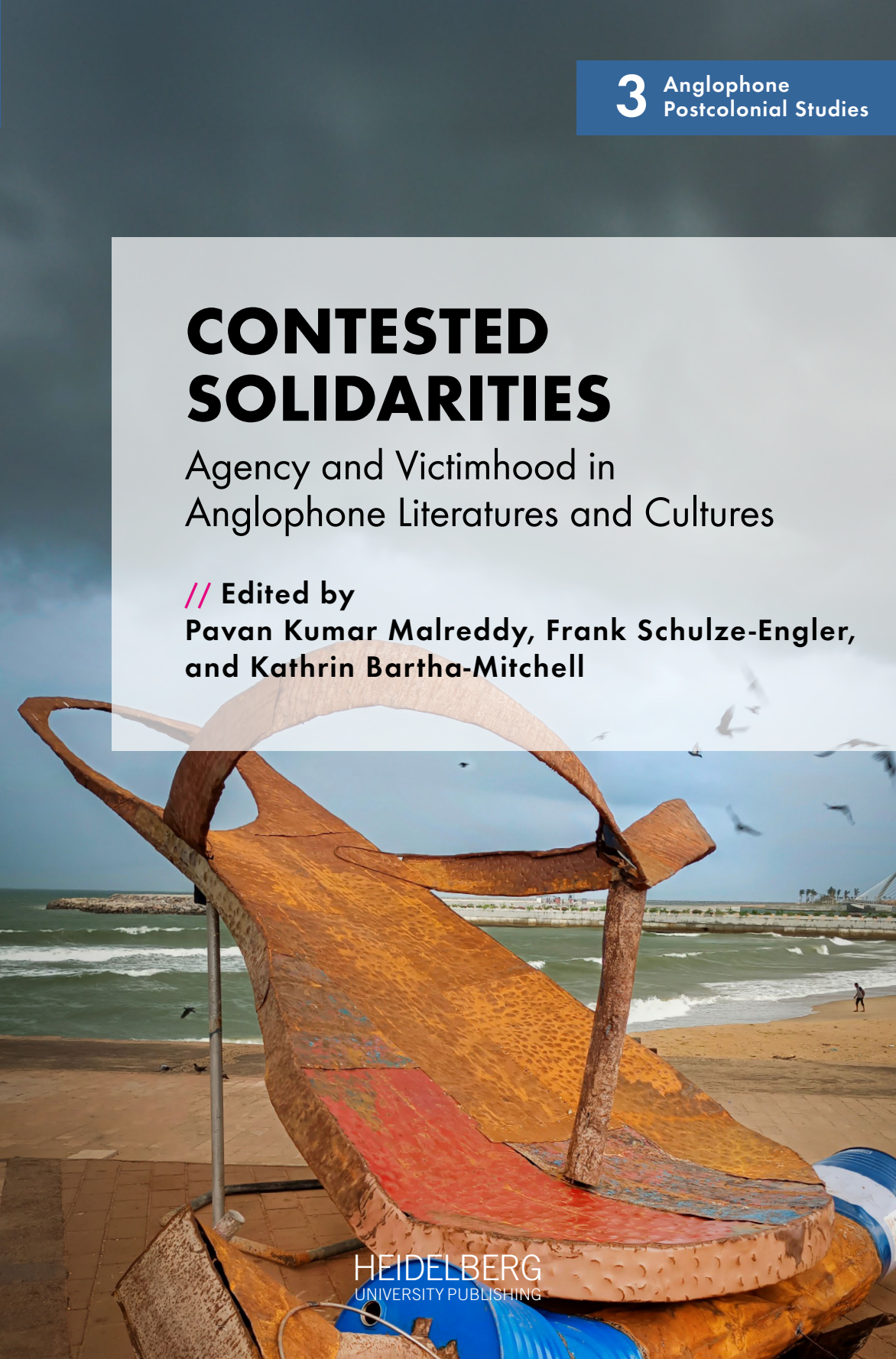
3 Anglophone Postcolonial Studies

CONTESTED SOLIDARITIES

Agency and Victimhood in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

// Edited by
Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell



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ORCID®
Pavan Kumar Malreddy https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4214-1464
Frank Schulze-Engler https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0148-2251
Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2418-9146

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In Memory of Harshana Rambukwella
(1975–2025)

In Memory of Harshana Rambukwella (1975–2025)

a friend, scholar, educator, and passionate human being

Harshana Rambukwella, who passed away on 21 April 2025 in Abu Dhabi, was a great ambassador of anglophone and postcolonial literatures. He appeared in two of the annual conferences of GAPS, the Association of Anglophone Postcolonial Studies in German-Speaking Countries, as a plenary and keynote speaker, sharing the stage with other prominent literary scholars such as Graham Huggan, Michael Rothberg, and Sinan Antoon. His plenary address at the Oldenburg GAPS conference in 2021 on "Patriotic Science" left a lasting impression on the audience, especially his critique of the hidden complicity of postcolonial studies with nativism, which often breeds anti-scientific and anti-intellectual ideologies in the name of national or local "authenticity." He delivered the opening keynote (featured in this volume) at the 2022 GAPS Conference on "Contested Solidarities" with his usual aplomb.

Harshana was a champion of "postcolonial inauthenticity"; although he never quite expressed his work in these terms, he did enough to dislodge the term "cultural authenticity" from the postcolonial lexicon, warning of its parochialism, latent Orientalism, and downright fascist tendencies. These views are extensively documented in his landmark book *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism* (UCL Press, 2018), where he offers a genealogy of Sri Lankan nationalism, which, in search of authenticity, brought on a civil war, dynastic politics, dictatorships, and turned Sri Lanka into a scarred island. It is this very disenchantment with received ideas that drew Harshana to the editors of this book. Pavan Malreddy met Harshana in Colombo in 2016, and subsequently in 2018 when he was appointed as the prestigious Sri Lanka Chair at the University of Heidelberg. He was instrumental in influencing Pavan to offer seminars on the literatures of Sri Lanka. From 2018–2023,

Malreddy, Pavan, Frank Schulze-Engler, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell. 2025. "In Memory of Harshana Rambukwella (1975–2025)." In *Contested Solidarities,* edited by Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell, VII–VIII. Anglophone Postcolonial Studies 3. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1559.c24286

Harshana was a frequent visitor to the German-speaking world, as he was affiliated with a research project at the University of Zurich and was a fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, where he also befriended our colleague Johannes Voelz (Professor of American Studies at the Goethe University of Frankfurt), who hosted him as a plenary speaker at the second annual conference of the projected ConTrust Excellence initiative in 2022.

Harshana was an incredible networker, and, as one of his peers remarked at his memorial held at New York University Abu Dhabi, he was like "a magnet who drew people towards him" with his sharp wit (at which he laughed uncontrollably), stunning one-liners, and his lyrical diction that he borrowed from his mother tongue, Sinhalese, giving his English a grace and beauty that is usually lost on those who treat it as a mere vocational object. Harshana was a great champion of secularism—so much so that he deserves the title of the Sri Lankan Edward Said—and equally a champion of the rights of Sri Lankan minorities, including its Muslim populations. He combined an unwavering commitment to vernacular cultures and traditions that came from his deep understanding of Sinhala with a superb mastery of English, a rare achievement among Sri Lankan scholars of his generation. Harshana demonstrated his ability to engage with Sinhalese literature—largely ignored by the English-educated Sri Lankan elite—in his writings as well as in public engagements. The term *aragalaya* ("struggle" in Sinhala), which he introduces in his chapter in the present volume, is the product of Harshana's bilingual literary trajectories, his trained eye for sociolinguistics, and his commitment to public scholarship.

The editors of this book are grateful that Harshana Rambukwella walked into their lives. They are grateful for his personal and intellectual generosity, for his passion, for his deep and penetrating vision of humanity, which is poorer without him. The humanities have lost one their finest craftsmen who could effortlessly blend social theory, lived experience, and the literary imagination.

This volume is a tribute to the spark he left among us, as he has now left us in search of the Light.

Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler,
and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell
25 June 2025

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Frank Schulze-Engler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy,
and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell

Introduction

> *When I was outside yesterday at the meeting with groups of young women and they were talking about imperfect solidarities, I said "Do you know that is the best kind of solidarity? Because the perfect solidarity can end up being a tyranny." So we have to also learn how to be in solidarity when we disagree with each other about certain things, or agree with each other about certain things—we have to be in solidarity which is not completely anarchic, which is useless, but also not completely hierarchical* [...]
>
> **"Arundhati Roy: Imperfect Solidarities!" 2019**

If anglophone literatures and cultures worldwide once sprang from a contested terrain of solidarities emerging in the shadow of colonialism, many of them have been struggling with the legacies of these solidarities, with ideals of liberation that have turned into new forms of oppression, and with the clamorous or muted appeals of old and new victimhoods for more than half a century now. Ethnic, racial, or national victimhood and solidarity have been invoked in a cynical politics of exclusion all over the globe—from an aggressive assertion of Hindu hegemony in India to a militant Buddhism in the guise of nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar or the abuse of anticolonialism as an ideology of oppression in Zimbabwe. In a quite different setting, victimhood has also become a mainspring of the anxiety-infested xenophobia spawned by right-wing populism in contemporary Europe and North America. At the same time, the oppression of minorities and the plight and agency of political, economic, and environmental refugees has generated new forms of sociality as well as solidarity.

While the twenty-first century has seen the exhaustion of 'enchanted' or 'unconditional' solidarities rallying around idealized images of oppressed 'postcolonial' or 'third world' collectivities, sections of academia continue to see 'resistance' as a form of catharsis, or even a panacea for a myriad of victimhoods and grievances. Yet anglophone literary texts and cultural

Schulze-Engler, Frank, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell. 2025. "Introduction." In *Contested Solidarities*, edited by Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell, 1–12. Anglophone Postcolonial Studies 3. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1559.c24287

productions themselves have long since engaged in self-reflexive encounters that have undermined trite formulations of perpetrators and victims and have explored the tribulations of what Michael Rothberg (2019) has called 'implicated subjects': all modern subjects are involuntarily implicated both in the history of oppression and victimhood, often simultaneously—not only in the formerly colonizing, but also in the formerly colonized regions of the world. More often than not, these implications, which call for a 'disenchanted' or 'conditional' solidarity that holds the abuses of victimhood in the name of agency accountable, cut across habitual East/West or North/South divides: as large parts of the world are rightly admiring civil resistance against the current military rulers of Myanmar and deploring the overthrow of Aung San Suu Kyi, the memory of how her own government was complicit with the persecution of the Rohingya minority in Burma seems to be waning. At the same time, European admonitions to respect democracy and protect the Rohingya (and other) refugees are timely but hardly beyond reproof, given the background of calculated misery in its refugee camps in the Mediterranean, unceasing daily deaths at its external frontiers, and the seemingly inexorable rise of a rabid anti-migrant populism promising a return to ethnocultural purity in many parts of Europe. More recently—after most essays assembled in this volume were written—the deadly Hamas attack on Israeli civilians in 2023 and the ensuing Israeli war in Gaza killing tens of thousands of non-combatants have given rise to a flurry of solidarities that, often enough, demand an unconditional commitment either to the liberation struggle of the Palestinian people or the right of the Israeli people to defend themselves and suspect diverging positions of condoning, if not supporting, either Islamophobia or antisemitism.

In this complex situation, the humanities and social sciences worldwide are facing a new round of clamours for relevance and witnessing a re-emergence of various forms of "enchanted solidarity" based on "the identification of a group of people to whom unconditional support is due on the part of an academic field that believes it needs to transform itself into a form of activism" (Schulze-Engler 2015, 20). Yet, amidst the torrents of misery channeled through global mediascapes into every home and lecture hall, there is arguably work to be done in cultural and literary studies in general, and in World Anglophone Studies in particular, that addresses the multiple forms of oppression and their manifold casualties in past and present worlds without taking recourse to a preemptive normativity promising instant identification of victims and perpetrators; that explores critical, self-reflexive, and disenchanted rather than organic, blanket, or mesmerized forms of solidarity; and that investigates literature and culture

beyond habitual victimological frameworks as sites of unruly, unexpected, and unpredictable agency.

The essays assembled in this volume provide impressive examples of such work engaging with a wide array of narrative forms—from novels, short fiction, life writing, and poetry to performance, documentary, film, and museum exhibitions—cutting across an equally wide array of contexts ranging from Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, and India to Kenya, the Middle East, Poland, Sri Lanka, South Africa, the UK, the USA, and Zimbabwe. They also testify to the challenges such work has to face in these engagements with regard to key concepts and critical vocabularies, many of which seem at least as contested as the solidarities announced in the title of this volume, and all of which need to be adapted or translated to make them usable for the work of cultural or textual analysis.

This is certainly true for the very term 'solidarity' itself. While there is a long tradition in philosophy and the social sciences—persisting to the present day—of scrutinizing solidarity as a principle, norm, or ideal in a singular mode,[1] there are excellent reasons to shift to 'solidarities' in trying to come to terms with social dispositions, political alignments, aesthetic allegiances, or the more-than-human world (Bridle 2022) in cultural and literary studies. If Marxist visions of 'internationalism' or anticolonial invocations of 'the wretched of the earth' were once able to espouse singular stories of 'the working class' or 'the colonized' as unshakeable pillars of 'solidarity,' "these allegiances' ephemerality [and] imperfections" (Lahiri 2020, 15) have largely undermined the credibility of single stories of global solidarity. This can be read as a story of loss, transforming solidarity from "an ethics of pity" to "an ethics of irony" and giving rise to "the ironic spectator," an "impure and ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical towards any moral appeal towards solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer" (Chouliaraki 2013, 2–3). Yet, similar to Rothberg's 'implicated subject,' such stories—while critical of "the global division of power that, in unequally distributing resources along the West–South axis, reproduces the prosperity of the former whilst perpetuating the poverty of the latter" (2–3)—risk perpetuating the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle by focussing primarily—or even exclusively—on 'the West' or 'the North.' Taking solidarity (as well as victimhood and agency) seriously in a globalized world arguably cannot be achieved without "Provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty 2008)—or, indeed, "the West"—and overcoming "the simple binary that opposes the colonial power (the West and

1 See DuFord 2022; Inouye et al. 2023; Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor 2024; Hunter 2024; or Hilal and Varatharajah 2024 for recent examples.

their local allies and accomplices) to the subaltern non-West (colonized societies)" (Sajed and Seidel 2023, 8). This entails paying "close attention to internal tensions, contradictions and hierarchies that are not reducible to West/non-West, colonizer/colonized" (Sajed and Seidel 2023, 8) and delving deeply into the contested histories, ideals, and practices of solidarity in what was once branded as the 'Third World' and today is often called the 'Global South.' Once these histories, ideals, and practices (as well as their entanglements with 'Northern' or 'Western' contexts) move centre-stage (rather than being considered peripheral objects of 'pity'), wider vistas of 'impure,' 'ambivalent,' 'messy' (Sajed and Seidel 2023, 7) and 'imperfect' solidarities (Lahiri 2021; D'Souza 2024) become visible that cut across a wide variety of social, political, cultural, religious, and ethnic locations and identities.

It is, thus, not by coincidence that HARSHANA RAMBUKWELLA uses 'disenchanted solidarity' as a key category in his opening chapter on "Postcolonial Solidarities in a Moment of National and Global Crisis" in Sri Lanka. Contrasting a "geopolitical solidarity" driven by "instrumental self-interests of nation states" with "a less instrumental and more human-scale solidarity" that emerged during the *aragalaya* (or "struggle"), "the spectacular people's uprising that got rid of a sitting president, a prime minister, and a cabinet of ministers" in 2022 (14), the chapter enquires into the rapid and unforeseen dynamics that enabled "a rare moment of collective action which transcended ethnic, religious, and class divisions" and the equally rapid and unforeseen demise of the *aragalaya* and "the swift resurgence of the corrupt political culture" (14). The "post-colonial solidarities" scrutinized in this chapter were neither based on grand narratives of socialist internationalism, global anticapitalism, or anti- or decolonial struggles (although some of the participants of the *aragalaya* championed such narratives), nor on an identitarian model of a "vertical alignment" of (socially, ethnically, culturally, or religiously defined) groups that "fought side-by-side but had little 'lateral' connection with each other" (20). What turned these solidarities into "an important moment in the history of the country," RAMBUKWELLA argues, was their ability "to transcend long-standing ethnic and religious differences" and their adoption of "a kind of postcolonial ethics where complex, and at times contradictory, positions and subjectivities can be held in balance," which provided "a momentary glimpse into a different political imaginary" (22). The ultimate failure of the *aragalaya* thus coincided with "the failure of such a postcolonial ethics": "When the imminent precarity that held diverse groups of people with antagonistic histories together lessened, people's sense of solidarity shifted from a position which could accommodate difference, to a more

conventional sense of solidarity that was delimited by what they were familiar with" (22). The role of literature in such a scenario, RAMBUKWELLA concludes in his reading of Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997), does not primarily lie in an 'activist' solidarity with specific social movements. If "the key challenge for Sri Lanka remains how the energy and political hope of the *aragalaya* and its inclusive solidarity can be nurtured and protected for a more enlightened and emancipated future," self-reflexive novels such as *When Memory Dies*—that invite us "to see both the potential but also the tenuous nature of disenchanted solidarity"—can provide direly needed resources for the shaping of political imaginaries capable of transcending "deeply entrenched social and cultural divisions" (24).

A further facet of contemporary solidarities is explored in MARIAN OFORI-AMOAFO's chapter "Beyond 'Victim Diaspora(s)': Post-Soul, the Afropolitan, and Aesthetic Solidarity in Contemporary Anglophone (Im) migrant Novels." Responding to widespread practices of casting Afrodiasporic lifeworlds and cultures as "victim diasporas" ("a legacy of transatlantic slavery and colonialism imposed on its descendants [that] often delimits reference frames for examining Afrodiasporic migratory experiences," 27), the chapter prospects "fresh pathways for envisioning and understanding migrant complex identities, transnational belongings, cosmopolitanism, solidarity, and agency" (28). Scrutinizing similarities between 'post-soul/postblack' scholarship produced in an African-American context and 'Afropolitan' visions generated from contemporary Africa, the chapter presents readings of three novels (NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2017) "that subvert simplistic readings through victimhood, dispossession, and abjection" (29). What emerges from this new wave of Afrodiasporic writers, the chapter concludes, is "a significant expansion to aesthetic agency and solidarities across the Black Atlantic world [...] positioning the figure of Africa and African descendants as already belonging to a globalised world" (47).

'Aesthetic solidarities' (albeit of a very different kind) are also a major concern of ROBERT KUSEK's chapter "Unlikely Comrades? South Africa, Poland, and the Solidarity of 'Implicated Subjects'." The solidarities investigated in this chapter are neither based on shared histories nor on common enemies, but on an "anti-identitarian comradeship" (71) emerging from a shared state of 'implication.' Drawing on Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject'—"one which, according to Rothberg, occupies an 'ambiguous space [...] between and beyond the victim/perpetrator binary' (Rothberg 2019, 33), as well as remains entangled in both historical and

present-day forms and mechanisms of injustice and violence" (56)—the chapter highlights a peculiar mode of "unlikely literary comradeship" between Polish writers such as Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz, who wrestled with their state of implicatedness in Stalinist and post-Stalinist authoritarianism, and white South African writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Dan Jacobson, who "by reading, studying, and commenting on the works of selected Polish writers entangled in their own histories of injustice and past/present systems of oppression […] attempted to negotiate their own subject positions and forms of implication in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa" (59).

Rothberg's reflections on the "implicated subject" also play a major role in JULIA WURR's chapter on "The Implicated Poetics of Social Reproduction and Neoliberal Diversity: Natasha Brown's *Assembly*" and in JAINE CHEMMACHERY's chapter on "Reclaiming Victimhood and Agency in Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *Year of the Runaways* (2015)." WURR carries the notion of 'implicated subject' over to a Black British context, where the protagonist of *Assembly* "suffers terribly from racial capitalist discrimination while at the same time successfully working in London high finance" (76). Her reading of Brown's novel highlights how "*Assembly* foregoes dichotomies of victims and perpetrators," "narrativises tensions of implication without defusing them," and "defies disambiguation and narrative closure" (77). 'Implicatedness,' the chapter suggests, is not only a thematic concern of a novel critical of neoliberal "diversity management" that "shows how solidarity is undermined when understandings of solidarity are limited to shared experiences of discrimination" without a firm base in a "shared aim of overcoming injustice and oppression" (77) but also a question of literary form, as *Assembly* "raises awareness of the potential implication of narrative and language in upholding systemic injustice" (77). CHEMMACHERY's chapter on *Migritude* and *Year of the Runaways* shows "how both works complicate notions of victimhood and agency by depicting complex precarious subjects who question the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'" (95). While all Indian migrants in Sahota's novel face racist ostracization in Britain, some of them engage in casteist discrimination against their Dalit compatriots, highlighting that "one may be a victim of systemic racism on the one hand, and a perpetrator of gendered oppression on the other" (111). Patel's performance accentuates the long-term effects of British racism in East Africa on South Asian African migrant women but also emphasizes the racist expulsion of South Asians from Idi Amin's Uganda in 1972, thus complicating "too simplistic a scheme which would equate perpetration with Western power and victimhood with a country from the Global South"

(101). Both texts thus draw attention to "everyone's role as more or less distant 'implicated subject,' making us all witnesses of entangled histories in the continuation of which we participate in various degrees" (111). At the same time, the chapter avers, both texts also engage in countering blanket ascriptions of 'victimhood' to migrants (and, in Patel's case, particularly to migrant women) by highlighting their agency.

'Victimhood' and 'agency' are, thus, two further key concepts that feature prominently in this collection and that are adapted from more general usages to the specific work of anglophone cultural and literary studies. 'Victimhood' in particular has turned out to be a highly controversial category, being apostrophied by some as cornerstone of a left-wing academic "victimhood culture" that "maximizes conflicts," "encourages chains of unending recrimination," and is "rife with animosities, with ethnic conflict even more pronounced" (Campell and Manning 2018, 258), while being seen by others as a pivotal strategy of right-wing attempts to bolster up white supremacy as "the proliferation of claims to victimhood produces its own victims by obfuscating truth—that is, by populating public discourse with too many voices of pain while selectively amplifying the voices of the already powerful over those of the underprivileged" (Chouliaraki 2024, 6). Significantly, both positions base their understanding of 'victimhood' exclusively on "the New Culture Wars" in the USA (Campell and Manning) or "the Anglo-American world" (Chouliaraki) and show little proclivity towards considering any other contexts in their argument. Given the disproportionate influence, if not hegemony, of Americocentric scholarship in global academia, it seems timely to move beyond the confines of such debates and explore wider vistas of victimhood and agency represented, contested and redefined in contemporary anglophone literatures and cultures. As Sean James Bosman observes, far from accentuating "victimhood and passivity,"

> anglophone authors often appeal to their readers to recognise that migrants should be treated as fully ethical subjects. […] most migrants, even refugees, are not necessarily powerless or helpless, despite what mainstream humanitarian and other narratives may assert. Rather, the amount of power available to them is limited and variable. (Bosman 2021, 4)

This limited and variable agency of border-crossing characters is explored in NADIA BUTT and SALEH CHAOUI's chapter "Between Agency and Victimhood: Forms of Self-Assertion in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999) and Wafa Faith Hallam's *The Road from Morocco* (2011)." Highlighting "resilience against political and

cultural hurdles" in Ahmed's and Hallam's memoirs (115), the chapter scrutinizes victimhood as "a contested terrain in the writings of both these authors" (116) and analyzes the "double-edged device" of 'memoir,' a genre long considered a male domain in the Arab world, as a "hybrid genre" that "provides a space where dominant stereotypical representations can be laid bare and challenged" (118). "The transformative act of border-crossing," the chapter concludes, invigorates the authors' agency and "allows them to insightfully and critically engage with both sides of the border, agentially facing the hierarchies of power fixated around them by fundamentalist and Western liberalist discourses alike" (134).

While migration and border-crossing are undeniably important contexts for investigations into changing contours of victimhood and agency in contemporary anglophone literatures, they are certainly not the only ones. Different scenarios of victimhood and agency emerge in two further chapters that investigate representations of groups often considered disenfranchised and powerless: VANESSA GUIGNERY's chapter "Victimhood, Agency, and Vulnerability: Portraits of Delhi Manual Workers in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2011) and Mridula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016)" and ALESSANDRA DI PIETRO's "Reversing Victimology: Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* as a War Narrative of Female Agency." For GUIGNERY, a central issue in literary representations of vulnerability and victimhood of the people living precariously in the Indian informal sector lies in the question of "whether empathy is the appropriate response to such books" (137):

> Both *A Free Man* as literary reportage and *Bicycle Dreaming* as fiction complicate the 'victim versus agent' binary system while interrogating the authors' positionings and the readers' response to the representation of working-class characters. Rather than portray the individuals as victims with whom author and reader may empathize from a safe distance, Sethi and Koshy draw the contours of working-class people's agency without exaggerating it or turning them into heroes, and simultaneously expose their own vulnerability as authors and our vulnerability as readers in their and our limited access to the depicted individuals. (150)

Both authors, the chapter concludes, probe the limits of representation by acknowledging "the flaws and pitfalls of their own literary enterprise" and thus testify to "their ethical concerns about representation" (150).

DI PIETRO's analysis of Mengiste's novel highlights how the same female characters that "appear as victims of a patriarchal society" at the beginning of *The Shadow King* (2019) "actively refuse the submissive role imposed on them by society" once the war between Ethiopia and Mussolini's Italy breaks out in 1935 and take up arms to fight the invaders. These female

characters thus "transition from a condition of victimhood to a politics of agency, defying the constrictions of both their own patriarchal society and of the foreign gaze of the colonisers" (155). Participation in war, usually associated exclusively with suffering and victimhood, thus becomes an avenue of emancipation and agency for the women characters in Mengiste's novel:

> The women in the novel challenge their initial condition of submission through the deconstruction of colonial, patriarchal, and feudal hierarchies that prevent them from speaking up. It is through their active participation in the war as soldiers that these women find their own voices, breaking the transgenerational cycle of gendered violence that relegates them to the role of passive spectators of their own history (171).

Yet another facet of victim-perpetrator relations becomes visible in SILVIA ANASTASIJEVIC's chapter "Beyond the Victim–Perpetrator Paradigm: Overcoming 'Single Stories' through Humor?" Taking its cue from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warning against "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), the chapter explores "how humor with its inherent transgressiveness can disrupt and overcome single stories" (175) and how selected works of anglophone fiction (a play and two films) provide a "portrayal of a multiplicity of affiliations and perspectives" and offer a "humorous critique of narrow representations of identity" (180). Following a critique of the tendency of academic identity politics to produce "strict and politically motivated identity constructs" and "fixed frontlines that make it difficult to negotiate between seemingly opposing positions or opinions" (177), the chapter delves into the humorous techniques of dismantling identity stereotypes in Drew Hayden Talor's play *alterNatives* (2000) that juggles "possible victim-perpetrator juxtapositions of Natives versus non-Natives, Jews versus Non-Jews, vegetarians versus meat eaters, and activists versus passive bystanders who might as well be oppressors" (180), the maze of intersecting 'Muslim' and 'Jewish' identities which the genetically, culturally, and religiously hybrid protagonist of Josh Appignanesi's *The Infidel* (2010) tries to navigate with uncertain success, and the aporetic attempts of three subway robbers to separate the passengers into identity groups that would indicate the 'right' kind of victim to ransack in Nino Aldi's short film *Tribes* (2020). In all three cases, the chapter concludes, "the entanglements between the various communities and individuals are so immense that, in a sense, the Other might as well be the self" (191).

As SAAMBAVI SIVAJI shows in her chapter on "Archiving the Margins: Art, Memory, and Resistance at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary

Art (MMCA) Sri Lanka," clear-cut distinctions between victims and perpetrators are also difficult in post-conflict scenarios such as contemporary Sri Lanka in the aftermath of a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Army that left more than 100,000 dead. Since the victorious government has shown little interest in commemorating this traumatic long-drawn-out conflict in which both sides committed massive human rights violations, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, SIVAJI argues, has become "a significant cultural institution in the preservation and articulation of collective memory" (193) through its inaugural exhibition *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* (2019–2020). In the absence of an officially sanctioned memory culture, the exhibition presents "multifaceted narratives of the victims" that "mediate, store, and transmit memories" and depict "the collective trauma of the marginalised" (193). The museum and its exhibition, the chapter underlines, thus become "a platform for reconciliation, education, and dialogue" and "a space where the darkness of history and the light of artistic expression converge, fostering a nuanced understanding and contributing to the process of reconciliation and healing" (209).

The final chapter in this collection returns to the question of solidarity with a cautionary tale of how anticolonial nationalism can blunt the critical appreciation of anglophone literature. DURBA MUKHERJEE's "Dom Moraes: A 'Traitor' Who 'Fractured' India or an Anglicized Middle-Class Empathizer Who Felt with the Marginalized?" revisits the work of one of India's most prominent anglophone writers, whose "Anglophilic self-fashioning" was criticized "as a betrayal of his Indian identity" (214) by an earlier generation of Indian critics but whose works have acquired a new urgency in the light of contemporary authoritarianism and the fostering of ethnoreligious conflict in India. Moraes's reluctant identification with his country of origin, the chapter argues, was due not to an insufficiently decolonized mindset, but to a critical stance towards "the very basis of modernity that India claims to have ushered in since its independence and, simultaneously, the Indian government's claim of India as a modern, democratic nation-state" (226/227). This becomes particularly pronounced, MUKHERJEE contends, in Moraes's later travel writings that highlight the violence perpetrated against minorities, depict "marginalized voices/sentiments in India, who feel equally alienated as did Moraes," and seek "to project the pluralities of India as opposed to a majoritarian Hindutva identity" (225). Rather than projecting a traitorous 'Anglophilia,' the chapter concludes, Moraes's writing can thus be read as an idiosyncratic act of literary solidarity: "It is in his association to the numerous other Indians

who feel dissociated from a majoritarian India, therefore, that Moraes reclaims his Indian identity" (228).

Taken together, the essays in this volume explore strengths and weaknesses of solidarity, victimhood, and agency as analytical categories in anglophone literary and cultural studies and present a wide variety of case studies that will hopefully contribute towards making our field more attuned to the new and complicated political, cultural, and literary scenarios of the twenty-first century and more attentive to the specific engagements of individual works of art with these scenarios. They also testify, we believe, to a spirit of self-reflexivity that continues to test theories, models, and methods—irrespective of their current popularity in academia—against a wide canvas of literary and cultural practice.

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ORCID®

Frank Schulze-Engler https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0148-2251

Pavan Malreddy https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4214-1464

Dr. Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2418-9146

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Harshana Rambukwella

Disenchanted Solidarity? Reflections on Postcolonial Solidarities in a Moment of National and Global Crisis

ABSTRACT In July 2022, Sri Lanka witnessed a spectacular people's uprising dubbed the *aragalaya* ("struggle"). People flocked in their hundreds of thousands to the capital Colombo and deposed a sitting executive president. The *aragalaya* was underwritten by extreme economic precarity and saw an unprecedented form of solidarity that cut across ethnic, class, religious, and other boundaries. However, as in other recent uprisings—such as the Arab Spring or the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong—the *aragalaya* was short-lived, and conventional politics reasserted itself in the country and unleashed further repression. This paper reflects on Sri Lanka's *aragalaya* and similar struggles elsewhere to critically probe different iterations of solidarity and to ask a series of interrelated questions about the ephemeral nature of solidarity, but at the same time to imagine possibilities for more sustained and substantial forms of collective social and political action.

KEYWORDS Aragalaya, people's uprising, solidarity, Sri Lanka, *When Memory Dies*

When this piece was initially conceived, it was under different circumstances.[1] I was in Europe, in Austria, in early April 2022, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine was gathering pace. Throughout Western Europe, solidarity with Ukraine was evident. There were also uncanny parallels between the European situation and the Sri Lankan one because, as Sri Lanka's economy crashed, India and China expressed solidarity and material assistance. However, in both contexts, many internal tensions in this discourse of solidarity were apparent. While the moral condemnation of

1 After the death of Harshana Rambukwella during the preparation of this volume for publication, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell undertook the last revision of this contribution.

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Russia, particularly by Western European nations, was swift, the willingness to convert this into direct action was more hesitant. Similarly, India's generosity towards Sri Lanka was informed by the need to counteract growing Chinese influence in the country. Therefore, it was clear that in terms of global geopolitics, solidarity would only make sense if it was understood in relation to instrumental self-interests of nation states. At the time, I positioned this geopolitical solidarity against what I saw as a less instrumental and more human-scale solidarity that was visible in Sri Lanka within the *aragalaya* or "struggle"—the spectacular people's uprising that got rid of a sitting president, a prime minister, and a cabinet of ministers. These were all historic firsts in Sri Lankan political history. In addition to undermining a deeply unpopular political regime, the *aragalaya* appeared to represent a rare moment of collective action which transcended ethnic, religious, and class divisions. However, several months down the line, with the swift resurgence of the corrupt political culture, the *aragalaya* rejected, and the radical democratic promise of the *aragalaya* largely dissipated, my view of the possibilities for solidarity on a micro scale are more circumspect. There is, perhaps, an inherent danger in offering analysis of fluid sociological phenomena without the benefit of hindsight—further complicated by my own subjective and affective entanglement with the *aragalaya*. I badly wanted to believe that radical change was possible. As Arjun Appadurai (2007) reminds us, 'hope' is a powerful and necessary political currency, but one that could also potentially blunt our critical consciousness.

The rest of this chapter explores the notion of solidarity in greater detail through two broad moves. Initially, I explore the tensions of attempting to theorize solidarity on a macro scale. Thereafter, I will move to the Sri Lankan context, where I will explore the people's uprising in relation to solidarity, and I will also introduce a literary dimension to the discussion by exploring an iconic novel about Sri Lanka's long and protracted ethno-nationalist conflict and what this has meant for the possibilities and limitations of solidarity.

Theorizing Solidarity on a Macro Scale

Solidarity, in geopolitical terms, is largely overdetermined by pragmatic concerns, though one can also imagine instances where states act non-instrumentally, as in times of grave natural disasters or rare instances when moral and ideological concerns guide statist interventions. It also tends to be hierarchical, with more powerful nations 'helping' the less

fortunate. However, even geopolitical solidarity is informed by a notion of mutual interest that distinguishes it from similar ideas such as justice or general duty towards society (Laitinen and Pessi 2014). Though the motivation may be pragmatic, this reciprocity nonetheless generates some empathy towards 'others' unlike you.

Solidarity on a smaller scale can also be informed by such instrumental interests. For instance, it can be seen in social contracts that benefit society as a whole but are not necessarily based on a moral principle. Even in philosophical terms, this reciprocal dimension of solidarity is important, because if one takes an exclusively communitarian approach and argues that solidarity is primarily about responsibility to the collective, this can result in conflicting solidarities—essentially creating 'in-' and 'out-'group structures (DuFord 2022, 10).

Therefore, solidarity on a micro scale seems to make more sense, because it is easier to nurture a sense of solidarity within a relatively homogenous social setting. However, both in a conceptual and political sense, the key challenge is in trying to understand how solidarity might work with diversity (Leinius 2022, 3–20). Even in sociological literature, there is a privileging of solidarity when it is informed by a compulsion to engage with people unlike you. For instance, Émil Durkheim distinguishes between "mechanical" solidarity associated with traditional societies and a communal sense of obligation with what he calls "organic solidarity," which he associates with more diverse, "modern" societies (Britannica 2022). Durkheim uses the analogy of the body, where each part carries out its functions independently but in relation to some overarching principle, to describe organic solidarity.

A basic problem confronting the theorization of solidarity is under what conditions a sense of obligation towards others unlike oneself can emerge (Leinius 2022, 4). Therefore, from a normative philosophical sense, solidarity that has some element of duty or care towards the other may be considered less impoverished than a form of solidarity that is largely informed by instrumental motives. As I shall discuss in relation to Sri Lanka, these tensions in conceptualizing solidarity have a direct relevance to understanding the *aragalaya*—in terms of who participated, what forms that participation took, and equally, who left when the circumstances changed.

Solidarity can also lead to misrecognition. Such misrecognition has been historically visible when 'progressive' agents have identified themselves with struggles they perceive as worthy. In Sri Lanka, this was visible when early international commentators valorized militant Tamil nationalism at the outset, hardly realizing the authoritarian tendencies of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many who took this position

drew on what Judith Butler calls "frames of recognition" (Butler 2009). It was progressive to identify with the militant struggle of an ethnic minority oppressed by a majority. But as those embedded within the Tamil community recognized—for instance, the authors of the iconic *Broken Palmyrah* (Hoole et al. 1990), one of whom was assassinated by the LTTE—the LTTE represented an authoritarian nationalist ideology that offered little moral counterpoint to Sinhala majoritarianism. Yet global geopolitics continued to construe the LTTE as 'authentic' representatives of the Tamil community.

This dilemma is also poignantly captured in James Fenton's poetry. Fenton, like many other first-world anti-imperialists inspired by the victory of North Vietnamese forces over 'American imperialism,' initially applauded the rise of the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia. In his deeply reflective and self-critical poem "In a Notebook," Fenton reflects on his own complicity in espousing solidarity with the Khmer regime (Fenton 1994). The poem begins with an idyllic pastoral scene of youth setting out to war:

> And night still lingered underneath the eaves.
> In the dark houseboats families were stirring
> And Chinese soup was cooked on charcoal stoves.
> Then one by one there came into the clearing
> Mothers and daughters bowed beneath their sheaves.
> The silent children gathered round me staring
> And the shy soldiers setting out for battle
> Asked for a cigarette and laughed a little…
> I sat drinking bitter coffee wishing
> The tide would turn to bring me to my senses
> After the pleasant war and the evasive answers
> (Fenton 1994, 15)

A few stanzas later, the same scene is repeated in reflective hindsight:

> And the tide turned and brought me to my senses.
> The pleasant war brought the unpleasant answers.
> The villages were burnt, the cities void;
> The morning light has left the river view;
> The distant followers have been dismayed;
> And I'm afraid, reading this passage now,
> That everything I knew has been destroyed
> By those whom I admired but never knew;
> The laughing soldiers fought to their defeat
> And I'm afraid most of my friends are dead.
> (Fenton 1994, 15)

The line "distant followers have been dismayed" pithily captures the dilemma of enchanted solidarity. For Fenton and others who espoused solidarity with 'distant' causes from what they saw as shared ideological concerns, the reality of their enchantment was often disturbing. However, distance is also relative. While Fenton was a 'Western' anti-imperialist espousing solidarity with an anti-imperial cause in the Global South, such misrecognition can happen even when there is much greater cultural, ideological, and political proximity. As I suggested at the outset, when I first conceived of this piece, I was caught up in the euphoria of events unfolding in Sri Lanka and what I saw as their radical democratic promise. Earlier this year, as I joined my friends, colleagues, students, and former political and ideological adversaries in uniting against a corrupt political regime, I saw an opportunity to effect substantive political change in the country and possibly the beginning of a form of pan-Sri Lankan solidarity that I had not witnessed in my lifetime. However, following a spectacular uprising, the spirit of solidarity that united this diverse group appears to have dissipated. The academic and political question that is central at this moment, therefore, is whether the solidarity that was witnessed within the *aragalaya* was transient or something more substantive.

The Historical Context Leading to the *Aragalaya*

To provide some context to my argument, a brief sketch of the current situation in Sri Lanka and the historical context that informs it is necessary. Sri Lanka concluded a three-decade civil war in 2009. Fought between a Sinhala majoritarian state and segments of the Tamil minority that engaged in an armed secessionist struggle, the conflict was shaped by the post-independence Sinhala nationalist project of building what has been described as an "ethnocracy" (De Votta 2021), where an impoverished understanding of representative democracy rationalized majority domination. Within this overarching political dynamic, mutually conflictual and exclusionary solidarities, built on ethnic, cultural, and religious exclusion, developed. Sri Lanka's post-independence history—its politics, social configuration, and economy—were overwhelmingly impacted by this conflict. It has also left deep and abiding genealogies of suffering, victimhood, and enmity, and little has been done in post-war times to achieve positive social change. Instead, exploiting and further nurturing triumphalist sentiments within the Sinhala majority community, the extended Rajapaksa political family—which was in power at the time—positioned itself as the savior of the Sinhala majority. This, in turn, enabled Mahinda Rajapaksa, the executive

president at the time, to achieve cult status as the man who triumphed in an 'unwinnable' war. From 2009 onwards, Rajapaksa's government, emboldened by the war victory, borrowed heavily from international financial markets and embarked on a rash of economically dubious vanity projects. At the same time, this Rajapaksa-centric Sinhala nationalism demonized the Muslim community as the new ethnic Other and created a toxic glue of racism, religious enmity, and corny capitalism. This period also saw the further entrenchment of a highly militarized state in which a large standing military, which had no productive role in a peacetime society, was strategically channeled into many areas of civilian governance and administration.

However, in 2015, Rajapaksa's dream of an unprecedented third term ended when he was ousted by a rainbow coalition of political forces. This was also read as a moment of solidarity, because the common goal of getting rid of the Rajapaksas united otherwise adversarial forces (Ali 2015). But it was precisely because it was read from a perspective of enchanted solidarity that this progressive political moment became a transient event. Those who united to oust the Rajapaksas—particularly politicians representing the minority communities—did so with deep reservations about the Sinhala political leadership they were aligning with. The brief solidarity that emerged in the conjuncture was one shaped almost entirely by the expeditious goal of displacing the Rajapaksas from power, and there was no 'shared value horizon' (Ter Meulen 2016) informing this shaky political alliance. However, had 2015 been understood through a more contingent notion of solidarity—where solidarity is seen as an ongoing process rather than a point of arrival—perhaps a different outcome had been possible. Some scholars have called this "disenchanted solidarity" or a recognition that solidarity needs to be understood as a contingent and situated practice (Schulze-Engler 2015). The solidarity that emerged in 2015 was shaped by unity against a common enemy, but once the enemy was gone, it could no longer be sustained.

The *Aragalaya* and Its 'Form'

A similar situation reemerged in 2022 in Sri Lanka with the *aragalaya*. Once again, a broad movement of solidarity formed. The immediate focal point, again, was the Rajapaksa dynasty; but, unlike in 2015, there was also a larger overarching consensus about changing the country's political culture. In addition, unlike in 2015, the solidarity that emerged with the *aragalaya* was not necessarily underwritten by instrumental political

interests. Instead, this iteration of solidarity had more 'organic' sources and was informed by the common perception of precarity that Sri Lanka's economic crisis has generated. This precarity was also something new in Sri Lankan society. While various forms of precarity had been widespread in Sri Lanka's post-independence history, these experiences of vulnerability were almost always ethnically and culturally overdetermined—for instance, the precarity of the civil war was experienced very differently in the 'Sinhala South' of the country and the 'Tamil and Muslim North and East.' Throughout the war years, the 'Sinhala South' of the country saw the Sri Lankan state as an entity that served Sinhala interests, and therefore, protecting the state was in its self-interest. But with the extreme economic meltdown, this social contract between the state and the Sinhala people broke to some extent.

The beginnings of the *aragalaya* lie in a series of governance blunders by the government of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Elected in the aftermath of the shrill Islamophobia generated by the tragic Easter Sunday attacks of 2019, Gotabhaya was seen as the 'apolitical' Rajapaksa who would lead the country to a new era of prosperity. Shortly after his election, Sinhala youth painted murals on roadside walls full of hope for a new future. But this sense of optimism was short-lived, as Rajapaksa made a series of blunders, beginning with drastic tax reductions leaving the state in deep financial deficit; early missteps in COVID-19 vaccination; and a disastrous attempt to switch to organic farming, virtually overnight, resulting in massive crop failures.

These governance failures were followed by countrywide protests, first by government schoolteachers and later by farmers across the country as agriculture went into crisis. A full-on national crisis emerged when people experienced ten-hour power cuts. It was the power cuts and fuel and medicine shortages that drew the urban middle class onto the streets. It is with their involvement that the *aragalaya* took distinct shape. The event that catalyzed the *aragalaya* was when thousands thronged Gotabhaya's private residence on 31 March 2022, demanding solutions. This uprising was met with a violent police crackdown.

On the next day, a 'Gota go Gama' or 'Gota go Home' village was established by a group of youth activists, with support from a cross-section of political parties, civil activists, professional groups, trade unions, and artists. While the focal point of the *aragalaya* was this Colombo-based occupy movement, the establishment of the Colombo-based protest site also marked an emergent national solidarity that was underwritten by the unprecedented economic precarity facing the entire country.

This early iteration of the *aragalaya* can be read as disenchanted solidarity in action. Present at the protest site were oppositional ideological and political forces: the Inter-University Students Federation (a university students' union with national reach, but with a controversial history of ideological indoctrination and systematic use of violence and coercion within universities); representatives of leftist political parties such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which stylizes itself as the 'radical' left; representatives of the Socialist Youth Union affiliated to the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), from which the FSP splintered; representatives of *ranaviruvo* or war veterans, who are idealized within the Sinhala community and instrumentally used by Sinhala politicians to drum up patriotic fervor; and members of the political party of the controversial ex-army commander Sarath Fonseka, a one-time Rajapaksa ally accused of war crimes. In addition, hardline Sinhala nationalist Buddhist monks, alongside Catholic, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu clergy were present. There were also LGBTQ activists and avant-garde artists. Professional groups such as doctors and particularly lawyers also provided support. One could argue that this was a form of vertical alignment in which these groups fought side by side but had little 'lateral' connection with each other. However, what distinguishes the *aragalaya* from what has gone before is that, despite the significant ideological and political differences between these groups, there was a hazy 'shared value horizon' that informed their participation. There was a broad consensus that the political culture in the country needed to change and some form of democratic accountability was vital, though this in turn was shaped by a somewhat naive and generalizing anger towards the entire 'political class.'

Two events at Gota go Gama symbolized the solidarity that emerged. One was the Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day on 18 May marking the death of Tamil civilians during the end of the war in 2009. In a context where such commemoration was banned by the state and the Sinhala majority population at large refused to acknowledge even the possibility of civilian deaths or war casualties, the symbolic value of this commemoration was significant. What made the event even more remarkable was that the Buddhist clergy—a significant moral and ideological force which has been historically seen as guardian of Sinhala nationalism—participated. The other event was a Pride march on 25 June—something inconceivable under normal circumstances. However, despite these progressive events, one could also argue that the *aragalaya* was a distinctly 'Southern' phenomenon in the political geography of the country. The north and east of the country, where minority communities predominate, did not join the *aragalaya* with such enthusiasm, partly because of the long history of state repression

in these regions and because many in the minority communities felt the Rajapaksa regime was, in essence, a creation of the Sinhala South.

These deep genealogies of enmity and division that have shaped Sri Lankan society for decades became more visible as the *aragalaya* confronted its adversaries more directly. The Gota go Gama site was attacked on 9 May by a politically instigated mob. Within minutes of this attack, people from all walks of life mobilized. Health workers and office staff abandoned their workstations and rushed to the site; others took a more violent route and attacked the mob. People set up vigilante squads, set fire to the buses that had transported the mob, beat up mob members, stripped them, and by that night, a number of houses belonging to local politicians were set ablaze. One member of parliament was also murdered by a mob. But how do we read this violence? Was it an act of solidarity or something else?

We can read the reaction of those who rushed to the site to protect the youth as a distinct expression of solidarity, because this action happened within the 'shared value horizon' of peaceful people's political action. But the subsequent violence damaged the social contract of peaceful dissent that animated the youth-led protest. The events of 9 May marked a decisive turning point. These events facilitated the emergence of a narrative about peaceful dissent turning violent that undermined the *aragalaya*. This became most evident immediately after the *aragalaya* achieved its most spectacular victory, when Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was forced to flee the country. This moment of victory was short-lived because Ranil Wickremasinghe, who succeeded Gotabhaya as the interim president, legally but with little legitimacy, moved swiftly to crack down on the *aragalaya*. In doing so, Wickramasinghe exploited the narrative of violence that emerged post-9-May and characterized the *aragalaya* as a form of anarchy invoking deep-seated fears about populism. This resulted in an almost immediate fracturing of the solidarity that sustained the *aragalaya*, as many middle-class and professional groups withdrew. They rationalized their withdrawal through two strategies—for one, they argued that the *aragalaya* had turned anarchic, and the other argument was about the need to restore political and economic stability. Systematic repression was subsequently unleashed by the state: the police were instructed to prevent any form of dissent, and even the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act—which allows law enforcement agencies to act with impunity—has been used.

So, what insights can we glean from the swift rise and fall of the *aragalaya* in Sri Lanka? The most obvious way to read the trajectory of the *aragalaya* will be to suggest that it was economic precarity that provided the basis for solidarity and that there was no 'shared value horizon' beyond instrumental

self-interest. However, even if we take this view, one could argue that the common precarity that pushed people from their isolated social, cultural, and class bubbles facilitated a form of reciprocal recognition we have rarely witnessed in Sri Lankan society. At the same time, while the *aragalaya* was animated by an existential struggle to secure the basics for a decent life, the slogans and the discourse surrounding the *aragalaya* rose above economic precarity. Those coalescing around the *aragalaya*, ranging from farmers to teachers, youth, artists, and other professional groups, shared a vision about the need for political change. The ability of the *aragalaya* to transcend longstanding ethnic and religious differences also marks an important moment in the history of the country. While many of these divisions have long genealogies, the broad solidarity that the *aragalaya* facilitated provides a momentary glimpse into a different political imaginary.

One way of viewing the inability of the *aragalaya* to translate into a more substantive and lasting political movement could be understood through the lens of disenchanted solidarity. Disenchanted solidarity, as it is understood by Schulze-Engler (2015, 19–26), requires a critically introspective praxis where solidarity is not idealized. It requires a kind of postcolonial ethics where complex, and at times contradictory, positions and subjectivities can be held in balance. With the *aragalaya*'s failure, what we can arguably see is the failure of such a postcolonial ethics. When the imminent precarity that held diverse groups of people with antagonistic histories together lessened, people's sense of solidarity shifted from a position which could accommodate difference to a more conventional sense of solidarity that was delimited by what they were familiar with. This, in turn, meant that the radical politics that underwrote the *aragalaya* could no longer be sustained.

When Memory Dies as a Literary Exploration of Disenchanted Solidarity

By way of conclusion, I would like to turn to one of the most iconic novels of solidarity in Sri Lanka. *When Memory Dies*, published in 1997 by Ambalavaner Sivanandan, the Marxist scholar-activist and founder of the Institute for Race Studies and founding editor of the journal *Race and Class*, is a quasi-epic novel of the precarity of working-class solidarities overdetermined by ethno-nationalism. Spanning three generations, the novel charts how a group of working-class activists attempts to chart a path of leftist solidarity that transcends ethnic, linguistic, and geographical divisions in a society that becomes increasingly polarized along ethnic lines.

The text, from its outset, is cautious about enchanted and vertical solidarities. In Book 1 (the novel is in three sections), a Tamil youth called Saha forms a close alliance with Tissa, a Sinhala labor activist, who in turn introduces Saha to S. W., a charismatic man with little formal education and an organic intellectual-activist in the Gramscian sense. Set in 1930s Sri Lanka, this segment of the novel explores working-class solidarities that fashion themselves in opposition to the collusion between colonial capital and local elites. The friendship is multi-ethnic and is also suspicious of the instrumental solidarities sought by organized labor politics. For instance, the novel depicts the early twentieth-century elite politician A. E. Goonsinghe as an opportunist. He professes a vertical solidarity with the workers but stands aloof. He also exploits racial prejudice against migrant Tamil labor for political advantage. Goonsinghe also betrays the 1923 general strike by striking a deal with the British. This section of the book ends with the death of a young Muslim boy shot by the police during the general strike—marking a symbolic loss of idealism.

The next segment of the novel traces the lives of the second generation. Saha's son Rajan marries a Sinhala woman, Lali. Lali and Rajan meet as radical youth activists at university. They raise a boy who is 'biologically' Sinhala, born to Lali from a previous marriage, but the child, Vijay, is both Sinhala and Tamil through socialization. This section ends with the rape of Lali at the hands of a Sinhala mob. Lali's rape marks another moment in the novel where the deep solidarity of Sinhala and Tamil unity forged within working class activism is disrupted by ethno-nationalism. But the novel continues to hold out the possibility of such solidarity into the third segment of the book, where Vijay, the biologically Sinhala but culturally and socially hybrid product of Lali's and Rajan's union, stands as a symbolic bridge between the two conflicting communities. This part of the novel unfolds in the 1980s with the emergence of Tamil militancy. Despite the breakdown of pan-ethnic working-class solidarities, Vijay refuses to give up hope. Towards the end of the novel, he undertakes a literal and symbolic journey from the 'Sinhala South' of the country to the 'Tamil North.' But this journey of reconciliation fails, and he is executed by his own cousin and childhood friend. The three segments of the novel, therefore, can be read as being marked by three symbolic deaths—each signifying a gradual loss of the possibility for a collective Sri Lankan identity. But the novel is also performing the function of memorialization. As its title, *When Memory Dies*—reechoed by one of its transgenerational protagonists proclaiming that "when memory dies, a people die"—signifies, deep solidarities were once a possibility and are, perhaps, a future possibility as well. Therefore, *When Memory Dies* invites us to see both the potential and the tenuous nature of disenchanted solidarity.

If we turn from the novel to the current Sri Lankan situation, there are distinct resonances. The youth-led occupy movement demanding a radical change in the political culture of the country has animated a sense of disenchanted solidarity that has transcended many deeply entrenched social and cultural divisions. It is also a solidarity that demands active participation and a horizontal commitment. But as the swift reversal of the gains of the *aragalaya* suggests, any sustainable political change in Sri Lanka will require substantive political change and consistent political engagement from various progressive groups within the country. In the last decade, we have witnessed the rise and demise of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring, and the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong—all of which share some similarities in their political imaginary, the profiles of the activists, and their methods of mobilization. However, all of them also largely failed to establish lasting political change and, in some cases, resulted in greater repression and erosion of democratic freedoms. Therefore, the key challenge for Sri Lanka remains how the energy and political hope of the *aragalaya* and its inclusive solidarity can be nurtured and protected for a more enlightened and emancipated future.

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Marian Ofori-Amoafo

Beyond 'Victim Diaspora(s)': Post-Soul, the Afropolitan, and Aesthetic Solidarity in Contemporary Anglophone (Im)migrant Novels

ABSTRACT The African diaspora's image of a "victim diaspora" (Robin Cohen) is a legacy of transatlantic slavery and colonialism imposed on its descendants and often delimits reference frames for examining Afrodiasporic migratory experiences (Goyal). However, contemporary anglophone Afrodiasporic writers adopt a liberated aesthetic stance from which they expand such bounded and narrow views. Aesthetic reframing done by these scholars includes the Afropolitan (Selasi) and post-soul/postblack aesthetic (Ashe). The itineraries of these new migrants focus on individual portraits to give faces to the faceless and often single narrative (Adichie) of African migration. They foster nuanced readings and forms of agencies through aesthetic liberation and via material and immaterial mobilities and migration in literary texts. This chapter examines how contemporary anglophone immigrant novels re-negotiate and recast multidirectional mobilities and foreground "frictions" of mobility (Cresswell) and inequalities of agency from which fresh understandings of solidarity, agency, and identity emerge.

KEYWORDS African diaspora, aesthetic solidarity, agency, immigrant narrative, mobility

> *You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering, so it's us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything and anybody.*
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> **NoViolet Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 285**

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I will miss America, but it will be good to live in my own country again.

Imbolo Mbue, Behold the Dreamers, 373

Here, in this country, it doesn't matter where you came from first to the white people running things. You're here now, and here black is black is black.

Yaa Gyasi, Homegoing, 273

Beyond Aesthetics of Victimhood

This chapter examines how contemporary African diasporic literary productions are renarrating single narratives and portraits of "African identity" toward multiple identifications in the context of migration. I show how post-soul/postblack aesthetics and the concept of the Afropolitan provide avenues of aesthetic solidarity in this reidentification practice. Through a critical reading of three contemporary novels about African migration, the analysis focuses on pluralising their protagonists' identities and representing a variety of migrant experiences of Africans and Afrodiasporic people. Each of the epigraphs cited above evokes aspects of migrant journeys in the respective novels discussed in this chapter and calls attention to the pitfalls of such moves. While they seem pessimistic, they reveal how migrant families, both those who leave and those who remain, are not oblivious to the complexities of their journeys. The novels reflect on their reality and portray compounding influences on their experiences, arming them with the power to control their own stories.

The spatial and migration politics staged in these contemporary anglophone immigrant novels re-negotiate and recast unidirectional mobilities to foreground the "frictions" and inequalities of migrant mobilities (Cresswell 2006) and, in so doing, offer fresh pathways for envisioning and understanding migrant complex identities, transnational belongings, cosmopolitanism, solidarity, and agency. The fraught relationships of global cultural flows that accelerate some mobilities while hampering others, like those of migrants, exacerbate how race, class, and gender categories shape unequal and uneven mobilities through access and stasis for mobile figures.[1] The first part of the chapter outlines the interconnections between post-soul/postblack and Afropolitan scholarship. It engages with

1 See Cresswell (2006); Adey et al. (2014); and Sheller (2018) as well as Gikandi, Goyal, and Schindler in the *Research in African Literatures* special issue, "Africa and the Black Atlantic" (2014). For critiques of male-centric discussions of the Black Atlantic, see DeLoughrey (1998); Newman (2012).

how scholarship on the two concepts fosters aesthetic solidarities that pluralise and represent the diversity of motivations and aspirations of African-descended peoples at "home" and in the diaspora. The second part then reads these critical crossings in the novels following the trajectories of the migrant characters' lives that subvert simplistic readings through victimhood, dispossession, and abjection.

The novels' realistic characterisation and world-building of the transnational lives of migrants facilitate resonance with readers who embark on deeply personal journeys with the protagonists towards attaining personal and collective dreams. The migratory journey is also, simultaneously, a coming-of-age story (*Bildungsroman*), as the novels depict struggles with identity and belonging in new cultural landscapes. Rocío Cobo-Piñero, for instance, has read *We Need New Names* as a "picaresque Journey" (2019, 475). The fast-moving narratives portray worlds collapsing under neoliberal financial fallout, threatening the protagonists' dreams of upward mobility, as happens to the Jonga family in Cameroonian-American Mbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). They stage social and moral corruption and a breakdown of political and religious systems, as in Zimbabwean-American NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). Alternatively, they portray a changed home(land) and, in doing so, interrogate the notions of ancestral heritage, racial identity, and translocal belonging, as in Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016).

The novels, which are all written by women, depict resilient women and girls facing impossible social and political pressures[2] that are essential to subverting established discourses of victimhood in which women are overrepresented. I contend that the authors' portrayal of spirited women moves them from a default victimised position and instead rethinks gendered tropes of victimhood—something that Bernadine Evaristo's Booker-Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) does convincingly. In this way, the narratives find excellent company with a generation of writing, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), which narrate a similar nexus of identity, race, and familial kinships of migrants. These literary texts reinscribe agency in their representation of the characters and show how they negotiate their identities via diasporic spatial mobilities.

2 For a detailed examination of girlhood in *We Need New Names*, see Chitando (2016).

Old Diaspora, New Diaspora: Establishing Aesthetic Frontiers

Yogita Goyal's injunction that "We Need New Diasporas" (Goyal 2017) is widely shared by many contemporary Afrodiasporic intellectuals and in diaspora scholarship.[3] The "old frames" of theorising and reading the African diaspora as a "victim diaspora" emerge from historical and present "catastrophic origins and uncomfortable outcomes" (Cohen 1996, 507). Some of these catastrophes include the "well-worn frames of racial ancestry or heritage" (Goyal 2017, 643), such as a singular presentation of a "Middle Passage epistemology" (Wright 2015) of victimhood, displacement, and dispossession as a consequence of transatlantic slavery. Western cultural imperialism and colonialism, political unrest, wars, and economic hardships perpetrate the narrative of African victimhood. However, such discourses, I argue, fail to sufficiently account for the agency of continental and diasporic Africans. The intersecting vulnerabilities of race, class, and gender collide, introducing further obfuscation in presenting victimhood biases against women or, as official and media reportage sometimes lumps the terms, 'women and children.' Reconsidering discourses and aesthetics of victimhood demands a shift towards centring Africans' agentive capacities in writing (but also narrating, documenting, and historicising) their lived experiences without limiting African diversity only to racial slavery and victimisation, despondency, and displacement. By "representing black humanity, agency, and futurity in the literature of migration and diaspora" (Goyal 2017, 643), the novels discussed in this chapter offer nuanced paths towards pluralising African and Afrodiasporic subjects globally.

Goyal argues that post-1960 second- and third-generation immigrant writers of African descent like Yaa Gyasi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, Taiye Selasi, NoViolet Bulawayo, Mbolo Mbue, and Teju Cole offer alternative narratives and means of narrating the multiplicity of identity in the African diaspora without the 'burden' of slavery, without being reactionary, and without the anti-colonial sentiments of the immediate postcolonial generations. Thus, these writers chronicle diverse migratory histories to inform genuinely multifaceted representations of blackness (641–2). Influenced by globalisation, Goyal argues, these twenty-first-century African and African diasporic writers depart from traditional frames of conceptualising diaspora which are summed up in Selasi's term "Afropolitan" (641).

3 For in-depth discussions of diaspora beyond victimhood, see Avtar Brah (1996); Rogers Brubaker (2005); and Robin Cohen (1996).

In *The New African Diaspora* (2009), co-edited with Nkiru Nzegwu, Isidore Okpewho distinguishes between an "old" and a "new" African diaspora marked by control systems before and after colonisation. The old African diaspora was propelled by enslavement and forced migration, whereas the economic forces that engendered labour migration produced a new African diaspora (Okpewho 2009, 5). The new African diaspora also emerges from political forces, creating a significant presence of political migrants who may be fleeing war and persecution. Capitalist and political forces underscore the African diaspora's "old" and "new" forms, very much like the protagonist Darling in Bulawayo's novel and Yaw Akyekum, the father of the protagonist Marjorie in Gyasi's novel, who emigrates to the US, disillusioned with post-independence Ghana. Yet this "new African diaspora" is by no means homogeneous; it is characterised by globalisation, diverse formations, and multiple locations, struggles, and identities, as well as a "bewildering diversity" and yet "complex threads of connections," as Paul T. Zeleza has pointed out (2010, 2).

These "new African diaspora" novels, Goyal argues further, resist Manichean readings and instead allow for layered readings beyond any "national or ethnic categories" (Goyal 2017, 642).[4] Afropolitans thus chart new ways of engaging with and analysing diaspora. They achieve this by dismantling simple attachments to traditional frames such as slavery, colonialism, and wholesale Pan-Africanism (Goyal 2017, 641–2). When such topics are discussed, these frames are problematised and complexly represented to avoid simplistic readings of African and Afrodiasporic experiences and lifeworlds.

Re-routing Aesthetics of Solidarity through the Black Atlantic: Afropolitan and Post-soul Aesthetics

African and Afrodiasporic writing, out of necessity, has been politically oriented to contest the realities of slavery's subjugation, (post)colonialism, civil rights, and independence struggles through the postcolonial theoretical paradigm of "writing back." Radical and resistant traditions such as Afro-pessimism, black activism, and nationalism partake in such intellectual and activist work. These circumstances engendered socio-political

4 In analysing the new diaspora, Goyal argues that scholars mark three main departures from the old exodus narratives: they are "largely voluntary [...] connected to globalisation and [they] result from the failure of the postcolonial state" (Goyal 2017, 642).

and intellectual movements that formed diasporic connections between aesthetic and liberation efforts, from Pan-Africanism to Négritude, Black Arts, and Black Power movements, as well as contemporary movements for Black Lives. In *Homegoing*, Yaw Agyekum, a Pan-Africanist historian, writes the book *Let Africans Own Africa* (Gyasi 2016, 222), citing the impact of "black people of America's movement toward freedom" on him and Gold Coast political elites, returnees themselves, who are all keen on independence (229). As Robin Cohen writes, Black intellectualism has, since the nineteenth century, documented the parallels between the struggles of "servitude, forced migration, exile and the development of a return movement" (2008, 39) with other diasporic populations (such as the Jewish diaspora), but particularly between African descendants in the diaspora and early "West African nationalists." Such interventions and solidarities continue today between African-American literary aesthetics theorised since the late 1980s and its extensions in postblack/post-soul aesthetics, from the cosmopolitan dialogues of Arjun Appadurai (1996) to "Afropolitan" sensibilities.[5]

In the three decades since its publication, Paul Gilroy's seminal *Black Atlantic* (1993) has offered a familiar route of plotting aesthetic solidarity within the African diaspora, generating much critique and praise. The paradigm has been critiqued for its Anglocentrism, masculinist outlook, and insufficient focus on (perhaps even neglect of) Africa in Gilroy's theorising. However, relegating the Black Atlantic to the status of an "old frame" which contrasts with the impulses of the Afropolitan and post-soul aesthetics in diaspora studies is hasty. Instead, focusing on Gilroy's interrogation of modernity offers an intervention in the transnationalism discourse that tends to ignore or downplay global Africans' roles, places, and perspectives. Beyond the proliferation of the term "diaspora" and its politics, however, Gilroy employs the "black Atlantic diaspora" (Gilroy 2002 [1993], 35) to show the solidarity in Black Atlantic history that involves the recurrent mobile intersections of black people "not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—[which] provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory" (16). This position markedly intersects with post-soul/postblack aesthetics, as heralded by Trey Ellis in his 1989 eponymous essay "The New Black Aesthetics" (Ellis 2003 [1989]), and the term Afropolitan, arguably

5 Post-soul/postblack aesthetics, for instance, partly builds on African-American signifying traditions theorised by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the pioneering *The Signifying Monkey* (2014 [1989]), in which Gates borrows variously from West African folklore and traditions, especially the trickster trope. Such aesthetic continuities and unities connect the texts and artists in their efforts to ameliorate identity representations.

coined by Achille Mbembe in 2007 (Mbembe 2020) and popularised and theorised by Taiye Selasi in the blog essay "Bye-Bye Barbar" (Selasi 2013a).

'Post-soul'[6] and 'postblack' are terms used interchangeably about African-American aesthetic and artistic productions "by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement" in the 1960s (Ashe 2007, 611). Over time, it has expanded beyond the US to include African-descended artists,[7] which makes this exploration of aesthetic solidarity worthwhile. Post-soul is essentially interested in an artistic break with earlier artistic and literary traditions; that is, it uses non-traditional art, experimentation, and inventive styles to interrogate, among other things, identity. Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, introduced the term 'post-black' together with her colleague Glenn Ligon as a shorthand for 'post-black art' at the exhibition "Freestyle" in 2001 (14). Golden's exhibition aimed to rethink the representation of art and the artist to transform them from '"black" artists' to artists (14).

In his 2007 essay, "Theorising the Post-soul Aesthetics," Bertram D. Ashe offers a practical interpretive and triangular framework of "the post-soul matrix" to analyse post-soul texts. The matrix consists of "the cultural-mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness [...] and the signal allusion disruption gestures that many of these texts perform" (613). His template indicates how the texts and the artists of post-soul challenge and subvert essentialist and monolithic discourses about "Black" identities, akin to what Chimamanda Adichie called "a single story" in her 2009 TED Talk (Adichie 2009), her response to reductive assumptions about her as a Nigerian immigrant highlighting racism in the US. The texts employ postmodernist narrative techniques such as metafiction, parody, and intertextuality to critique established modes of artistic, literary, and cultural expression.

Similarly, Afropolitan writing refuses the burden and expectancy of addressing dystopian and catastrophic portrayals of Africa. Even when such situations are depicted, as Bulawayo does in portraying the social decay and hardship in fictional Zimbabwe, the satirical mode gestures towards critical rather than mimetic readings. Showing similarities does not disregard the contextual differences and experiences from which authors like Gyasi, Bulawayo, and Mbue write, compared to their African-American and other Afrodiasporic peers. Like post-soul writing, their novels foster

6 Nelson George first coined "post-soul" in his 1992 article for *Village Voice* "Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bohos," which evolved into *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-soul Black Culture* (1992).

7 See Thelma Golden's 2017 interview with Joachim Pissarro and David Carrier in *The Brooklyn Rail* magazine.

artistic freedom; engage in the practice of "writing back to self" (Mwangi 2009), which is non-reactionary; complicate Africa and Africanness; and revel in their cultural hybridity.

Who are Afropolitans, then? Taiye Selasi sees them as the post-1960s "newest generation of African emigrants" with trans-local attachments and cultural identities. Afropolitans express their African identities forged not against or despite slavery but by being cosmopolitan with specific African sensibilities. Selasi argues that the Afropolitan is forged along three dimensions of identity, "national, racial and cultural" (Selasi 2013a, 530). I add another dimension of relevance, the diasporic, which allows for engagements with diaspora and global African descendants. Moreover, it builds on the solidarities of the Black Atlantic, which is essentially a frame for transnational–global African modes of shared being. Selasi insists that the identities of people of African descent relate to "the history [of slavery] that produced 'blackness' and the political processes that continue to shape it" (530). However, I argue that reductive associations of African descendants' self-identification to racial heritage and phenotype are superficial and problematic. In their study *In Search of the Afropolitan*, Eva Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek write of the Afropolitan as

> confident, often spectacularly attractive, worldly, and profoundly itinerant African or person of African descent. The Afropolitan, it seems, is always about to arrive, yet also most likely soon about to leave. To be Afropolitan is arguably an effect of globalisation and late modernity. *It is a mobile and decentred position that disavows earlier deeply hegemonic phases of modernity as it calls for a reorientation of ideas about Africa and African culture and identity*. (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 1; my emphasis)

Achille Mbembe's use of the term Afropolitan diverges from Selasi's use in the question of mobility. Both recognise global African citizens' "willingness to complicate Africa—namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them" (Selasi 2013, 529). However, for Mbembe, Afropolitanism reinscribes Africa and Africans as members of the world in contrast to the tendency to write them as separate from it. Therefore, both a global aesthetic and a way of life reject victim identification while remaining cognisant of the "injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world" (Mbembe 2020, 60). This worldly belonging often requires a flow of people, ideas, and information. Afropolitans attempt to redefine and expand the notions of Blackness and Black identities, what Ashe calls "blaxploration" or "troubling blackness" (Ashe 2007, 614). Furthermore, these new Afropolitans advocate for pluralising and understanding African identities in all their diversity.

Likewise, post-soul employs the "cultural mulatto" trope (Ashe 2007, 614) to reflect this mode of multiple complex identification and modes of belonging in the world. Regardless, many scholars have intensely debated an 'elitist mobility' inherent in Selasi's deployment of the term Afropolitan. However, both Selasi and Mbembe envision spatial mobilities as part of a complex interrogation of identities for Afropolitans, just as post-soul/postblack envisions such an interrogation for global African descendants.

Mobile itineraries of characters in the novels show that anglophone African diasporic writers adopt similarly liberated aesthetic stances (Tate 1992, 200)[8] from which they address and expand bounded and narrow views of and "single stories" about African-descended peoples (Adichie 2009). While Adichie's rebuttal appears to replay singular assumptions about her American roommate, it becomes a valuable mirror to view the flawed logic of race and identity and a counternarrative to move beyond a reactionary practice of simply 'writing back.' It is also where critiques of Afropolitanism and post-soul arise, resulting from generational differences and artistic renovations. The post-soul artists' attempts at complicating the text of blackness that Bertram D. Ashe has called "blaxploitation" (2007, 614) are often condemned as exploitative. However, "blaxploration," if anything, takes a cue from the 1970s blaxploitation films' 'stick it to the man' formula in problematising iterations of blackness[9] rather than wholly adopting some of its flawed typecasting.

In its earlier development, critics misconstrued postblack/post-soul as pursuing a discourse of "post-race" and thus perceived it as contemptuous of civil rights struggles that enabled their aesthetic freedoms. Writers such as Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, and Colson Whitehead were chastised for their "uncharacteristic" depiction of Black lifeworlds[10] and their glib and careless take on the 'struggle,' signalling race issues in the US. Undeterred by such accusations, these artists acknowledge the critical struggles and strides but carefully distance themselves to create space for new avenues of Black empowerment, aesthetically or otherwise. Christian Schmidt (2017) argues that, if anything, postblack insists on interrogating race without "the yoke of expectations levied on black artists" (2). I agree with his position, since there is nothing 'uncharacteristic' about complexly portraying

8 For further details on aesthetic liberation, see Greg Tate's "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke" (1992).

9 Blaxploitation alludes to the African-American-led gangster movies of the 1970s, which were anti-establishment and anti-Hollywood. For post-soul and blaxploitation, see Ofori-Amoafo (2022).

10 See more on the critique of depicting black life in Mitchell and Vander (2013).

African and Afrodiasporic peoples' realities, and they do not have to be depicted in limited ways to be considered 'authentic,' either.

Similarly, some scholars chastise the Afropolitan for promoting elitist mobility and being averse to African-situated literary practice (Hodapp 2020, 1; and Musila 2016, 111), what Grace Musila has termed "Africa lite" (110)—an idea of diluting African artistic portraits for global consumption. Musila claims that the Afropolitan fosters an "easy comfort and uncritical embrace of consumer cultures and an equally uncritical embrace of selective, successful global mobility and cultural literacy in the global North" (112). Her claims are not entirely unfounded. There is something quite problematic about mobility politics, especially given the so-called migrant crises in recent years and, more recently, in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Yet her critique suggests that 'Afropolitans' depict new examples of singular African success stories, with which I disagree. Afropolitanism's flaws notwithstanding, it has excellent prospects in retelling a new "global African immigrant […] and a new narrative of African identity politics" (Wasihun 2016, 392–3) and creating a "*space* [for] critical inquiry" (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 3; emphasis in original) about African and Afrodiasporic identities. I contend that the aesthetics of the post-soul and the Afropolitan usefully interrogate and foreground the diverse itineraries of these new migrants.

So, how do mobility and diaspora converge in re-negotiating agency and representation? In conventional scholarship, agency briefly concerns the means for individuals to act in certain situations. Agency, freedom, and mobility are often co-constituted and entangled in practice, seeing that being on the move affords possibilities to change the present and future conditions. In this regard, the three novels offer different aspects of the immigrant experience in untangling the (im)possibilities of being on the move. A journey motif structures all three novels literally and metaphorically, and the motives range from individual-personal to collective-social. Freedom is often associated with agency, because being agentic is conceptualised as having the free will to effect change. Feminist and gender studies scholars' examinations of agency focus on women's ability to effect change rather than being recipients of actions. Sumi Madhok, in this regard, rethinks agency models "in oppressive contexts" (Madhok 2013, 102)—such as colonialism, slavery, and crises—to curtail their inherent "action bias" (107) and theoretical binaries. She argues instead that such agency models overlook social settings and history. Madhok further proposes expanding the notion of agency through its "practise and site" and "background conditions" (106), so that agency does not only mean "the ability to act (freely or unfreely)" or defiance against despots but, instead, focuses on "the sociality of persons"

(106). In this sense, the socio-historical contexts in the novels shape the limits of agency for the characters along political, gender, and class lines.

Gyasi's Translocal Belongings

Yaa Gyasi's award-winning historical novel *Homegoing* has garnered a diverse growing scholarship.[11] Set in Gold Coast/Ghana and the United States, the novel shows how the culture of nineteenth-century Fanteland is altered through inter-ethnic wars and slavery as individuals and families are torn apart and forcibly carted across the Atlantic (Esi Otcher) and within the Gold Coast (ancestor Maame, Effia Otcher, James Collins, Abena Otcher) and Africa. Later, the reverse migrations of latter-generation returnees (Yaw Agyekum, Marjorie Agyekum, and Marcus Clifton) show the complications of familial kinship and belonging to ancestral homelands and to diasporic host nations as well as how the characters negotiate their identities between the two. Although belonging to the new diaspora, the novel successfully weaves traditional frames of slavery and return narratives together with contemporary postcolonial immigrant narratives through the stylistic choice of a nuanced transgenerational narrative, thereby avoiding the trap of limiting the narrative to any single frame. The relationship of subsequent generations to the ancestral home differs based on their retained connections, whether material or immaterial. While Marjorie's ancestor Effia Otcher remains in Fanteland, she, like her descendants, is exiled throughout the novel. Through the inherited touchstone of Maame, the matriarch, symbolised in "the black stone pendant" (Gyasi 2016, 16), Yaw Agyekum, Marjorie's father and the

11 Discussions include those on migration (Landry 2018; Yothers 2018), home and diaspora (Heinz 2020), warmth, or safety. In such associations, home is set up as a pre-existing space, an organic community, and an inborn feeling, i.e. an allegedly natural experience that can become threatened by hostile outside forces. Such a sedentarist metaphysics sees mobility as a pathology or threat and rejects both homelessness and alternative notions of home. However, ideas of home have been 'mobilised' in nomadological approaches to home and mobility. Here, home is reassessed as a dangerous fantasy, and a radical homelessness and nomadic subjectivity turns into a progressive source of resistance to essentialist sedentarism and state control. This binary opposition has led to certain impasses in the discussion of home that the article traces, to then propose a third way of conceptualising home in a close reading of Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* (Motahane et al. 2021), trauma (Dawkins 2023; Van Rens 2023), and historiography and memory studies (Owusu 2020; Taoua 2021), among others.

fifth-generation grandson of Effia, migrates to the United States, starting an immigrant narrative. The intergenerational model shows both intra-regional and international migrant experiences. To rethink her place and identity, Marjorie Agyekum, Effia Otcher's sixth-generation grandchild, depends on family rituals and transnational mobilities of journeys 'home' to Ghana (Gyasi 2016, 264–6). Nonetheless, these rituals and mobilities cannot retain unproblematic connections on either side of the Atlantic.

In the US, Marjorie is "black" (273), but she is deemed an "obroni" or "white girl" in Ghana (269). These multiple colliding identifications and the refusal to acknowledge her individuality depict a broader identity politics imposed on Marjorie as a diasporic figure, which is symptomatic of the tendency to ignore the diversity of Afrodiasporic personhood and conflates migrants into types, 'victim' and 'poor,' 'homeless,' or even 'Black.' In Marjorie's case, the so-called luxury of mobility, which is the bedrock of her Afropolitan status and should offer agency instead, reveals the blockades to identity and mobility. This way, her cosmopolitanism becomes both liberating and restrictive. Marjorie must forge a new way of belonging away from the traditional binary of home versus diaspora or Afropolitan versus domiciled African that is instead situated at the interstices of the two. Marjorie's status as a returnee—a traditional migrant and diasporic figure often depicted as either temporarily or permanently displaced and disengaged from a person's native culture—is destabilised. Her realisation of a need for alternative ways of identifying beyond the binary of domiciled or displaced diasporic subject gives her room to expand the boundaries of representing her Black identity beyond the discourse of victimhood. Instead, she embodies the figure of the cosmopolitan/Afropolitan and "cultural mulatto" (Ashe 2007, 614).

In opposition to discourses that pivot diaspora against homeland identifications,[12] the novel nurtures translocal belongings that allow Marjorie to identify simultaneously as not Ghanaian and not American while attempting to grapple with her place and position in both societies. The aesthetic choices of locating Marjorie both in and out of the two geographies (Ghana and the US) allow her to interrogate possibilities that make plural identification possible. Unlike traditional tropes of 'return journey,' which perpetuate unidirectional return to a putative welcoming, unchanged, and fixed homeland, *Homegoing* posits a complex ambivalence of return journeys and interrogates home spaces, traditionally considered safe and nurturing, as continuously turbulent and violent.

12 Avtar Brah critiques binarised discussions of homeland versus diaspora and home versus exile that tend to reiterate the "fixity of origins" (1996, 177).

Returning home in the novel does not guarantee homeland belonging and acceptance: in Marjorie's case, it entails the shock of being called a "foreigner" on returning to Ghana and Fanteland. While some characters physically return to the homeland, they naturally meet a changed home space, as happens with Marjorie and her cousin Marcus Clifton, many generations removed, who is particularly shocked by his encounters with locals; the majestic, whitewashed Cape Coast castle; and its sinister history, which completely unravels him (Gyasi 2016, 297–9). Marjorie's retort to being offered a tour to the Cape Coast Castle is, "I'm from Ghana, stupid. Can't you see?" and the boy's response, "But you are from America?" (264) is distinctly different from her grandmother's hearty welcoming "Akwaaba. Akwaaba. Akwaaba" (265). So, while these scenes might seem similar to established diaspora discourses of identity, the logic of returnee politics reveals the difference between Marjorie's choices and her awareness of her multiple identifications. The novel recasts 'redemptive' returns and problematises ancestral heritage as a locus for establishing homeland belonging and identity for diasporans.

Mbue's Disillusioned Dreamers

In *Behold the Dreamers*, Jende Jonga leaves his young family, his wife Neni and six-year-old son Liomi, in Limbe, Cameroon, to pursue the American Dream. He attains asylum status (Mbue 2016, 8), is a hopeful and lively immigrant, and works tirelessly for two years, living in squalor to save and bring over his family (12). The novel opens *in medias res*, as Jende nervously presents an exaggerated résumé (3) at an interview as a driver for the wealthy Clark Edwards, an investment banker on Wall Street with Lehman Brothers (4). He secures employment after embellishing the truth about his 'legal' status with a bogus reference from his riotous cousin, Winston (17) and agrees to sign a non-disclosure agreement (8).

The opening chapters establish how Hollywood has globalised the American Dream and show how Jende and Neni have accepted the myth of a 'rags to riches' narrative with several references to Hollywood movies and characters as symbolic equivalents of success.[13] According to Dominic

13 The imitation luxury bag Neni purchases in Chinatown symbolises her aspirations for a better life, her American dream. Her friend Fatou thinks she looks like "Angeli Joeli" (Angelina Jolie) (12), and Jende describes Mrs Cindy Edwards as being similar to "the wife in *American Beauty*" (28). At the same time, Bubakar, the sly Nigerian lawyer that Jende hires to process his asylum case, jokingly refers to *Jerry Maguire* in their introductory meeting (Mbue 2016, 24).

Strinati, the concept of the American dream expresses the ideology that "material wealth and success in life can be achieved by anyone who has the necessary initiative, ambition, ingenuity, perseverance and commitment" (Strinati 2000, 27). As Jende tells his boss, Clark Edwards, "America has something for everyone" (Mbue 2016, 40).

The novel's opening also reveals the daily struggles of immigrants to secure their livelihoods, from visa applications to impostor syndrome about abilities and possible acceptance into new cultural spaces. Friction, Tim Cresswell argues, facilitates how "people, things and ideas are slowed down or stopped" (2006, 108). He refers to this as "the friction of the national border or the gate of the gated community" (111). This border policing and gatekeeping frustrates the efforts of many immigrants like Jende in fulfilling their aspirations for coming to the US. While mobility can allow increased chances for realising their dreams, the process is markedly more complex with institutions and systems regulating mobility flow; there is no certainty. For dreamers like Jende, it does not offer solutions for their daily hardships of being an immigrant in America. The intertextual references to the now-defunct investment banking company Lehman Brothers in the novel's beginning, Jende's nervousness, and the many telephone interruptions in his interview with Edward Clark foreshadow the later blockages to the Jongas' American Dream (Toohey 2020).

Moreover, the Lehman reference signals the looming crisis in the narrative, referring to the real-life economic and financial collapse of 2008. As the novel progresses, the relationship between the Jongas and the Edwards moves beyond the initial one of employers and trusted employees. Neni becomes a temporary domestic help to the Edwards family alongside her education at the community college, further entangling the two families. The Edwards seem, in part, a personification of an idealised American Dream, so the closer the Jongas get to them, the more they become disillusioned by this unattainable dream and the more their world unravels as they become disillusioned by the promises and lure of the United States. The dysfunctions of the Edwards seem to rub off on the Jongas as they go from a closely-knit immigrant family to a collective of estranged individuals, each clamouring to hold on to their aspirations shaped by the challenges of immigrant life. The dream must be deferred, as the asylum application fails, and the economic turmoil forces them to relocate to Limbe by the novel's end.

Gender identity and societal constraints limit the agency and mobility the characters in Mbue's novel can access. Cindy Edwards's upward social mobility from a poor childhood to upper-middle-class status does not resolve the traumas of being a neglected wife, being an absentee mother in her children's lives, and struggling with drugs and alcohol. Her white castle of

life is portrayed as harbouring dark secrets—the harsh realities of upwardly mobile life. Neni Jonga travels to America to escape the harsh reality of being born female in Limbe and the economic hardships of her family and society. Mobility is, for her, an opportunity to realise "a dream besides marriage and motherhood" (Mbue 2016, 14). Nevertheless, her identity performance as a woman, mother, and wife ultimately delimits Neni's agency in acquiring her education and realising her American Dream of becoming a pharmacist.

Neni was initially unable to access education in Cameroon because of patriarchy prioritising male children, but later emigrated to join her husband, Jende, in the US. Her immigrant journey seems to offer a solution and a way of subverting patriarchy in her native town of Limbe. However, she is unable to escape patriarchy's reach altogether. Neni succumbs to her husband, Jende Jonga's, will and defers her studies to have a second child. Eventually, she quits school and returns to Cameroon with Jende when he can neither stay nor find employment in the US. The limits to Neni's agentic performance through migration arise and are compounded through her multiple identifications as an immigrant, woman, wife, and mother. Using an intersectional lens unveils the limits to her mobility rather than casting her as a passive victim. Neni takes bold steps in realising her dream: she defies her father to travel to the US and marry Jende; she tries her best to continue her education; and when financial strains back her into a corner, she successfully blackmails her employer, Cindy Edwards, to the anger and dismay of her husband, Jende. What ultimately fails her is America, which refuses to allow her to stay to realise her dream.

The novel employs a cyclical narrative, ending with Jende and Edward Clark once more in his Wall Street office and concluding with the arrival of the Jongas in Limbe (368–75). The encounter between Clark and Jende is filled with admiration and respect as the latter says goodbye before he departs for Cameroon. He notices Clark's smile and generally cheerful demeanour (368). Jende refuses to live in "limbo," never fully belonging while awaiting his asylum application (372–3). He consciously chooses his destiny by relocating his family to Cameroon because, as Clark Edwards observes, "[f]amily's everything" (369). Jende thus prioritises his family's well-being over a half-life in America. After Cindy's death and the Wall Street crash, Edwards also relocates from New York to Virginia to be closer to home (368). The two families learn important lessons about friendship and family from their different upwardly mobile journeys which they eventually choose. They forsake the lure of big-city cosmopolitanism for the small towns of Arlington, Virginia and Limbe, Cameroon, where they can reconnect to meaningful relationships. This problematic but brave choice that Jende makes offers an alternative narrative of return migration, one

that is not of victimhood through deportation nor overwhelming successes of "burgas" (well-to-do returnees) but of a family seeking to recollect and reconnect to build a stable environment for their future. The Jongas become the agents in their family narrative.

Bulawayo's Changemakers

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* interrogates social institutions by situating their histories in oppression and domination. The ten-year-old protagonist and child narrator, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, and her band of friends offer unique perspectives and commentaries on socio-economic and political life by role-playing adults. Darling narrates the collective suffering of the characters and their fight for survival and calls them up as witnesses to a nation's failing economy. The gaze of tourists and news cameras paradoxically obscures the glaring reality of the children's suffering, fuelling Darling's desire to show that she is "a real person living in a real place" (Bulawayo 2013, 8). The novel synecdochically uses the children to represent a cultural narrative of Zimbabwe. Moreover, it critically evaluates the abuse of political power, the illusion of religious respite, the structure of the home via gender, patriarchal and classist lenses, and how these collectively fuel economic hardships that drive migration. This enables the novel to disillusion the agency of mobility and offer criticism through sobering, witty, and satirical language games. Gender is prominently featured in the novel because the reasons and manner of accessing mobility delimits and shapes people on the move. From the outset, circumstances in the slum, cynically called Paradise, mature the children quickly, and they already dream of escaping the agony. Sbho, at nine, dreams of marrying out of Paradise (Bulawayo 2014 [2013], 12–13), Bastard dreams of going to "Jo'burg," and Darling dreams of going to America (14). The "country-game" (48) that the children—Darling, Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Stina, and Sbho—play shows their keen awareness of colonial and imperial structures. Their desire to be Western countries rather than African ones in this game (49) is, again, a poignant reminder of the state of collapse and symbolic of their desire to escape their circumstances in Paradise.

The novel's opening, "Hitting Budapest," establishes a tone for character and aesthetic disobedience by enabling our young protagonists to go where they are prohibited from going. As the narrator/focaliser Darling informs readers, "We are on our way to Budapest […] even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road" (1). They are adamant about "getting out of Paradise!" (1). Nothing will stop them from enjoying the "guavas"

in Budapest. The guavas are symbolic of all that has been refused to them and their families in the shantytown, Paradise, and to people like them by corrupt political and religious elites because of their socio-economic status. This outlook is simultaneously personal, communal, and global, thus addressing Afropolitan concerns. The narrative successfully depicts the struggles and experiences of ordinary economic migrants, such as the protagonist, Darling, and her relatives. The precarity of their lives is filtered through pain, loss, and violence, but the narrative still refuses to depict them as a monolith.

Using analepsis, Darling recounts the forced mobility and displacement of the residents of Paradise during the post-liberation era in fictional Zimbabwe that leads to their material and immaterial impoverishment (73–7). She emphasises their lack of agency and the power imbalance by stating how "they just appeared" (73) in Paradise. Inequality and poverty loom over residents of Paradise, where Darling lives a life with her family that has nothing Edenic about it. Ironically, the naming and renaming signalled by the novel's title indicate the desperate need for change and renewal, calling for new identifications,[14] and the use of the motifs of "light" and "bones" communicate their needs and suffering. Darling's Grandmother, "Mother of Bones," is a personification of poverty.[15] Her mismatched shoes, their poorly lit and cramped shack (26) huddled next to "Heavenway," the graveyard (132), and her anecdotal foraging for bones to survive (28) connote no Paradise. Their living conditions are contrasted with the well-lighted, spacious, and seemingly fruitful neighbourhood of fictional Budapest to reveal societal inequality. Moreover, the text uses the children's daring and, at times, dangerous mobility across the border from Paradise into Budapest to steal guavas as a microcosm of inequality, class differences, social decay, and unequal access to meeting essential needs.

Frustrated with a life of poverty, graduate unemployment, and the failure of the post-independence state, Darling's "kind and funny" (91) father becomes argumentative, mean, and hostile (92–3). Despite Mother's objections, he migrates to South Africa and works as a miner (22); her cousin Makhosi follows suit. Father eventually abandons the family, and both men return home later sick (89–90). Similarly, Mother is a trader at the border, and her presence in Darling's life is sporadic (21). Darling's Aunt Fostalina

14 See Esther Mavengano (2022) and Polo Belina Moji (2015) for more on the significance of naming in the novel.

15 Mother of Bones is also a historical allusion to a general history of resistance and the figure of Mbuya Nehanda, a spiritual leader and freedom fighter from the Shona ethnic group who lived in the 1800s.

lives and works as a caretaker in "Destroyedmichygen" (49) in the US. This naming is a satirical reference to Detroit, Michigan while at once calling attention to the shared economic decline of Zimbabwe and Detroit.[16] Darling occasionally uses her dream of moving to America to cope with her present sufferings and needs. The United States thus becomes the greener elsewhere in Darling's dreams.

Despite their hopeful and sometimes naïve protests and screams for "Real Change," the abuse suffered by Paradise residents at the hands of security officers during their forced eviction is traumatising for both adults and children. The journey of the adults to vote for change is marred by the risk of assault (65–7), while the children become paralysed and remain rooted in place, anxiously awaiting their return (68–70). The traumatic aftermath of the demolition of the shantytown and their subsequent displacement thus transcends the physical. It offers a broader commentary on human-engineered migrations and their impacts on families and communities, using Paradise residents' and the children's fear of losing their parents when they go to vote for change.

The novel chastises religious institutions through a satirical depiction of new Christian Pentecostal churches in post-independence Africa and is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's satirical portraits of religious moral degradation in the Jero plays (Soyinka 1996). In the manner of the charlatan, Brother Jero, the tellingly named Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro in the narrative is an extortionist and sexual predator. He desecrates the church and preys on the residents of Paradise who seek the oasis of religion to escape their precarious lives. Young Darling observes that the Sunday robes of the adults "have now lost their whiteness" (Bulawayo 2013, 31), both a biblical allusion to the sins within (Mborro) and the toils without (economic hardships and poverty). While the children are disillusioned by religion and demand "change" (29), the adults need the illusion to cope but are wary of provoking further assault on their livelihoods (29–30). This showcases how the failure of social and cultural institutions engenders forced migrations.

In the chapter "Blak Power," the children are on their seasonal guava "harvesting" (Bulawayo 2013, 111) and encounter a security guard who, like a border patrol guard, stops them, questions their presence in Budapest, and demands they should leave (105). Shortly afterwards, they encounter an angry armed mob who attack Budapest, announcing that they are reclaiming "Africa for Africans!" Deploying this Black nationalist ideology, the mob

16 The novel references the fall of the Great African city of Zimbabwe from a stalwart in African trading in antiquity to the economic crises that peaked in November 2008—which led the country to adopt the US dollar as its currency.

demands that the "white" colonialists "go back […] home" (111), prompting Godknows to ask, "What exactly is an African?" (119). In this instance, the novel complicates the question of identity to escape any reductionist understandings while staging the problematics of anti-migrant rhetoric that often too quickly and carelessly displaces migrants as not belonging and belonging elsewhere and the entanglements of colonial history in the present when the 'white' couple exclaim that they are Africans. Darling is remorseful because she cannot help the white couple being dragged away by the mob led by an "Assistance Police Commissioner" (118), making her, her friends, and the mob "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019) in the larger narrative and politics of belonging and identity in global migration. The turning point in the novel occurs, and things take a severe turn, in the chapter "For Real." Democracy and change icons like Bornfree are murdered by police and, by extension, the state (Bulawayo 2013, 133). Soon, angry protestors replace mourners at his funeral, and the BBC and CNN observers again capture events. In "How They Left," Bornfree's death and the deferral of change are catalysts for the next wave of migration by citizens, who leave "in droves" to escape the unbearable life of loss and poverty (145–6), something the novel foreshadows through the children's "country-game" (48).

Darling leaves in the aftermath and immigrates to "Destroyedmichygen" to live with Aunt Fostalina and her family. Her dreamy American days and glorious return home are halted initially by cold, snowy days and, later, by limited funds and visa restrictions. The final three chapters, "How They Lived," "My America," and "Writing on the Wall," offer different aspects of the immigrant experience. The chapters depict diverse people, from students to immigrant workers, and offer yet more portraits of the struggles and precarity of immigrant lives as they adjust to US culture. In "My America," Darling lives her version of an imperfect 'American Dream,' not a Hollywood 'rags to riches' narrative. Darling works in a grocery store, taking extra shifts and, like many immigrants, working multiple jobs to enable her to fund her community college classes. When Darling responds to the phone call from Chipo, whom she has avoided for years, she sympathises with the still-ongoing hardships of their friends and community, which angers Chipo. She accuses Darling of being a traitor for leaving their "burning" country behind and having lost her claims to belongingness (284–6). Darling's uncertain future in the US and the displacement from her homeland become too much to bear. In her confusion, the news of Bin Laden's death from Uncle Kojo, Aunt Fostalina's partner, suddenly transports her back to Paradise, remembering when all the scattered family and friends were together. Nonetheless, the memories of playing with her friends are violent war games where they engage in shootouts (57)

and where they try to "Find Bin Laden" (69). Symbolically, the final scene, in which Bornfree's now stray dog, Ncuncu, renamed Bin Landen by the children, is struck by a bread delivery truck shows ambivalence in Darling's memories. It brings her journey full circle, marking her homeland as forever marred by violence yet comforting because of the symbolism of the familiar scents of "Lobels bread" (18, 90).

Conclusion

When absolute freedom is not the expectation of mobility or agency, as Madhok suggests, small successes become meaningful and teachable experiences. At the ends of the novels, the characters do not experience fairy tale endings. Darling's American Dream is in progress, and Marjorie does not receive the complete homecoming she expects in Ghana. In *Behold the Dreamers*, the Jongas are forced to return to their town, Limbe, in Cameroon because their coming-to-America story is shadowed by the trials of immigration laws, economic downturn, employers, and education strictures alongside other family troubles. They must regroup and redefine their dream from a location of belonging. Mobility is multidirectional in the novels, overturning the traditional pattern of South–North migrations. Return migrations in *Behold the Dreamers* and *Homegoing* metaphorically offer a reversal to the 'route' of Atlantic slavery and open up a space of possibilities for negotiating a new identity beyond its frame.

The characters in Bulayawo's novel are as different from Gyasi's narrative and those in Mbue's text as they are similar in their shared response to expanding the frames from reading transnational African and Afrodiasporic migrations. They collectively desire and search for places of economic opportunities and acceptance, renaming, and reidentification. Together, they tell aspects of more significant immigrant stories: not one, but many. Ashe refers to this in his post-soul matrix as blaxploration, "troubling" (Ashe 2007, 620) the representative texts of blackness, and stretching, questioning, challenging, and representing Africanness in all its diversity. Understanding what it means to be African on the continent and in the diaspora is a helpful strategy. I have shown in this chapter how the post-soul/postblack and the Afropolitan converge through a transnational ethos of the Black Atlantic, which becomes helpful for interrogating Afrodiasporic experiences in a globalised world. Like Knudsen and Rahbek's *In Search of the Afropolitan* (2016), I do not intend to take sides in a war of words about the right way to re-configure what it means to be an African or African descendant now. Just as postcolonial studies have no

consensus on their immediate future and disciplinary boundaries, so are divergent perspectives compounded in examining the Afropolitan.

My goal in this chapter has been to open a critical space to move the debate forward and acknowledge the possibilities of this new wave of Afrodiasporic writers as a significant expansion to aesthetic agency and solidarities across the Black Atlantic world. I have argued that their aesthetic practices foster unity to rethink the representations of (Black) African identities in the modern world. Hopefully, the chapter has demonstrated how these aesthetic solidarities between them move forward theorising, writing, and positioning the figure of Africa and African descendants as already belonging to a globalised world.

ORCID®
Marian Ofori-Amoafo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2168-1269

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Robert Kusek

Unlikely Comrades? South Africa, Poland, and the Solidarity of 'Implicated Subjects'

ABSTRACT The chapter investigates how a number of white South African writers have attempted to negotiate their subject position(s), as well as their forms of 'entrapment' in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, by studying and commenting on the works of selected Polish writers. While discussing a variety of works by Lionel Abrahams, J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson, and Stephen Watson, as well as their 'dialogue' with the likes of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz, the chapter argues that the latter writers and their oeuvre have been deliberately prioritised by South African authors due to their perceived implication and entanglement in the long history of violence taking place in Central European 'bloodlands.' A comparative and transnational analysis undertaken in this study postulates the existence of a South African–Polish 'literary' comradeship/solidarity—one that cuts through national, ethnic, and geographical boundaries and finds the *raison d'être* of its struggle not in the same enemy but in an acknowledgement of one's implication, namely, an indirect and involuntary participation in past and present injustices.

KEYWORDS comradeship, the implicated subject, Poland, South Africa, transnationalism

Transnational Comradeship: South Africa and Poland

In early 1962, in the first of many attempts to escape South Africa, his "handicap" (Coetzee 2003, 62), J. M. Coetzee arrived in London. *Youth*, the second volume of his *autre*-biographical trilogy, is—much like Joseph Conrad's 1898 novella of the same title[1]—concerned with a young man's

1 A direct reference to Conrad and his works can also to be found in the narrative of *Youth*. During one of his Saturday visits to the Reading Room of the British

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formative experience of a journey and disillusionment over the romantic and idealistic vision of life. However, it is also a testament to John's "misery," "plight," and "disgrace" (47, 71, 114, 132), which, one might argue, stem from his multiple, intersectional, and often conflicted entanglements: political, emotional, social, economic, and sexual. For example, John might be constantly preoccupied with looking for his "Destined One" (54, 93) and profess his belief in the "transfiguring power" of love (78), but when Sarah, his Cape Town girlfriend, gets pregnant, he abandons her and makes her arrange an illegal abortion all by herself.[2] Elsewhere, he might declare that he wants to cut all possible ties with South Africa, but he enjoys the comforts of a Kensington flat owned by Caroline, one of his lovers, and financed by Caroline's stepfather, who works in the South African motor business built upon (and profiting from) the policy of racial segregation. He might still sympathise with the "third brother" (Coetzee 1998, 65), but the Pan-Africanist Congress demonstration which is organised in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre and which he witnesses in Cape Town remains of concern to him only to the extent that it can affect his plans of escaping South Africa: "*Will ships be still sailing tomorrow?*—that is his one thought. *I must get out before it is too late!*" (39). Entangled in many aesthetic, personal, and ideological struggles, John—this "implicated subject" *par excellence* (Rothberg 2019)—discovers a sense of unlikely comradeship[3]

Library, John meets Anna, a Polish émigrée who is carrying out research into the life of the English explorer John Hanning Speke. In order to seduce her, he talks to her about Conrad's early life in Poland and his time in Africa as well as his aspirations, which mirror his own: "As they speak he wonders: Is it an omen that in the Reading Room of the British Library he, a student of F. M. Ford, should meet a countrywoman of Conrad's? Is Anna his Destined One?" (54).

2 Whenever John meets a new love/sex interest, he simultaneously questions his own attractiveness and sexual prowess, wonders whether he, in fact, deserves better, or speculates how he might "extricate himself [from a relationship] without ignominy" (54). In one of the episodes, he also allows himself to be picked up by an older man and to be fondled by him (79).

3 The term 'comradeship' and its communist associations appear to be particularly pertinent with regard to J. M. Coetzee and his trilogy. In *Boyhood*, John expresses his "passion" for Soviet Russia and "loyalty to the Red Star" (26, 27), which manifest themselves in, for example, obsessively drawing Russian planes and ships caught in the act of destroying their American enemies; naming his dog Cossack; and referring to himself as "the Russian soldier on the Brandenburg Gate, raising the red banner over the ruins in Berlin" when he witnesses the downfall of his father (160). In *Youth*, John expresses sympathy for the Vietcong and considers joining communist revolutionaries, either in Vietnam or in China. He even sends a letter to the Chinese Embassy in London offering

with the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert.[4] Together with Joseph Brodsky and Ingeborg Bachmann, whose works offer a counterpoint to his reading of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and F. M. Ford, Herbert becomes John's aesthetic compatriot, who, like Brodsky, "is with him, by his side, day by day" (91). Herbert—whose poetry Coetzee might have, indeed, first heard on the radio during his stay in Britain[5]—speaks to John "from lone rafts tossed on the dark seas of Europe" (91). The lines of Herbert, as well as those of fellow Central and Eastern European poets, are

> release[d] [...] into the air, and along the airwaves the words speed to [John's] room, the words of the poets of his time, telling him again of what poetry can be and therefore of what he can be, filling him with joy that he inhabits the same earth as they. "Signal heard in London—please continue to transmit": that is the message he would send them if he could. (91)

However, in the late 1960s, the "signal" was not only heard in London, Austin, or Buffalo.[6] Similarly to Coetzee's *Youth*, "Place," a poem written by the eminent South African poet Lionel Abrahams, offers an account of another escape—one in which, right after some violent storm, several

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his services to the regime (153). For more about the generic figure of the comrade, see Dean (2019).

4 It might be argued that Herbert is not the only Pole who attracts John's attention during his London years. Although Andrzej Munk and his film *The Passenger*—arguably the major source of inspiration for *In the Heart of the Country* (1977)—is not mentioned by the narrator of *Youth*, it is more than likely that Coetzee saw it for the first time in London in 1964, when he returned to the UK together with his newly-wed wife Philippa Jubber (cf. Kannemeyer 2012, 130–2; Attwell 1992, 60, 380).

5 The first English-language collection of Herbert's poems appeared in print only in 1968 (Herbert 1968), but individual poems were available to the English-speaking readership prior to that date. For example, the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, published in 1965, contained four poems by Herbert translated by Czesław Miłosz ("Reconstruction for a Poet," "Poem," "Period," and "The Langobards"). However, it is likely that Coetzee is referring to three BBC radio productions of Herbert's plays that he might have heard during his stay in London: "The Other Room," "The Philosophers' Den," and "Reconstruction of a Poet," broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1962, 1963, and 1964, respectively (Taborski 1964, 78). Also, given Coetzee's propensity for collapsing temporalities, violating chronologies, and combing fact and fiction, it is possible that he became familiar with Herbert's poetry only when he moved to the United States in the summer of 1965.

6 Austin (Texas) and Buffalo (New York State) being Coetzee's two US destinations in the period 1965–1971.

white Johannesburgers leave the city and drive to the Rand to hold an outdoor poetry reading near a mine-dump. As the poem's bracketed note of introduction states, the reading took place in the summer of 1969, while the poems recited by a group of friends included those by Zbigniew Herbert and Miroslav Holub, among others (Abrahams 1988, 24). Interestingly, it is neither South African nor American poetry that the speaker of "Place" is able to recollect ("I half forget what poetry we read / our own? Mtshali's? Plath's?" [25]). What the poet remembers instead is the "humane affirmative thrust / of two scientist-poets out of Europe's East" whose "translated lines / we there, with voice and ears and hearts / lent scope and life, brought strangely home" (25).[7]

These two instances of South African writers who are not only avid readers of Zbigniew Herbert's poetry but who also acknowledge the formative role played by the Polish poet's lines in the development of their own writerly idiom seem to welcome at least several conceptual frameworks.

For one, it might be argued that the examples quoted above testify to the existence of the new "axis of filiation" (Gandhi 2006, 10)—one that successfully crosses the South–East divide and goes beyond the well-established communities of belonging contingent on the categories of nation, ethnicity, or race. In this sense, Herbert, Coetzee, and Abrahams could be seen as part of an "affective community" based on various forms of "transnational or affiliative solidarity" (10). What is more, Coetzee's and Abrahams' interest in the "poets out of Europe's East" (or, as a matter of fact, out of the European core) could be read as a manifestation of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have identified as "minor transnationalism" (2005), i.e. a non-binary configuration which prioritises the horizontal model of cultural exchange and opposes vertical (the kind based on the core/centre–periphery structure) methods used to conceptualise the global circulation of ideas, cultures, capital, etc. Adopting such an approach could encourage one to perceive Coetzee's and Abrahams's reading of Herbert as a conversation (though one-sided) between two minor cultures and two

7 Another notable poem that juxtaposes South African and Central European experiences and topographies and, consequently, partakes in establishing what one might call a "collaborative geography" (Craggs, Geoghegan, and Keighren 2013) is Stephen Watson's "The Other City," written in memory of Zbigniew Herbert after the Polish poet's death in 1998. The poem not only juxtaposes Herbert's Warsaw with Watson's Cape Town (both "bitter-sweet"; the former "besieged" by the Third Reich and the Third Rome, the latter "besieged' by on-going racial violence [Watson 2000, 150, 152]]) but also builds a number of transnational links and connections between their distinct (yet similar) historical experiences in the twentieth century as well as pointing to a shared dialectic of the "illusions of hope" and "delusions of hopelessness" (150).

minor literatures: South African and Polish.[8] Additionally, it is also possible to discuss Coetzee's and Abrahams's aesthetic (but also ideological) reading choices as a deliberate act of re-positioning and de-provincialising their own oeuvre in their attempt to escape South Africa and enter the global literary canon[9]—especially in the light of Herbert's iconic status and his outgrowing the domain of Polish or Central European literature. Coetzee himself suggests the very possibility of this interpretation in his partly (auto)biographical essay "What is a Classic?"—particularly when he writes about choosing classical musical culture, represented by Bach, over the middle-class popular musical culture of his South African childhood. While suggesting two alternative readings of the episode (which he calls "transcendental-poetic" and "sociocultural"), Coetzee asks the following question: "[Was] I [...] symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me 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?" (Coetzee 2001, 9). Given the fact that the essay closes with Coetzee's discussion of Herbert ("the great poet of the classic of our own times" [16]), it might be justified to claim that the very same question and the very same "sociocultural" interpretation of one's identity formation can be formulated with regard to Coetzee's early election of Herbert and positioning the latter in the very heart of his literary patrimony.

Although all of the suggested conceptual models appear to be potentially quite productive and likely to offer some new interpretative formulas for the South African—decades-spanning and multifaceted—response to Polish literature and Polish writers (cf. Popescu 2010; Kusek 2020), the present chapter would like to investigate several instances of this 'dialogue' by referring to Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject'—one

8 My reading of South African and Polish literatures in terms of '*littérature mineure*' is indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conceptualisation of the category, in which "minor literature" is not primarily the literature of numerically small nations/groups but the literature of oppressed minorities, avant-garde literature, or literature characterised by a minor usage of the major language (1975).

9 Or, alternatively, re-provincialising it by means of creating a "minor-to-minor network" (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 8) where one provincial (minor) literature (South African) does not encounter a "major" literature (British or American) but, instead, establishes a system of connections with another provincial literature (Polish).

which, according to Rothberg, occupies an "ambiguous space [...] between and beyond the victim/perpetrator binary"[10] (Rothberg 2019, 33), as well as remains entangled in both historical and present-day forms and mechanisms of injustice and violence.

There are several reasons why Rothberg's approach might be both appropriate and useful in illuminating the relationship between South African and Polish "comrades." Although his 2019 study does not make overt connections between South Africa and Poland, its discussion of William Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* (especially the connections between apartheid and the Holocaust that these works explore) and the Warsaw Ghetto (which Rothberg considers an "enduring focus of multidirectional acts of memory that engage with the transnational legacies of *colonial* and *racial* violence" [124; emphasis mine]), as well as numerous references to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and its so-called "internationalism," suggest that South Africa and Poland might deserve a comparative and transnational analysis. This line of investigation could not only acknowledge similar modes of implication in the history of violence, inequality, and persecution but also identify and scrutinise a cultural solidarity ("solidarity-via-identification" [3]) that existed between South African and Polish (or Central European) artists prior to the demise of apartheid and, to a lesser extent, after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Rothberg suggested the very possibility of this South African/Polish intersection six years before the publication of *The Implicated Subject*, i.e. in his 2013 essay "Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject." The piece offers a discussion of Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom* (an [auto] biographical account of South African Jewish writer who returns to pre-WWII Poland and Lithuania in search of the traces of his grandfather, Rabbi Heshel Melmed) and William Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* (a series of short animated films which explore South Africa's political history). Rothberg's essay, which deals with the problems of the legacies of transgenerational traumas and on-going implication in historical violence, not only juxtaposes the traumatic landscapes of South Africa with those of Central Europe[11] but, more importantly, points to the possibility

10 Elsewhere, Rothberg states: "The implicated subject serves as an umbrella term that gathers a range of subject positions that sit uncomfortably in our familiar conceptual space of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders" (Rothberg 2019, 13).

11 The mining pits near Kimberley and the Holocaust death pits concealed by Lithuania's innocent-looking landscape, as well the site of the former concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau and the town of Vereeniging, which is located next to Sharpeville. The latter parallel has been suggested by Kentridge in one

of linking different forms of individual and collective implication across the categories of nation, geography, memory, or the past.

Rothberg's intuition to locate the likes of Dan Jacobson and William Kentridge at the heart of his model is not the only reason why one might be tempted to consider other South African writers/artists and, consequently, recognise them as potential "figures of implication," the inhabitants of the grey zone (on a par with Jacobson and Kentridge). In fact, while reading Rothberg's 2019 study vis-à-vis the life and work of, for example, Lionel Abrahams, J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Stephen Watson, or Rose Zwi,[12] one is struck by how South African authors have been—at various times and on various occasions[13]—entangled in complex forms of implication that are carefully unveiled by Rothberg in his book. For example, as white South Africans in the apartheid-governed regime, they were inevitably "aligned with power and privilege" (Rothberg 2019, 1) to which non-white South Africans had no access. It is the very alignment and the fact that they unavoidably "inhabit[ed] [...] regimes of domination" (1) that in the end allowed many of them to be beneficiaries of the system and of the "material and social advantage" (15) that it provided (e.g. education, travel or publishing opportunities).[14] Also, their implication in various forms of oppression (racial and gender, past and present) was often accompanied not only by a sense of denial or unconsciousness of their own entanglement (as this chapter's brief discussion of *Youth* has shown) but also by what Rothberg calls "self-reflexivity" and the ability to confront historical violence: a condition that can be recognised as one of the parameters of implication (11, 19). J. M. Coetzee has alluded to this sense of implication a number of times—most explicitly, perhaps, in his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech delivered in 1987. In that piece, he argued that, in South Africa, everyone born with a white skin belongs to a "closed hereditary

of his commentaries for *Drawings for Projection*. See Rothberg (2013, 50, 56); Kentridge (2010, 110–1).

12 It should be noted that most of the writers privileged by the present essay are South African Jews, who, as Rothberg notes, were particularly "caught between varieties of racism and vacillating between accommodation and resistance to the apartheid regime" (Rothberg 2019, 24).

13 I am aware of Rothberg's warning not to think about the implicated subject as an ontological identity and, instead, acknowledge a co-existence of different subject positions (victim, perpetrator, bystander, implicated subject) that individuals and collectives occupy in time; see Rothberg (2019, 8–9).

14 Oftentimes regardless of their dedication to anti-apartheid activism and subsequent persecution by the apartheid institutions of power (e.g. censorship of Gordimer's works).

caste [from which one] cannot resign" ("can the leopard change its spots?" he asked rhetorically [Coetzee 1992, 96]);[15] and he concluded with the following diagnosis of the "implicated" condition of the white South African writer who both inherits and benefits from being a member of his caste:

> What prevents him [from "quitting a world of pathological attachments, [...] anger and violence"] is [...] the power of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body. The crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as *irresistible* as it is *unlovable*. (98, 99; emphasis mine).

Is it possible that, in privileging a number of Polish poets as far as their reading choices were concerned, Coetzee and his fellow South African writers responded not so much to the supposed clarity of the latter's moral positions, their steadfastness and unyielding commitment to resist the political and ideological regime of the time (as has been suggested before, e.g. Geertsema 2014; Kucała 2014) but, as this chapter argues, to their implication and entanglement (or "entrapment," to use Coetzee's term) in the long history of violence taking place in Central European "bloodlands" (Snyder 2010)? To the Polish poets' position as the inheritors of those traumatic legacies? The plausibility of this interpretation is confirmed by Jonathan Crewe in his discussion of the poetry course Coetzee taught (together with Crewe) at the University of Cape Town in the 1970s. According to Crewe, although the course paid tribute to the poetic works of Hugh McDiarmid and Pablo Neruda, its main subject of interest was Herbert and his two poems: "Apollo and Marsyas" and "Elegy of Fortinbras." Crewe clearly interprets Coetzee's choice of Herbert as a "deprovincialising" strategy;[16] yet the main reason for prioritising Herbert is the latter's ambiguous position and resistance to be easily positioned in a binary model of perpetrators or victims ("neither a Stalinist nor a

15 He also commented on the mutual entanglement of what Rothberg would define as 'victims' and 'perpetrators': "In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master; the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave" (Coetzee 1992, 96).

16 His understanding of the term is different from the one suggested earlier in this essay, however. For Crewe, deprovincialisation appears to be synonymous with responding to the global literary fashions of the time: "At a time of Marxist academic enthusiasm, it was salutary to encounter an Eastern Block writer," he writes (19).

freedom-loving poster-boy of the US State Department" [Crewe 2013, 19]), as well as his being powerfully affected by the legacy of oppression and suffering handed down from one generation to another. Crewe writes:

> Herbert was clearly the product of a difficult, complex, European-Polish history in which Poland had experienced successive occupations by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. That culture had generally been rendered invisible by the Manichean Cold War division between Communism and Democracy. Herbert's metapoetic sophistication, long memory, and tightly controlled intensity evidently appealed to Coetzee, as did Herbert's allusive or allegorical subtext of political violence, cruelty, and totalitarian repression. (19)

(Un)likely Comrades

In the light of the above-formulated consideration, I should now like to briefly point to three examples of Polish–South African "comradeship" which should be understood not only as a mode of "belonging," "solidarity," or a commitment to a "shared vision of the future" (Dean 2019, 9, 10, 12) but also as a form of transnational affinity between different (yet parallel) types of implication. All three appear to demonstrate the validity of this chapter's central claim, namely that by reading, studying, and commenting on the works of selected Polish writers entangled in their own histories of injustice and past/present systems of oppression, their white South African counterparts have attempted to negotiate their own subject positions and forms of implication in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

Nadine Gordimer and Czesław Miłosz

The first example discussed here is Nadine Gordimer and her summoning of Czesław Miłosz[17] in her seminal 1982 essay "Living in the Interregnum"—a piece powerfully concerned with the ambiguities of living and writing in South Africa, as well as the responsibilities of the writer in oppressive regimes. The fact that Gordimer turns to Miłosz, perhaps Poland's greatest "implicated" poet,[18] should not come as a surprise, given

17 In "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer called Miłosz and Milan Kundera "two of the best contemporary writers in the world" (1988b, 288).

18 The best-known testament to Miłosz's sense of implication in various forms of historical atrocities and forms of oppression is his 1943 poem "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (2001a). Michael Parker observes that even though

her life-long interest in writers from Central and Eastern Europe (Milan Kundera and Ivan Turgenev, among others)[19]—especially in a text that clearly has an ambition to be read across nation-states and that underscores transnational involvement in various forms of historical violence. It is in the opening paragraphs of "Living in the Interregnum" that Gordimer defines apartheid as "the ultimate term for every manifestation, over the ages, in many countries, of race prejudice" (262).[20] She further adds that "[e]very country could see its semblance there; and most peoples" (262). In Gordimer's vision, none of the white settler population and their offspring is innocent—she sees apartheid as a "bluntness" that "revealed *everyone's* refined white racism" (262; emphasis mine).

Gordimer's essay, which she accurately identifies as a confession and an acknowledgement of one's sins (or, as a matter of fact, one's complicity), unambiguously voices the writer's concern with her position as a white South African writer and her belonging ("whether [she] like[s] it or not" [264]) to what she calls a "segment" of white South African society which—in the state of interregnum, an ambiguous period in-between the old and the new when, as Antonio Gramsci notes, *fenomeni morbosi* are likely to crop up (Gramsci 1971, 276)[21]—does not wish to operate in dichotomous logic: either run away from the new order or find ways to "survive physically and economically" (264).[22] According to Gordimer, this segment of the South African population which was "never at home in white supremacy" (270) and which is characterised by a painful awareness of its implication and corruption ("we have 'seen too much to be innocent,'" Gordimer repeats after Edmundo Desnoes [266]) has been incapacitated by its overpowering sense of "white guilt" (266). It is here that Gordimer

the poem's speaker, a gentile, attempts to "differentiate himself from death's helpers," he, nevertheless, feels "complicit in this and all the other despicable crimes carried out over the centuries against Jews and other races by poor specimens of humanity claiming to be Christians" (8). Cf. Błoński (1990).

19 Cf. Popescu (2010, 153); Jackson (2017, 31–5, 53–4).

20 She also calls apartheid a "habit" which an "average South African is not conscious of" (266)—an observation which is re-iterated in Rothberg's study with regard to the implicated subject's sense of unconsciousness of their own entanglement(s).

21 For a recent discussion of Gramsci's 1930 statement which serves as a motto to Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), consult Achcar (2022).

22 "The state of interregnum is a state […] of contradictions" (269). For Gordimer, it is also a situation which requires an "accommodation of paradox" and a necessity to move between the positions of the victim and the perpetrator (e.g. Gordimer's recollection of attending a public meeting concerning the Swaziland deal).

turns to Miłosz—a writer who throughout his life continued to struggle with a powerful guilt complex (cf. Franaszek 2017, 410; Miłosz 1981, 126) and who made it one of his oeuvre's major themes—for the first time. While attempting to define the condition of her social "segment" (her "people") and, consequently, also herself, Gordimer quotes Miłosz's line about the threat posed by guilt which is capable of "sap[ping] [a modern man's] belief in the value of his own perceptions and judgements" (266). She argues that what white South Africans require (in order to achieve the kind of future that could be shared by both black and white South Africans) is to become the individualised moral subjects who would reclaim their agency and thus find a way to overcome a paralysing culture of self-victimisation. It is not enough to "weep over what's done," she says, and adds: "We have to believe in our ability to find new perceptions, and our ability to judge their truth" (266).

Miłosz's words become central to Gordimer's process of understanding the condition of the white South African 'implicated subject' and a sense of passivity which impedes any potential attempt to resist or dismantle the existing racial structures. By referring to the Polish poet (via carefully selected quotes), she alludes to an otherwise unlikely parallel between South Africa of the late 1970s and early 1980s and pre-WWII Poland—especially with regard to the implicit "powerlessness of the individual" who becomes entangled in various historical and political mechanisms of the time (271; Miłosz 1981, 120).[23] Most of Miłosz's lines quoted by Gordimer come from his literary attempt to situate himself in a wider political and social context, namely *Native Realm*, published in English in 1968—an (auto)biographical narrative concerned with the writer's early life and, simultaneously, a nostographic account of his titular Polish–Lithuanian "native realm." It is not difficult to guess why Gordimer must have found this account appealing and relevant to her own (and her country's) situation. The subject of Miłosz's recollections is his homeland: the repeatedly

23 Originally, the fragment about the "powerlessness of the individual" that Gordimer quotes in her essay follows Miłosz's discussion of the political situation in Poland and Central Europe in 1939: "On one side were the Germans—Hitler and the four Horses of the Apocalypse. On the other was Russia. In the middle was the nauseating Polish Right, which, in the perspective of time, was doomed to failure. The groupings of the Centre—Populists and Socialists undermined by Communist sympathies—were difficult to take seriously. Parliamentary methods were discredited in the eyes of my generation. […] My state of mind in those days [1939] could be described as the same dream over and over: we want to run but cannot because our legs are made of lead. I had come up against the powerlessness of the individual involved in a mechanism that works independently of his will" (Miłosz 1981, 120).

colonised territory of the Commonwealth, subjected to acts of racial, economic, and religious violence, inhabited by Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews, who, as Miłosz observes, "hated not only their [latest] sovereign, Imperial Russia, but each other" (16). The fragment of *Native Realm* that attracted Gordimer's special attention (and which, one might argue, mirrored her own beliefs) is to be found in the chapter entitled "Marxism," which, much like "Living in the Interregnum," is concerned with the relationship between politics and the writer's life. At the heart of its argument lies the question about one's position vis-à-vis the demands imposed by various regimes in which one is entangled—in the case of Miłosz, his bourgeois/gentry background, Roman Catholicism, and Polish nationalism as well as Communism. Miłosz writes in the following manner about his response to the 'either/or' logic embedded in his early experiences: "I was stretched [...] between two poles: the contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history; in other words between transcendence and becoming. I did not manage to bring these extremes into a unity, but I did not want to give either of them up" (125).

How to respond to one's sense of implication and the fact that one is incapable of (or averse to) occupying either of the binary subject positions (a Pole or a Lithuanian, a believer or an agnostic, a nationalist or a Communist)? How—to quote another of Miłosz's auto/biographical lines cited by Gordimer in her essay—does one act when one has been used to drinking "Manichean potions"? (270). Miłosz recalls a sense of guilt which he developed in the course of his Catholic upbringing and its after-effects: the feeling of disgrace when, for example, a radical literary critic accused his early work of political passivity and aesthetic reactionaryism (of "wanting to keep [his] hands clean" [Miłosz 1981, 124]); or when his friends—"the embodiment of intellect, daring, and capacity for self-sacrifice in the struggle with the blockheaded authority of the state" (126)—were tried and sentenced for "leftist" sympathies while he "curled up in the sun" (125).[24] For Miłosz, the kind of guilt that is likely to develop in an individual aware of their entanglement and participation in various forms of injustices (as well as of being a beneficiary of power and privilege that result from those injustices) is a potential threat that might lead to one becoming a "direct agent of harm" (Rothberg 2019, 1). For Miłosz, guilt is an "ally of any

24 Elsewhere, Miłosz writes about the painful incident in the following manner: "I sat at the hearings in the courtroom, clenched my fists in anger at the existing political system and also felt ashamed of my role as an outsider, who was never involved in organisational aspects. I was not aware of their involvement with the Communists, but suspected it" (in Franaszek 2017, 158).

ideology,"[25] as it invalidates one's subject position understood as an ability to subjectively understand and make meaning of the world. It is this kind of guilt, this "abdication of the will" (Gordimer 1988a, 267) that Gordimer is rightly suspicious about when she ponders over the role that her "people," her "segment" with their morally compromised position can play in the "new that cannot yet be born" (266). By overcoming the sense of guilt, they are more likely to find a way "out of the perceptual clutter of curled photographs of master and servant relationships, the 78 *rpms* of history repeating the conditioning of the past" (270). When she quotes Miłosz for the last time, she chooses a two-liner ("What is poetry which does not save / Nations or people" [272]) from his poem "Dedication," written in 1945 and addressed to Miłosz's fellow poets who—unlike himself—fought and died in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 (Miłosz 2001c). This is a telling choice, indeed; and, one should add, coherent with other pieces by Miłosz selected by Gordimer to provide a commentary on her personal and political views regarding South Africa. Not only is it a poem which is set in its own interregnum ("You mixed up farewell to an epoch with the beginning of a new one" [Miłosz 2001, 77]); not only is it a piece which pronounces its faith in literature's obligations towards individuals and communities as well as attesting to the dangers posed by a new ideological regime (in Miłosz's case, the communist regime, with its desire to erase the memory of the Warsaw Uprising from history). Most importantly for the present discussion, it is a confession by a poet who, despite his feeling of guilt and shame, professes a belief in the possibility of ending a cycle of violence[26] and thus finding a way to "reconcile the irreconcilable within himself" (Gordimer 1988a, 278).

Dan Jacobson, Adam Mickiewicz, and Czesław Miłosz

Gordimer is not the only South African writer who has turned to Miłosz, her "countryman,"[27] while trying to undo the knots of her enmeshment with apartheid. Miłosz also features in the work of Gordimer's fellow South African Litvak Dan Jacobson—more specifically, in the already

25 He traces the origins of his future complicity and acknowledgement of People's Poland to this pre-WWII feeling of guilt (125).

26 "They used to pour millet on graves or poppy seeds / To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds. / I put this book here for you, who once lived / So that you should visit us no more" (Miłosz 1973, 45).

27 Miłosz was born in Sztetejnie (nowadays Šeteniai) in 1911. His home village is located approximately 150 kilometres from Žagarė, the birthplace of Nadine Gordimer's father Isidore Gordimer.

mentioned memoir entitled *Heshel's Kingdom*. The story of Jacobson's travel to Lithuania in the early 1990s to visit the place where his mother was born and where his family continued to live until 1941 (i.e. to Varniai) is much concerned with transnational parallels between South Africa and Central Europe.[28] This is particularly conspicuous in Jacobson's discussion of South African and Central European landscapes, in which his hometown of Kimberley and the Northern Cape are fused with the town of Varniai and the Lithuanian countryside—both presented as border-/hinterlands and a provincial space carved out within another provincial space. In Jacobson's memoir, Varniai's description as "remote, out-of-the-way, lacking streets and convenient transportation to the central city of the country" (18), as a dwelling where only one brick-walled house exists (23), is constantly juxtaposed with the writer's near-identical account of Kimberly: "shabby, bypassed place even within South Africa" (74) where the veld "beg[ins] not fifty yards from [one's] garden" (72). For the writer, South Africa and Central Europe are each other's spitting image: both are "provincial" (68, 145), holding the status of "rough-and-ready annexe" to civilisation (68); both are described using the same repertoire of adjectives: flat, empty, silent, vacant (71, 109, 110, 113, 149, 181, 183). Jacobson is also struck by a "surprising likeness" (117) of houses that he encounters in Lithuania with those that surrounded him in South Africa since his birth.

However, Jacobson's interest in topographical and architectural parallels between South Africa and Central Europe remains just a prelude to Jacobson's effort to understand his own position in South Africa (as a South African Jew), the position occupied by other social and ethnic groups, and the network of relationships that have developed between them. While trying to look at his early years spent in Kimberley, Jacobson will conclude that "the society in which we found ourselves was quite as fissured as any to be found in Lithuania and […] almost as comprehensively ruled by administrative fiat" (72). Though Jacobson is careful not to draw straightforward parallels between Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa, or between Central European Jews and Black South Africans,[29] he cannot resist building analogies between various ethnic and national groups that have populated both regions. The dominant position occupied by the Poles in

28 For a thorough discussion of these parallels and further development of the claims formulated in this sub-section, see Kusek (2023).

29 Unlike, for example, Rose Zwi, who acknowledges a direct correspondence between the two historical phenomena. "How can we fail to recognise our own lives in those of the black people?" (Zwi 1997, 48) her father will ask when commenting on the living and working conditions of the black mine workers upon his arrival in South Africa from Lithuania.

Lithuania reminds him not only of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in Ireland but also of the English-speaking South Africans who have dominated the country's intellectual and cultural life. Conversely, ethnic Lithuanians are perceived as Central Europe's Afrikaners. Both ethnic Lithuanians and Afrikaners are, in Jacobson's words, a "proud but despised group, cherishing a language and culture which they knew to be looked down on by their white, English- (or, given the present discussion, Polish-) speaking compatriots (their Ascendancy)" (151); both are directly involved (as bystanders and perpetrators) in the history of oppression and violence—the genocidal policy of Nazi Germany and apartheid, respectively. Elsewhere, his visit to Kaunas's and Vilnius's synagogues and subsequent speculations about the museum role they were supposed to perform once the extermination of the European Jews had been completed become conflated with what he sees as analogous ethnographic displays which he saw in South Africa, featuring the works of the San people who, in the nineteenth century, were pushed to the edge of extinction by Cape colonists (143).

It is, again, by bringing two poets "out of Europe's East," namely, Adam Mickiewicz and Czesław Miłosz, that Jacobson appears to indirectly talk about his complex standing with regard to South Africa[30]—including his inevitable participation in sustaining injustices in the very country to which his family emigrated so as to escape persecution. He knows that, as a white South African, he is no longer entitled to claim the position of the victim of racial violence;[31] that the diamond pits which he re-visits in the opening section of the book and which become inextricably linked to the death pits in Lithuania have been based on suffering, subjugation, and exploitation of Black South Africans. One might claim that Jacobson's own entanglements in power hierarchies are reflected in those that he identifies in Mickiewicz and Miłosz. Interestingly—and crucially for the present argument—he sees both poets as inhabiting different and often overlapping regimes of domination, despite their own subjection to the oppressive power of, for example, Tsarist Russia. For example, he sees them as belonging to the class of the Polish landed gentry, i.e. hereditary landowners whose economic well-being largely depended on Lithuanian serfs. Additionally, he pays attention to the fact that, although born in Lithuania, they were Poles who spoke Polish, wrote in the Polish language, and

30 This reading is supported by the fact that Jacobson, whose memoir is filled with descriptions of the South African landscape, first refers to Miłosz in the context of the latter's "plangent" evocations of the "remote Lithuanian landscapes of his childhood" (151).

31 Despite frequent instances of antisemitism.

identified themselves culturally with Poland and the West (for instance, Jacobson refers to Miłosz as a "passionately bookish Francophile" [151]). If one were to follow Jacobson's parallels between South Africa and Lithuania (and recognise historical alliances between Afrikaners and Lithuanians, Black South Africans and Central European Jews, etc.), then it becomes clear that Jacobson reads his identity,[32] as well as the story of his and his family's entanglements—a mixture of victimisation, domination, and complicity[33]—through the prism of Mickiewicz and Miłosz. He reads himself as an English-speaking and English-educated Jew born in South Africa who consistently elected English and (Central) European culture to be his points of reference[34] and who cannot but acknowledge his position as a beneficiary of the system of colonial and imperial violence. But there is another aspect of Jacobson's transnational 'implicated subject' that the writer fails to notice in his discussion of Mickiewicz and Miłosz—one that unites all three writers. They all resorted to the same manner of undoing the knots of their enmeshment in the oppressive systems they were born into: they escaped from their homelands into exile.[35]

J. M. Coetzee and Zbigniew Herbert

The last example privileged by the present discussion is concerned with how Polish literature might be activated to help in one's confrontation with multiple forms of past and present violence that one is implicated in—not only those related to racial oppression or economic exploitation

32 Jacobson addresses this issue in detail in his (auto)biographical collection *Time and Time Again* (1985). Of his precarious South African identity, which seeks and requires other (trans)national forms of self-identification, he writes the following: "As so many others have done [...] I found it wasn't the reality of the countries from which the books and movies came that I was compelled to doubt, but the reality of the country I lived in: this undescribed and uncertified place where not a single thing [...] was as other places were. Everything around us was without confirmation, without background, without credentials; there was something unreliable, left out, about the whole place, and hence about all of us, too" (8–9).

33 Jacobson extensively writes about different attitudes towards apartheid among South African Jews, including that of his uncle, who embraced Afrikaner nationalism. In *The Implicated Subject,* Rothberg quotes Kentridge referring to the subject position of South African Jews as "'an interesting position' between accommodation and marginalization" (111).

34 Similarly to Mickiewicz and Miłosz—both Polish-speaking and electing Polish and Western European culture as their points of reference.

35 Mickiewicz to France; Jacobson to England; Miłosz to the United States.

but also violence towards animals and nature. I am referring here to a curious appearance of Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Apollo and Marsyas" in a catalogue entitled *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout*, which was produced as a companion piece to the exhibition by the Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere displayed in the Belgian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennial—the exhibition whose curator was J. M. Coetzee.[36] Despite defining his role as a curator, J. M. Coetzee served primarily as a "source of inspiration" for the artist—as powerfully testified to by a series of letters exchanged between De Bruyckere and Coetzee over a period of seven months (from September 2012 to March 2013) which comprises a substantial part of the show's catalogue.

The piece that De Bruyckere showed in Venice—a monumental mould of a dead and uprooted tree covered with many layers of wax and flesh-coloured paint[37]—clearly attributed fleshiness to wood. It did not only represent the metamorphosis (the wood-into-flesh/flesh-into-wood transformation) but, as a matter of fact, embodied or enacted it. For Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, the work was reminiscent of a fractured and bandaged body, a "prehistoric corpse, or medieval royalty entombed in a cathedral"; it was "the embodiment of the spectacularized uncanny par excellence" (Buchloh 2013, 316). It was also interpreted—especially due to the use of specific materials, such as wax, horse's skin and hair, cotton, and wood—as the embodiment of suffering and violence that has been inflicted upon the entire natural world by the humankind.

True to the role that has been assigned to him by De Bruyckere, Coetzee remains the piece's major "source of inspiration." Consequently, he provides the artist with two literary pieces (later included in the catalogue) which, one might argue, help him not only voice his preoccupation with the position that one can occupy in the face of suffering (those of a witness,

36 For a detailed discussion of co-operation, see Kusek and Szymański (2015).

37 The artist herself spoke about "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" in the following manner: "You enter the space and see an enormous tree. I've worked with trees before, but on a much smaller scale, and always in vitrines. I bought old vitrines and used the same encaustic technique. I start from the dead tree and make a mold. We begin with that negative, a silicone mold, and in that we paint the encaustic in many layers, with epoxy and iron at the center to make it stronger. Only when you take the wax out of the mold can you see the resulting surface. Then you put all the parts together […] and then paint it layer after layer—as many as 20 layers altogether. […] I use the same palette here as in the human bodies. So it looks really human. That is a subject of much of my other work, and in fact you can look at the tree as a huge, wounded body. It's as if it needs to be taken care of—as if nurses came by and bandaged it" (Hirsch 2013).

a by-stander, or a perpetrator) but also point to one's multiple entanglements in different, both past and present, forms of oppression.

The first piece is a short story entitled "The Old Woman and the Cats." It narrates John's visit to his mother, the retired writer Elizabeth Costello, who spends the last days of her life in a small Castilian village taking care of feral cats and a mentally disabled man called Pablo. Out of all Coetzee's fictional creations, Elizabeth Costello has addressed (and embodied) the sense of implication in the most ostensible manner—not only by criticising one's refusal to acknowledge the horrors of animals' lives and deaths[38] and pointing to one's participation in the present-day industry of death which "cuts [animals] up and refrigerates, and packs them so that they can be consumed in the comforts of our homes" (Coetzee 2004, 66) but also by building an analogy between the meat industry and the Holocaust and comparing two modes of implication: in the Holocaust and in the industrial slaughter of animals. When giving a "lesson" on human capability and eagerness to "close [their][39] hearts," on humans being impure and corrupted yet simultaneously refusing to "feel tainted" by animal suffering (Coetzee 2004, 80), she memorably formulates the following verdict on the condition of the implicated subject and one's understanding of it:

> We point to the Germans and Poles and Ukrainians who did and did not know of the atrocities around them. We like to think they were inwardly marked by the after-effects of that special form of ignorance. We like to think that in their nightmares the ones whose suffering they had refused to enter came back to haunt them. We like to think they woke up haggard in the mornings and died of gnawing cancers. But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment. (80)

But in responding to De Bruyckere's somewhat desperate plea to provide her with "[s]omething else, something new that [Coetzee] feel[s] could be related to [her] work […]; [a] text, a story, an essay maybe" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013, 29), Coetzee offers an additional contribution which is to

38 The "horrors" and "deaths" that, according to Costello, take place around us: "I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant enough town, I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet, I am sure they are here. They must be. They simply do not advertise themselves. They are all around us as we speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them" (Coetzee 2004, 65).

39 In the lecture, Costello constantly uses the pronoun "we"—thus commenting on her own position of implication. This aspect is also addressed by Elizabeth's comment about her wearing leather shoes and carrying a leather purse.

help the artist in her creative process, namely a poem by Zbigniew Herbert entitled "Apollo and Marsyas," i.e. one of the major pieces that Coetzee read and taught at the University of Cape Town in the 1970s (Crewe 2013). By placing Herbert's poem—one that offers its own version of the well-known mythological story and focuses on the aftermath of the duel[40]—in the context of De Bruyckere's artwork, as well as the fictional character of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee, once again, points to the Polish poet as a kind of lens through which one can investigate one's own "response-ability" (Haraway 2016, 28) and modes of involvement into multiple forms of violence (towards fellow humans beings, animals, nature, etc.): not only across geography, race, or time, but also across species. It is justified to claim that by evoking Hebert's poem, in which Apollo becomes an indifferent witness to Marsyas's agony,[41] Coetzee manages to mobilise a range of responses (or entanglements, or implications) to one's participation, often indirect, in injustices—those of "judges [who] have awarded victory to the god," of Apollo with his "nerves of artificial fibres," of a "petrified nightingale" which falls at Apollo's feat in the wake of Marsyas's scream, and, ultimately, a tree to which Marsyas was tied and which in the final line of the poem turns white (138, 139, 140).

Herbert's poetic image of a white, grief-stricken tree—a pine tree[42] to which Marsyas is nailed and which, as a result, becomes a crippled tree—is central to my reading of the role Polish literature has played in various attempts undertaken by South African writers to understand their own position in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Herbert's poem might, indeed, offer some much-needed commentary on the work of De Bruyckere and the piece's problematisation of one's engagement with the world: in particular, one's responsibility for (and response-ability in the face of) suffering. However, it could be argued that its major aim is to reveal Coetzee's *own* direct implication in the history of violence in South Africa.

40 Herbert calls this aftermath "the proper duel" (Herbert 2008, 138).

41 Perhaps also a perpetrator, given the ambiguity of the line about Apollo "clean[ing] his instrument" (138). For a detailed discussion of the poem and its interpretations, see Barańczak (1987, 58–9).

42 On ancient writers, who almost unanimously (with the exception of Pliny) identified the tree on which Marsyas was hanged as a pine tree, see James Frazer's commentary on Book 1.4.2 of Apollodorus' *The Library* (Apollodorus 1921, 30–1). Interestingly, a lone pine tree (synonymous with death and destruction) also features in Czesław Miłosz's post-WWII poetry—particularly a poem entitled "Outskirts" ("Farther on, the city torn into red brick. / A lone pine tree behind a Jewish house" [Miłosz 2001b, 65]). For more on the image of the lone pine in Miłosz's poetry and its place in the poet's wartime landscape, see Okopień-Sławińska (2013).

This essentially (auto)biographical interpretation of Coetzee's evocation of Herbert's poem is validated by notes that are to be found in Coetzee's papers held at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas in Austin. In an early handwritten draft of what was to become *Boyhood*, under the date of 11 May 1993, Coetzee makes a direct link between a crippled pine tree and his life in South Africa (HRC). In this entry, he evokes the deformed trees that grow on the golf course in Cape Town—the pine trees that are both alien and a dangerous species; alien because they are native to the Mediterranean region and were introduced to South Africa during the seventeenth century and dangerous since they use more water than native vegetation. In Coetzee's reading, they become a metaphor for his own position as a white South African citizen: "Deformation. My life as deformed, year after year, by South Africa. Emblem: the deformed trees on the golf links in Simonstown" ("Notes for autobiography, 11 May—8 August 1993," 1/1).[43] A tainted pine tree evoked by Herbert in "Apollo and Marsyas" thus becomes just another version of Coetzee's damaged Cape Town pine trees, whose "bones," as Coetzee observes elsewhere, are twisted by "something in [their] genes, some bad inheritance, some poison" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013, 46). Herbert's and Coetzee's cripplewood trees metamorphose into each other and, therefore, become the symbols of the implicated subject who, just like them, "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" (46).

Conclusion

In one of his essays about poetry from "the other Europe," Stephen Watson re-affirms the centrality of Polish poetry—Zbigniew Herbert, in particular—to South African literary production. In his view, their lines "provide [them, i.e. South Africans] with a complete education as to the character of the [twentieth] century itself, illuminating its crimes, more insidious temptations, while also suggesting how these might be resisted" (1990, 110). Speaking of their ability to occupy multiple positions simultaneously

43 David Attwell also makes a reference to this fragment in his 2015 biographical study of Coetzee's writing, entitled *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*. He not only explains the reason for the trees' shape (the result of south-easterly wind from the Atlantic Ocean) but also emphasises the fact that their deformation is a "mockery of the [golf] club's wistful founders." Most importantly for the present discussion, he sees them as "emblems […] for the effects of place and history on one's character" (Attwell 2015, 4).

(between optimism and pessimism), he concludes that Polish poetry "says something for us, […] speaks on all of our behalf, even though our historical context might seem utterly remote and alien to such voices as [Herbert's]" (110).

Jodi Dean is most right when she repeatedly states that "anyone but not everyone can be a comrade" (35) and that comradeship should by no means be "substantialize[d] […] via race, ethnicity, nationality" (39). It is precisely this kind of anti-identitarian comradeship that the present chapter has attempted to discuss with regard to selected South African and Polish writers—one that cuts through national, ethnic, and geographical boundaries and one that builds a shared sense of belonging among those who are "on the same side of the division" (35). However, it has also argued that the *raison d'être* of the South Africa-Polish 'literary' comradeship is not the struggle against the same enemy (a totalitarian regime which materialises in the form of apartheid and Communism, respectively) but an acknowledgement of one's implication, namely, an indirect and involuntary participation in past and present injustices. In short, the very comradeship that the chapter has prioritised in its discussion of South African writers' 'dialogue' with their Polish 'comrades' is one between individuals who are not only "bastard people" (Dean 2019, 30)—those disposed and constantly in pursuit of their 'real' home, even if such an endeavour takes them as far as the European core—but also 'implicated subjects.'

ORCID®
Robert Kusek https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9969-0221

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Julia Wurr

The Implicated Poetics of Social Reproduction and Neoliberal Diversity: Natasha Brown's *Assembly*

ABSTRACT By reading *Assembly* alongside Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject* as well as Nancy Fraser's *Cannibal Capitalism*, this chapter explores how Natasha Brown's debut novel negotiates the implication of social reproduction and neoliberal diversity against the backdrop of precarious care in ongoing racial capitalism. If the complex subject position of the novel's female Black British protagonist—who has worked herself into the one per cent and serves as an avatar for diversity management while at the same time continually experiencing sexualised and racialised discrimination—foregoes the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators and instead fosters "long-distance solidarity" (Rothberg 2019, 12), the text's juxtaposition of its different vignettes underlines the complex interplay between diachronic and synchronic forms of implication in the highly condensed form of just 100 pages. *Assembly* not only illustrates the complex structural relationship between social reproduction, diversity management, and individualising storytelling but also invites reflections on metaphorical readings of cancer while at the same time raising awareness of the potential implication of narrative and language in upholding systemic injustice.

KEYWORDS *Assembly*, cancer as metaphor, health disparities, implication, social reproduction

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A death in the tram,
a death in the doctor's office,
a death with the prostitutes,
a death on the job site,
a death at the movies,
a multiple death in the newspapers,
a death in the fear of all decent folk of going out after midnight.
A death,
yes a DEATH
Fanon 1980, 13; emphasis in original

While there is hardly any secondary literature on Natasha Brown's debut novel yet, *Assembly* (2021) has received great acclaim from literary critics and fellow writers alike. It is particularly the novel's highly condensed depiction of how its protagonist, a Black British woman from a poor family, suffers from intersectional discrimination which has been applauded (Collins 2021; Gyarkye 2021). Nonetheless, the novel's conclusion—that is, its protagonist's decision not to undergo treatment when she is diagnosed with breast cancer—has also prompted criticism (Williams 2021; Schröder 2022). Given that the novel not only foreshadows death from its beginning but also continuously portrays health disparities as well as the daily social deaths which the protagonist endures, the unease caused by her decision against treatment needs to be considered as part of the wider narrative tension which *Assembly* creates. In addition to mirroring the constant pressure which the protagonist is under, this tension stems from the young woman's complex subject position as an implicated subject who suffers terribly from racial capitalist discrimination while at the same time successfully working in London high finance (Rothberg 2019).

As this chapter argues, it is through this unresolved tension of implication—created both by means of its implicated protagonist-narrator and through the use of an implicated poetics—that *Assembly* negotiates the complex structural relationship between differential life chances, social reproduction, and diversity management. According to Michael Rothberg, implication describes the subject positions of those who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (2019, 1). Implicated subjects are thus neither victims nor perpetrators, but, through their involvement in structures of injustice and oppression, they contribute to producing and reproducing these subject positions (Rothberg 2019, 1). As the following analysis will show, *Assembly* foregoes dichotomies of victims and perpetrators. Narrativising the tensions of implication without

defusing them, the novel defies disambiguation and narrative closure. In the highly condensed form of just 100 pages, the text instead raises awareness of the potential implication of narrative and language in upholding systemic injustice. As *Assembly* consequently resists teleologies which suggest that individual empowerment might be the solution to desolidarising and fragmenting neoliberal tendencies, the novel provides interesting insights for the study of contested solidarities. Refracted through the complexly implicated position of its unnamed narrator and through her daily "social deaths" (Patterson 1982), the novel demonstrates both how the manifold tendencies of neoliberal desolidarisation exacerbate existing social dividing lines and how they contribute to creating new ones. In addition, the novel's narrative exploration of diversity management shows how solidarity is undermined when understandings of solidarity are limited to shared experiences of discrimination and are not "based on shared commitment to a cause" (Scholz 2008, 34), that is, the shared aim of overcoming injustice and oppression (Bargetz, Scheele, and Schneider 2019, 11–2).

In order to analyse the politics of form which *Assembly* adopts so as to negotiate the narrator's individual experiences of discrimination against the backdrop of neoliberal desolidarisation, this chapter will first analyse how the novel's narrative choices regarding juxtaposition and fragmentation, narration, focalisation, and deixis as well as metafictionality and layout refract narrative as well as linguistic implication. Then, the chapter will focus on the implicated plots of diversity management and social reproduction as well as on how the novel resists the strategies of neoliberal storytelling so frequently employed to emplot diversity management and social reproduction. In a last step, the chapter will discuss possible metaphorical readings of the protagonist's cancer diagnosis.

Narration and Implication

As the following section will show, *Assembly* tightly interweaves the mediation of its narrator's complex implication with its own politics of form. By assembling different vignettes into a fractured picture of implicated narration, the novel mirrors the desolidarising and fragmenting tendencies of neoliberal transformation, rendering visible many of Rothberg's findings. Rothberg observes that, when people participate in or benefit from the perpetuation of systems of oppression in an indirect or belated way without being identifiable as direct victims or perpetrators, the resulting modes of implication are often "complex, multifaceted, and sometimes

contradictory" (2019, 2). In order to negotiate such complex modes of implication, *Assembly* relies on the juxtaposition of numerous vignettes. By thus defying linear representation, the novel creates an associative and fragmentary structure which interweaves the narrator's individual experiences with historical and systemic background information.

Evoking comparisons to, amongst others, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (Collins 2021; Pittel 2021, 90–1), *Assembly* narrates one day in the life of its unnamed protagonist—the day preceding a garden party at her privileged white boyfriend's family estate in the English countryside. During this day, the protagonist delivers a talk at a school, which forms part of her firm's diversity management, receives a shared promotion, decides against having her breast cancer treated, takes the train to the countryside, and receives a marriage proposal from her boyfriend. Organised into three parts, all of these events are told in vignettes by the protagonist herself. Merging the narrator's perception of the action in the narrative present with her associations of political and personal events, these vignettes mirror the narrator's thought processes. Through the insertion of flashbacks, they moreover provide information on the autodiegetic narrator's past struggles, especially her experiences of discrimination and her attempts at assembling herself into her current—successful but still highly vulnerable—self (Brown 2021, 17).[1]

Preceding the novel's three main parts and the autodiegetic narration therein, three brief chapters featuring a different narrative situation reify the intricate relationship between narration and implication in the novel from its beginning. In one of them, the protagonist is addressed in the second person—presumably by a Black man seeking her solidarity in his experiences of discrimination in Britain. The other two chapters are told by a heterodiegetic narrator who first introduces the protagonist by relating her detached but intense suffering from different forms of discrimination and sexual harassment in the third person. Later on in the novel, it transpires that this narrative choice might also be of the protagonist's own making, as she tries

> to consider events as if they're happening to someone else. Some other entity. There's the thinking, rationalizing I (me). And the doing, the

1 In combination with the text's criticism of stratified social reproduction in times of progressive neoliberalism, *Assembly*'s temporal setup as well as its condensation and subversion of some generic conventions of the *Bildungsroman* would make for an interesting case study when it comes to contemporary postcolonial one-day *Bildungsromane*.

> experiencing, her. I look at her kindly. From a distance. To protect myself, I detach. (Brown 2021, 41)

While the heterodiegetic narration at the beginning of the novel can be read as such an act of protective narrative detachment, at the moment of the protagonist's first appearance in *Assembly*, this narrative perspective fulfils two further functions. Firstly, this perspective demonstrates how her boss harasses and objectifies her: "He could see her at her desk from his office and regularly dialled her extension to comment on what he saw (and what he made of it): her hair (wild), her skin (exotic), her blouse (barely containing those breasts)" (Brown 2021, 1). Secondly, and although the protagonist still serves as the focaliser in these sections, her gendered designation as "she/her" in the heterodiegetic narration also indicates what role narrative perspective can play in creating a potential implication in this harassing and objectifying gaze.

Complex Implication between Neoliberal Storytelling, Structural Discrimination, and Subjectivation

Throughout the text, this nexus between narration and implication is further explicated; it becomes particularly explicit in the text's exploration of neoliberal storytelling. According to Sujatha Fernandes, neoliberal storytelling is often based on reductionist and relatable portrayals of individuals and their stories of empowerment. While models of entrepreneurial self-making are thus fostered in neoliberal storytelling (Fernandes 2017, 3), historical and systemic contexts are mostly neglected. Because of this individualising take (Fernandes 2017, 6), neoliberal storytelling can be said to promote the upward social mobility of the few at the expense of solidarity and collective claims among the many. By co-opting individual narratives of people from diverse backgrounds, neoliberal storytelling moreover weaves these narratives into "a polyvocal fabric that insulates the master narrative from critique" (Fernandes 2017, 6). In short, neoliberal storytelling furthers meritocratic myths while neglecting structural inequality, and it refracts claims for redistribution into claims for recognition.

In Brown's text, the reductionist tendencies of neoliberal storytelling are addressed from the beginning. Not only does the novel's first part open with an act of neoliberal storytelling, but the text further underlines this storytelling by a change from hetero- to autodiegetic narration. The new narrative "I" of the autodiegetic narrator thus tellingly makes her first appearance when the protagonist gives a talk at a school as part of the diversity management of her firm:

> It's a story. There are challenges. There's hard work, pulling up laces, rolling up shirtsleeves, and forcing yourself. Up. Overcoming, transcending, et cetera. You've heard it before. It's not my life, but it's illuminated two metres tall behind me and I'm speaking it into the soft, malleable faces tilted forwards on uniformed shoulders. (Brown 2021, 9)

As the last sentence in this quotation illustrates, the autodiegetic narrator is fully aware of the structural implications of diversity management and social reproduction, and she critically reflects on what delivering such talks on a regular basis means for her own implicated position: "It's an expectation of the job. The diversity must be seen. How many women and girls have I lied to?" (Brown 2021, 10; see also 30, 55). Throughout the novel, the narrator further explicates this connection between neoliberal storytelling and implication, and she criticises and defies it. In particular, the narrator directly reiterates the individualising tendencies which her boyfriend prefers when writing political speeches, and explicitly addresses issues of implication (called "complicity" here; see also 23) which arise in the context of narrativising events in a way that de-emphasises systemic problems:

> Sugarcoat the rhetoric, embed the politics within a story; make it relatable, personal. Honest, he says. Shape my truth into a narrative arc—
>
> Alright, I try it. I tell a story. But he demands more. He wants to know who did what, specifically, and to whom. How did it feel? (Give him visceral physicality.) Who is to blame? (A single, flawed individual. Not a system or society or the complicity of an undistinguished majority in maintaining the status quo …) And what does it teach us? How will our heroine transcend her victimhood? (Brown 2021, 88)

As the following section will show, *Assembly* further differentiates the portrayal of narrative implication and storytelling by also including the narrator's metafictional reflections on her own implication. Thus, the narrator's consideration of how—now that she has amassed enough social capital—she could also use her voice to counter instead of engage in implicated storytelling (Brown 2021, 87) is complemented by her metafictional reflections on the impossibility of defying narrative implication. While she, for instance, concedes that her "only tool of expression is the language of this place. Its bias and assumptions permeate all reason I could construct from it" (Brown 2021, 89), she still engages in another reflection on the use of language which partly deconstructs the very language used. To this end, the novel employs "Fig 5," one of its insertions offset in a different

layout, to juxtapose "white" and "black" (Brown 2021, 90–1). By graphically interlocking the connotations and associations of these two words instead of presenting them in two completely separate columns, the text highlights their dichotomous use while at the same time questioning and blurring their seemingly unambiguous positions.

Although the narrator's pessimistic metafictional appraisal and its programmatic tone call into question the possibility of reducing narrative implication, on the diegetic level the narrator still tries to create a story which challenges its own implication. In contrast to the talks which the narrator delivers at schools, the story she tells in *Assembly* is not reductionist, as it does not take for granted that "our heroine [will] transcend her victimhood" (Brown 2021, 88). Instead of an easily relatable story, the narrator—an unnamed as well as complexly implicated subject—emplots a more complicated narrative. This narrative partially defies the teleology of neoliberal storytelling while at the same time acknowledging the implication of a "[w]rong life [which] cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 2005 [1951], § 18). The narrator thus states that "to carry on, now that I have a choice, is to choose complicity. Surviving makes me a participant in their narrative. Succeed or fail, my existence only reinforces this construct. I reject it. I reject these options. I reject this life" (Brown 2021, 96). By highlighting the structural discrimination which has contributed to the narrator's decision to "reject this life," *Assembly* undermines reductionist portrayals of empowerment which end in the success of the individual against all systemic odds; at the same time, the novel depicts the extreme violence which underlies the narrator's complex processes of subjectivation not to justify the protagonist's decision, but to foreground the tragic nature of a racialised individual's decision to reject survival.

In order to negotiate this combination of discrimination and subjectivation, *Assembly* features a complexly implicated protagonist who defies easy categorisation. While empathy and identification with this complexly implicated protagonist highlight chances of solidarity which cross dividing lines, the novel at the same time portrays the protagonist as an individual with a complex subject position and as someone who, in the critical situation in which she finds herself, makes decisions which might not easily invite empathy or identification (for instance, despite being in a relationship with him, the narrator tells her boyfriend her biopsy came back clear when it did not; Brown 2021, 16). This differentiated way of portraying the protagonist can evoke feelings which are more complex than pity, idiopathic identification or idiopathic empathy in a wide range of readers. In fact, if idiopathic forms of identification or empathy are "essentially self-referential, grounded on shared reality" (Bennett 2003, 134), *Assembly*'s way of portraying the protagonist potentially transcends the "logic of

identification" (Rothberg 2019, 3) of many differently positioned readers; instead, the novel invites "long-distance solidarity—that is, solidarity premised on difference rather than logics of sameness and identification" (Rothberg 2019, 12). By thus de-emphasising the logics of identification, the novel can be read as re-centring both the risks and potentials of storytelling for creating solidarity under conditions of linguistic and narrative implication and their histories and systems of forceful attribution.

In addition to raising questions about how different conceptions of solidarity interact with linguistic and narrative implication, *Assembly* further expands the grammars of "victimhood," "complicity," and "beneficiaries" (Brown 2021, 86) by unclosing not just their synchronic manifestation but their diachronic dimension as well. In this way, the novel further complicates its negotiation of implication, showing that "[f]orms of violence and inequality premised on racial hierarchy take shape in small-scale encounters and large-scale structures [and that they are] instantiated repetitively in the present yet burdened with active historical resonances" (Rothberg 2019, 2). As the example below illustrates, the text does so by assembling different vignettes into juxtapositions which underline the interrelationships between contemporary forms of injustice and inequality and their long histories. Although the narrator indicates that she feels at a loss as to how to "examine the legacy of colonization when the basic facts of its construction are disputed in the minds of its beneficiaries" (Brown 2021, 86), the following scene demonstrates the great effectiveness of presenting complex forms of implication by means of literary juxtaposition:

> Fig 6.
>
> @hmtreasury:
>
> Here's today's surprising #FridayFact. Millions of you helped end the slave trade through your taxes.
>
> (Her Majesty's Treasury's Twitter account accompanies this cutesy misrepresentation of history with an illustration depicting people, enslaved—including a mother, baby strapped to her back and chain heavy around her neck. The caption boasts of Britain's generosity in *buying freedom for all slaves in the empire.* Compensating slave-owners for property lost. Did you know?)
>
> It is true that his [her boyfriend's] family's wealth today was funded in part by that bought freedom; the loan my taxes paid off? Yes. And he is an individual and I am an individual and neither of us were there, were responsible for the actions of our historical selves? Yes. Yet, he lives off the capital returns, while I work to pay off the interest? (Brown 2021, 92–3; emphasis in original)

Raising the historical issue of slavery in the frame of the protagonist's own confrontation with death, this juxtaposition serves as a reminder of the repercussions of slavery in "the ongoing production of lives lived in intimate relation to premature death (whether civil, social, or literal)" (Best and Hartman 2005, 13; see also Rothberg 2019, 65). By illustrating the tenuous but pertinent connections between slavery, misrepresentation, and contemporary inequality in this way, the text moreover manages to convey a complex image of racial capitalism which counters the misrepresentation of the Treasury's tweet in a similarly condensed form, while also negotiating a further example of the nexus between narration and implication.

Contested Solidarities and the Question of the "We"

This nexus between narration and implication—as well as its role in assembling selfhood or creating solidarity—is further highlighted through the protagonist's use of the collective "we" in her narration. Whereas she compares the speech act of saying "we" in the relationship with her boyfriend to "necessary aspect[s] of life," such as "work" or "exercise" (Brown 2021, 20), the narrator uses the first-person plural to refer to racialised people with less hesitance. Tellingly, the text frames the "we" which the protagonist uses for her privileged boyfriend and herself with—albeit illusive—images of social production. In contrast, the collective pronoun used to refer to those who are racialised is first presented within a frame of death: the narrator introduces this "we" during one of her mother's phone calls, in which her mother would habitually tell her about people who died recently. The "punchline structure" which her mother employs to report these deaths bothers her daughter (Brown 2021, 15) and makes her reflect on the relation of narration and implication again. Nonetheless, the narrator still sees these reports as "[a]n exhaustive proof that we, whatever it was that bound us all together within the first-person plural, were not surviving" (Brown 2021, 15). Although the text thus modifies this collective "we," the use of personal deictics again directs attention to different forms of linguistic and narrative implication both on and beyond the diegetic level.

At the same time, by invoking this tentative "we," the text also explores the complex implication of historical fault lines and new forms of social fragmentation under racial capitalism and progressive neoliberalism. According to Nancy Fraser, progressive neoliberalism "celebrates 'diversity,' meritocracy, and 'emancipation' while dismantling social protections and

re-externalizing social reproduction. The effect is not only to abandon defenceless populations to capital's predations, but also to redefine emancipation in market terms" (Fraser 2022, 69). In this situation, in which "centuries of racialized stigma and violation meet capital's voracious need for subjects to exploit and expropriate, the result is intense insecurity and paranoia—hence, a desperate scramble for safety—and exacerbated racism" (Fraser 2022, 50). *Assembly* illustrates these complex connections between racial capitalism and progressive neoliberalism by juxtaposing vignettes which depict the anti-capitalist protests of presumably white protestors ("blonde dreadlocks," Brown 2021, 46) with allusions to Jeremy Corbyn's political stance and his privileged upbringing as well as with the narrator's own experiences of racism uttered by a panhandler and her concluding remark:

> I am what we've always been to the empire: pure, fucking profit. A natural resource to exploit and exploit, denigrate, and exploit. […] After the war, the empire sent again for her colonial subjects. Not soldiers, this time, but nurses to carry a wavering NHS on their backs. Enoch Powell himself sailed upon Barbados and implored us, come. And so we came and built and mended and nursed; cooked and cleaned. We paid taxes, paid extortionate rent to the few landlords who would take us. […] We were hated. […] Enoch, the once-intrepid recruiter, now warned of bloodied rivers if we didn't leave. (Brown 2021, 47–8)

Thus also historicising what is currently discursivised as the crisis of care, which underlies progressive neoliberalism and which is one of the reasons of widespread insecurity, this quotation illustrates how Britain, like other countries in the Global North, has attempted to fill the care gap with the help of not only workers from Eastern European countries but also racialised workers from the Global South (Fraser 2022, 70). Thereby, Britain has exploited and denigrated those migrant workers who came, and it has displaced the care gap "from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South" (Fraser 2022, 70). So, although the narrator does try to find a sense of belonging in the historical and contemporary "we," she presents this "we" as ruptured by exploitation (note the repetition of the word "exploit" in the quotation above), and she continually questions both the category itself and her place in it. In fact, by conceding that she knows Jamaica from stories only and that, to her cousins, she is the "English cousin" (Brown 2021, 49), she again indicates the complexity of narrative implication in a story in which she herself does not only show her struggles to assemble herself into a fractured self in line with the neoliberal demands of social reproduction in times of diversity management, but in which the novel itself assembles its different vignettes into a fractured picture of implicated narration.

The Implicated Plots of Neoliberal Diversity and Social Reproduction

From its beginning, *Assembly* reifies the implication(s) of narrative voice; the text does so in order to negotiate the narrator's individual experiences of discrimination in neoliberal structures of diversity management and social reproduction. Both on the level of content and structure, the novel explores how the entangled logics of diversity management and social reproduction pre-structure the protagonist's entire professional and personal life. While the novel strikingly illustrates how the narrator suffers because her professional and social ascent are continually belittled as tokens of diversity (see, for instance, Brown 2021, 30, 55, 84–5), the way in which the protagonist understands her relationship with her boyfriend even more drastically represents this intersection of social reproduction and a neoliberal notion of diversity:

> With him, I have become more tolerable to the Lous and Merricks of this world. His acceptance of me encourages theirs. His presence vouches for mine, assures them that I'm the right sort of diversity. In turn, I offer him a certain liberal credibility. Negate some of his old-money baggage. Assure his position left of centre. (Brown 2021, 67)

Structurally, the novel further emphasises this intersection by the fact that the protagonist's boyfriend proposes to her on the day of his parents' anniversary celebration—a wedding proposal which illustrates how the stratified and repetitive logics of social reproduction adapt themselves to the demands for neoliberal diversity. Although the protagonist has already met her boyfriend's parents several times, this is the first time that she is invited to their estate. As the narrator's friend Rach indicates, "'This weekend means big things […] Things she abstracted to diamond-ring emojis" (Brown 2021, 23). Challenging her friend's commodified way of framing social reproduction, the narrator questions these "things" and their link to social ascent: "I wasn't sure that I was ready for any things. I knew these were the things to want, the right things to reach for. But I felt sick of reaching, enduring. Of ascent" (Brown 2021, 23). When her boyfriend—who, like the other characters, remains unnamed and is only referred to by means of his social reproductive functions—quite literally proposes to get married ("Fuck it […] Let's get married" [Brown 2021, 99]), the narrator dents her boyfriend's belief in stratified social reproduction. Although she observes how, outwardly, "[e]verything's coming together" (Brown 2021, 100), she shakes both her boyfriend's and the readers' certainty by presenting an ending which is more open to death than to any form of

(re)production. Instead of giving her boyfriend "the assumed yes" (Brown 2021, 100) which would emblematise the marriage of neoliberal promises of diversity and social reproduction under progressive neoliberalism, the narrator just observes that he is "[s]uddenly, so uncertain" (Brown 2021, 100). Structurally, the novel mirrors this suspension by steering towards—although never fully reaching—the garden party organised to celebrate the anniversary of the narrator's boyfriend's parents.

At the same time, *Assembly* uses the telos and the setting of the garden party as a celebration of a highly stratified form of social reproduction to further explore the clashes in progressive neoliberalism alluded to earlier. While both the narrator's boyfriend and his father regard the social marriage of neoliberal diversity and social reproduction as progressive (""Meghan Markle? Now that's progress, that's modernization. Inspiring stuff."" Brown 2021, 64), the narrator attributes her boyfriend's mother's latently hostile behaviour towards her to the fact that the mother herself married into the family. Stating that "I was unsurprised to learn the titles and heritage properties were all on the father's side. There was an uncertainty beneath the mother's hostility that I almost identified with" (Brown 2021, 25), the narrator again alludes to how precarity and identity politics can be played off against each other in progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2002, 69). Thus, the narrator revisits how this may lead to clashes between the interests of "progressive 'new social movements,' opposed to hierarchies of gender, sex, 'race,' ethnicity, and religion" and the interests of "populations seeking to defend established lifeworlds and (modest) privileges" (Fraser 2002, 69). In addition, she indicates how this situation erodes forms of solidarity which are not based on identification by stating how she "almost identified with" (Brown 2021, 25) the mother's animosity. Some of the fault lines are spelled out even more explicitly when the narrator meets her boyfriend's "political friends from across the spectrum. Conservatives who oo and ah and nod, telling me I'm just what this country is about. And so articulate! Frowning liberals who put it simply: my immoral career is counterproductive to my own community. Can I see that? My primary issue is *poverty*, not race" (Brown 2021, 86; emphasis in original). As it turns out, however, the many intersecting issues which the protagonist has to face cannot be reduced to one "primary issue" but are presented as intricately connected with the so-called crisis of care. In the novel, this finds expression in the fact that the narrator suffers from chronic stress and that she limits her social contacts mostly to her colleagues, her partner, and his family. By moreover interweaving its exploration of the implication of neoliberal diversity and social reproduction with the protagonist's cancer diagnosis, *Assembly* ultimately negotiates the crisis of care as a question of narrative implication.

(Not) Treating Cancer as a Metaphor

Given that *Assembly* entangles its criticism of racial capitalism and the crisis of care with references to its narrator's illness, the protagonist's breast cancer might be interpreted as a metaphor of the crisis of care in what Nancy Fraser calls "cannibal capitalism" (Fraser 2022). As the use of cancer as a metaphor for social, political, and economic ills remains common in public discourse (Potts and Semino 2019), such a metaphorical reading of cancer would not be an exception. In such a reading, the protagonist's breast cancer would gain an additional layer of meaning as a metaphor of how "capitalism's drive to unlimited accumulation leads it to cannibalize the very social-reproductive activities on which it relies" (Fraser 2022, 54). Interpreting the protagonist's disease in this way would tie in with those two characteristics of cancer which most prominently inform uses of cancer as a common metaphor for unrestrained capitalist growth (Potts and Semino 2019, 90; see also McMurtry 2013; Kilgore 2016). Firstly, cancer cells "are cells that have shed the mechanism which 'restrains' growth" (Sontag 1991, 64). The resulting unregulated proliferation of cancer cells, secondly, damages the very organism in which this proliferation takes place. In their linguistic study on the uses of cancer as a metaphor, Potts and Semino consequently state that this "is perhaps the best-known characteristic of cancer—that it involves an abnormal growth of cells in the body that damages the body itself" (2019, 88). In *Assembly*, the narrator's cancer is found in her breast, that is, in a body part which is mainly gendered female and associated with care. In view of how tightly the novel interweaves its criticism of capitalism, systemic racism, and the crisis of care with the protagonist's diagnosis, her breast cancer could be interpreted as raising awareness of the fact that in contemporary neoliberal orders, racialised populations continue to be exploited, not least as care-givers, and could moreover be read as a metaphorical warning not to neglect issues of social reproduction in analyses of capitalism (Fraser 2022, 53–4).

As the following quotation demonstrates, *Assembly* features individual scenes which—by highlighting the interconnections between systemic racism and cancer—seem to invite metaphorical interpretations of cancer. In fact, in order to depict these interconnections in this quotation, the novel no longer relies on mere juxtaposition. Instead, in what can be read as an illustration of the complex implication of contemporary racialised violence and cancer, the text actually blends the narrator's diagnosis with a scene in which Lou, the narrator's colleague, simultaneously consumes his lunch and the video of Philando Castile's death:

> The doctor said I didn't understand—
>
> I recall Lou, eating lunch at his desk while Philando Castile's death played out between paragraphs on this screen. […] The doctor said I didn't understand, that I didn't know the pain of it; of cancer left untreated. I'd wish I'd acted sooner, she said. Pain, I repeat. Malignant intent. Assimilation—radiation, rays. Flesh consumed, ravaged by cannibalizing eyes. Video and burrito, finished. Lou's sticky hand cupped the mouse and clicked away. (Brown 2021, 83)

In this dense and elliptical quotation, several elements, and most notably the "[f]lesh consumed, ravaged by cannibalizing eyes," simultaneously refer to the narrator's assessment of cancer treatment, to her colleague's consumption of his burrito, to the news item, and to the ravaging gaze and violence of racialisation. While the text thus conjoins these issues, it additionally furthers metaphorical readings of implication by also featuring images such as the "sticky hand" of an implicated subject who has just consumed racial violence. As the novel moreover has the protagonist self-characterise as someone who has never had the privilege to learn to listen to her needs (Brown 2021, 40) and has instead assimilated to the utmost degree (Brown 2021, 46, 95), such a metaphorical reading of her cancer seems to gain even more traction. In analogy to how "[i]n cancer, […] cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the nonyou" (Sontag 1991, 68), the young woman's cancer might consequently be read as the complete capitalist cannibalising of the protagonist.

In the logic of such a metaphorical reading, the protagonist's decision not to undergo treatment might be interpreted as an act of anti-capitalist and anti-racist resistance. However, it is at this moment that the novel also strongly highlights very material concerns which counter the potentially metaphorical readings outlined this far. For instance, by insisting that "*Nothing* is a choice. … Nothing *is* a choice. … Nothing is a *choice*" (Brown 2021, 44–5; emphasis in original), the narrator not only confronts neoliberal grammars of choice with the stratified social reality of the many, but—now that she has access to private health care—also decides against continuing to serve as profit, this time as a cancer patient in a neoliberal health care system.[2] Moreover, by deciding against a treatment which might sustain her as a resource for cannibal capitalism, she also decides to no longer serve as an avatar of diversity, not to become the potential future wife of her boyfriend, and to thereby no longer engage in socially reproducing the system in which she feels reduced to dehumanised objecthood:

2 For an important intertext of *Assembly*'s exploration of breast cancer in racial capitalism, see Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980).

> I'm not sure I understood that I could stop, before this. That there was any alternative to survivable. But in my metastasis, I find possibility. I must engage the question seriously: why live? Why subject myself further to their reductive gaze? To this *crushing objecthood*. Why endure my own dehumanization? (Brown 2021, 95; emphasis in original)

Even if the narrator's being diagnosed with breast cancer—a disease which might reduce her ability to have biological children herself—might thus, at first glance, be read as metaphorically representing the crisis of care in cannibal capitalism (Fraser 2022), the novel as a whole still embeds the representation of the diagnosis in the very material conditions of the protagonist's life, especially regarding the stratification of life chances. In particular, *Assembly* negotiates the dimension of death in the protagonist's life with an immediacy which belies metaphorical readings. If the protagonist still has to endure the daily social deaths of discrimination despite having worked herself into the "one per cent" (Brown 2021, 43), the dimension of death in *Assembly* assumes a more literal meaning not only because of the protagonist's diagnosis but also because the novel alludes to the connection between unequal life chances and encounters with premature death from the beginning. While the autodiegetic narrator ponders how her boyfriend grew up privileged and in a safe and encouraging environment in the countryside (Brown 2021, 77), the rare mentions of the narrator's own past are often framed by death: "For much of my own childhood, I lived next to a cemetery. Through the front windows, I'd watch funeral processions snake along the road: black horses followed by black hearses followed by regular cars in different colours" (Brown 2021, 11). The narrator moreover underscores the complex historical implication of death and stratified social reproduction by stating that despite "[g]enerations of sacrifice; hard work and harder living. So much suffered, so much forfeited, so much—for this opportunity. For my life," she is "ready to slow [her] arms. Stop kicking. Breathe the water in" (Brown 2021, 13). In this instance, the narrator thus uses a metaphor which, reminiscent of the all too literal "I can't breathe" uttered by victims of contemporary racialised police violence, illustrates how the long histories of racial capitalism, in which great numbers of enslaved people drowned at sea during the transatlantic trade, folds into the racialised presence of differential life chances.

It is thus against a wider backdrop of death and differential life chances that the narrator explores contemporary health disparities. In order to illustrate these disparities, the narrator alludes to the differential treatment of cancer patients according to their health insurance. For instance, the narrator mentions how her friendship with her privileged white colleague Rach began when her colleague's "father recovered from cancer

and my grandmother died of it" (Brown 2021, 20). While this mention of Rach's father surviving and the protagonist's grandmother dying of cancer cannot, of course, be interpreted as monocausal, the narrator still contextualises it in a way which casts doubt on her friend Rach's statement that "[v]ictimhood is a choice" (Brown 2021, 21). Using close juxtaposition, the narrator not only showcases her friend's unawareness of privilege but further underlines health disparities by contrasting the bad memories of public hospitals where she must have visited her grandmother with her own experiences at the oncologist: "But now, for me, it's private rooms. Fresh-cut flowers and espresso" (Brown 2021, 39).

In general, then, the novel's joint negotiation of cancer and the crisis of care in cannibal capitalism might seem to invite a metaphorical reading of cancer. This reading would imply that, as an individual, the narrator cannot overcome the systemic cancer of racial capitalism and that—in analogy to her actual metastases—she as an implicated subject cannot prevent it from metastasising within her: "Metastasis: it spreads through the blood to other organs, growing uncontrollably, overwhelming the body" (Brown 2021, 77). Especially because the novel ends after the protagonist's diagnosis, so that it does not depict her suffering from her literal cancer while it shows her suffering from intersectional discrimination under racial capitalism, such a metaphorical reading of cancer might stand to reason.

Be that as it may, the text eventually defies a unified metaphorical reading in which the story of an individual is used to illustrate societal wrongs, not least because *Assembly* challenges the individualising tendencies of neoliberal storytelling from the beginning. Although the novel highlights the socially stratified differences in life chances, it also depicts the narrator's boyfriend as suffering from depression and fears of failure (Brown 2021, 18–9, 25, 65), so that *Assembly* would have to be read as questioning more generally whether, under cannibal capitalism, anyone can thrive. Most importantly, however, the protagonist's cancer cannot be reduced to a metaphor because the autodiegetic narrator herself does not consider her cancer as a capitalist infiltration. In fact, she sees the cancer as a part of herself which—after all that she has already left behind in the process of assimilation—would be next to be removed, this time surgically. Even if the narrator's assessment of her disease could still be attributed to her internalised self-depreciation (Brown 2021, 46), her own scepticism towards such metaphorical readings is still prominently spelled out: the narrator continually challenges the use of "as-yet-metaphoric planes" in reductionist storytelling, and she admits that she is "lost both literally and in the larger, abstract sense of this narrative" (Brown 2021, 84). As the text continually directs attention to the relationship between narration and

implication in this way, the question of how to read the novel's implicated plots of social reproduction, neoliberal diversity, the crisis of care, and the protagonist's cancer might thus not consist of mapping a metaphorical reading onto the disease. Instead, the text's ongoing reflection on the impossibility of transcending narrative implication might serve as an invitation to contextualise the implications of metaphorical readings of disease in times of limitless self-optimisation. In this regard, it is particularly worth noting that it is not only the protagonist's subjectivation of racism but also the imperative of self-optimisation and able-bodiedness which exclude her again from the neoliberal promises of diversity at the very moment she is diagnosed with cancer.

In general, then, although the criticism of financial capitalism which *Assembly* expresses might seem to invite metaphorical readings of cancer, the novel's ongoing negotiation of, and meta-reflections on, narrative implication still call for a more differentiated reading which does not fold the illness of an individual into a metaphor of societal wrongs. Not least because—as Potts and Semino show—contemporary language use still reflects cancer in a "slightly outdated" way which does not consider medical advances (2019, 93), Susan Sontag's warning against using cancer as a metaphor should consequently be heeded. If Sontag argues that the metaphorical use of cancer is insensitive to people suffering from cancer and that it could also serve as a means to legitimise extraordinary measures such as violence and war due to its historic deployment in political and military discourse (1991, 84–5), *Assembly* complements such critiques. It does so by highlighting the impossibility of altogether foregoing the individualising tendencies of neoliberal storytelling while at the same time defying its logics of narrative unity and closure. Instead, through its fragmented politics of form, the novel directs attention to how differential life chances, health disparities, and their very real consequences have become an even more stratified social reality, and not a mere metaphor, in times of progressive neoliberalism.

Conclusion

What makes Natasha Brown's debut novel such an interesting text when it comes to analysing contested solidarities in anglophone literatures is that it negotiates the neoliberal implication of social reproduction and diversity management not just by means of the figuration of its complexly implicated protagonist, but by a poetics which constantly questions its own implication. If the complex subject position of the novel's protagonist—who has

worked herself into the one per cent and serves as an avatar for diversity management while at the same time continually experiencing sexualised and racialised discrimination—foregoes the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators and instead fosters "long-distance solidarity" (Rothberg 2019, 12), the text's juxtaposition of its different vignettes underlines the complex interplay between diachronic and synchronic forms of implication. In sum, *Assembly* not only decries progressive neoliberalism on the level of content but intensifies this critique by adopting a fragmented form which defies simplifying promises of narrative unity and closure in times of decreasing solidarity. On the level of content, the text consequently depicts the ongoing racial discrimination in a progressive neoliberalism which embraces diversity as long as it serves as a—healthy—resource which can be assimilated into socially reproducing the dominant social order (Fraser 2022). On the level of form, the text complements this critique by challenging the implicated poetics of neoliberal storytelling, diversity management, and social reproduction by means of a narrative tension which—in steering towards death and in resisting easy defusing—is not only reminiscent of the indissoluble tension of Fanon's famous imperfect internal rhyme "yes a DEATH" but also illustrates that, for the complexly implicated protagonist, it becomes even more impossible to live wrong life rightly.

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Jaine Chemmachery

Reclaiming Victimhood and Agency in Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015)

ABSTRACT This chapter analyses Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) through the prism of Michael Rothberg's concept of 'implicated subjects.' It shows how both works complicate notions of victimhood and agency by depicting complex precarious subjects who question the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator.' The texts under study orient us towards Fiona Robinson's praxis of care by generating "joint attention" (Citton 2017) and engaging with the bodies of readers/spectators, turning the latter into augmented 'implicated subjects.' While Sahota's work calls for general recognition of shared vulnerability, Patel's text and performance draw our attention to the archival nature of bodies and garments alike, while her very own body connects stories, female subjects, and bodies through her performance. Both works offer possibilities of collective attending to entangled histories of oppression, past and present, and shed light upon the specific predicament of female subjects as victims of continued forms of oppression through history.

KEYWORDS agency, archive, attention, body, care

The point of this chapter is to offer a comparative analysis of two literary works from the Indian diaspora, Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015), to study how the works invite us to ponder the notions of victimhood and agency (with the former term being often associated with precarious figures in the Global South), to question empathy, and to consider alternative forms of solidarity.

Migritude by Shailja Patel is a multi-modal work, a work of resistance in all possible meanings: it resists colonialism and its contemporary forms, but it also resists interpretation and categorisation by its very shape. It is, indeed, a composite work: the book is made of four parts, with two

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having the same titles, while Part 3 is composed of poems and Part 4 contains more paratextual information. Many drawings can also be found throughout the work.[1]

Migritude was initially a 90-minute performance; in Patel's words, "a tapestry of poetry, history, politics, packed into a suitcase, embedded in my body, rolled out into theatre. An accounting of Empire enacted on the bodies of women" (Patel 2010, 96).[2] It was born out of a case of saris that Patel's mother gave her as her wedding trousseau when she realised her daughter, a lesbian woman, was never to marry within a heterosexual frame, but she still wanted to pass on something to her. *Migritude* tackles the history of British colonisation in Kenya, the forced migration of Asians under Idi Amin's dictatorship in 1972,[3] but also Patel's experience of discrimination as a Kenyan of South Indian heritage while she was studying in the US and the UK. The title of the book/performance is a pun drawn from Aimé Césaire's concept of 'negritude' (see Césaire 2004), but it also echoes the notion of "migrant with an attitude" (Patel in KQED video, 2007).[4] Patel does not hide the activist nature of her work, as she presents *Migritude* as "the voice of a generation of migrants who speak unapologetically, fiercely, lyrically, for themselves" (Patel 2010, 143).[5] The choice of the term "voice" particularly resonates with the fact that *Migritude* was

1 In her analysis of Patel's work, Jennifer Leetsch shows how the drawings partake of "not only a sensitive retelling of the often-violent linkages between textile and trade routes, but also a visual materialization of these intersections" (Leetsch 2021, 700).

2 To find out more about the project, see KQED Spark—Shailja Patel (YouTube). I have not been able to see the stage production, so my analysis will focus on the textual object. To read more about the stage production, see Leetsch (2021).

3 Leetsch introduces Patel thus: "Patel herself grew up in Kenya as the daughter of second-generation West Indian Gujarati immigrants at a time of political upheaval during the rule of Daniel Toroitich arap Moi (1978–2002), a decade after Kenya's independence in 1963 and a few years after Idi Amin, 'the villain of her childhood,' had seized power in Kenya's neighbouring country Uganda and expelled Uganda's eighty thousand Asians in 1971 (Patel 2010, 78)" (Leetsch 2021, 693).

4 The concept is a combination of emigration and negritude. 'Negritude' refers to the experiences of deportation, displacement, and cultural erasure which are common to African peoples and are foundational of their collective memory and identity. It used to refer to francophone African writers, but now often refers to transnational writers who discuss migration, among other topics.

5 Given the specific context in which this article is written, it is essential to highlight Patel's repeated vocal calls for a ceasefire in Palestine after the Israeli state has meted out relentless violence to mostly civilians in Gaza in retaliation for the attacks perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023.

initially thought of as a performance and only became a written work in a later stage of the project.[6]

In comparison to Patel's multimodal work, Sahota's Booker-Prize-shortlisted novel about the experience of Indian refugees in Sheffield over the course of a year is a seemingly less complex object of study, albeit worthy of interest. Given that Patel's and Sahota's works are very recent, they have not elicited much critical literature, but they have been read in the context of renewed interest in refugee and migrant literatures[7] at a time when migrant and refugee figures have been foregrounded in the news in the aftermath of the Syrian war, and the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

A comparative analysis between the two works enables us to see how they question stereotypes concerning 'Global South' victimhood, but they also call our attention to the specific aspects of the condition of 'Global South female migrants.' The generic difference between Sahota's novel and Patel's work will help us investigate how drama, poetry, and novels provide distinct perspectives to explore precarious lives lived in an alien land. Patel's work, for instance, brings new insights into the articulation between the (female) migrant condition and corporeality, while the female body in Sahota's work remains 'textual.'

Both works also complicate the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators. This chapter will, therefore, draw upon Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject': a subject which is neither a victim nor a perpetrator but may occupy several positionalities through time: "implication comes in diverse forms: it describes beneficiaries and descendants, accomplices and perpetuators, and it can even attach to people who have had shattering experiences of trauma or victimization and are thus situated within 'complex implication'" (Rothberg 2019, 200). A close examination of these works will show how they call the general public's attention and urge us to care about 'real-life' migrants. As both works imply communities—of readers, of spectators—they are likely to generate not just attention but "joint attention" (Citton, 2017). Drawing on Yves Citton's work, Jean-Michel Ganteau argues that "joint attention implies a *connivance* between two or more participants *about a same object* [and is the] *condition for*

6 Leetsch traces back the history of the work: "Patel initially wrote *Migritude* in 2006 as a spoken-word one-woman theatre show, to be performed on stage at La Peña, a community cultural centre in Berkeley, California. In 2010 Kaya Press (an independent non-profit publisher of writers of the Asian and Pacific Islander diaspora) published a print edition which arose from the show, the materialized text of *Migritude*" (Leetsch 2021, 692–3).

7 See, for instance, Maryam Mirza (2022) on Sahota; Jennifer Leetsch (2021) on Patel.

the emergence of a collective or at least communal attention" (Ganteau 2023, 15; my emphases). This may be articulated with Rothberg's theory of action which derives from his conceptualisation of the implicated subject:

> Since we live among others, our models of responsibility must leave behind the individualist assumptions of liberal legal culture and its emphasis on individualized guilt and consider instead what it means to act collectively—which also means indirectly and at a distance—both for good and for bad. (2019, 48)

My claim is that both works, by engaging us through reading and *attending* a performance, in Patel's case, may turn us into augmented 'implicated subjects,' not just ones aware of their implication but subjects likely to act for future justice.

Sahota's Novel: A Challenge to 'Migrant Victimhood'

Sahota's Indian characters are shown to experience dreadful living conditions in the UK: they sleep in overcrowded rooms, live in fear of police raids, experience discrimination and hardly eke out a living:

> Avtar studied the four small piles he'd made of his money. The first pile was for the monthly repayment on what he owed Bal. The second for the loan taken out against his father's shawl shop. The third pile was meant to help his parents with their rent and bills and, lastly, a pile for his own expenses here in England. No savings pile. There'd never been a savings pile. (Sahota 2015, 100)

The quotation highlights the discrepancy between the number of piles the character has and his final sense of dispossession, which is epitomised by the absence of any savings pile. Avtar had to sell a kidney to obtain a student visa, another character entered the country as an 'illegal,' as the press would say, and yet another entered into a sham marriage with Narinder, a British-born Indian woman with an orthodox Sikh lower-middle-class background.

Adding to these bleak images of refugee life, Sahota's novel offers nuanced characters, such as Randeep, who is a victim of racism and class-based discrimination in the UK while he is considered a perpetrator at home, as he sexually harassed a student while he was in India. Two other characters, Savraj and Kavi, who are siblings of Indian origin struggling to make ends meet in Sheffield, discriminate against those they call 'chamaars,' members of a Dalit sub-caste. One of them once exclaims:

"There are no jobs. […] Or if there are jobs they go to the fucking chamaars with these government quotas" (Sahota 2015, 287). The association between the derogatory term used to refer to the caste and the offensive adjective "fucking" leaves no doubt as to the character's feelings toward the people he has just mentioned. The language used by Kavi to refer to a Dalit Indian woman is even more offensive, as he associates her 'Dalitness' with the fact that she may be sexually exploited: "she's just one of the chamaars. She gets passed round. I'd never treat one of our own girls like that" (Sahota 2015, 279). On the one hand, the use of parataxis is a way for the character to equate in his speech the woman's 'caste identity' with her 'exploitability.' On the other, the use of the pronoun "our" participates in the 'we vs them' frame, which is one recurrently deployed in anti-immigration rhetoric.

While readers may be willing to sympathise with characters experiencing racial discrimination in England, it is difficult to overlook their discriminating practices based on gender and caste. As Maryam Mirza argues: "Savraj's lack of compassion for and antagonism towards the Dalits, who have endured centuries of oppression and discrimination, and her brother's sexual exploitation of lower-caste women complicate our sympathy" (2022, 96). Sahota's novel is a useful reminder that caste is not annihilated overseas but that it lives on among the Indian diaspora.[8] This certainly makes it more complicated for readers to simply side with the precarious characters depicted in Sahota's novel, as the latter may occupy both the positions of 'victim' and 'perpetrator.'

While Sahota's novel calls our attention to 'Indian migrant victimhood,' Patel's work challenges the particular trope of 'Indian female victimhood.'[9]

Patel's Migritude: Challenging 'Global South Female Victimhood'

Patel debunks two strong orientalist stereotypes about women in saris: "Indian women in saris are exotic, mysteriously alluring, sexy, mystical" and "Indian women in saris must be oppressed, uneducated,

8 Sonja Thomas (2018) analyses the persistence of caste among Indian Christian communities in the US. The passage also recalls Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*, even if she focuses on gendered violence in contexts of migration: "It would be false to assert that violence against women ceases with emigration. It doesn't, and it hasn't. Indo-Caribbean women in Canada, the United States and Britain continue to be victims of domestic abuse" (2013, 211).

9 To read more about stereotypes assigned to Indian women, see Mirza's discussion on the female characters in Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2022, 89).

un-cosmopolitan, not fluent in English" (Patel 2010, 142). The stereotype itself draws on what Chandra Mohanty called the monolithic construction of the 'Third World woman' in Western feminist discourse:

> I would like to suggest that the feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular "Third World woman"—an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. (Mohanty 1991, 53)

Patel's narrator recalls the association she drew as a child between women and passivity, echoing the link often made between victimhood and lack of agency: "As a child, I knew of women strangled in their saris. Women doused in paraffin and burned in their saris. Saris made you vulnerable. A walking target. Saris made you weak" (Patel 2010, 21). The passive form grammatically associates the aforementioned women with a state of non-agentic victimhood. Women here become the objects of a type of violence carried out by agents aptly made invisible by the passive form, which emphasises the impression that they only exist as victims of such invisible violence. The noun "women" is also the direct object of the verb "to make," which consequently objectifies them as vulnerable and weak—two characteristics often associated with victimhood. The staccato rhythm even produces an effect of rigidity, echoing the freezing of the very possibility for Indian female agency to emerge in such a discourse.

But Patel counters the discursive creation of 'third-world female victimhood,' particularly that of "the passive downtrodden South Asian woman" (Puwar 2003, 25), by drawing our attention to the very agency of women wearing saris: "No one told me about women who went into battle—in their saris. Worked the fields—in their saris. Why didn't anyone tell me about women who laboured on construction sites in their saris?" (Patel 2010, 21). In this series of questions, not only is the grammatical subject "women in saris" re-visibilised but "women" are made the grammatical subjects of action verbs such as "went into battle," "worked," "laboured,"[10] which enables the speaker to claim the female subjects' agency.

To counter the association between victimhood and passivity (and its corollary, voicelessness), Patel has women who were victims of sexual

10 This passage may remind the readers of the 'Gulabi gang,' a gang of women dressed in pink-coloured saris, led by the vocal activist Sampat Pal Devi, who promote ideals of social justice for girls and women in rural areas in India. See https://gulabigang.in.

violence in the context of British colonial rule over Kenya speak in testimonial form. *Migritude* first challenges official history by giving us the experience of a 'history from below': "it all began with a battered red suitcase filled with untold stories and unseen beauty" (Patel 2010, 2). The parallelism underlined by the adjectives "untold" and "unseen" points to the invisible/inaudible nature of the story (until then) and echoes what French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc argues in *L'Invisibilité sociale*, namely that neo-liberalism creates a context where the monopoly of some experiences makes other lives invisible, and by extension, other voices inaudible (Le Blanc 2009). Patel's work counters this by making such (his) stories, or rather 'herstories,' seen and heard. In the poetic section of her book, Patel clarifies her intention by quoting Adrienne Rich's "Every poem is the breaking of an existing silence" (Patel 2010, 100). The text centres the voices of the women who experienced British violence in Kenya but also Idi Amin's dictatorship in Uganda, especially the violence it imposed upon Asians. Patel's work therefore complicates too simplistic a scheme which would equate perpetration with Western power and victimhood with countries from the Global South, here Uganda and Kenya. The speaker/narrator also highlights the system of complicities that existed between Western powers and the dictator, which made it possible for the latter to thrive, taking us back to the concept of 'implication': "Secret documents, declassified in 2001, show that Britain, Israel, and the US instigated and backed Idi Amin's military coup" (Patel 2010, 11). Apart from complicating historiography, Patel's *Migritude* also sheds light upon 'victimhood' and 'solidarity' by particularly emphasising notions of commitment or 'engagement' and the body.

A Call to Reclaim an Embodied Space to Speak From

> All I heard was: You have to be careful in a sari. You're exposing (whisper) the body. Don't let the pallav slip under the breast. That's obscene. Don't let the petticoat show the panties. That's obscene. Allure without being sexual. Be beautiful without being aware of it. Attract without meeting anyone's eyes. You must never act as if you owned your body. (Patel 2010, 22)

Patel evokes Indian society's injunctions and interdictions regarding the female body to better reject them. In another passage, after alluding to colonial violence with the "baskets of severed hands presented at day's end/to Belgian plantation masters in the Congo/thumbs chopped off Indian weavers by the British," Patel's speaker exclaims: "I make this work/because I still have

hands" (Patel 2010, 35). In both instances, readers/spectators are reminded that bodies are objects of violence and instruments of resistance. The mention of the speaker/performer's hands can also be articulated with Rothberg's concept of "complex implication," namely, the fact that "people can occupy multiple positions at the same time (as victims, perpetrators, and collaborators, for instance)" (2019, 40). While Patel's speaker, who we may assume is a double figure for the author, is certainly located at the intersection of racial and gender oppression, the artist's positionality makes her a privileged subject compared to the subjects she conjures up in her work. The mention of the artist having "hands" refers to the writer/performer's relative privilege,[11] compared to the 'direct' victims of colonial and dictatorial violence.

After sections entitled "this is the history we didn't learn" and "this is the history we read in school," the speaker adds: "This is the history we didn't read": "Oral testimonies from women who survived the camps" (Patel 2010, 17). Patel's endeavour consists in archiving, in both written and performative form, the silenced stories of violence against women in the context of British colonialism in Kenya. An effect of hyper-visibility is produced by the use of italics and the staccato rhythm "*The white officers had no shame. They would rape women in full view of everyone. Swing women by the hair. Put women in sacks, douse in paraffin, set alight*" (Patel 2010, 17; emphasis in original). A shift from the impersonal noun "women" to the "we" pronoun progressively occurs: "they burnt us with cigarette butts. Forced us to walk on hot coals" (Patel 2010, 17), which underlines a move from women being thought of as individual subjects to them considering themselves as part of a collective.[12] The voices of a community of survivors are finally given for us to listen, especially those of "Survivor 1," "Survivor 58," and "Survivor 613," while the numbers pinpoint their substantial amount. Such references prevent singular stories from being homogenised and reduced to "newsworthy" matter and statistics. By centring these testimonies, Patel's work engages with the notion that victims are not passive objects but, as Rebecca Stringer puts it in *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, "agentic bearers of knowledge" (Stringer 2014, 14).

11 As Rothberg argues: "The implicated subject is not an ontological category and does not always or necessarily correspond to our stereotypical images of privilege (the 'straight white cis-gendered man,' for instance)" (Rothberg 2019, 22). In his discussion of "complex implication," he also evokes the particular positionality of descendants of victims.

12 In Leetsch's terms: "[I]n Patel's show, the performance with and through the sari cloth can be seen as a strategy of not only addressing trauma but also of creating connection and community, of not only claiming voice but also of claiming voice together" (2021, 702).

Patel also offers a declaration of sisterhood: "I carry my history. I carry my family. Over my saris, I wear my sisters" (Patel 2010, 41). The quotation highlights the bodily continuum between the children's bodies and the performer's as it reappropriates Roland Barthes's (1973) articulation between text and texture with the fabric acting as support for a weaving together of voices and stories.

Patel's work underlines a specific relation between physicality, narrative and agency: "I walk a lot of my writing, the way you walk a dog—it completes itself in motion" (Patel 2010, 77).[13] As the saris become narratives, Patel's body turns into text as well: "How the distance of arm from torso, the amount of energy in a leg, are physical text that the audience reads without even knowing that they are reading it" (Patel 2010, 86). Victims in her work are, therefore, not just agentic bearers of knowledge: they become agentic bodies as they regain their voices and bodies by proxy, through Patel's retelling of their stories and her physi(ologi)cal commitment in the performance: "At *Something is bursting the walls of my arteries*, energy surges through my body. Like a rocket ignited, I am propelled into motion […] every cell charged with joy" (Patel 2010, 92).

The specific references to body parts and the mention of terms like "energy," "physical," or "propelled into motion" are reminiscent of physics but also of Frantz Fanon's discussion of the centrality of the body in anticolonial politics. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, the Caribbean psychiatrist and thinker of anticolonialism famously evokes an interaction taking place between a white child and a black man on a train. The child is afraid of the black man ("'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened!"), which triggers the following reactions: "Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible" (Fanon 1967, 112). The interaction ends up with both of them trembling, out of cold and/or fear. The situation depicts an interaction that could be found in a colonial context. It also shows the physical interaction at stake—the fact that one somatic reaction triggers another. Patel exposes how such mechanics may exist within members of the same "minoritised"

13 In the shadow book, which is a sort of double version of the text to be performed, Patel explains how her body is what literally makes it possible for words to be uttered: "[T]he end of the footbeats is my cue to open my eyes and begin" (Patel 2010, 76). The connection between walking and writing/creating is one that was particularly central to Frantz Fanon, as Matthew Beaumont recalls: "Fanon's prose is shaped by the propulsive force of his pacing" (Beaumont 2024, 7). It is no accident that Patel's focus on mobile bodies may be articulated with Fanon's phenomenological approach to racialised subjects, as will be shown later in the chapter.

community and articulates it with a stance of resistance. Collective, revolutionary potential may therefore exist in the mere exchange of energy between anticolonial subjects. As Neetu Khanna argues, also drawing on Fanon's work, "the visceral requires the body of the 'other' to set off its somatic response" (Khanna 2020, 20). One can expand this reflection on energy transfer to a process occurring between actors and spectators, or between an author and their readers, as Patel explains: "theatre is relationship. A body in front of other bodies. Unfiltered, unedited, unmanipulated. In real time. If I screw up on stage, everyone participates in the moment" (Patel 2010, 85). If one considers Patel, and the receivers of her work, as implicated subjects—each one being specifically positioned in relation to history—it becomes clear how collective agency could involve "commitment to transforming structural injustices in future-oriented actions" (Rothberg 2019, 50).

Patel's specific reference to the "energy in a leg" (Patel 2010, 86) may also be articulated with Fanon's discussion of the muscularity of the colonised subject's body in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride. (Fanon 1963, 52)

Fanon adds: "The native's muscles are always tensed […] That impulse to take the settler's place implies a tonicity of muscles the whole time" (Fanon 1963, 53). Patel's reference to energy and physics—"it completes itself in motion" (Patel 2010, 77)—therefore seems to address how Fanon reads muscular effort as the "muscular manifestation of the subject's revolutionary consciousness" (Fanon 1963, 53). Both Patel's and Fanon's texts emphasise the articulation between the postcolonial body and revolutionary agency, but Patel's work also highlights how central the relationality between bodies 'implicated' in the act of bearing witness to the victims of violence is.

Patel's insistence upon the physicality of the body reflects the archival nature of the body. Her work is reminiscent of historian Gyanendra Pandey's observation: "When and how do we archive the body as a register of events; or gestures, pauses, gut-reactions; or deep-rooted feelings of ecstasy, humiliation, pain?" (Pandey 2013, 7). *Migritude*, with its insistence on physicality, invites us to conceive of the body alongside Pandey's terms, i.e.

as a record of historical events, as an archive and a source of knowledge, just as the sari.[14] Speaking about the visual production, Leetsch observes:

> Generously spreading the saris across the stage floor and thus sharing them with the audience, Patel constructs not only a personal connection between herself and the people in the room, but she also creates a textile connection that reaches from the weavers whose hands were chopped off in nineteenth-century India, to those expelled from their homes in Uganda under Amin, to the survivors of rape in twentieth-century Kenyan camps, and right into the present. Sharing both material and histories with the audience, Patel engages spectators physically and emotionally. (Leetsch 2021, 708)

Patel's bodily performance and the way she 'engages' her audience partake of an exploration of implication. Finally, both works disrupt the dichotomous logics of caregiver and object of care, while retaining their respective perspectives on the matter.

Raging against the Humanitarian/Colonial Machine

Beyond this slightly provocative subtitle, what is at stake is, of course, not to launch a gratuitous attack on the people working in the humanitarian sector. Patel indeed denounces "humanitarianism" when it turns into a system and/or a career. As she makes clear: "So I make this word from rage" (Patel 2010, 35).[15]

In the poem section of the work, a similar line, "make it from rage" echoes a line from the previous stanza, "make it with your body" (Patel 2010, 122), which is strongly evocative of the link between rage and the body in one's assertion of agency—the latter being suggested by the occurrences of "make." This echoes the ways in which bell hooks has highlighted the fruitful nature of rage and its imbrication with resistance:

14 Drawing on materialism, Leetsch reads the sari in *Migritude* as "an archive or repertoire for the memories and trauma connected to empire's structures of oppression and violence, but more importantly also as an emotional marker for resistance. The saris in all their stubborn and porous material existence wilfully bear witness not only to Patel's performances, but also to histories of women's suffering" (Leetsch 2021, 697).

15 In Sahota's novel, a memorable passage about anger is associated with Narinder, who goes against her parents' will and turns against their religion: "'I've never been so angry. When they said what I was doing was wrong, I just wanted to scream. I wanted to shout. I've never been like that'" (Sahota 2015, 267). In this section, I wish to focus on rage in Patel's work, as it draws on more diversified elements than those that can be found in Sahota's novel.

> Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct. Then and now I understand rage to be a necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action. (hooks 1995, 16)

Rage in Patel's work is particularly audible thanks to her use of an accusatory second-person pronoun. The immigrant's anger is expressed in another collective voice—a community the poet belongs to: "We recoil when you joke about how your kids will do social justice work in Palestine as teenagers. As if Palestine will never be anything but a social justice summer camp. A case study in genocidal oppression for wealthy American teens with wanna-be-radical parents" (Patel 2010, 34). Patel criticises the extent to which empathy can be delivered on a short-term basis and is not envisaged as unconditional. The transformation of Palestine into a "case study" and the striking oxymoron "social justice summer camp" underline the incongruence of having "social justice" time-circumscribed and context-conditioned, with "summer camp" recalling a holiday hobby.

Rage is also rife in *Migritude*'s denunciation of climate injustice: "Pepsi buys up water rights in Central Africa, but keeps the water dirty" (Patel 2010, 36) which leads to an impassioned call for equality: "I want the gutters of Berkeley to float plastic bottles, like the ditches of Nairobi. I want the poodles of New York to choke on plastic bags like the cows and goats of Zanzibar" (Patel 2010, 36). This poetics of rage, which relies on the anaphoric repetition of "I want" at the beginning of each new sentence underscores the "coloniality of power," to borrow from Anibal Quijano's terminology (2007), which implies the persistence of colonial practices beyond historical decolonisation when it comes, for instance, to waste management.

The speaker's anger is also perceptible in the denunciation of historiographical practices, especially those ruling over the narratives of colonial history. Patel's text combines historical information and reflections on indoctrination: "In Kenya's war of independence, fewer than 100 whites and over 25,000 Africans died" (Patel 2010, 19). This appears right after the mention "We learned in school that we attained independence peacefully. Without bloodshed" (Patel 2010, 18–9), which stresses the distortion between disembodied statements, reminiscent of the writing of historical textbooks, and a more personal, at times angered, voice: "We were the model the rest of Africa was supposed to look to! A happy, multiracial nation where Whites, Asians, and Africans all lived in harmony" (Patel 2010, 19). The use of exclamatory punctuation and the enumeration of the peoples said to live in harmony draw the readers' attention to the veneer of historical

narratives hence made palatable and the fact that more entangled facts are to be found under the narrative surface of historical accounts.

Rage against colonialism and its aftermath takes the shape of a curse in Patel's work, turning the narrator/speaker into a prophetess of sorts: about the British soldiers who raped many women and children (650 rape allegations made, covering more than 35 years, between 1965 and 2001), the speaker exclaims: "May the redness overtake them. May red ants feast in their groins. Scorpions nestle in their beds. Blood vessels explode in their brains, organs rupture in their bellies. Wherever they go, may the land rise up in redness against them" (Patel 2010, 47). The number of anatomical references and the variety of verbs used ("overtake," "feast," "nestle," "explode," and "rise up"), all connoting proliferation, emphasise the speaker's desire for no single part of the colonisers' bodies to be spared. As violence has been exerted upon colonised bodies, the migrant's voice—in solidarity with the former, and despite the distance that separates her from the events which occurred in history—responds with rage by voicing verbal violence aimed at the perpetrators' bodies. It simultaneously invites the readers and spectators to share this experience of enraged solidarity by bearing witness to the victims of past and present violence, through the acts of reading and attending the show.

From Empathy to Praxis of Care

The move from empathy to care mentioned in the subtitle partakes of a certain defiance towards empathy which, as Suzanne Keen notes in *Empathy and the Novel*, can be seen as "yet another example of the Western imagination's imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to 'feel with,' in a cultural imperialism of the emotions" (Keen 2007, 148). Patel's and Sahota's works appear as calls to precisely move away from empathy to privilege care. Fiona Robinson argues that one has to wonder about the unequal power relations which may remain in acts of empathy. She invites people in the Global North to "rethink the implications of [their] 'moral' actions" (Robinson 2016, 173): "it compels us to reflect on the harm we may be doing in 'doing good'" (Robinson 2016, 173). Robinson adds that "what is important about care is its *necessity*—it *must* be done; and its *ubiquity*—it is *always* being done" (Robinson 2016, 171; emphasis in original). In Patel's work, as is visible in

the passage about Palestine as summer camp, empathy becomes something that can be bestowed upon others often thought of as subalterns.[16]

In this reflection about empathy, I wish to refer to Leetsch's assertion that

> the connection between voicing trauma and the creation of empathy and systems of solidarity lies at the forefront of Shailja Patel's art. The auto/fictional collaborative testimonies provided in her performances and poems create communities within the work and also, through their collaborative character, open themselves up to the reader, providing access to traumatic histories and ultimately producing the possibility of an ethical engagement across cultures. (Leetsch 2021, 707)

While I agree with how solidarities are created within *Migritude*, I would not speak of a creation of "empathy" in regard to Patel's work. Patel's dry, staccato writing imposes images upon the readers/spectators which hinder the identifying processes at the core of empathy: "1982 / gunshots in the streets of Nairobi / military coup leaders / thunder over the radio / Asian businesses wrecked and looted / Asian women / raped / after the government / regains control / we whisper what the coup leaders / had planned" (Patel 2010, 27). The paratactic effect prevents us from directly identifying with the victims and, therefore, appropriating their experiences. This process of impossible identification echoes Rothberg's discussion about the slogan "We are not Trayvon Martin" in the wake of the latter's murder:

> rather than understanding this enunciation as an act of disidentification, I read the slogan as a way of resisting appropriation that has the potential to open up a new political space for examining unwelcome forms of implication […] "We are not Trayvon Martin" becomes an occasion to mark another kind of belonging: the speaker's implication in the conditions that contributed to Trayvon's murder. (Rothberg 2019, 6)

In her poem "Eater of Death," about Arab children killed by a drone, the poet says: "their names will not be remembered, They are not *Amrikan*. Museums will not hold their relics, they are not *Amrikan*" (Patel 2010, 112; emphases in original). The poet counters this logic of erasure by literally

16 Carolyn Pedwell (2013) discusses the unequal power relations at stake in empathy, especially how the beneficiaries of empathic feeling, often emanating from the North, are often people from the Global South: "in the vast majority of these [liberal] texts, it is an imagined subject with class, race and geo-political privileges who encounters 'difference' and then chooses whether or not to extend empathy and compassion […]. The act of 'choosing' to extend empathy and compassion can itself be a way to assert power" (Pedwell 19).

'incorporating' these names without appropriating them: "I will keep them safe—in the cracks of my teeth / in the pit of my pelvis / in the raw raw flesh / beneath my eyelids" (Patel 2010, 113). The past events are connected with the future (as the use of "will" highlights) in each iteration of Patel's performance, which shows that "implication emerges from the ongoing, uneven, and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable pasts into an unredeemed present" (Rothberg 2019, 9).

Sahota's Politics of Recognition

Against a conception of empathy which sees some subjects as the exclusive providers of empathy and others as its receivers, Sahota's novel invites us to think alongside Nancy Fraser's concept of "transformative recognition" (Fraser 1998, 448), which she sees as preliminary to a "politics of care" and, I would add, a praxis of care. In the novel, Tochi, a Dalit character whose silent attitude is frequently recalled, explains the violence his family and himself have experienced as Dalits:

> He told her everything. About his father's accident, his sister's wedding, his attempts to make it as an auto driver. The riots that engulfed them and killed his family. His two years working in a brick factory in Calcutta and the travel across to Europe by plane, ship and truck. His weeks on the streets of Paris and the year in Southall and, finally, the trip up to here, Sheffield. (Sahota 2015, 125)

The riots that killed his family imply "overkilling" (Taraud, 2022) acts.[17] "Her" in the quote is Narinder, the Sikh British-Indian woman who is determined to provide care to the people around her. The revelation of Tochi's personal history of victimhood leads to the birth of a special connection between the two protagonists, regardless of their respective castes and genders. In a later response to Tochi's unveiling gesture, Narinder relinquishes her religion by symbolically taking off her turban. The passage may be read as Narinder showing herself as vulnerable in response:

> She raised her fingers to her head, to her turban. She lifted it off and put it on the table. [...] She stared at him, her arms arranged over her chest *as if she were naked*. Candlelight on her long hair. He came forward and knelt

17 I am referring to Christelle Taraud's concept of "sur-tuer" in the context of feminicide—the fact of exerting extreme violence before or after killing somebody in the form of mutilation, dismemberment, or rape, among others (Taraud 2022).

> beside her and put his head in her lap. He felt her hands lightly touch him and they both wept for all they had lost. (Sahota 2015, 433; emphasis added)

This passage is illustrative of Robinson's contention that "transformative recognition ensures that practices are based on a picture of mutual vulnerability and interdependence, and a shared need both to care and be cared for" (Robinson 2016, 163). Narinder leads a life defined by an "ethics of care. But by acknowledging Tochi through touch—Tochi who is a member of the caste formerly called 'Untouchables'—and giving him her vulnerable self to see ("as if she were naked"), Narinder acknowledges both his vulnerability and hers. The mention of their skins touching emphasises Robinson's idea of sharing, which is central to her reading of care. Mutuality being at stake in the praxis of care is finally highlighted by the use of the term "both." The acknowledgement of mutual vulnerability leads to the creation of new, unexpected solidarities and to the dismantling of the "object of care–care-giver" binary. The shift in the narrative from her to him and, finally, to the "they" pronoun literalises the nascent solidarity between the two characters, echoing Robinson's statement that "acts or practices of care and recognition can only occur *in relation*" (Robinson 2016, 165; emphasis in original). Sahota's novel depicts an evolution from Tochi and Narinder each eating dinner on their own to them progressively cooking and eating dinner together:

> She divided the sabzi and put a plate of white bread in the centre of the table. She sat down. He was looking at the food.
>
> […] "Are you making roti?" she asked, curious. She joined him at the sink.
>
> He was using his hands, the wet dough hanging off his finger-tips in stiff peaks. "You made the sabzi, I'll make the roti." […] That became the shape of their evenings: *one of them* cooking up the dhal or sabzi*, the other* making the rotis*, and then a meal together, quietly, peaceably* (Sahota 2015, 426; emphases added).

The passage literalises the fact that care relies on reciprocity. The evolution in the use of pronouns shows how the two characters are initially considered separate entities ("You made the sabzi, I'll make the roti") before being envisaged as a collective: "that became the shape of *their* evenings" (emphasis added). This evolution toward mutual solidarity, one that is oblivious of caste or gender, is epitomised in the last sentence of the passage, with the parallel phrases "one of them cooking" and "the other making" leading to the melting of their separate selves into the collective "and then a meal *together*" (my emphasis). By taking us into the kitchen of this Sheffield flat and depicting seemingly plain gestures, Sahota shows us

a praxis of care being carried out by characters who "perform unnoticed, invisible tasks and take care of basic needs" (Laugier 2015, 218). Care is particularly highlighted by the use of the action verb "make"—a reminder that care, indeed, consists of *acts* of care.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to underline how the two works draw our attention to the particular case of female precarity in contexts of colonialism and immigration. Patel's writing and performance can be read as a tribute to the victims of colonialism and forced migration and a denunciation of the British colonisers and Ugandan perpetrators of violence against Asians. *Migritude* also hints at the specific female victims of colonialism and at present forms of oppression, as women remain the main subjects of globalised precarity. This is also shown in Sahota's novel with Narinder, who is a British citizen experiencing both racism in England and patriarchal oppression embodied by her father and brother who predicate the honour of the family upon her way of living.

Both texts question stereotypes about victimhood but complicate the positions of victim and perpetrator, which makes their analysis through Rothberg's concept of implicated subject enlightening. Sahota's novel engages us to think beyond categories that are not as clear-cut as could be imagined and not mutually exclusive. One may be a victim of systemic racism on the one hand and a perpetrator of gendered oppression on the other. Patel's and Sahota's works complicate the simplistic scheme according to which perpetration is necessarily on the part of Western colonial powers, while victimhood would only be associated with a character, or a country, from the Global South.

Both works also examine how the past continues to exist in the present, be it through Tochi's experience of caste discrimination that played a part in his departure for the West, where he re-experiences caste discrimination coupled with a type of racism that finds its origins in colonial history, or in Patel's evocation of the organic link between past and present victims of gendered and racial discrimination in Uganda, Kenya, and Western countries. Both consequently call our attention to everyone's role as more or less distant 'implicated subject,' making us all witnesses of entangled histories in the continuation of which we participate in various degrees. But Patel's work, drawing on a multimodal endeavour embracing drama, poetry, journalism, and testimonial discourse, centres female corporeality and voices as it claims the archival status of both bodies and saris, with the

body of the performer acting as vital principle connecting subjectivities, lives, stories, and narratives—past and present.

Both works finally reclaim a specific 'victimhood status.' *The Year of the Runaways* highlights the limits of individual Indian female agency in the West, as Narinder cannot ultimately rescue her friend Savraj. According to Mirza, "Savraj's vanishing from Narinder's life, and from the narrative, is a powerful reminder of the vicious tenacity of some forms of precarity which resist being overcome in an individual's life" (2022, 100). This is a reminder that the move from victim to survivor is often seen to depend on individual agency. It is, of course, a great achievement when victims manage to heal from traumatic events at an individual level. But the two works oppose the neoliberal tendency that views the path of healing as one implying an individual leaving the state of victimhood to embrace that of survivor. They call our attention to systemic forms of oppression leading to states of victimhood which need to be reclaimed and acknowledged collectively. The initial stage of the process is carried out through the "joint attention" triggered by Sahota's and Patel's literary and artistic gestures. Such collective attention drawn to the same object(s) is what may then lead to effective praxis, which includes recognition and the provision of acts of care. Through our experience of the works' bodily poetics, we can imagine becoming augmented implicated subjects, not just by acknowledging our responsibility in the continuation of past processes in our current world, but by becoming actively implicated in bearing witness to ongoing processes of discrimination which create persistent victims whose status we may collectively acknowledge, while resisting such historical continuities. Renewed politics may emerge in such embodied practices of reading, seeing, and listening as are generated by Sahota's and Patel's works.

ORCID®

Jaine Chemmachery https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2368-2775

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Nadia Butt and Saleh Chaoui

Between Agency and Victimhood: Forms of Self-Assertion in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999) and Wafa Faith Hallam's *The Road from Morocco* (2011)

ABSTRACT This chapter examines forms of self-assertion in two memoirs—*A Border Passage* (1999) by Egyptian writer Leila Ahmed and *The Road from Morocco* (2011) by Moroccan author Wafa Faith Hallam—with reference to Arab identity as a fluid notion and its connection to Islam and gender hierarchies. We argue that Ahmed and Hallam, despite being modern and privileged Muslim women from the Arab world, assert themselves in very different ways in their writings, as they leave their (home)lands and venture abroad for a life they have desired. To this end, we analyze how Ahmed's and Hallam's multiple journeys demonstrate resilience against political and cultural hurdles in diverse cultural settings. We also investigate the memoirs as a family archive which allows the authors to present their ways of seeing and exploring personal, familial, and national histories; exercise agency; and deny victimhood against all odds, thus showing courage in the wake of new challenges at home and abroad.

KEYWORDS agency, Arab autobiography, Arabness, resistance and resilience, victimhood

Introduction

In recent years, Arab anglophone literature, especially written by Arab diasporic women, has drawn the attention of prominent literary scholars such as Geoffrey Nash (2017), Claire Gallien (2017), Nouri Gana (2013), Claire Chambers (2011), and Layla Al Maleh (2009), to name but a few. Keeping in view recent developments in the field of Arab anglophone literature in the

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wake of transnational and transcultural connections around the globe, this article seeks to examine forms of self-assertion in two memoirs—*A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999) by Egyptian writer Leila Ahmed and *The Road from Morocco* (2011) by Moroccan author Wafa Faith Hallam—with special reference to Arab identity as fluid (Sheehi 2004, 1–14) and its connections with Islam and gender hierarchies. These memoirs unearth not merely Ahmed's life history, set in Egypt, England, Abu Dhabi, and America, as well as Hallam's existence in Morocco and the United States, but also chronicle different forms of self-assertion in times of political and cultural transformations in their native lands.

Although both Ahmed and Hallam, as modern Arab women, come from a highly privileged background, they tend to assert themselves in very different ways in their writings as they leave the safe and secure spaces of their (home)lands and venture abroad for a life they have desired and dream of—a life that provides an opportunity to think and live beyond the conventional notions of nation, culture, race, and religion. To this end, we discuss how Ahmed's journey from Cairo to America and Hallam's journey from Morocco to America demonstrate resilience against political and cultural hurdles in their memoirs as a hybrid genre, criss-crossing life-writing, autobiography, double autobiography, memory narrative, diary, "history" (Moore-Gilbert 2009, 77) or "travel-writing" (Moore-Gilbert 2009, 83). In addition, we analyze the memoirs as a family archive which allows Ahmed and Hallam to present and share their way of seeing and exploring familial and national histories, exercise agency, and deny victimhood against all odds and, thus, show courage in the face of unfavourable circumstances. Indeed, victimhood remains a contested terrain in the writings of both these authors as they narrate their journeys in heterogeneous cultural landscapes. For Michael Rothberg, the dichotomy between the victim and the perpetrator is not straightforward. Therefore, he defines it with the help of the term "the implicated subject" and the related notion of "implication" (2019, 1). The category of "the implicated subject" alludes to "one who participates in injustice, but in indirect way" (2019, 20). By introducing a theory of implication, Rothberg invites the reader to think beyond the "binarized identities and the victim/perpetrator imaginary" (2019, 20). Importantly, the framework of implicated subjects not only broadens the discussion about victimhood and agency but also sheds a different light on histories of violence, injustice, and collective guilt, which tend to surface in the two selected memoirs under study.

In the following, we analyze how writing an autobiography-cum-memoir itself becomes a form of self-assertion; then how Ahmed and Hallam present their modern and innovative views on cultural and

national belonging during their time at home and abroad; and, finally, how they question and address Arab identity, especially female identity, as they strive to reconcile with their life challenges as liberated women in the Islamic world and the West.

Contested Borders: Self-Assertion in Contemporary Arab Anglophone Autobiographies by Women Writers

Since James Olney's influential work *Studies in Autobiography* (1988), autobiography has often been seen as "a kind of step-child of history and literature" (1988, xiii), "loose and baggy a monster" (Dibattista and Wittman 2014, 4), or simply a low-brow genre. However, Arab women's autobiographies, a somewhat neglected area of academic inquiry, need to be seen as part of a contemporary turn within a classical genre that has been deeply Eurocentric, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe (2010, 198). According to Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman, the academic investigation of autobiography, however recent, has a rich—if undetermined—tradition of scholarship. "The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw a surge in studies of autobiography as scholars across the historical and critical spectrum began to appreciate that autobiography demanded more systematic attention than it was receiving" (2014, 1). Declaring it an "unruly genre," Dibattista and Wittman claim that it is difficult to define autobiography as a genre (see also Moore-Gilbert 2009, 67), since it can be loosely grouped under the rubric "life-writing" (2014, 2). To them, the question arises if "memoir, reminiscences, diary, journal, autobiography, lyrical essay, personal letters, fictional autobiography, even biography" can "constitute an autonomous genre with distinctive literary traits," or if such texts are only "a loose assemblage of works whose most common feature is a shared preoccupation with personal experience" (2014, 2). We believe that memoir and life-writing can be seen either as adjacent genres of autobiography or its synonyms, as they are for Dibattista and Wittman (2014, 4).

The two most influential studies on autobiography by Paul John Eakin, with the telling titles *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985) and *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), vividly engage with autobiography as a form of (re)fashioning the self as much as self-invention. Thus, a preoccupation with the self is certainly the most prominent feature of autobiography. In her introduction to *In the House of Silence*, a collection of autobiographical essays by Arab women, Fadia Faqir declares that Arab women are trying to "define their position in history" by locating themselves "vis-à-vis the male master narrative"

as well as formulating their own "separate individual identity" (1998, 8). Geoffrey Nash observes that "Arab women's English autobiographies are especially linked to the opportunities thrown by migration and cross-cultural interaction" (2007, 154), to which we add that in the memoirs under study, Ahmed and Hallam contest cultural, racial, and linguistic borders just as much as national and territorial ones; thus, they defy national containers, whether at home or abroad, to define themselves as independent women. Their lives as migrants and expatriates "across the lines" (see Cronin 2000, 1–7) become a metaphor of travel and translation, the idea of which James Clifford has expounded in his well-known work *Routes* (1997). Indeed, it is travelling between countries and continents as well as cultures and languages literally and metaphorically that seems to shape postcolonial perspectives presented in what Bart Gilbert-Moore calls "postcolonial life-writing," "a branch of auto/biographical literature" (2009, xi). In the memoirs discussed in this chapter, there is arguably a development towards fascination and then disillusionment with the former colonial rulers, leading to a renewed self-awareness. Consequently, the (post)colonial frames tend to recede as these women move between home and abroad.

In the last two decades, the genre of memoir writing has caught the attention of Arab anglophone writers as a medium which provides a space where dominant stereotypical representations can be laid bare and challenged. Scholars from literary, cultural, and historical disciplines have taken memoirs of Arab women seriously, particularly in relation to the issues of self-writing and the invention of selfhoods, which differ from mainstream medial and historical narratives (Hassan 2002; Golley 2003, 2007; Nash 2007; Abdelrazek 2007; Moore 2008). The act of self-writing for Arab women stands as a testimony to the material and experiential conditions of their livelihoods, which vary according to the historical, social, and political situations into which they were born. In this regard, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, in her edited book *Arab Women's Lives Retold*, argues that Arab women's autobiographies are produced at the intersection of cultural discourses that govern the representation and construction of their identities. Such intersections, for Al Hassan Golley, involve the convergence of issues such as "self and subjectivity, the private and the public, ethnicity, nationalism and transnationalism, and postcolonialism […], setting up a polyphony of readings that overlap, challenge and digress from each other" (2007, xxvii). These autobiographies can be deemed as subversive in their potential to challenge the social fabrication of identity. Waïl Hassan notes that they perform a double operation: "contesting the identity assigned by the dominant majority discourse while at the same

time utilizing its sanctional narrative procedures in order to enter into its regime of truth" (2002, 9). Thus, memoirs by Arab women have been more than just a mode of self-representation through the act of writing: they have also been a means of finding a voice and articulating agency.

One of the primary issues which concern Arab women has been the predilection for victimhood. Within current print and electronic media, Arab and Muslim women have often been construed as victims of their husbands, families, communities, society, or religion. The centrality of memoirs as a genre resides in the immediate space of expression they allow authors on their own terms, who tend to dismiss the notion that most Arab women are in need of a "saviour" (Abu-Lughod 2013, 29). The agency of Arab women lies in their ability to write themselves, by their own account and according to their own proclivities. While such an act is largely subject to the ferocious laws of visibility and the liberal market economy, it still is a significant stepping stone in the larger discursive context of agency and victimhood.

Crossing geographical borders has been one of the narrative modes employed by Arab women writers in order to challenge the typical representation of Arab women as confined subjects. The word "journey" in the title of Ahmed's memoir and "road" in Hallam's text already evoke a form of transgression and transformation as an outcome of moving freely. Mobility seems to have empowered Arab women to voice out the tyrannies of home and homeland. It is through engaging different modalities of mobility, travel, and migration that Arab women writers are construing their (post)colonial feminist identities (Moore 2008, 130). Ahmed's and Hallam's deeply personal narratives tackle the problematic of gender and migrant female identity, emphasizing the symbolic value of rediscovering the body as a fundamental theme in Arab women's diasporic narratives. In her book *Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing*, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek draws attention to the psychological and geographical terrains that undergird displacement as a fundamental experience in diaspora and border crossing for Arab women writers (2007, 9). This is reminiscent of Avtar Brah's theorization of borders as metaphors of psycho-sexual, cultural, and racialized demarcations which intensify the experiences of displacement and encounters (Brah 1996, 198; in Abdelrazek 2007, 9). As Carol Fadda-Conrey has pointed out, the phenomenon of border crossing urges rethinking hegemonic notions such as belonging and citizenship by subjecting them to the convulsive experiences of transnationalism and cross-cultural encounters (2014, 7), thus often involving a re-imagination of home and homeland. Hence, as our subsequent analysis will prove, what characterizes Hallam's and Ahmed's memoirs is that, ever since their first

time away from home, the act of moving around and travelling abroad has been associated with autonomy, agency, and independence.

Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999)

Leila Ahmed, born in Cairo in 1940 into a Muslim upper-class family, grew up in a post-revolutionary Egypt. Having been schooled exclusively in English in Cairo, in the late 1950s Ahmed moved to England to attend Girton College, Cambridge, where she earned a degree in English. Despite their privileged status, after the revolution Ahmed's family became political outcasts, as her father, a prominent civil engineer, opposed the Aswan High Dam project, hailed by then President Gamal Abdel Nasser as a symbol of economic independence and progress. The government continued to harass Ahmed's family for years, including a refusal to issue a travel passport to Ahmed who wanted to return to England for graduate studies. Eventually, Ahmed was able to travel and receive her doctorate degree from Cambridge in 1981, after which she moved to Abu Dhabi to work for a commission on women's education. Finally, she came to the US for a professorship at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. She taught there up until 1999, when she became the first professor in Women's Studies in Religion at Harvard Divinity School. Ahmed has established herself as a leading scholar in Islamic and gender studies whose seminal work *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992) is considered a classic in the field of Islamic feminist theory.

Ahmed's memoir *A Border Passage* is, indeed, a striking example of twentieth-century Arab anglophone life-writing from the Arab world. We argue that Ahmed's memoir not only demonstrates the travels of memory, intertwining the personal with the political, but further overlaps with a quest or self-discovery narrative, a narrative of displacement, exile, and (trans)migration, or simply a coming-of-age narrative, as she traces her journey from childhood to youth; from innocence to enlightenment; and from life in Egypt to life in the Western world. In addition, the memoir underlines Ahmed's difficult relationship with her mother, a woman of Turkish origin, which was crucial in breeding loneliness in her at an early age, further distancing her from her siblings. In brief, the memoir represents a dual journey: not only does it unfold the obvious journey of the author from the Arab world to the West but it also traces an inner journey from "colonial consciousness" (Said 1979, 325), rooted in Ahmed's fascination for Western education and reservations about Egyptian culture,

to colonial liberation, after witnessing the devastation of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the Western indifference to the violent conflict between Palestine and Israel in 1948.

Divided into two separate parts, Part 1 of *A Border Passage* describes Ahmed's childhood and adolescent years in Egypt, including important political and personal events such as the making of Arab nationalism around the time of the 1920s after the Ottoman Empire, the war with Israel in 1948, the Suez Canal crisis in 1956, the loss of Ahmed's Jewish friend Joyce, and Ahmed's move to the West in the 1980s; Part 2 explains Ahmed's life in Cambridge and her growth as an Arab academic and her migration to Abu Dhabi and then, finally, America. Ahmed particularly shares her alienation from her own family and from the country under the popular dictator, Nasser, who unfortunately failed to keep Egypt as a plural society inhabited by Jews and Copts rather than only Muslims, which according to Ahmed, caused a great deal of cultural and political setback. This is what Ahmed, as a secular Muslim and feminist, deeply regrets in her writing. At the same time, she acknowledges the fact that Nassar wanted to eradicate the old patterns of feudalism to which Ahmed belonged and heralded an era of equality and justice, but she could not help missing her huge home, lost to strangers overnight, and her private English-medium school, suddenly nationalised and replaced by an Arabic-medium school; consequently, educational standards declined steeply, disrupting her interest in her studies which were no longer challenging. Yet, as "the implicated subject" (2019, 20) in Rothberg's sense, Ahmed considers herself neither a perpetrator nor a victim of the exploitive feudal system. On the contrary, she defines her position as someone born into the colonial setup from which she slowly releases herself.

Ahmed asserts herself in three fundamental ways in her memoir, written against the background of great cultural and political change in Egypt. "Border and Passage," the first two words of the title of her book, "foreground the journey as an accomplished fact, while the next four nouns in the subtitles emphasize the distance travelled" (Nash 2009, 355). However, in gendering the traveller, as the story is declared a "A Woman's Journey," Ahmed prepares the reader for a different kind of odyssey, which is not limited to obstacles the traveller is bound to face but includes the process of coping and, at times, of overcoming and reconciling with them. Consequently, Ahmed's memoir is not merely an immersion in or a manifestation of the cultural and racial dichotomies that divide our world but also a critical appraisal of these dichotomies that pervaded her most formative years in Cairo. As Waïl Hassan claims, "*A Border Passage* presents itself as a narrative of connectedness rather than polarity" (2011, 147).

Aside from these dichotomies that pervade Ahmed's imagination as well as her narration, it is equally important to point out that Ahmed's memoir is also an expression of a writer's doubly marginalised position: firstly, women writers writing about their travels and transformations in the form of a memoir are marginalized, as this form of writing has been long considered a male undertaking (Douglas 1991, 145; see also Anishchenkova 2014); secondly, Ahmed as an Arab woman raises her voice against European definitions of Arabness and highlights her own struggles with being an Egyptian and not an Arab at home. This is shown in Ahmed's treatment at the hands of her Arabic teacher Miss Nabih, a refugee from Palestine, who strikes her across the face in school for not speaking and reading accurate Arabic and hence not being a true Arab (1999, 243; all further references in the text are to this edition) as well as abroad, when Ahmed is spat on by a man twice on the bus in Cambridge for being an Arab (268).

In his article "From Harem to Harvard," Nash highlights how the Arab autobiographical canon is a male one and how women writers "seek out strategies by which to gain entry to the genre" (2009, 351). One such strategy is a trip down memory lane through which Ahmed reflects and challenges the significant issues surrounding Egyptian women, Islam, and identity as well as Arab nationalism, nationhood, and the cultural divide within the Arab world. Despite acknowledging the political events of the 1950s and 60s that shaped her imagination, she points up their significance from a layman's perspective, admitting that her memoir is a work of memory and not a book of politics. Opposing a widespread misconception about Arab women as suppressed, Ahmed observes that even though Egyptian homes are divided into male and female quarters as 'harem,' it is women like her grandmother who exercise full authority in running domestic affairs and act as the real head of the family. Also, despite her aunt Aida committing suicide for not being allowed to seek freedom from an oppressive marriage, Ahmed defines the role of women in Egyptian society as fighters who do not give in but go on struggling to define themselves as free and independent souls, thus questioning the stereotype of Arab women as submissive, passive, or perpetual victims. Ahmed also relates that, when she registered her short marriage with Alan at the Egyptian embassy in England, she remembered the difficulties of Aunt Aida around divorce; therefore, she "did not fail to invoke the clause that it is right of every Muslim woman to invoke—transferring the power of divorce from husband to wife" (221). Thus, Ahmed continues to live as an Arab in the West, as a woman of colour whose "quiet revolution" consists of mapping, naming, and making "visible the territory of" her "own different experiences" (226).

As Ahmed writes about her distinct approach to different events taking place in her lifetime in the domestic as well as the national sphere, writing "a memoir" (241) itself becomes a form of resistance, namely, resisting political oppression as well as a singular identity being stamped on her, defining the self beyond the national container, and forging a transcultural identity; we as readers get to know her individual perspective on family, politics, and culture, contrary to history books or popular media. As a result, the memoir serves as repository of 'other' histories—an alternative archive of individual lives intertwined with politics. Clearly, Ahmed celebrates cultural diversity in Egypt, stemming from people practising different faiths in times of political crisis, which have played a significant role in shaping her imagination and perception of the world(s) she has inhabited. It is not surprising that Ahmed takes issue with a narrow definition of Islam, which she considers harmful to the cultural richness that pervades Egypt.

As Ahmed travels between Sufi and Wahhabi Islam and thus shares with the reader how she experiences Islam in the West, she urges a rethinking of Islam in terms of a differentiation between political Islam, exploited for power and control, and secular Islam as practised only in the private domain. Here, we point out the two aspects—*Faqiha* and *Sharia*—which are considered to be the foremost pillars of Islam. *Faqiha* is the interpretation of Islam, as religion itself is too complicated to be understood, so the question is who interprets Islam. It is the *ulema* or the Islamic scholars, who have always been men, that define religion. And they create *Sharia* or the Islamic law, as it is based on their judgement or interpretation of Islam. This dimension is what Ahmed criticises in her memoir as a counter-narrative—a narrative which offers a female vision of Islam. She declares that Islam as she experienced it in Egypt is squared with the male version of Islam, which is in correspondence with the medieval version of Islam—written Islam or textual Islam, as opposed to Islamic practices in the domestic spheres of women. Ahmed maintains: "there are two quite different Islams, an Islam that is in some sense, a women's Islam and an official, textual Islam, a 'men's' Islam" (1999, 123). Ahmed observes that, in the segregated society of Egypt, women and men understand religion in different ways. She adds:

> The dictum that "there is no priesthood in Islam"—meaning that there is no intermediary or Interpreter, and no need for an intermediary or interpreter, between God and each individual Muslim and how that Muslim understands his or her religion—was something these women and many other Muslims took seriously and held on to as a declaration of their right to their own

> understanding of Islam […] I expect that the Islam I received from the women among whom I lived was therefore part of their subculture. In this sense, then, there are not just two or three different kinds of Islam, but many, many different ways of being Muslim. But what is striking to me now is how different or rare the Islam in which I was raised is but how ordinary and typical it seems to be in its base and fundamentals […] It is the Islam not only of women but of ordinary folk generally, as opposed to the Islam of sheikhs, ayotollahs, mullahs, and clerics. It is an Islam that may or may not place emphasis on ritual and formal religious practices […] but a broad ethos and ethical code and a way of understanding and reflecting on the meaning of one's life and of human life more generally. (125)

Ahmed experienced the finest and most appealing forms of Islam during her teenage years, when—as she recounts in Chapter 3, "In Expectations of Angels"—in the month of Ramadan, her grandmother introduced the angels to her whose presence could not be seen but only felt (67). This version—the mystic and spiritual or the Sufi dimension of Islam—turned out to be a polar opposite to the Islam practised in the national space: the "Islam of the texts," "the Islam of the arcane," in short "the men's Islam" (125), which aims at suppressing women and depriving them of their rights, especially the Islam propagated by the Muslim brotherhood for promoting their own power and political recognition.

Like Hallam, Ahmed presents identity as a dynamic concept rather than strictly anchored in time and space. Importantly, Ahmed deals with her identity—just like with Islam—as travelling: a moving notion rather than a fixed entity. This sense of mobile identity becomes increasingly significant as Ahmed travels abroad. In fact, she always strives to travel to England for her education, despite having been denied a passport for years by virtue of being the daughter of an engineer who has criticised the regime. By travelling abroad and experiencing the image of Arabs and Arab women in the West, Ahmed particularly seeks to redefine "Arabness" to provide deeper insight into the various dimensions of Egypt at the forefront of Arab nationalism from a new angle. This new sense of identity stems from her movement between languages (English and Arabic), cultures (Arab and Western), and religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), in different times (childhood and the forming adolescent and youth years) and places (Cairo, Cambridge, Abu Dhabi, and America). Hence, the narrative becomes a space of diverse encounters in which a transnational and transcultural rendition of Arab identity (Phillips 2013) and histories is noticeable. Ahmed also adopts a plural approach to her position and role as an Egyptian academic and as a woman from the Arab world. Thus, Ahmed seeks to break several stereotypes in her memoir about Arabs in general and Egyptian women in particular to define herself as a woman beyond

other people's static beliefs and imaginations. In her article "Speaking in Tongues: Arab Autobiographical Discourses of Americanization" (2017), Valerie Anishchenkova rightly argues that Arab female memoirs break stereotypes about Arabs as well as Arabian women.

As Ahmed joins Western academia, she is dismayed to notice that the Arab world, just as Arab identity, is imagined as monolithic. Therefore, she claims that "we are always plural. Not either this or that, but this *and* that. And we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousnesses a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us" (125; emphasis in original). Ahmed undoubtedly admires Arabness as manifested in Arabic literature. However, she dismisses "*any* institutional configurations of Arabness—be it Nasser's Pan Arabism or the Orientalist constructs imposed on her by the American academia" (Anishchenkova 2017, 109; emphasis in original). By dedicating Chapter 11 in the memoir ("On Becoming an Arab") to the notion of identity in the making, Ahmed not only shares "a personal odyssey through the politics, emotions, and history of our becoming an Arab" (246) but also underlines the negative connotations associated with terms such as Arab or African, which only pin her down to a narrow nationalism that negates "pluralism" (264). With the help of a ship image, she challenges the "two notions of Arab" that she is "trapped in—both false, both heavily weighted and cargoed with another silent freight. Both imputing to me feelings and beliefs that aren't mine" (256). She declares,

> I am not here to betray. I just do not want to live any longer with a lie about who I am. I don't want any longer to live with lies and manipulations, I can't stand to be caught up like this forever in other people's inventions, imputations, and false constructions of who I am—what I think, believe, feel, or ought to think or believe or feel. (255)

So, she sets out not only to reject and omit such falsities but also to define her role as a woman between cultures, languages, and traditions—a woman located in the liminal spaces of travelling cultures and identities, which have been the sum total of her existence as an Arab scholar and writer. Importantly, she also fashions selfhood in her memoir as a platform of rejecting a simplified image of the Arab/woman as filtered through a singular Western male lens.

According to Ahmed, around 1945, suddenly "The Europeans were defining us and we, falling in with their ideas, agreed to define ourselves as Arab," when the very word 'Arab' in "European tongues" is "internally loaded in the negative" (266). By challenging the European image of the Arabs and a unidimensional Arabian identity imposed on her, Ahmed

urges a truthful method of documenting and understanding the Arab world, which is far more complex than the European version that was used to justify plundering of a region considered primitive and in constant need of the West. She is particularly pained to notice that, for Europeans, Arabs meant people of "a lesser humanity" whom "you did not honour and whose lands you carve up and appropriate as you wished" (267).

At first, Ahmed rejects her Egyptian womanhood, as she dreads being like the women by whom she was surrounded—"I knew that I had to become either a man or a Westerner" (194). But having gone through several experiences of immigration—her studies at Cambridge, her work in Abu Dhabi, a brief return to Egypt, and finally immigration to the US—Ahmed develops a nuanced understanding and appreciation of her feminist identity that incorporates her numerous selves: Muslim and secular academic, Egyptian and American, English-speaking and Arabic-dialect-speaking. Anishchenkova rightly underlines that Ahmed's intertextual references to Virginia Woolf's seminal essay *A Room of One's Own* "work in unison to construct a transcultural feminist identity" (2017, 111). As a result, Ahmed resists being labelled as an Arab, so-called primitive woman when, in reality, she is bound to a hybrid and plural identity. Not surprisingly, she plays on the Western perception of Arabian women trapped in their "harems" by naming a chapter of the memoir "Harem" (which is actually about the independence of women in the domestic spheres in Cairo) and another "Harem Perfected" (which is about the agency of women academics in Girton College, Cambridge supporting younger academics).

A Border Passage is not only a story of cultural, geographical, and emotional dislocations but also a story of Ahmed's development as an Arab woman at home and abroad. As her narrative cuts across cultural and political demarcations, it urges us to think beyond what is popularly believed about Nasser as a charismatic leader when he was an oppressive dictator; how colonial and postcolonial cultural trajectories are perceived by Ahmed and her countrymen in Egypt; how she imagines secular Islam as opposed to politicised Islam, and above all, how Arabness is imagined across borders. As Ahmed, a traveller between countries and cultures, shares an arduous journey of self-understanding, the memoir manifests "the process and voyage of discovery," her new "understanding of the past" (246), and, above all, her agency. Thus, her text as a personal, familial, and historical archive dismisses victimhood surrounding the role of an Arab woman in the face of all kinds of crises and maps out new ways of reading personal and national histories from a transnational vantage point.

Wafa Faith Hallam's *The Road from Morocco* (2011)

Wafa Faith Hallam was born and raised in Morocco. Being a diasporic subject who is quite noticeable in the American literary scene, Hallam's configuration of identity is constantly shifting; it is a process of becoming and manoeuvring with changes in socio-cultural standing. She identifies herself as an emigrant woman of Arab and Muslim background who has been a "naturalized American citizen for thirty years" (Hallam 2016, para. 1). Hallam, following in the footsteps of many contemporary female Arab writers in America, takes women's liberation, the status of women in society, and the breaking of taboos as central themes in her memoir. As such, she envisions a space that is, to a large extent, gendered in a way that places women and their challenges at the centre of postcolonial Morocco. With her memoir, which unfolds a deeply personal chain of events, Hallam can be regarded as one of the pioneers of anglophone Moroccan literature who seeks to give voice to the Moroccan female journey towards emancipation from patriarchy and the embracing of modern liberal values. In this vein, Hallam strives to create a gendered space in which Moroccan female subjectivity is not only adamant but also endowed with the potential to undermine patriarchal paradigms. The intersection of gender and space is inextricably interwoven, in the sense that women's attitudes are determined by the physical and cultural spaces they inhabit. In this respect, Hallam, through her personal experience, seeks to re-envisage how these spaces are essential in the process of subject formation. Hallam's narrative, in fact, broadens the scope of Moroccan literature, which has for decades been known mostly by its francophone writers. Significantly, the narrative form Hallam has chosen creates the possibility of constructing a politics of womanhood that offers fresh perspectives on diasporic Arab female subjectivities from a global perspective.

The Road from Morocco focuses on the female characters' experiences of trespassing cultural boundaries, providing a different image of how Moroccan women grapple with the pressure to adhere to traditional roles. Hallam demonstrates that not all women were submissive and complicit with the patriarchal structure by presenting her mother's antagonistic perception of the borders tethering her. This claim is further emphasized by Anouar Majid's assertion that Hallam's memoir "upends the notion that women from Arab and Muslim backgrounds are trapped in male dominated structures" (2011, para. 26). Hallam's representation of her female characters dismantles the identicalness and homogeneity associated with Arab women as they have been engraved in the medial consciousness of orientalism. Attributing agency and independence to them unearths the

plurality of Arab women who trespass the private space of 'harem' and debunk patriarchal authority by their assumed cultural transgressions.

In his extensive review, Majid situates Hallam's autobiographical account within those Moroccan literary productions that shatter the "literary and social conventions with such force that is bound to provoke strong reactions" (2011, para. 3). Comparing its literary courage to Mohamed Choukri's widely acclaimed memoir *For Bread Alone*, Majid rightly deems the memoir a literary text that is not stifled by conventions, since it boldly tackles several issues related to women in Arab and Muslim societies. Furthermore, the memoir can be situated within the Shahrazadian tradition of feminine storytelling in which Arab women writers voice out their concerns against the oppressive structure of their nations.

The Road from Morocco reveals the process of identity and subjectivity as affected and shaped by shifting locations, times, and circumstances. Hallam's memoir, based on a recorded story and family memories, starts in the Moroccan city of Meknes, where her mother, Saadia, is married at the age of 13 against her will, and ends with Hallam's spiritual rediscovery. The reader discovers that, unlike her only semi-literate mother, Hallam is a French-educated, sexually liberated Muslim woman who travels to Europe and then to the United States, eventually accepting a high-ranking job on Wall Street. While this may seem an American Dream come true, such an overwhelming experience, in fact, challenges and threatens everything she holds dear. Thus, the memoir is about leaving home and returning to it by taking several detours around the globe.

As indicated in the prologue, what urges Hallam to write this memoir is her incredible yearning to write her mother's life story which tends to intersect with Hallam's own story and thus turns out to be a double memoir or a mother–daughter (auto)biography. Given the limitations of Hallam's perspective as a child, the integration of her mother into the narrative lends a certain sense of authenticity to the text. Also, by coalescing her mother's story into hers, Hallam manages to give voice to her mother, who has been constantly struggling to end an unwanted marriage to an elderly man and to achieve economic independence in a male-dominated Moroccan society. More importantly, the question of space is integral in the mother–daughter story. First, it is highlighted in her mother's trespassing of *hudud* and confinement, in which she strives to resist her imposed marriage by breaking with the assigned traditional roles of women in the private space. Second, it is demonstrated in Hallam, who, having been inspired by her mother's will to freedom, has followed several trajectories for the sake of self-discovery. Moving between several countries as a bookseller with her boyfriend, Hallam's identity acquires a transnational

dimension through which she is able to experience the freedom of movement beyond national boundaries.

Hallam dismantles static notions of Moroccan femininity by presenting a new version of what it means to be both female and an immigrant. Both the daughter and the mother, whether in their homeland or abroad, refuse to give in to rigid gender norms stemming from religious and cultural mores. Whilst Hallam's father feels constrained by traditional gender expectations, his wife, Saadia, refuses to comply passively and subverts patriarchal structures by moving to a larger city, where she starts a business, plays tennis, wears Western clothes, and is present in the public space, which was at that time an exclusively male domain in the Moroccan conservative context. Being forced into an early marriage, Saadia feels that her childhood is stolen and violated. Despite being a single mother of four children with no regular income, Hallam's mother takes her husband to court and wins the divorce case to liberate herself from an oppressive marriage she never wanted. The act of imposing a divorce stands out as an attempt to defy the community's efforts to bend her into conformity with its norms and values, which she sees as incompatible with who she is as an individual, especially after her visit with her brother to Madrid, where she finds the social milieu more liberating. Divorce in extremely unfavourable circumstances is both a liberation and a triumph for Saadia, as Hallam reveals: "after almost twenty years in a reviled union, my mother had defeated her husband" (2011, 49). Regardless of the fact that family law in Morocco is governed by Sharia law, according to which women cannot ask for a divorce, Saadia manages to reverse the allegedly normative pattern in which only the husband can grant a divorce. This implies her strong agency to break through the literal and cultural borders of her entrapment. With her desire for autonomy, freedom, and individuality, Saadia is determined to pursue the "path that was to lead her out of the course that had been preordained for her by her gender" (31).

Inspired by the liberal values of the West by virtue of her upbringing according to a French lifestyle, Hallam is eager to travel and then settle abroad. Like her mother, Hallam learns the liberating feeling of being in Europe, where she is not subject to shame for enjoying her independence in a public sphere, as in Moroccan culture. She is fully aware that she is not a normal conventional girl in Morocco, as she is cognizant of the hazards associated with adopting such a lifestyle. In this vein, James Clifford's emphasis on how "diasporic experiences are always gendered" (1994, 313) holds true for Hallam, since her experience falls within such a diasporic framework. Hallam's narrative corresponds to the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century transnational migration and postcolonial

diasporic condition in which experiences of displacement and feeling of being "out of place" (see Said's memoir 1999) are intertwined with the formation of selfhood. The societal, political, and cultural barriers which tend to bind Arab women to traditional patriarchal structures are often cast aside through the experience of migration. Hence, migration and the diasporic condition create a new space of self-expression—a space that is not surveilled by hegemonic conservative forms of power but promises freedom of movement as well as speech.

After passing the baccalaureate examination, Hallam travels to New York upon invitation by Moulay, a family friend, where she "was thunderstruck, transported by the heightened pace, boundless energy, baffling diversity, infinite ambition, fearless vision, and voracious material appetite, and couldn't help feeling small, foreign, awkward, and totally awed" (Hallam 2011, 80). Having been fascinated with the city, she decides to pursue college in America. Hallam's life is set to follow another trajectory due to her encounter with her future husband, Robbie O'Brien. Her relationship with Robbie turns from passion and love to violence and abuse. This signals the beginning of her disorientation in America, suggesting that the maltreatment of women is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Islamic world.

After earning a master's degree in international relations and Middle Eastern studies, Hallam is successful in obtaining a licence to practise real estate brokerage and wishes to bring together all her family, including her mother Saadia, who is blindly enamoured with the American Dream, only to be disillusioned later in her life. As a foreigner, Hallam is pressured to change her name to one that would sound like a Western name in order to successfully advertise the properties they sell, as suggested by her recruiter. She does so by legally changing her name from 'Ouafae' to 'Wafa' and her surname from 'Ben Hallam' to 'Faith Hallam.' Similar to Ahmed, Hallam can also be viewed as an "implicated subject" (Rothberg 2019, 20). While Hallam faces prejudices as an Arab Muslim woman, she also participates in and benefits from aspects of American capitalist society, such as changing her name to assimilate more easily. Hallam's decision to anglicize her name highlights the complexities of implication, complicity, and agency for a diasporic woman navigating power structures and societal expectations. She declares that "without hesitation I chose 'Faith' the literal translation of my Arabic name 'Ouafae,' not realizing then that, in so doing, I had completely obliterated my ethnic background" (128). This indicates a deeply seated discomfort at the idea of her Moroccan/Arab identity being erased and the multiple repercussions that would ensue. It also shows that the market exercises hegemonic control over who has access to the

premises of capitalist societies. Similar to the situation of many migrants in American diaspora, Hallam disguises her identity to save herself from racial profiling. It is also an attempt to facilitate her integration and assimilation into the homogeneous fabric of the market in the US. Thus, for both sociocultural and political reasons, her cultural identity undergoes a process of loss and reconstruction. As a result, her assimilation does not alleviate the feeling of fragmentation and her desire for recognition but, rather, amplifies her inner tensions later.

With her irresistible vitality, Hallam manages to achieve tremendous success in the traditionally male-dominated field of Wall Street banking. Within a short period, after the birth of her only child, Sophia, and before her divorce is finalized, she is promoted to the position of senior financial consultant and vice president. However, in the wake of 9/11, she finds that the American Dream, which is defined by material success, has shattered all around her. In this vein, Hallam's yearning to be a part of the American cultural fabric and her desire to slip into an American identity remains an illusion. Hence, she is pushed to the brink of an identity crisis, knowing—or rather realizing—that her desire to belong was nothing but a delusion. As she clearly states, "this war, this new hatred of Muslims, is definitely affecting me deeply, although not overtly. It's more of an inner struggle. For the first time in more than twenty years, I feel I don't belong anymore" (162). In the face of these developments, Hallam embraces the fact that crossing geographical borders never means a radical break with one's former identity and socio-cultural background. She realizes that the world she knows "changed forever after that day. Nothing could have prepared [her] for such a terrible event both emotionally and professionally" (154). With her political awareness of the workings of power and control, she is unable to maintain her independence from racial prejudice despite her constant attempts to distance herself from her origins. As such, she rethinks her position and starts reflecting on the ways she has obliterated her Arab and Muslim identities. She points out:

> But this felt much more personal, and it beckoned me to come clean about my identity, to close ranks with all the other Arab-Americans who felt stigmatized and cast off. I felt a pressing need to speak out, condemn the murderous fringe that cloaked itself in Islam only to defile it. Theirs was not the religion of my father, I wanted to shout out. His peaceful, tolerant creed had nothing to do with those barbarians. (163)

The perpetual stigmatization of Muslims as a community of dangerous jihadis in several parts of the Western world, from which many Muslim immigrants strive to disassociate themselves, also concerns Hallam and

makes her curious about her origins and religion. Such a propagation of an image of primitive Muslims pushes her to reconnect with a community she had initially abandoned. Unsurprisingly, the overpoliticization and demonization of Islam in the media generate in her a cognitive dissonance, especially as she remembers "the religion of my father" (163), which was a peaceful and tolerant creed, as opposed to the violent fanaticism attached to it both by jihadis and Western media. Consequently, she feels compelled to speak against such narrow beliefs and align herself with a community which is constantly being targeted at multiple levels.

After these traumatic events, including her mother's death, Hallam goes back to Morocco for almost two years to cope with the new phase of her life. However, after the dreadful experience she has undergone back home due to the shockingly retrograde state of the country, she feels that the existential hole left by her many turbulences regarding her identity was exacerbated at the expense of her sanity and mental stability. Due to her pervasive feelings of unbelonging in her homeland and her daughter's refusal to adapt, Hallam is compelled to look for new ways of being and belonging. Therefore, she decides to return to America with her daughter. For the first time, she realises that despite having financial problems, she can learn to value more the immaterial aspects of her existence. The revelation dawns upon her once she has read Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth*, suggested by her friend Naziha, which leads to a spiritual awakening that finally allows Wafa to relocate herself and her identity beyond closed containers. Being introduced to a spiritual realm that she had never experienced before, she keeps on exploring the newly discovered field of self-help spiritual literature to a point where all her struggles seem futile, and she finds peace with who she is. Additionally, beyond the material proclivities that governed her former lifestyle, the writer herself avows the substantial effect this spiritual awakening has left not only on her mindset but also on her reasoning and writing style. She declares:

> My quieter mind, solidly grounded in the present moment, made it possible for my thinking—when it was called upon—to be more creative, and instilled my writing with greater motivation and inspiration, though I soon realized it still lagged in direction and belief. My intellectual vacillations had less to do with the overall purpose of my task—I saw my book as vital to understanding myself through an in-depth look at my past in order to unveil the roots of my confusion—than with the need of expert guidance. In mid-summer 2008, I had reached midpoint in my memoir and I was bewildered by the technical complexity of it. (186)

Having adopted a different mindset and approach to her new self and identity, Hallam is able to overcome the estrangement that has plagued her for such a long time and to redefine her physical location in tandem with her identity as a work in progress. Following the teachings of the Buddha that she begins to profess, Hallam embarks on a spiritual journey, which paves the way for self-discovery as well as inner peace. Nevertheless, the fruition of such a journey, she adds, would not have been possible without the reflexive parallelism she has successfully drawn out between her own and her mother's life stories. This confluence of lived experiences has brought about the changes which are dubbed "cathartic" by Hallam herself. She relates:

> On that fateful night of April 2007, my departed mother had indeed channelled her desire for me to write her story, foreseeing all along that it would lead me to the unearthing of my own narrative, which in turn would pave the way to my true purpose. For if during her lifetime, she never knew how to experience the lasting inner peace and joy that awareness brings, she witnessed it in me, and that must have allowed her to finally rest in peace. Hence, my memoir has gone from a narcissistic exercise in solipsism and self-pity to a tool for self-observation and tangible insight. (196)

The transformative potential of Hallam's experience during the course of her journey sparks a metamorphosis of her worldview and identity as a whole. Going through such a dramatic transformation, however, Wafa's perception shifts from the materialist logic that formerly underpinned her view of reality to a spiritual one. Such a paradigmatic shift was inevitable, because the conditions which compelled her to come to terms with her origins and religion contributed to shaping her into a woman who stopped idealising the West for its material and cultural grandeur. She simply reconciles with who she is: not a victim, but a woman with multiple belongings and a cosmopolitan self.

Conclusion

Ahmed's *A Border Passage* and Hallam's *The Road from Morocco* are unique contributions to autobiographies from the Arab world, a genre which was a male domain for a considerable period of time. The significance of these memoirs lies in the fact that they act as alternative archives, as history and culture are tied to female experiences rather than to nation and nationalism. Importantly, these memoirs dismantle and debunk the myths of Arab

women as demure and docile beings who can only navigate within the rigid confines of home and hearth. Through their memoirs as a mouthpiece of their heroic struggles at home and abroad, Ahmed and Hallam document their journeys as self-discovery as much as self-assertion.

As their life events overlap and intersect with the political and cultural transformations at the local and global levels, both writers provide deep insights into the notion of female identity, particularly Arab female identity, and Arabness, and how it is tied to the changes women undergo and the challenges they encounter in diverse cultural contexts. At the same time, Ahmed and Hallam also offer alternative ways of following Islam and of being a Muslim in our globalised world before and after 9/11. Indeed, the memoirs celebrate Ahmed's and Hallam's strong sense of freedom, as they refuse to succumb to rigid gender hierarchies and patriarchal structures in Egypt and Morocco or cultural prejudice towards Arabs in the Western world. Hence, their writings demonstrate a strong sense of agency and subjectivity, as these women travel across national and cultural borders, fight victimhood, and become the sole masters of their destiny. Additionally, it seems that their agency is invigorated by the transformative act of border crossing. Understanding border crossing as an existential state, rather than an arrival at a destination, enables us to understand the double-bind onslaughts which Muslim women experience between departure and arrival, home and homeland. It is precisely that suspended space of existence, characterized by voluntary and involuntary mobility, which allows them to insightfully and critically engage with both sides of the border, agentially facing the hierarchies of power fixated around them by fundamentalist and Western liberalist discourses alike.

ORCID®

Nadia Butt https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2291-1570

Saleh Chaoui https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3882-4772

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Vanessa Guignery

Victimhood, Agency, and Vulnerability: Portraits of Delhi Manual Workers in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2011) and Mridula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016)

ABSTRACT This chapter examines the representation of Delhi manual workers in Aman Sethi's literary reportage *A Free Man* (2011), about homeless daily construction workers in an Old Delhi labour market, and Mridula Koshy's novel *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016), which portrays the children of an itinerant buyer of waste and a scavenger in South Delhi. The two books feature disenfranchized people or characters from the Indian working class, who may be seen as the victims of a social and economic system which feeds on the vulnerability of manual workers in deprived areas. However, I will show that Koshy's novel and Sethi's reportage blur the lines between victimhood and agency, refusing to make their books narratives of either abjectivity or aspiration. I will also question whether empathy is the appropriate response to such books and explore the distribution of vulnerability which may pertain not only to the manual workers but also, partly, to authors and readers.

KEYWORDS agency, contemporary Indian literature, victimhood, vulnerability, working class

In 2009, social anthropologist Gudrun Dahl remarked that contemporary texts in sociology and anthropology, but also in women's studies and some official discourses, often insist on presenting underprivileged groups not as passive victims lacking power, intent, volition, and responsibility but as active social participants endowed with agency and a capacity for initiatives.[1] Dahl calls it the "ANV trope ('Agents Not Victims')" and explains that

1 Research for this chapter was conducted at the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities in New Delhi with the support of the Institut des sciences humaines et sociales of the CNRS.

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this trope derives from a "wish to write respectfully" (Dahl 2009, 392) about the examined groups, "redress stereotypes" (Dahl 2009, 393), and not essentialize passivity. On the other hand, the recent development of vulnerability and precarity studies, along with the ethics of care, have turned vulnerability into what Jean-Michel Ganteau calls "a paradigm of the contemporary condition and of contemporary culture, and a template for the wounded contemporary subject" (Ganteau 2015, 4). However, theoreticians argue that, although vulnerable persons may be exposed to the possibility of being harmed ('vulnerable' comes from the Latin *vulnus*, meaning 'wound'), they are not inscribed within a binary system of opposition between victims and agents if one considers that vulnerability and the ethics of care entail a relational model of interdependence, premised, as suggested by Ganteau, on "vulnerability to the vulnerable other" (Ganteau 2015, 11).

Such complex issues of positioning and representation are crucial in literary texts which portray underprivileged social groups, as is the case in Aman Sethi's literary reportage *A Free Man* (2011), which focuses on homeless daily construction workers in Sadar Bazaar in Bara Tooti Chowk, an Old Delhi labour market, and Mridula Koshy's novel *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016), which relates a year in the life of Noor, the teenage daughter of a Muslim kabadiwala (an itinerant buyer of waste) in Chirag Dilli, South Delhi. Journalist Aman Sethi (born in Mumbai in 1983) first met the community of workers of Sadar Bazaar in December 2005 when working on an article for *Frontline* magazine about daily-wage construction workers. He recalls that for that journalistic piece, he adopted the stance of a detached and objective observer, while his project for *A Free Man*, started thanks to a six-month grant, was one he called "research" and "consciously a non-journalistic exercise" (in Guignery 2024, 226). His aim was "to understand the mazdoor ki zindagi—the life of the labourer" (Sethi 2011, 7) and to experiment with "narrative techniques to write about labour and work" (in Sarkar 2012, 10). Sethi drew inspiration from non-fictional books by American writers on the working class in the United States, such as Studs Terkel's *Working* (1974), which investigates the meaning of work for a whole range of different people, and Ben Hamper's 1991 memoir *Rivethead*, about his time on the General Motors assembly line (in Sarkar 2012, 10). In Sadar Bazaar in Delhi, Sethi met the homeless daily workers on and off for five years, joining them for tea, drinks, joints, and conversations, helping them with money or taking them to the hospital.[2] *A Free Man* is a record

2 Sethi's method could be compared to that of Rajat Ubhaykar, who spent more than five months hitchhiking with truckers all across India and wrote *Truck de India!* (2019), a travelogue that documents the strenuous working and living

of Sethi's research and conversations with these workers, with a special focus on the most colourful of them, Mohammed Ashraf.

Mridula Koshy (born in 1969 in Delhi) shares Sethi's interest in the working class. In the United States, where she lived between the ages of 14 and 34, she lived in deprived neighbourhoods, did menial jobs while studying at college, and then worked as a trade union and community organizer. She returned to India in 2004 and, in the early 2010s, co-founded The Community Library Project (TCLP) in Delhi, which runs free community libraries.[3] Her collection of short stories *If It is Sweet* (2009) features characters from various class backgrounds, while her first novel, *Not Only the Things That Have Happened* (2012), set in Kerala and the United States, explores the theme of inter-country adoption. While both these books are formally innovative, her second novel, *Bicycle Dreaming*, is deliberately characterized by "simple linear storytelling" (Dubey 2016), as the author, who was reading picture books to groups of teenagers after school, wanted to narrate a story "that could be their life and recognizable to them" and "'test the theory that [she] could tell a not-simple story simply'" (Doshi 2016). The book, dedicated to "*the children of Deepalaya Community Library and Reading Project*" (Koshy 2016, v), portrays children of waste pickers—one of them a Muslim girl, the other a Dalit boy—whose fathers, because of their religion or caste, struggle to secure stable work.[4]

Both *A Free Man* and *Bicycle Dreaming* feature disenfranchized people or characters from the Indian working class, who are essential to the capital's functioning but whom the developing city is reluctant to see and acknowledge "as part of its self" (Prakash 2002, 5).[5] The two books highlight the

conditions of truck drivers in India. Ubhaykar said in an interview that his greatest source of inspiration was *A Free Man* (in Varma). New Yorker writer Katherine Boo also conducted an immersive experience when she spent three years with the inhabitants of the Annawadi slum, situated by Mumbai's airport, and depicted their lives in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012). In his review of Boo's book, Sethi noted: "That she is an American who worked entirely through translators has prompted some reviewers to applaud her even-handed objectivity and others to critique the book for objectifying its subjects and fetishising the poverty of the powerless, dark-skinned 'other'" (Sethi 2012).

3 https://www.thecommunitylibraryproject.org/about-us/.

4 Koshy said that *Bicycle Dreaming* was her "attempt to understand how family life is sustained among the working class": "I wanted to know if there is a level of poverty below which family life—mutual love and sacrifice—is not sustainable" (Koshy 2017).

5 In 2002, Gyan Prakash referred to "the growing number of poor housed in slums and streets, who provide the cheap labour and services without which the official city could not survive. Exploited and disenfranchised, the existence

vulnerability and precariousness of people who belong to the informal sector in India. In *A Free Man,* Sethi documents the economic and infrastructural changes which have affected Delhi and its labourers since the 2000s, such as the banning of factory work within city limits since 2004 (Sethi 2011, 10) and the demolition of working-class settlements.[6] Sethi also mentions the low wages of the daily construction workers, their short life expectancy due to work accidents or health issues (tuberculosis is a recurrent disease), and the fact that some of them, hoping to get a job, were tricked into surgeries to have their organs removed. In *Bicycle Dreaming*, not only do kabadiwalas need to pay bribes to secure their routes but the development of private garbage collecting companies and the onslaught of plastic incinerators have reduced the manual workload (Koshy 2016, 113) and lessened the workers' income so that, in the novel, the protagonist's father loses his job as an itinerant waste buyer and ends up as a scavenger (Koshy 2016, 201).

These groups of people may be said to belong to the category of the subaltern and appear as the victims of a social and economic system which feeds on the vulnerability of manual workers in deprived areas. Their subalternity, subordination, and victimhood may in turn elicit or invite affective and cognitive empathy on the part of the books' authors and readers, in the sense of "sharing the feelings of another as a means of coming to an appreciation of the other" (Weiner and Auster 2007, 123–4). However, a close examination of the representation of such groups in Koshy's novel and Sethi's reportage encourages one to question these categories and their contours. I will first show the ways in which these two books, despite portraying people in a situation of vulnerability and precariousness, blur the lines between victimhood and agency. I will then question whether empathy is the appropriate response to such books and explore the distribution of vulnerability which may pertain not only to the manual workers but also, partly, to authors and readers.

of this other cannot be acknowledged by the official city as part of its self. […] But this 'obsolete' population refuses to 'bow out of history'" (Prakash 2002, 5).

6 This was the case of Yamuna Pushta, which included Sanjay Amar Colony (demolished in 2004) and Nangla Machi (demolished in 2006). These settlements were destroyed "to make way for broader roads, bigger power stations," and the Commonwealth Games which took place in 2010 (Sethi 2011, 39). Sethi devoted an article to the demolitions in *Frontline* magazine in July 2005 (Sethi 2005a).

Blurring the Lines between Victimhood and Agency

When the historians of the Subaltern Studies Group released the suppressed histories of the Indian peasantry in the 1980s, they insisted that the subaltern classes were autonomous subjects in the making of their own history (despite the difficulty, or impossibility according to Gayatri Spivak, of retrieving their voices). Similarly, in the books examined here, most of the people and characters do not present themselves as passive victims and, instead, display forms of agency, asserting the strength of their freedom (as encapsulated in the first paratext of *A Free Man*, its title) and wishing for independence, as symbolized by bicycle riding in Koshy's novel. Although their agency has limitations, the books challenge the strict dichotomy between active agents and passive victims and subvert what Ines Detmers has called "the topos of subaltern victimization" in her analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), in which "[t]he novel's 'underdog-hero' […] operates to satirically question the almost habitual designation of the subaltern as the victim" (Detmers 2011, 540). By refusing the status of victims, the workers in Sethi's and Koshy's books resist what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called the "lines of articulation or segmentarity" through which their lives and identities have been socially and economically "stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 4, 10).

In *A Free Man*, which Sethi described as "a philosophical chat on how to find pockets of freedom in an oppressive world" (in Guignery 2024, 224), Ashraf "refuses to be a victim of his fate": he "has chosen a life of making do with poverty, which allows him a certain world of freedom" (in Sandhu 2013). He exercises this freedom by deciding not to work when he has just enough money to go through the day or by leaving the confines of Bara Tooti Chowk when he feels the urge to move around. In *Bicycle Dreaming*, Noor, the Muslim kabadiwala's daughter whose family lives in a one-room home, takes pride in wanting to ride a bike like her father and become India's first kabadiwali (a female itinerant buyer), thereby challenging the frontiers of gender and thwarting social expectations (Koshy 2016, 39). Her schoolfriend Ajith, the son of a Dalit rag picker, aspires to become an engineer and is the one teaching Noor how to ride a bike; by transgressing caste barriers, he is subverting the trope of victimization and displaying agency. Through the means of reportage and fiction, the two books thus point to the complexity of the social situations they depict and expose the limits of the concept of victimhood. This does not mean that the socially underprivileged characters are not struggling, but the authors shirk away from portraying them as mere victims and do not appeal for our empathy or compassion by deploying forms of voyeurism.

A Free Man: Turning Away from Narratives of Abjectivity or Aspiration

Aman Sethi remarked in an interview that in *A Free Man*, he did not want to write a book that would evoke a "sense of pity for people—the working class, the victims," "the kind of book which is focused on the horror of poverty [... and] presents poverty as a kind of trap, which people have no way of getting out of" (in Sandhu 2013). The interesting aspect to him "is to always write about people as active beings, rather than passive recipients" and to "try and capture the struggle to be free" (in Guignery 2024, 223). Sethi thus breaks away from "abjectivity," which he defines as "the tendency for narratives about the working class to deliberately and thoughtlessly describe entire ways of life as abject" (in Lau 2018, 378). He regrets that "our narratives only produce heavy dreams of stability and voicelessness" when labour actually "aspires to a fluid mobility of its own" (in Mishra and Sethi 2015). This mobility is evidenced in *A Free Man*, where the itinerant workers are continually moving from one place to another; in a *Frontline* article, Sethi remarked that "[t]he absence of fixed spaces of work and residences, seen as a 'problem' by state narratives, is often seen as 'liberating' by workers" (2005b). In 2005, Sethi referred to the failure of the Delhi government to formalize the labourers' work through a welfare board because of the workers' refusal to be locked "into the logic of the state via tools like registration, police verification and membership of organisations" (Sethi 2005b). He quoted a carpenter who told him: "I come and go as I please. I work when I want to, I go home when I feel like it" (2005b), and he pointed to the discrepancy between the way the state views the workers and the way they see themselves. In *A Free Man*, rather than dwell on "the 'abject' condition of the construction worker" (2005b), Sethi depicts their everyday life from morning to night, providing details about their status as mazdoor (the lowest worker in the chain), beldaar (the understudy) or mistry (the expert or supervisor) and giving information about their manual activities and the way they spend their time off. Sethi also lets the reader hear their voices through dialogue (the reporter's conversations with the workers were recorded), which is his way of "letting the material breathe" (in Guignery 2024, 224).[7]

7 This is also the expression Sethi used in his review of Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* when referring to the opening sequence in the Annawadi slum: "Boo is content to underplay her hand and let the material breathe, rather than step in with a heavy editorial hand" (Sethi 2012).

If Sethi manages to avoid "exoticizing, essentializing, and commodifying poverty" (Lau 2018, 377), Marianne Hillion points to Sethi's "magnifying of Ashraf's austere way of life as the fruit of his self-determination" (Hillion 2021, 351), while Lisa Lau wonders whether there might not be "a certain romanticization of Ashraf's 'choices'" (Lau 2018, 382) in Sethi's insistence on the worker privileging freedom over security and affluence. Lau asks: "Might this depiction of Ashraf, which is resolutely against depicting him as any kind of victim, have swung round instead to casting a somewhat heroic light on his marginal lifestyle?" and she hypothesizes: "In his anxiety not to abjectivize this community or focus on their exploitation to the negligence of their humanity, Sethi may be accruing to them more agency than they actually have" (Lau 2018, 382). Lau's argument is valid, but Sethi seems to be acutely aware of the limits of this freedom and agency. For example, when Ashraf forgets his mother's address and phone number and finds himself "a complete lawaris without any fixed address, family, or home" (Sethi 2011, 175), the tea shop owner ironically tells him he is now "completely free" (Sethi 2011, 176), because he can benefit from government schemes and get "[f]ree food, free medicines, free everything" (Sethi 2011, 176). However, Ashraf promptly qualifies that supposed freedom: "Lawaris meant he would die on a footpath in Delhi, and no one would even know" (Sethi 2011, 176).

The workers' agency is therefore contained within the limits of their poverty and should not be overstressed. Indeed, as Lau rightly points out, Sethi also "sidestep[s] narratives of 'aspiration,' where 'aspiration' is couched in terms of the neo-liberal pursuit of highly individualistic and consumerist lifestyles" (Lau 2018, 378)—a narrative that may be found in such a rags-to-riches story as Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Contrarily, the agenda of *A Free Man* is not to chart the emancipation of subaltern subjects and their increasing agency or upward mobility, which, as noted by Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums*, is "a myth" (Davis 2006, 179). As Sethi explained, the itinerant workers of Sadar Bazaar have "in a sense opted out of th[e] system," giving up the "hope of eventual upward mobility," and the reporter was specifically interested in this sense of "renunciation from worldly ambition, of stepping out of a certain idea of a rat race and coolly observing it" (in Sarkar 2012, 15). By offering slices of life that are neither abject nor heroic, Sethi is thus avoiding the binarism he identified in labour narratives set in India, with, on the one hand "stories of heroism, happy and triumphant" and on the other "stories of devastating defeat" (in Calabria 2012). As he points out, "people live their lives in the area in between" (in Calabria 2012), and it is this in-between zone that Sethi and Koshy are exploring in their books.

Self-Respect and Dignity in *Bicycle Dreaming*

After reading the prologue of *Bicycle Dreaming* and its "long graphic descriptions of muck and grime" in the landfill from which people retrieve material to sell to recycling factories, Divya Dubey, writing for the *Hindustani Times*, wondered whether Koshy was guilty of "serving India's filth and poverty to a mostly Western readership, on a platter" (Dubey 2016), but she swiftly discarded this initial hypothesis. Indeed, in *Bicycle Dreaming*, Koshy, like Sethi, avoids both narratives of abjectivity and stories of aspiration, a feature that can also be found in her short stories.[8] She said that she aimed to veer away from the "curiosity of revulsion" with which middle-class readers often approach narratives of poverty, a curiosity "which allows us to feel comfortable with our distance" from poor characters (in Guignery 2023, 248). But she also wanted to push back "against the notion of heroism" (in Guignery 2023, 246) and the type of "aspirational literature" (Koshy 2021) which can be found in *The White Tiger*. For that purpose, she portrayed her characters as neither victims nor exceptional people, refusing to "depict their lives as being missing something which can only be completed for example by climbing the hierarchy" (Koshy 2021).

Bicycle Dreaming differs from *A Free Man* in that, in Koshy's novel, agency is centred on children (who are absent from Sethi's book), while the parental figures seem to be viewed through the prism of victimhood and exploitation. This can be seen in passages that throw light on the transformations of the work of itinerant buyers and scavengers in Delhi and point to varying degrees of vulnerability depending on caste and religion. In the acknowledgements to her novel, Koshy refers to Kaveri Gill's interdisciplinary survey *Of Poverty and Plastic: Scavenging and Scrap Trading Entrepreneurs in India's Urban Informal Economy* (2010), in which the author points to the precariousness and very low social status of waste workers, especially Dalits and Muslims. Gill notes that "the lower social ranking of waste worker groups is institutionalized through their caste status" (Gill 2010, 26), confirming that caste, "that ancient iron grid of institutionalized inequality, continues to be the engine that runs modern India" (Roy 2019, xii). Gill adds that Muslims "appear to share and labour under the same caste and castelike norms and low status as S[cheduled] G[group] waste pickers" (Gill

8 Maryam Mirza examines Koshy's short story "Almost Valentine's Day" about an Indian domestic servant employed by an Indian immigrant family in the United States and argues that "it neither subscribes to a rosy image of domestic service nor presents the transnational maid as an essentially helpless victim of class, race and patriarchal power" (Mirza 2019, 115).

2010, 92) even if Koshy notes a difference in *Bicycle Dreaming*, as Dalits, unlike Muslims, are not allowed to ride "from house to house on a bicycle" (Koshy 2016, 142) to collect kabadi—i.e. "dry, segregated, inorganic waste" (Gill 2010, 88). Dalits can only go "through the naala," i.e. the river where people throw their garbage, and look "through the kooradan" (Koshy 2016, 203), i.e. the garbage dump with its "wet, unsegregated mix of organic and inorganic waste" (Gill 2010, 88). In *Bicycle Dreaming*, Ajith's Dalit father loses a source of income when the government burns a landfill in Ghazipur where he used to sort through garbage; similarly, Noor's father loses his job when a private company "take[s] over the colony's waste" (Koshy 2016, 179) and a new incinerator burns the plastic the kabadiwalas used to collect (Koshy 2016, 138). Noor's father is thereafter reduced to "pick[ing] through the ashes" what "kabadi doesn't get burnt in the incinerator" (Koshy 2016, 201), thus being degraded to the status of a scavenger.

Waste pickers therefore seem to have very little agency in *Bicycle Dreaming*, and several passages depict them as the victims of bribers and private companies.[9] However, in *Of Poverty and Plastic*, Gill interrogates the "compelling exploitation label" which some studies on informal waste chains are drawn to, a label which excludes "a discussion of 'choice' and 'freedom'" (Gill 2010, 25). Contrarily, Gill aims to emphasize the relative agency, especially of "subordinate scheduled caste groups […] in negotiating 'a decent life' in today's neoliberal environment" (Gill 2010, blurb), and for that purpose, she deploys not only quantitative but also qualitative methods to explore "more nebulous and loaded elements such as self-respect, dignity, security, inclusion, agency, and freedom" which can contribute to the rag pickers' well-being (Gill 2010, 78).

This perspective is of interest to Koshy, who reveals the qualities of agency, self-respect, and resilience of Ajith's father through the detailed description of his shelter, filled with "boxes and bags of goods, sorted and waiting to be hauled away" (Koshy 2016, 214), "goods that took time to collect," such as the rubber chappals which he gathers over a month. The neat piles of goods viewed through Noor's inner focalization and listed through anaphora testify to the man's proud dedication to his task: "Here was a pile of empty sauce packets, here a pile of ballpoint pens, here razors and wooden toys" (Koshy 2016, 215). A similar sense of satisfaction (rather than a feeling of exploitation

9 Noor once witnesses her father being humiliated by greedy contractors, adopting a posture of subordination: "His stoop was one of apology. His hands were in front of him. They were placed, palms together in pleading" (Koshy 2016, 113). The paratactic clauses reflect Noor's shock at this vision of her submissive father reduced, in this description, to mere body parts.

and victimhood) can be found in Katherine Boo's portrayal of Abdul, a Muslim teenage garbage sorter, in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*: "Where he excelled was in the sorting—the crucial, exacting process of categorizing the purchased waste into more than sixty kinds of paper, plastic, metal, and the like" (Boo 2012, xv).[10] In *Bicycle Dreaming*, Noor's father defends the value of his skills when his job is taken over by private companies, insisting that the kabadiwalas made the work "what it is today" (Koshy 2016, 202), and he is honoured when chosen to speak at a meeting to fight for their profession (Koshy 2016, 198). In her short story "Romancing the *Koodawallah*," Koshy also emphasizes the self-respect of the itinerant buyers when depicting them carrying off plastic bags of rubbish "with such loud laughter as six or eight men may muster to embolden their claim to dignity" (Koshy 2008, 34).

In *Bicycle Dreaming*, however, the characters endowed with greater agency are the waste pickers' children, despite their vulnerability due to their age and poverty. In the prologue, the two unnamed children who sort through the garbage in the landfill and come out with empty bags nevertheless boast of making 2,000 rupees the day before and heading to the city to buy things and see a movie. Agency is also gained through education, as the Dalit boy Ajith aims to become an engineer, while Noor is encouraged to study to become a nurse or a policewoman. However, Noor's innermost longing is to become a kabadiwali (a job not performed by women, as noted in the novel and confirmed in Gill's survey [Gill 2010, 87–8]), and to achieve that goal, she needs to learn to ride a bicycle. She admires her aunt for riding a bike "to gather firewood far from where she lived" (Koshy 2016, 56), which she perceives as a sign of agency. Bicycling riding as a form of empowerment is what is stressed in Palagummi Sainath's piece "Where There Is a Wheel" in *Everyone Loves a Good Drought*: *Stories from India's Poorest Districts* (1996), which was a source of inspiration for Koshy's novel. In this piece, Sainath reports on his visit to the city of Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu in the mid-1990s, where tens of thousands of Muslim "neo-literate rural women"—among them agricultural workers, quarry labourers, village health nurses, and schoolteachers—took to "bicycling as a symbol of independence, freedom and mobility" (Sainath 1996, 564). In addition to encouraging literacy, a progressive movement in the area fostered cycling as a way for women to gain confidence and reduce their dependence on men.[11] Noor's wish to learn to ride a bike may likewise be inscribed within that dynamic of agency and emancipation.

10 On questions of subaltern agency and voice in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, see Davies (2019).

11 Cycling also had an economic benefit, as it allowed women to go to several villages more rapidly to sell their products (rather than waiting for a bus).

Sethi's and Koshy's books thus clearly subvert the trope of subaltern victimization and blur the binarism of victimhood and agency, without, however, remaining blind to the underprivileged characters' precariousness or portraying them as having escaped their working-class condition. This nuanced representation of manual workers goes hand in hand with a reflection on the ethical stance of the observer of the working class. Several reviews have stressed the empathetic treatment of the labourers in the two books, but the concept of empathy needs to be addressed with caution, as the author's or the reader's empathy may unwittingly reduce characters to the status of victims or else elevate them to the status of exceptional beings. Beyond empathy, what needs to be explored is the way in which the workers react to the gaze and/or the care of the outsider as journalist or observer (and, later on, as reader) and to what extent this reaction may complicate the distribution of vulnerability.

Empathy and the Distribution of Vulnerability

It is tempting to read Sethi's and Koshy's books through the lens of empathy, and this is how several reviewers approached them. While, for Indian novelist Manju Kapur, *Bicycle Dreaming* "reverberates with empathy" (Koshy 2016, front cover), a reviewer of *A Free Man* noted that "Sethi excels at emphatically depicting what could come across as a miserable existence: he allows Ashraf and the other mazdoors (labourers) to share their stories without either judging them or pretending to be one of them" ("A Free Man" 2012). What is meant by empathy here is not an "emotional self-pitying identification with victims" (Landsberg 1997, 82) but corresponds to what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement," which "involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (LaCapra 1999, 722), or, in the words of Alison Landsberg, "a way of both feeling for, while feeling different from, the subject of inquiry" (Landsberg 1997, 82). However, several theoreticians have pointed to the limitations of empathy as a "self-regarding emotional response" which tends to erase the subject one supposedly feels for (Keen 2007, xxiv).[12] Koshy herself has qualified the scope of empathy in fiction,

12 On the limits of empathy, see for instance Stephanie Newell's analysis of the 2010 BBC documentary *Welcome to Lagos* about impoverished Lagosians living in slums. She notes in particular how the voiceover of a British actor takes on "the fascinated curiosity of a touristic outsider reinforcing the cultural

arguing that an "individual act of empathy often only affirms to you your own humanity," it "satisfies *your* dignity and *your* humanity" (in Guignery 2023, 248). Koshy also remarked that in novels featuring a poor person, the protagonist might be "exceptionally noble or sensitive or beautiful or even brutal" and "[w]hat we are asked to empathise with, is the exceptional nature of the character and not so much the character's humanity" (in Nandan 2016). What she aimed for instead in *Bicycle Dreaming* was to see "if it would be possible to write a story in which the reader is asked not to empathise with the exceptional characters, but rather with their humanity" (in Nandan 2016). This implies considering them not as victims or agents but simply as human beings. Sethi, for his part, sees *A Free Man* "not as an act of empathy, but as an act of old-fashioned solidarity," for solidarity, unlike empathy, is political: "it acknowledges that when you stand in solidarity with someone, you are not that someone; the act of saying 'I am in solidarity with you' is acknowledging difference, but saying difference can be overcome towards a certain political end" (in Guignery 2024, 225).

In addition to solidarity, the two books could be read through the perspective of care and vulnerability, provided the two notions do not turn the other into a victim deprived of autonomy who needs our compassion or help. In *A Free Man*, Sethi highlights the "irredeemable distance" which separates him from the community of homeless workers he is observing (Hillion 2021, 284): the journalist has a permanent job and a home to go back to and enjoys social and economic agency, which enables him to help the workers by giving them money, taking them to the hospital or accompanying them to places.[13] This unbalanced relationship between Sethi and the workers may bring to mind what several care ethicists have identified as "paternalistic modes of domination" from privileged caregivers (or agents) to victimized care receivers (Robinson 2016, 160–1). However, I would argue that, as in the ethics of care, their relationship is, to a certain extent, what Marcia Morgan calls "an interdependent and mutually constitutive relationship between self and other" (Morgan 2020, 12), one which does not reproduce the victim–agent binarism but draws from different degrees of vulnerability. Indeed, for this kind of project, Sethi had to become a participant in the long term to earn the trust of the people he

otherness of the people portrayed, even in the process of ostensibly forging empathetic connections between Western spectators and the Lagosian poor" (Newell 2019, 116). See also Bloom (2016); Pedwell (2014); Weiner and Auster (2007), among others.

13 "I would look out for him in a material sense," Sethi says about Ashraf (in Sarkar 2012, 14).

talked to and be given access to their circle. As he said in an interview, "you need to make yourself vulnerable and be okay with it" (in Calabria 2012).

If the workers face the epistemic violence of the reporter's "barrage of questions" (Sethi 2011, 31), as an interviewer, Sethi depends on the workers' willingness to take part in the exchange. Thus, what appears at first hand as an asymmetrical relationship or what Hillion calls "the one-sided intrusive nature of the reporter-subject relationship" (Hillion 2021, 310) is maybe more complex than that. On the one hand, Sethi regularly voices his doubts, questions and confusions about his project within the book, thereby acknowledging the ethical limitations of his enterprise. For instance, he quotes Ashraf's accusing words: "For you, all this is research: a boy tries to sell his kidney, you write it down in your notebook. A man goes crazy somewhere between Delhi and Bombay, you store it in your recorder. But for other people, this is life" (Sethi 2011, 114). On the other hand, the workers repeatedly resist Sethi's "demand for narrative" (Derrida 2004, 78) and, by doing so, make him vulnerable, as the success of his work hinges on their inclination to share their stories with him. When Sethi met Ashraf for his *Frontline* piece in 2005, the man "had refused to answer any questions directly," "he had clammed up and refused to offer his opinion" (Sethi 2011, 6). For this new project, Sethi acknowledges that "[w]ith the exception of Ashraf, no one at the chowk makes the effort of talking to [him] more than they have to" (Sethi 2011, 64). The female bar owner, Kalyani, a hard-working woman who manages to bypass police regulations to sell alcohol to pavement dwellers, bluntly refuses to talk to him, while a colourful man, J. P. Singh Pagal, tells tall tales and thereby prevents the journalist from getting "new insights into the condition of labour" (Sethi 2011, 37). Ashraf himself asserts his agency by wilfully retaining the possession of his story, refusing to answer the journalist's questions, embarking on digressions or speaking in onomatopoeias, preventing Sethi from "build[ing] a proper timeline" of his life (Sethi 2011, 93). Although Sethi eventually proposes a two-page chronology of Ashraf's life with rough dates and events in the last chapter of the book, the brutal form of that timeline jars with the rest of the book, in which a more balanced, trusting and interdependent relationship between journalist and subject has been achieved.[14]

14 Sethi recalls that he had "mixed feelings about including the timeline" (in Maqbool 2014), and a friend who read an early draft, in which the book ended with the timeline, considered it "an act of violence"—a way of having "control over Ashraf's narrative" (in Sandhu 2013). However, the epilogue that comes after the chronology partly attenuates the violence and control as it transcribes Ashraf's voice on the phone from the hospital where he was treated for tuberculosis in

In *Bicycle Dreaming*, we may perceive a similar destabilization of the distribution of vulnerability in the prologue, in which the two unnamed children collecting material from a landfill are observed and questioned by an unidentified onlooker, but will not let that person turn them into victims. They not only give the observer an embellished version of their everyday lives but they also "look […] away when asked their names" (Koshy 2016, 2), and as they leave, the boy shouts loudly: "What do you care what our names are?" (Koshy 2016, 4). The workers and scavengers, suspicious of the observer's questions, retain agency by denying the onlooker access to their identity, making them vulnerable by keeping information about themselves. By placing this passage at the beginning of her novel, Koshy is sending a signal to her readers that they will be as vulnerable as the prologue's observer to not knowing everything about her characters. She noted, for instance, that she deliberately avoided the use of irony, as she did not want the adult reader to know more than the child character and, therefore, assume a position of "self-congratulatory" superiority (in Guignery 2023, 249).

Both *A Free Man* as literary reportage and *Bicycle Dreaming* as fiction complicate the 'victim versus agent' binary system while interrogating the authors' positionings and the readers' response to the representation of working-class characters. Rather than portraying the individuals as victims with whom author and reader may empathize from a safe distance, Sethi and Koshy draw the contours of working-class people's agency without exaggerating it or turning them into heroes, and simultaneously expose their own vulnerability as authors and our vulnerability as readers in their and our limited access to the depicted individuals. Sethi's and Koshy's portrayal of working-class people and their acknowledgement of the flaws and pitfalls of their own literary enterprise testify to their ethical concerns about representation. Significantly, to this day, neither Sethi nor Koshy have published any subsequent books after the two examined in this chapter. Although Sethi has engaged with creative practice in different forms, he did not feel he could write "an immersive book about another form of working-class life" (in Guignery 2024, 227). Koshy explained that she stopped writing fiction when she realized that the working class could not "join the conversation" (Mirza 2021, 174) she was trying to engage with

Calcutta before being discharged. Ashraf eventually escapes Sethi's control, as he disappears from the radar, no longer making phone calls and remaining unseen by his friends in Calcutta. Sethi is nevertheless confident that "Ashraf will find us when he wants to" (Sethi 2011, 223), a formulation which stresses Ashraf's agency as a subject.

because they could not afford to buy books or read them in English (in Guignery 2023, 244). She decided instead to fund a free community library in order to give access to literature to the underprivileged children who live in her neighbourhood. Her aim is to "broaden literature, not just by literally bringing people into literature as it exists, but by having people engage with literature in a way in which ultimately literature will have to change" (in Guignery 2023, 252). This change could imply a transformation of the way working-class people are depicted in Indian literature in English.

ORCID®

Vanessa Guignery https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4008-2007

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Alessandra Di Pietro

Reversing Victimology: Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* as a War Narrative of Female Agency

ABSTRACT Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019) is a fictional retelling of the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936). If war narratives are often told from the perspective of the male gaze, Mengiste's novel reverses such common practice by recounting the tale of the Ethiopian women who fought against the Italian soldiers. Even though at the beginning of the novel the female characters appear as victims of a patriarchal society, the author *de facto* constructs a narrative of female agency that goes beyond victimology: once the war breaks out, the women actively refuse the submissive role imposed on them by society, instead taking up arms to fight the invaders. This chapter analyses how the female characters in the novel transition from a condition of victimhood to a politics of agency, defying the constrictions of both their own patriarchal society and of the foreign gaze of the colonisers.

KEYWORDS African literature, female agency, Maaza Mengiste, war narrative

Introduction

The Shadow King (2019) is the second novel by Ethiopian-American author Maaza Mengiste. Shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, *The Shadow King* has since been widely celebrated by critics and readers alike for its fictional retelling of the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936). The story is set in Ethiopia in 1935; while *The Shadow King* can be defined as a choral novel, the narration mainly focuses on the representation of the female soldiers who fought during the conflict and who are defined by Mengiste as "the forgotten black women" (Mengiste 2019).

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From a historical perspective, the invasion of Ethiopia was part of the colonial expansion policy of Benito Mussolini's fascist dictatorship.[1] In 1935, without an official declaration of war, the Italian armies that were located in Eritrea and Somalia (both of which already were Italian colonies) attacked and invaded Ethiopia. Notwithstanding its brevity, the Italo-Ethiopian War was particularly brutal, as Mussolini not only allowed the use of poison gas but Italian troops also destroyed Red Cross hospitals and civilian targets (Sbacchi 1997, 55).[2] Despite "Italy's policy of ruthless repression [which] was meant to destroy Ethiopian resistance, to compel the Ethiopian Church, local leaders, and the intelligentsia to collaborate with the occupying power" (Sbacchi 1997, 178), the resistance of the Ethiopians spread throughout the country and continued even after the end of the war, complicating the creation of a stable colony.[3] In 1936, Italy announced the annexation of Ethiopia to its colonial territories. The Italian acquisition of Ethiopia led to the creation of so-called Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*, also known as AOI) in the Horn of Africa, a colony that also included Somalia and Eritrea. This meant the desegregation of the

1 The colonial expansion of Italy in Africa actually began after the country's unification in 1870, when Italy started to expand its territories by acquiring a few protectorates in Africa, such as Assab Bay and Massawa, both located on the Red Sea. However, it was during Mussolini's fascist dictatorship that colonialism became "central to the construction of nationhood, […] [and] emerged as a key component of the regime's project of unifying Italians" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005, 2).

2 The use of poison gas in Ethiopia led to protests against Mussolini's government both in Italy and internationally, even within the League of Nations (the first intergovernmental organisation, a predecessor of the current United Nations, whose goal was to maintain world peace). In order to contain the anti-Italian sentiment, Mussolini created counter-propaganda, according to which Italy's military attacks were a response to supposed atrocities committed by Ethiopians against Italian soldiers, such as emasculation and the use of explosive bullets. In this sense, during the war, both Italy and Ethiopia violated international conventions: Italy had signed the 1925 Geneva Protocol that prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons in war; Ethiopia failed to respect the 1929 Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. To read more, see *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935–1941* by Alberto Sbacchi (1997) and *I gas di Mussolini. Il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia* by Angelo Del Boca (1996).

3 For a comprehensive account of the Ethiopian resistance, see "Review of the Literature on Ethiopian Resistance with Particular Emphasis on Gojjam: 1936–1941" (2003) by Seltene Seyoum and Chapter 7 in Sbacchi (1997).

Ethiopian Empire that had been previously governed by Emperor Haile Selassie until the arrival of Italian troops in 1935.[4]

As mentioned above, *The Shadow King* is a fictional retelling of the Italo-Ethiopian War. Besides its relevance as a historical narration, this chapter is interested in Mengiste's representation of female characters within the novel. War narratives are usually gendered, and "war experience is constructed according to culturally distinct gender expectations" which are also inscribed in literary writing even though "society censors those who write outside of what is considered to be their gender-specific experience: women should not write about the front as a lived experience; men should not describe threatened masculinity" (Cooke and Woollacott 1993, xii). Within war narrations, female characters are often relegated to marginal positions such as cooks, nurses, victims, and so on. Such roles reiterate the subordination of women to patriarchal and sometimes colonial hierarchies. *The Shadow King* reverses these kinds of narration through the unveiling of the history of Ethiopian female soldiers. This chapter analyses how Mengiste's war narrative goes beyond victimology by representing female characters who transition from an initial position of submissiveness into active agents, defying colonial and patriarchal systems of power.

Reversing Victimology: Asserting Female Agency through War

The Shadow King can actually be defined as a choral novel, since the narration is entrusted to various central characters whose voices create an ensemble of perspectives throughout the novel. The text comprehends four books and three rubrics that are divided as follows: the "Interlude," which is narrated by Emperor Selassie while he is exiled in Europe alongside

4 Ethiopia was finally liberated from Italian colonialism by the Allies troops during the Second World War, a liberation after which the monarchy of Haile Selassie was restored. Selassie's monarchy lasted until 1974, when an economic crisis led to the outbreak of violent riots and then to the deposition of Selassie. On this occasion, power was seized by the Derg, a military junta that renamed itself the Provisional Military Administrative Council. The Derg ruled Ethiopia as a Marxist–Leninst state until 1987, when it collapsed due to the long-lasting Ethiopian civil war (1974–1991)—fought between Ethiopian–Eritrean anti-government rebels and the Derg—and became the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). The PDRE remained in power with Mengistu Haile Mariam as head of state until 1991, when it was replaced by a transitional government. In 1995, general elections were held and the current Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was constituted. For more, see Marcus (2002).

his family[5] (Selassie's point of view is, therefore, almost an external one, and the narration of this part is entwined with the emperor's feelings of nostalgia for the loss of his nation); the "Chorus," which encompasses episodes that are told by the collective voices of omniscient narrators (the sons and daughters of Ethiopia, those who came before and who will come after the story takes place), who recount the actions and feelings of the novel's characters; and lastly, there is a rubric entitled "Photo," which focuses on the description of a series of photographs taken during the conflict—these are ekphrastic moments that mainly encompass the point of view of Ethiopian war prisoners.

Alongside these three rubrics and their narrators, there are also other narrative voices that belong to central characters who are directly involved with the events of the story: there is Ettore Navarra, a Jewish photographer of the Italian army; Italian Colonel Carlo Fucelli; and lastly, Kidane, an Ethiopian officer in Selassie's army. Additionally, there are female narrators as well. Among them emerge Aster, Kidane's wife, a noblewoman who guides the female soldiers during the war; Hirut, an orphan who initially works as a servant in Kidane's household and who then decides to fight against the Italians on the battlefield; and Fifi, an Ethiopian woman who becomes the lover of Colonel Fucelli in order to gather information about the military strategies of the Italian army, which she reports directly to Kidane.

The decision to include a variety of narrators allows the author to offer different perspectives regarding the events recounted in the novel. For instance, if, on the one hand, viewpoints such as the rubrics "Chorus" and "Photo" represent the extent of the everlasting mark left by the Italo-Ethiopian War on the memory of Ethiopian people throughout generations, on the other hand, the narrative voices of Aster, Hirut, and Fifi are central to the development of a narrative of female agency. In particular, by focusing on female narrators, "the author not only memorialises the role of women in this war, but also points to the ways in which the woman's body

5 During the Italo-Ethiopian War, Emperor Selassie and his family went into exile in Europe and only returned to Ethiopia in 1941. The main goal for the emperor was to present the case of Ethiopia to the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. In the speech Selassie held on 30 June 1936 in front of the reunited nations, he denounced the brutality of the Italian colonial invasion and the use of chemical weapons (which violated, as mentioned, the existing Geneva protocols) while also affirming that the League of Nations had abandoned Ethiopia. Because of his attempts to resolve the war through international diplomacy, Selassie has been considered a relevant figure in the international human rights debate. For more, see Chapter 3 in Nault (2020).

itself is a battlefield, subjected to a continuum of violence that dissolves the boundaries between peacetime and war" (Sarkar 2021).

As a matter of fact, Mengiste extensively describes in the novel how the three aforementioned female characters are constantly at war, trapped in a condition of submission that is dictated by the systems of patriarchy and colonialism. In this sense, Aster, Hirut, and Fifi are all initially subjugated to what postcolonial theory has defined as double colonisation. This notion refers to the situation of double oppression experienced by women who "are subjected to both the colonial domination of empire and the male domination of patriarchy" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2000, 66).[6] At the beginning of the novel, the three female characters are all ensnared in one way or another in such a condition of subjugation, from which they can break free only when they start asserting their own agency through the active participation in the armed resistance.

In this sense, Mengiste portrays an arch of transformation from a status of "objects" into a condition of "subjects," which can be further theorised through bell hooks's following statement: "those who dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated as objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks 1989, 80–1). As mentioned above, the female characters in *The Shadow King* are able to overcome their initial situation of submission within a patriarchal and colonial society by becoming soldiers and asserting their agency.

For instance, because of her social status as a noblewoman, Aster is forced by her family to marry Kidane in an arranged marriage. Aster's efforts to avoid the marriage (even the attempt to run away from her family's home) are useless. The imposed marriage results in her suffering a traumatic experience of sexual abuse during the wedding night. This episode is described by the ensemble of voices of the *Chorus*:

6 One of the first scholars to put forward the notion of double colonisation has been Gayatri C. Spivak in her pivotal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), in which she analyses the existing interrelations between the patriarchal and colonial systems and how they oppress women into a condition of subjugation. Spivak writes: "Both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1988, 287).

> But she is still a girl, still that young bride left alone in her new husband's bedroom with her back pressed against a wall. […] Listen as she curses what has brought her here, as she curses names long forgotten. As she peers into the great cavernous hall where her father prepares another wedding toast, and she curses him too. There she sees her mother and the other women bend into one another, arms gently pressed against stomachs, and she hears their whispers like blasphemous oaths: She will get used to this like we did. She will learn to love him like we have had to learn. She will learn obedience as a way to survive. […] There is no way but through it. There is no escape but what you make on your own. And the bride […] lies on the bed and opens her legs and tells herself she will know what to do and there is nothing to do, and she lets herself disappear until all that remains on that bloodstained bed is a girl remolding herself out of a rage. (Mengiste 2019, 316–7)

This extended citation is relevant because it underlines the communal subjugation of women to a patriarchal system that perpetrates generational violence against female subjects—here, in the form of an imposed marriage and obedience towards the husband/father figure. The same mechanism of submission is reiterated over and over again and is experienced by Hirut and Fifi as well, even if in different ways. Fifi is a mysterious woman whose real name is Ferres and who was once known as Faven. As previously stated, Fifi is actually a spy for Kidane; she becomes the lover of Colonel Fucelli with the intent of gathering information from him regarding the military strategies of the Italian army. Nevertheless, despite the woman's deception, Fifi is still ensnared in an unbalanced relation of power: at the beginning of the novel, Fifi is deprived of her freedom of movement by Fucelli, who forces her to remain with him in the Italian camp where she is constantly objectified not only by the patriarchal system but also by the colonial gaze of Fucelli and the rest of his men. In the end, Fifi will be pivotal for the outcome of the battle between Kidane's soldiers and Fucelli's army: it is Fifi who informs Kidane's men of the exact moment in which they can ambush the Italians, a final conflict that sees the fall of both Kidane and Fucelli and the temporary victory of the Ethiopians.

As for Hirut, after the death of her parents, she starts working as a servant for Kidane and his wife Aster. Her relationship with both Kidane and Aster is a complex one: on the one hand, Kidane initially appears as a sort of mentor and protector for Hirut, only to then become her abuser; on the other hand, Hirut's rapport with Aster is also unbalanced because of social hierarchies. The fact that Hirut and Aster share a condition of submission to patriarchy does not seem to unite the two women against the common source of oppression. On the contrary, Hirut's and Aster's relationship is

complicated by the social hierarchy that governed "the feudal Ethiopia of the 1930s, [which was] deeply divided by class" (Sarkar 2021). The influence of such a division among social classes is further reiterated in the novel by the presence of "the cook," a woman who remains unnamed and who often acts as "the voice of conscience" (Sarkar 2021)—for instance, when the cook helps a young Aster in the failed attempt to run away from her father's house before the marriage with Kidane. The cook even endures the physical punishment for this act of rebellion instead of Aster (Mengiste 2019, 47). The complicated relationships between the female characters in the novel, therefore, underline "Ethiopia's history of feudalism, of different ethnicities and languages, and even of slavery" (Breen 2021, 136).

The effects of such a hierarchical system particularly emerge from the initial confrontations between Hirut and Aster, who are fixed in the socially constructed roles of servant and noblewoman. Throughout the novel, there are several instances that represent the consequences of such constricted roles: first, when Aster finds out that Hirut keeps small objects from their home for herself—"a broken pencil, a rusted pocketknife, a torn umbrella, a horseshoe, a small amber stone" (Mengiste 2019, 25)—she violently punishes Hirut by whipping her; second, when Kidane physically abuses Hirut on different occasions, Aster does nothing to stop him nor does she show signs of compassion for Hirut. As a matter of fact, during a confrontation between the two of them that takes place after the episodes of violence against Hirut, the woman actually threatens to kill Kidane; to such affirmation, Aster answers as follows: "The problem is you think you're the only one. You don't know how common you are. […] If you do anything to hurt my husband, I will kill you myself" (Mengiste 2019, 198).

Aster's words hint at the fact that, just like Hirut, she has also been abused, even underlining the commonality of this experience among women in general; the words further reveal that, despite the violence endured, Aster is nevertheless ready to protect her husband in a display of subjugation to those patriarchal hierarchies that require the woman's obedience and loyalty to the authority of the husband. Aster's reaction is a result of the assimilation of those social roles that are imposed upon female subjects by a patriarchal system. In this sense, such a pre-established hierarchy of power allows a reiteration of patriarchal violence from one woman to another, creating an almost endless circle of abuse and oppression. This condition is further aggravated by the colonial presence of the Italian army, since the women have to further endure the objectifying gaze of the colonisers.

Such a condition of double colonisation experienced by Ethiopian women also informs the historical accounts of the Italo-Ethiopian War:

as Mengiste points out, the few accounts of female warriors that she encountered during the research for the novel referred to "women who were married to men of note: They were noble women who had married into noble families or were married to noblemen who were generals in the Ethiopian army. So these women were recognised by history because they were positioned in society based on who they married" (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 40). In this sense, the feudal patriarchy upon which Ethiopian society was based not only characterised the relationships between women, as seen with Hirut and Aster, but also influenced the actual history that was being passed on from one generation to another. As stated by Mengiste, this is the reason why she strongly focuses on the construction of Hirut's character in *The Shadow King*:

> And I started to wonder about all those women and girls, like my great grandmother, that nobody ever talked about. All those village women, the farmers, the peasants, the women who were illiterate, that did not come from any family of any real status in Ethiopia, who fought and yet they were not recognized by history—even by Ethiopian history—because they were not worthy of remembrance. I think the world is filled with more of those women than any other type. I wanted to recognize that by creating a character, named Hirut, who is an orphan and is really supposed to be nobody. But she insists that she is somebody and that somebody is a soldier. The book unfolds around her. (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 40)

In the novel, then, the war becomes a possibility for those women who were supposed to be invisible in the face of a patriarchal and colonial society to change the narrative that was being told: participation in the resistance gives them the opportunity to debunk the systemic oppressions of feudal patriarchy and colonialism. As a matter of fact, when the conflict intensifies, Aster and Hirut refuse to accept the roles assigned to them by Kidane, that is, to care for the wounded and to cook for the army. On the contrary, Aster immediately decides to take command of an army of female soldiers. These women are not accustomed to fighting in a war; they are only part of Kidane's group because they initially have specific jobs to do as caregivers: "Close at [the men's] heels are the women with stretchers and blankets, wool scarves and food supplies. They are the ones who will carry the wounded, bury the dead, and feed Kidane's army" (Mengiste 2019, 95). Nevertheless, once the conflict begins, these women do not hesitate to abandon such limiting roles in order to take up arms under Aster's orders and fight against the invaders.

The significance of the women's presence within Mengiste's war narrative is further underlined by the fact that Hirut contributes to the creation

of the 'shadow king': Hirut notices that one of Kidane's men, Minim, physically resembles the emperor—who, in the meantime, has fled to the United Kingdom; the news that the monarch has abandoned his own country and people leaves Ethiopians demoralised, crushing their motivation to fight against the invaders. In this regard, it might be interesting to notice how it is no coincidence that Minim's name means "nothing," a choice that reflects on the actual importance of the real emperor during the Italo-Ethiopian War: while the monarch abandons his people, leaving the country to the mercy of the invaders, it is common people like Minim and Hirut who carry the weight of the resistance. This idea is reiterated when, in the epilogue of the novel, Mengiste describes the meeting between Hirut and Ettore, which happens in 1974 during the uprisings against Selassie. On this occasion, Hirut by chance also meets the emperor himself, who is once again fleeing the palace to escape the people's protests against him. Once Hirut is face to face with Selassie, she urgently starts whispering the names of all those people who fought years prior against the Italians—Kidane, Aster, Fifi, and so on: "and as she says their names, she feels them gather around her and urge her on: Tell them, Hirut, we were the Shadow King. We were those who stepped into a country left dark by an invading plague and gave new hope to Ethiopia's people" (Mengiste 2019, 423). This episode underlines the importance of the people's anti-colonial resistance; as Mkumba observes, "[Hirut's] lamentation cements that the Ethiopian heroes are not celebrated and recognised for their contribution to their nation during their lifetime. Thus, their spirits demand to be celebrated as heroes despite being dead" (Mkumba 2023, 54).

This is why the shadow king impersonated by Minim during the war can actually be considered a symbol of those uncelebrated heroes, a reminder of the courage of all the men and women who fought against the Italians. As a matter of fact, the idea of dressing up Minim as the emperor in order to lift the spirits of the population actually works, motivating Ethiopians to keep fighting; such deception is also meant to reinforce the image of the country in the eyes of the Italian army. The creation of a body double for the king seems to be an almost common practice, as Kidane recalls: "My father and grandfather used to tell me stories of shadow kings, [Kidane] says. Empress Zewditu[7] even had her shadow queen when she

7 Empress Zewditu was the only empress regnant of the Ethiopian Empire and ruled the country from 1916 to 1930. During her reign, however, it was actually her cousin Ras Tafari Makonnen (Ras is a royal title that often refers to a prince)—who later became Emperor Haile Selassie—who was appointed as regent.

led her armies. Our leaders couldn't be in two places at once, so they had their doubles" (Mengiste 2019, 232). The idea of creating a shadow king has positive results, since it discredits the news of the emperor's escape, not only restoring people's faith in their leader and their nation—and, therefore, reinforcing the Ethiopian resistance—but also destabilising the Italian soldiers who knew about and counted on Selassie's exile.

Additionally, the presence of a shadow king also leads to the creation of an army of official female guards whose purpose is to defend the emperor. Hirut becomes one of these guards, alongside other women that soon decide to join her, while Aster takes command of the emperor's army of female soldiers, training them to fight. Once Minim is dressed up as the monarch, the resemblance is striking:

> [Minim] is a breathtaking figure in uniform, his black cape dark as the dead of night, his polished shoes so shiny they seem almost wet. He is a replica of the faded picture, Emperor Haile Selassie come to them with overgrown hair, a shaggy beard, and shoulders that slump into a concave chest. He is a battle-worn image come to life, creased and slightly faded, but held up by sturdy bone, guarded by two soldiers named Aster and Hirut who stand on either side of him, an example to all of Ethiopia's women. (Mengiste 2019, 236–7)

The remarkable physical likeness of Minim to Emperor Selassie makes the deception possible. Once the news of the monarch's return spreads through the territory, the population comes out to greet the emperor: "Shepherds and farmers point to flashes of sunlight and wisps of fog as proof of divine assistance. Crowds gather at wells dotting the highlands and whisper amongst themselves, waiting anxiously for the emperor's appearance" (Mengiste 2019, 237). The news of Selassie's return echoes through every corner of the country, lifting up the spirits of Ethiopians.

Furthermore, the presence of Aster and Hirut as guards of the emperor also incites Ethiopian women to join the army of female soldiers. In the novel, this opportunity gives women the possibility of rising above the pre-imposed roles assigned to them by a patriarchal hierarchy. In this sense, the chance to fight alongside the men on the battlefield helps women acquire agency over themselves and their bodies. When the shadow king makes his first appearance in front of some villagers reunited for the occasion, Hirut wears a uniform, a rifle on her back and an ammunition belt: "She is dressed as a Kebur Zebegna, a member of the emperor's elite army" (Mengiste 2019, 238). Hirut's new clothes are the first sign of a profound transformation that begins with her becoming a soldier for the shadow king. Moreover, during this event, Kidane addresses the crowd defining

Hirut and Aster the emperor's "guards, these women who are also warriors, soldiers, daughters of our Empress Taitu[8] who once led forty thousand against these *ferenjoch*[9] the first time they invaded forty years ago. Have you forgotten your blessed leader, daughters of Ethiopia?" (Mengiste 2019, 240; emphasis in the original).

The official recognition of Hirut and Aster as the king's personal guards reinforces the idea that the two women's new social role as soldiers liberates them from the initial submission to a marginal position. This radical change also influences the way Hirut addresses herself in front of the crowd that is celebrating the appearance of the shadow king: she claims her role as "a soldier, a blessed daughter of Ethiopia, proud bodyguard of the King of Kings. [Hirut] takes her rifle and lifts it above her head. [...] Hirut steps back beside [the shadow king], silent and stunned, feeling her chest swell, overcome by the display of loyalty and passion. It was, she will later say, as if they loved me too" (Mengiste 2019, 241). The words chosen by Hirut are significant because this is one of the first instances in which the woman uses her own voice to define herself. As hooks notices, "coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (hooks 1989, 34). The aforementioned episode is representative of the transformation from object into subject that Hirut (and Aster, too) experiences once she becomes a soldier of the shadow king. The reaction of the crowd is a further validation of such radical change.

8 Empress Taytu Betul was the wife of Emperor Menelik II, who ruled Ethiopia from 1889 to 1913. Together with her husband, Taytu Betul founded Addis Ababa, the modern capital of Ethiopia, in 1886. The empress was also a key figure in the anti-colonial history of the country during the late 1880s. The episode Kidane cites in the aforementioned quotation refers to the fact that the empress fought alongside her husband in the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–1896), leading the Ethiopian army against the Italians during the battle of Adwa, when Ethiopians defeated the Italian army, *de facto* stopping Italian colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa. The battle of Adwa is still remembered as a symbol of pan-Africanism because of the Ethiopians' decisive victory, which made Ethiopia the only African country to maintain independence during the so-called Scramble for Africa—the period known as New Imperialism (1881–1914), during which various European countries colonised most of the African continent. For an account of the empress's role during the conflict, see Jonas (2011).

9 This Amharic term means foreigners and is generally used to refer to white people.

Through their renewed identity as official guards of the shadow king, Hirut and Aster become a symbol of female liberation in front of the Ethiopian people, motivating other women to join the army. These newly acquired social roles become a way through which women can challenge the hierarchies of both the patriarchal and the colonial system. In this sense, the female victimology tied to traditional war narratives is reversed: if, at the beginning, the female characters of the novel are subjugated to preimposed social and gendered roles (usually as caretakers of the wounded and/or as cooks for the army), by becoming soldiers, and therefore by fighting alongside men as their equals, women can now overcome those marginal positions initially imposed upon them, *de facto* deconstructing the hierarchies of power that entrap them. In this regard, Hirut, Aster, and the other female soldiers present a different war narrative, one that is oftentimes lost through history, since the majority of historical accounts mainly focus on men; nevertheless, such an alternative war narrative can sometimes be partly reconstructed from archives and photographs.

This is the case of *The Shadow King*, which was written after the author's research in historical and photographical archives.[10] As Mengiste points out, the relevance of such archives is strongly connected to the construction of a national history: "The one thing that working in the archives showed me was that if you can control memory, you can control a nation and its future, because you are defining the way that the country remembers itself and how it plans and describes its future" (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 33). Furthermore, according to the author, the peculiarity of photography is that "[p]hotographs do not capture memories. They just freeze a moment. […] there is that gap between what the photographs captured and the memories they might contain" (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 34). The presence in the novel of the rubric "Photo" is therefore meant to close that gap, in order to reconstruct through ekphrastic moments the memories and histories behind the photos of the Italo-Ethiopian War.

As mentioned above, one of the characters, Ettore Navarra, is a photographer for the Italian army. The role of photos within the narrative has a double significance: on the one hand, they represent the use of media during Mussolini's fascist propaganda—in this regard, Mengiste notices that "Mussolini was well aware of the power of photography, the power

10 Mengiste also founded Project 3541, an online archive of photographs of the Italo–Ethiopian War. The project includes photos from Mengiste's private collection as well as photos shared by family members of people who lived through the conflict. The project can be retrieved at the following link: https://www.project3541.com.

of visuals. That Fascist period was an explosion of propaganda, of posters, of films. He was well aware of what he was doing, and he knew that sending cameras into the war to take photographs would justify that war" (Mhute 2020). On the other hand, the photos also serve as an instance of the objectifying gaze of the colonisers, who consider Ethiopian/African women "exotic beauties." In this sense, Mengiste points out that "photos of Ethiopian girls and women were used to entice Italian men into joining Mussolini's army. They marched into Ethiopia singing songs of what they would do to Ethiopian women" (Mengiste 2019).

The photos of nameless and powerless (female) subjects are therefore representative of the power relation between colonisers and colonised, further reiterating the double colonisation women are subjected to by forcing them into an objectified position. Photos can tell a story and, in the case of *The Shadow King*, the narrative they create aims to present Italian soldiers as victorious and Ethiopian men and women as subjugated to the Italian colonial power. This is particularly true with regard to the presence of female soldiers within the Ethiopian army, something that disconcerts the Italians. In relation to the effect that the presence of Ethiopian female soldiers had on the invaders, Mattoscio observes that "The sudden exit of the Black female body from the perimeter of domestic servitude and sexual subjugation makes it 'incomprehensible' and disquieting" (Mattoscio 2022, 645), a manifestation of female assertiveness that perturbs the Italians. This is the reason why, when Hirut and Aster are imprisoned by the Italian army, Colonel Fucelli orders Navarra to take photos of them in order to demonstrate the weakness of the Ethiopian female soldiers. During a conversation between the two men, Fucelli argues that:

> Some [men within the Italian army] are afraid the two prisoners are part of an army of women. They say Haile Selassie even has female bodyguards. Ettore shakes his head, imitating Colonel Fucelli's own expression of disbelief. They call them Amazons, sir. They think they've come to seduce and kill us and the *ascari*.[11] […] Fucelli holds his gaze. Most of these men are illiterate, soldato.[12] They're bound to believe in superstition. They're scared of many things. He pauses. It's interesting, you know, Fucelli continues. We fight other men, but we're frightened of women. […] Our men are frightened of these Abyssinian women, he says slowly. They make up stories about them and believe them, he adds. […] We think they're so different from

11 The term *ascaro* was mainly used in the colonies of Italian East Africa and refers to those Ethiopians who were enlisted in the Italian army.

12 *Soldato* means soldier in Italian.

> our women because we don't know anything about them, he continues. This makes us scared." (Mengiste 2019, 334–5; emphasis in the original)

The long quotation underlines the relevance of photos and oral stories in the creation of a specific narrative that can influence people's minds to the point of, in this case, stopping Italian soldiers from fighting because they are afraid. Fucelli, therefore, orders Navarra to take photos of Hirut and Aster as war prisoners, in order to demonstrate to his own soldiers and to Italian people abroad that the stories about Ethiopian female warriors are untrue. Fucelli's decision of taking photos of the two women also results in an act of violence and abuse meant to oppress Ethiopians into submission: Hirut and Aster "will be taken outside and made to stand until the sun goes down. They will be forced to undress or put on a uniform or salute in their abesha chemise[13] for newspapers and cameras, for those newly arrived *ferenj* settlers who have never seen a female soldier up close" (Mengiste 2019, 363; emphasis in the original). Such a psychophysical violation is further aggravated by how those photos are used:

> They are made into postcards and passed out to Fucelli's men. They are sent to newspapers and used by journalists. They are kept as souvenirs and discussed in administrative meetings. The photographs of the women are distributed to shops in Asmara and Addis Ababa, in Rome and Calabria, in officers' clubs in Tripoli and Cairo. Hirut and Aster are called many things: Angry Amazon, Woman Warrior, African Giuliette. They are handled and ripped and framed and pasted into albums […]. (Mengiste 2019, 359)

The imposition of having their photos taken and then being used to satisfy the exoticism of the colonisers deprives Hirut and Aster of their agency, objectifying them under a colonial and patriarchal gaze. As previously stated, Fucelli uses the photos of Ethiopian prisoners as war propaganda, with the intent of making his soldiers look victorious in the eyes of the Italians, as well as with the intention of intimidating Ethiopians into submission. As Mattoscio argues, "[t]his is a kind of violence based on the power of the gaze, on making Black women vulnerable to the abuse of their (naked) image in the mystifying narrative of colonial propaganda" (Mattoscio 2022, 646). Therefore, forcing Hirut and Aster to pose in front of a colonial/patriarchal gaze is an attempt to deconstruct the almost mythical narrative about Ethiopian female soldiers, of whom the Italian army was afraid of. The humiliation of Hirut and Aster, their objectification and submission in the presence of Fucelli's army, is a way to show the men that these are not intimidating warriors but 'normal' women.

13 The abesha is a traditional Ethiopian dress.

Nevertheless, Hirut's reaction to being forced in front of a camera is one of defiance: despite Fucelli's threats, she remains impassive, refusing to bow her head or to acknowledge the presence of the Colonel. Hirut's equanimity creates confusion among the Italians: "They think she is lost. They think she cannot see herself, double-bodied and split, clothed and naked, young and old, […] They think she has found a way to escape while standing still, but Hirut, daughter of Getey and Fasil, born in the year of a blessed harvest, knows that this is also a way to fight" (Mengiste 2019, 366). Hirut's resistance is a further instance of the character's transition from an initial condition of submissiveness within a patriarchal and colonial society into a condition in which she asserts her own identity.

It can also be noted how, in describing Hirut's female emancipation, Mengiste confers a moral side onto the character's growth, which particularly emerges in two instances: firstly, when Hirut manages to escape from the Italian imprisonment and has the chance to kill Ettore as an act of revenge, but ultimately chooses not to do so; secondly, when Hirut and Ettore meet once again in 1974, and Ettore begs the woman to forgive him for the actions he committed during the war. As Breen notices, through this episode the author "flips the classic hierarchy of colonial power" (Breen 2021, 135) by giving Hirut control over Ettore's feelings of shame and remorse.

A further testament of Hirut's growth in the novel also comes from the symbolism connected to the weapon she uses in battle. During her time as a prisoner, there is one word that Hirut constantly repeats: Wujigra,[14] a term that refers to her father's rifle, the only object in the woman's possession that was left to her by her late parents. At the beginning of the novel, Kidane takes the rifle away, since he is gathering all the weapons he can find to fight against the Italians. The weapon, however, has a peculiar relevance within the narrative, since it is a symbol of Hirut's life before her parents' death, when she was a free woman and not a servant. "The rifle has disappeared. It is as if it never existed. As if this life, in this house, is all that she has ever known, as if she has been no one else but this unloved girl" (Mengiste 2019, 24). Even if Hirut will only find her Wujigra once the war breaks out, the weapon remains a symbol of how she has risen above

14 The Ethiopian term Wujigra refers to the Fusil Gras, a type of French service rifle manufactured during the second half of the nineteenth century. As specified within the novel, this is an old rifle that was mainly used during the first Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–1896). This is mentioned at the beginning of the novel, when Kidane is looking for weapons to prepare his army for the upcoming war: "It's a Wujigra, he says. My father used one in the battle at Adua when we faced these Italians the first time. This must be at least forty years old, maybe closer to fifty" (Mengiste 2019, 17).

her initial position of submissiveness to assert agency over herself. In this sense, there are two relevant instances in which Hirut's growth emerges within the narrative: first, when Kidane's army is getting ready to ambush Fucelli's soldiers, the shadow king appears in front of the Ethiopian people alongside Hirut, his female guard:

> [The Ethiopian army] do not fear the growing rumble sliding through the valley from the Italian camp. The noises do not matter. Instead, they look toward Hirut, their new image of Mother Ethiopia, the one who represents all the women who have survived the war to raise their guns and fight or rush onto the battlefield to carry the wounded. The army falls prostrate. (Mengiste 2019, 302)

Here, the image of Hirut becomes a symbol not only of the whole nation but also of all the female soldiers who have fought and keep fighting for Ethiopia—a symbol of female resistance against colonial and patriarchal power. The second instance refers to an episode in which Navarra and one of Fucelli's *ascari* try to talk to Hirut while she is imprisoned, but the woman completely ignores them to the point that they get angry.

> She does not change her breathing or stiffen her body or flail helplessly when that same *ascaro* yanks open the gate and bends into her face and shouts her name until it is a hard and painful blast in her ear. Instead, she looks up at his face, bloated with futile anger, and calmly waits for whatever comes next. Because this is one thing that neither the *ascari* nor Fucelli nor this stupid *soldato* staring at her with a gaping mouth will ever know: that she is Hirut, daughter of Fasil and Getey, feared guard of the Shadow King, and she is no longer afraid of what men can do to women like her. (Mengiste 2019, 338; emphasis in the original)

These two instances demonstrate the progressive transformation of Hirut, who is able to escape the condition of double colonisation she is initially entrapped in. Such a radical change is enabled by Hirut joining the armed resistance, which gives her the possibility of fighting alongside the men as their equal. This helps Hirut break free from the objectifying gaze of both colonialism and patriarchy. In this way, Hirut and the other female characters within the novel are able to defy the stereotyped narrative according to which women should only occupy marginal positions within society. It is through their active participation to the war, in fact, that Hirut, Aster, and Fifi can challenge colonial and patriarchal systems of power.

In this sense, the women's activity as soldiers reverses traditional male-centred war narratives, which usually define female characters as only cooks, caretakers, or victims. Moreover, *The Shadow King* also

highlights what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie defines as "the danger of a single story," i.e. the danger of stereotyped images perpetrated by a dominant narrative/narrator. Adichie underlines the power of stories and how they have been often used to construct a narrative of socio-political and cultural colonisation: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie 2009). In the case of Mengiste's novel, the stories of Hirut, Aster, and Fifi offer a representation of female resistance against colonial and patriarchal hierarchies that *de facto* rewrites not only the history of a country but also that of the "forgotten black women" (Mengiste 2019).

Conclusion

In the *Shadow King*, the female characters fully represent the transition conceptualised by hooks: from a condition of subjugated "objects" that is represented at the beginning, when Hirut, Aster, and Fifi are all subjected to the hierarchies of patriarchy and colonialism (even if in different ways), the three women are able to grow into a condition of "subjects," which is made possible by their active participation in the war as soldiers. The transition from subalterns that cannot speak to active agents contributes not only to the construction of the women's own identity but also to the defence of their nation. As a matter of fact, the story of the female soldiers of the shadow king becomes a legend, almost a myth, which is represented by the aforementioned symbolic image of Hirut as Mother Ethiopia. As Mkumba argues, "Mengiste depicts some female characters as heroines that fight against political oppression in Ethiopia to highlight women's contribution to Ethiopian history" (Mkumba 2023, 43). In this sense, the women in the novel defy the oppression of double colonisation while actively contributing to the nation's anti-colonial resistance.

Through the stories of Hirut, Aster, and Fifi, Mengiste creates a war narrative of female agency that reverses victimology. The women in the novel challenge their initial condition of submission through the deconstruction of colonial, patriarchal, and feudal hierarchies that prevent them from speaking up. It is through their active participation in the war as soldiers that these women find their own voices, breaking the transgenerational cycle of gendered violence that relegates them to the role of passive spectators of their own history. Furthermore, as previously stated, the newly found agency of these female characters becomes a key element in the

anti-colonial struggle of Ethiopia. Therefore, in reconstructing the history of the so-called forgotten black women, Mengiste weaves a story of female resilience and resistance, unveiling the voices of Ethiopian women from the oblivion of history and lifting them into an almost mythical dimension.

ORCID®
Alessandra Di Pietro https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6216-3110

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Silvia Anastasijevic

Beyond the Victim—Perpetrator Paradigm: Overcoming 'Single Stories' through Humor?

ABSTRACT In "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cautions against one-dimensional conceptualizations of identity, namely, "single stories." While such reductionist portrayals of identity are problematic, they are nevertheless frequently used to classify people along the lines of victims and perpetrators. Even when the status of victimhood is not enforced from the outside as a means to take away agency but self-imposed to gain political power, the consequences of using such reductive labels are potentially disastrous. After all, when showing people in only one way "over and over again, […] that is what they become" (Adichie 2009). The problem with these "stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009). However, identities are manifold and can be influenced by historical circumstances, culture, gender, class, interests, and more. Accordingly, this chapter will focus on how humor, with its inherent transgressiveness, can disrupt and overcome single stories. The analysis will include the play *alterNatives*, the ethnic comedy *The Infidel*, and the short film *Tribes*.

KEYWORDS cultural complexity, humor, identity politics, single stories, stereotypes

Introduction

What are "single stories," and why should they be overcome, whether through humor or otherwise? Single stories refer to a myopic mindset that is translated into a misleading representation of an individual, a location, or a community. Coined by the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her 2009 TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story," the term describes flat and one-dimensional understandings of identity, such as the "starving or uneducated African" or the "abject Mexican immigrant." As the title of

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Adichie's talk suggests, such stories are highly problematic, even dangerous, given that they overshadow the complexities of identity and history for the sake of a simplistic label. A juxtaposition that frequently accompanies such limited perspectives is a politically motivated and reductionist portrayal of identity in terms of victims or perpetrators. While these and other classifications can be imposed externally, as in the above example, this is not necessarily the case. A self-attribution of the victim role, for instance, is a common strategy to gain political power or sympathy. Nevertheless, a lack of enforced external classification does not erase the problem arising from these essentialist portrayals of communities or individuals, namely, the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is not "that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009, 13:11–13:23). What this implies is that when "a people [are shown] as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, […] that is what they become" (Adichie 2009, 09:28–09:36). In this vein, both externally and internally attributed victimhood can result in confined identity constructs that are difficult to escape, even when they no longer serve the purpose they were meant to originally.

A discussion revolving around blame and accusations as typical for victim–perpetrator constellations is inevitably deeply rooted in what has become known as identity politics. Identity politics is a "slippery term" (Lichtermann 1999, 136) that has been stretched so far as to include a variety of causes that are only marginally related to the way in which Renee Anspach used it in 1979 when referring to "self- and societal conceptions of disabled people" (Bernstein 2005, 47). While several sources attribute the coinage of the term identity politics to Anspach (Bernstein 2005; Sapkota 2014; Sawitri and Wiratmaja 2021), outside academia the term "was first popularized by the 1977 manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, an organization of queer, Black feminist socialists, and it was supposed to be about fostering solidarity and collaboration" (Táíwò 2022, 10–11). In said manifesto, it was literally connected to an externally imposed victim position that was meant to be overcome:

> This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. (Blackpast 1977, n.p.)

As the following decades have shown, this concept would create a stir in various areas. Since its introduction, the term identity politics has been

> widely used throughout the social sciences and the humanities to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, the women's movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements in Canada and Spain, and violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in postcolonial Africa and Asia, as well as in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. (Bernstein 2005, 47)

While the above list may seem extremely diverse at first glance, the obvious common denominator is that all these examples revolve around understandings of the individual within and apart from the community, with each of these movements having emerged from neglected, marginalized positions. To put it another way, these struggles are born out of victim positions that were then utilized to foster unity and derive strength to overcome unfavorable circumstances. This is also true for the Combahee River Collective, whose experiences uniting "these activists—the consistent sidelining and devaluation of their political priorities within different political organizations—were foundational to the stance they developed, which they christened 'identity politics'" (Táíwò 2022, 11).

However, the increase of the use of the term identity politics has also generated critical voices on this politically motivated focus on group affiliation, raising questions such as Paul Lichtermann's "[m]ust identity politics devolve into group selfishness?" (1999, 101). As this question implies, strict and politically motivated identity constructs can entail the creation of fixed frontlines that make it difficult to negotiate between seemingly opposing positions or opinions. This divisional tendency has not gone unnoticed by the originators of the term, either, as elaborated by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò in connection with Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the collective:

> In the decades since the founding of the Combahee River Collective, instead of forging alliances across difference, some have chosen to close ranks—especially on social media—around ever-narrower conceptions of group interests. Smith says, diplomatically, that many of today's common uses of the concept are "very different than what we intended." (2022, 12)

The reality of identity politics followed by the collective was permeated by entanglements with other cultures with similar plights, which is why the "collective's principled stance on identity politics functioned as a principle of unity, rather than division" (Táíwò 2022, 11):

> [W]e also drew many women of color or who were not Black to us. We had connections with Latinas. We had connections with Asian women […] And they drew us too. Because it wasn't just like one way. When we'd find out

> about things that were happening, we would get ourselves there as well. (Beverly Smith in Táíwò 2022, 11)

Echoing a similar sentiment as Adichie and both Barbara and Beverly Smith, Amartya Sen warns that "the neglect of the plurality of our affiliations and of the need for choice and reasoning obscures the world in which we live" (2007, xiv). This is not only problematic because obscuration can lead to a misrepresentation of people and places, but also because it can potentially lead to violence. Accordingly, even self-imposed single stories can be detrimental, since they falsely portray identities as static and unchanging. What would be a more accurate assessment is that identity "is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime" (2000, 23), as Amin Maalouf puts it. In other words, identities are in a constant state of transformation. Likewise, our "spheres of knowledge," to use Drew Hayden Taylor's term, which directly influence our perception and presentation of identity, can also be transformed.

Taylor discusses these spheres of knowledge in connection with humor and its limits. After all, humor can potentially be aggressive or oppressive, and thus, reactions to comedies and the like can often culminate in discussions of cultural appropriation or political correctness. In this sense, humor and identity politics may be seen as not-too-distantly related cousins. According to Taylor, the political correctness of a joke can be measured on a ladder of status, meaning people with a higher status are not allowed to joke about people of a lower status. In Taylor's words: "Successful jokes are filled with helium, not lead" (2005, 71). Furthermore, humor can also work in a lateral direction. If the vertical movement is reversed, with a dominant cultural group making fun of an oppressed one, it turns into discrimination. By invoking this theory, I do not wish to buttress the claim that certain forms of humor should be censored. Rather, this theory can be used to examine the tendencies of the humor portrayed. In fact, Taylor himself jokingly describes politically correct humor as boring, given that humor frequently resides at the boundaries of what is considered culturally appropriate. This is where the aforementioned spheres of knowledge come in:

> Within your sphere of knowledge is your life. Everything you have learned, […] everything you have come to understand lies within your sphere. […] In relation to cultural appropriation, it can be argued that you should write only about something within your own sphere of knowledge. Otherwise, you're intruding on another person's (or culture's) sphere. […] The same principle can be applied to the world of politically correct humour. […] Yet there are exceptions. When people take the time to acquire additional knowledge, do their research […] then their spheres of knowledge can grow. (Taylor 2005, 73–4)

This means that if a person lives in a different country or culture than they were born in, for instance, the scope of content they can use to create humor grows, as opposed to one's birthplace or the like giving one the authority to discuss a particular matter. At the same time, however, even when a group or person is linked with a variety of identity categories and impacted by various cultural backgrounds, this fact does not automatically give them representative power. Kwame Anthony Appiah aptly clarifies this by stating that "[h]aving an identity doesn't, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity. The privilege of representing a group has to be granted somehow" (2018a, 19). The reason for this lies in the likely degrees of difference between those belonging to a certain form of individual or collective identity. In Appiah's words, "[w]hile identity affects your experiences, there's no guarantee that what you've learned from them is going to be the same as what other people of the same identity have learned" (Appiah 2018b, n.p.).

What the previous discussion goes to show is why humor—especially when connected to (mis)representations of identity, which it so frequently is—can be considered such a minefield. There are countless examples throughout history where humor 'went wrong,' in some cases even with dire consequences. One of the works chosen for this chapter's analytical part, the play *alterNatives*, for instance, has resulted in a bomb threat against a theater where it was to be staged. As my aim for the following analyses is not to explain how the humor works on a mechanical level but, rather, on an ideological one, the implications of using a particular form of humor are more important than the deconstruction of its underlying structure in this chapter. As opposed to serious discussions about ideologically heavy topics, which can result in irreconcilable disagreements, humor has an advantage in broaching such issues. The alleged lightheartedness that is nowadays attached to humor can make tough topics easier to digest, or help facilitate overcoming unconscious beliefs and assumptions. To say it in the words of Thomas King, a First Nations humorist: "You can get in the front door with humor. You can get into their kitchen with humor. If you're pounding on their front door, they won't let you in" (*Redskins* 2000, 23:54–24:00).

The examples I have chosen below reject the notion of a single story in regard to the representation of personal and social identities. While the topics they raise are edgy and controversial, they do so in the frame of humorous joviality, not serious criticism. However, the possible consequences evolving from the discussion of these topics cannot actually be dismissed as unreal or uncritical in any sense. My examples poke fun at rigid conceptualizations which presuppose a certain 'essence' as the basis

for identity while also emphasizing inherent constructionist processes involved in the creation of identities in the first place. Both of these strategies become evident in the portrayal of a multiplicity of affiliations and perspectives as well as in the humorous critique of narrow representations of identity. This is shown by emphasizing the struggle and ridiculousness of reductionist identity attribution through a series of misunderstandings and misrepresentations between the perceived self and the Other.

Misrepresented Identities in *alterNatives*

Drew Hayden Taylor's *alterNatives* relies heavily on ridiculing stereotypes to reveal the baselessness of the idea of authentic identities. Thematically, the play centers around a well-meant, yet problematic, dinner party organized by Colleen Birk, "a 'non-practicing' Jewish intellectual who teaches Native literature" (Taylor 2009, back cover), who is in a relationship with Angel Wallace, "an Urban Native science fiction writer" (Taylor 2009, back cover). Her underlying motive for organizing the get-together is her desire to meet Angel's former friends and self-fashioned "alterNative warrior[s]" (Taylor 2009, 8)—activists involved in Native identity politics—Bobby Rabbit and Yvonne Stone. The final couple in the group consists of Dale Cartland and Michelle Spencer, Colleen's friend and her husband, who are characterized as a "vegetarian veterinarian" and a "vegetarian computer programmer" (Taylor 2009, 8), respectively. The way in which the six characters are described already hints at the underlying contempt for the belief in the existence of authentic identities, given the various parties represent "clichéd extremes of both societies" (Taylor 2009, back cover).

Moreover, as the descriptions of the various characters imply, ridiculing these stereotypes allows for the creation and dismantling of various victim–perpetrator juxtapositions. We have the possible victim–perpetrator juxtapositions of Natives versus non-Natives, Jews versus non-Jews, vegetarians versus meat eaters, and activists versus passive bystanders who might as well be oppressors. However, none of the characters fulfill the expectations these seemingly one-dimensional roles may raise. In the following pages, the subversion of three single stories will be examined in particular: The victim roles of Jewish and Indigenous people, the perpetrator role of anthropologists, and the opposition of 'good' vegetarians with 'evil' meat eaters.

First, the professor, Colleen, does not actually follow her Jewish faith and is therefore not put in the victim role in connection with her religion. Instead, she (perhaps subconsciously) tries to force her Native Canadian

partner, the writer Angel, into the role of the victim, as she repeatedly tries to convince him to read literature presenting a victimological perspective of Indigenous identity. This is thematized by the latter when Dale is surprised to find *How a People Die*, a book Colleen also teaches in her classes (Taylor 2009, 46), "hidden underneath some fish sticks" (2009, 37) in the freezer. When questioned about the logic behind this cold storage, Angel amusingly replies "[w]here else would you put a dead people but in a freezer" (Taylor 2009, 37), explaining: "All these books you keep giving me have either some quaint legend or contain yet another adventure in an oppressed, depressed and suppressed Native village. If I'm told that I'm oppressed one more time, I'll end up a drunk. Cheers" (Taylor 2009, 37). With this statement, Angel not only criticizes such a narrow perspective of Indigenous identity but also invalidates and ridicules it with the help of another stereotype, Indigenous alcoholism, showing that a focus on the single story of oppression can lead to depression. In this way, not only the inaccuracy of those reductionist stories is revealed but also the intertwining of such beliefs with the everyday lives and convictions of the characters. Thus, the Indigenous victim position is portrayed as deeply entrenched even in higher education. However, it is not through a moralizing statement that the misrepresentation is dismantled but through the use of various forms of humor. The scene abounds with examples of incongruity humor and self-deprecation on Angel's part, in the latter case resulting in a perpetuation of a victim identity when he refers to the single story of Native alcoholics. However, on a more meta level, it clearly represents an offer of feeling superior to an audience that may understand itself as not being prone to such narrow assumptions about identity. And if the opposite is the case, these embedded beliefs can be unraveled in a light-hearted manner, without a moralizing finger being pointed at those who may have believed in them.

Ironically, the attribution of the victim role is not one-sided and not only external, since Angel has been using Colleen and their relationship to absolve himself of the guilt of having told invented stories about his Native people to anthropologists who came to study his culture on his reservation when he was a child. The later activist Bobby was also involved in this. What takes the invention of identity through stories to an entirely different level is Angel and Bobby's childhood involvement in the creation of *The Legends of the Ontario Ojibway*, another book Colleen teaches. When anthropologists visited their village, telling the kids they would give them fifty cents for "every legend [they] told them, […] as long as [Bobby and Angel] promised they were authentic, handed down to [them] by their ancestors" (Taylor 2009, 128), the two 11-year-olds saw it as an opportunity

to make money by inventing legends. There was "[n]ot an ounce of truth in those stories" because their "legends were none of [the anthropologists'] business" (Taylor 2009, 129). As it turns out, the joke is not on the anthropologists, however, but on Indigenous identity, given these stories ended up "being presented as factual and authentic" (Taylor 2009, 129). Thus, in another twist of irony, "Native teachers are teaching this book to Native students," and it is "going to out-live" (Taylor 2009, 130) them all. Accordingly, even completely invented stories and traditions can become single 'truths.' Angel describes this behavior, which Bobby appears not to consider very problematic, as superiority humor that hurts people, citing it as the reason he left his former friends (Taylor 2009, 130–1). Furthermore, Angel's dismissal of these stories as an adult points towards the transformability of identities, showing him as capable of not revising but reevaluating former mistakes and drawing consequences from them. In this sense, his identity is portrayed as a changeable narrative which has to contend with the consequences of a self-attributed faulty single story—an example of unconscious self-victimization. Bobby and Yvonne, on the other hand, are presented as consciously perpetuating subject positions of being victims, their lives deeply entrenched in an oppositional understanding of identity politics.

In a different twist on allegiances, here not of a culturally predetermined kind, Dale's vegetarianism is revealed to be a form of identity that was forced onto him by Michelle, who literally connects her love for him to this lifestyle choice (Taylor 2009, 29), implying the cliché that vegetarianism is connected to being a good person. On the flip side, meat eaters take on a negative role. Because of this narrow perspective Michelle subscribes to, it comes as quite a shock to her that Dale eats a piece of meat later in the play (Taylor 2009, 84). Michelle blows the incident completely out of proportion, asking: "What if I die, Dale? What will you do? Eat me?" (Taylor 2009, 88). While these questions illustrate that she sees herself as a victim whose partner has gone over to 'the dark side,' these exaggerations also make her and her narrow-mindedness the target of the joke. Yet it is not Dale who ultimately gets assigned the role of the perpetrator, but Bobby. Not only does Dale claim that Bobby *made* him try the meat (Taylor 2009, 84) but Michelle later repeats the accusation (Taylor 2009, 88). Bobby, on the other hand, jokingly describes himself as the victim, "the injured party" (Taylor 2009, 88), as he almost burned his hand in the moose pan because of Michelle's scream. Bobby's self-attributed victim role is then further confirmed when Michelle claims it would have "serve[d] [him] right" (Taylor 2009, 89) to get injured, to which he replies "[a]dvocating injury to a fourth world citizen. How politically incorrect" (Taylor 2009, 89). In this

case, however, it is not Bobby who becomes the butt of the joke but, rather, Michelle, as his exaggeration of the circumstances again ridicules her behavior. Moreover, the idea of overly inflated victim positions in terms of identity politics is ridiculed as well, giving the audience the opportunity to laugh at the implied parochialism of such positions. As the play continues, the roles of victim and perpetrator, the single stories as seen from Michelle's perspective, are reversed. Bobby eventually openly criticizes the idea of enforcing vegetarianism by telling Michelle it is wrong "when you pressure people. Don't impose it on the rest of the world" (Taylor 2009, 110). This comment not only applies to the situation at hand but appears to resonate with the play in many ways. After all, the characters seem to constantly attribute identity categories and concomitant expectations of behaviors. The underlying supposition that there is a certain essence or authentically pure form of identity is repeatedly ridiculed and dismantled. Thereby, fixed borders between victims and perpetrators as well as between self and Other disintegrate almost immediately after having been erected and are shown to be substantially dependent on narrative constructs.

Breaking Down Rigid Fronts in *The Infidel*

My second example confronts the idea of self with a perceived Other in terms of ethnicity. In *The Infidel: A Comedy of ~~Epic~~*[1] *Ethnic Proportions*, this entanglement is taken to a completely new level. The comedy revolves around the protagonist Mahmud Nasir, a Muslim from the East End of London, who finds out he was adopted after his mother dies (*The Infidel* 2011, 11:32). What makes this fact problematic for him is that the name his birth parents gave him is Solomon 'Solly' Shimshillewitz, which means he is of Jewish origin. While he is not a particularly devout Muslim (given he drank alcohol before and does not pray regularly, for instance), he considers his religion to be an important cornerstone of his identity. Hence, Mahmud's first reaction to finding out his adoption history is utter disbelief, but once he does know about his secret past, it seems as if a veil has been lifted. Although he has trouble believing it at first, thinking that he even looks exactly like a Muslim, he is forced to recognize his mistaken preconceptions and reductive assumptions when he meets four orthodox Jews at the entrance to a synagogue. Like him, they are middle-aged, bald

1 The crossed-out "Epic" is part of the title as displayed on the English DVD cover (see The Internet Movie Database).

men who are somewhat overweight (*The Infidel* 2011, 17:00–17:25). Thus, physically, they are eerily and incongruously similar to Mahmud. In this scene, the joke is not only on Mahmud's understanding of himself and his cultural background but also on the idea that physical features clearly denote a particular heritage. In terms of theoretical conceptions of ethnicity, the movie hence puts forth an anti-essentialist understanding of ethnic identity which "emphasizes the fluid and contextual meaning of 'ethnic phenomena'" (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 15) and thus rejects the idea of a single story. A further implication is that beliefs (or narratives), whether of a religious or other kind, can overshadow realities and shape them so that they can completely obliterate certain complexities.

Mahmud's inability to deal with his newfound self leads to him befriending the initially antagonistic character (cf. *The Infidel* 2011, 08:35) Leonard 'Lenny' Goldberg, a Jewish cab driver originally from America, and the only Jew Mahmud seems to know. When Lenny finds out about Mahmud's unearthed past, he laughs at Mahmud for having the most Jewish name ever ("Why didn't they just call you Jewy Jewjewjewjew and be done with it?" *The Infidel* 2011, 29:40)—this being an example of superiority humor that works top-down from Lenny's perspective but also functions in a self-deprecatory manner, since he is making fun of his own culture. Nevertheless, Lenny also offers Mahmud important information to advance his search for his lost identity by telling him that a man by the name of Izzy Shimshillewitz used to live around the neighborhood. In an effort to recollect himself and retrace his unknown past, Mahmud calls every Jewish old folks' home in the area and eventually manages to locate his father. However, a rabbi prevents Mahmud from entering his father's room, claiming Izzy is a devout Jew who would have a heart attack if a Muslim man claimed to be his son, a statement which indicates that the fronts between the two religions are equally rigid from either side. When the rabbi asks Mahmud what he knows about Jews, he can only come up with stereotypes his colleagues used earlier, such as having big noses or liking money. This implies that, even though Mahmud is now aware of a further piece of the puzzle that is his identity, he has not yet interrogated his own uncritical assumptions about Jews. Hence, the rabbi sends Mahmud on a mission, saying "what you need to do, and quickly, is think about what it means to be a Jew. And then […] We'll think about letting you in" (*The Infidel* 2011, 32:33–32:47). In this scene, Mahmud could be said to be taking on the role of the victim and the perpetrator simultaneously. On the one hand, he clearly mischaracterizes and lumps together all Jews by describing them with prejudiced single stories. On the other hand, he is excluded from the Jewish community despite being Jewish himself, which suggests at least

a tendency towards victimization. Of course, the latter may be temporary and is triggered by his own questionable actions.

Ironically, when Mahmud enlists Lenny to help him become or at least seem more Jewish, he simply learns to follow other single stories than the one he mentioned to the rabbi. To be more Jewish, a compilation shows Mahmud having to: read a book on serious illness, eat Jewish food, learn how to say 'oy' and 'vey,' listen to Jewish music while feeling its tragic weight, dancing, and wearing a kippah. The last item on the list appears to be the most challenging for Mahmud, as there are several parts in this scene in which he fights Lenny when he is to put the headwear on Mahmud. Interestingly, most of these markers of Jewishness Mahmud is trying to acquire do not center around the Jewish religion *per se*. This is somewhat amended in Lenny's last-minute briefing for Mahmud right before the bar mitzvah:

> [T]hings not to mention: Hitler, Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Hitler, the fact that you're actually a Muslim. […] There may be one or two [prayers], but when in doubt, just do this. [mumbling] […] Have you memorized some Yiddish? […] Just sprinkle in a few words during the conversation—You know, "schlep," "kvetch," "traipse."[2] (*The Infidel 2011*, 44:14–44:45)

This mixing of languages does not work very well for Mahmud. Therefore, when being asked how he likes the event, he resorts to describing it as "very Jewish" when his absurd description of it being "very geschmack […], very traipse" (*The Infidel* 2011, 46:00) results in questionable looks. What this shows is that entering an ethnic community can be difficult despite belonging to it by birth, and it points to the performative aspect of belonging to a community in the first place. Nevertheless, Mahmud's failing Yiddish is quickly forgotten when he is asked to sign a petition for the North London Ladies Eretz Yisrael Guild, which states: "We, the undersigned, believe that the state of Israel […] is unfairly demonized by BBC, ITV, Channel 4, and all other forms of the UK news media […] despite being […] a shining example of democracy and fairness, which simply wants to live […] in peace with its neighbors" (*The Infidel* 2011, 44:14–44:45). Here, the state of Israel is portrayed as a self-perceived victim which is presented as a perpetrator from the outside. Mahmud manages to get out of signing the petition by faking a cramp. This is followed by a prayer, for

2 When Mahmud surmises that the last word is actually English, Lenny simply replies that it "sounds Yiddish" (*The Infidel* 2011, 44:14–44:45). After all, the questionable experiment they both embark on is all about appearances.

which Mahmud puts on a half-burned kippah, again raising questionable looks from the other guests.

The burned religious garment hints at the fact that, throughout the film, Mahmud is not only pushed towards his Jewish side through circumstance, but being a 'real' Muslim is also a major strand of the narrative, with him ending up with ambiguous ties to two extremist religious positions. Thus, the film repeatedly subverts attributions of the status of victim and perpetrator by showing Mahmud unwittingly taking part in identity politics, eventually even in a manner that tends towards radicalism. While it would be an overstatement to describe the film as a thorough representation of complex identities, it still goes beyond the portrayal of single stories, as it plays with the interchangeability of the roles of the victim and the perpetrator, for instance, and their determination by context.

The previously described bar mitzvah scene stands in stark opposition to Mahmud's participation in a 'Support Palestine' rally, which he attends for his son, Rashid, who is hoping to marry the stepdaughter of the famous fundamentalist preacher, Arshad El-Masri, who claims that a "good Muslim should disassociate himself from all disbelievers" (*The Infidel* 2011, 39:38). Whereas the rally seems to include people from various ethnic backgrounds, they do not appear very tolerant, as evidenced when Mahmud removes his taqiyah, due to the hot weather, and reveals a kippah underneath—a moment which fittingly seems to encapsulate Mahmud's identity dilemma. The reaction of the demonstrators is anger, which is why Mahmud pretends to have brought the kippah in order to burn it. He does so, and the action is filmed by El-Masri's men and uploaded on his website. This is the moment when Mahmud is caught quite literally between the fronts, forced to pick one over the other out of desperation. The scene not only illustrates the problematic consequences an exclusionary form of identity politics can entail but also reveals the emotional basis of hatred that goes along with more radical positions. The amusement is induced by emphasizing the impossibility of this choice and the situation in which Mahmud finds himself.

Burning the kippah does get Mahmud praise from El-Masri and his acceptance of the families connecting through marriage when El-Masri, his wife, and his "funny men […] come to see if [Mahmud's family] is Muslim enough" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:01:52). But burning the religious symbol also results in the police and a crowd of offended demonstrators showing up in front of Mahmud's house, understanding his actions as those of a perpetrator of bigotry. The police tell Mahmud that he is "under arrest on suspicion of having performed actions in contravention to the racial and religious hatred act of 2006" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:08:17–01:08:25). Being put on the

spot, Mahmud reveals that he is Jewish, which leads the police to follow the same logic as Taylor's ladder of status on politically correct humor: "I suppose it's all right then, sir. […] [I]t's like that Jackie Mason fella. He can take the piss out of Jews 'cause he's a Jew. We wouldn't arrest him for it, would we?" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:09:57–01:10:04). Hence, what is implied is that lateral humor, about one's own people or those of similar standing in society, is permitted disrespect. While this seems to be a clear-cut case for the police, one of the bystanders claims Mahmud "doesn't even look Jewish," another disagrees, while a third describes Mahmud as "basically a Schvartse" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:10:08–01:10:11), which is "the Yiddish word for 'black' […], [e]quivalent of the English word, nigger" (Urban Dictionary 2011, n.p.). The obvious incongruities in the different interpretations of Mahmud's physical appearance here again underline the understanding of ethnic identity as a social construct, while also foregrounding the context-driven understanding of identities. In terms of humor, the audience is invited to laugh at the incongruous behavior of not only Mahmud but also the police and the bystanders. As opposed to Appiah's warning concerning representational agency when it comes to one's social identity, here, the assumption on the part of the police is that belonging to a certain identity group does allow you to speak for the whole community, even if this results in a negative or reductionist portrayal of a culture or ethnicity.

The claim which interprets Mahmud as being a black person stems from the father of the boys whose bar mitzvah Mahmud crashed earlier. While the father is offended by Mahmud's "religious hatred," his comment ironically ends up getting him arrested by the police for "inciting religious hatred" himself. Again, it seems the categories of perpetrator and victim become senseless and are thus subversively overcome by utilizing a humorous incongruity. In Taylor's terminology, the problem with the father's behavior lies in the fact that his sphere of knowledge not only excludes him from making statements about black people but, when considering the ladder of status, his comment can be described as a descending movement on said ladder, thus exemplifying downwards racism rather than upwards humor.

While Mahmud's coming to terms with his transcultural allegiances is at the center of the film, he is by no means the only 'hybrid' character. The major twist of the movie revolves around the fundamentalist preacher El-Masri, who can supposedly "trace his lineage back to Ibrāhīm ibn al-Walīd, ibn ʿAbdallāh, [an] Imam of Medina of the eighth century" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:04:58). However, El-Masri's ethnic background and thus identity is completely invented, as he was born in 1962 to Scientologist parents in Manchester with the name of "Jimmy Monassa, later to be known as Gary

Page, [Mahmud's] favorite pop star" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:32:36–01:32:38) who faked his death "to avoid a few tax issues and nonpayment of child support to five kids from five different women" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:32:53–01:32:59). Hence, El-Masri's 'old life' can be seen as incongruous with his new one as a fundamentalist preacher, as he clearly did not use to practice what he now preaches. Accordingly, not only Mahmud but also El-Masri manage to incorporate a version of an Other within themselves, albeit in the latter case only for a short time and under very questionable circumstances. In both cases, this is achieved by speaking a different language (or pretending to do so), wearing a specific form of dress, and adhering to certain customs. Through the juxtaposition of the hybrid identities of Mahmud and El-Masri, the orientalist opposition of East versus West is invalidated. Yet, by depicting and naming various stereotypes about Muslims and Jews, the film may not only dismantle but also perpetuate them, despite its emphasis on the perspectival attribution of the categories of victim and perpetrator. Hence, the success of the complexity of edgy jokes such as these is also largely dependent on the ideological framework of the audience.

Dismantling *Tribes*

The last example I have chosen is Nino Aldi's short film *Tribes*. This film locates the Other within the self in a different manner. At the same time, it juxtaposes literal victims of a crime and its perpetrators only to quickly dissolve this stark opposition again.

The premise of the film already sounds like a joke: An African-American (Jemar), an Arab-American (Amed), and a white man (Kevin) try to rob a subway. As the title suggests, the film ridicules tribalism (Lanier 2020, n.p.), with allegiances always being put into opposition. This is triggered by Jemar not wanting to rob 'his people,' telling a black teenager and an older African-American woman that they are "good" (*Tribes* 2020, 01:36–01:47). Following this, none of the robbers want to rob 'their people.' But when Kevin claims he does not want to rob 'his people,' the other robbers react by saying "we definitely gonna jack your people. […] [T]hey're the ones behind all the suffering" (*Tribes* 2020, 02:48–02:51). Accordingly, they understand themselves as victims of systemic racism. When Kevin brings up a different victim narrative and retorts that "[his] people suffer every day because of [the other robbers' people]" (*Tribes* 2020, 02:51–02:52), all other white people on the subway widen their eyes and shake their heads to openly disagree with Kevin's politically incorrect statement. Therefore, it seems, Kevin paradoxically and incongruously does not have the

backing of 'his people.' Again, we are reminded of the fact that belonging to a certain community does not automatically mean you get to speak on their behalf, especially when your single story only constitutes half the picture. While Kevin's claim would go against Taylor's ladder of status, as it punches down the ladder, the fact that Kevin becomes the one ridiculed by not being supported by anyone else shows that the humor does go up the ladder after all. It is the moral superiority offered to the audience which is the basis for the amusement.

To keep the robbery going, Amed suggests they only "jack who isn't like any of us" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:01–03:04), which results in another incongruity when Kevin adds "like the immigrants" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:05). Amed disregards this suggestion by saying "they're kinda my people" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:11–03:13), a claim Jemar quickly negates, as Amed is from Queens. Amed, however, fortifies his argument by explaining that his whole family consists of immigrants, thereby claiming a transcultural form of allegiance for himself. When Kevin replies with the primordialist notion that one "can't have more than one people" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:19), an African-American passenger refutes this by bringing up her mixed DNA, which includes not only Nigerian but Native American DNA (*Tribes* 2020, 03:21–03:27). Although the proof for multiple identities inherent within one individual comes at a biological level, which may imply that a cultural broadening of one's spheres of knowledge is not possible, the short film ultimately does not stick to this essentialist understanding of 'one's people' in terms of blood relations. Instead, Jemar's incongruously academic-sounding monologue conceptually widens this notion of belonging, as he claims that

> what we see as self-identity goes far beyond genetics or geopolitical demarcation. The American founding doctrine of placing an individual above the collective results in a multifaceted society in which a person can identify with a myriad of subgroups based on factors like regional history, ancestral migration, moral values, or social-economic status, often as a means to elevate themselves above those they deem unfamiliar in opposition. I mean, you know, motherfucker! (*Tribes* 2020, 03:47–04:21)

The last sentence completes the incongruous opposition between street and academic vocabulary. At the same time, the curse word functions as a relief to the seriousness of the topic. Yet, even with this more open concept of belonging, it quickly becomes obvious that determining who one's people are may be a difficult endeavor. In order to decide whom to rob, the three thieves force the passengers at gunpoint to repeatedly divide into two different groups which could also be described as examples of victims and perpetrators: immigrants versus immigrant haters, homosexuals

versus homophobes, rich versus poor. Eventually, this drifts into ridiculous oppositions, such as Starbucks or Nascar Starbucks, paper or plastic, and dualism or nihilism. (The last example actually does not impel anyone to move, which leads Jemar to conclude that none of them read.) Contrary to the robbers' hopes, however, trying to separate the passengers into groups does not clarify who should be robbed and thus become the victims. Rather, forcing the passengers to choose a side illustrates how entangled these communities—and, thus, forms of belonging—really are. None of the passengers can be described with 'a single story,' which further cements the underlying emphasis on the complexities of identities, even when it comes to identity politics. Accordingly, even some heterosexuals end up siding with the homosexuals, since they also "identify with the struggle of being an oppressed minority (*Tribes* 2020, 05:24–05:29). Likewise, one of the passengers is revealed to be a gay man, who is also an immigrant to the US (of presumably Russian decent) but hates immigrants nonetheless and could be described as a personified incongruity. The back-and-forth between picking one side or the other leads the robbers to realize that in none of the oppositions presented are they on the same side. That is, until they come up with "more of a materialist tribalism" (*Tribes* 2020, 07:22), namely, guns or no guns. While this finally separates the robbers from the rest, it also makes Amed realize that "I'm part of something much bigger. All these people, they're not me, but it turns out they kind of are me. We're all connected, I just been choosing not to see. Taking from them hurts me, it hurts in here [pointing at his heart]. I mean, you know, motherfucker!" (*Tribes* 2020, 08:10–08:45). As in the previous monologue, an incongruity is created, although this time between the friendly sentiment of Amed's message and the curse word at the end. Unfortunately, the insight comes too late. At this point, the subway has already stopped, and laser targets are visible on the robbers. Hence, the last example of incongruous humor comes in the form of the opposition "fucked over here, unfucked over there!" (*Tribes* 2020, 09:34–09:37), thereby ironically putting the robbers into a self-induced victim position from which they most likely cannot recover.

Conclusion

To conclude, in all three cases presented above, the complexity and multiplicity of allegiances are emphasized and, thus, the various apparently absolute oppositions are portrayed as senseless, which results in the ridiculing of absolutist understandings—and, thus, single stories—of identity,

culture, and ethnicity. The entanglements between the various communities and individuals are so immense that, in a sense, the Other might as well be the self. In this vein, the underlying oppositional tendency of identity creation is revealed to be a construct rather than an unchanging reality. Accordingly, neither the films nor the play subscribe to a rigid understanding of belonging that presses an individual or a group into certain containers of allegiance. Rather, they underline not only that allegiances are frequently connected with political or other strategies of self-assignment but that they are also highly dependent on performance, interpretation, and context. Hence, the comedic examples demonstrate that identities are greatly dependent on perspective and narrativizations. What this shows is that there is always more than a single story.

In terms of humor, the way in which single stories constantly blank out a variety of complexities is repeatedly highlighted. Whether reductionist understandings of identity can be overcome by humor, however, depends largely on the audience that decrypts the amusing depictions with which it is confronted. Jokes and other forms of humor can frequently not only be understood in one way, and thus do not exemplify single stories either. What might be a joke to some may be an insult to others. Furthermore, even in being humorously dismantled, stereotypes and beliefs run the danger of being reproduced, depending on who the audience of said humor is. If certain intricacies of humor are misunderstood or not even detected, the possibility remains of laughing at the alleged 'truth' of the stereotype rather than its dismantling. Yet such possible setbacks do not take away from the potential that humor offers for engaging difficult topics with relative ease, thereby creating at least the possibility of transforming narrow mindsets in a playful manner.

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Saambavi Sivaji

Archiving the Margins: Art, Memory, and Resistance at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT This chapter examines the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka as a site of memory based on its inaugural exhibition, *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales*. It explores the intricate relationship between art and memory, how artworks invoke memory, and analyses how the exhibited artworks perform memory and work as a form of resistance. This investigation delves into the ways artworks embody and communicate historical and personal narratives, positioning the MMCA as a significant cultural institution in the preservation and articulation of collective memory.

KEYWORDS agency, commemorative practices, MMCA, site of memory, solidarities

Introduction

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) is the first museum in Sri Lanka dedicated to modern and contemporary art. Established in 2019, the museum was first located on the seventeenth floor of the Colombo Innovation Tower and later found a place in the heart of Colombo—on Crescat Boulevard. The MMCA, though an art museum, writes history and preserves memory. As the website of this museum indicates, it has been conceptualised as a public museum in Sri Lanka to commemorate and conserve Sri Lankan art forms (MMCA 2022). The emergence of this museum at a time when public memorials and commemoration are banned is a significant milestone. Curated by Sharmini Pereira, the first exhibition and show was named *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* (19 December 2019–16 August 2020) and comprised four galleries holding 115 artworks by

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45 artists of diverse backgrounds and cultural influences. This chapter is based on this exhibition. The title of the exhibition signifies the role of artworks and how they tell us different stories. The stories that we associate with artworks depend on our socio-political backgrounds and the baggage that we carry with us. This exhibition raises the following questions: "How do artworks tell stories? What stories do they not tell? Can the same story be told in different ways?" (MMCA 2022). The artworks on display portray stories of memory, remembrance, war, violence, suffering, celebration, and various other human emotions.

The entrance of the museum displays a poem by the writer Cheran Rudramoorthy. The poem portrays how a "bridge, strengthened by its burden of a hundred thousand tales, collapses within a single tear" (MMCA 2022). This poem has been translated and displayed in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. The bridge that the poem portrays symbolises the power of collective stories, the need to reiterate the telling and retelling of stories, and how this process leads to the retelling of memories. It is noteworthy how each gallery has been named. Gallery 1 is named "Survey, Country, Home / Land." The artworks on display in this gallery are based on landscape and the idea of home and country. The linguistic choice to write home/land as two distinct words is commendable. For many in Sri Lanka, a homeland does not exist; it was shattered by the war. Gallery 2 is named "Gaze, Self, Portraits," and the artworks in this section are mainly photographs and recorded performances. Gallery 3, titled "Landscape / Landscapes, Territory," reflects artworks based on the idea of landscape and marked territories. Gallery 4 is named "Mourning, Loss and Belief," and this gallery houses Sri Lankan artworks on the civil war.

The emergence of the MMCA is crucial because it has given a voice to the silenced history and memory of the Sri Lankan civil war. It has provided a space for victimised communities to share and connect with their repressed memories. Andermann and Arnold-de Simine illustrate the role museums play in this regard:

> By giving a voice to what has been left out of the dominant discourses of history, diversified and sometimes even compatible narratives have supposedly been granted a place in the museum that seems no longer to aspire to any totalizing synthesis (2012, 4).

The MMCA's positionality in Sri Lanka comes into play at this point, and it is of particular interest to this chapter. Though the MMCA is an art museum, the exhibits of various types it holds give voice to a history that has been left out of the dominant narrative produced by the Sri Lankan state. The MMCA, as an independent museum, contributes to a new identity for the silenced, repressed memories of the dead and the victims of the civil war.

Art and Memory

Art and memory are interconnected, because art is a powerful medium that captures the materiality of memory. The evocative nature of artwork not only portrays the multimodality of memory but creates a lasting impression in the minds of the audience. Because of its visual appeal, the viewers or visitors also identify their own memories and emotions through the artwork. Artworks mediate memory materially, and the materiality of memory in the artworks brings out the narratives of the victims. According to Muntean et al., "memory is performed, mediated and stored through the material world that surrounds us" (2019, 22). It is this mnemonic practice that will be discussed in detail in the next section through the selected artworks. Monuments were considered one of the earliest sources of the material forms of memory. As the field of memory studies came to encompass multimodalities, memory scholars were also interested in artworks as memory objects. This chapter attempts to answer the relationship between artworks and memory, and how artworks and art practices depict and perform memories. Eakin notes that "memory bridges the gap between the lived past and the imagined future" (in Plate and Smelik 2015, 2). This chapter argues that it is the artworks and the memory artefacts displayed at the MMCA that bridge the gap between the present and the violent past of Sri Lanka. The multidirectionality and the multimodality of memory enable the emergence of artistic practices which capture the nuances of memory. A visual artwork can speak volumes compared to a written form. It is this appealing nature of visuality that powerfully depicts violent and traumatic memories. It is noteworthy how the memory practices have transformed over the years. As Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik have pointed out, Michael Rothberg has summarised this transformation

> by speaking of a shift "from lieux de memoire to noeuds de memoire," coining a new term to designate the "knots" of memory at the intersection of memories and legacies of genocide, colonialism, and slavery today and to "capture the dynamism inherent in remembering—what we call memory's "multidirectionality." (2013, 13)

The MMCA, in this context, is a *lieu de memoire* as well as a *noeud de memoire* that bridges the knots between the repressed and violent memories of the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. Each artwork on display presents multifaceted narratives of the victims, while some of them are testimonies of their first-hand experiences. Through the different narrative strategies, the artworks mediate, store, and transmit memories. The MMCA, an art

museum, serves as a storehouse of artworks that depict the collective memories and the collective trauma of the marginalised.

The MMCA: Resistance through Art

The following section presents a critical analysis of selected artworks from the exhibition *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales*. By engaging in a close reading of each artefact, this section demonstrates how resistance is portrayed through the artworks and reflects on the transmission of memory and the role of memory artefacts in a post-war nation.

"Cabinet of Resistance No 2" (2016)

This artwork was designed by the artist Shanaathanan. It "utilizes and transforms the card index bureau. An administrative archival system, originally designed to collate scientific data in the 18th century. This bureau was later adopted by libraries and museums, along with state bureaucracy for filing purposes" (MMCA 2022). Crane refers to curiosity cabinets in her theorisation of museum and memory as follows:

> The phenomenon of the curiosity cabinet in Europe dates at least from the Renaissance. While elaborately decorated, portable, or cabinets, might house a special collection of valuables, the curiosity cabinet was a larger, immobile entity characterized by an interest in displaying a wide variety of natural and man-made objects in one place—the plenitude of the world represented in the microcosm of a single room or space. (2000, 67)

Utilising an archival system originally designed for a special collection, the artist employs a unique approach in capturing the real-life testimonies of thirty individuals within thirty cabins of a wooden structure, aptly named the "Cabinet of Resistance." This title encapsulates the spirit of resistance and resilience that defines the narratives of those who endured the ravages of war. Each cabin within this installation unveils the poignant testimonies of possessions carried by individuals during their migrations and exoduses within the country. The "Artist" cabin, for instance, recounts the migration journey of the artist Vijitharan's family who, being farmers, carried their cherished hoe. This testimony draws a compelling parallel between the utilitarian use of a hoe for cultivation and nourishment and its poignant transformation into a tool for burying the dead. The farmers' most treasured possession thus became a vessel for both life and death, embodying the complexities of their wartime experiences. The cabin dedicated to "Sandbags"

unfolds the crucial role played by these protective barriers in war-torn areas. While sandbags were indispensable for shielding against shelling and bombing, the testimonies reveal a poignant choice: individuals opted to carry their most cherished possessions instead of the practical but cumbersome sandbags. This deliberate decision underscores the deep emotional connection people maintained with their personal belongings, even in the face of wartime adversity. Throughout the artwork, the artist captures the profound impact of war on individuals' lives, narrating stories of resilience, sacrifice, and an enduring human spirit. The "Cabinet of Resistance" becomes a living testament to the multifaceted experiences of those who navigated the tumultuous landscapes of conflict, preserving the narratives of survival and the intrinsic value of cherished possessions amid the chaos of war.

The bridal saree stands as a cherished and symbolic possession among married Tamil women, carrying immense sentimental value. When a married Tamil woman passes away, the significance of this cultural tradition is evident as her bridal saree is respectfully adorned on her body, accompanying her to her final resting place through burial or cremation. This ritual not only reflects the deep emotional connection to the saree but also underscores its role as an enduring symbol of a woman's life journey. The sentimental value attached to the bridal saree extends through generations, as daughters often choose to don their mothers' bridal sarees at their own weddings. This tradition not only pays homage to familial bonds but also signifies the continuation of cherished memories and the passage of tradition from one generation to the next. However, the artwork delves into the poignant choice faced by women who, despite the sentimental value and memories associated with their bridal sarees, find themselves compelled to sell these precious garments. The act of selling the bridal saree becomes an expression of sacrifice for the well-being and protection of their families, emphasising the resilience and selflessness embedded in the narratives of these women. Within the "Jewelry Safe" cabin, the artwork narrates the practice of carrying photographs instead of jewellery. In a departure from conventional valuables, these families chose to safeguard the remnants of their cherished memories in the form of photographs. This deliberate decision reflects an understanding of the enduring power of visual memories to transcend material possessions. The cabin becomes a repository of stories, where the intrinsic value of photographs is elevated above traditional notions of wealth, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of families in the face of challenges.

> When the Sri Lankan Army started their operation to re-take land from under LTTE control we had to abandon our ancestral house due to the

> shelling. We carried the necessary amount of clothes; documents and photo albums with us but we did not know what to do with the jewelry. Carrying the jewelry with us presented a risk. So, we dug the earth closest to the well under the coconut palm and buried the jewelry before we left the house (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

This is the testimony of a woman who chose not to carry her jewellery and, instead, carried photographs and documents. This reiterates the memorial value of photographs and written records such as documents. The role of photographs in carrying familial memories is theorised by many scholars. Connerton points out that "photography is an 'inscriptive' (archival) memorial practice that retains an 'incorporative' (embodied) dimension: photographs give rise to certain bodily acts of looking" (in Hirsch 2013, 116). Connerton's argument validates the idea that family photographs facilitate the affiliative acts of the 'post' generation in understanding the inherited postmemory. Thus, family photographs can be considered a medium of postmemory. By carrying their photographs with them, this family preserves their memories for the next generation to be transmitted in the form of photographs.

The cabin named "Bunker" narrates the story of a schoolboy who was hiding in a bunker to escape from forceful conscription by the LTTE. Bunkers, or underground hideouts, were an indispensable feature for the people who lived in the north of Sri Lanka, which experienced war for three decades. People built bunkers in their houses to escape from shelling and bombing. Each house at least had one bunker. During the last phase of the war, the LTTE forcefully conscripted men and women from each household. To save their children from being conscripted, parents had built bunkers in the backyard and hidden their children:

> We had a bunker in our house to protect us from the air raids. My father created an inner cell within the bunker to hide me. It was a tiny dark place, with little air and full of insects. I spent the daytime in the bunker, and if I noticed strangers in the vicinity, I immediately moved to the inner cell. I had to hide inside my room. The later recruiters were more aggressive and desperate. They would forcefully enter the house by breaking doors and roofs. My parents, like other parents in their position, were helpless. My father buried a tar barrel in the ground and put me inside it. He covered the opening of the barrel with firewood. For the entire day, I stayed inside the barrel with fear. (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2")

The above testimony portrays the intensity of the war, and how it threatened the livelihoods of the people who lived in the war zones. It also demonstrates the physical as well as psychological trauma this boy has been through. Living in a bunker, not knowing what would happen to him,

must have been a traumatising experience. By reading this testimony, the visitors can visualise the traumatic experience of the narrator. This is a first-hand experience of a war victim, and this kind of narrative is not present in the larger war narratives authored by the state. By giving voice to this schoolboy through this artwork, the artist gives voice to the silenced victims of the war.

Another cabin, named "Jam Bottle," narrates the story of an individual who used jam bottles as kerosene lamps. During the 1990s, when the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka were severely affected by the war, there was no electricity. People resorted to alternative means; one of them was jam bottle lamps. These lamps were mostly used by students to study and to do other education-related work. This is one of the ways in which people who lived in the war-affected areas expressed their resilience against the state. The cabin named "Jam Bottle" narrates the story of a medical student who lived through the war in Jaffna, and how he made use of the jam bottle lamps:

> When Jaffna was under the control of Tamil rebels from 1990 to 1995, the Sri Lankan government imposed an embargo on all goods and services to the LTTE held areas. There was a shortage of fuel and no power supply. We passed the night using oil lamps; children had to manage to study with these lamps. To minimize the fuel consumption special lamps were made of jam bottles. Every household had these handmade lamps. When I was a medical student at the University of Jaffna, I had to manage to do my studies with these lamps. But the light produced by the lamp was not enough to see the full page of the big anatomy books. I kept the jam bottle lamp on the page of the book and moved it line by line to read the page (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

The above anecdote reveals how, even amidst difficulties students prioritised education and found ways to study. Reading with the help of light from a jam bottle lamp is an excruciating experience for the reader. However, the students had no other option but to continue using the jam bottle lamps. A visitor to the MMCA who reads this cabin can empathise with the experiences of the students. The present students who read this anecdote will understand how the students of the past generation survived in a war-ridden country. According to Plate and Smelik, "art and popular culture are dynamic processes that mediate memory through narrative strategies, visual and aural styles, intertextual references and intermedial relations and re-enactments and performances" (2015, 7). What we see here is a visual representation in the form of index cards that narrate the lived experiences of the victims of the war. These narratives also

transmit the memories of these victims. The individual testimony of this medical student not only transmits his individual memory but also serves as a collective witness to the generation that used the jam bottle lamps throughout most of their lives. Similar to this alternative mechanism, people used dynamos to connect to radio stations, as electricity or batteries were needed to operate the radio. Since essential items were banned and there were no telephone services, the people who lived in the affected areas were cut off from the rest of the country or the entire world. The narrator of this cabin says:

> There was no direct connection with the rest of the country and the world. We had no telephone services. We were dependent on the BBC, VERITAS and the All India Radio to listen to local and international news. But to operate the radio we needed batteries or electricity. In the middle of the town, a tea shop fixed a loudspeaker to listen to the BBC Tamil service at 9.45 pm. A large crowd assembled in front of the shop at 9.45 pm every day (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

This tea shop functioned as a communal space in which a community, long afflicted by decades of war and disconnected from international news, encountered a medium that gave them access to the rest of the world. This communal space is also a place where this community's collective identity is built.

The cabin named "Doctor" carries the testimony of Dr Punithan, who was one of the resident doctors during the last phase of the war. His testimonial is a witness to the human massacre. He states that there were severe shortages of medicines, and the patients were treated in makeshift hospitals. As people moved from a war-torn area to a slightly better area, the hospitals also moved—makeshift hospitals were built under the trees. An excerpt from his testimony is as follows:

> During the peak hours of the war, I worked 20 hours a day and looked after nearly 300 to 400 patients. Under normal conditions, a doctor would typically attend to a maximum of 17 patients per day. After performing an operation, our next medical challenge was to keep the patient safe from shelling and sniper attacks. So, we made bunkers under the trees and laid the patients on the sand. The number of injured patients drastically increased after 2008, with the advancement of the army but the number of doctors and number of supporting staff remained the same (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

Punithan's testimony is an eyewitness account of the resilience of the healthcare professionals who saved thousands of injured civilians.

Punithan could have left the war zones, too, but he chose to stay despite the imminent threat to his life. He is also one of the few doctors who shared their horrendous experiences after the end of the war. Many doctors who served in the war zones left the country after the war and refused to publicly share their experiences because of the possible threats it posed. It can be stated that within Shanaathanan's cabinet of resistance, an archive unfolds, chronicling narratives that embody unwavering resilience.

"This Is Not a White Flag VII" (2012)

This artwork was created by Chandraguptha Thenuwara using mixed media on board. It appears to be a white rectangle on which "this is not a white flag" is written in English, Sinhala, and Tamil. It is noteworthy that Thenuwara designed this immediately after the end of the civil war. Though this artwork appears to be a symbol of peace, it ironically questions the idea of peacebuilding and the failure of the Sri Lankan government in declaring peace when, in fact, people succumbed to the wounds of their traumatic memories of violence. "Thenuwara's work appears to ask if the image of a white flag is a deception—and, by extension, if peace is a falsehood" (MMCA 2022). This artwork questions the peace-building process in Sri Lanka. The state announced its victory over the LTTE, organised parades and victory monuments, and celebrated the victory rather than addressing the human rights violations that took place during the civil war. 'Peace' and 'reconciliation' are deceptive words in the post-war Sri Lankan landscape because the remnants of the war are still haunting the survivors, and victim narratives do not have any place in the state-sponsored war narratives. Thus, peace in Sri Lanka is a lost cause. According to Rothberg, "multidirectional memory reveals how the public articulation of collective memory by marginalized and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and justice" (2013, 40). In the same manner, this artwork speaks for the marginalised, and in so doing, posits questions pertaining to peace-building in Sri Lanka. Visitors who witness this artwork will navigate their way through the questions this artwork raises.

"Journey I" (2015) and "Journey II" (2015)

This artwork was made by Samvarthini based on her various journeys between Jaffna and Puttalam. It portrays a tin suitcase with a rotating mechanism and a map-like structure. Though it looks like a map, it does not contain any resemblance to real places or names. She uses outlines,

hatching marks, and blacked-out areas. Samvarthini's artwork evokes noticeable changes that occurred in the post-war landscape of Sri Lanka, especially in the cities of Jaffna, Mannar, Vauniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Puttalam, and Anuradhapura.

> Here districts are ominously reduced to outlines, hatching marks, and blacked-out areas. The presentation of these drawings in small tin suitcases with an improvised rotating mechanism plays with the idea of a place in transition. As these adapted suitcases make clear, these drawings also register a past in the process of being made obsolete. (MMCA 2022)

This chapter is interested in the word 'obsolete,' and it reads this artwork based on the idea of the systematic erasure of memories. The areas that this suitcase depicts are war-torn districts. By using an obsolete structure, this artwork questions how remnant memories in the form of physical structures are demolished through an emerging building boom. This is done systematically by the state to erase accountability, transitional justice, and the human rights violations that took place during the war. It is noteworthy that the areas that the artist marks are predominantly Tamil-speaking areas where the minority Tamils reside. These places underwent rapid changes soon after the end of the civil war. The name boards of the shops that bear any resemblance to the LTTE were replaced by new name boards. The LTTE, during their reign, followed a Tamil-only rule in the *de facto* Tamil state where the names of the roads, lanes and shops were given 'pure' Tamil names. However, the aftermath of the war saw a systematic erasure of these names as well as the demolishing of the buildings that were built by the LTTE. In doing so, the state erased the linguistic identity of the Tamils that the name boards and the places carried. Samvarthini's artwork can be interpreted as a response to the institutionally organised act of erasing the linguistic identity of the minorities in Sri Lanka. The artist chose not to name the places and created map-like structures. Placelessness in the artwork symbolises the plight of the victims whose narratives are placeless in the dominant narratives of Sri Lanka's civil war. Begona points out that "in its different dimensions of landscape, space or territory, place is overwhelmingly present in the minds and social interactions of people" (in Gray 1999, 193). Here, this artwork underlines the placelessness of the areas which lost their linguistic identity markers to an act of state-sanctioned erasure. The title of this artwork, "Journey," is significant because it portrays the repeated displacement of the people who lived in these areas. During the intense civil war, they would migrate to temporary shelters and return to their villages when the situation returned to normalcy. The lives of these people were constantly on the move—travelling

to find temporary refuges and returning when the situation improved. This artwork tells us the stories of the arduous journeys of the people who lived in the war zones, and highlights placelessness.

"War Text" (2002)

This artwork was created by Kingsley Gunatilaka. It depicts an open book, and within the open pages toy soldiers are perched facing another group of soldiers. Using an old book and toy soldiers as props, Gunatilaka evokes the idea of how civilians were used as shields by both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE. "War Text" is a reference to the language of war and how language was manipulated to present war as a humanitarian operation. Lakoff says language is "the art of effective argument" (2000, 4). Examining the language of war elucidates the idea that manipulation of language is the centrality of the discourse of war. The language is manipulated based on the propaganda of the dominant group. Consequently, war is justified through a distortion of truth, and language is used and misused to camouflage reality by the fighting forces. It is noteworthy that the military discourse of war re-iterates the depersonalisation of civilians, and the language of war lends itself to this form of representation. Shields are metal covers that are usually used in wars to protect combatants. Civilians were forcibly trapped inside war zones by the LTTE so that the government forces would not attack the zones where the civilians were trapped. However, the innocent civilians were the victims of both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The civilians who are victimised in the war are the vulnerable group trapped between the two armed forces. By placing armed soldiers inside an open book and naming it "War Text," the artist critiques the presence of war in the everyday reality of the people.

The used book also symbolises the disruption caused by the war in the educational activities of the students. The title of this artwork, "War Text," is noteworthy: as a text, this artwork documents the effects of the war, civilian casualties, massacres, violence, and human migration. The title also symbolises the emergence of state-sponsored war texts, both fictional and non-fictional, after the war. The state promoted texts that celebrated and valorised the war. Nationalist literature projected the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa as a king who defeated the enemy of the state—the LTTE. He was compared to the former kings of the Anuradhapura dynasty who defeated the Cholas—Indian kings from the Dravidian Tamil dynasty. This artefact is a thought-provoking work of art which urges visitors to question the idea of war. When I first glanced at this artwork as a visitor, it evoked a striking image that stayed with me for several days. This

artwork can also be interpreted as a memory artefact that resonates with the violent memories associated with war—hiding in bunkers, sounds of shells, and bombing.

"Sinhala–English Dictionary in a Steel Jail" (2007)

Designed by Kingsley Gunatilaka, this artwork represents a Sinhala–English dictionary in a steel jail. This is a reminder of the Sinhala Only Act, imposed by the government in 1956, and its aftermath. In 1956, the then Sri Lankan government declared a new 'Sinhala Only' language act and thereby asserted Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka, to the exclusion of the other languages spoken in the country. Tamil and English were not accorded the same status. This resulted in the minorities in Sri Lanka who were speakers of English and Tamil being marginalised in all aspects of their lives. Precipitated by the violent events that followed the introduction of this act, the first communal riots happened in 1958.

> The act automatically disenfranchised a quarter of the country's then population, namely the Tamil speaking communities in the island, who perceived the act as a threat to their language, culture, and identity. The unrest it caused led to the first island-wide anti Tamil riots in 1958, shattering the trust the communities once had for one another, laying the groundwork for one of the longest wars in modern history (MMCA 2022).

Gunatilaka's artwork recalls this violent history of Sri Lanka and questions the politics of using language to divide the people of the country. It reflects the failure of the language policy and how the state disenfranchised the minorities in Sri Lanka. By designing a dictionary in a steel jail, the artist invokes a poignant image of the imprisonment of the minorities under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and various other modes. It also suggests that the dictionary is not accessible to the people, as it was sealed. In the same manner, the non-Sinhala-speaking minorities did not have access to state services because of the language they spoke. In addition to this, the dictionary contains only English and Sinhala, signalling the arbitrary omission of Tamil from state discourses. Furthermore, this artwork serves as a memory artefact that evokes institutionalised violence and the traumatic memories associated with that violence.

"No Glory" (1998)

"No Glory" is a poignant creation by Sarath Kumarasiri, where he skilfully moulds two distinct pieces of footwear from clay. This artwork serves as a symbolic representation of the missing civilians in the aftermath of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka. During these tumultuous events, Tamils in Colombo faced violent attacks, with homes being looted and set ablaze by marauders. The repercussions were devastating—some Tamils lost their lives, while others sought refuge abroad, and the rest relocated to their ancestral homelands. The 1983 riots marked a pivotal moment in Sri Lanka's history, amplifying racial violence. This artistic tribute not only commemorates those who perished but also stands as a testament to the diversity of the affected citizens. The deliberate dissimilarity between the two items of footwear underscores the varied ethnicities, religions, and cultures of the individuals impacted by the tragic events, adding layers of depth to the narrative embedded in the artwork.

> In the years following the anti-Tamil riots that took place in Colombo on 23 July 1983, Sarath Kumarasiri created a series of works in memory of those that lost their lives. Using clay, he sculpted items of clothing such as trousers and shirts—the uniform of the unarmed civilian to condemn the senseless killing of innocent people. A selection of footwear rendered with this same intent formed part of his 'No Glory' series. The artist's decision to present single, rather than multiple pairs of shoes gives expressive form to the numbers of missing civilians who were caught up in the violence of the civil conflict. (MMCA 2022)

The absence of footwear in this artwork serves as a symbol, encapsulating the tragic reality of enforced disappearances that befell countless youth, men, and women. These individuals, abducted during the civil war, experienced a harrowing fate, with armed men using white vans to carry out these abductions—an infamous phenomenon known as 'white van abductions.' The mere sight of a white van became synonymous with peril, etching a haunting image in the cultural memory of the civilians. Similarly, the missing footwear becomes a haunting symbol, embodying the trauma experienced by the person it belonged to during their abduction. The artist's act of preserving and protecting this artwork becomes an act of resistance against enforced disappearances. Despite attempts to erase the traces of the victims, the artwork defiantly stands as tangible evidence, resisting systematic erasure by the state. It serves as a testament to the dark reality of state-enforced disappearances. In this poignant artwork, the absent footwear transforms into a memory landscape, evoking the void left by the missing pair. Visitors to the MMCA are invited to confront

the trauma of the victims, prompting them to visualise the untold stories behind the missing footwear. The deliberate dissimilarity between the two pieces of footwear not only signifies the plight of civilians fleeing war zones amid shelling and bombing but also represents the heart-wrenching instances of families torn apart during these chaotic escapes. By naming the artwork "No Glory," the artist emphatically reiterates the stark truth that there is no honour or triumph in war. The artwork challenges viewers to reflect on the human cost of conflict, urging them to question the whereabouts of the missing pair and imagine the untold stories of those who vanished amidst the tumult of war.

"Study for Kannagi" (c. 1963—1972)

"Study for Kannagi" is a bronze statue made by Tissa Ranasinghe to commemorate the 1958 communal riots in Sri Lanka. This artefact portrays a female figure grieving near a corpse. The female figure is a symbolical representation of Kannagi, the heroine of the Tamil epic *Silapathikaaram*. She is worshipped by the Tamils and the Sinhalese as a goddess. Showing a grieving Kannagi near a corpse highlights the grieving mothers and wives who lost their sons and husbands during the war. The grieving Kannagi figure can be juxtaposed with the grieving Kannagi from the Tamil epic, who destroys an entire city when her husband is falsely accused and killed. This artefact as a repository of traumatic memories of violence embodies the sorrow that engulfed the lives of women who lost their loved ones. At the same time, it stands as a symbolic representation of the mothers and wives who continue to protest, question, and demand that the state reveal what happened to their sons and husbands who were forcefully disappeared. A grieving woman at the side of a corpse is a recurrent image in many cultures and also figures prominently in Tamil classical literature. The artist uses this image to depict the plight of the traumatised women whose only resort is grieving. Somasundaram reflects on the trauma of the victims of the civil war, especially women. He states:

> a broader and long-term psychosocial intervention for collective catharsis and a healing of memories for traumatized families and community would be an acknowledgement of what had happened. Communication / representation of collective trauma is crucial for the psychosocial rehabilitation of communities and public education, and consequent interpretation, acceptance and inclusion in individual, collective and social memory (2010, 26).

The grieving mothers and the wives need answers from the state. Their long-dormant trauma needs a closure. However, this acknowledgement

has not been given by the state to date. This artwork can be interpreted as a stark reminder of the human rights violations during the civil war in Sri Lanka and the horrors of the war. By subverting the epic heroine Kannagi to represent ordinary women, the artist records the othered history of the Sri Lankan civil war. The feminine narrative that this artefact carries is a juxtaposition to the masculine narrative of the civil war, which glorifies and valorises the war. "Study for Kannagi" is a powerful depiction of the unsung heroines, the mothers and the wives who are singlehandedly fighting for truth and justice for their loved ones.

"Displacement" (2015)

Having personally faced displacement, Vijitharan reflects on his own family's forced departure from the northern part of Sri Lanka during the final phase of the civil war. In this evocative piece, the artist crafts a bicycle seat, intentionally omitting other components. The bicycle, a ubiquitous mode of transport in the lives of the people in the north of Sri Lanka, emerges as a powerful symbol of the recurring human displacement experienced by the community. The bicycle holds particular significance for Vijitharan's family, who come from a farming background where the bicycle is an integral part of their daily lives. In the north of Sri Lanka, the bicycle transcends its utilitarian function, becoming a cherished companion for residents. In Sri Lanka, the bicycle stands out as the common man's trusted mode of transport. Through the symbolic representation of the bicycle seat, the artist captures the essence of displacement experienced by countless individuals, using a familiar and integral object to convey the impact of migration and upheaval. The artwork not only serves as a personal reflection on Vijitharan's own journey but also resonates with the broader narrative of the Northern Sri Lankan community, where the bicycle becomes a silent witness to the shared experiences of displacement and the resilience of its people.

> Vijitharan's presentation of a seat without its frame and wheels parodies the displacement of people from their homes and communities. Using an economy of means, the work starkly evokes the devastating sense of loss during the final stages of the conflict (MMCA 2022).

The bicycle seat, stripped of its essential parts in Vijitharan's artwork, serves as a unique symbol, starkly reminding viewers of the losses endured by individuals during the bombing and shelling in Sri Lanka. This stripped-down artefact becomes a visceral reminder of the human toll exacted

by the conflict, encompassing the loss of loved ones, treasured possessions, and even the physical trauma of severed body parts. According to Somasundaram,

> from January to May 2009, a population of 300,000 in the Vanni, the northern part of Sri Lanka, underwent multiple displacements, deaths, injuries, deprivation of water, food, medical care, and other basic needs caught between the shelling and bombings of the state forces, and the LTTE which forcefully recruited men, women, and children to fight on the frontline and held the rest hostage (2010, 1).

The figure shown here is the number of deaths during the last five months of the war. The bicycle seat with the missing parts portrays missing civilians and civilian deaths due to LTTE and state violence. It also testifies to the lack of accountability on the part of the Sri Lankan government in reporting civilian casualties. The state "continued to assert that 'not a single drop of civilian blood had been shed' and the 'biggest humanitarian rescue mission in history had been executed'" (in Somasundaram 2010, 26). This artwork is a testimony to human migration, displacement, enforced disappearances, and civilian casualties.

"Tyre"

The installation "Tyre," conceived by Pradeep Chandrasiri, strategically places a solitary tire at the centre of Gallery 4, compelling the audience to confront its unsettling symbolism without explicit captions. This tire serves as a powerful and silent witness to the harrowing events of the 1983 ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, where Tamils were ruthlessly targeted and burned by angry mobs who callously thrust burning tires over their victims' necks. Unlike other exhibits at the MMCA, the absence of captions enhances the impact of this artefact, urging viewers to engage in contemplation and drawing attention to the disruptive nature of the displayed tire. This intentional lack of context underscores the artist's approach, allowing the artefact itself to narrate the violent history it embodies. The tire, placed prominently, becomes a focal point that demands the audience's attention, inviting them to grapple with the traumatic memories etched into the cultural consciousness of the Tamils. As a memory artefact, the tire becomes a vessel of remembrance, carrying the collective trauma of the victims. By evoking the July 1983 riots, deeply ingrained in the cultural memory of the Tamils, the tire prompts visitors to imagine the brutality unleashed on Tamil civilians solely due to their ethnicity and language. This powerful

representation aligns with Hirsch's (2013) theories on carrying forward the stories of victims, acting as a conduit to channel the suppressed narratives of the past. The tire, standing as a visceral reminder of the violence camouflaged and submerged by the state, provides an outlet for viewers to see, touch, and discuss the traumatic memories associated with it. In its simplicity, the tire becomes a catalyst for dialogue and reflection, unravelling a violent history that demands acknowledgment and remembrance in order to confront the ongoing impact of such atrocities.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, there is no memory museum in Sri Lanka that commemorates the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. Memorial events organised by civil society and the families of the victims came under surveillance, while on the other hand, state-sponsored museums in Sri Lanka celebrate war as a humanitarian operation. The primary argument of this chapter is that the exhibition *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* entails a positionality to interpret the MMCA as a site of memory. As a memory site, the MMCA also serves as a space where museum activism takes place. The artefacts displayed in this particular exhibition each narrate the stories of the victims of the civil war and transmit their memories to the next generation. As the task of the museum is to collect, exhibit, preserve, and remember, this chapter reads the MMCA as a site of memory that facilitates a collective remembering of the memories of the war. In this way, the MMCA can be seen as the yin and yang of the history and the memory of the Sri Lankan civil war, as the museum represents a repository of contemporary art. Similar to the complimentary nature of yin and yang, the museum's role extends beyond mere documentation. It becomes a platform for reconciliation, education, and dialogue. The museum becomes a space where the darkness of history and the light of artistic expression converge, fostering a nuanced understanding and contributing to the process of reconciliation and healing. The role of the MMCA as a site of memory is deployed through the transmission of contested memories, traumatic memories, collective memory, and postmemory. The artworks analysed in this chapter depict various memory narratives such as survival stories, stories of migration, trauma, and exoduses. In this way, the MMCA also engages in memory activism, as it brings out the subaltern voices that are silenced in the dominant narratives. The museum collects, exhibits, and transmits memories and counter-hegemonic voices. In doing so, it creates an activist space that allows subaltern narratives to emerge.

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ORCID®

Saambavi Sivaji https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4749-460X

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Durba Mukherjee

Dom Moraes: A "Traitor" Who "Fractured" India or an Anglicized Middle-Class Empathizer Who Felt with the Marginalized?

ABSTRACT Dom Moraes (1938–2004) is a significant presence within the field of post-independence prose writings about India. However, he has often been misinterpreted as a "traitor" and an upholder of colonial discourse or, at best, a poet who was solely able to express his sensibilities through poetry. Such criticism of Moraes does not take into account his extensive engagement with India and Indian self-fashioning that can be found in his larger literary career, which also consists of a significant volume of his memoirs. Moraes spent his lifetime travelling across India, from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century, documenting his experiences. A nuanced chronological reading of his self-fashioning that forms a major strand in these texts reveals his affiliation to India through a sense of association to the felt community of the marginalized in India. Looking at his notions of individual habitus and class dispositions, this chapter argues that it is, ironically, through this mutually shared feeling of dissociation from a majoritarian image of India that he reclaims his own Indianness.

KEYWORDS Dom Moraes, felt community, habitus, self-fashioning, travelogues

Dom Moraes (1938–2004) has significantly contributed to the repertoire of Indian anglophone poetry and is simultaneously a paramount presence within the field of post-independence prose writings about India. However, he has often been misinterpreted as an upholder of colonial discourse or, at best, a poet who was solely able to express his sensibilities through poetry. In the tradition of what Neil Lazarus identifies as the criticism of Eurocentric views and that of "elitist top-down historiography as the foundational gestures of postcolonial studies" (2004, xiii), some of

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the earliest Indian anglophone literary critics, like C. D. Narasimhaiah and M. K. Naik, have criticised Moraes's Anglophilic self-fashioning as a betrayal of his Indian identity. Drawing on Moraes's apparent self-portrayal in his memoirs, Naik refers to him mostly as a poet who "has studiedly disowned his Indian heritage repeatedly" ([1982] 2011, 205) and whose claim to fame rests on being "an Indian English poet" and on his refined linguistic skills. Naik writes: "Moraes has not published a new collection of verse […] and appears to have turned to prose […] [and] his verse has shown little evidence of any startling development consequent upon the reportedly successful transplantation, since he became a British citizen" (206–7). Also, C. D. Narasimhaiah states, "I couldn't care less how it sounds to contemporary English ears […] and I should tell my British friends, if they should ever share Mr. Moraes's misgivings, that it will not do them much harm to learn that the world is a little larger than England" (1976, 12). Eunice de Souza accuses Moraes of catering to colonial discourse in reference to his opinion of the country as being populated by "grotesques and morons" (1978, 339). Bruce King considers Moraes's poetry to be least concerned with either India or "Indianness" ([1991] 2005, 19) and, consequently, criticises his superficial engagement with India. King's statement is understandable, since Moraes's extensive engagement with India is mainly reflected in his memoirs, which were mostly written later. Thus, the later critics of Moraes, like Michael Schmidt (2004) and Ranjit Hoskote (2012), are not merely compassionate to his position but go so far as to exonerate Moraes of such accusations. Foregrounding Moraes's compulsion to lend a voice to marginalised communities across the world, irrespective of their nationality, caste, or class, Schmidt sympathetically portrays Moraes as a cosmopolitan author. Similarly, Rima Bhattacharya (2018) quite literally interprets Moraes's writings about alienation from his home as characteristic of a cynic cosmopolitan identity.

However, the earlier criticisms of Moraes, which were mostly written from the perspective of one's country of origin being a significant marker of one's individual identity and authorial self-fashioning, lack a deeper insight into Moraes's sense of alienation from India, as do most of the later critical interpretations of Moraes as a rootless cosmopolitan. In turn, a significant number of his critics fail to uncover Moraes's need to explore and define his Indian identity that underlines a vast body of his writings. In the decades following Indian independence, the sheer volume of criticism of Moraes's works, as can be observed from the comments of Narasimhaiah, de Souza, Naik, and King, are based on either Moraes's poetry or his personal self-fashioning in the form of his citizenship or marriage. Moraes only finds a cursory reference as an autobiographer in

Naik's text.[1] In this context, Jeet Thayil writes: "it was something no early reader of Moraes could have predicted. After decades of wandering the world he returned to India, where he immersed himself in the country's politics and sensibility" (2016, 225).

Moraes's evolution as an Indian author stretched as long as his writing career, and a chronological reading of his prose narratives on India reveals the developing trajectory of his identity as an Indian. Moraes's earliest return to India after a long period of absence from his country of origin and his prose writings about the experience date back to 1960 with the publication of his first memoir, *Gone Away*, where he refers to the journey as the "Return of a Stranger" (2003a). This apparent dissociation from his country of origin is rather ensconced within a problematic entanglement that he sought to resolve through his extensive travels across India and, subsequently, writing about them. A nuanced reading of his writings would reveal the morass that Moraes was trying to unravel with regard to his identification with his country of origin (Chattopadhyay 2012, 2014). His concern with "India and Indianness" is not merely a matter of his later writings. The subject shaped Moraes's self-fashioning as early as the 1960s and continued to do so throughout his life, as can be interpreted from his numerous travel narratives on India. The following sections shall, therefore, first deal with the charge of Moraes being a traitor to India that is often levelled against him and then trace the evolution of Moraes's Indian self-fashioning in terms of his socio-cultural habitus and his association to India based on his empathy for the 'felt community,' a term denoting communities that are formed, shaped, and sustained through a commonality of sentiments, which I borrow from Rajat K. Ray (2003).

Moraes's Childhood, "Dream England," and the Charge of a "Traitor"

Moraes was the son of the Indian journalist Frank Moraes and one of the earliest Indian female pathologists, Beryl Moraes (née de Monte). Born and brought up by a middle-class, English-speaking parentage, he grew up linguistically different as a child from the majority of Indians

1 In contrast to Naik's opinion of Moraes as primarily a poet, Ghosh (2008) refers to Moraes as the "greatest Indian prose stylist, with the most beautiful sentences" while speaking about his memoir, *My Son's Father*.

(Moraes 2003a, 167; Moraes and Srivatsa 2002, 21).[2] With the experience of a traumatic childhood in India as a result of his mother's insanity and his linguistic alienation from the country, an adolescent Moraes wished to become an anglophone writer based in England. As a result, the distinct colonial middle-class desire of becoming English found an exponential heft in Moraes in the form of "dream England" (Chattopadhyay 2022, 109). Interestingly, on his return to London from his first visit to India, after spending a little less than a decade in the West as a student, Moraes writes:

> But landing in London is my beginning, my perpetual peaceful return to your hand in sleep at last made actual. I will bring back yaks to you in my head, and lamas; rice-fields drying in the sun, the living and the dying of a world half-the-world away. (2003a, 158)

Moraes's quote begins with a contestation: India being his country of origin is what should be usually considered as his beginning, yet Moraes implies the opposite, stressing that his life in England is the peaceful refuge, the "dream England" from his childhood and "at last made actual," as home, in the early phase of his writing career. That return does not, however, imply that he could isolate himself completely from India. Instead, he promises to bring with him memories of the Indian voyage and relay "the living and the dying" that he came across. Moraes's statement is a record of his interest in Indian society, and within the context of a brewing political emergency that eventually led to the Sino-Indian war, his broaching of the subject of political asylum for the fleeing, homeless Tibetan "lamas" from China in Nehruvian India already reveals a knack for Indian politics.[3] The quote also highlights by his own sense of homelessness, which is apparent in his remark, "I can bring you nothing else, because all the rest comes from you" (158), made immediately after. The statement is a re-iteration of his anglicization, but a closer look at the statement reveals that it is also underpinned by his peculiar colonial middle-class bearing. It is this middle-class perspective that he often prioritizes, and in the following section we shall see how that significantly shapes his outlook; before we

2 See Chattopadhyay (2012, 2014) and Chattopadhyay (2022, 104–5) for further details about how Moraes's linguistic alienation from India and his traumatic childhood affected his self-fashioning.

3 As early as his first return to India, in a conversation with Nehru, when Moraes was asked "which India" he would write about, his impromptu reply was "Tibetan borders" (2003a, 39), which was a socio-politically problematic space at the time.

do so, however, I would like to focus on a few other crucial incidents that informed Moraes's dissociation from/identification with India.

Moraes publicly denounced his Indian citizenship during the 1961–1962 Indian army annexation of Goa, his ancestral homeland. The dramatically staged burning of his Indian passport on TV, besides being an act of protest against Indian politics, can be interpreted as a personal act.[4] Moraes ponders about the drastic step in his later memoir, *Never at Home* (originally published in 1992): "Nehru had refused a plebiscite and forced the issue, making the Goans Indians without consulting them, I was ashamed to be an Indian" (371). He further adds that, though he could express his dissent against the act in England, "the Indian press tore [him] to pieces, an effigy of [Moraes] was burnt in public in Bombay, and the Indian High Commission protested to the newspaper that had published [his] article" (371). Moraes recalls being invited to a debate organized by BBC on the issue of an Indian student calling him a "'Traitor!' and [Moraes notes …] others took up the word. It was impossible to say anything much" (371). Moraes addresses such accusations as "the Indian habit of talking about 'cultural heritage of the nation,' and then attempting to foist it on others" (372). His assessment in the form of a generalization, "the Indian habit," describes his own opinion about India. For him, a hostile, nationalist India over the years represented a monolithic, majoritarian voice that he strongly detested. Also, most postcolonial imaginations of India had been conceived as non-anglicized till around the 1980s, and later, an idea of a Hindu-majoritarian country became dominant, about which he extensively writes in his last two travel narratives that he co-authored with Sarayu Srivatsa. Within such a nationalistic, majoritarian frame, he would hardly find an acceptance as an anglicized, colonial middle-class writer. Consequently, his own remark about India is coloured by a simplistic, generalized opinion about India.

In spite of this, Moraes's desire to reclaim his association with India repeatedly brings him back to the country from early 1969 till the 1980s. Thayil remarks, with regard to Moraes's writings, that it is his poetry rather than his prose that reveals his affiliation to India (2016, 229). In reference to Moraes's visit to India in the early 1970s while working for the BBC film *The Bewildered Giant*, Leela Naidu (2010) writes about a conversation that the producer, Tony de Lotbinière, had with them. De Lotbinière had asked

4 In *Never at Home*, Moraes writes about his meeting with a Goan "newfound friend" (436), sometime around 1969, who provided clarification on Moraes being treated as a hero in the state: "you expressed what all of us were feeling" (436), vis-à-vis the Goan "'liberation'" (436).

Moraes about his and Leela's identity, with the question, "'She's half-Indian and half-French. You're an Indian genetically, but you seem like a brown Englishman,' […] 'How do you position yourself?'" (107). She had promptly replied, "I can understand the Europeans and I am at home in India. I can grow roots anywhere" (107). She added that Moraes very meekly followed it up with "'Me too,' […] and shut up […] He was uncomfortable with self-revelation when it was direct […] he could shape it into his poetry, but he could not talk about himself" (107–8). This insight into Moraes's attitude highlights the paradox with regard to his apparent dissociation from his country of origin; it is, therefore, important to untangle and chronologically read the various incidents, discretely jumbled up by Moraes in his travelogues and memoirs, in order to understand the writer's dissociation and simultaneous self-fashioning as an Indian. Thus, paradoxically, one of the first things that Moraes was able to think as he held the newborn son he had with his English wife was, "[he] has English apples for cheeks, but somewhere behind them is a tinge of gold and olive, the colour of the country from which I came" (2003a, 334). In marking his own identity in the "tinge of gold and olive" against that of the "English apples" of his son, he subconsciously reiterates the binary, India and England, which had been existent in his mind. It is this sense of binary that actually led to his understanding of living in England and anglicized self-fashioning as being contradictory to his Indian identity. However, with time, England as a space of escape no longer provided him with a sense of safety.

In *Never at Home*, he writes about his migrant status in England, which he was repeatedly made aware of during the period between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, in the wake of the Notting Hill crisis: "England was my home. Was I to be treated like an immigrant? Then it occurred to me that I was an immigrant" (417). These incidents proved to be a fact-check that London, too, could add to his sense of rootlessness. Similarly, he opens up about the anxieties that he faced in England: "I had had breaks in my poetry, but never such a block as this" (416). In the same context, he writes of his recurrent dreams about a close acquaintance, Brian Higgins, a Yorkshire poet, who perished loveless and friendless in London (420–3). Noting that Higgins's situation repeatedly haunted him, Moraes feared that he might face something similar if he was incapable of writing any more. The crisis was further aggravated by his reviewers' comments on his collection titled *Poems 1955–1965* (1966). Moraes notes one such criticism by Hayden Carruth: "[there] was not a word about the country [India] in the entire corpus of [his] poetry," when India was "unbelievably full of material." In turn, he responds, "[it] was still not too late; I could return to my proper place" (2003a, 392).

Consequently, we find him being ever more involved in writing about India, as is revealed in the series of books published during this time. He published *The Open Eyes* (1976), a book on Karnataka, where for the first time he revealed his changing opinions about India. As an engineer working for a colonial India, his grandfather had "built roads and bridges […] and that he had certainly been through these areas, on foot or horseback" (2005 [1976], 57), in the state of present-day Karnataka that Moraes, too, was travelling across for the purpose of his book. He sympathetically admits:

> Though I was not aware of it until a few years back [… my] grandfather […] was posted there for some years […] when I was child we didn't like each other much, but looking around me at the landscape I thought of the dedication of the engineers, the doctors […who] had none of the facilities available now, but they were tough men driven by a sense of duty […]. (57)[5]

The changed opinion seeps down to other Indians, whom he no longer finds "uniformly crass in […] behaviour" (Moraes and Srivatsa 2002, 21). Thus, sometime around the late 1970s, he accepts the Time-Life project of writing *Bombay*, as part of the series *The Great Cities*. The project aimed to explore significant cities around the world through the eyes of a person who is usually considered to be an expert on the topic for a metropolitan audience. It was a rather covert move on the part of Moraes as an author to accept the project, being well aware of the fact that he was specifically chosen to author the text as an insider to the city of his birth. In doing so, Moraes subtly reverses his role from being the stranger to being an author who had grown up in the city and returns to reclaim it through his writing.

Despite Moraes's wish to reconcile with his country of origin, his task was hardly easy. After his years spent on becoming English, his portrayals of India often faced scathing criticisms by nativist critics. Alasdair Pinkerton observes in this context that, after the BBC showed *The Bewildered Giant*, to which Moraes contributed significantly,

> [t]he Indian High Commission in London reported receiving a deluge of letters from both non-resident Indians (NRIs) and others in Britain, "expressing their concern and distress at these films being derogatory to and highly biased against India." (Pinkerton 2008, 539)

What followed was a censorship notice by the government of India, under the prime ministerial regime of Indira Gandhi, on 14 August, 1970, which instructed the BBC to shut down its Indian offices within a period of 15 days. The negative reception of his works in India prolonged Moraes's

5 See also Moraes (2003a, 194–5).

uncertainties about returning to India and living in the country. Writing about other instances of bewilderment that he faced, Moraes mentions a situation that he experienced while shooting for one of the BBC documentaries at Kolkata. The English crew of his team refused to eat with their Bengali counterparts, "whose table manners disgusted them" (2003a, 350), but had no issues with him or his English counterpart. Being in charge of the team, he finds himself "in a very strange position," and when asked about the conduct of the English fellows, he writes, "I had spent years to become English; Clive and I were from the same culture. The Bengalis and I were not. But neither were the two British cameramen like me [...]. I was afraid to face the answer" (350). Moraes finds that he could no longer fit into any unitary idea, either English or Indian. His being "afraid" to face the question is rather a realization that he will have to forgo the constructed binary between a distant Indian homeland and an English home that he bore for a lengthy period.

The Nehruvian Colonial Middle Class and Moraes's Individual Disposition

One way to assess Moraes's socio-cultural and political outlook would be to go back to his childhood and adolescence, which was shaped in a certain way. A glimpse of this phase can be found in the beginning of his book *Bombay*, where he writes about his anglicized, colonial middle-class upbringing (1979, 37–40). I draw my understanding from Sumit Sarkar's definition of the colonial middle class as the section of Indians who received Western education from around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (1989, 65–70) and whose social roots "lay not in industry or trade [...] but in government service or the professions of law, education, journalism or medicine" (68). This section of middle-class Indians forms the earliest nationalistic leader-cum-writers of India and imagined India as a nation in the form of nationalist autobiographies (Holden 2008; Boehmer 2005b). However, by the time India emerged as an independent nation-state, nationalistic sentiments started settling down among the England-returned middle-class writers. Iyengar mentions Nirad C. Chaudhuri's works, written after Indian independence, as a significant contribution within the field of Indian anglophone prose works and refers to Chaudhuri as "an intellectual who has the courage to stand aside and be different from the crowd, a critic of Indian society with an almost Swiftian capacity for making surgical probes" (1985, 572). Similarly, Iyengar mentions in passing the travel memoirs of Ved Mehta and Dom Moraes (568–9),

which differ from the national writings of their middle-class predecessors. Once India gained independence and there was a political need to mould a national consciousness different from the colonizers,[6] Indian colonial middle-class writers often sought to interrogate the socio-cultural, economic, and political differences that India as a nation confronted. Though the Indian colonial middle class was necessarily divergent in several ways,[7] the Nehruvian Indian middle class, as Sanjay Joshi (2017) writes, was a class "characterized by its cosmopolitan urbanity, its liberal or left-leaning politics, and a degree of embarrassment or at least cultural cringe when it came to any public discussion of matters of caste and religion". Brought up within Nehruvian middle-class self-fashioning, it is important to understand that Moraes grew up with his individual dispositions. To clarify this, we shall draw from what can be called—in Pierre Bourdieu's nomenclature—the concept of socio-cultural 'habitus' and 'individual habitus.'

Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be understood as a "structured and structuring structure" (1994, 170). Regarding Bourdieu's definition of habitus, Karl Maton writes that it is "the property of actors […] 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is 'structuring' in that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices" (2012, 50). Bourdieu argues that it is not simply the past that determines the present and future but, rather, a self-propagating transaction that occurs both ways. Arguing that one's activities are in various degrees socially conditioned, besides "externalization of internality" (Bourdieu 1977, 72), Bourdieu's theory emphasizes the all-pervasive and dynamic nature of social structuring. Foregrounding the issues of fashioning with regard to class, the distinct individual interactions within a specific spatial and temporal plane, and the past conditioning (in terms of the capital, field, and habitus, respectively), Maton suggests Bourdieu's theory of practice as a significant lens to analyse social interactions (2012, 50–2). Further, Bourdieu adds that habitus is:

> [the] product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more

6 The national/ist autobiographies (Holden 2008; Boehmer 2005a, 2005b) of Nehru or Gandhi that sought to build an image of India in opposition to its colonial history were definitely products of the existent pre-independence contingencies (see also Iyengar ([1962] 1985, 295; Guttman 2007, and Majeed 2007.

7 See Fernandes and Heller (2006); Sarkar (1989); Torri (1990) for details about differences among the colonial middle class in India.

> or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence. (1977, 85)

It should be mentioned here that Bourdieu has developed this concept throughout the trajectory of his sociological career, and although dense and often contested as a theoretical concept (see Bennett 2007; Reay 2004), habitus provides an understanding of being implicated within socio-cultural spaces. According to Bourdieu, individuals act within an inculcated set of value systems, generated within the respective socio-cultural and economic category, and are, in turn, disposed to act within a range of possibilities that the category engenders. Thus, the individual acts mitigated through one's language, mannerisms, and tastes are all variably shaped by their social standings and are simultaneously self-propagating. Bourdieu sees these simultaneously structuring structures as embodiments of a complex operative strategy. Besides the "material conditionings of existence," Bourdieu distinguishes the social classes as objective conditioners that majorly impact an individual's habitus as he lays the ground for his argument: "the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus" (1977, 86). Yet Bourdieu makes space for the individual spontaneity of practices within any specific field, which has often been considered as going against the grain of his first argument. In fact, the complexity of his theory mostly derives from this duality that he persistently argues throughout his writings.

Thus, in *The Logic of Practice* (1980), he distinguishes between what he terms the "class habitus" as an overdetermining structure and the "individual habitus." Bourdieu describes the latter as the "singularity of their social trajectories, to which there correspond series of chronologically ordered determinations that are mutually irreducible to one another" (1990 [1980], 60), while distinguishing it from the overarching former category of class habitus (60–1). Considering the differences between individuals' "social trajectory," despite being located within a similar matrix of class and temporal conditioning, he states that all individuals operate from a subjective perspective. The subjectivity results from his/her relative series of experiences, which make room for what Bourdieu describes as the individuality of practices. This proposition of subjective operations within an overarching structural objectivity is further justified in his theoretical work, *Distinction*, as he writes, "the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and

meaning-giving perceptions" (1984 [1979], 170). Bourdieu adds that the subjectivity is not necessarily always in sync with the collective dispositions and can be defined in terms of individual perceptions that evolve through the unique order of life experiences that an individual chances upon but are also, at times, consciously practiced. Bourdieu exemplifies his argument thus:

> Intellectuals and artists have a special predilection for the most risky but also most profitable strategies of distinction, those which consist in asserting the power, which is peculiarly theirs, to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, but in another mode, by other classes or class fractions (e.g., kitsch). (282)

While claiming that individual tastes and dispositions are always subject to unrealized conditioning that, consequently, continues to reinforce the structure itself, he highlights conscious acts on the parts of intellectuals and artists to consciously break with the normative range of responses. Whether the strategic dissociation succeeds in forging a clear boundary between the objective pattern and a subjective enactment seems debatable; however, what is significant herein is the "[assertion] of power" through such practices. Thus, Reay (2004) speaks of Bourdieu's sociological lens as a tool through which "[we] begin to get a sense not only of the myriad adaptations, responses, reactions and resistances to 'the way the world is,' but also of individuals struggling to make the world a different place" (437). With this insight into the possibility of individual practice within a field, it will be easier to understand Moraes's self-fashioning.

Moraes's stance of dissociating from his country of origin, as already argued, is underlined by his persistent desire to return and re-write his version of India. Thus, his being "afraid to face the answer" at the aforementioned lunch was because he could neither place himself in the position of the Bengali cameramen, who were hardly accustomed to English table manners, nor that of the racially prejudiced English cameramen who threw a tantrum at sharing a table with the former. The incident was problematic, as the binary that he had created vis-à-vis India and England was falling apart. This realization, however, starts taking concrete shape as Moraes travels across the country and finds himself at ease and appreciative of Indian spaces when he visits Karnataka. In *The Open Eyes*, he was able to feel at home in the "hospitality, uneffusive, unobtrusive" at his host's house, where the latter remarked, "Karnataka is basically a middle-class society. We have no real poverty, but we have not produced

any Tatas or Birlas" (2005, 127).[8] By the time Moraes had settled in India, his understanding of himself was hardly pitted against the binary of an Indian self or an English identity, but arose quite in terms of a class disposition.

Thus, when asked about his sense of companionship with Indians like Mr Dhagat, from his travels in Madhya Pradesh, about whom he writes in the book *Answered by Flutes*; or Basu Bhattacharya, who was his constant companion in Bombay after he returned to the city; Moraes replies, "I disliked most urban Indians I met because they were more obsessed with money and success than anyone else I had ever encountered," emphasizing "the crassness of many newly rich Indians, or those who had suddenly climbed into an avidly acquisitive middle class" (Moraes and Srivatsa 2002, 44). His settling down in India by the 1980s coincided with socio-political changes in the country that had become apparent by the 1990s:

> Three landmark events at the start of the 1990s highlight these transformations—one, the agitation against the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (1990); second, policies of economic liberalization adopted by the Government of India (1991); and third, the December 1992 destruction of a 16th-century mosque by a Hindu nationalist mob that wanted to build in its place a Hindu Mandir (temple). (Joshi 2017)

These changes brought about an evident socio-cultural change in India, besides redefining its political setup. Instead of a colonial, Nehruvian India, the post-1990s period saw the emergence of a new middle class (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Fuller 2009) as the dominant force behind the socio-cultural and political framework of India. Brought up within the traditional colonial middle-class habitus, Moraes naturally found the change and the habitual brandishing of the newly acquired status of the new middle class overbearing. Simultaneously, what irked him about the change was the aggressive religious or caste clashes that had erupted since the 1990s. Moraes thus found the 1992 demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid by a Hindu nationalist mob a jolting spectacle of the rise of a Hindutva voice that sought to create a majoritarian Indian identity (Varshney 1993; Shani 2005). This time, however, instead of opting to leave the country, he sought to address his situation of being a minority among a rising, violent, majoritarian tide in India. It is this conscious attempt that shaped Moraes's two twenty-first-century travelogues, and in these texts,

8 Tatas and Birlas are Indian business conglomerates owned by eponymous business tycoons.

in turn, he seeks to identify with India through his feeling of empathy for the dissociated and the marginalized voices of the country.

Moraes and the Felt Community of the Dissociated in India

In *Out of God's Oven,* Moraes strings together incidents of violence perpetrated against minorities and, consequently, seeks to project the pluralities of India as opposed to a majoritarian Hindutva identity; he calls it "the advent of a new and brutalized form of Hinduism under a government that encouraged unbridled communal hatred" (2002, xiv). Moraes opines that such violent caste and religious clashes, propagating communal tensions and hatred, refuse to consider the centuries of shared Indian history marked by different identities for different residents of the country. Within this context, he writes, "[the] Indian people [have] no sense of history. Their heroes shared the fate of their ancient monuments […] now books were written in defense of Godse, the man who killed him" (68). Highlighting the case of right-wing violence (of which Nathuram Godse, who had assassinated M. K. Gandhi for the latter's campaigns for the cause of Dalits and Muslims in India, was a representative), Moraes pinpoints the change that India has witnessed in the form of worshipping the Mahatma on the one hand, and books being written that normalize Godse's act on the other. Again, in his portrayal of the Sikh community and their feeling of being betrayed, Moraes paints a picture of another marginalized section of society that can hardly reconcile to a majoritarian Hindutva identity. Moraes quotes Mr Brar, a Sikh, who voices his alienation from the state: "[we] are an entirely separate race […] different from the Hindus, different from the Muslims" (163). At the core of this alienation, as Brar argues, lies a violent history: "[have] you read how many of our people were martyred during Partition, fifty years ago? […] In 1984 the Hindus martyred even more of us in Delhi" (163). Brar argues that the Sikhs share a sense of alienation with other Indian minorities: "in 1992 they massacred Muslims in Mumbai […] Soon they will turn on other minority communities" (165).

Mr Brar's feeling of alienation finds resonance in the opinion of another Indian Urdu poet from Lucknow, once the seat of high culture in Mughal India. Moraes quotes him: "In Lucknow and UP, over the last fifty years, there has been a purposeful attempt to destroy Urdu" (255). The poet argues that it is an ironic stance on the part of the Indian "government […] the misguided ones [… who] hate the language because they say it is Muslim" (255), who have in turn sought to replace the language with

Sanskrit, which is equated with Hindu and the majoritarian Indian culture. Besides the fact that the interpretation of Urdu as the language of Muslim invaders is a complete misinterpretation (Metcalf 2003) of Indian history, it is also problematic to establish Sanskrit as an authoritative language of the land. In the context of the overall obfuscation of Indian history by the majoritarian Hindutva followers, Romila Thapar writes:

> [Some] are now propagating an interpretation of Indian history based on Hindu nationalism and what has come to be called the Hindutva ideology [...] arguing that the Aryans and their language, Sanskrit, were indigenous to India. The [...] theory became axiomatic to their belief that those for whom the subcontinent was not the land of their ancestors and the land where their religion originated were aliens. (2002, 15)

Challenging this theory, Thapar writes that by "the mid-twentieth century, the notion that language and race can be equated was found to be invalid, and indeed the entire construction of unitary races was seriously doubted. The concept of an Aryan race fell apart" (15).

Foregrounding the divisiveness in India through these conversations, Moraes challenges the notion of majoritarian Indian identity. This line of argument can be also observed in the next travelogue, *The Long Strider*. Depicting a sixteenth-century Mughal India as observed through the eyes of his protagonist, Thomas Coyate, Moraes writes:

> Indians belonged to religions; to villages or towns, or to small provinces. The Hindus within the area ruled by the Moguls would never acknowledge loyalty to the Emperor, but had no language to link them with the other Hindus beyond the borders. The Muslims could hardly be expected to protect Hindu interests that conflicted with their own, and had their divisive sects, as the Hindus had castes. (2003b, 155)

The differences in caste, religion, and language that presented themselves in the form of riots or institutional/authoritative suppression, as documented in *Out of God's Oven*, are projected as part of sixteenth-century India under the rule of Jehangir as well. The perspective finds further heft in the quoted remark of a Sikh in *The Long Strider*: "the Muslims under Jehangir started to persecute Sikhs. Under Aurangzeb, it became worse [...] This has become a tradition in India. When the Muslims are not following it, the Hindus do" (135).

Comparing the practices of dividing communities, authoritative violence, and suppression of minorities in India from the two time-frames, Moraes critiques the very basis of modernity that India claims to have ushered in since its independence and, simultaneously, the Indian

government's claim of India being a modern, democratic nation-state. Alexander Motyl suggests that, in the context of the existence of modern nation states, "[democracy] and the market are two forces that compel individuals and groups to compete unremittingly, that produce winners and losers continually" (1992, 313) and argues that for a modern, democratic nation-state to function, there is a persistent need for secularism that hinders majoritarian or totalitarian tendencies. He writes that this "secularism is premised on the division of authority between a ghettoized religious sphere and an ever-growing public sphere, a polity that exerts the authority formerly exercised by the religious" (318) within the context of European nations. The Indian modern nation-state that came into being after independence was primarily moulded by the England-returned colonial middle class. One of the distinctive attributes of this otherwise disparate class was the significance of a public sphere that was differentiated from one's private life.[9] This separation between the private or religious sphere and the public sphere is naturally non-existent in a sixteenth-century Mughal India and seemed to be one of the major tenets that Nehruvian secular India sought to implement and, perhaps, extensively failed at (Khilnani 2004; Guha 2007). However, as observed by Moraes, the distinction is equally lacking in twenty-first century India, which has seen a rapid rise of Hindutva politics. With his own intellectual leanings of a traditional, liberal, Nehruvian middle-class man, Moraes found himself connected to the marginalized sections of society in his feeling of alienation from the majoritarian Indian idea.

Arguably, therefore, Moraes only feels at home in the presence of a handful of Indians with whom he could connect, rather than in the larger India. He thus remarked, "I thought I had never been so happy in my life, not even in England" (2002, 41) as he travelled across Madhya Pradesh in the company of Mr Dhagat during his research for the book *Answered by Flutes*, where they managed to prevent an innocent tribal boy from being unjustly punished in a case of murder, where evidence had been tampered with by the village's rich and powerful local leaders. It is this aspect of Moraes that was highlighted by some of his later critics, who found that the criticisms of Moraes as a 'traitor' to India was not merely incoherent but a prejudiced misreading. Thus, Ranjit Hoskote points out Moraes's feeling of oneness with the marginalized, stating that the latter was

> [largely] ignored by those academic regurgitators of postcolonial theory in India, who find they cannot twist him to their limited purposes. [… Moraes]

9 See Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008, 119–142) and Sudipta Kaviraj (2015, Chapter 10).

> explored the enigma of the human condition, of selves [...] torn apart and recast [...]. The fashion has been to discredit his prose as ephemeral, forgettable, irrelevant to his true calling. (2012, xvi–xvii)

In a similar fashion, Sarayu Srivatsa writes about Moraes as "the advocate of the marginalized wherever he went" (2019, xi). We must note in this context that Moraes extensively travelled India in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, gathering his data to highlight the situation of the marginalized, on various fronts, in the country, hoping to create a picture of India that differs from its majoritarian nationalist politics.

A group bonded by a sense of affiliation based on mutually shared feeling is what Rajat Ray terms a 'felt community,' suggesting that such fragmented voices together might, as well, bear the potential of shaping a nation. Ray writes:

> When a cultural community assumes definite shape in a state, it becomes, in his perception, a nation [...]. Indeed, if a community of emotion, in the process of becoming a nation-state, incorporates more than one cultural community, the structure may, in certain conditions, fragment [...] it is historically closer to reality to treat these various communities of sentiment, [fragments], as nationalities coexisting in a civilization underpinned by a common mentality, i.e., a broader community of emotion. (2003, 9–10)

What Ray suggests is that the nation in itself is brought together by shared cultural perceptions. However, the divergent cultural elements that underlie the broader national sentiment, which he calls 'fragments,' usually co-exist within any nation. Identifying these "sentiments" or "[communities] of emotion" as "nationalities," Ray hints at the possibility of rupture that exists within every nation. By depicting the marginalized voices/sentiments in India, who feel just as alienated as Moraes—who was regarded as a traitor and an outsider on the basis of his linguistic, socio-cultural, intellectual backgrounds—Moraes seeks to undermine his self-fashioning as a stranger in India. It is in his association to the numerous other Indians who feel dissociated from a majoritarian India, therefore, that Moraes reclaims his Indian identity.

ORCID®
Durba Mukherjee https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7244-926X

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About the Authors

Silvia Anastasijevic https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7954-0650
is a Research Associate at the Department of English, American, and Celtic Studies at the Rhenish Friedrich Wilhelm University of Bonn. Her habilitation focuses on narratives of posthumanism and artificial intelligence which transgress cultural and biological boundaries. She completed her PhD in 2025 at Goethe University Frankfurt. In her dissertation, she examined transcultural humor in the Anglophone world in various media. She has co-edited the volume *The Many Worlds of Anglophone Literature: Transcultural Engagements, Global Frictions* (Bloomsbury, 2024) as well as a Special Issue of *Kairos. A Journal of Critical Symposium* 4.1. entitled *Moving Centers & Traveling Cultures* (2019). Moreover, her research has been published in *Collisions of Cultures: Frictions and Re-Shapings* (Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2022, edited by Lily Rose Tope and Wolfgang Zach) and *Keywords in Transcultural English Studies* (2019). She is also the Editorial Assistant for *Matatu: Journal for African Literary and Cultural Studies* (Brill).

Dr. Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2418-9146
is Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the English Department of Zürich University (Switzerland). She holds degrees from Freie University Berlin and earned her PhD jointly from Monash University (Melbourne, Australia) and Goethe University (Frankfurt, Germany), resulting in her first monograph *Cosmological Readings of Contemporary Australian Literature: Unsettling the Anthropocene* (Routledge 2024). Her teaching and research primarily focus on the Environmental Humanities and Ecocriticism, World Anglophone literature, and transculturality. Currently, she is writing her second book, which explores the issue of intergenerational justice across time and space, as seen through the lens of Anglophone literature. Her work has also been published in *The Many Worlds of Anglophone Literature: Transcultural Entanglements, Postcolonial Frictions* (Bloomsbury 2024), *Australian Literary Studies* (2022), and *Narratives of Scale in the Anthropocene* (Routledge 2021). Together with Clara Hebel, she is the co-founder of the Environmental Humanities Slow Reading Group "Read the Room" at Goethe and Zürich University.

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Nadia Butt https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2291-1570
is Professor of Global Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the University of Frankfurt. She is the author of *Transcultural Memory and Globalised Modernity in Contemporary Indo-English Novels* (2015) and *The Travelling Imagination in Cross-Cultural Literature* (forthcoming). She has taught postcolonial literatures at the Universities of Giessen, Muenster, Milwaukee-Wisconsin. In 2019, she was awarded the Dr. Herbert-Stolzenberg Prize by the University of Giessen, where she worked as a senior lecturer from 2009 to 2023, for her outstanding achievements in teaching. Her main areas of research are transcultural theory and literature, postcolonialism, mobility and migration studies, memory studies, Global Anglophone literatures, and travel literatures. Her research has appeared in international peer-reviewed journals such as *Prose Studies*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, *Postcolonial Interventions, Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, and *Studies in Travel Writing*. Recently, she has published a special issue with *Matatu: Journal of African Culture and Society* (2025) and a handbook on *The Anglophone Novel in the 21st Century: Cultural Contexts – Literary Developments* (2023).

Saleh Chaoui https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3882-4772
is a lecturer at the University of Sidi Mohamed ben Abdellah, Morocco. His main research interests include postcolonialism, postsecularism, gender studies, diaspora fiction, and transnationalism, with a particular focus on exploring the intersections of faith, identity, and agency in Anglophone Muslim literature. He has presented his research at numerous international conferences across Europe. His work has been published in several international journals, including *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, ("Ensouling Agential Praxis in a Secular World: A Sufi Spiritual Turn in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*") *Religion and Gender* ("Navigating the Religious in the Cosmopolitan: Displaced Muslim Female Identities in Camilla Gibb's Sweetness in the Belly") *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, and *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences.*

Jaine Chemmachery https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2368-2775
is Senior Lecturer in Postcolonial and Diasporic Literatures at Sorbonne Université. She wrote her PhD dissertation on R. Kipling's and S. Maugham's short stories on Empire and the relation between colonialism, modernity and the genre of the short story (2013). Her main research fields are postcolonial studies and literature, diasporic literature and decolonial theory. Her current research focuses on mobility studies, body studies and critical phenomenology. She co-edited with Bhawana Jain a collected volume

entitled *Mobility and Corporeality in Nineteenth to Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Literature: Bodies in Motion* (2021) and edited a special issue of *Postcolonial Literatures and Arts* (formerly known as *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*) on the topic of "Renaissance" (2022). Her latest publications include "'We'll be in touch all the time': Touch and/as Resistance in *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie), (*L'Atelier*, 2023, 15.1) and "'He wants me to bring him home, even in the form of a shell': Criminalized Bodies and Repatriation in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*" (*Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2024, 26. 1)

Alessandra Di Pietro https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6216-3110
received her doctorate from the University of Bern, Switzerland, for her thesis on *Contemporary Postcolonial Literatures as World Literatures: An Analysis of World-Making Narratives of Resistance,* which will be published as a monograph by Palgrave Macmillan. She is currently Teaching Assistant and Exam Committee Member (*cultrice della materia*) at the University "G. d'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescara, Italy, where she also started a second PhD that looks at the representations of African cosmologies in contemporary African and Caribbean Literatures. Her research interests include postcolonial and decolonial studies, feminist theory and queer studies. She has attended various international conferences and her articles have appeared in a number of peer-reviewed journals and edited collections. She is a member of the research group *L&GEND: Literature and Gender Identity*, which is funded by the University "G. d'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescara.

Vanessa Guignery https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4008-2007
is Professor of contemporary British and Postcolonial Literature at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon and the President of the SEAC (Society of Contemporary English Studies). She is the author of monographs on Julian Barnes (2001, 2006, 2020), B.S. Johnson (2009), Ben Okri (2012), and Jonathan Coe (2015), and the editor or co-editor of some fifteen collections of essays on contemporary British and postcolonial literature (notably on Ben Okri, Janet Frame, Nadine Gordimer, and Caryl Phillips). Her research interests focus on issues relating to the poetics of voice and silence, hybridity, generic transformations, fragmentation, and genetic criticism. Her latest monograph is *Julian Barnes from the Margins: Exploring the Writer's Archives* (Bloomsbury, 2020). She edited a special issue of the journal *Études Anglaises* on contemporary Nigerian literature (2022) as well as *Conversations with Ben Okri* (University of Mississippi Press, 2024). She is currently writing a book on Kazuo Ishiguro's creative process through an analysis of his archives. Website: www.vanessaguignery.com.

Robert Kusek https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9969-0221
(Ph.D, D.Litt), Jagiellonian University Professor, Department of Comparative Studies in Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. His research interests include life writing genres, the contemporary novel in English, postcolonial studies, queer heritage, as well as a comparative approach to literary studies. He is the author of two monographs, including *Through the Looking Glass: Writers' Memoirs at the Turn of the 21st Century* (Jagiellonian University Press, 2017), and several dozen articles published in books, academic journals, and magazines, as well as co-editor of fourteen volumes of articles, most notably *Travelling Texts: J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers* (Peter Lang, 2014). He was a researcher in a number of Polish and international projects—currently he is a principal investigator in the National Science Centre funded project entitled "(Un)accidental Tourists: Polish Literature and Visual Culture in South Africa in the 20th and 21st Centuries."

Pavan Kumar Malreddy https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4214-1464
joined the Chair of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at Potsdam University in 2025, after a long and winding career in the humanities and social sciences in India, the Netherlands, Singapore, Canada, Germany, and Belgium. He previously held positions at Chemnitz University and Goethe University Frankfurt, and specializes in 20th and 21st century comparative Anglophone literatures and cultures with a regional focus on East Asia, Africa, and South Asia, and a thematic focus on conflicts, communal bonds, insurgencies, populism, public life and migrancy. He interviewed/hosted prominent novelists and theorists such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, Arundhati Roy, Yann Martel, Homi K. Bhabha, Mohsin Hamid, Tom McCarthy, Amit Chaudhuri, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Tabish Khair. He co-edits Kairos*: A Journal of Critical Symposium*, and serves on the advisory board of *Philosophy, Politics and Critique* and *The Journal of Alterity Studies and World Literatures*. His latest monograph, published with Cambridge University Press, is Insurgent Cultures: World Literatures and Violence from the Global South (2024). He is currently working on a monograph titled *Postcolonial Fever: Anatomy of an Exhausted Paradigm* (Routledge 2026, contracted), and a *Cambridge Companion to the Literatures of the Global South* (w/Lars Eckstein).

Durba Mukherjee https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7244-926X
is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Gokhale Memorial Girls' College, Kolkata. She holds a PhD from the Indian Institute of

Technology, Kanpur, where she worked on the travel memoirs of Indian middle-class returnees in a dissertation titled "Literature of Return: Portrayals of India in the Travel Memoirs of Indian Middle-Class Returnees." Her research interests include life writing, travel literature, and Indian writing in English. She is revising her doctoral thesis into a monograph, which has been accepted for publication by Routledge. Her research works have appeared in *Life Writing*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* and *Studies in Travel Writing*.

Marian Ofori-Amoafo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2168-1269
is a doctoral candidate in US American studies at the University of Bayreuth. She is currently completing her dissertation examining twenty-first-century anglophone novels of slavery. Her thesis adopts a race-critical and Black feminist geographic approach to examining literary geographies and mobilities of slavery, their afterimages, and transgenerational impacts on Afrodiasporic descendants. She has also lectured at the Universities of Bayreuth, Passau and Hildesheim on African American literature and culture, anglophone African, and Afrodiasporic literatures. From June 2022 to February 2024 she worked as a research associate on the University of Passau's BMBF-funded project "'Welfare Queens' and 'Losers': a Critical Race and Intersectional Perspective on the U.S. American Welfare State," examining structural racism within U.S. society. Her expertise is in transnational American Studies, Diaspora and Black Atlantic studies, global slavery studies, literary spatial and mobility studies, and immigrant literature. Additional areas of interest are critical race theories, Black feminist Geographic and Mobilities. She has published in *American Studies* (Germany) and *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* and has forthcoming publications with Routledge, *Literary Geography*, and heiUP.

Harshana Rambukwella, who passed away during the preparation of this volume, was Director of the Postgraduate Institute of English at the Open University of Sri Lanka and Visiting Professor at New York University Abu Dhabi. He was a comparative literature and cultural studies scholar with an interest in the intersections between literature, history, aesthetics, and nationalism in South Asia. He was also a sociolinguist with a strong interest in critical sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Rambukwella authored *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity* (UCL Press 2018) and published in journals such as *boundary 2*, the *Journal of Asian Studies*, and *Interventions*; he was also an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* and served on the editorial board of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. During his time in Abu Dhabi, Rambukwella was working on a

project on the 'cultural life of democracy,' looking at democracy in 'everyday life' as expressed in cultural and aesthetic artifacts and also served as a Project Fellow on the *Reversing the Gaze* team—an interdisciplinary multi-sited project attempting to interrogate how insights from the postcolonial world can be usefully employed in the analysis of populism and anti-democratic thinking in Europe.

Frank Schulze-Engler https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0148-2251
was professor of New Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at Goethe University Frankfurt until his retirement in 2023. He has published widely on African, Asian and indigenous literature and culture, postcolonial theory, comparative perspectives on and the teaching of the New Literatures in English, Indian Ocean Studies, postcolonial Europe, and transculturality in a world of globalized modernity. From 2013–2019, he was joint project leader of "Africa's Asian Options" (AFRASO), a major collaborative research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. His most recent book publications include *Afrasian Transformations: Transregional Perspectives on Development Cooperation, Social Mobility and Cultural Change* (Brill 2020, co-edited with R. Achenbach, J. Beek, J. N. Karugia and R. Mageza-Barthel), *Entanglements: Envisioning World Literature from the Global South* (Ibidem 2022, co-edited with A. Gremels, M. Scheurer, and J. Wegner) and *Mapping World Anglophone Studies: English in a World of Strangers* (Routledge 2024, co-edited with Pavan Kumar Malreddy).

Saambavi Sivaji https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4749-460X
is a PhD Candidate and Teaching Fellow at the School of Social Sciences, Monash University. She holds a Master of Arts in Anglophone Literatures, Cultures, and Media from Goethe University Frankfurt, where she graduated with distinction, and a BA (Honours) in English from the University of Colombo. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on cultural memory and diaspora studies, particularly within Sri Lankan Tamil transnational contexts. Her doctoral research investigates the cultural and memorial practices of the first generation Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Australia. She has presented her work at numerous international conferences, including the Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, The British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) conference in the UK, and the Annual GAPS Research Conferences in Germany. Saambaviy is the recipient of several scholarships and grants, including the Monash University Faculty of Arts International Postgraduate Research Scholarship, the Christopher Brumfit Scholarship awarded by BAAL, the Goethe Graduation Scholarship, and travel grants from both GAPS and

BAAL. In addition to her academic work, her creative pursuits span poetry, fiction, and bilingual literary translation. She is also a classically trained violin enthusiast with a keen interest in music as a form of cultural expression.

Julia Wurr is Junior Professor of Postcolonial Studies at the Institute for English and American Studies at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany. Her first book, *Literary Neo-Orientalism and the Arab Uprisings: Tensions in English, French and German Language Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), analyses the commercialisation of Neo-Orientalist and securitised elements in short fiction and novels aimed at the Western literary market. Her current research project on "reproductive imperialism" explores the nexus between narrative, social, and biological reproduction in (post)colonial texts and contexts. Her research interests include postcolonial medical and health humanities, biocapitalism, as well as South Asian and Arab Anglophone literatures, and she is involved in research projects on critical AI studies and migration studies. Julia Wurr serves as the vice-president of GAPS, the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies, and is associate editor of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.

GAPS gesellschaft für anglophone postkoloniale studien
association for anglophone postcolonial studies

This volume responds to the multiple forms of oppression and their manifold casualties in the Global South, without taking recourse to a preemptive normativity promising instant identification of victims and perpetrators. It explores critical, self-reflexive, and disenchanted rather than organic, blanket, or mesmerized forms of solidarity. It further investigates literature and culture beyond habitual victimological frameworks as sites of unruly, unexpected, and unpredictable agency. The edited collection of essays provides impressive examples of such work engaging with a wide array of narrative forms—from novels, short fiction, life writing, and poetry to performance, documentary, film, and museum exhibitions—cutting across an equally wide array of contexts ranging from Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, and India to Kenya, the Middle East, Poland, Sri Lanka, South Africa, the UK, the USA, and Zimbabwe.

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HEIDELBERG
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SEIT 1386