THE SOUS-RÉEL AND POSTCOLONIAL POSSIBILITY IN THE WRITING OF DAMBUDZO MARECHERA

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The Sous-Réel and Post-Colonial Possibility in the Writing of Dambudzo Marechera

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Abstract

The writing of Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera still only has a small (though growing) body of criticism which surrounds it. Within current research, altogether too much space is devoted to the salaciousness of Marechera’s personal life, while less attention is given to his methods. My thesis uses postcolonial, psychoanalytical, and political literary theory in order to examine Marechera’s body of creative writing. Marechera was an African author of avant-garde fiction. I begin by situating his fiction within a longer genealogy of the avant-garde in Africa (a genealogy that is notably absent from European literary theories of the avant-garde). In this section, I look at novels written by Gabriel Okara, Ayi Kwei Armah, Bessie Head and K. Sello Duiker. I examine how their incorporation of their native tongue into English (Okara), their use of obscenity (Armah), and their explorations of mental illness (Head and Duiker), all coincide with Marechera’s writing practice. In my second chapter, I move into a deeper exploration of Marechera’s novellas, short stories and multi-modal works. Here I call upon postcolonial psychoanalysis (such as the work of Stefania Pandolfo), black scholarship on race and structures of power (specifically through Lindon Barrett), and existing Marechera scholarship. Primarily looking at his two short novels, House of Hunger and Black Sunlight, I examine how Marechera takes and adapts avant-garde strategies in order to create stories that capture Zimbabwean life at a particularly chaotic decolonial moment. I term his technique “sous-realism” because of his devotion to representing humanity at its most debased and visceral. His writing, which scrapes at the dark undersides of reality, is anti-authoritarian to its core. I argue that this devotion to anti-authoritarianism sets him apart from African social realists who used fiction as a tool for decolonization. Afraid of growing totalitarianism in the nations surrounding Zimbabwe, Marechera’s avant-garde poetics provided a crucial counterpoint to social realism.
Lay Summary

This thesis addresses gaps in research about Dambudzo Marechera. He is a Zimbabwean who wrote surrealist fiction and died at the age of thirty-five in 1987. His work looks at issues of poverty, racism, and sexually transmitted diseases within Zimbabwe during its long Civil War. My key focus was to bring attention to Marechera’s literary style to show how crucial his work is in expressing the destructiveness of colonialism in Africa. While much of the early scholarship on Marechera focuses as much on his drinking and mental health issues as his writing, my thesis pays great attention to his innovative novels. I aim to show how his chaotic style is a deliberate and important technique. Within Dambudzo Marechera’s writing, nothing is comforting.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, S. Baugh.
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Dedication

For my parents
Introduction

In articles about anarchism in Africa, almost every single one begins with an apologia about how anarchism never really caught on in the continent.\(^1\) It must read against the grain of history to piece together any sort of movement. In popular genealogies of the avant-garde,\(^2\) Africa does not get a mention. In focusing my thesis upon a Zimbabwean author whose work is informed by these two movements, one must begin to piece together the why and the how.

Dambudzo Marechera was born in 1952 in Southern Rhodesia and died in independent Zimbabwe in 1987. He spent many years in Oxford and, after dropping out, around the UK. Rather than looking at his work as completely singular, a meshing of two traditions that had never meshed before, I will construct a brief genealogy of the literary avant-garde in Africa. Then, I will show how Marechera took up and modified these avant-garde experimentations through his anarchist literary practice, performing what I will call sous-realism. Rather than reaching for a lofty, transcendent goal with no bearing on his lived experience, Marechera mined the dark underside of reality in Harare and Vengere to create experimental fiction that explored the fractured postcolonial/colonized condition.

When Wole Soyinka described Dambudzo Marechera as a “profound even if exaggeratedly self-aware writer,” he was getting at the crux of Marechera’s writing style (The Black Insider, back cover comment). He was an author of anticolonial and surrealist fiction and poetry. While he wrote primarily fiction, deeming him exaggeratedly self-aware is fitting. I will be arguing not only that Marechera’s creative writing is an example of the possibilities of surrealism in Africa but also that his work employed a “sous”-realist practice that utilizes

\(^1\) See Maia Ramnath.
\(^2\) Such as those written by Peter Bürger, Ales Erjavec, and Peter Nicholls.
anarchic narratives, obscenity, and violence in order to capture the psychic life of the 
(de)colonial subject. I look at how the formal qualities of his writing—which combine fiction 
with reverie and essay—blur generic boundaries in favour of a new kind of African realism. His 
creative work is speculative, as he sought to invent a literary form that would be suitable both for 
depicting the violent conditions of Zimbabwean life and for presenting a critical reflection on 
that life.

Marechera’s struggles with psychotic episodes, alcohol use, and unpredictable behaviour 
often became the primary focus of critical literature about him (Habila 253). The trajectory of 
both his life and his fiction (which frequently refashioned personal anecdotes as surrealism) spits 
in the face of comforting fables that paint the contemporary, globalized world as a meritocracy. 
Narratives of an individual’s singular genius allowing him to rise above the circumstances of his 
birth are presumably meant to comfort the global bourgeois while placating colonized and 
racialized peoples. These archetypal tales reassure the colonized that if they only try hard enough 
and are deserving, anyone can overcome the struggles of their upbringing.3 Dambudzo 
Marechera dismisses this narrative and exposes its inherent racist condescension. Raised in 
Vengere township, from a large family, Marechera’s upbringing was marred by violence both 
within and without his home (Veit-Wild xiv). His talent got him into the University of Rhodesia 
on a full scholarship, and when he was expelled there, he was given a full scholarship to Oxford. 
Yet he died of AIDS related complications at the age of thirty-five, having spent years living on 
and off the streets in the UK and Zimbabwe. His distinctly visceral literary style eschews 
transcendental and romanticized narratives. In his explosive creative work, Marechera makes 
apparent the inescapable destructiveness of colonialism on its subjects. By presenting readers

3 These stories are of such a pervasive archetype that they are impossible to list, but include films like The Blind 
Side, and The Pursuit of Happyness.
with a violent and crude body of work, Marechera disorients the reader by emulating the chaotic process of decolonizing his own (and his protagonists’) minds.

In his novels and novellas, Marechera cites modernist authors with such frequency that his stories verge on pastiche. Drawing upon a global avant-garde tradition, Marechera then reshapes these citations and allusions, breaking them down in a process Marechera described as “subverting images from within” (Veit-Wild 4). I plan to trace his invention of a new form that I call, following Mushakavanhu, “literary anarchism” (Mushakavanhu 11), created through a violent use of pastiche that exists in a circular, subjunctive temporality, with an unwavering devotion to obscenity and the rant.

In my first chapter, I will contextualize Marechera’s body of work among his African avant-garde contemporaries. I will show how avant-garde writing highlights the fragmented subjectivity of the (de)colonial subject. In this period, 1950s-1980s, “African post-independence dogmas” (Toivanen 38-39) preferred the political straightforwardness of “social realism” to surrealism. It was a period of heated debate around how African stories should be told.4 As a result, critics like Juliet Okonkwo were highly critical of Marechera’s work when it was published (Ibid). But Marechera was not the only African author in this period to eschew social realism. I will look at the following African avant-garde works: Ayi Kwei Armah’s The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Bessie Head’s A Question of Power, Gabriel Okara’s The Voice, and K. Sello Duiker’s The Quiet Violence of Dreams. Referring to Peter Bürger’s (admittedly Eurocentric) theory of the avant-garde, I will trace how the avant-garde manifested itself as an anticolonial writing practice in Africa. The works of these other African authors often deal with mental illness (Head) and the mental alienation attendant to the decolonial process.

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4 Here I will reference the various points of view on the evolution of African writing seen in the writing of Achebe, Césaire, Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o
(Armah) in ways that realism cannot. Mental illness is aestheticized by blurring the real and the unreal, thereby capturing a chaotic moment of decolonization, when conceptions of Africa were in flux.

In the second chapter, I will focus in on Marechera’s experimental style. His writing crosses genres with fluidity, pulling from a long, global modernist tradition in order to create stories that are at once fiction and essay, narrative and rant. By employing a grotesque and overly embodied surrealism, Marechera intervenes in longstanding histories of racist thought that see black bodies as overly physical. In Dionne Brand’s *Map to the Door of No Return*, a work much like Marechera’s in the ways it combines fiction, memoir and critique, Brand theorizes the history of the “Black body” as a site of “captivity,” but also as a “common possession, a consumer item” (Brand 35, 39). The black body becomes a site of desire and disgust, described via exaggerated physicality (Brand 39). Marechera contends with this historical over-embodiment of blackness through writing that is comically physical. His characters must contend with themselves, their families and everyone they know being reduced to “stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh” (Marechera *HoH* 60). His protagonist in *House of Hunger* states: “No, I don't hate being black. I'm just tired of saying it's beautiful. No, I don't hate myself. I'm just tired of people bruising their knuckles on my jaw” (Ibid). He parodies this over-embodiment through repetitions of motifs like the stain.

Marechera’s work always functions on multiple levels. The painful embodiment here is a poignant, while parodic, exploration of internalized racism. He hosts imaginary debates between white scholars theorizing Africa in *Black Insider* and explores anarchism through increasingly surreal and disjointed passages in *Black Sunlight*. He sets out to do theoretical work because he is worried that the prevalent, social realist tendency in African writing would become
hegemonic. I plan to employ the works of Georges Bataille in order to examine how Marechera both contends with and recuperates embodiment. By employing a style that is more “sous” than “sur-realism,” Marechera plumbs the depths of colonial misery (Bataille). By bringing together a genealogy of avant-garde thinkers in African literature, and fitting Marechera’s contribution into this larger picture, I will be creating a study of modernism in Africa that undermines any notion of a unified African writing practice (such as social realism). I hope to show the ways in which avant-garde writing is in fact an important part of the anti-racist anti-colonial project.

By bringing together African writing on anarchism and surrealism, I intend to create a project that looks at all of these intersections in ways that have not been done before. Rather than looking at Marechera’s work as autobiography or overemphasizing the salacious details of his life, as much of his current criticism does, I hope to show that Marechera was a talented thinker, theorist and writer. His cross-genre work actively attempts to invent a potent anticolonial genre of writing. By refashioning embodiment, by employing rants, and by clever use of citation, Marechera invented a new genre, heavily influenced by avant-garde and pastiche, that expresses the condition of the postcolonial ex-patriot. As unflinchingly aggressive and visceral as his writing is, it spoke both to readers growing up in slums in Zimbabwe, and diasporic Africans feeling ill at ease in the UK and elsewhere.

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5 See Helon Habila’s criticism of this, as well as Flora Veit-Wild’s writing on Marechera, which combines biography and criticism.
Chapter One: An African Avant-Garde

In a Phil Lind Initiative series at the University of British Columbia called “Thinking While Black,” Ta-Nehisi Coates puts forth a helpful framework for understanding colonial and racist experience. He describes the colonizers’ approach as a type of gaslighting: the colonizers say to you, “‘if you do x, y and z, I won’t hit you. But then I don’t expect you to do x, y and z.’ And when you do, of course, they hit you anyways” (Coates). The requirements are an excuse and meeting them is supposed to be impossible. Yet what happens if the colonized completely refuses to play the game of good colonized subject? What if when asked to jump, one does not ask how high? Instead Marechera smashes a plate at a Guardian Prize reception. In cases like these, a violent refusal seems like the biggest political gesture possible. In analyzing the avant-garde work of Gabriel Okara, Ayi Kwei Armah, Bessie Head, and K. Sello Duiker, I hope to show a genealogy of the surreal in Africa, and how these authors refused the expectations placed upon them by governments both colonial and postcolonial alike. These novels form a body of work that addresses an alienating decolonial moment, in which protagonists refuse to be part of a future or a past, instead imagining different possibilities of being. While these represent a smaller body of work than avant-garde movements elsewhere, they also crucially demonstrate the techniques of a specific decolonial moment.

Regarding Marechera’s predecessors, and inspirations, Gabriel Okara is Nigerian and published his novel The Voice in 1964, while Ayi Kwei Armah from Ghana published The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born in 1968 from the United States. Okara represents a precursor to Marechera’s experimentations with the English language, as they both port over patterns from their mother tongues into English. Armah, on the other hand, provides a model for the

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6 Something Marechera notoriously did, in 1979 (Habila 254)
disaffected protagonist, who refuses to enter into independence on its terms. Marechera’s contemporary, South African exile and Botswanan transplant, Bessie Head, explores mental illness in *A Question of Power*. I end with K. Sello Duiker, who wrote in the 2000s and was inspired by Dambudzo Marechera, in his longest and most surreal novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*.

Peter Bürger, Aleš Erjavec, Peter Nicholls: all write histories of the avant-garde with no mention of Africa. Yet, in K. Sello Duiker’s *Quiet Violence of Dreams*, or in Marechera’s essay, “The African Writer’s Experience of European literature” the lineage of African experimental writing is assumed. Marechera’s influences range from Russian to French to Nigerian and Kenyan. *Quiet Violence of Dreams* refers frequently to Duiker’s African literary predecessors, citing Marechera, or Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. I will take up their notion that this aesthetic continuum exists on a global scale. When Okonkwo criticized Marechera for participating in a “European avant-garde tradition” (Toivanen 38), she neglected the dynamism of the avant-garde in Africa. From Ayi Kwei Armah to Bessie Head, African authors have deployed the strategies of the avant-garde in order to critique masculinist nationalism, and to explore the fragile mental state of the postcolonized in the postcolonial moment in which they were living.

In turning to the work of Peter Bürger, and his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, I will show the ways in which avant-garde fiction in Africa emerged as a response to both colonialism in Africa and the decolonial struggle. This art is self-aware and self-critical. Bürger’s theory addresses Europe specifically, and charts the emergence of the avant-garde as both a response to the bourgeois individualization of art, and as an end point to the Aesthetic movement (Bürger 22). Because the colonies did not undergo the same bourgeois development, they are perhaps
excluded from his consideration. However, their commitment to obscenity, to dismantling the English language, and to scraping at the underbellies of life and mental illness for their material, means that the project of the African avant-garde writers is not disconnected from this European one in its methods or aims. In order to be avant-garde, the author must be self-critical. Bürger states that within the avant-garde, “[w]hat is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men” (Bürger 49). The work of dismantling art, in a European context, provides a critique of bourgeois capitalism, and of the increasing disconnect between art and life. For the African writer, concerns would naturally be different. As Achille Mbembe notes in On the Postcolony, the postcolonial subject lives in quite a different political context than the European capitalist one. He argues that most postcolonial societies are organized by a dictatorial “commandemant,” who cause the postcolonial subject to exist in an ambiguous state, “engag[ing] in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules” (Mbembe 129). Not humanist, individualist members of a neo-liberal society, but subjects who must constantly navigate the excesses of postcolonial power.

With that caveat in mind, it bears noting that the postcolonial authors below exist in this moment of “obscenity” (Mbembe 103), but that they are also engaging in the type of self-critical and self-conscious practice that Bürger describes. As a result, their postcolonial avant-garde product has concerns that differ from the European but that often employ similar practices. Like the European Dadaists, who Walter Benjamin notes write “‘poems [which] are a “word salad” containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language’ … (Illuminations, pp. 237-38),” obscenity becomes one of the most crucial means of African avant-garde expression (Bürger 29). Again, as Bürger writes, “in the historical avant-garde movements, shocking the
recipient becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent” (Bürger 18). For an author whose described his own work as a form of “literary shock treatment” (Veit-Wild 5), Marechera is employing the praxis of the European avant-garde, while also taking up particularly African concerns.

One of the primary modes of critique performed by Marechera and Gabriel Okara is at the level of language. Colonization necessarily adds another concern to the avant-garde project of an African writer: that of the mother tongue. All of the authors that follow wrote their works in English. However, their writing practice attempts to bend the limitations of the colonial language in order to give space to their decolonial thought. Beginning with The Voice by Gabriel Okara, for whom emulating his native tongue (Ijaw) in English was a primary focus, I will show how Marechera’s later work similarly creates a dialogue between Shona and English. In his introduction to Okara’s text, Arthur Ravenscroft notes that African writers, such as

Christopher Okigbo and George Awoonor-Williams have often been greatly influenced by African oral verse traditions, the plays of Soyinka by some of the dramatic conventions of Yoruba folk-opera, and the novels of Achebe by certain linguistic and general cultural characteristics of Ibo and Pidgin. Whatever else has resulted, their literary achievements have enriched the English language and helped to keep it a supple artistic medium, at a time when much metropolitan writing in Britain and the United States has become jaded and dehumanized and merely cynical. (Okara 3)

Here, Ravenscroft (perhaps unwittingly) shows how global superpowers continue to profit off of the work coming from their former colonies. African writing reinjects vitality into British writing.
Both Marechera and Okara are filling a perceived gap that British authors were unable to fill. Marechera, in an interview with Alle Lansu, states that the English literature [he] had been studying … is not very interesting for a Third World person with, as it were, a revolutionary background. It’s straight-laced, it’s complacent, and on the whole conservative. They did not really have the equivalent of the United States 1950s and ‘60s, the Beat Generation writers, who were actually protesting against their whole establishment. (Ibid 26)

A reductive view of British literature: certainly. However, it shows how these early experimental African authors were positioning themselves against a perceived deficiency in the British literary scene. While their work is revolutionary, it also provides the somewhat contradictory function of revitalizing the very language and literature it positions itself against. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s seminal text *Decolonising the Mind*, wa Thiong’o interrogates this very decision. He wonders: why “should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed with taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? … We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages” (wa Thiong’o 8). As a result, the project of revitalizing English is fraught with all the troubles of colonization, if it is taken up thoughtlessly. Arthur Ravenscroft’s introduction shows his hope that through exploiting the creative output of other cultures, the British may enrich their own. Dambudzo Marechera, in an interview, admits he feels great tension at writing only in English and becoming a “keen accomplice and student in [his] own mental colonisation” (Marechera *House of Hunger* 7).

With those large caveats in mind, I still find it valuable to trace out the ways in which Marechera and Okara play with the English language and seek to show that in both authors’ work a disruptive kernel remains. Rather than looking at Okara’s writing as simply part of a
parasitic process by which English further enriches itself through the colonized’s labour, I argue that this deployment of the mother tongue in English is a means of destabilizing the language. Marechera describes it as a purposeful “brutalizing” or “blackening” of English (Veit-Wild 4). Okara’s novel follows Okolo, a man searching for “it,” ostracized by his community because of his search (Okara 23). The story follows his exile and ultimate death for posing questions that make the Elders of his town uncomfortable. Allied with the witch, Tuere, they represent those who are unable to conform to the rigid, authoritarian standards of their postcolonial Nigerian home. The novel’s frequent dialogue produces a surreal effect largely through transposing the idioms and formal qualities of Ijaw into English. The style is evident on every page. Here, Okara writes: “As everybody so prayed and invoked according to his or her religion, the forty to fifty years killed woman from her seat rose with eyes opened wide and like a man over the mass of legs, walked, stumbled, walked, stumbled, to the pointed canoe’s bow” (62). This moment demonstrates his technique strikingly: the idiomatic expression used to describe the woman’s age as having “killed” many years, as well as the rhythm of her movement mimicked in the rhythmic repetition of the words “walked” and “stumbled.” In this scene as well, Okara shows the confluence of people of different religions and cultures, on their way to the city. Through a simple plotline and surreal experiments with the English language, Okara makes clear the heart of the matter: a critique of the post-colonial requirement that all must, as the villainous Chief Izongo states, “toe the party line” (43). Okara thus engages in an anti-authoritarian story-telling, drawing inspiration from his culture yet pushing the bounds of accepted forms of African literature. By transposing Ijaw into English, Okara uses folkloric and indigenous values as a vehicle for critiquing authoritarian and corrupt Nigerian politics.
Similarly, in examining Marechera’s work alongside both European and African traditions, Michelle Decker notes that it can be read several ways. On the one hand, his writing reads as European pastiche, but, his rambling and obscene techniques also show his style’s “formal relation to the performed African epic,” and his novella *House of Hunger* can be seen as “an autochthonous Zimbabwean text” (Decker 152). The meandering, plotless narratives, full of characters straight from fable and parable, both heavily cite European avant-garde sources and African ones. Marechera’s steady employment of obscenity, which got *Black Sunlight* banned in Zimbabwe, is a nod to Shona culture. In defense of Marechera’s *Black Sunlight*, Aaron Hodza asserts that obscenity is integral to traditional Shona culture (Veit-Wild 297). Hodza cites various traditional Shona songs as evidence, an example of which is a song that goes “Thank you, Farting One,/Who farted in the sky/Going blast!... Evil buttock/Lion’s testes/Slave to the cunt” (Ibid). Shona is Marechera’s mother tongue, but he only wrote one of his stories in the language. Within folk songs and origin stories in Shona, obscenity holds a central place. It does not have the same debased value as it does in English. Rather than writing in Shona, Marechera transposes cultural sentiments into English, and his cavalier violence inspires shock. By decontextualizing idiomatic expressions, Okara and Marechera’s work discombobulates their readers.

In *Blackness and Value*, Barrett notes the political importance of shock. He says that feelings of “shock, awe, or intellection” can cause “a revolution of value” as the “formalized and fetishized boundaries of value are recrossed and reimagined from an Other vantage” (Barrett 33-34). This moment of shock provides a possibility for reimagining English and the other languages navigating through it. In situating Shona (and Ijaw) expressions outside a cultural context in which they are readily understood, Marechera and Okara undermine perceived cultural hierarchies that would place English on top. It also forces the reader out of their comfort zone by
confounding understanding. Marechera uses Shona to reshape English, but also reshapes his Shona upbringing through surrealism in English. Again, this draws back to the work of Peter Bürger on the avant-garde. In employing defamiliarization and shock, the avant-garde artist is launching an “attack on the status of art” and “demand[ing] that art become practical once again” through the “way art functions in society” (Bürger 49). Unlike criticisms that argue Marechera’s modernist stylings render his work completely devoid of political weight, a look at the avant-garde show the ways in which experimentation is able to push at the bounds placed upon Marechera and African writing in general to conform to a larger nationalist project.

Marechera, in interviews, makes clear that he is keenly interested in destabilizing the function of art in the post-colony. Of course, the function of art in bourgeois society is not the same as its function in the post-colony. In making art practical again, Marechera’s stylistic moves do not mirror exactly his European counterparts. In fact, an important part of his project is, as he says in his interview with Alle Lansu, “art for art’s sake,” a rejection of the pressure to write literature that is “another instrument of official policy” (Veit-Wild 38). As Michelle Decker notes, Marechera’s focus on disrupting the expectations set upon African authors allows critics to “analyze the beauty of African aesthetic works,” something which “continues to be seen as frivolous or colonial” (Decker 136). Because there is an overwhelming tendency to regard postcolonial African work as political art, performing a specific political purpose, the brilliant aesthetic moves of its authors often go ignored. While the political importance of postcolonial writing cannot and should not be neglected, Marechera and authors like him provide something different from a social realist blueprint for the shape of their post-colonial nation.

In fact, Marechera’s writing refuses the pressure to be easily reduced or refashioned for a nationalist project. The theme of refusal, interwoven with persistent obscenity, ties Marechera’s
work to that of Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Both authors write stories about people who refuse. They refuse nationalism, refuse to participate in the bribery and corruption necessary for self-advancement, but also refuse to live up to some standard of heroism or genius. Like Marechera, Armah’s text is obscene throughout. He begins and ends with images of rot and “victorious filth” (Armah 15), a filth that is ever-encroaching and inevitable. His unnamed protagonist moves through this life thinking of “after-piss” and “stale sweat” (Ibid), avoiding success at all costs. As Mbembe notes, within the post-colonial sphere, it is impossible to view the obscene as an act of rebellion. In fact, the real inversion takes place when, in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology, and when power, in its own violent quest for grandeur, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence. (Mbembe 133)

In Mbembe’s conception of the post-colonial milieu there is no outside, nothing that escapes the perversions of oppressive and excessive state power. The vulgar critiques of government become a continuum with the government itself as it deploys vulgarity and the citizens take up excess. It is in this uneasy and pessimistic sphere that Armah’s project often lies.

His protagonist refuses the new system of bribery and corruption in Ghana, but this never feels liberating. He laments that “he had cut himself off from the future … he had chosen to make the dry struggles of the present stretch out and consume the whole of his life to come” (Armah 137). This claustrophobic atemporality is integral in both Marechera and Armah’s work. This represents a cultural moment, as Michelle Decker notes, that is “representative of the Mbembian post-colony: the system he establishes prevents postcolonial subjects from maneuvering from underneath the myth of Africa, made weighty by … the vulgar
commandemant whose modes of power anticipate and absorb all forms of protest” (Decker 139). Mbembe’s post-colony makes protest almost impossible, and generally ineffectual. Yet, Armah’s tale ends on a triumphant note. His protagonist, refusing corruption, is saved from the coup that ruins his wealthy former friend Komsoon. In a reversal of fortunes, the protagonist becomes Komsoon’s saviour. And in keeping with the tone of the text as a whole, the protagonist’s saving act takes on all the elements of the absurd obscene, forcing Komsoon to steal away from his house through “the shithole” latrine (Armah 196). In the end, a complete refusal to participate becomes the protagonist’s saving grace. Yet, he is never able to shake off the pervasive obscenity and foul stench that overcomes all the novel’s characters.

In one of the most surreal passages of the text, Armah moves from the third person to the first person in his sixth chapter. It is a temporally muddled political rant, as well as a tender portrayal of the friendships the protagonist has lost due to tragedy and death in the fight for Ghanaian independence and its aftermath. In her text, _On Pain of Speech_, Dina Al-Kassim defines the “rant” as a complex of address, entreaty, and attack that characterizes the haphazard and murky speech that only sometimes gathers itself into a counterdiscourse and which has become a symptom of modernist writing, avowed to truth telling but unable to secure its own speech from the clutter of its own undoing. (Al-Kassim 3)

This somewhat self-defeating style is apparent in the writings of Armah and Marechera. Especially in Armah’s case, the overwhelming pessimism of his work makes its political message at best fractured, and for the most part, somewhat obscure. It seems to be political, yet the politics may be as simple as the refusal of success in the post-colony, on its terms. His fractured and frantic musings present a picture that is never quite whole, never quite satisfactory.
The long and convoluted chapter ends on this note: “No saviors. Only the hungry and the fed. Deceivers all. Only for that is life the perfect length. Everyone will tell you, pointing, that only the impotent refuse … But remember, getting takes the whole of life” (Armah 106). Throughout, if anything, Armah entreats the reader towards this very impotence, for it is perhaps the only way not to be devoured and destroyed by greed. In this formulation, it seems impossible to avoid the mental trouble of the dispossessed subject who has nothing and cannot strive to have more.

This feeling of psychic alienation is central to Bessie Head’s obscene and surreal novel, *A Question of Power*. A contemporary of Marechera’s, writing from Botswana, her work explores the aesthetic and philosophical possibilities within mental illness. Her narrative moves from the surreal representation of the protagonist Elizabeth’s psychosis, which encompasses a sort of universalizing and disorienting time, and linear narratives of sanity, grounded in Elizabeth’s gardening projects. Within the moments of psychosis, Head poses philosophical questions in dialogue with characters Elizabeth has imagined. Speaking to Sello, a monk who has lived a thousand lives, Elizabeth finds herself discovering that “no one [is] the be-all and end-all of creation, that no one [has] the power of assertion and dominance to the exclusion of other life” (Head 30). Head uses her own experiences of mental illness to create a theoretical framework for exploring the philosophical questions of Southern Africa, and to interrogate systems of violence. Not only that, but, in her description of psychosis, Elizabeth goes on an anti-authoritarian journey, rejecting all forms of power over other human beings.

To take up the position of a mentally ill subject, Bessie Head, through Elizabeth, re-signifies schizophrenic production that is normally relegated to the meaningless. As Catherine Prendergast notes in her essay, “On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability,” those diagnosed with schizophrenia and psychosis, live
“a life denied signification.” Given the present configuration of discourses of mental illness, the writing of schizophrenics can only be seen as arhetorical, the test, the record of symptoms, Exhibit A. At best it is seen as music, as poetry, as some personal expression that has no bearing outside of itself, no transactional worth.” (Prendergast 57).

It is common practice to see the content of the schizophrenic’s delusions as devoid of content. Perhaps ornamental, but not substantive. Within *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head does contend with the paralytic effects of psychosis. Elizabeth is rendered mute by the abuse heaped upon her by the allegorical figures of her delusions. In an imaginary exchange with a figure she calls Medusa, Elizabeth finds herself completely at a loss when confronted with her mixed race identity. Medusa’s accusation: “You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages” (Head 41) sends Elizabeth “stark, raving mad” (40). These figures make tangible the very real damage of her fractured mental state. But they do so in specific ways: they reflect Elizabeth’s struggles to navigate her mixed race identity in countries where the most important markers seem to her to be black and white. Like Okara and Marechera, too, Head struggles with loss of autochthonous language, in her case her missing father tongue. While she is often viewed as not quite belonging to either whiteness or blackness, she reflects that she “lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa” (12). Feeling alienated from African culture, her life is still fully shaped by the realities of Apartheid.

At the same time that these aestheticized psychotic episodes represent moments of cultural disconnect and silencing for Head and Marechera, both authors also seek to recuperate a psychotic subjectivity. Deploying the psychotic episode as a tool, they demonstrate the fracturing of subjectivity that occurs under colonialism (and politics that understand the world in black and

7 See page 32 of this thesis for a deeper exploration of how Marechera ties together mental illness and the clash of cultures (via Shona and English) in *House of Hunger*. 
white). Head’s allegorical exploration of Elizabeth’s madness shows how racism has permeated her psyche, and her journey to unlearning that racism. In her dealings with Sello (the saintly and sinister apparition), she muses that “Humility, which is a platitude of saints and recommended for the good life, could be acquired far too drastically in Africa” (Head 102). Under colonial superstructures upheld by racism, Elizabeth realizes that saintly humility becomes a perversion, a self-hating doctrine. Here, her work echoes the words of Frantz Fanon on internalized racism during the colonial process. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon notes that colonization turns all virtues and “customs of the colonized people, their traditions, their myths” into “the very sign of [their] poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity” (Fanon 42). Under colonialism, autochthonous values are seen as debased and are forcefully replaced by Christian ones. Head speaks back against this proselytizing, to reject religious doctrines that subjugate blackness. Her words make clear that “universal” values like humility are deployed quite differently in an Apartheid state. In her citation, humility becomes a way to further feelings of inferiority.

Elizabeth’s mental illness is not only made up of philosophical musing and epiphany. It can also be painfully disorienting. Throughout the text, whether Elizabeth is hallucinating or not is left deliberately unclear. Her world exists in a state of perpetual violent fracture. Conveying psychic alienation through this highly aestheticized mode, Head creates a dialogue between Elizabeth and two competing (yet similar) characters: Sello and Dan. These figures are based on people Elizabeth knows, but who have morphed into her psychic tormentors. Head describes the alienating effects of Elizabeth’s condition as “Torture. Something had gone wrong between sleeping and waking … Wave after wave of obscenity was beating against her head” (Head 121-2). The descriptions are visceral, violent, bloody and over the top. They demonstrate an inability to shut out the outside world. Elizabeth is made permeable by her madness, unable to keep others
out, or to maintain her own subjectivity. This human permeability is crucial to the obscene. In Bakhtin’s formulations of the obscene, it is “the impersonal body, the body of the human race as a whole, being born, living, dying the most varied deaths, being born again” which is manifested in the truly grotesque text (Bakhtin 173). Anna-Leena Toivanen, in paraphrasing Bakhtin, notes that “the grotesque body is characterized by the way in which it transgresses its own limits and opens up to the world” (Toivanen 40). This creates an aesthetic exploration of mental illness while also exploring the anxieties of the post-colonial body, living in constant fear of violence and venereal disease (Veit-Wild 6). Through an exploration of madness, Head demonstrates the fragile position of the newly post-colonial subject.

The question of vulnerability is crucial to K. Sello Duiker as well. In his long meandering novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, his protagonist, Tshepo, spends a long time forcibly confined to a mental hospital in South Africa. Unlike Elizabeth, whose psychosis remains largely unpolicied, Tshepo’s every word is scrutinized for possible wrongdoing. In exploring mental illness, Duiker shows the criminalization of the mentally ill through institutionalization. Tshepo admits he feels “desperate,” saying: “On the outside it would be considered normal to react the way I did after being provoked, at least by some people I know. But in here every gesture is amplified under the psychologist’s gaze” (Duiker 26). Tshepo’s personal mental woes are exacerbated by constant abuse at the hands of malicious hospital staff. Their uniform suspicion towards his every gesture leaves him feeling fragmented and alone. While Head, Marechera and Duiker all explore the aesthetic potential of psychosis fueled fiction, Duiker also reveals the destructiveness of psychic surveillance. Just as Jonathan Metzl states in *Protest Psychosis*, within hegemonic racial discourses about mental illness, “black defiance to white medical authority [is] psychopathic” (Metzl 90). Any reaction is deemed an over-reaction, and here, again, the actions
of the mentally ill patient are only legible as symptoms. Tshepo’s personhood disappears into his diagnosis. Like Elizabeth, and the unnamed protagonist of *House of Hunger*, Tshepo’s mental alienation makes him permeable to the outside world, and as such, at the mercy of the grotesque.

Finally, in linking together all these texts and seeking out their commonalities, I have been creating a genealogy. This literary lineage is not only a crucial way of contextualizing Marechera’s writing practice, but also something Marechera and Duiker take up in their own fiction. K. Sello Duiker, writing from South Africa years after Marechera’s death, takes inspiration from him in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. This novel has a gentle rhythm. Characters come and disappear, while Tshepo moves from drastically different mental states. Because the novel has this meandering flow, focusing on a specific moment seems a good way to contemplate the novel as a whole. One particularly telling scene is from Tshepo’s battle of the books, between him and his roommate Jacques. He references Marechera’s *House of Hunger*, and the scene is also reminiscent of a scene in *House of Hunger* itself. In both novels, these moments reveal the tension at play in creating any kind of African literary lineage.

In both *Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *House of Hunger*, the titles of books spark complex conversations layered with cultural meanings. In Tshepo’s fight with Jacques, Tshepo leaves out “a very provocative title: House of hunger [sic] by Dambudzo Marechera” (Duiker 308). The provocativeness of the book is not explained, but rather a mystery to decipher. Certainly, when Jacques response is to leave a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on his desk, it is clear that both are using the titles to communicate their relations to race and to each other (Ibid). The stakes of their unspoken conversation are high: Tshepo represents the lineage of African writers that served to inspire Duiker in real life (Marechera, Achebe). However, Jacques pushes

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8 A particular scene in which Marechera describes his protagonist’s psychic alienation in conjunction with a rainstorm, uniting inner and outer worlds, is explored in Chapter Two.
back with a title that evokes white saviour tropes. There is much at stake in navigating the many racial tensions in South Africa, and Tshepo very often expresses his desire to create a connection with the rest of Africa, as well as his skepticism of every group in South Africa. By presenting this lineage as the petty culmination of a fight that involves Tshepo tricking Jacques into wearing cologne made from his urine, Duiker reveals the precarity of this project (307). Duiker undercuts any literary heritage through the scene’s humour. It becomes an ambivalent moment, never afforded a completely sincere gravity. In *House of Hunger*, as well, when the protagonist goes to visit his poet friend Philip, he lists the books on his desk with a dispassionate gaze: “Aimé Césaire, LeRoi Jones, James Baldwin, Senghor, and a well-thumbed copy of Christopher Okigbo’s poems” (Marechera 74). Philip seems to be performing the role of a good and enlightened African poet, yet the protagonist remains unmoved. There is a clear tension that exists surrounding the notion of a redemptive literary history. Philip seems to merely be performing the motions of black solidarity, a solidarity Marechera is often both skeptical of and moved by.

In his novel, *Black Sunlight*, Marechera explores these feelings even more through the figure of Nick. The protagonist, Christian, remembers him and his disastrous attempts at public poetry: Nick is unable to understand the political climate of the time. He is reviled for his English poetry and his “‘modernistic European manner’” (Marechera 110). Marechera and Duiker are aware of what is at stake in any attempts to create this kind of lineage, especially when Marechera’s work was criticized for being too European (as was Nick’s). The idea of what it meant to be an African writer is at the forefront of Marechera’s self-conscious work. It appears in much more subtle ways in Duiker. Later in the passage, Christian notes how Nick must navigate “the tourist and anthropology market – Blanche’s racket –” a clear criticism of the white
demand for the exotic, while also acknowledging the pleasing room for “experiment” which “had the face of negritude” (Marechera 111). The scene contains all the ambiguity and potential that existed within Marechera’s writing projects. He mocks Nick’s plight although it was also his own. Negritude is mentioned as an experiment, but because it carries such heavy evocations of pan-Africanism, it also teases that lineage that both Duiker and Marechera ambivalently invoke. Both the protagonist of House of Hunger and Tshepo are solitary figures, thus any notion of a kinship between artists is strained. They are positioned on the outside of African zeitgeists.

However, Duiker is not merely ambivalent. The end of his novel calls upon Nigerian literature as a subtle critique of the xenophobia that is becoming more and more apparent throughout Quiet Violence of Dreams. Tshepo notes his “lament” for the state of Nigerians in South Africa and says that he finds “comfort in Soyinka and Okri” (Duiker 454). Throughout the novel Tshepo is comforted by books. Yet authors are rarely mentioned by name. This moment is brief and easy to miss, but since it is placed within his description of the troubles faced by Nigerian immigrants its importance is clear. Just as he mentioned “No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe” in his battle with Jacques, it becomes evident that lauding these three Nigerian authors is a response to South Africa’s isolationist prejudice against the rest of Africa (308). The standoff with Jacques comes after a scene in which his friend Mmabatho reveals her xenophobia, threatening Tshepo’s naïve optimism. Mmabatho openly distrusts black Africans and warns Tshepo against “Makwere-kwere,” slang for black foreigners (often Nigerians) in South Africa (260). This leads to a final inter-reference with Duiker’s contemporary, Phaswane Mpe. Duiker apparently knew Mpe in real life, as he “read the eulogy at the funeral” of Mpe (a year or so before Duiker’s own death) (Blingaut). Quiet Violence of Dreams and Welcome to Our Hillbrow
contain interreferences that support their literary friendship. Duiker closes the novel saying “Hillbrow is full of Nigerians and makwere-kwere” (Duiker 451). Hillbrow is the setting of Mpe’s novel, and the plot revolves around xenophobic tension in South Africa. Mpe, too, uses the word “Makwerekwre” and speaks of the stereotypes of Nigerians as “Drug-dealing;” not only that, but a beloved and deceased character is named “Tshepo” (Mpe 44). Here the conversation between the two novels seems a more hopeful establishment of an anti-xenophobic South African literature. While a lineage of authors might be problematized by ongoing racism as well as tension surrounding how and what to write, there is some positivity to be found in how these two authors converse across their novels.

The tension of the lineage of African literature seems to emanate from various sources: the alienating effects of xenophobia, the oppressive white desire for exotic black literature, the inability or unwillingness to live up to the style demanded of African authors. Whatever the reasons for it may be, calling upon these lineages in order to question, critique and also celebrate them, gives insight into the highly self-conscious writing styles of Marechera and Duiker. Both authors are aware that they are wrestling with the literary expectations placed upon an entire continent. They both have a complex relationship with said expectations.

All in all, I have set up this brief genealogy to offer a glimpse into the importance of the avant-garde on the continent, and the ways in which avant-garde styles open up new avenues for questioning post-colonial subjectivity, as well as the expectations placed on African authors. In subverting these expectations, the authors I have engaged with offer up new modes for understanding African subjectivity, while taking up autochthonous African traditions. Experimentation causes fragmentation, and within those fragments lies possibility. While at times the political disappears into disjointed ranting, the rant itself serves a purpose: it unsettles
its reader. That unsettling, that shock, crucial to European avant-garde movements, takes on a new meaning in Africa. Perhaps it is never able to escape the all-encompassing grotesque of the post-colony that Mbembe describes, but at the very least it opens up means of understanding the fractured subjectivity of these ex-pat authors in moments of political upheaval.
Chapter Two: BS and the Sous-Réel

In the prior chapter, I have discussed various techniques deployed by African avant-gardists, and how these overlap with Dambudzo Marechera’s writing practice in various ways. Here I will delve more specifically into Marechera’s style. In creatively exploring the lives of the racial “other,” Dambudzo Marechera eschews social realism in favour of what could be termed “psychotic realism,” or the “sous-réel.” While Marechera’s work could be described as surreal, I have chosen the term “sous-réel” to reflect the ways in which he focuses on debasement, obscenity, and disjointed narratives in a style that uses that which is deemed “low” as the locus of possibility. Rather than have hopes contingent upon transcendence, he descends into a chaotic realm in which he explores the devaluation of blackness. In the short story collections House of Hunger, and Scrapiron Blues, as well as his novel Black Sunlight, Marechera explores the struggles of Zimbabwe both pre and post-independence. His work undertakes this project by employing sous-réel and obscene writing that explores past and present but precludes futurity. Suspicious of the Western artistic canon, he explores black time(lessness). When stories defy narrative expectations of plot, progress, and resolution, they propose an alternate model of understanding being. This is a disruptive artistic practice. Deploying a politics of disruption, Marechera interrogates existing systems of power in Zimbabwe. Aestheticizing psychological turmoil becomes a tool for jolting readers out of readerly expectations, and for resisting facile, redemptive readings. Non-linear narrativization becomes political praxis by taking up the problems of racism. Exploring the underside of surrealism, these works propose a revolutionary practice that puts everything in question.

In theorizing what it means to be sous-réel, I turn to the work of Bataille in his essay: “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix Sur in the words Surhomme and Surrealist.” In this essay,
Bataille interrogates the prefix *sur* and what he believes to be a problematic desire to strive for transcendence, when real political potential exists below ground. Bataille is critical of the surrealist movement for its “double tendency” of employing “low values (the unconscious, sexuality, filthy language, etc.)” in order to elevate them to the “predominance of higher ethereal values (clearly expressed by the addition of the prefix *sur*)” (Bataille 39). Rather than employ obscenity for transcendent ends, Bataille employs the low in order to delve even deeper. According to Bataille, the prefix *sur* is part of a disturbing tendency toward authoritarianism that must be avoided. He states that “[r]evolutionary idealism tends to make of the revolution an eagle above eagles, a *supereagle* striking down authoritarian imperialism” which “naturally leads to the failure of the revolution and, with the help of military fascism, the satisfaction of the elevated need for idealism” (Bataille 34). Bataille here dismisses any notion that a higher authoritarianism has any hope of creating a genuine revolutionary spirit. Idealism is dismissed as authoritarianism in disguise, and any thought of looking upwards for salvation is rejected. What one must strive for instead is what Marx terms the “old mole:” the revolution that “begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of the proletarians” (Bataille 35). Bataille’s conception of the surrealist movement focuses upon bodily experience and rejects ethereal politics as inherently authoritarian. The term sous-réel (*sous* meaning under) thus becomes the most apt for the surrealist project that rejects idealism but holds on to obscenity, sexuality, and other things deemed immoral or debased. This commitment to obscenity is political in that it creates a new realism that explores Marechera’s experience of being black in the UK and Zimbabwe, as blackness is excluded from history and canonicity.

This anti-authoritarian strain is at the heart of Marechera’s work. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon warns that the revolutionarily inclined masses of a colonial state run the risk
of descending into “incoherence and anarchy” without leadership (Fanon 198). Fanon is intrigued by the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat of African shanty towns but warns against falling into anarchy and disarray. Rather than shying away from this possibility, Marechera embraces anarchism as a site of self-defeating potential. Against any form of authoritarianism, Marechera creates anarchic revolution in the plot and style of his work. His timeless writing style is also his anarchist praxis. Tinashe Mushakavanhu describes Marechera’s writing as one in which “no set hierarchy exists” and that the ways in which he breaks “linear links” and has “narratives [that] cascade in no apparent or necessary order… is, indeed, a kind of exuberant anarchy” (Mushakavanhu 20). Rather than employing anarchy as a dirty word, Marechera uses it as a site of creative potential. He is combating all authority, including indigenous African authority. In Lindon Barrett’s Blackness and Value, Barrett is attentive to the role of authority in the construction of value. Barrett states that as “much as they are affirmative, value and authority are at every point oppressive, from absent or unknown vantages… the negative, the expended, the excessive invariably form the ground of possibilities for value” (Barrett 21). Critiquing the violence that underpins the creation of value and authority, Barrett says that value is created through the violent negation of the Other through literal or figurative death. Marechera takes up the views of thinkers like Bataille and Barrett by destroying any form of hierarchy and deeming any and all authority oppressive.

This style stems from Marechera’s in-depth reading in the traditions of Russian anarchism (Bakunin and Kropotkin, in particular) and his self-styling as an intellectual anarchist. Marechera states: “I was reading books on intellectual anarchism to reinforce my own sense of protest against everything… one has to be in a perpetual state of change, without holding on to any certainties” (Veit-Wild 31). While anarchism never became a well-rooted political
movement in Africa (Ramnath “Non-Western Anarchisms and Postcolonialism” 677), Marechera deployed it on a philosophical level in order to create a specific writing practice. A lack of distinction between individual characters is also characteristic of Marechera’s poetry and novels. This indistinction and confusion enhances the anarchistic qualities of his literary style. For instance, in Black Sunlight, the protagonist encounters his own doppelgänger: “the hair, the mouth, the chin… I was looking at myself” (Black Sunlight 60). The meeting is followed by an increasingly confused conversation/rant between the two who may or may not be the same person. Here, Marechera’s devotion to subverting hierarchy manifests as a lack of fixed or distinct identity. He pushes back against colonial systems of power (including his education) and provides an obscene, chaotic alternative, in which the humming of the flies that flit around the toilet have the same cultural gravity as classical music: in fact, nothing has gravity at all.

House of Hunger, Marechera’s first novella, follows an unnamed first-person protagonist, as he wends his way through the overcrowded and violent township of Harare. Throughout the text is a leitmotif of a “cloud of flies from the nearby public toilet humming Handel’s ‘Hallelujah Chorus,’” which Marechera states is an “almost perfect photograph of the human condition” (Marechera 21). The flies reappear throughout the text, almost always humming that same chorus (Marechera 53, 60, 96). Marechera’s use of flies, refuse, violence and obscenity perform many functions. The flies that hum Handel are part of Marechera’s violent practice of allusion and reference, in which he takes high culture from Europe and violently debases it through association with rot and decay. The Black Insider, Marechera’s rejected manuscript that would be repurposed into Black Sunlight, was published posthumously in 1992. Its heavy use of citation
is oft-interpreted, and often misunderstood. At the very least, to look at his allusions as reverent is reductive.

In fact, in *The Black Insider*, Marechera’s protagonist, who is named Dambudzo, finds exquisite pain in his references. In this collection of writings by Roberto Fernandez Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, Retamar begins with the incendiary claim that by applying the rules of colonization and extermination employed in the USA to other Europeans, “the bourgeoisie … stigmatize in Hitler what they applauded as a healthy Sunday diversion in westerns and Tarzan films” (Retamar 4). This incendiary and truthful opener is mirrored closely in *The Black Insider*, when Dambudzo laments his childhood “diet of Tarzan and cowboy films” as “the first downward step towards the first circle where black fires rage incomsumably. Candide’s experience of the world is the nearest we can get to the series of cerebral shocks which await the savage who is earnestly in search of culture” (Marechera *BI* 32-3). In both cases, the post-colonized subject, forced to live in a global culture that seeks nothing less than their annihilation, is assaulted on all fronts by the culture of the West. The canon of pulp fiction and classic fiction becomes nothing but more ammunition in the war to destroy the colonized and post-colonized. It celebrates the murder of the non-white subject as a healthy “diversion.” As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o notes, in colonization, the “bullet was the means of physical subjugation” and “[l]anguage was the means of the spiritual subjugation” through “education, particularly in language and literature” (wa Thiong’o 9). Marechera’s consistent debasement of the citations he takes up thus becomes a means of fighting against his own internalized colonial education. Marechera’s protagonist both revels in and refuses the “role of the unfathomable black intellectual mind”

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9 See Madhlozi Moyo’s “Classical Allusion in Marechera’s Prose Works,” in which Moyo generally states that Marechera’s citations demonstrate a reverence and wish to situate himself within a universalized (yet European) canon.
This role, especially in the allusion laden novel *The Black Insider*, appears to be an uneasy navigation of life in Zimbabwe and Britain that involves the continual deployment of allusion in order to bring it to the basest levels of lewdness and misery.

His use of obscenity is frequently tied to his irreverent practice of bringing in European and Christian allusions. He uses them in order to critique their perceived superiority. Instead they join Marechera in the visceral daily lives of his characters. In his novel *Black Sunlight*, Marechera’s protagonist (ironically named Christian) visits a Church and speaks of a carnal unity with the statue of Christ:

He look[s] as if He had just had a woman from behind… like He had not been to the toilet for two thousand years. He looked like I felt. That was the connection. That was what made Him big, this mirroring quality… explicitly showing all his wounds and orifices with an air of spirited invitation. In these terms Nick had described him to me, described him as one describes a thorn in one’s flesh, or the spreading disease between one’s thighs. (Marechera *BS* 28)

Employing doubling here to connect the white Christ and the black protagonist, Marechera does sexual violence to Christianity and sanctity. Comparing Christ’s stigmata to the open wounds of venereal disease unites spiritual and sexual injury. All wounds are equalized as the sacred is violently brought down to the level of profane sexuality. Marechera (who died of AID related complications) is genuinely concerned with “venereal disease” and its aesthetic representation. By exploring venereal disease through Christ, Marechera reveals the complex and often destructive role of Christianity in Africa. Just as venereal disease takes lives, so do Christian missionary values. Furthermore, by focusing on the permeability of Christ’s body, Marechera unites Christianity with the Bakhtinian grotesque in order to undermine its godly authority.
The grotesque (as Marechera unites it with European allusion), is not Marechera’s only aesthetic tool. The second part of my premise relates to the potential of a “psychotic realism.” Rather than a counterpoint to sous-realism, psychotic realism is the idea that taking up an aesthetics of psychosis can be a political writing practice, and crucial to undermining the transcendent. Cornelius Castoriadis, in “The Construction of the World in Psychosis,” explores what it would mean to examine psychosis as a space replete with meaning rather than devoid of it. The idea of taking that which has been deemed valueless and reimbuing it with value using the very arguments by which it was discounted is the crux of interpreting Marechera’s work. Turning again to Barrett, he theorizes the “twofold structure or movement of value” and its “extreme promiscuity, since value is perpetually at war with itself” (Barrett 33). In his examination of value, Barrett focuses upon the violence required to imbue value: because all value-making is double pronged: it deems one object valuable, to the exclusion of other objects (Ibid 19). Thus, value is always at war with itself, because it must violently assign and strip objects of value in order to perpetuate its own system. In this understanding of the world, and how it creates value, the psychotic delusion becomes a helpful model for questioning that which society deems worthwhile. Castoriadis theorizes that psychosis and its ensuing delusional creation is not in its essence a reduction, a mutilation, or the sum of the debris of the common world, but rather an alteration in certain of the latter’s organizing principles, and a disappearance or a vanishing of the very wish to participate in the common world. (Castoriadis “Construction of the World in Psychosis” 200-201) Castoriadis insists that delusion is a form of creation that rejects the world as it is. It subverts received value and structures of power. Rather than relegating the expressions of psychosis to meaninglessness (or valuelessness), Castoriadis insists that psychosis is in fact a means of
altering the hierarchies of the world as they exist. Focusing, as Barrett does, upon that which exists outside of value, is like Castoriadis’s use of the potential of the psychotic. He utilizes a realm often ignored to provide meaning.

Marechera explores psychosis in almost all his work. As Castoriadis has suggested, Marechera uses depictions of psychosis in order to explore political issues. In situating psychosis culturally, Castoriadis sees it as part of a “subject’s radical imagination,” however, he also notes that psychosis empties the self of meaning and devastates the relationship to others through the “obliteration of the dimension of desire [which] conditions the psychotic’s separation” (Castoriadis 206-207). Attentive to the real consequences of psychosis, Castoriadis is still concerned with mining the imagination for meaning, that “radical” potential. Separation is artfully deployed by Marechera. In *House of Hunger*, Marechera’s protagonist describes his mental alienation as a cultural one. His psychosis takes on the form of “an interminable argument, one side of which was always expressed in English and the other side always in Shona” (the narrator and Marechera’s first language) (Marechera *HoH* 43). This is the postcolonial subject position: Marechera presents psychic alienation in order to posit himself, the writer, as an outsider to the thrust of history. That disconnected position, fragmented from tradition, family, past and future, is what allows the characters (and author) to speak uncomfortable truths. Stefania Pandolfo in “The Thin Line of Modernity,” explores the dynamic potential of the moment of “fracture” that occurs in fiction and psychoanalysis (Pandolfo 121). According to Pandolfo, it is pain that allows for possibility: it is a “source of unbearable suffering that inaugurates … the possibility of speech” (Pandolfo 143). It is the very anguish of postcolonial alienation that creates the space for speech. By stepping outside of a history that
rejects the black subject in any case, Marechera shows the possibility of expression during the breakdown of meaning.

In *House of Hunger*, Marechera’s protagonist guides the reader on a disjointed and violent journey through his experiences of psychosis and mental disturbance. Rather than engage with the world on its own terms, Marechera unsettles language to reject the world and all it offers. Aestheticizing a period of madness as part of a storm that overtakes his school, Marechera’s protagonist says that the rain “spilled down into our minds, soaked our words, and left us openmouthed. Mouthwet” (Marechera *HoH* 45). Marechera explores psychosis as the dissolution of the separation between inside and outside. Here, the world enters into the mind, and the mind spills out into the world. In exploring madness in this way, Marechera breaks down the separation between mind and world, between objective and subjective reality. The storm both literally and figuratively wets Marechera’s protagonist. The psychotic break refashions the character’s world.

Through his creative work, Marechera shows that the construction of a (post)colonial self is contingent on a disrupted time, and an unreliable narrator. In *House of Hunger*, Marechera retells the story of the protagonist’s father’s death many times and many different ways, obscuring any sense that there is a “true” story to be uncovered. Instead of focusing on veracity, the death of the “old man” becomes an emblem for the black condition. Describing his father’s death in a train accident, he states the “old man died beneath the wheels of the twentieth century. There was nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh, when the whole length of it was through with eating him” (Marechera *HoH* 60). Marechera’s father died in his real life, but within the fictional world of *House of Hunger*, the death becomes another figuring of the black condition in the twentieth century. The motif of the “stain” becomes an expression of the sous-
réel of black life in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. Individual subjectivities become collective experience, as his father is turned into a tragic black hero destroyed by contemporary racism. Even the protagonist’s mother tells him that after the accident, there “‘was nothing left [of the old man] but stains’” (Marechera HoH 19). The tragic takes on elements of farce through repetition and distortion. The ubiquity of the stain makes a farce of racism, the value system that inaugurates the protagonist’s agitated mental state.

Stefania Pandolfo’s “The Thin Line of Modernity,” fuses literary criticism, philosophy and psychiatric debate in order to explore temporality in modern Morocco. Her theories of time serve as an elucidation of the political possibilities sub-textually present in the writing practices of Marechera. While Marechera always eschews a straightforward politics, it is possible to view his techniques as a moment of political protest against hegemonic understandings of modernity, subjectivity, and blackness. In Pandolfo’s words, “[u]nder the gaze of melancholy, historical consciousness comes to a halt, and history is ‘hypostatized,’ frozen in the ‘unpresent’ tense” (Pandolfo 125). This melancholy and unpresent tense is the subjective reality of the colonized subject, who is excluded from modernity while alienated from her traditional past. This theory of colonized psychopathology reflects Marechera’s non-linear and timeless narratives. For Marechera, it is the way to create a verisimilitude to Zimbabwean life that is at once affectively true and utterly sous-réel.

When Barrett discusses atemporality, he is at once elucidating his theory of time and value, while also engaging in a writing practice that disrupts time. For Barrett, in the history of the United States, timelessness and valuelessness go hand in hand. Barrett theorizes that timelessness in space (aka the position of the black subject) is the “antithesis of God and of the voice. Timelessness in space marks pure materiality and… is the reality of the unanimated, or
dead body” (Barrett 110). The white subject, on the other hand, is assigned value through “spacelessness in time,” and thus a transcendence of material reality (96). To possess progressive time is to be closer to God, while atemporality is related to the bestial and hopelessness. Through a close reading of Ann Petry’s novel, *The Street*, Barrett shows the ways in which fiction can be used to underscore and illuminate an unspoken reality. Here, black subjects are treated as silent, as overly embodied, overcome by cultural expectations of physicality, and lack of progress. This separation of black and white happens on the level of time: white characters in the novel have a future, black characters rehash the same scenes from different angles, obscuring any thought of futurity in favour of a present moment which is “spatial, which is to say, the press of present moment upon reconstituted present moment mirrors the press of person upon person, of tiny, dingy room upon tiny, dingy room that above all characterizes the street” (Barrett 106). Barrett argues that in situations of poverty, racism, and overwhelming closeness, future possibility is replaced by the overwhelming physical presence of the current moment. This interpretation of timelessness is in keeping with what Pandolfo describes as the pathologizing of the “mentalité indigene prémorbide” which is “described in terms of a lack of the concept of time, deficiency of the critical faculty, and inability to think conceptually” (Pandolfo 131-132). Lacking time is conflated with lacking sense and relegates the racialized other to a place outside historical progress.

This disruption of time, and the claustrophobic past and present, are defining features of the novella, *House of Hunger*, the novel, *Black Sunlight*, and the story collection, *Scrapiron Blues*. While they were all written at varying points in Marechera’s life (the first two written in London, the third written back in Zimbabwe and published posthumously), Marechera deploys similar non-linear tactics throughout. Just as Petry’s work serves to reveal the racist
underpinnings of America, Marechera explodes time to reveal the near unnavigable position of the postcolonial subject at the moment of violent decolonization. Two childhood friends of Marechera, interviewed about his book *House of Hunger*, state that Marechera’s description of his life in the townships is “exactly the way it was” (Veit-Wild 60). His non-linear sous-realism forms part of an affective realism, in which he captures through a specific and highly aestheticized performance of township life, a certain communal reality. All three texts take long and meandering detours into flashback to the point that often there does not seem to be a central narrative thread at all, so obscured does it become in the claustrophobic tragedies of the past. In *Black Sunlight*, Marechera deliberately calls attention to the failure of linear time, and the ways in which racism and authoritarianism have become inescapable.

In *Black Sunlight* there is past and present, but no future. The Black Sunlight organization within the novel is a fictional anarchist cooperative fighting for the liberation of Zimbabwe. However, Marechera begins his novel in Chapter 1 with the revelation that the Black Sunlight anarchist revolt has already been quashed. The events of Chapter 1 take place long after the events of all the subsequent chapters. The “present” shows the protagonist, Christian, who has fled the revolution in order to go on an anthropological photographic mission. His old friend Blanche arrives only to tell him that “the fiery and revolutionary fervour ha[s] been… stamped out ruthlessly,” and to give him “a long list of those killed behind the barricades, those summarily executed, those detained, those who ha[ve] escaped into yet another soul-destroying exile. The military now rule[]” (Marechera *BS* 13). This is an indictment of Mugabe’s military regime that Marechera observed with trepidation from England. In framing the book this way, Marechera creates a portrait that is chaotically bleak and full of impossibilities. It becomes clear as one reads through the book that Christian and his enthusiastic revolutionary friends, Susan,
Katherine and Chris, will end up defeated and scattered. This pessimism is again tied to a grotesque writing practice, in which the Black Sunlight organization does not exist, “[e]ven the very name, BSO was a joke. Bakunin Shits Okay. Bleeding Sods (cf. Orifices) … [to] atrophy ourselves with a BSO label was shit” (Ibid 104). The entire temporality is subjunctive and circular. Each moment returns to undermine itself. Each revolutionary gesture is also a reiteration of the inescapable grotesque. And yet, from Chapter 2 onwards, he undertakes their stories in non-linear zigs and zags, exploring that space of impossibility with generosity and smatterings of hope.

Similarly, in *House of Hunger*, the protagonist frequently derails the narrative into explorations of a chaotic past. The narrative ends with a claustrophobic cluster of stories upon stories: the narrator recalls a story told him by an old man. The old man is previously assumed to be the protagonist’s father, but here, perhaps is another figure altogether. He, like Marechera, prefers to tell stories that are “oblique, rambling, and fragmentary” (Marechera HoH 97), and the novella concludes with him ominously telling the narrator that he “found this little package… [with] photographs of you and your friends and little notes about what you do… Trouble is knocking impatiently on our door” (Marechera HoH 101). Here, Marechera concludes on a moment of a promised future that is perhaps bleaker than even the present tense. It is a promise and a threat that the protagonist’s political agitating will catch up to him. In that way, it predicts the concerns of the later novel, *Black Sunlight*, and its explorations of the dangers of revolutionary politics. In *Black Sunlight*, the revolutionaries live for the moment. Susan, revolutionary and sometime lover of Christian, says: “I don’t have any future or once upon a time. I’m talking shit today” (Marechera BS 43). Because of threats on all sides, and lives full of
claustrophobic violence, the present moment stretches out to encompass all things. The only truth is the grotesque and overbearing “now.”

While timelessness in Marechera’s work is related to a nihilistic, colonial subjectivity, it is also connected to his exploration of sexism and gendered violence. Julia Kristeva’s essay “Women’s Time” traces how women have historically been conceptualized as existing outside of history, that “when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming, or history” (Kristeva 15). Women, and female subjectivity, become emblematic of “repetition and *eternity*” across fields and civilizations (Ibid 16). In this way, womanhood is relegated to a place outside of rationalist value. Science and progress are gendered male, while the female is associated with birth, with the cycle of life, and a certain stasis. Bringing together the spatial treatment of women and black people is something Marechera focuses on in all his work, dense as it is with sexual and racial violence. Interviewing himself, Marechera notes that his commitment to the “voluptuous blackening image,” “discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within,” is allied with the writerly projects of the feminists: he deals with the racism of English, and they with its maleness (Marechera *HoH* 7). His work also focuses strongly on sexual violence, which he explains as follows:

because at that time black men were used to being the slaves of the whites… the only slaves they had were their women. That’s why women were the ultimate victims of racism in this country. And I make no apology about the way I have depicted that very strongly in my books. (Veit-Wild 13)

Thus, the timelessness of life in the slums of Harare is doubly felt by the women, who suffer racism’s effects the most strongly of any colonial subject. Barrett, too, is interested in a
theoretical exploration of “the course of the twentieth-century U.S. literary academy as inflected by the concerns of race and gender” (Barrett 23): he notes that “African American women… have been and continue to be socially encoded as jezebels” and “whores” which becomes a “powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults’ (Collins 77) made on African American women” (Ibid 119). Marechera concerns himself unflinchingly with the ways in which black women are the victims of the greatest excesses of racial violence, due to their twice vulnerable positions as black and female.

In M. NourbeSe Philip’s essay “Dis Place— The Space Between,” Philip uses embodiment in order to speak back against centuries of rape and violence towards black women in the Americas. Rather than reject the bodily for its troubled relationship to violence, she reclaims it. Her work includes poetry, letters and essay, creating a hybrid writing style similar to Marechera’s own. Especially Mind Blast, his novel length work that is part play, part short stories and ends with poetry. The intertwining of genre adds to the anti-authoritarian protest in both works. It is by bringing together various means of writing and exploration that their stance is more fully explored. The formal qualities of their work mirror and enhance its content. For Philip, as well, reclaiming the inner space is crucial to reclaiming the ability for speech. She evokes the mythic “Nanny of the Maroons— that used to be catching de bullets in dem baccra firing pon she people right inside she crotch’ … Consider! dis place— the inner space repelling and resisting the aggressive penetrations from the outer space” (Philip 98). Within her essay, it is through returning to the violated “inner space/of body” that one reclaims that body (Ibid 99). It is also through referring to the vagina in terms both graphic and euphemistic that she can speak back against rape. It is through the often times visceral reclamation of female sexuality that Philip also reclaims speech.
In Marechera’s writing sex takes on similarly complicated functions. Reproducing in detail scenes of horrific sexual violence, Marechera addresses the sous-réel reality of his upbringing. On the other hand, he explores sexual anarchy in *Black Sunlight* primarily through Susan (an anarchist revolutionary). Right before she and Christian engage in their affair, she tells him: “Christ, I’d hang on to my clitoris even if they were cutting my throat” (Marechera *BS* 45). Within the novel, the risk of having her throat cut is definitely real. Susan states that she privileges her own sexuality even above her life. Sexuality is a site of tremendous violence in all of Marechera’s writing, but particularly in *Black Sunlight*, he experiments with how it can be reclaimed. Just as Philip contends with a history often inseparable from violence, so too do the women in Marechera’s texts. Katherine, married to a drunk, describes her love making as a battle. She states: “He was drunk. I won hands down… I knocked him out in the third round” (Ibid 40). There is a doubling that complicates the redemptive reading. Sex is both rehabilitating and destructive, a protest and a defeat. It is this very formation of doubling that becomes a key feature of Marechera’s sous-réel practice.

Similarly, Lindon Barrett’s *Blackness and Value* is subtitled: *Seeing Double*. This subtitle reflects the way he presents a series of apparent dichotomies, in order to question whether they are really so distinct from one another and to show the ways they are implicated within each other. Using the same word (“hypostasized”) as Pandolfo, he asks: “what exactly does it mean to pursue an understanding of race (as a value) in these terms – as both fluid and hypostasized, as concomitantly a series of transactions and the representation of a formal essence, as agonistically systemic?” (Barrett 55). In a work that grapples with the notions of race and of value, he defines race in dynamic and contradictory terms in order to explore the complicated (and hypocritical) way in which value is formed through violence in the United States. Race as a marker of value,
or non-value, is part of this contradictory process: the violence that underpins contemporary understandings of race is obscured by narrativizing race as a static value. Dealing as he is with such multivalent and contradictory definitions of race, Barrett defines value by looking at moments of rupture in black American history. Through the exploration of the singing voice, and especially the singing of Billie Holiday, Barrett explores how American privileging of literacy was used as a means of undercutting the subjectivity of black people and slaves (who were not allowed to learn to read or write). The singing voice becomes a means of cutting this concept down to its hypocritical bone:

Singing voices iterate or repeat nothing per se, because speech is declined insofar as they do not singularly intend to effect, or direct, the meaningful word but first of all to affect, display, or deploy - even displace - the meaningful word. Consider again Frederick Douglass's retrospective understanding of enslaved African Americans singing ‘unmeaning jargon . . . which, nevertheless, [is] full of meaning to themselves’ (31).

Singing voices emphasize the *infinitude* of ‘unmeaning’ that presupposes and inaugurates signification. (Barrett 84)

Singing becomes a disruption to “signing” (Ibid), and a means of communication that privileges affect over intelligibility. Historically, black Americans have used song as a means of asserting selfhood when that selfhood was categorically denied by slavery or racism. The moment of being hurt, the cut that allows space for the utterance, becomes the ahistorical emblem of possibility for Barrett of a black subjectivity.

In *Black Sunlight*, Marechera addresses unmeaning in very similar terms. First of all, the character who serves as a stand-in for Marechera in the narrative is the writer Nick, who dies early on, and off-scene. Before his death, he is a failed writer, whose experimental prose is so
hated by the audience of his one and only poetry reading—for the “‘vulgar words,’” the unintelligibility” and “‘his modernistic European manner’”—that a fight breaks out and Nick goes into hiding (Marechera BS 110). This is similar to criticisms Marechera received from African critics for his early work. Anna-Leena Toivanen cites Juliet Okonkwo, who “object[s] to Marechera’s abundant and apparently hap-hazard use of ‘obscene and four-letter words,’ which, as she maintains, ‘are used purely for their own sake’” (Toivanen 38). In inserting Nick into the narrative in this way, Marechera displays his commitment to literary pessimism. While his work deals with the violent daily lives of Zimbabweans, he presents even himself, and his work, as dead. However, in a celebration of unmeaning, an anarchist character, “Nicola, in triumph, add[s] that in order to arrive one must give up intelligibility for it is not necessary to be understood. Words liberated from punctuation radiate one upon another and cross their various magnetisms, following their own continuous dynamism” (Marechera 111). While Marechera is a writer and not a singer, he too, hopes to empty literacy of its expected meaning. Rather than seeking understanding, he wishes to unsettle. His long-winded passages confound the reader with their opacity. This is part of a chaotic political practice designed to unsettle both African and European notions of value and aesthetic merit. Marechera obviously presents his work in written form, but with a sharp skepticism towards literacy. The possibility of literacy comes in the disruption of expectations of language.

Timelessness, while often portrayed as negative, also becomes a site of cross-cultural unity. Pandolfo theorizes this breakdown of linear time as the “temporality of the ‘cut’ or the ‘bridge,’ related to the drawing of a line that separates and joins worlds experienced as at once contiguous and remote” (Pandolfo 118). The “cut” becomes a place of political possibility for formulations of new consciousness. Collapsing time reveals the multiple complicated
imbrications of racism and colonialism in the formation of a contemporary subjectivity. Barrett notes that various critical work on black singing traditions in the States “carefully supports the belief that African cultural formations might overwhelm great discontinuities of time and space” (Barrett 59). Barrett spends considerable time deepening what this analysis and continuity means for black artistry. He is intrigued not only by the ways in which timelessness is the fate of the excluded Other, but also the cultural importance of threads that seem to exist outside of time and are rather linked by the continued presence of black subjects. When Marechera’s *Black Sunlight* protagonist Christian, a photographer, is forced to run from the African chief he was sent to photograph, he muses that there:

is always somebody on the run. From weird judges, fucking pigs… from the ugly face of tradition… And there was Hitler at the Olympic Games turning his backside on our finest athlete. You do not wait for the starter’s gun. The mere presence of the Ku-Klux-Klan in the neighbourhood is enough. (Marechera *BS* 9)

Though he is fleeing a black African, Marechera twists the plot: instead he is fleeing the evils of a very Western racism. When Marechera refers to “our” finest athlete, he shows his awareness of the pan-African and black struggle, and that his work supports the anti-racist project of decolonization. Hitler and the Ku-Klux-Klan unite the Zimbabwean struggle against racism to the Western one. Taking place in the late 1970s, time is also irrelevant. Racism becomes an ever-present threat. Later in the novel Christian states, in a parenthetical passage, that “(Steve Biko died while I was blind drunk in London. Soweto burned while I was sunk in deep thought about an editor’s rejection slip.)” (Marechera *BS* 114). This moment of disconnect is full of pathos, as he breaks down the boundaries of time and space. Marechera tends to present arguments on both sides in each case: he rages against racism while also being skeptical of African nationalism and
unity. The dichotomous lists collapse into a scene where Christian flees the black chief and the white racist at the same time.

This is the complex subjectivity of the postcolonial subjects in Marechera’s works. They are contending with racism, but it is both internalized and external. Barrett and Fanon discuss the ways colonialism and racism create their own other. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes how it is the “settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence” (Fanon 36). The settler exists due to disenfranchising and othering the native, thus the two identities are forged through colonial violence. Barrett contemplates race through his own theories of value, but the words look the same when he states that “value is an impeachment of the Other, the willful expenditure of the Other in an imposing production of the self” (Barrett 28). Identity, then, is often forged through violence. There is a sort of powerlessness to this interpretation: where a black, colonial subject’s identity is not her own, but a reaction.

Marechera is the one to further complicate this reading of racism and the creation of the other. In *House of Hunger*, “Black Skin What Mask,” is the title of a short story about feeling overly visible as a black Zimbabwean at Oxford, derided by other African students for hailing from a nation that had yet to win independence from colonial rule (Marechera 131). Here, he plays with Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to tackle issues of hypervisibility, and a failure of black solidarity when it is other black students who are the most merciless towards Zimbabweans. Internalized racism is explored in a different vein here than the way Fanon does it: hinging on the failures of pan-Africanism and the ways in which black skin can be devalued by other black people. In Marechera’s essay “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature,” he refers to Fanon as “that black Frenchman” (Marechera 100). Marechera possesses a clear skepticism of the “Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*,” while also recognizing his integral
impact on 20th century Africa (Ibid). In concentrating on internalized racism, Marechera calls into question the construction of race that simply pits black against white and deals with the more complex realities of racial tension in Zimbabwe.

Marechera also puts Fanon’s theories into action in *Black Sunlight* and *Scrapiron Blues*. Fanon’s concern with the so-called *lumpenproletariat*, the starving people of the shanty towns in Africa, hinges on a belief that they contain within them the most dynamic revolutionary potential in Africa (Fanon 130). For Marechera, this *lumpenproletariat* are the people with whom he grew up. While he writes in a surreal manner, there is a dedication to a visceral reality, expressing the real and pervasive violence of Marechera’s youth. In an interview, Marechera says that there is “a lot of sex and violence in the township” (Veit-Wild 10). Committed to a surrealist realism, Marechera takes on the project of examining the lives of the *lumpenproletariat* with an unflinching attention to detail. In *Scrapiron Blues*, Marechera records the lewd bar time stories of Fred and attempts to “grasp the kind of story that will take in the swimming-pool skin of the Harare skies” (Marechera *Scrapiron Blues* 5). Moving from what Frantz Fanon describes as the first phase of postcolonial literature, in which the indigenous author’s work “can easily link up… with definite trends in the mother country [England],” Marechera moves to the second phase, where he immerses himself back in his country, but since he is “not a part of his people” he “recall[s] their life only” (Fanon 222).

While Marechera does move towards a more anthropological style in *Scrapiron Blues*, dismissing his early work as mere assimilation (as Fanon might), does not hold. Rather than assimilationist, Marechera refashions modernism and surrealism for the project of a sous-réel. Marechera is skeptical of any attempts at capturing realism, except through the project of debasing language to represent his experiences of poverty and violence. In his short story “The
Sound of Snapping Wires,” Marechera mocks the writer who engages in “the kind of self-conscious 'ethnic' poetry which has its roots in a bogus vanity, employing the nuances of revolt and black pride” (Marechera HoH 147). The position of the anthropologist, or the black nationalist, is always one Marechera keeps his distance from, and views with distrust. His position as author (and as character in his own works) is deliberately left ambiguous. In fact, it is partially this ambiguity which reinforces Marechera’s anarchist writing practice. Refusing to pick any political side other than self-destructive revolution, Marechera writes disorienting stories that affect a different kind of realism. It is the realism of a fractured psychic state, and of living in a community marred by excessive violence.

In employing and exploring a practice of writing that is sous-réel, at times psychotic, and which purposefully disjoint linear time in order to disorient the reader, Marechera creates works that are political at the level of their formal qualities. While he does not espouse a specific set of political ideals, his devotion to an anti-authoritarian project is on display in the very way his work takes up citation and rejects progressive time. Employing chaos, they question received notions of value and blackness. The alienated subjectivity of the psychotic subject is coeval with the alienation of the black (postcolonial) subject. Thus, explorations of madness and all the expressions that exist outside value, provide a way of creating a specifically black realism. This realism works on an affective level and eschews expectations of transcendence. In writing grotesque stories, Marechera asserts their importance as they are. He explores the violence of colonial rule in a way that denaturalizes violence through its very ubiquity (Decker 162).

Through excesses that are neither redeemed nor romanticized, he rages against life as it was. In exploring failed revolution and the psychic turmoil of young Zimbabweans, Marechera does not come to any transcendental philosophical conclusions. In fact, we are left instead with the final
line of *Black Sunlight*: “the mirror reveals me, a naked and vulnerable fact” (Marechera *BS* 117).

Sous-réel practice allows for the expression of black subjectivity. Transcendence is rejected because it is part of European configurations of value. There is no European value here: there is the reality of violence.
Conclusion

This thesis addresses Dambudzo Marechera’s unique writing practice while also situating it within a larger history of the avant-garde in Africa. In the writing of Dambudzo Marechera, obscenity becomes a site of possibility for revolt against a hegemonic system that seeks to censor and control post-colonial authorship. His work is fragmentary and disorienting, and yet the disorientation is the point. If Marechera can unsettle readerly expectations, then perhaps he can lay bare the horrific violence suffered by the colonial subject, whose mind and body is brutalized at every turn. In exposing how this violence persists even in the decolonial moment, Marechera provides a mirror for his fellow Zimbabweans. He also invents a means of understanding the psychic turmoil that occurs when life in the postcolony poses a new and dangerous set of problems. By aestheticizing this chaotic moment, Marechera wreaks change through destruction.

Like other African authors who inspired and were inspired by him, Marechera explores language and moments of cultural disconnect that arise from colonization. An avant-garde practice is uniquely able to address questions of psychic fracture under colonialism and authoritarian rule. Gabriel Okara experiments with the English language, pushing at its received limits. This experimentation inspires Marechera’s own technique. Bessie Head and K. Sello Duiker combine the obscene and mental illness, creating non-linear narratives similar to Marechera’s own. It is through combining and refining the techniques of other avant-gardists that Marechera creates his own style. Both Marechera and Ayi Kwei Armah wrote much of their work as ex-patriots living in the UK and the United States, respectively. While they have been critiqued for their European and cosmopolitan sensibilities, their style in fact captured a very specific sort of chaos felt by ex-patriots navigating their countries’ politics from afar. Their style captures the alienation felt by someone who carries all the baggage of their home country onto
foreign soil, and who must parse the revolutions and coups going on at home from a distance. This distance breeds political pessimism but artistic optimism.

That optimism is visible in Marechera’s interviews and essays. Marechera is famous for saying:

I am the *doppelgänger* whom, until I had appeared, African literature had not yet met. And in this sense I would question anyone calling me an African writer. Either you are a writer or you are not. If you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you. (Veit-Wild *A Source Book* 221)

This quote sums up his rejection of all authority succinctly. It is also one of his more incendiary statements, which reflects his frustration with the pressure to write social realism. Seeing this pressure as an aesthetic limitation unfairly placed upon African writers, Marechera rejects the African epithet. Underneath his characteristically defiant statement is his optimism: by rejecting the “African” he can expand artistic possibilities for African writing. Rather than have African work relegated to anthropological study, it can be re-evaluated for its revolutionary techniques. Ironically, it is through this rejection of the nation-building project that he has become a folk hero in Zimbabwe today.10 It is because he rejected authoritarianism and transcendental politics that he was able to live a life that appealed to Zimbabwean readers. His neighbours and friends read his work and recognized their lives. Furthermore, by showing how his work takes up similar African avant-garde concerns to the other authors examined here, it is possible to re-evaluate his contribution to literature (African and otherwise). Rather than help promote postcolonial nation building, he sought to create fictions that crystallized a moment of decolonial agony.

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10 See Tinashe Mushakavanhu’s article about *House of Hunger*: “The 40-Year-Old ‘Prophetic’ Novel that Predicted the Troubles of Modern-Day Zimbabwe.”
As critics like Michelle Decker and Aaron Hodza have also noted, Marechera does not merely cite the European. He is heavily inspired by African writers and their struggle to write against hegemonic expectations. For example, Marechera notes that Wole Soyinka “has, in Zimbabwe, been dismissed as an art-for-art’s-sake bourgeois reactionary writer,” though he is rarely read (Marechera “Soyinka, Dostoyevsky” 107). While I was unable to address Wole Soyinka in the scope of this thesis, like the other authors I have examined, he produced avant-garde fiction dismissed for its style. Marechera, in his fiction, essays, and interviews (as well as fiction that combines all these genres and more, notably Mindblast), concerns himself with expanding African literature. His work is grotesque in appreciation of Shona culture, and it is avant-garde in reaction to social realism. He proposes an expansion of African writing. His writing expresses authentic agonies of his upbringing as he writes and rewrites his family history but does so in a way that pushes at generic limitations.

Marechera and the other authors I have reviewed all share a clear concern with the rise of authoritarianism in postcolonial states. The avant-garde, in all its shocking and sous-réel qualities, thus provides the perfect mode for critiquing the authoritarian. In exploring the grotesque without exalting it, they tackle racism, corruption, and hybrid identities in their various milieus. Marechera’s poem, “The Coin of Moonshine,” distills his anti-transcendental position. He writes:

Your nights are luminous with our neon progress
Exhorting the homeless to bank with Beverley
Exhorting the thirsty to have a Coke and a smile
Exhorting the ill-educated to take a correspondence Course in Self-Confidence. And ever the circling
Moon gleams, a bright distended coin above the dark decade

Casting beams of greed through my shantyshut door. (Marechera *Mindblast* 112)

Within his poetry and creative work, Marechera dismisses productivity and self-improvement as flimsy shams. Transcendence is seen as a romanticizing notion that can only hurt the colonized and the poor. What good is it to exhort those who have no money to invest? Marechera, often homeless himself, intimately understands this infuriating paradigm. These dreams of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps are an offensive ploy. Dambudzo Marechera’s rage is pointed at all the superstructures of power that both degrade blackness and suggest that it is only the individual holding himself back.

Marechera’s writing about his own writing provides a helpful framework for understanding his project. I have cited his interviews and essays to show that his writing practice is self-conscious and deliberate. His political goal was to unsettle the contemporary understanding of African literature in the 1980s. While critical attitudes are shifting and expanding, Marechera’s writing is critical to that expansion. His writing is political and deeply aesthetic. It is also political through its aesthetics. This makes him a perfect subject of study for analyzing stylistic innovation in African literature. The avant-garde in Africa holds a special place in its unique ability to navigate the various psychic fractures of colonialism and the decolonial process. Dambudzo Marechera’s varied body of work takes up grotesque sous-realism to explore that intricate subject position. His shocking and violent writing denaturalizes received values.
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