responds with “human kindness” as he “takes her in her arms” to comfort her (the novelist who “is by no means a comforting writer”),⁵¹ Elizabeth is reduced to her ageing, moribund, all too human physical state, emitting “the smell of cold cream, of old flesh.”⁵² For a moment, the clash of ideas ceases; there is no argument, no rejoinder, only words of solace: “There, there. It will soon be over.”⁵³ Death, too, is an elsewhere.

Untimeliness in Coetzee’s late, global fiction, is often linked to aging and mortality, to a waning grip on what is timely in the world today, and to an ethics of uncertainty. In its link to aging and mortality, Coetzee’s global novels make some of the gestures that Edward Said describes in his incomplete, posthumously published work, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2004). Said describes a sense of “general abiding timeliness” that reigns in artistic presentations of human beings at various stages of life whereby, “what is appropriate to early life is not appropriate for later stages, and vice versa.”⁵⁴ The “late style” that interests Said, exemplified by Beethoven’s later works, goes against this sense of timeliness, it “involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*...”⁵⁵ The result is that late style “is in, but oddly apart from the present.”⁵⁶ Late style in this sense describes both Coetzee’s and Costello’s late

⁵¹ Ibid., 5.

⁵² Ibid., 112.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24.

novels.⁵⁷ The old and dying are, like Agamben's "contemporary," figures on the cusp, or in the "break," but instead of simply having a privileged vista over present, past, and future, their experience of time's fractured-ness, of the competing claims of multiple temporalities on their waning capacities for language and for action, are the cause for conflict, confusion, and (largely internal) drama. In this Coetzee's global fictions take a Beckettian turn, though, as James Wood remarks with some spite and some accuracy, they are like Beckett "without the comedy."⁵⁸ It is, however, an earlier dramatist that presents us with untimeliness not as heroic vantage but as a condition of doubt. For Shakespeare's Hamlet, whose father's ghost tasks him, and only him, with *justice*, time is "out of joint" and he, like Costello, like Nietzsche, like Beethoven, is disjoined from his times. Jacques Derrida characterizes this disjuncture, together with the imperative to "set it right,"⁵⁹ in terms of uncertainty and impossible closure.⁶⁰ Boris Groys argues that "in the context of modernity" the present was seen as "something that should be overcome in the name of the future, something that slows down the realization of our projects, something that delays the coming of the future."⁶¹ Today, however, after modernism, in contemporary times, what had been an obstacle has now become a method: we have

⁵⁷ Hermann Wittenberg in his essay on the topic sees late style manifesting in two ways Coetzee's post-Nobel work: "a form of literary licence to dispense with the conventions of more complex character narration and plot development, as well as a freedom to give offence." It seems to me, however, that character and narration in Coetzee's earlier works are already spare, and that there remains more to be said concerning the way in which Coetzee's late style allows him to depict the present while giving "offence." Herman Wittenberg, "Late Style in J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*," *SCRUTINY* 2 15, no. 2 (2010): 49.

⁵⁸ Wood, "A Frog's Life."

⁵⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5.211.

⁶⁰ "To maintain together that which does not hold together, and the disparate itself, the same disparate, all of this can be thought ... only in a dis-located time of the present, at the joining of a radically dis-jointed time, without certain conjunction. Not a time whose joinings are negated, broken, mistreated, dysfunctional, disadjusted, according to a dys- of negative opposition and dialectical disjunction, but a time without *certain* joining or determinable conjunction." Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 20.

⁶¹ Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux journal* 11 (2009), last modified December 11, 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/>

valorized “doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision... the need for prolonged reflection, for a delay.”⁶² For all her untimeliness, then, according to Groys’s analysis, Elizabeth Costello would be more contemporary than modern, her uncertainty opening her up to political and ethical inefficacy, to being “stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without any future,” but also, through the same gesture affirming “life as pure being-in-time, beyond its use within the framework of modern economic and political projects.”⁶³ Costello operates in the present caught between urgency and delay.

3. *The Timeless*

An important part in literature’s reluctance to move past concepts of canonicity has to do with its remnant transcendentalism, something that Coetzee actively figures in the form of the post-secular and post-human secular humanist, Elizabeth Costello. While timeliness and untimeliness come down to a question of subjective judgment measured against present public opinion, timelessness in *Elizabeth Costello* relies on the judgment of others and other times. The writer is on trial throughout, from the first lesson, “Realism,” in which Costello travels to the fictional “Altona College” set in the real “Williamstown, PA,” in order to accept the fictional “Stowe Award” that shares a name with the real “Stowe Prize.” The judgment begins with her son, David, who “cannot imagine her getting through this *trial* without him at her side.”⁶⁴ Readers familiar with works like *The Life and Times of Michael K.* and *Disgrace* would, at this point, expect another Coetzeean variation on Kafka, but they would not be prepared for the density and excess of Kafka references, Kafkaesque scenes, and Kafka-inspired tropes. These

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 3.

culminate with Elizabeth Costello – in the penultimate chapter, “At the Gate,” with its gate and court explicitly “out of Kafka” – ⁶⁵ twice betraying her profession as writer, exclaiming that the scenes around her are simply “too literary.”⁶⁶ Where David Lurie’s trial for sexual misconduct with a student in *Disgrace* is Kafkaesque,⁶⁷ resembling the literary works of Franz Kafka, the trials of Elizabeth Costello are not only Kafkaesque but measured against Kafka as literary standard: these are relentlessly literary judgments, assessments of literary value, determinations of who is kept waiting and who passes into the canon of great literature. As with Kafka who creates a “minor literature” out German, a major language,⁶⁸ Costello writes from outside of what Pascale Casanova in her sociological approach to world literature calls the “literary center.”⁶⁹ The first six lessons are set in, or between, settler colonies: America, Australia, South Africa. America has, arguably, become a new literary center through its proliferation of new prizes and universities (to the extent that it seems plausible to the casual reader, before looking them up, that the prizes and universities in the American parts of *Elizabeth Costello* are real but obscure). America is also quite clearly the center of the business of publishing with three of the “big four” publishing houses located in New York. But Australia and South Africa remain peripheral. The trope of lasting literary value and entry into the (singular) literary canon in *Elizabeth Costello* is not figured as purification or a “process of

⁶⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 208, 218.

⁶⁷ See Christopher Conti, “The Trial of David Lurie: Kafka’s Courtroom in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” *Textual Practice* 30, no. 3 (2016): 469-92.

⁶⁸ “The problem of expression is staked out by Kafka not in an abstract and universal fashion but in relation to those literatures that are considered minor, for example, the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague. A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.

⁶⁹ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 24.

decontextualization” as Imraan Coovadia would have it,⁷⁰ but is rather one of the few elements in this novel of ideas that turns us to historical context.

Consider, for instance, the following invocation in “Realism” of the familiar trope of writing as bid for immortality:

‘Ignoring all the copies of the book you have written that are going to perish – that are going to be pulped because there is no buyer for them, that are going to be opened and read for a page or two and then yawned at and put aside for ever, that are going to be left behind at seaside hotels or in trains – ignoring all these lost ones, we must be able to feel there is at least one copy that will not only be read but be taken care of, given a home, given a place on the shelves that will be its own in perpetuity... even if I myself should be knocked over by a bus the next day, this first-born of mine would have a home where it could snooze, if fate so decreed, for the next hundred years, and no one would come poking with a stick to see if it was still alive... if I, this mortal shell, am going to die, let me at least live on through my creations.’

Elizabeth Costello proceeds to reflect on the transience of fame. We skip ahead.⁷¹

This chapter is the only one where the narrator’s voice is quite as undisguised, interruptive, and jarring. By having this authorial voice confidently decide to “skip ahead,” Coetzee is no doubt making a point about the construction and constructed-ness of Realism, but he is also letting his narrator *judge* Costello’s speech. There is nothing here, the narrator implies, that can’t be summarily encapsulated with the brief phrase, “Elizabeth Costello proceeds to reflect on the transience of fame,” nothing original, nothing worth repeating *verbatim*. The moment when Costello declares her desire to become a classic (that familiar catachresis of a work for an author) and thus to occupy space on the stateliest bookshelves in London, “the great cultural metropolis for

⁷⁰ Coovadia, “Coetzee In and Out of Cape Town,” 110.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Antipodeans” (and presumably others from former British colonies), those in the “British Museum,”⁷² is the same moment that the impatient narrator chooses to cut her out, omit her speech, subject her to paraphrase. The judgment comes down: no, she will not enter, “it is possible... but not now.”⁷³

Pascale Casanova insists that “world literary space” is “semi-autonomous” from the global political economy, and that the asymmetries and inequalities of the former consequently cannot be assumed to neatly map onto those of the latter.⁷⁴ Strictly speaking, then, despite trading in Bourdieusian overlapping but semi-autonomous *economies* of value, Casanova’s image of the World Republic of Letters is not (only) determined by circulation, though its effects are visible there. Before judgments of literary value are circulated (by what in a Kafkaesque idiom we call “gatekeepers”) they must first be imagined. Literary centers are constructs, which exist “both in the imaginations of those who inhabit it and in the reality of the measurable effects [they] produce.”⁷⁵ Pheng Cheah – in his landmark intervention into the field of world literature, *What is a World?* (2016), which argues for the temporal dimension of a Heideggerian “worlding,” which he feels has been elided by the geographic and spatial attention to representation and circulation in world literature theory – lauds Casanova for her vision

⁷² Ibid., 15.

⁷³ Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” trans. Ian Johnston, last modified June 11, 2015, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/kafka/beforethelaw.htm>

⁷⁴ One of Casanova’s big claims in *The World Republic of Letters* is that “[w]orld literary space as a history and a geography – a space constituted by writers, who make and actually embody literary history – has never been properly traced or described. The ambition of the international literary criticism that I propose in the pages that follow is to provide a specifically literary, yet nonetheless historical, interpretation of texts.” Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 4, my emphasis.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 24.

of world literature as a “social force” but criticizes it for lacking what he calls a “normative dimension.”⁷⁶

What cannot be entertained within this conceptual framework is an agonistic relation between an ethicopolitically committed world literature and one produced by the commercial market, where both compete as alternative attempts in the ongoing *making* of the real world.⁷⁷

Coetzee has been read, time and again, and rightly so, as a writer with “ethicopolitical” commitments, and it would be easy to read him as an exemplary text in *worlding* or giving readers what Cheah, following Derrida, calls “the gift of time.”⁷⁸ Such a reading would have to be attentive to the way in which Coetzee’s fictions exceed the “real world,” and especially to the way in which his fictional personae – characters that these texts invite us to read as so many masks for Coetzee himself – exceed the real life John Coetzee. Jane Poyner, for example, in reading the late fiction, claims, “Coetzee is less concerned with the truths his characters promote than with the modes or ‘pacts’ by which these truths are conveyed, in this way testing the *ethico-politics* of intellectual practice.”⁷⁹ In the gap between “Elizabeth Costello,” “J. C.,” and the “John Coetzee” of his global fictions on the one hand and the real (still) living author on the other, between the logic of ethicopolitical commitments and the logic of the market, between the standardized view of the present sustained by global capital and the contra-present suggested by a writing that issues from outside the network of global capitalism’s recognized nodes, emerges a

⁷⁶ Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2016), 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁹ Poyner, Jane. *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 177, my emphasis.

worlding that expands the reader's sense of space-time. There can be no doubt that Coetzee's global fictions have "agonistic" relation to neoliberal rationality and the universalizing global market, which is one of the ways in which they declare their untimeliness. And it is clear that Coetzee's version of worlding in these texts is unique in that they push autobiography to the limit in order to open up a new relation to time. But worlding and opposition does not account for the stubbornly recurring figure in Coetzee's work of the World Republic of Letters – the collectively imagined space of "canonization" and "consecration," which he, like Casanova, describes in a *religious* vocabulary. Admitting of worlds in the plural, Coetzee's novels long for transcendence; they exhibit what will be described in a singularly clumsy and awkward depiction of sexual desire in *Diary of a Bad Year* as "a metaphysical ache,"⁸⁰ which deconstructive or phenomenological terms do little to help us grasp.

Writing about art, Boris Groys claims that in the place of the "religious promise of resurrection and eternal life" modernity gave us the material promise of "a permanent art collection... [The] archive, library, and museum promised secular permanency, a material infinitude."⁸¹ Today, however,

this promise of an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility. Museums have become the sites of temporary exhibitions rather than spaces for permanent collections. The future is ever newly planned – the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a

⁸⁰ Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, 7.

⁸¹ Groys, "Comrades of Time."

point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control. The only thing that we can be certain about in our present is that these historical narratives will proliferate tomorrow as they are proliferating now – and that we will react to them with the same sense of disbelief.⁸²

This is one place where the analogy between artistic contemporaneity and literary contemporaneity might hold up. Books, of course, do not rely on museums or galleries for their availability; there are different measures of survival such as being in print, archived, or available on line. But Elizabeth Costello draws a remarkable parallel in her reference to the collection of books at the British Museum. And literature is equally vulnerable to the “constant proliferations of historical narratives.”

The desire for literary transcendence in Coetzee’s global works appears in different guises: the banal capacity for writing (among other inscriptive media) to outlast the writer; the intimations of transcendence that literature inspires in its readers; and the author’s desire to be “immortalized” in the canon. The latter form of transcendence is competitive, combative even – only the “greats” will be remembered – and with surprising frequency expressed in terms associated with professional sport.⁸³ True extra-historical transcendence (religious or Platonic), in Coetzee’s vision of his own work, however, remains just a longing, never to be fulfilled. Coetzee clearly admires and is fascinated by authors who can wholeheartedly believe in literary “greatness,” in a

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ To take an example from *Elizabeth Costello*: David refers to Elizabeth as a “heavyweight” as opposed to the “lightweight” academics in attendance at a dinner in Elizabeth’s honor. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 7. A sports vocabulary for “greatness” runs through *Slow Man* (cycling), *Diary of a Bad Year* (sport in general, cricket, horseracing), *Summertime* (rugby), and especially the exchange of letters with Paul Auster, *Here and Now* (sport in general, cricket, baseball, tennis, chess).

“calling” that exceeds their time and place,⁸⁴ but he cannot foster such a belief in his own exceptionality.

Summertime remains Coetzee’s fullest elaboration of the struggle to be remembered beyond one’s time, to become, in that limited sense, timeless. As final volume of Coetzee’s trilogy of novelized autobiographies, *Summertime* differs from its predecessors in that the action is set *after* the death of the protagonist, John Coetzee. The book consists of notes by a future biographer together with a series of interviews with women who knew John Coetzee in life: colleagues, former lovers, a cousin. *Summertime* was written while J. C. Kannemeyer was working on Coetzee’s authorized biography, the eventual publication of which was advanced because of an untimely demise, not of the subject, but of the biographer.⁸⁵ As several reviewers have pointed out, Kannemeyer’s biography would have required Coetzee’s cooperation and would have occasioned the writer revisiting his past. But *Summertime* is not written alongside Kannemeyer’s *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* as much as *against* it and against all future biographies. Julia Frankl, the subject of the first “interview” in *Summertime* reports the following exchange with “John” after she asks him what “books should be:”

‘A gesture of refusal in the face of time. A bid for immortality.’

⁸⁴ In this regard consider Coetzee’s writings on the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and on the Australian novelist, Patrick White. For Coetzee on Rousseau, see, for example, J. M. Coetzee, “Confessions and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky,” *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 3 (1985): 193-232; J. M. Coetzee, “A Fiction of the Truth,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 27, 1999; as well as J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (New York: Penguin, 2015), especially chapter 5. For Coetzee on White, see J. M. Coetzee, “Patrick White: Within a Budding Grove,” *New York Review of Books*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/11/07/patrick-white-within-budding-grove/>.

⁸⁵ J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, trans. Michiel Heyns (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2012).

‘No one is immortal. Books are not immortal. The entire globe on which we stand is going to be sucked into the sun and burnt to a cinder. After which the universe itself will implode and disappear down a black hole. Nothing is going to survive, not me, not you, and certainly not minority-interest books about imaginary frontiersmen in eighteenth-century South Africa [, like *Dusklands*].’

‘I didn’t mean immortal in the sense of existing outside time. I mean surviving beyond one’s physical demise.’

‘You want people to read you after you are dead?’

‘It affords me some consolation to cling to that prospect.’⁸⁶

The premise of *Summertime* is to convert this “prospect” into retrospect, to imagine the writer being remembered before he is actually gone, to cast a future perfect scenario, a speculation about what will have been, into the present tense of interview dialog. The timeless here, as in *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, is a “refusal in the face of time,” not an actual transcendence of it. The parameters of the discussion remain material and historical, nothing is posited “outside time,” but the trope of immortality and the language of transcendence props up John’s desire to survive his “physical demise.” Within the frame of *Summertime*, John’s writing (or at least the figure of John as writer) does outlive his death through the fact of the biography for which these interviews are conducted: the present of *Summertime* is one in which John’s desire to superannuate his physical existence will have come to pass. If we take up the book’s invitation to collapse *Summertime*’s John Coetzee with the author of *Summertime*, it is then – despite its long catalog of unforgiving posthumous *judgments* of both John the man and John the writer – an authorial fantasy wherein the wish to be remembered has been fulfilled: a “consolation,” a soothing lullaby for the self. David gathers Elizabeth

⁸⁶ Coetzee, *Summertime*, 61.

Costello into his arms and promises, “There, there. It will soon be over;”⁸⁷ *Summertime* gathers J. M. Coetzee into its pages and promises, “There, there. It won’t all be over.”

In “A Fiction of a Truth,” Coetzee’s describes an obstacle that every autobiographer will have to surmount: “A story, says Aristotle, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. An autobiography, by definition, does not have an end. As a story it is therefore inherently unsatisfactory. It lacks a shape.”⁸⁸ In the previous chapter, I showed how Edouard Levé overcame this obstacle in *Autoportrait* by disavowing narrative shape altogether, yielding instead to the associative work of memory, adding up sentences “like picking marbles out of a bag.”⁸⁹ But I also showed him give his “life” a shape, a shape that later became impossible not to read in light of his own real-life suicide, when in the first sentence of *Autoportrait* he writes: “When I was young, I thought *Life A User’s Manual* would teach me how to live and *Suicide A User’s Manual* would teach me how to die.”⁹⁰ I showed how in *Suicide* – a novel purportedly about the suicide of one of Levé’s friends, addressed as “you” throughout – the addressee and the narrator (who is closer, in terms of verifiable facts, to the real Edouard Levé than any of Coetzee’s fictional personae are to him) become increasingly conflated, to the extent that the second-person *Suicide* becomes an extension of the first-person *Autoportrait*, giving shape to a life (in these novels without beginnings, middles, or ends) that is complete, *achevé*, exhausted. Grant Farred calls this kind of writing “autobiography” – the writing of the self from an impossible perspective, after death. “The autobiography constitutes

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Coetzee, “A Fiction of the Truth.”

⁸⁹ Edouard Levé, *Suicide*, 34.

⁹⁰ Levé, *Autoportrait*, 5.

the critical act of taking apart – autopsying – the life of the author before that life is (physically) over.”⁹¹ Farred reads *Summertime* as Coetzee’s autobiography and, given that Coetzee’s novel (unlike, say, LeVé’s novel) is primarily concerned with what will be said about him and his work by *future critics*, in this light *Summertime* becomes a kind of autoimmunity against criticism – a critical firebreak to stop the wildfire of future criticism. For writers who hope to avoid having their express wishes ignored and being interpreted contextually and *for the present*, Coetzee advises destroying their work while still alive: “do the job yourself. Furthermore, do it early, before you are physically incapable. If you delay too long, you will have to instruct someone else to act on your behalf, and that person may decide that you do not truly, finally, and absolutely mean what you say.”⁹² *Summertime* entertains the notion that the same advice holds for guaranteeing a literary legacy. It is here that Farred’s astute reading reveals *Summertime*’s radical denial of the future:

The autobiography disqualifies the future (the critic who is not yet), rendering it an intellectually arid time. In the radical terms of the autobiography, the future, the time after the Self, is of no consequence. In this way, the autobiography is a radically presentist genre: it seeks to make the (infinite) now the only moment of critical writing.⁹³

Could it be that Coetzee’s material and historical sense of timelessness – being against time, but within time – amounts to sheer presentism? That this most untimely of writers, in his “late style,” is in fact “now” making a timely gesture, a just-in-time issuing of his final word, the ultimate manifestation of his will (and testament)? When Coetzee invokes

⁹¹ Grant Farred, “Autobiography,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 4 (2011): 832.

⁹² Coetzee, “Patrick White.”

⁹³ Farred, “Autobiography,” 836.

but stops just short of the transcendental, does it leave him stranded in the here and now, soon to become the there and then? Is his a futile gesture, a mere offering of consolation for the forgetting and misremembering to come? And if so, to whom, other than the author himself, is *Summertime* addressed? If it short-circuits future criticism, dragging future critics back into *Summertime*'s present the same way that John Coetzee's past is gathered in that present, who else can occupy this "(infinite) now?"

A more open version of the bid for immortality can be found in "A House in Spain" (2000), where an unnamed writer (another Coetzee persona) purchases and renovates the titular residence in what amounts to a "form of marriage between a man growing old and a house no longer young."⁹⁴ The story begins with the aging writer declaring himself to be against the times, specifically against new-fangled notions of love for material objects, like a house: "Once you start falling in love with objects, what will be left of real love, love as it used to be? But no one seems to care. People fall in love with tapestries, with old cars."⁹⁵ The story recounts the writer coming to feel, if not love exactly then "something like it" for a house that he buys in Spain, where he, as foreigner, can at best hope to be "tolerated."⁹⁶ As he cares for and dwells in this house, he finds himself thinking about its previous occupants:

Between these walls men and women, generation after generation, lived their intimate lives, talking and quarreling and making love in a language that he barely understands, according to habits that are foreign to him. They have left no ghosts behind, none that he can sense. But that does not matter. He broods on him, insofar as one can brood on

⁹⁴ J. M. Coetzee, "A House in Spain," *Architectural Digest* 57, no. 10 (2000): 76.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76, 72.

people one has never so much as glimpsed. If he had pictures of them, he would hang them on the walls: dour couples in their dark Sunday best, with their children crouching at their feet, humble as rabbits.

Why? Why does he want to remember people he never knew? For a good reason. When his own time here has passed he does not want to be utterly forgotten. If the village will not remember him (he will die far away; after a decent interval, there will appear, without explanation, a new owner, a new face, and that will be that), then he hopes (hoping against hope) that in some sense the house itself will bear the memory of him.⁹⁷

A story by Coetzee: *cherchez l'animal!* The description of the property includes this remark: "There is a rabbit hutch too, should his tastes incline to rabbit flesh."⁹⁸ The hutch and the house both contain inhabitants, "humble as rabbits." Humble, and mortal. This is why the writer must work on the house's reparations and improvements himself: the work is his signature, the hope of an imprint that will outlive him, that will survive his "flesh." But if he, the writer, hopes to be remembered, then it is his reciprocal duty to try to remember the house's former occupants, even though he knows nothing about them, even at the cost of inaccuracy, invention, and projection – "dour couples in their dark Sunday best." Like the John Coetzee of *Summertime* who learns to speak "Hottentot" – the dead language of the autochthonous Khoi and the San peoples of the part of Southern Africa where the Coetzee family farm is located – the writer of the "House in Spain" remembers the dead, makes a late effort to learn their language, abide by their customs, even by their aesthetic. As Grant Farred observes, "What the dead demonstrate to the living is how silent they will be when they are dead."⁹⁹ The only path to timelessness is to speak now,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹⁹ Farred, "Autobiography," 840.

while it is timely, in an untimely fashion, of the dead, and to hope “(against hope)” that after our demise the living will, in turn, speak of us.

4. *The Contingency of Classics*

In 2006, contributing to an edited volume celebrating the centenary of Samuel Beckett’s birth, Coetzee wrote a rather odd piece entitled, “Samuel Beckett in Cape Town – An Imaginary History.” Beckett had, in 1937, at the urging of one of his professors at Trinity College, Dublin, applied for a position in the Italian department of the University of Cape Town where Coetzee would in 1956 commence his studies as an undergraduate and eventually, after spending time in the U.K. and the U.S., become a professor of English Literature. Part essay, part speculative fiction, Coetzee’s very short text ponders what might have arisen had Beckett’s application been successful. Assuming that Beckett, stranded in South Africa during the Second World War, found “easy colonial life” to his liking, his work might have had a very different local inflection.

Knowing no Italian and only a few words of French, I would not have been able to study in Professor Beckett’s department, but I would certainly have heard of him as the author of *Waiting for Godot*, and perhaps even attended a performance of the play written in an English scandalously inflected with the argot of the Cape Flats.¹⁰⁰

With Beckett in Cape Town, so the claim goes, Coetzee would have been resistant to adopting the older writer as a “spiritual father,” and would “certainly not have spent [his] time at the University of Texas labouring over a doctoral dissertation on Professor

¹⁰⁰ J. M. Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett in Cape Town – An Imaginary History,” in *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. James Knowlson and Elizabeth Knowlson (New York: Arcade Pub., 2006): 75.

Beckett's prose style."¹⁰¹ According to this speculative account, had the two writers met in Cape Town, neither of them would have produced the work for which they were respectively awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

What is not clear from Coetzee's short piece is *why* he thinks he would not have been drawn to Beckett's prose style as a dissertation topic. Is it that he would have found Beckett's proximity off-putting – that he considers material presence antithetical to “spiritual fatherhood”? Is it that the young Coetzee's desire to study, and perhaps emulate, Beckett's prose has to do with it being produced in Europe, or Paris, the capital of the “World Republic of Letters”? Or is it rather – and this is the possibility that best fits the text – that there is a geographical contingency to literary “greatness,” that Beckett's prose, if issued from South Africa would not have merited study (at least according to the values of the academic institutions of the day, the very values that Coetzee's Argentinian pedagogical and publishing endeavors seek to overturn)?

It is easy to hear in Coetzee's imagining of a *Waiting for Godot* “scandalously inflected with the argot of the Cape Flats” a parallel to an English-language *Waiting for Godot* inflected with the rhythms and idiom of Irish English. In a public discussion of the Spanish-language translation of his book of essays and interviews, *Doubling the Point* (English 1992, Spanish 2015), Coetzee, whose Ph.D. dissertation was about Beckett's style, dilates on his trajectory as a Beckett scholar:

I wrote a fair amount on Beckett in the 1960s and 70s, always trying to discover the secret of the attraction that his prose held for me. I found his prose quite mesmerizing and I tried, you know, various forms of linguistic analysis to crack the secret of Beckett's prose.... What I have discovered more recently, from other critics of Beckett, is that –

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 75-76.

you know, this was staring me in the face but I just didn't recognize it – that Beckett is Irish. [Laughter]. And that in fact if you want to know the secret of Beckett's appeal, you have only to go to Ireland, because there are lots of people who talk and write like Beckett in Ireland.¹⁰²

That Beckett's style can be reduced to his Irish-ness is perhaps an overstatement, but that the time and place of one's birth and upbringing has an impact on one's language is not a controversial claim at all. The South-African *Godot* would presumably resemble the Anglo-Irish *Godot* in its excess of local idiom. But the language of Beckett's French original is stranger, harder to locate, more idiolect than dialect, bearing the trace of an individual rather than a region. There is a tension in Beckett studies between those who would see him as first and foremost an Irish writer, positioning him within or in relation to a national and inter-national literary history, and those who see his work, especially in French, as an abstraction from and denial of such categories. In Coetzee's counterfactual investigation, Beckett would use a version of English for the original, but a different English to the one he grew up speaking. Both varieties of English reflect a colonial history, both stand in a relation of subjugation to the dominant form, and both are in a sense "scandalous."¹⁰³ But to introduce the vernacular of the Cape Flats circa 1956 into *Waiting for Godot* is to give the play a racial and political dimension different (though

¹⁰² J. M. Coetzee, "John M. Coetzee: Cartas de Navigacion" YouTube video, 1:03:45, lecture in "Literaturas del Sur" series, Buenos Aires, on April 15, 2015, posted by Museo MALBA, May 8, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnfjHQ48EMc>

¹⁰³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* has as its primary definition of "scandal, n." the following: "1. In religious use. a. Discredit to religion occasioned by the conduct of a religious person; †conduct, on the part of a religious person, which brings discredit on religion. Also, perplexity of conscience occasioned by the conduct of one who is looked up to as an example." The word is one that has been prominent and carefully deployed in Coetzee's lexicon since *Disgrace*, where David Lurie's scandal also has a religious parallel. In this context it serves to de-sacralize and, to repeat the term that I take from Pascale Casanova, de-"consecrate" Beckett in the canon (also a religious term) of world literature. "scandal, n.". OED Online. December 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171874?rskey=gmZvhJ&result=1> (accessed March 02, 2017).

not necessarily incomparable) to that of the original. Despite the stipulation that this play would carry the status of (an alternative) original, we, the implied readers of Coetzee's text who live in a world that already has an *En attendant Godot* and a *Waiting for Godot*, cannot but imagine it as a translation (or perhaps a translation of the translation) of the work we already know. Could this play by Professor Beckett of the University of Cape Town's Italian Department be translated back into a European language? Could it become a classic, if a classic, as Imraan Coovadia claims, is defined by its capacity to survive de-contextualization? Or are translatability and the potential to become a "classic" attributes of the European *Godots* alone?

In an interview given shortly after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003, Coetzee talks about a South African staging of Beckett.

Beckett was an Irishman and a European with no African connections at all. Yet in the hands of a dramatist of the sensitivity and skill of Athol Fugard, Beckett can be transplanted into South African surroundings in such a way that he seems almost native there. What does this show? That the history of the arts is a history of unceasing cross-fertilization across fences and boundaries.¹⁰⁴

The success of Fugard's adaptation may have spurred the idea of a *Godot* originally composed in a South African setting. But unless we can imagine the transplantation moving in the opposite direction, with Beckett choosing to adapt one of Fugard's plays, say *Boesman and Lena* or "*Master Harold*" and the Boys, into Parisian surroundings, and getting the funding and cultural support to do so, the claim about an "unceasing cross-fertilization across fences and boundaries" is misleading. There is no technical or

¹⁰⁴ "An Exclusive Interview with J. M. Coetzee," by David Atwell, *Dagens Nyheter*, August 12, 2003, <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee/>

aesthetic reason why such an adaptation could not take place, but the prestige-gap between European and African cultural products, then and now, makes it hard to imagine the adaptation moving the other way. Paris sees plays from all over the world staged locally, especially during its annual *Festival d'Automne*, but the value of these plays is almost always framed in terms of “windows on the world;” to adapt these plays to a French setting would work entirely counter to this market logic.

When asked about his relationship to South Africa in the same interview, Coetzee admits that his “intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African.”¹⁰⁵ These allegiances make him a “late representative” of European colonial expansion, together with its “history of oppression,” responding to the people of “the part of the world” where this “failed or failing colonial movement [...] sought and failed to establish itself.”¹⁰⁶ The hesitation between tenses – “failed or failing” – suggests a temporal ambivalence, an uncertainty about the past-ness of the past regarding the future-less colonial project. Coetzee’s response to this present/history comes in the form of his fiction and he has rigorously refused to reduce that response into “abstract terms.” While his books are not in the tradition of realism and would rarely be simple *depictions* of (post-) colonialism, few readers of works like *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986) or *Disgrace* (1999), would dispute their responsiveness to various colonialisms and their legacies. There is, however, a tension between the sensitivity to historical oppression (and its legacy, that is ongoing, even in failure and without future) in Coetzee’s work and his “intellectual allegiances” to the canons and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

classics of European art. And never are these allegiances more pronounced than in the works of his global period.

In another text associated with the centenary of Beckett's birth, this time the introduction to the fourth volume of Grove's Centenary Edition of Beckett's complete works under the editorship of Paul Auster, Coetzee again insists on Beckett's ability to move "across fences and boundaries."

In the popular mind his name is associated with the mysterious Godot who may or may not come but for whom we wait anyhow, passing the time as best we can. In this *he seemed to define the mood of an age*. But his range is wider than that, and his achievement far greater. Beckett was an artist possessed by a vision of life without consolation or dignity or promise of grace, in the face of which our only duty – inexplicable and futile, but a duty nonetheless – is not to lie to ourselves. It was a vision to which he gave expression in language of a virile strength and intellectual subtlety that marks him as one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷

Beckett's work has, for Coetzee, a quality of timelessness, or, if not timelessness strictly speaking – his greatness is, after all, qualified with "in the twentieth century" – then at least the attribute of lasting value. It has earned the status of a classic, the ability to be contemporaneous with earlier and later epochs, to let the "the popular mind" of today experience "the mood of an age" gone by, to remain relevant beyond its own moment, to survive de-contextualization.

Coetzee's pronouncements on the timeless value of Beckett might seem hopelessly retrograde – another repetition of the quasi-autonomic standard motions of a

¹⁰⁷ J. M. Coetzee, introduction to *Samuel Beckett: Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, by Samuel Beckett, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove, 2006), xiv, my emphasis.

literary critical machine fitted to endlessly reproduce the exceptional value of “Western” literature. But Coetzee’s position on the classic is subtler than one might think. In a 1991 lecture given in Graz, Austria, he revisits the question raised in a lecture, given by T.S. Eliot in 1944, bearing the same title: “What Is a Classic?” Eliot’s own lecture echoes the title of Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve’s 1850 essay – “Qu’est qu’un classique?” – a piece that Eliot claims not to have read for thirty years and which he could not reread in preparation for his address due to “accidents of the present time.”¹⁰⁸ This dry and oblique reference to the ongoing Second World War and the damages to the public libraries of London, where Eliot delivered his lecture to the Virgil Society, is the only of its kind in Eliot’s speech. The rest of his text is devoted to establishing an altogether more detached historical and literary perspective, perhaps reassuring in its context. While Eliot does not cite directly from Sainte-Beuve’s essay, he clearly remembers its argument well enough to address, adopt, and dispute some of its key points,¹⁰⁹ and the lecture as a whole is responsive to Sainte-Beuve’s famous definition of the classic (or statement of how he would like to see the classic defined):

What is a classic? A true classic, as I would like to hear it defined, is an author who has enriched the human spirit, truly increased the extent of its treasure, taken it a step further, discovered some unequivocal moral truth, or once more uncovered an eternal passion in a heart where all seemed to be already known and explored; who has given his thought, observation, or invention, in any form that is deep and great, refined and sensible, sane and beautiful in itself; who has addressed everyone in a style that is completely his own,

¹⁰⁸ T.S. Eliot, *What is a Classic?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945): 8.

¹⁰⁹ Eliot, for example, takes the time to make clear that he, unlike Saint-Beuve, is not interested in the “healthy” classic as defined in contradistinction to the “sickly” romantic; while in earlier pieces like “Tradition and the Individual Talent” he is eager to assess the work and not the author, here he follows Sainte-Beuve in considering the classic status of “Virgil,” “Dante,” “Shakespeare,” and “Pope”; and he will follow Sainte-Beuve thinking the classic through the idea of a “language,” “nation,” and “race.”

and yet also that of the whole world, a new style, without neologism, new and old, easily contemporaneous with all ages.¹¹⁰

Eliot too will reflect on how a classic can be simultaneously new and old, fresh and timeless. But he will complicate the sense of the universal: the “human spirit” and its “unequivocal moral truth” will, for Eliot, explicitly have to pass through Europe before addressing “the whole world” or being “contemporaneous with all ages.” If Sainte-Beuve’s Eurocentrism lies so deep as to be unconscious and unacknowledged, Eliot’s Eurocentrism is explicit and avowed, but also qualified. Towards the end of his lecture, Eliot’s argument takes on a geographic, or at least spatial, vocabulary, for a temporal theme. He introduces a key word – the “provincial” – a term that Coetzee notices and will continue to meditate upon throughout his autobiographic trilogy, the *Scenes from Provincial Life*.

Eliot’s “provincialism” encompasses more than what is commonly associated with the phrase or can be found “in the dictionary definitions.”¹¹¹ Although in the context of a contemplation of the classics, Eliot uses the concept of the provincial to say something about his own age. For Eliot, it entails

a distortion of values, the exclusion of some, the exaggeration of others, which springs, not from lack of wide geographical perambulation, but from applying standards acquired within a limited area, to the whole of human experience; which confounds the contingent

¹¹⁰ “Qu’est-ce qu’un classique ? Un vrai classique, comme j’aimerais à l’entendre définir, c’est un auteur qui a enrichi l’esprit humain, qui en a réellement augmenté le trésor, qui lui a fait faire un pas de plus, qui a découvert quelque vérité morale non équivoque, ou ressaisi quelque passion éternelle dans ce cœur où tout semblait connu et exploré ; qui a rendu sa pensée, son observation ou son invention, sous une forme n’importe laquelle, mais large et grande, fine et sensée, saine et belle en soi ; qui a parlé à tous dans un style à lui et qui se trouve aussi celui de tout le monde, dans un style nouveau, sans néologisme, nouveau et antique, aisément contemporain de tous les âges.” Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve, “Qu’est qu’un classique?” in *Causeries du lundi* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1881): 3:42. (My translation.)

¹¹¹ Eliot, *What is a Classic*, 30.

with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent. [...] It is *a provincialism, not of space, but of time*; [...] one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares. The menace of this kind of provincialism is, that we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together; and those who are not content to be provincials, can only become hermits.¹¹²

Presentism – the valorization of what is current at the expense of what is past, of the living at the expense of the dead – becomes, for Eliot, a kind of provincialism. At this point he sounds a lot like the Eliot who twenty-five years earlier in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” made a strong claim for a sense of history and tradition as the counterintuitive basis for original poetry: “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together [...] makes a writer more acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.”¹¹³ To become provincial is to lose not only one’s sense of tradition, the accomplishments of the past and the achievements of the dead, but also one’s own historical moment or contemporaneity; it is to generalize from limited experience and consequently to espouse the wrong universals, or, worse, to espouse no universals at all. Tied to this presentist provincialism is the “menace” of a kind of globalism that undoes European exceptionalism but does so at the cost of consigning the cultures of the past, or, as Eliot would have it, “the dead,” to oblivion.

Coetzee, in his lecture, makes the observation that “nowhere does Eliot reflect on the fact of his own Americanness, or at least his American origins, and therefore on the somewhat odd angle at which he comes, honouring a European poet [Virgil] to a

¹¹² Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

¹¹³ Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Perspecta* 2 (1982): 37.

European audience.”¹¹⁴ He goes on to speculate that the young (still-American) Eliot must have felt like so many “young colonials struggling to match their inherited culture to their daily experience,” colonials for whom the “high culture of the metropolis may arrive in the form of powerful experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way, and which seem therefore to have their existence in some transcendent realm.”¹¹⁵ From a provincial, American, position, the “world” of “world literature” seems other-worldly; by moving to London, adopting English culture and letters, *electing* to be English (and therefore, so he will argue, also belonging to the continental European literary “tradition”), Eliot aligns himself and his work with this colonially produced transcendence. The phenomenological (first-person, embedded-in-life and culture) perception of the essential European-ness of literature when viewed from the (former) colonies is limited neither to “high culture” nor to Eliot’s day; provincializing Europe remains a project today.¹¹⁶ The association of literature with Europe (or “The West”) is an ongoing phenomenon. As Ankhi Mukherjee puts it in the introduction of her book, also entitled *What is a Classic?* (2014), the “Western literary canon may be an abstraction elsewhere, but in the postcolony it is a key prop in an all-too-familiar scene involving a shelf of European books and a ‘provincial’ writer who dreams of arriving at the hubs of world literature.”¹¹⁷ Remarking on Eliot’s own “provincial” origins (at a time before American cultural dominance), and his European

¹¹⁴ J. M. Coetzee, “What is a Classic?” in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002): 2.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁶ While scholars widely agree that Europe has in fact already long been provincialized, thoroughly entrenched in a global system by the mid-twentieth century, if not significantly earlier, there is still a need for provincializing it in as an “imaginary figure” that remains “embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms of thought*.” See Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000): 3-4.

¹¹⁷ Ankhi Mukherjee, *What is a Classic?: Postcolonial Rewriting and the Invention of the Canon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2014): 1.

“elective affinities,” (to use Goethe’s phrase that, for good reason, has been popular in postcolonial circles), Coetzee invites us to consider the way a Eurocentric canon can elicit desire from afar.

It is at this point that the essay takes a remarkable turn: in order to weigh the merits of two alternative approaches to Eliot’s project – one which reads Eliot in his own terms, taking the “transcendental” call of Virgil across the ages as the “subject’s point of origin,” and all Eliot’s “self-fashioning” as following from that vocation; the other which reads his attempts at re-aligning himself and the world around him as “essentially magical,” a manner of thinking spurred by a “Eurocentric education” – Coetzee turns to his own experience as a “young colonial” suddenly confronted on a summer afternoon in a Cape Town garden at the age of fifteen with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, an experience that, he claims, changed everything.¹¹⁸ In letting his argument “follow an autobiographic path that may be methodologically reckless but has the virtue of dramatising the issue,”¹¹⁹ Coetzee emulates the *locus classicus* of autobiography, Augustine’s *Confessions*, staging his own scene of conversion in a garden. Rather than a child’s voice crying “*tolle lege, tolle lege*,” it is the sound of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* that delivers his calling. Like Augustine, the young Coetzee is overwhelmed and entirely convinced in the moment, and, again like Augustine, as soon as the moment passes he once more begins to doubt, asking,

is there some non-vacuous sense in which I can say the spirit of Bach was speaking to me across the ages, across the seas, putting before me certain ideals; or was what was really going on at that moment that I was electing high European culture, and command of the

¹¹⁸ Coetzee, “What is a Classic?,” 8-9.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and ultimately out of what I must have felt, in terms however obscure or mystified, as an historical dead end – a road that would culminate (again symbolically) with me on a platform in Europe addressing a cosmopolitan audience on Bach, T.S. Eliot and the question of the classic?¹²⁰

This is more than just a rhetorical question for Coetzee. In the course of “What is a Classic?” he will clarify its stakes, examine its ramifications, and in his subsequent writing, critical and fictional, he will return to the question from different angles and with different emphases. But he will not give a definitive response, knowing full well that it is “a question of the kind which one would be deluded to think one could answer about oneself.”¹²¹ Ankhi Mukherjee sees Coetzee’s ambivalence as a struggle between the desire to be “recognized and judged favorably by the classic’s exacting standards” and his “misgivings about the transmission of knowledge in the humanities: the acquisition of disinterest and autonomy by subscribing to transcendent values that comes with an inescapable sense that to be educated is to be incorporated into the knowledge economy.”¹²² To this I would add his desire for an educated audience (South African or International) upon whom the Augustinian echo of his scene in the garden would not be lost, and his misgivings about the self-serving nature of the impulse to join the literary metropolis. Ever scrupulous, Coetzee (or his persona) won’t let us forget Eliot’s provincial origins and he won’t let us forget his own.

5. J. M. Coetzee, *International Art Curator*

¹²⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

¹²¹ Ibid., 11.

¹²² Mukherjee, *Classic*, 39.

This dissertation ends where it began: at that most emblematic of contemporary art fairs, the Venice Biennale. Elizabeth Costello appears again, this time issuing from Coetzee's own pen, in "The Old Woman and the Cats," Coetzee's contribution in his collaboration with Berlinde de Bruyckere, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* (2013).¹²³ *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* was the Belgian entry at the 2013 Venice Biennale; Berlinde de Bruyckere was the artist, Coetzee the curator. Perhaps this means we can add "Belgian" alongside South African, British, American, Australian, and Argentinian, to Coetzee's ever-growing list of national affiliations. Or perhaps her choice of curator simply means that de Bruyckere is not much beholden to the inter-national format of the Biennale in an age when the art world (with all its ties to global capital) is leading the way in cultural globalization. The setting of the story does nothing to clarify the situation. It takes place in Spain.

Elizabeth Costello is never explicitly identified in "The Old Woman and the Cats;" her first name is mentioned only once, sardonically, as "the Good Queen Elizabeth."¹²⁴ But she is depicted as a renowned writer, concerned with the nature of animals and the ethics of what humans do to them. She has a son, John, an academic in America, who has a wife, Norma. Costello's identity, unlike in Van Niekerk's "The Fellow Traveler," is not a riddle. However, almost everything else about this parabolic text is, as John complains in the opening paragraph, "complicated:"

He finds it hard to accept that, to have an ordinary if necessary conversation with his mother, he must come all the way to where she resides in this benighted village on the

¹²³ Berlinde de Bruyckere and J. M. Coetzee, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* (London: Mercatorfonds, 2013).

¹²⁴ J. M. Coetzee, "The Old Woman and the Cats," in Berlinde de Bruyckere and J. M. Coetzee, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* (London: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 27.

Castilian plateau, where one is cold all the time, where for supper one is given a dish of beans and spinach, and where, in addition one has to be polite to these half-wild cats of hers that scatter in all directions every time one enters the room. Why, in the evening of her years, can she not settle down in some civilized place? It was complicated getting here, it will be complicated getting back; even being with her is more complicated than need be. Why must everything his mother touches become complicated?¹²⁵

One of the pillars of modernity and the chief accelerators of globalization is telecommunications: technology that allows people to communicate almost instantaneously, across vast distances. Characteristically untimely, Elizabeth Costello chooses to live in a place relatively unmarked by these modern, global times. To John, her willful provincialism (within Europe), and hermit-like insulation, is utterly baffling and more than a little frustrating. The place where Elizabeth elects to spend her final days is remote, remote in the sense of poorly connected to the global transport grid that makes all places where people may choose to dwell or “reside” variably “accessible.” It is also, in John’s progress-minded, pro-Enlightenment world-view, one that is “benighted” and not “civilized.” Everything that John notices about this place – its antiquated heating systems, its simple (vegetarian) diet, its lack of an efficient scheme for animal control – marks its continuity with older ways of life. It is, in other words, a “backward” place, one lagging behind the times, out of synch with other places, such as the America where John lives. It is not, for John, a “contemporary” setting, neither in the colloquial sense of being at the cutting edge of progressive modernity, nor in the sense I have been developing here, of being a place that he recognizes as sharing his present.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 7.

Visiting this Castilian village, “San Juan Obispo,”¹²⁶ John receives another Costello “lesson;” a supplementary lesson to the eight “lessons” of *Elizabeth Costello*. Lesson 9: on the complexity of “being with.” He goes to Spain to converse with his mother, to make practical plans for her final years, plans that could be conveyed reliably through language, their meaning, or content, trans-lated (carried across) from sender to receiver with aid of a steady medium, a strong signal, and minimal noise: plans, in other words, that could have been made by teleconference, over the phone, by email, or even through the post. Instead of having the conversation he intends, he suffers through a tutorial in “being with” his mother, the cats, and an unkempt old man called Pablo. Instead of communication, he gets communion; instead of planning his mother’s future demise, he has to *face* her ongoing presence/present.

Faces are important in this text, to an extent that might provoke ungenerous critics to accuse Coetzee of genuflecting to his theory-minded “international readers,” sending them on a merry chase aided by their favorite hunting-dogs, Levinas and Derrida. If such readers do exist, they are likely to be disappointed. The issue is raised, face up, from the beginning, when John casually refers to a cat with a white spot on its “face” and his mother corrects him at length, insisting that, “The only creatures with proper faces are human beings. Our faces are what prove us human.”¹²⁷ For John, like many a philosopher before him, the key feature of a face is its *anteriority*,¹²⁸ the idea of facing forward, in the senses both of being directed at the world and of being directed toward the future: the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 25. A Google search reveals no San Juan Obispo in Spain, though there is a San Juan del Obispo in Guatemala and in Antigua. Here where Google fails is where the question “remote or fictional?” becomes un-answerable for the contemporary reader.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁸ “If only human beings have faces, then with what, through what, do animals face the world? *Anterior Features?*” Coetzee, “The Old Woman and the Cats,” 8.

human being qua future-oriented animal, able to think beyond the merely-animal present and past the merely-imprinted past, capable, above all, of *choice*. But Elizabeth clearly has a different, metaphysical conception, explaining to John:

Even we [humans] are not born with faces. A face has to be coaxed out of us, as a fire is coaxed out of coals. I coaxed a face out of you, out of your depths. I can remember how I bent over you and blew on you, day after day, till at last you, the being I call *you my child*, began to emerge. It was like calling forth a soul.¹²⁹

This quasi-religious language mystifies John, who, several pages down in the argument, eventually admits, “When the word *soul* is used, I generally cease to understand.”¹³⁰ Nevertheless, he latches on to the idea of a soul or face acting like a personality or character – something that is developed through time. In John’s experience, cats, despite their promise as kittens, never grow into fully individuated entities, each simply an “embodiment of the Platonic Cat;”¹³¹ Elizabeth, unsurprisingly, disagrees. For her cats have souls but not characters. The souls of cats are invisible, not to an all-seeing God, but to humans (since cats don’t have faces) and to other cats (since cats don’t use vision to “apprehend” one another).¹³²

So the debate goes, with Elizabeth contradicting everything John proposes. The ethical argument regarding animals is not my focus here, though it will certainly be of interest for many Coetzee scholars. Suffice it for my purposes to note that at the far end of the spectrum of a present juncture – the concatenation of entities with which someone shares a present – are animals. It may well be impossible to share any meaningful sense

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹³¹ Ibid., 8.

¹³² Ibid., 9.

of the present with creatures whose experience is all present, without past or future. But sharing a present with an en-souled critter, one whose soul has been “coaxed” into being through time and care, is quite a different proposition. And determining what precisely can be shared between species in San Juan Obispo is also a limit figure for translatability. What precisely is carried across is uncertain, but the act of translation itself – Elizabeth’s “apprehension” of these creatures, and their “apprehension” of her – con-joins them into a shared present; without “visible” content, the juncture itself is what matters.

The fluidity of the relation to animals and to humans is clear from the outset of this story, with Pedro and the cats united under the category of things that irk John about his mother’s residence. The human-animal equation appears most bluntly and violently when, after thinking of the cats qua problem for some time, John conceives, but has the tact not to propose, a (final) solution: “If it were up to him alone to solve the problem of this village and its plague of cats, if his mother were in no way involved – if his mother were deceased, for example – he would say *Kill them all*, he would say *Exterminate the brutes*.”¹³³ In “Lesson 3: The Lives of Animals,” Elizabeth Costello famously likens industrial farming to the holocaust, the mass killing of animals to the mass murder of human beings, earning her the ire of other characters in the room and earning Coetzee the ire of many a critic. Here again an equation is proposed, a reflexive identity between human and animal, animal and human. John’s mind brings up an echo of Colonel Kurtz’s mad scribbling in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which ends with the imperative, “Exterminate all the brutes!” Kurtz likens humans (Africans) to animals (brutes) on the unexamined basis that animals (“plagues” or pests) are the proper objects of a species of killing aimed at eradication (extermination). The equation is: (these) humans are animals

¹³³ Ibid., 28.

(or pests) that therefore can (or must) be exterminated. When John cites Kurtz, the equation becomes reflexive: (these) animals are humans (Kurtz's "brutes") who are animals (or pests) that therefore can (must) be exterminated. This reflexivity between human and animal is a reminder of the fact that the technocratic solutions John contemplates for the "plague" of cats, conform to a mode of rationalism that can (and historically has) also been applied to humans.¹³⁴ John's fantasies about felinicide are the acceptable face (though not so acceptable that he can give it voice) of his murderous thoughts, a distraction from the more disturbing glimpses of homicidal and matricidal fantasies that are not permitted conscious airing, that are relegated to contemplation in the future conditional – "if his mother were deceased, for example."

The assumption is, of course, that age rather than John will end Elizabeth's life, and her impending demise is the central concern of the story. When John turns the conversation away from philosophizing about the soul toward the practical "problem" of Elizabeth's final days and beyond, we get to the crux of their disjunctive outlooks:

"Where does it get you, mother," he says, "sitting by yourself in this godforsaken village in the mountains of a foreign country, splitting scholastic hairs about subjects and objects, while wild cats, full of fleas and God knows what other vermin, skulk under the furniture? Is this really the life you want?"

"I am preparing myself for the next move," she replies. "The last move." She looks him in the eye; she is calm; she seems to be entirely serious. "I am accustoming myself to living in the company of beings whose mode of being is unlike mine, more unlike mine than my human intellect will ever be able to grasp. Does that make sense to you?"

¹³⁴ In "The Lives of Animals," Elizabeth comments, "it was from the Chicago stockyards where the Nazis learned to process bodies." Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 95.

Does it make sense to him? Yes. No. He came here to talk about death, the prospect of death, his mother's death and how to plan for it, but not about her afterlife.¹³⁵

John's concerns are rational and intellectual – making choices and solving problems; Elizabeth's concern is living and being-with critters in a way that has nothing to do with reason or intellect. Nothing could be more in keeping with the times, with this age of neoliberal reason, than John's rational pragmatism, which Elizabeth so roundly rejects: "Life as a set of problems to be solved; life as a set of choices to be made: what a bizarre way of seeing things!" And, within a secular frame, nothing can be more timeless than her immersion in the village life she shares with Pablo and the cats, a manner of being-with that "is not a matter of choice," but rather an "assent," a "giving over," a "Yes without a No."¹³⁶ Elizabeth is forward-looking, "preparing" for death, but her focus is on the present-continuous of the preparation, not on the end result. John may have cause to suspect his mother of becoming religious in her late years, living in a town named for a saint, with a man (a reformed sex-offender who during a "troubled period" would "expose himself" in public to young women and children) obsessed with the Pope.¹³⁷ But when he asserts point-blank, "There is no God, mother," she confirms that they share at least that one premise, responding, "No, there is no God."¹³⁸ So if not a religious or otherworldly afterlife, what is the "next move" that she prepares for? The answer can only be a secular, worldly, afterlife that unfolds in the present. She prepares for the "move," not for the destination.

¹³⁵ Coetzee, "The Old Woman and the Cats," 10.

¹³⁶ Coetzee, "The Old Woman and the Cats," 25.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

In the context of the Venice Biennale, the temporal and geographical threads of Coetzee's strange allegory take on special significance. Tasked with creating contemporary art, De Bruyckere and Coetzee conceive of the work as engaged in a timeless conversation with the classics, referencing in their letters canonical depictions of martyrdom of Saint Sebastian; poetry by Ovid, Virgil, Dante, and Zbigniew Herbert; colors used by Titian, Bellini, and Veronese; and Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ*. Tasked with producing a national entry in an inter-national festival, they deliver a highly site-specific work, drawing on the history of the city – De Bruyckere writes to Coetzee, “The entire pavilion will be treated as a pedestal [...] I want to create an atmosphere for both sculpture and viewer. Here, the city and its history will form the pedestal for my work.”¹³⁹ The accompanying text, “The Old Woman and the Cats,” has a local setting that is not in the country they “represent,” moving the scope of relevance from the “world city” to the “global.” The title, *Cripplewood/ Kreupelhout*, is in two languages with echoes of a third,¹⁴⁰ indicating a trans-national and trans-lingual dimension. In a note on this title, Coetzee relates the “lexical tangle” around “kreupelhout,” involving, among other things, crutches, gnarls, snarls, cripples, and knots, to the tree itself: “The cripplewood tree grows out of the buried past into our clean present, pushing its knotted fingers up through the grate/gate behind which we have shut it.”¹⁴¹ The installation itself [fig. 4.1] contains an array of pieces of “cripplewood,” coated in wax, and sporadically tied with bandages. These bundled appendages seem, like many have observed, remarkably like wounded limbs – like living, dying flesh. The joints are rough, their

¹³⁹ De Bruyckere and Coetzee, *Cripplewood/ Kreupelhout*, 49.

¹⁴⁰ Coetzee points out that because of his knowledge of Afrikaans, “kreupelhout” has connotations for him that it “probably doesn’t have for” De Bruyckere, though the South African “kreupelbos” also has a “scaly, black, twisted stem.” *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

concatenation complex. “Knots are of two kinds,” Coetzee reminds us, “the rational kind, creations of human reason, that having been tied can be untied; and the kind that occur in nature, for which there is no loosening, no solution, no *oplossing*.”¹⁴² Against the global conceived as rational totality, *Cripplewood/ Kreupelhout* offers us a limited present with global reach, some of its elements brought and tied together through careful translation, others imported already knotted by nature: a possible, realist, present juncture made flesh.

¹⁴² Ibid.

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