

World Enough, and Time: Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* with Marcuse, Benjamin, and Chakrabarty

Greg Forter 

This article contributes to recent discussions of temporality in relation to the concept of “world,” and especially, to how thinking “world” with “time” can rejuvenate postcolonial figurations of futurity. The theoretical texts I discuss include Pheng Cheah’s What Is a World?, Darieck Scott’s Extravagant Abjection, and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe. I retrieve the distinction in these works between the structural dislocations that “found” human being and decompose linear time, and more properly historical decenterings in which the heterotemporal is an effect of social processes of exploitation and (colonial-capitalist) domination. To honor this distinction, I place recent thinkers into dialogue with Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, suggesting that a post-poststructuralist reclamation of the latter is particularly overdue. The article culminates in an explication of Zoë Wicomb’s David’s Story—a work that asks us to live through its form that postcolonial mode of the nonsynchronous with which my argument is concerned.

Keywords: world literature, postcolonial literature, postcolonial theory, Marxism, temporality

Two remarkable recent critical works propose a rather startling connection between literature, the imagining of other worlds, and the category of time. In *What Is a World?*, Pheng Cheah argues that contemporary efforts to theorize world literature have relied on an overly spatialized conception of “world.” He contends that the condition for conceiving the world as a global extension of objects in space is a largely occluded but prior experience of time as nonlinear, constitutive disorder. This is a time that founds the “self” both in and as a being-with-others that’s presubjective, nonanthropological, and constitutively nonidentical to itself. Both colonialism and contemporary capital work by “forgetting” this originary temporality and (more generally) through the privileging of the spatial over the temporal. Postcolonial literature is thus “world literature” when and inasmuch as it retrieves and permits us to experience the “world” as the advent of a radical temporal alterity—when and inasmuch as such literature is “an enactment of worlding by the gift of time.”¹

Greg Forter is the author of three books and numerous articles. He teaches postcolonial, US, and contemporary world literatures and theory at the University of South Carolina. (Email: Gforter1@mailbox.sc.edu)

1 Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 18, 129.

Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* is a very different kind of book. Eschewing both the category of world literature and the direct exploration of worlding per se, Scott thematizes a region of experience that portends the *unworlding* and temporal dismantling of the (Black male) self. His claim is that this temporal dismantling is the medium through which the racialized body lays claim to a power inhering in the very fact of its submission. *Extravagant Abjection* develops these claims through a reading of African American fictions that invite (Scott shows) a mobile identification with abjection as the site of anticolonial empowerment—an identification through which is disclosed “a different world” (his words) where the refuse of identity will have been embraced, if not yet integrated or temporally reassembled.²

I suggest that these invocations of “world” have a surprising amount in common. Both bespeak a theorist's willingness to envision some *other*, nondominative social order. In both, the lineaments of this other world emerge from the recovery of an ordinary relation to time. And in both, imaginative literature serves as an exemplary site for accessing this temporality, a place (if not the only one) where the world we inhabit is itself revealed as containing the occluded remnants of that other-worldly dimension of time.

The arguments are in each case both dazzling and daring. Still, I wish to focus on a set of limits that are symptomatic of more general tendencies in contemporary theory. Although both authors are explicitly concerned with sociohistorical forms of domination—colonialism, white supremacy, even (in Scott) heteronormativity—they rely on theoretical models that transhistoricize the ameliorative (temporal) condition they seek to reclaim. Cheah theorizes that condition by way of the late Derrida. He conceives it as a presubjective, nonthematizable, differing/deferring dimension of being that founds the “world” as a constitutive nonpresence continually haunting individual subjects and the objects they seek to know.³ In Scott the emphasis falls instead on the “temporal dispersal” disclosed by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. This is an order of “anonymous” or “amorphous” existence that precedes intentional consciousness; it provides the substratum of a perceptual apparatus perpetually forging the illusion of the self's consistency over time.⁴ There are of course important differences between these two accounts. Yet each refers to a temporal order that underlies *any and all* social worlds (though all known worlds occlude it). It follows from this that each considers literature indispensable to a politics aimed at redressing historical injustice only inasmuch as literature gives onto nonhistorical “truths,” truths that in these theorists' eyes apply to everyone, always.

The problem can be recast to stress a central tension in each work. For Scott, Black abjection is *sociogenic in origin*, indistinguishable as it is from what Frantz Fanon calls “becoming black” at the hands of historically specific relations of domination. Yet it is *ontogenic* in what it reveals about the phenomenology of human existence: a general (racially, historically, and socially nonspecific) condition of freedom-in-imprisonment and imprisonment-in-freedom, whose primary temporal form is “counterlinear”

2 Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 151–52.

3 Cheah, *What Is a World?*, chap. 6.

4 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 85–86.

dispersal.⁵ For Cheah, the legacy of colonialism lingers in the historically explicable phenomenon called “the destruction of the world by capitalist globalization”—a phenomenon he wishes to distinguish from “the structural disappearance of the world that accompanies the inappropriable other’s coming.”⁶ Yet this latter event is radically *nonhistorizable*, an advent marked by constitutive nonpresence and heralding that hauntological affliction that in deconstruction is the antifoundational foundation of *all* human being: “freedom from the regularity of temporalization, whether we understand temporality as a succession of nows or as the anticipation of a future present.”⁷ My hesitation has to do with whether this nonhistorical temporality and the world onto which it opens are sufficient for redressing the *historical* injustices with which Cheah and Scott are concerned. Do we not need to distinguish between acknowledging the wounds or temporal decenterings that constitute our being-in-time and addressing injuries caused by such social formations as chattel slavery, settler colonialism, homophobia, and patriarchy? The first of these are by their nature insusceptible to amelioration—that’s what it means to call them “originary”—whereas the second *might* at least be redressed because they are, precisely, historical rather than structural-foundational.

The distinction is not exactly new. In the context of mourning and trauma theory, Eric Santner and Dominick LaCapra have each made similar differentiations—between structural and historical forms of grief-work in Santner’s case and between the trans-historical absence posited by poststructuralists and historical experiences of loss in LaCapra’s.⁸ Here I wish to draw on a rather different intellectual tradition. It is one I have had to construct as much as uncover fully formed, and it involves a constellation of writers who could be shown on many points to diverge quite radically: Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and the South African novelist Zoë Wicomb.⁹ What links these figures is less a coherent theoretical program than, first, a materialist intuition about the socio-economic determinants of culture and the constitutive role of praxis—of “sensuous human activity”—in the production and transformation of social life;¹⁰ and second, a wedding of that intuition to the project of thinking temporal heterogeneity “with” utopian restitution and the forging of other worlds. In making

5 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 66–67, 259. Scott arrives at Merleau-Ponty through Fanon’s account of “the native’s tensed muscles” in *Wretched of the Earth*.

6 Cheah, *What Is a World?*, 179.

7 Cheah, *What Is a World?*, 171.

8 Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

9 For reasons of space, I’ve omitted an additional figure—Reinhart Koselleck—who could be shown to belong to this tradition. See his *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), chap. 14.

10 For “sensuous human activity,” see the first of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One: With Selections from Parts Two and Three and Supplementary Texts*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Press, 1970), 121. My definition of materialism in relation to practice comes from Roy Bhaskar by way of John Bellamy Foster. Bhaskar distinguishes among three dimensions of a “materialist worldview”: “practical materialism,” which emphasizes the centrality of “transformative human agency” in the making of “social forms”; “ontological materialism,” which posits the priority of matter and physical processes over thought; and “epistemological materialism,” according to which objects of knowledge have a real existence outside of and prior to knowledge itself. Materialists may adhere more or less strongly to one or the other of these elements, though Marx himself subscribed to all of them. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 2.

such links, each author retains a powerful sense of the distinction between the (temporal) deformations that inhere in our being-in-time and being-in-language and those that are the products of historical dispensations of power. My wager is that honoring this difference can bring the concepts of world and time into more fruitful relations than those provided by Cheah and (more obliquely) Scott. Keeping faith with the distinction requires attending to how historical forms of the heterotemporal can alone reveal, in Susan Buck-Morss's words, that "the empirically finished suffering of history is [in fact] unfinished" and "the present course of events does not exhaust reality's potential."¹¹ The present contains in reified form the memory of a *non-ontological plenitude*, which thought must blast from the continuum of time to redeem human history's unfinished suffering.

Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* provides a productive (if surprising) starting point.¹² The book attempts to wrest and sublimate the kernel of truth from Freud's assertion that civilization and human happiness are locked in permanent, escalating warfare. To achieve this Marcuse proposes to distinguish between two modalities of repression—modalities that correspond to and extend the distinction I've made between "structural" and historical dislocations. The first of these Marcuse calls "basic repression."¹³ The term refers to the forms and degrees of repression necessary to the survival of the human organism per se and the formation of relatively individuated selves who can exist pacifically with others (i.e., a social order). Here Marcuse is acknowledging the transhistorical necessity of *some degree* of curtailment in the proto-subject of the pleasure principle—the principle that strives for full and total gratification, *here and now*, without heed of the consequences—and the subordination of such desire to the demands of "reality." Implicit in such a view is that any and all social orders require deferred gratification and conformity to norms, but offer in recompense basic survival and the sublimated gratifications of sociality, comradeship, romantic affection, and so forth.

Marcuse argued that a materialist psychoanalysis must supplement this account of transhistorical repression with the historical category of "surplus-repression." This he

11 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 233, 244.

12 Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis and his generalized suspicion of "sexual liberation" have so permeated critical discourse in recent decades that Marcuse's kind of radical psychoanalysis has fallen into near-total disrepute. (See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage, 1980], esp. 1–15 and 157.) Yet scholars have for some time suggested that Foucault misunderstands repression when he criticizes it as purely "negative." See, for example, Gad Horowitz, "The Foucauldian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution," *Political Theory* 15.1 (1987): 61–80, and Joel Whitebook, "Against Interiority: Foucault's Struggle with Psychoanalysis," *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 312–47. In a different vein, Deborah Cook has argued that Foucault is less hostile to psychoanalysis than is conventionally assumed and that his emphasis on panoptical processes of internalized self-discipline can be read as extending Freud's description of how normative subjectivity is constituted by the introjection of superegoic functions (Deborah Cook, "Foucault, Freud, and the Repressive Hypothesis," *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 45.2 [2014]: 148–61).

13 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1966), 35.

defines succinctly as “the restrictions necessitated by social domination.”¹⁴ He expands on this definition in a passage worth quoting at length:

The various modes of domination (of man and nature) result in various historical forms of the reality principle... . These differences affect the very content of the reality principle, for every form of the reality principle must be embodied in a system of societal institutions and relations, laws and values which transmit and enforce the required “modification” of instincts... . Moreover, while any form of the reality principle demands a considerable degree and scope of repressive control over instincts, the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination introduce *additional* controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association. These additional controls arising from the specific institutions of domination are what we denote as *surplus-repression*.¹⁵

The passage is remarkable partly for the way it helps reveal the limits to Foucault’s influential critique of the “repressive hypothesis.” For insofar as Marcuse intercalates repression with domination, he also proposes that this dialectic is not just negative or prohibitive (as Foucault claims the left Freudians believed), but productive. What it produces is reality itself—reality as historically variable. The reality principle is “embodied” in norms and institutions that produce specific kinds of subjects who conform to the demands of this historically differentiated reality (and conform “all by themselves,” to paraphrase Althusser). This means that while *some* forms of decentering or originary curtailment are constitutive of human life, other (properly historical) repressions and the constricting norms that accompany them are susceptible to change and even overthrow. Revolutionary change would *abolish this historical form of the human* at the same time as it transformed the “reality” that both invented and required that form. But it would not—*could* not—ameliorate the decenterings or (temporal) dislocations that all of us suffer by virtue of our being-in-time and being-in-language. The distinction between basic and surplus repression would thus permit an analysis that articulates rather than collapsing what Scott calls ontogenesis and sociogenesis: the Derridean/phenomenological insights into those wounds that are constitutive of human subjectivity and the sociohistorical analysis of decenterings induced by colonialism and white supremacy.

Like Scott and Cheah, Marcuse links his social critique and his vision of emancipation to distinct figurations of time. He names the late-capitalist incarnation of the reality principle the “performance principle” and indicates that it requires a massive desexualization of the body’s surface in the name of instrumentalizing that body for the performance of alienated labor. This process is in one sense a spatial delimiting—the surplus desensitization of erotogenic zones and increased centralization of pleasure on the genitals, which together “free” the rest of the body for work. But it includes a temporal dimension as well. A spatially circumscribed and sensuously impoverished pleasure is constrained to take place during “leisure time,” the time not spent at work. This signals the “temporal dismemberment” of a relation to the body and bodily pleasure

14 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 35.

15 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 37.

that precedes and subtends the reign of the performance principle.¹⁶ “A society governed by the performance principle must of necessity impose such [temporal] distribution because the organism must be trained for its alienation at its very roots—the *pleasure-ego*.” Yet “the pleasure principle ... is ‘timeless’ ... in the sense that it militates against [this] temporal dismemberment.”¹⁷ It aims to incarnate an “eternity of pleasure,” the embodiment in historical time of an antilinear and heteronomous ex-stasis. In abolishing the performance principle and its version of the human, then, the revolution that Marcuse foments would retrieve that “timeless and useless gratification” in which the body’s polymorphous intensities become ends to be sought for their own sake—ends that interrupt chronological time with the timelessness of that measure of plenitude that survives on “this” side of basic repression.¹⁸

To be sure, Marcuse’s arguments cannot be translated without remainder into the lexica of Cheah and Scott. The Marxist commitments of *Eros and Civilization* lead to a foregrounding of the nexus between capitalism and the patriarchal family as the central impediment to an emancipated world—and to a paucity of interest in race, on one hand, the expressly colonial instance of capital on the other. Just as Marcuse must therefore negate and sublimate Freud’s category of repression to extract from it its historical truth, so must we perform an analogous operation on Marcuse’s text. I propose to do this by retaining the distinction between historical and structural (or basic) forms of repression while restoring to the historical side of this cleavage the colonial and racial dynamics that *Eros and Civilization* cannot compass. Cheah’s and Scott’s theorizations of an other-worldly, originary temporality inhering in the racialized body (Scott) and the neocolonial social order (Cheah) invite this kind of double hermeneutic. But race and colonialism will themselves be negated and preserved by this maneuver; the analysis of racial/colonial *domination* is subordinated in what follows to an interpretation that places race in determinate relation to capitalist *exploitation*. My aim here is to take seriously the statement that “race is a fiction” by suggesting that the motivation for sustaining it is the extraction of surplus-value, not domination or the will-to-power alone.¹⁹

Marcuse’s concern with the vagaries of the body, meanwhile—and especially, with the so-called “perversions” as heterotemporal, bodily protests against the devastations of patriarchal capitalism—aligns him more closely with Scott than with Cheah since the former’s emphasis on the category of abjection has an obvious corporeal reference. It thus bears noting that *Extravagant Abjection* contains one of the most compelling contemporary engagements with Marcuse’s arguments. Scott is particularly good on the role of memory in *Eros and Civilization*’s vision of carnality. “[F]or Marcuse,” he writes, “the better pre-ego past and the better postcapitalist future are, if not precisely one and the same, at least reflections of one another.”²⁰ This view of the past as mirror to the future follows from Marcuse’s understanding of the processes by which capitalism props subordination upon the fact of temporal impermanence: “The mere anticipation

16 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 45–48.

17 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 47.

18 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 47.

19 See Todd Cronan, “Class into Race: Brecht and the Problem of State Capitalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (2017): 54–79.

20 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 117.

of the inevitable end [of any moment of plenitude],” Marcuse writes, “introduces a repressive element into all libidinal relations and renders pleasure itself painful. The primary frustration in the instinctual structure of man becomes the inexhaustible source of all other frustrations—and of their social effectiveness.”²¹ The argument here, as Scott rightly notes, is that the linearity of ordinary “clock” time becomes the alibi for an ideological insistence on the fleeting character of all pleasure, and hence, on dissatisfaction as the very essence of human being. Linear “time ... is for Marcuse one ... concept that psychologically defeats political attempts at ending suffering or eliminating alienation.” The result is that *Eros and Civilization* reaches backward to move forward, “model[ing] politics on ... the pre-ego and [the libido prior to the] subject/object split”; resistance to capitalism’s ontologization of social misery requires a “radical remembrance that permits the primordial past ... to live in the present and to set the standard for a liberated future.”²²

This is an exceedingly insightful reading of Marcuse’s text. The very fact of its inclusion in *Extravagant Abjection* should prompt an overdue assessment of how an expressly liberatory psychoanalysis might be reclaimed for contemporary thought. But without the distinction between historical and structural levels of analysis, Scott’s text risks construing the “better pre-ego past” as a quasi-natural (“primordial”) category—an experience of bodily plenitude that predates social life altogether, rather than, as Marcuse argues, an historically formed condition that can be retrieved in modified form precisely *because* it was social all along. From this misprision it’s a very short step to what seems a preemptive defense in Scott’s book against the charge of naive utopianism: he intimates that the damage inflicted by racism approaches the intractability of—indeed, is indistinguishable from—those structural, insurmountable decenterings to which I referred earlier. Shifting at one point to a Lacanian register, Scott writes: “It is possible to say that blackness either is another layer of the constitutive split [that founds the human subject], or that it is the constitutive split for those who exist it; but whichever of the two it may be, its attributes are the same, and what it accesses is ultimately of similar significance.”²³ Such formulations make the abolition of injurious racial categories all-but impossible to imagine. (How would one abolish a *constitutive* split?) The best one can do is to “stretch” current norms to include an acknowledgment of our founding dislocation (in and as a form of blackening), thereby opening the subject to what conventional identities disown and disparage.²⁴ The revolutionary aims of Marcuse’s analyses are thus enfolded in a project that hovers between granting the need for radical

21 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 231.

22 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 117.

23 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 115.

24 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 259. Scott derives the concept of stretching from Frantz Fanon, who famously declared that Marx’s analysis of class-based oppression must be “stretched” to account for the colonial situation. Scott’s use of this concept, though it produces a far more compelling Fanon than Homi Bhabha’s version of him, seems to me susceptible to the criticism leveled by Ato Sekyi-Otu in *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 45: “Bhabha’s favorite Fanon would ... bestow retroactive virtue on an imposed necessity [i.e., on colonial subjection], wrest from the colonized subjects’ abjection the secret of their liberty, and find in the inner divisions inflicted upon them the joyful wisdom of an indeterminate identity.... The result is a Fanon who has no foundational premises from which to rail, yell, and holler—a Fanon who as a consequence has no ideals to realize.”

change and endorsing Black abjection as an inescapable if elastic condition of empowerment-in-submission.

I am interested in the worlds that emerge when we refuse this preemptive defense. I am drawn to the shimmer of alien landscapes that beckon not when we open ourselves to the originary temporality concealed by all social orders, but when we grasp that the ontological differs from the historical and that the historical alone is where something like social renewal might happen. Only there—in the historically malleable world—can time be made an ally of freedom rather than a medium of compulsion and necessity. Neither a teleological, progressivist straightjacket nor a disavowed truth to which we must learn to submit, the kind of time I have in mind is one whose heterotemporal dimension results from historical processes and hegemonic modes of remembrance, which seek to expunge defeated desires, forbidden solidarities, and revolutionary possibilities from the living present. Such desires, solidarities, and possibilities resist complete erasure, returning instead to haunt the present with the residues of unrealized pasts. Marcuse's text provides one way of beginning to conceptualize this *historical* form of the heterotemporal, especially as it is lived at the individual, corporeal level. Surplus-repression appears in this light as a mechanism of self- and reality production, whose unwanted byproduct is the specter borne upon the flesh of pasts that the present has failed at once to realize and to metabolize. Such a view has the further benefit of including a normative dimension in its critique of present dominion. The forms of polymorphous pleasure persisting on "this" side of basic repression serve as figural templates for a world that's characterized by the disalienation of labor, the maximization of pleasure, and the sublation of individual gratification into collective, social forms.²⁵

Despite the advantages of Marcuse's view, however, we would do well to supplement it with those of theorists more directly concerned with historical time's non-identity with itself. In such theorists' work, the movement of thought is tuned to the timbre of worlds that inhere, not so much in the individual body, as in the larger social space of a capitalist present that's haunted by pasts whose repression also constitutes it.

Walter Benjamin's meditations on method are particularly germane to this endeavor. In the brilliantly gnomic, enigmatic late essay, "On the Concept of History," Benjamin developed a series of figures for thinking about the heterogeneous presence of the past in every "now" and the relation between such heterogeneity and the project of liberation. A central object of his critique is what he terms *historicism*—a view of history that reduces it to untrammelled forward motion ("progress"), to a purposeful movement of the human collectivity through "homogeneous, empty time," and to a positivist effort to "eradicat[e] every vestige of history's original role as remembrance." Benjamin describes one effect of this view as "the elimination of every echo of a 'lament' from history."²⁶ He points, that is, to how the very form of this kind of historiography

25 See here the remarkable passage in which Marx describes the aesthetic-sensuous content of human freedom (freedom, for example, as a "complete emancipation of all human senses," such that "in practice the senses ... become direct theoreticians"), "Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 92–93.

26 Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938–1940), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 401. The "Paralipomena" consists of fragments apparently omitted from the draft of "On the Concept of History," which in its turn remained unpublished at the time of Benjamin's death in 1940.

goes hand in glove with “empathy with the victors,” such that the act of “transmitting” historical knowledge participates in the violence that constitutes such knowledge and that the knowledge itself represses. “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” as Benjamin famously put it. Our “cultural treasures” “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. . . . And just as a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”²⁷

I take this to be a reflection not merely on the violence and exploitation constitutive of what we call culture, but on how historicism abets such violence. The historicist transmits history itself as a “document” whose narrative seamlessness enables it to pass as “cultural treasure.” But it can do so only inasmuch as that seamlessness stifles the lament of the “anonymous toilers” over whose bodies the “rulers” and the historicists “step.”²⁸ To brush history against the grain is then to resist this narrative procession: “The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.”²⁹ In developing this critique, Benjamin offers a theologico-materialist theory of time’s non-identity with itself: “The historian who [grants that the past “became historical posthumously”] ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. . . . [H]e establishes a conception of the present as now-time [*Jetztzeit*] shot through with splinters of messianic time.” Or again, “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time.” For “The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. . . . [And] only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.”³⁰ Finally, and perhaps most suggestively:

Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. . . . In this structure [the historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history; thus he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era *in* the lifework, and the entire course of history *in* the era.³¹

Such passages have attracted a great deal of critical commentary over the years. I’ve quoted them at length to stress that, despite compelling efforts by some commentators to

27 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol 4, 391–92.

28 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391.

29 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 394–95.

30 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 390, 395, 397.

31 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 396.

appropriate Benjamin for deconstructive purposes, his interest lies rather in the tension between a theological account of time's heterogeneity in a fallen world and a materialist analysis of that "fall" itself.³² The fallen character of the world we inhabit comes from the fact that it is a world defined by historical domination and, more particularly, by the history of class exploitation that the historical materialist would combat. To engage in that combat the critic must strive to make the historically silenced audible as a heterogeneous, undigested "lament" within homogeneous, empty time—a lament of the anonymous multitudes that will not be heard as anything other than its determinate negation, until such time as a "redeemed mankind" rediscovers the past as "citable in all its moments." The latter discovery is contingent upon a rejuvenated, materialist historiography on one hand, a revolutionary transformation of the world on the other. Redemption, in other words, in Benjamin's thought, takes place when an eschatological yearning to repair the rift in time is negated yet preserved in a materialist understanding of what put time out of joint with itself in the first place.³³ If such redemption is figured in the essay as eruption, advent, unprecedented and unforeseen arrival ("every second [is] the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter"³⁴), this is nonetheless a *materialist* form of advent. The "messianic arrest of happening" creates "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."³⁵ It involves the filling of temporal emptiness with a heterogeneity that, while its content evades all pre-predication, must be named and seized by a revolutionary consciousness if the hetero-temporal dimension within history is to achieve its eschatological ends.³⁶

I'm suggesting that pairing Benjamin with Marcuse can help us see how the forging of other worlds requires attending to specifically historical instances of the nonsynchronous. Where Marcuse thinks of these instances as memorial residues of carnal intensities that the performance principle requires us to forget, Benjamin locates them in artifacts and events more evidently public, and hence, more clearly riven by class antagonism. It is the silenced scream of history—the occluded lament of the dispossessed—that exercises his imagination. The unique demands of theorizing this lament without prematurely substantializing it are surely what give rise in his work to the dialectic I've described between (negative) theology and materialist historiography. The same demands underlie

32 Buck-Morss has developed the most trenchant arguments for the necessity of thinking theological messianism together with Benjamin's materialism (Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 242–43, 339). For an insightful treatment of Benjamin as proto-deconstructionist, see Michael G. Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). Derrida himself feels to me more astute when he notes, in his response to critics of *Specters of Marx*, that his thought resembles Benjamin's on some points but parts company on the question of utopian futurity ("Marx & Sons," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker [London: Verso, 1999], 248–50).

33 Buck-Morss puts it this way: "The present as the moment of revolutionary possibility acts as a lodestar for the assembly of historical fragments ... The present as 'now-time' keeps the historical materialist on course. Without its power of alignment, the possibilities for reconstructing the past are infinite and arbitrary" (Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 338–39).

34 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

35 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.

36 On this absence of pre-predication, see the following from the "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History': "Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a 'redeemed humanity' might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers" (402).

the often-noted, but still extraordinary inventiveness of Benjamin's method. The ideas in "On the Concept of History" are inseparably bound up with the form of their presentation; they rely on modernist compositional techniques to *enact* the disruptions of historicist narration that the work recommends in its content.³⁷ These techniques include the aphoristic juxtaposition of disconnected, nonlinear fragments, and theoretical *aperçu*. They work to "arrest" the reader's attention by compelling her to apprehend ideas as "monads" dislodged from any philosophical or theoretical whole. The ideas appear as discrete images and figures of thought "blasted" out of their historico-conceptual continuum, which form themselves into unforeseen "constellations" with the noncontiguous present in which the reader encounters them.³⁸ I return in the following to this literary-formal aspect of Benjamin's project; it brings us back to a point raised earlier on which Cheah, Scott, and I are in agreement: the indispensable role of the literary in helping us think both "world" and "time."

It would be possible to trace a clear line from Benjamin's essay to the most influential recent treatment of heterotemporality, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*.³⁹ That book has met with a number of trenchant criticisms since its publication, both from the Marxist left (Chibber, Kaiwar) and from those inspired by Derrida's work on spectrality (Cheah).⁴⁰ A full discussion of these criticisms lies outside the scope of the present article. Instead I wish to distill and highlight what are to me the most productive formulations in Chakrabarty's book and to stress how these formulations reveal an ongoing, Benjaminian materialism that both the Marxist and Derridean critiques elide.

For Chakrabarty—like Benjamin—stages his argument as a critique of historicism.⁴¹ His claim is that radical and liberal histories alike have shared a Eurocentric

37 This formal inventiveness is both an effect of the influence of surrealism on Benjamin and a stylistic inflection of his long-term preoccupations with ruins, fragments, quotations, collectibles, and allegorical representation. All of these are sites in his thought for congealing a knowledge at once deracinated from organic continuity and condensing the hidden form of some other, determining totality.

38 The quoted words in this sentence are all from Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.

39 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

40 See Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013), and Vasant Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincializing Europe* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2015).

41 Chibber and Kaiwar both construe this postcolonial antihistoricism as the misguided solution to a false problem. The problem combines two claims that, according to these critics, are broadly shared by postcolonial thinkers: that the Marxist understanding of capitalism's global diffusion homogenizes capital as a unitary phenomenon that absorbs all difference into itself; and that this understanding misses the modes of domination and resistance that characterize the (post)colonies and lie "athwart" the totalizing ambitions of capital. (For Ranajit Guha, this difference takes the form of a "dominance without hegemony"; for Chakrabarty, it inheres in the distinction I shall discuss between History 1 and History 2.) Chibber and Kaiwar counter that capitalism does not *require* the absorption of differences (indeed, it thrives on the heterogeneous and not-yet-assimilated) and that the postcolonial effort to supplement Marxism in response to its purported historicism is really a new form of Orientalism: it treats "Eastern" paradigms of thought and feeling as insusceptible to the rationalist categories of the "West," and hence "resurrects the worst instances of Orientalist mythology ... by assigning science, rationality, objectivity ... to the West, thereby justifying an exoticization of the East" (Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 288–89).

These objections sound a useful note of caution against knee-jerk anti-universalisms that hypostatize cultural differences. Yet Chibber is especially misleading in his insistence that *Provincializing Europe* is unremittingly hostile to universalizing reason and European models of thought, including Marxism. In fact, Chakrabarty's book argues for the indispensability of Marx's account of capital as a universalizing

understanding of the political realm as more or less equivalent to a specific time horizon, namely, that “homogeneous, empty time” with which Benjamin was centrally concerned. Within such histories a particular kind of subaltern agency *cannot* be grasped as political because this agency continues to inhabit a temporality defined by the coevalness of the human with “gods and spirits.” There is thus a close connection between the colonialist production of secular-modern temporal “emptiness” as the medium of legible political activity and the historicist understanding of history as development or progress. “Historicism,” writes Chakrabarty, “posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance ... between the West and the non-West. In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization. In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment... . The inhabitants of the colonies, on the other hand, were assigned a place ‘elsewhere’ in the ‘first in Europe and then elsewhere’ structure of time.”⁴²

There results for Chakrabarty an imperative at once historiographic and political. We must learn to “provincialize Europe” by making visible in European modernity the heterotemporal residues of life-worlds that modernity itself traduces. This means developing a mode of narration that reveals how the homogeneous, empty time of the modern is *historically* out of joint with itself; it is marred by a prior, subaltern temporality that persists within and decomposes it, even as this desacralized time construes itself as internally unified and views the temporality of “gods and spirits” as an outside (the past) that it has surmounted. The fact that Chakrabarty, like Benjamin, appeals to a realm of religious meanings to “think” this out-of-jointness tells us something significant about their projects. Each thinker intuits that the most potent resource for a critique of the present and the forging of utopian alternatives may lie in the retrieval and translational explication of yearnings to which religion once spoke and that secular modernity neither satisfies nor snuffs out. (I note here that both Chibber and Kaiwar are especially critical of this emphasis on gods and spirits but have little to say about the unmet yearnings to which religions might yet speak.) Paramount among these is a yearning for “wholeness.” This is not, I suggest, an intrinsically reactionary yearning, though it can of course take reactionary forms. Its radical potential emerges in the fold between structural and historical conceptions of what ails us. The *ontological* wholeness imagined to reside on the other side of our structural dislocations is not of this earth and must be left to the theologians; but something approaching *historical* wholeness—the wholeness that comes from a radical redress of historically induced injuries—may indeed be possible,

phenomenon that requires universalist concepts for its critique, and he concludes with the admonition that “at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincializing it only in an anticolonial spirit of gratitude” (255). Kaiwar at least acknowledges these latter statements. He treats them, however, primarily as contributions to what he too considers Chakrabarty’s covert(?) Orientalism (see Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient*, xv, 185–86, and 320–22).

For a convincing rebuttal to this charge of Orientalism, see Bruce Cumings, “Back to Basics? The Recurrence of the Same in Vivek Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*,” *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, ed. Rosie Warren (London: Verso, 2017), 136; for a nuanced assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Chibber’s critique and Chakrabarty’s arguments, see Viren Murthy’s “Looking for Resistance in All the Wrong Places? Chibber, Chakrabarty, and a Tale of Two Histories,” in the same volume, 215–55.

42 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 7–8.

or at least worth holding out for. This is the wholeness of a “redeemed mankind” for whom the past has “become citable in all its moments.” It is less a plenitude of unmitigated presence than a condition in which all instants in a repressed history of lamentation will have been made available to consciousness, linguistically retrievable, and capable of being named and referred to—in short, “citable.” The expressly textual meaning of this term (*citable*) attests to the distinction between historical and structural decenterings; to redress the first of these is not to pretend to have overcome the second. We remain caught up in the deferrals of language, with all its citational antipathy to “presence,” even after what Benjamin views as humankind’s historical redemption.

It’s this historical, Benjaminian emphasis that Cheah elides in his critique of *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty, Cheah argues, can conceive of the heterotemporal only as an alternative mode of presence. Because he “views temporality ... as a collective cultural subject’s experience of time and the determination of time-consciousness by a religious or secular worldview,” he “conflat[es] the temporal horizon of socialism [with] the constitutive interruption of presence by ... absolute alterity.” In doing so he proposes nothing more than the “coevalness of different temporalities and ontologies of presence, of different rational sovereignties.” The “tension” he traces “between historicist secular time and the other kinds of time that it obscures is only a quarrel between the secular enlightenment and the religious consciousness that the enlightenment tried to vanquish or contain.”⁴³ There is, in short, in Cheah’s view, nothing in Chakrabarty to suggest the depths at which the heterotemporal structures any and all forms of being-in-time.

The persuasiveness of this critique is directly proportional to how one views the aims of *Provincializing Europe*. Does it purport above all to describe the hauntological structure of human time? Or is its aim rather, as I have argued, to highlight only those ghosts produced by the history of colonial capital? The chapter “Two Histories of Capital” suggests that the latter is indeed the case.⁴⁴ In that chapter, Chakrabarty approaches the heterotemporal through Marx’s account of capitalism’s “becoming” as the process by which it *produces* a particular past as “its” past. Capitalism institutes exactly those breaks and continuities necessary to establishing its supremacy, making it possible to speak of feudalism, for example, as belonging to the “prehistory” of capitalist modernity, as a social formation recognizable within the parameters of capitalism’s “arising” out of its destruction. Such a view of history is indispensable to understanding capitalism as a world-historical phenomenon; it illuminates in particular the universalist ambition of capitalist modernity, which seeks precisely to colonize the past and make it into *its* prehistory, the story of its own, implicitly necessary and implacable coming into being.

But Chakrabarty uncovers in Marx a second aspect of capital’s prehistory. He calls this History 2 in order to distinguish it from the previous kind, which he names History 1. “Elements” of this other prehistory “are also ‘antecedents’ of capital, in that capital ‘encounters them as antecedents,’ but ... ‘not as antecedents established by itself, nor as

43 Cheah, *What Is a World?*, 204–05.

44 The remainder of this paragraph and the entirety of the following one reprise while recontextualizing my discussion of Chakrabarty in Greg Forter, *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 1.

forms of its own life-process.”⁴⁵ This means that “‘antecedent to capitalism’ are not only the relationships that constitute History 1 but also other relationships that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital. Only History 1 is the past ‘established’ by capital. . . . Marx accepts, in other words, that the total universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital.”⁴⁶ The distinction between History 1 and History 2 is a way of naming this excess; it points to the cleavage between what capitalism can absorb into its life processes and what persists beside it in undigested, unassimilated form.

The relation between these nonsynchronous times is resolutely historical. Or, to put it differently, the forms of heterotemporality that concern Chakrabarty are those which arise from colonial capital's degradation and relegation of (once-)colonized peoples to the realm of the nonmodern. This relegation creates a residue of historical heterogeneity within homogeneous empty time but has no *necessary* implications for the general, structural wound inflicted by the present's constitutive nonpresence to itself. *Provincializing Europe* neither denies this “hauntological” dimension nor conflates it with the historical. It is, in brief, Benjamin (rather than Derrida) who serves as this book's secret sharer.⁴⁷

Chakrabarty's claims could equally be shown to have tantalizing echoes with Marcuse's text. Those echoes have to do with how each author regards the *body* as at once the resource and figure for what capital aims but fails fully to subdue.⁴⁸ Rather than pursue such similarities here, however, I'd like in the interest of space to conclude with an example of what literature uniquely knows about the relations between nonsynchronous time and the imagining of other worlds. Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* is particularly compelling for this purpose.⁴⁹ My analysis of that book in what follows stresses how it enacts through its *form* a specifically postcolonial instance of the heterotemporal as it disrupts and forestalls the movement of homogeneous time. The analysis takes its shape from three of the novel's key concerns: its critique of the historicist gestures through which the African National Congress (ANC) has narrated its story of the new South Africa's birth; the formal encoding in *David's Story* of the temporal possibilities foreclosed by that narrative, with specific reference to how this form enacts variations on

45 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 63. The internal quotations are from Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*.

46 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 64.

47 Chakrabarty's proposal to place Heidegger and Marx into dialogue downplays the extent to which earlier materialists had staged such a dialogue and risks, at times, suggesting that the book's main innovation lies in this juxtaposition. My claim is that a postcolonial rerouting of Benjamin's insights is *Provincializing Europe's* most significant achievement.

48 Compare the following from Chakrabarty with my earlier discussion of Marcuse: the “vital forces” of the body are in Marx “the ground of resistance to capital. They are abstract living labor—a sum of muscles, nerves, and consciousness/will—which ... capital ... always needs but can never quite control or domesticate” (*Provincializing Europe*, 60).

49 There are by now a number of excellent articles and book chapters on Wicomb's novel. I've been especially influenced by Shane Graham, “This Text Deletes Itself: Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*,” *Studies in the Novel* 40.1–2 (2008): 127–45; Kaelie Giffel, “Historical Violence and Modernist Form in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 64.1 (2018): 53–78; Christa Baiada, “On Women, Bodies, and Nation: Feminist Critique and Revision in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*,” *African Studies* 67.1 (2008): 33–47; and Minesh Daas, “‘Amanuensis’ and ‘Steatopygia’: The Complexity of ‘Telling the Tale’ in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*,” *English in Africa* 38.2 (2011): 45–60.

Benjamin's "constellations" and Chakrabarty's History 2; and the novel's direct invocation of "other worlds" as what I suggest is a spatialization of the historically hetero-temporal, the evanescent incarnation in space of a disjunctively immanent mode of futurity.

David's Story explores the crushing weight of South African history on the post-apartheid present, or, more precisely, on the years immediately following Nelson Mandela's release but prior to apartheid's final defeat. Its main character, David Dirkse, is a "coloured" MK guerilla who has hired the nameless female narrator as amanuensis for his story.⁵⁰ But what exactly *is* that story? Where does it begin or end? Who, even, are the story's main characters? Do they include only David, his comrades, and his immediate family? Or must the amanuensis account for such actual historical figures as the separatist Griqua leader Andries le Fleur, whom David claims as a distant ancestor and to whom the novel devotes a good deal of space? Must she also account for Saartjie Baartman, the Khoi woman captured, caged, and exhibited across nineteenth-century Europe as the so-called "Hottentot Venus," whom David insists belongs in his story because "One cannot write nowadays ... without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself."⁵¹ Perhaps most perplexingly, what is the author of David's story to do with the figure of Dulcie Olifant? David invokes her as a female guerrilla with whom he has had some kind of relationship but whom he will not or cannot discuss in terms other than cryptic allusion. She appears to have been both sexually instrumentalized by members of MK and violated more recently by nameless, balaclava-headed torturers who could just as well be ANC as National Party vigilantes.

Raising while declining to answer such questions is *David's Story's* central purpose. It is a book concerned with the impossibility of "tell[ing] the sequence of [past] events like the beads of a rosary."⁵² It is, in other words, a book uncompromisingly "about" its own method, a relentless effort to question the representability of pasts that it nonetheless insists on representing. This might seem to make it an instance of that strand of postmodernism Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction."⁵³ Yet the novel itself analogizes its form to earlier *modernist* works.⁵⁴ In a remarkable exchange between David and his narrator-scribe, the latter begins to tell a story about James Joyce and *his* young scribe, Samuel Beckett. It is a story about mistranscription and the ghostly entry of other voices into discourse. But before even reaching the end of this story, the narrator leaps from her chair in excitement, shrieking as she recognizes: "Youth Day—Soweto Day, the sixteenth of June—that's also Joyce's Bloomsday ... Day of the Revolution of the Word. Imagine, black children revolting against Afrikaans, the language of oppression, on the very anniversary" of the day that Joyce set his modernist monument. "[And] wasn't that also the day you met Dulcie, in the Soweto Day celebration?" (35). What the

50 "MK" abbreviates the Nguni phrase "Umkhonto we sizwe" or "spear of the nation," the secret military wing of the ANC.

51 Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000), 1. Future references will appear parenthetically in the article's body.

52 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

53 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), chap. 7.

54 Giffel, "Historical Violence and Modernist Form in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*."

narrator does here, I suggest, is discover a kind of Benjaminian “constellation.” She blasts open the continuum of time to reveal a relation between the present and its *nonimmediate* pasts (David meeting Dulcie on one hand, Bloomsday and the Soweto uprising on the other); and these pasts render the present meaningful by activating a shared affinity between literary and “real world” revolution. In stressing such connections, the novel’s wager is that modernist forms of a Benjaminian variety retain a pressing claim on our attention. And this is so, as Wicomb will show, precisely inasmuch as at moments of crisis, such forms provide the radical imagination with ways of “depicting” without ontologizing historical instances of the nonsynchronous.

The pasts that most concern this book are thus those that resist representation for historically specific reasons—they’re deprived of voice by social, not hauntological, forces.⁵⁵ Le Fleur’s invention of an insurgent nationalism that modeled apartheid “before the Nationalists had dreamed up that idea” (78); a Baartman who escapes both the colonial myth of her concupiscence and her counter-mythology by the resistance movement; the irreducible particularity of Dulcie’s experience as a *female* guerrilla—such stories as these are representationally foreclosed by historicist narratives of the emergent nation as “nonracial democracy” (150), and of the liberation movement as one where questions about “the conditions of the female guerrillas” are (in David’s word) “Irrelevant”: “In the Movement those kinds of differences are wiped out by our common goal” (78).

David is on one hand a beneficiary of this narrative foreclosure: his is an emphatically historicist story that could be called “The Heroic Anti-Apartheid Insurgent Fights to Make a Nonracial Democracy.” The novel’s considerable power, however, resides in the way that his effort to *tell* this story by placing it in the mouth of a woman outside yet “broadly sympathetic to the liberation movement” (1) reveals to him that such haunting of one story by another is the condition of any “truth” this side of humankind’s historical redemption. His text comes gradually to be swallowed by what he first disparages as the narrator’s “prattling ... about meaning in the margin, or absence as an aspect of writing” (2). The materials he hands over are all “fragments [that] betray the desire to distance himself from his own story; his many beginnings, invariably flights into history ... show uncertainty about whether to begin at all,” as if “he both wanted and did not want [his story] to be written” (1). The pages are covered in doodles and cryptic notes, some parts “scored over” and others imperfectly erased, the paper itself at times crumpled or torn, and all of it alluding to without naming the inscrutable truth that David wishes his story to convey. This is a truth he begins by thinking must be “left to its own devices” (2) but comes at last to view as “the word that can’t be written. He has changed it,” the narrator states, “into the palindrome of Cape Flat speech—TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT—the words speed across the page, driven as a toy car is driven by a child, with lips pouted and spit flying, wheels squealing around the Dulcie obstacles... TRURT ... TRURT ...

55 I differ here with Daas’s otherwise illuminating analysis, which views the unrepresentable in *David’s Story*—what Daas terms “silence”—as the symptom of a Derridean truth about the generalized impossibility of reference and full speech. Daas’s argument in this sense reprises the general problematic with which my article is concerned: the conflation of historically induced injuries and silences with structural or hauntological ones. See Daas, “‘Amanuensis’ and ‘Steatopygia,’” 53–58.

TRURT ... TRURT ... the trurt in black and white ... colouring the truth to say that ... which cannot be said the thing of no name ...” (136).

The “Dulcie obstacles,” the palindrome of a reversible and mutilated “truth,” the simultaneous naming and crossing out of “that ... which cannot be said”—these comprise the heart of the novel’s historical-narrational dilemma. For as the book “progresses,” it becomes increasingly clear that “Dulcie” is the organizing name for what the nation’s story must repress. David at one point refers to her as a “scream ... echoing through my story” (134). She is, in other words, a characterological figure for Benjamin’s “lament’ [within] history,” the lamentation whose “every echo” the victors seek to “eliminate” from their accounts.⁵⁶ The promise she represents of interpersonal fulfillments that run counter to the movement’s demands for self-sacrifice, as well as her unbearable reminder of a sexual exploitation committed on that movement’s behalf, are what make Dulcie’s tale at once constitutive of the new nation’s story and impossible for it to recount. The sexual appropriation of her body reprises (with a difference) the foundational act of land appropriation that drives le Fleur into separatist nationalism, reminding readers that the ANC, too, will make a devil’s pact with capitalism that foreshortens its revolutionary potential.⁵⁷ Hence the reference in a later passage to “another page” that David has contributed, one “without words” but full of “geometrical shapes” including “diamonds,” with the “cartoonist’s oblique lines that indicate sparkling,” “I have no doubt,” the narrator remarks, “that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on [this] page” (205). The extraordinary association of Dulcie’s mutilation with the gem whose discovery in the 1860s precipitated a new bout of primitive accumulation suggests that *David’s Story* thinks of sexist (and racist) domination as motivated by material, economic factors. The ANC’s failures with regard to such dominion is perhaps nothing less than the devastating symptom of its leaders’ acceptance of the terms for integrating the new South Africa into the neoliberal order.

Dulcie’s resistance to David’s story, meanwhile, is also a resistance to the triumphalist narrative that calls such integration “freedom.” Her inassimilability to that tale makes her an instance of Chakrabarty’s History 2, a heterogeneous *temporal* element within and disrupting historicist narration.⁵⁸ The final page of David’s “unfinished section on Baartman” is thus “a mess” that the narrator “do[es] not quite know how to represent... I know that it is his attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out. Then there are beginnings scattered all over, and at various angles that ignore the rectangularity of the paper, as if by not starting at the top or not following the shape of the page he could fool himself that it is not a beginning” (135).

56 Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” 401. I stress that this critique of South Africa’s impending “victors” comes from the feminist-materialist *left* of the ANC.

57 See here Ronnie Kasrils, “How the ANC’s Faustian Pact Sold Out South Africa’s Poorest,” *The Guardian*, 24 June 2013 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/24/anc-faustian-pact-mandela-fatal-error>), and Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), 190–91. Shireen Hassim, *ANC Women’s League: Sex, Gender, and Politics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015) offers a judicious account of the strengths, limits, and historical shifts in the ANC’s feminist wing. On land theft as capital’s primal crime in the colonized world, see Fredric Jameson’s controversial but still generative essay, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 84.

58 For a related reading of the novel’s temporal dislocations that mines them for their queer significance, see Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 137.

“Dulcie and the events surrounding her cannot be cast as story,” she continues. “I have come to accept this view of David’s... There is no progression in time, no beginning and no end. Only a middle that is infinitely repeated, that remains in an eternal, inescapable present” (150–51). This “eternal present” that Dulcie inhabits is of a paradoxical kind. She is, in fact, *never present* as such. She haunts the story instead as a “middle” that lacks the substance of present-being. She appears here *only* as an “infinitely repeated” echo, the unrepresentable scream of a history constituted by her silencing. The literary power of *David's Story* lies in fact just here: in how its formal procedures require us to be decomposed by that scream. The novel asks us, for the duration of our reading, to dwell in a form deformed by the traces of history’s unrecorded barbarisms, a form without formal beginning or ending (except in the most literal of senses) and certainly not “progressing” toward retrospective significance. We are instead taken up by a history whose heterogeneous, inassimilable lament interrupts the composure of our narrative transport through homogeneous, empty time.

If Dulcie’s scream is one name for that lament, I suggest that another is “steatopygia.” This is the word that the narrator tells us “has fired [David’s] imagination and ... set the story on its course” (17). It presides over his narrative as a kind of inaugural incantation, not least because of a semantic excess that he finds difficult to contain: “he is anxious ... that it will not be understood simply as natural padding of the buttocks but rather might be read in white people’s pathological terms” (17). The word can thus be understood as the index of a “natural” fleshiness that colonial history has persistently overwritten and refigured as (naturally) degraded. It describes a condition common among Khoi women that has undergone two types of surplus repression (to return to Marcuse’s terms): the bodily circumscriptions necessary for any kind of individuation and social intercourse have had overlaid upon them the *gendered* disgust at female fleshiness that underpins patriarchal dominion and the *racist* pathologizing of nonwhite bodies that licenses colonial violence and exploitation. The story told by *David's Story* aims to retrieve this “natural padding” as the memorial residue of carnal possibilities that patriarchal-colonial capitalism has attempted to snuff out (or at least, to render repellent to desire). The revolutionary potential redeemed by this process shadows and exceeds the historical violence inflicted on steatopygous flesh. The pivotal figure for grasping how this works is, once again, Dulcie.

For like almost all of the women in the novel, Dulcie, too, is steatopygous.⁵⁹ But only in her case is steatopygia an uncannily virtual “substance,” a fleshly excess that’s weirdly spectral and that (like her scream) disturbs the present with traces of the unrealized past. The tortures she suffers at the hands of masked men are thus, on one hand, intensely corporeal, taking as their special target her steatopygous flesh. Her body “quivers, writhes, shudders, flails, squirms, [and] stretches” beneath the torturers’ instruments; her flesh is subject to procedures that “tenderize, baste, sear, sizzle, score, [and] chop” it, producing (among other marks) a pattern of “crisscross cuts on each of her naturally bolstered buttocks” (178, 19). On the other hand, however, “Her own body” comes in the

59 Wicomb highlights the steatopygia not only of Dulcie, but of Rachael Susanna (le Fleur’s wife); of the so-called “Rain Sisters” whom le Fleur recruits in an effort to make one of his prophecies come true; of David’s wife, Sally, his grandmother, Ragel, and his great-grandmother Antje; and of the unnamed narrator/amanuensis.

face of this violence to be dislodged from the solidity of the present and to “live” perennially “in the curious past tense.” It dwells in the heterotemporal light of a training mission she once ran “in the Venda, in a cave, [where] she ... watched the sharp black shadows of young women [recruits] as they entered... . They came in traditional dress,” Dulcie remembers, but when they left after being trained, “they filed past her searching gaze, their bodies a mere hint of movement within the sculpted shapes, the AK-47s perfectly concealed” beneath their clothing (19). It’s through an identification with these women that Dulcie’s corporeal present is irradiated with “the curious past tense of the Venda dress”: just as their bodies resisted her effort to see the rifles she had taught them to conceal, so her body now “tak[es] its aspect from the gaze of a viewer who cannot undress it, who cannot imagine the crisscross cuts on each of her naturally bolstered buttocks” (19). The very flesh being violated in the present contains, in this sense, the memorial residue of a past that works to disorient that present—a past that is not exactly Dulcie’s own, but through which she becomes less the recipient of violence than the site of a bodily recalcitrance to it (“the gaze of a viewer who cannot undress it”), the bearer of a flesh to which revolutionary violence now covertly adheres (the AK-47s concealed under the women’s dresses).

The absence of reference to “steatopygia” in this case is part of the point I wish to make.⁶⁰ The Venda women’s concealment of weapons *draws upon* without *collapsing into* the semantic range of “steatopygia,” reprising as it does an act of concealment on the part of le Fleur’s steatopygous wife. Rachael Susanna “secreted in her voluminous skirts” the Staff of Office she will pass to le Fleur (thereby legitimating his power), such that, when le Fleur reaches into her loosened dress to seize the “symbols of authority,” he feels “in the swell of her full-grown steatopygia a spirit moving him to husbandhood” (46). The Venda women’s nonsteatopygous bodies then reprise while also correcting Rachael Susanna’s concealment-in-steatopygia (“correcting” it, in that they do not relinquish the “symbols of authority”), while Dulcie’s violated steatopygous body is redeemed by the “curious past tense” of the Venda women’s insurgent flesh. It’s perhaps no surprise, in light of all this, that Dulcie’s body becomes in its turn the site of an extraordinary utopian projection:

Dulcie after a tortured night sets off speeding through the streets of Woodstock onto the highway, where she sees over the top of the distant mountain her own heart rise over the city, its light in her eyes, and the cracked ribs, the bleeding nipples are nothing, nothing at all, as her own swollen heart hovers on the horizon then bursts to bathe the world in soft yellow light, her body lightened of the burden of that sentimental heart now beating out the two dear syllables so that she will no longer accelerate through the iron railing and hurl herself into ... death ... how could she with that light pushing as tenderly as freedom above the hills, urging her to wait, wait, and see with mundane curiosity whether David, wherever he is ... would see that heart in the eastern sky and feel his own drawn into its embrace of light. (115)

The “wait, wait, and see” indicates that this is a fantasy expressly oriented toward the possibility of a redemptive future, one made possible by the externalization of the body’s

60 As a Bantu people, the Venda are unlikely to be steatopygous.

insides and their dispersed evanescence into light. David's refusal to be seduced by this "flirtatious light" as he watches the sunrise many miles away (115) is merely a measure of this novel's sobriety about utopian restitution. It signals again the disjunctive continuity between the apartheid past and the ANC future: Dulcie "does not know why or how, but she notes nevertheless: that this pretense of a relationship [with David] coincides with the visits [from her torturers] by night; ... that one is a recursion, a variant of the other: the silence, the torture, the ambiguity; and that in such recursion—for if on the edge of a new era, freedom should announce itself as a variant of the old—lies the thought of madness madness madness" (184).

Strikingly, and like the theorists I have discussed, these meditations on temporal alterity are accompanied by intimations of other worlds. "[Y]ou'll never understand about Dulcie," David tells the narrator, because "hers is another world altogether." "And when freedom comes," she asks him "what are we meant to do with these different worlds? Which one will survive? Or rather, which one will you choose for me?" David dismisses her question as another "bourgeois myth of niceness": "There've always been other worlds; there always will be many, all struggling for survival." The narrator responds to this remark by withdrawing into private contemplation: "I try to think of my walled winter garden where the basil is still green and bushy... . But another image invades, one of worlds as a stack of so many dirty dinner plates that will not come unstuck as each bottom clings to another's grease" (196–97).

This physical image of stacked worlds, of worlds that communicate through the grease that makes them adhere to one another but does not abolish their separateness, is the spatial equivalent of the historical heterogeneity discussed so far. David's desire to "choose" one world for the rest of us points at once to a revolutionary aspiration toward total transformation and a recognition that *this* totality is partial; the incarnation of the new South Africa excludes (has excluded) other worlds, which stick to the new one and "struggle" around its edges "for survival." These other worlds represent precisely versions of those repressed pasts that Benjamin indicates might someday become "citable in all [their] moments." They include realms in which the story of female guerrilla fighters could perhaps be told as something other than its negation into inarticulate lament. They include, in other words, worlds in which the emergent nation might make good on its most radical (economic and gendered) promises rather than merely its electoral-political ones. To realize *those* worlds would not, of course, entail surmounting our foundational dislocations. That would indeed be naive utopianism. But it might make permanently available in the present the fullness of a transfigured now-time, the plenitude attendant on redemptions secreted in our historical pasts.