

Postcolonial Narcissism, Cryptopolitics, and Hypnocritique: Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*

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There is something wrong somewhere. If we are supposed to write in the sort of Jane Austen manner—good god!—how can you equate revolutionary feeling with, as it were, a reactionary literature?

—Dambudzo Marechera to Musa Zimunya and Wilson Katiyo in Austin, *The House of Hunger*

Dambudzo Marechera is as well-known for his eccentric autobiography as he is for his prodigious writing talent. Yet despite Marechera's occasionally outrageous behaviour and the complicated internal universe of his writing, African literary scholarship has, until recently, been reluctant to consider how his fiction might be structured by psychical unease.¹ By extension, such scholarship ultimately resists acknowledging the existence of the “psychopathological” subject in African Literature.²

I offer a modified, situated psychoanalytic theoretical model for reading Dambudzo Marechera's identity-performances and the narrative designs of his fiction. I argue for a narcissistic relation between Marechera and his work—a relation in which the life and the work are co-implicated in one another, in mutually reinforcing ways.³ If we adhere to this critical method, we are able to shift our emphasis away from a nostalgia for the “real” Marechera toward a reading of the cultural fantasy that “Marechera” came to represent. Indeed, Marechera—insofar as we could ever impute anything like intention or an authorial effect to such a duplicitous figure—actively promulgated and abetted this cultural fantasy. Thus, I read Marechera's received biography and his prose works as related texts, and indeed as mutually defining fictions.⁴ The advantage of such an approach is that it offers a psychoanalytic model of reading and fiction writing calibrated to the larger Rhodesian settler-colonial history and the later European multicultural milieu from which Marechera's work emerged. By positing a relationship between literary reading and the wishful self-transformations of a formerly colonized subject, I contend that Marechera's fantasies of self were strategically canny responses to the available cultural narratives and to the larger politics of placement within which he found himself, whether in Africa or in Europe.⁵ Schematizing Marechera's strategically canny responses in terms of his social and

literary projects, I advance a theory of “cryptopolitics” and I delineate one of its primary modes, which I term “hypnocritique.”

Postcolonial Critiques of Psychoanalysis

There are considerable theoretical pitfalls in invoking a psychoanalytic framework in relation to postcolonial writing and subjectivity. Indeed, postcolonial theory has extensively critiqued the founding assumptions and the institutional complicities of psychoanalysis. In fact, it is possible to problematize psychoanalysis on historical, conceptual, diagnostic, institutional, and experiential grounds.

Historically, early colonial discourses and scientific racism often negated the interior lives of African subjects, opting for a much more narrow focus on anatomical “deviations.” As Jock MacCulloch puts it, the “old racism was concerned with measuring the native’s body: the literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries filled with attempts to discover a key to the African’s backwardness in the size or structure of his brain” (5). In this vein, Sander Gilman has advanced the argument that nineteenth century pseudo-scientific theories of race developed anatomically coded markers of sexual promiscuity and of moral degeneracy in such “secondary sexual characteristics” as the Hottentot Venus’ steatopygia or the European “prostitute’s ear” (238, 240-48). In this sense, race remained “readable,” if covert, in theories of sexuality. Gilman hints that the gradual internalisation of anatomical difference, and especially of race, modelled the idea of the unconscious at work within us—to the extent that “secondary sexual characteristics” such as steatopygia in European portraiture encode latent and deviant features of the psyche and female sexuality. Freud inherits such dubious racial metaphors and occasionally betrays them in his thinking, especially when he likens female sexuality to a “dark continent” (Gilman 256-7). Likewise, Freud describes the positioning of fantasies between the preconscious and the unconscious as being comparable to “individuals of mixed race who taken all round resemble white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges” (“The Unconscious” 190-1). Conceptually, some of Freud’s theories are directly indebted to the history of imperial contact (e.g., “fetishism”); others rely upon unfavourable cultural comparisons that are politically problematic (e.g., “narcissism,” which compares the beliefs of “primitive peoples” to those of European children).⁶ Diagnostically, a psychoanalytic approach to African literature risks instituting a universal explanatory category that elides political specificities.

To offer just one example, where the superego is determined by a racist society that imposes a Eurocentrically derived nation-state upon already existing African political, social and subjective modes, the

supposedly normative identifications at work in the Oedipus complex or in the human subject would be complicated considerably. When Freud writes that the ego ideal has “a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, class or a nation” (“On Narcissism” 96), he by definition consigns decolonizing African revolutions to narcissism, and in so doing he quite forgets the European Imperial powers’ arbitrary, irrational compromises that were involved in the drawing up of the modern borders of African nation-states at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885). In fact, Freud’s thought is purposefully counter-insurgent. He frames the narcissistic withdrawal of object-libido and the consequent deterioration of conscience in terms of a metaphor of “revolt against this ‘censoring agency’” (90). It is therefore understandable that, *institutionally*, colonial psychiatry and ethnopsychiatry often became counter-insurgent technologies of colonial power that provided alibis for colonial suppression of rebellion. Here, we might recall ethnopsychiatrist J. C. Carothers’ recommendation that the Kenyan Mau Mau war could be quelled by giving the Gikuyu people the psychic security they allegedly craved in the form of a “Villagization Programme” (resulting in forced removals, imprisonment, curfews, forced labour, crop destruction, and famine).⁷ Moreover, we might consider the way in which confessions resulting from torture in Kenyan concentration camps acquired a pseudo-therapeutic justification along the lines of a “talking cure”—by dubbing this aspect of military strategy the “Rehabilitation Programme.”⁸ Experientially, colonialism had a profound psychical impact upon its subjects and in many cases overwhelmingly formulated their subjecthood, to the extent that Frantz Fanon would declare that his therapeutic project encompassed political goals: “As a psychoanalyst, I should help my patient to become *conscious* of his unconscious and to abandon his attempts at hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of change in the social structure” (100).

Historically, conceptually, diagnostically, institutionally, and experientially, psychoanalysis displays theoretical and practical fault-lines. In short, psychoanalysis’ key assumptions and practices—its embedded standards of normality and deviance, and the therapeutic rehabilitation of agitated states through self-disclosing utterances—cannot be completely separated from the utterly abnormal and aberrant effects of colonial surveillance, torture, and suppression. Further, psychoanalysis’ conceptual apparatus—especially its claim for a universally present development of subject, psyche, and sexuality (derived from racially-differentiated bodies that supposedly evidence discrepantly evolved psychic states)—is inseparable from the world-historical ambitions of nineteenth-century European imperialism. In response to these postcolonial critiques of psychoanalysis, I contend that psychoanalytic readings of African literatures need to acknowledge the interior lives of African subjects while avoiding the conceptual minefield of psychoanalysis in its normative or regulative dimension, as well as the political complicities of colonial psychiatry and ethnopsychiatry. Indeed, when we encounter psychopathologies or perversities at work in African

literary texts, we should at least consider the possibility that these features contain a political logic that emerges from the history of colonization or that these features amount to a tactical logic for working with colonialism's contemporary legacies. It is within this cautious and considerably delimited sense that I shall develop the idea of a situated "postcolonial narcissism" in Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*.

The Received Biography

Marechera offers much more to African literary criticism than the argument over whether he was too liberated to need a politics or too alienated to produce one. In the clamour to contest literary ideology, we too often overlook dispositions of mind or personality. What sort of personality was Dambudzo Marechera? The biographical documentation collected in Flora Veit-Wild's source book on Marechera is well-known, but I intend to rehearse it here in order to advance an original argument about Marechera's compulsion to narrate and to make a case for his cryptopolitical disposition.

Dambudzo Marechera was born in 1952 in Vengere Township, Rusape, Zimbabwe. Between the ages of six and ten he gathered his first books from a local rubbish dump, or from the rubbish bins in a neighbouring white suburb (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 58). After the death of Marechera's father in 1966, and the family's subsequent eviction from their home in 1969, his secondary education at St Augustine's School in Penahlonga was subsidized by a scholarship and by the local Anglican missionaries (51). Unable to support her family as a lone parent, Marechera's mother turned increasingly to alcohol and prostitution (53, 57), which may have precipitated Marechera's nervous breakdown between the ages of eighteen and nineteen. This breakdown was characterized by outbreaks of hypochondria and by Marechera's persistent delusions that he was being followed by two men who wanted to kill him (68, 53). Despite his mental illness, Dambudzo Marechera graduated with A-aggregates in three subjects and went on to study English Literature at the University of Rhodesia on a scholarship. A year and a half later he was expelled for engaging in student demonstrations against the university's administration (125). With the assistance of his English tutors, Marechera received a Junior Common Room Scholarship for study at New College, Oxford (151-2). During his time there, he borrowed money from practically everyone he knew without repaying it, was sued by Blackwells bookshop for non-payment of debt, drank excessively, disrupted a summer school at the college, assaulted college stewards on at least two occasions, and was finally sent down for setting fire to some rubbish in his college room (153-4, 159, 162-3, 175).⁹ While living in a tent on the banks of the River Isis (177), he wrote his first

short-story collection, *The House of Hunger* (published 1978), which was awarded the *Guardian* Fiction Prize in 1979.

Marechera arrived at the ceremony wearing a “bright red poncho and a broad-brimmed black hat” (189), with a copy of Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* under his arm. In his acceptance speech, Marechera advocated the “removal of such prefixes as . . . ‘black’ from the substantive ‘writer.’ He spoke of himself collecting prizes in London while his people were being killed in Zimbabwe” (189). Later, Marechera drunkenly threw china at the chandeliers. In my view, Marechera orchestrated this episode in order to masquerade as the “black” or “ethnic writer,” replete with “traditional” regalia (including Pound’s *Cantos* and a “Stetson”!), only to debunk this performance in iconoclastic style. Simon Bright remembers another of these “cultural masquerades” in his first encounter with Marechera:

I met Dambudzo Marechera on 18 April 1980, the day of Zimbabwe’s Independence, at the Africa Centre [London]. . . . Marechera looked very smart. He was wearing a complete riding outfit with jodhpurs, black jacket, boots and a bowler hat. He stood out because everybody else was very patriotic looking: a black Zimbabwean dressed like an English lord about to go on a fox-hunt, with a pseudo upper class English accent plus a slight stammer. . . . While we tried to be very African and dressed in ethnic clothes, there was this black fellow making a mockery of English lords and Africans at the same time. (qtd. in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 247)

Marechera’s publisher, James Currey, remembers the fox-hunting kit, but also other disguises—the author impersonating a *Guardian* newspaper photographer and even an old woman while begging for publishing advances (225). Of course, such outfits may well have been selected without the luxury of choice: Marechera lived much of his life as a tramp and may well have simply worn the apparel that came to hand. However, this does not detract from the fact that his performances of self are readable outside of the narrow circumstances of their making. In fact, this is precisely the direction of my argument. Dambudzo Marechera presented an awkward and cryptic, but roundly spectacular, presence to those who met him. He stuttered his entire life (46-8). He was diagnosed as a psychopath by Oxford psychiatrists (175). He swore habitually (167-70). His accounts of his own life history are notoriously unreliable. In an interview with the Dutch journalist Alle Lansu (reprinted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 5-48), Marechera misremembers his own past no less than ten times. He lies six times, resorts to gross exaggeration eleven times, and contradicts himself twice.

The content of these autobiographical inaccuracies is significant. Regardless of their truth status, they invariably have a political bearing. For instance, Marechera remembers his father being imprisoned and fired from work for not having a bicycle licence, when his father was in fact imprisoned for selling bicycle licences illegally (7). Marechera claims to have had an uncle who fought with the British forces in World War II and returned home to Rhodesia to be given a bicycle instead of a pension (9). Marechera’s brother, Michael, remembers no such uncle, and it is possible

that Marechera is displacing an element in the story of his father's imprisonment onto a non-existent family member and a much broader world-historical canvas. The point here is not that Dambudzo Marechera's memories are false. Instead, the point is that these memories are artistically true to the wider circumstance of settler-colonial and racist injustice in which both brothers grew up. A number of Marechera's inconsistencies centre on the death of his father. He remembers being eleven and at home when his father died (he was thirteen and at boarding school). He claims his father was shot by a Rhodesian Light Infantry officer, and that the corpse was so riddled with heavy automatic bullets that it had to be sewn back together (11). In fact, the generally accepted account of the father's death is that he was run over by a motor vehicle as he walked home on the road at night (12). In the very same interview, Marechera contradicts his previous account of his father's death by referring to the hit-and-run accident and to the fact that he was summoned from boarding school to go and see his father's body in the mortuary for the last time (47). In this account, the corpse is also horrifically dismembered and the head and one arm have been severed from it. In the interview, he claims that the trauma of seeing his father's body caused him to stutter, when in fact various acquaintances of Marechera have confirmed that he began stuttering at a much earlier age (47).

Marechera's fabricated account of the shooting of his father shares characteristics with some of his other fabrications in the Lansu interview. For example, he lies about having to leave the country illegally following the student demonstrations at the University of Rhodesia (20-1). Marechera exaggerates the number of students arrested following these demonstrations and states, falsely, that the security forces killed two students. He remembers foreign journalists photographing the demonstrations, when in fact foreign journalists did not readily obtain visas from the Rhodesian government at that time. Marechera then reports hiding out in the house of two white students and donning the uniform of a servant as a disguise. His hosts remember no such disguise (22). Again, the memory here has a symbolic and imaginative significance that is independent of its truth-status—Marechera's place as a political refugee in the household recapitulates settler-colonial patterns of the house servant's domestic dependence upon the employer, such that Marechera's act of political dissent tips over into precisely an instance of that which it contests. In another screen memory, Marechera claims that a staff member of the University of Rhodesia, Alfred Knottenbelt, was able to obtain a scholarship for him to attend Oxford because Knottenbelt was working underground for the United Nations Refugee Commission. Knottenbelt merely worked for the World University Service (21). Marechera remembers being on a political asylum visa whilst at Oxford, when in fact it was an ordinary student visa (27). Similar inaccuracies abounded when Marechera visited West Berlin in 1979 to attend a cultural festival focusing on international literature. He arrived in Germany without the necessary travel documents. The immigration officials detained him and

would have deported him had his publisher (James Currey) and the conference organizers not intervened (269). At the festival, Marechera linked his detention at the airport to his “expulsion” from Zimbabwe (271). He lied about having been beaten up by the Berlin police (276). He used the incident “to establish himself as a politically persecuted guerrilla writer and tailored his biography to fit this image. During the discussion after his reading, he mentioned that his father was blown up by a landmine . . .” (270). He claimed erroneously that *The House of Hunger* had been banned in Rhodesia and proclaimed himself a Marxist who supported Robert Mugabe (quite forgetting that he himself had heckled Mugabe in London one year previously).

While Marechera’s inconsistencies have been well-documented by Veit-Wild, no one has yet read them symptomatically. I contend that these fabrications, errors, contradictions, and exaggerations share a common structure. In each, Marechera makes his own minimal, and in some cases negligible, part in the Rhodesian (or British, or German) political climate a great deal more significant or extensive than it really was. Just as we have seen with Marechera’s guises of the English fox hunter at Zimbabwean Independence celebrations and of the Poundian “African writer,” his autobiographical fabrications amount to attempts to inhabit scattered identities that Marechera himself could never have inhabited simultaneously. He endeavours to inhabit the place of his others. I would argue that Marechera’s fantasies and delusions can be understood in a non-normative sense as the very grist of a literary mind. Read symptomatically, these performances suggest Marechera’s desire to occupy the metropolitan cultural scene and the settler-colonial historical processes that produced him. In short, this is a self—an African personality if you wish—that gathers its near and distant histories as stories.

So far, we have built up an apocryphal profile of an impoverished, alcoholic, coprolaliac, paranoid, stuttering, psychopathic, compulsive liar, arsonist, and vandal who happened to write impressive literary fiction. This spectacular assemblage of behaviours might make for interesting, if unreliable, consideration. I do not intend to undertake that consideration here. Instead, I want to examine Marechera’s more obvious compulsion: the compulsion to narrate, to fabricate stories. We have seen that Marechera’s own “lived modes” were often elaborate fictional artefacts. Likewise, Marechera’s fiction exhibits pronounced autobiographical compulsions.¹⁰ In both the lives and their fictions, there is a tenacious self-imagining method at work.

Fictional Doublings and Self-Inscriptions

Reading Marechera, therefore, requires us to think through unevenly punctuated continuities and disturbances. One of the difficulties that many

readers experience when they first encounter the biographical Marechera is that he is always in at least two places—one cannot pin him down. Just as the biographical Marechera is always in two places, similar processes of doubling are a key feature of his fiction.¹¹

The House of Hunger has a strong autobiographical element, but the autobiographical details are not confined solely to the narrator or to a unitary protagonist in any given story. Instead, these details are dispersed across various characters in such a way as to unsettle the very notion of autobiography. For example, in the title novella, “House of Hunger,” one of the narrator’s classmates—Harry—only dates “white chicks” (Marechera, *The House of Hunger* 11, 15). In this sense, Harry’s sexuality accords with Marechera’s own preference for sexual relationships with white women.¹² It also accords with Marechera’s bold claim in an interview, “I actually find love of people of the same race very much as an incest” (*Cemetery of Mind* 215). In Marechera’s short story, Harry is beaten up for being a police informant (*The House of Hunger* 20). However, Marechera himself faced the allegation that he was a police informant while he was a student at the University of Rhodesia (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 148). While Harry is a villain in “House of Hunger” and in a separate short story entitled “The Transformation of Harry” (*The House of Hunger* 88-92), there is arguably also a partial and historical identification with him on Marechera’s part. To put this another way, Harry may be a political untouchable in the universe of story, but he is also a prior possible version of the self.

In a similar vein, “House of Hunger” contains a character called Edmund who is physically small and who enjoys Russian literature (61). Edmund therefore has features in common with the adult Marechera, who was slight of stature and appreciated Russian authors. Edmund is bullied by a character called Stephen, who “firmly [believes] that there was something peculiarly African in anything written by an African” (63). Stephen is an avid reader of the Heinemann African Writers Series. In this, Stephen has features in common with the teenage Marechera, whose reading was intimately linked with this series. Like Edmund, the older Marechera frequently promoted the idea that the writer should not be constrained by “the African image.” Notwithstanding this position, he published his first collection of short stories and his first novel in the very same Heinemann African Writers series that his unlikeable character Stephen promotes.

At stake in the antagonism between Stephen and Edmund is an ideological struggle between African cultural nationalism’s prescriptive notions about culture and Marechera’s adamantly eclectic approach toward literary input. But, in some senses, the ideological struggle that we encounter at this point in “House of Hunger” posits a false dichotomy, since Marechera’s own reading history indicates that he had a considerable investment in both sides of the argument at different points in his trajectory—as a teenage reader of and adult author in the African writers series, and as an adult aficionado of Dostoevsky and Gogol. The

animosity here is ideological, but it is also always already at some level transacted between older and younger versions of the subject.

Marechera has further investments in Stephen's and Edmund's animosity. For instance, Stephen casts aspersions on Edmund's mother, calling her a "common drunken whore" (63). As a result, Edmund challenges Stephen to a fight and is beaten up. While Marechera's own mother was not a "common drunken whore," we have already observed that Marechera's nervous breakdown arose partly out of his dislike of his mother's drinking habits and of the male company she kept after the death of his father. When the narrator of "House of Hunger" goes to check up on Edmund's condition after the fight, Edmund repeats over and over "I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon" (66). At this moment in the narrative, Edmund shares an affinity with the narrator of "House of Hunger," who himself has a breakdown that is precipitated by voices saying "something obscene about [his] mother's morals" (29), resulting in hallucinated figures that ape his every movement. This is possibly why the narrator says of Edmund's self-deprecating statement, "I understood it only too well" (66). Edmund's self-deprecating words and the narrator's breakdown, in turn, echo the bizarre hallucinations experienced by the narrator of another story in the collection, "Burning in the Rain," who imagines that he is being mocked by an ape in the mirror (83).

If we pause for just a moment to untangle the pattern of self-imagings here, we can see that differences between the literary identifications of the older and younger Marecheras are imaged in the animosity between Edmund and Stephen. In turn, Stephen's taunt about Edmund's mother and Edmund's consequent identifications with apes are replayed in the narrator's own hallucinations of aping figures (precipitated by taunts about *his* mother's morals) and these hallucinations are in turn replayed in the aping reflections in a subsequent story, "Burning in the Rain." In Marechera's own teenage nervous breakdown, the two figures following him aped the schoolboys and teachers around him (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 28-9). It is as if these imagings and re-imagings of the self and its aping doubles shuttle between "life" and "fiction," endlessly staging the occasion for story.

The most striking instance of doubling in "House of Hunger" occurs in the first section of "The Writer's Grain." That story focuses on an unnamed narrator who is doodling on a blotting pad one night when he begins to see dark spots multiplying in front of his eyes. These dark spots swoop into his face and shoot "out with the very matter of [his] brains" (100), after which he sees his own face staring "coldly" back at him (101). When the narrator touches the apparition, he tells us that it pulled "the skin of my face out. It revealed me to myself" (100). The apparition here marks the emergence of the narrator's malevolent double, who soon becomes more real than the narrator and begins to supplant him. Evacuated from their originating subject, the narrator's doodles now begin to assume a life of their own: "The circles and the squares, they shot upward like a little explosion, and slammed in the ceiling leaving a sooty

imprint on it, and then fell slowly back to the ground like a fine black soot. And they were my thoughts, too, those fine black grains. They were my life" (101). The sooty substance here is reminiscent of "Burning in the Rain," whose anonymous protagonist wakes up one day to find himself dressed in a Father Christmas suit with soot leaking out of it (86). In the first section of "The Writer's Grain," the soot is a figure for the externalization of the narrator's "life" and "thoughts" into the space of writing, with a resulting evacuation of selfhood. The narrator proceeds to a party and gets drunk, following which he again encounters his malevolent double and then flees the party in order to warn his estranged wife about this impostor. The wife, herself the spitting image of the narrator's daughter, Clara (103), is meanwhile having an affair with a "student with the peculiar name Marechera" (102). En route to the flat, the narrator meets a trusty sidekick—a mongrel—and the two proceed to the wife's flat, where they discover the wife having sex with the evil doppelgänger (113). A fight ensues, in which the narrator and the mongrel team up against the wife, the narrator's evil double, and Marechera, the student.

This section of "The Writer's Grain" is itself partially reduplicated in "Thought-tracks in the Snow," the penultimate story in *The House of Hunger*, which describes a narrator's deteriorating relationship with his wife, who has been sleeping with a Nigerian student the narrator has been tutoring (145). When the affair is made public in a heated argument, the student begins beating up the narrator's wife. At this point, the narrator, Charles (who shares Dambudzo [Charles] Marechera's adopted English name), is unable to intervene, because he is incapacitated by a flashback about the use of police Alsations on demonstrating university students (147). This flashback replays a moment from "House of Hunger," in which the narrator's childhood memory of being attacked by a "shaggy" dog recurs after he is beaten up at a white right-wing student demonstration (71-4). These Alsations and shaggy dogs are arguably versions of the mongrel in the first section "The Writer's Grain"—a short story which is itself a "shaggy dog story" related just before closing time in a bar (115, 124). In a further twist, the wife in "Thought-tracks in the Snow" is pregnant and the narrator suggests that she should abort the pregnancy (148) with the help of a doctor friend—Michael, an Oxford doctor (named after Marechera's brother, Michael)—who stammers (like Dambudzo Marechera). In "The Writer's Grain," Clara, the narrator's daughter (who, we remember, is the spitting image of her adulterous mother) has also had an abortion performed by one of the narrator's friends from his university days (103). Taking a few steps back from this thicket of textual detail, we might describe the relationship between the various stories and characters of *The House of Hunger* in terms of a cinematic critical metaphor. The stories in the collection are designed as if Marechera has shot a filmic scene, re-arranged the furniture, and then shot the scene from the reverse angle.

Postcolonial Narcissism

What, then, are readers to make of this? I would argue that Marechera's endless self-fictionalisations and the doublings or doppelgängers that we find in his fiction evidence a desire to play every part going—a narcissistic desire to somehow be all of the story. In my analysis, this narcissistic desire originates in Marechera's relationship with the book. The doublings and the idealized versions of self that we find in Marechera's fiction are part and parcel of the larger fantasies of relocation and self-translation that the book inspires in him. The book becomes a site of ideal self-imaging in which the contradictions of a colonized society may be embraced or even transcended. Particularly important here is Marechera's discovery of his first books on a rubbish heap. These discoveries have been corroborated by his childhood friends, the twins Washington and Wattington Makombe (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 58), "doubles" who were present at the founding scene of Marechera's literary career. Marechera recounts his discovery of his first book in *Mindblast*:

I was mesmerised by books at a very early age. I obtained my first one—Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia—at the local rubbish dump where the garbage from the white side of town was dumped everyday except Sundays. You never knew what you would find in that rubbish dump. Broken toys. Half-eaten sandwiches. Comics, magazines, books. One brilliant blue morning I found what I thought was a rather large doll but on touching it discovered it has [*sic*] a half-caste baby, dead, rotting. I fled as fast as I could to the safety and razorfights of the ghetto. I read that encyclopaedia from cover to cover. Wandering among the Ancient Egyptians, the Persians, the Hittites and the Gittites. Pouring [*sic*] over the voyages of discovery by the British, the Spanish, the Portuguese. . . . It was an early flowering of my imagination, all caused by a chance encounter with a Victorian imperialist on a rubbish dump in a small town in Zimbabwe. I was at the departure point for what by various quirks would turn out to be my writing career. . . . I had discovered [*sic*] that whatever the body may be, the mind is its own world. (135-6)

A number of points need to be made. To begin with, what we have here is a narrative of colonial transgression. In a Promethean wager, the colonized child is locating himself within the settler's discards in order to transport himself beyond the mundane and brutalizing environment of Rhodesian township life. These moments of transport provide a basis for Marechera's narcissistic impulses. Homi Bhabha's chapter on the colonial book ("Signs Taken for Wonders") in *The Location of Culture* is helpful here, because it discusses the English book's ambivalent effects within structures of colonial authority. Bhabha suggests that once the colonized put the book to their own uses and interpretations, it becomes one of the pre-eminent sites in which the hybrid is formed. By repeating the book with a difference (since they are not its anticipated readers), the colonized turn the book from a locus of colonial authority into a misreadable or distorted text.¹³ In effect, the colonial book becomes a shadow of its former self, a partial presence rather than the representation of an essence (Bhabha 114).

Furthermore, it is precisely by inserting themselves into the book that the colonized effect a colonial doubling that Bhabha describes as the “strategic displacement of value through a process of the metonymy of presence” (120). Bhabha’s notion of hybridity can begin to account for Marechera’s masquerades and fictional self-inscriptions, since it suggests that such disguises are an ambivalent exercise in camouflage. This camouflage gives the colonial gaze, or the emergent gaze of indigenous nationalism for that matter, “the *ruse* of recognition” (115, 120). In the passage that I have quoted from *Mindblast*, the clue to Marechera’s identity-performances and literary self-inscriptions lies in the fantasies of relocation that the book inspires. The narrator actively visualizes changing places with his historical and cultural others. The book enables him to inhabit another set of life circumstances vicariously: “whatever the body may be, the mind is its own world” (*Mindblast* 135-6) Further, the passage describes the “origin” of the narrator’s writing career, and it is this career that gives rise to the necessity of masquerading, of inhabiting, other, partial selves.

We need to complicate such literary origins, given that the central myth of the Marechera story is that of the self-begetting subject. With this need in mind, it is notable that the mixed-race infant’s corpse should appear in the middle of Marechera’s description of his first book, since it is a hybrid appearing at the very moment Marechera’s readerly hybridity comes into being.¹⁴ The origin of the self-begetting subject replicates itself in a manner which ensures that it can be neither singular nor self-identical. Hybridity’s capacity to double itself is at work even here. The corpse forms part of a “memory” whose status is no doubt experientially plausible, insofar as mixed-race infants would have been abandoned by some mothers during the 1950s. But this memory is also layered with literary memory—if only because it is strikingly redolent of Oswald Mtshali’s South African resistance poem, “An Abandoned Bundle” (1971), which includes “a mutilated corpse – / an infant dumped on a rubbish heap –” (60).¹⁵

It seems to me that if we read Marechera in this way, then the book becomes a fantasized site that is inhabited by a proliferation of partial ideal selves—selves, for instance, which wander among Ancient civilizations in faraway places, while making infanticidal discoveries alongside Soweto poets immediately south of the border (and a literary lifetime later). In short, the book is a site of both identification and fragmentation (because it can never be fully inhabited). Moreover, if we read Marechera in this way, Freud’s association of narcissism with primitive peoples is turned upside down. Why does Marechera reverse Freud’s association of narcissism with primitive peoples? Because it is precisely by inhabiting the forms of colonial authority contained in the book, or precisely by aspiring to so-called “civilizational ideals,” that Marechera is placed in a narcissistic structure of recognition. In other words, as a colonized reader he is required to reflect the Eurocentric system of value that the book contains. And this narcissistic structure of

recognition is impossible to live out, because the demand of colonial authority is that the colonized assimilate forms of colonial value; but this aspiration is only ever partially permitted. To read Marechera in this way would allow us to argue for an historically produced postcolonial narcissism, inspired by the impossible structure of recognition set in place by Marechera's engagement with the book as a locus of settler-colonial authority. The upshot of that impossible structure of recognition is that any self posited in narrative becomes a vacuity, with its most fundamental processes invested extraneously—like “life” and “thoughts” in “The Writer's Grain,” or like “biography” in Marechera's assorted masquerades of “self.” In Freudian terms, this would amount to an over-investment of object-libido at the expense of ego-libido, precisely the opposite of Freud's account of narcissism and, in extremity, paranoid schizophrenia—both of which result from a withdrawal of object-libido and an over-investment of ego-libido.¹⁶

Writing plays a key role in this libidinal schema. In Chris Austin's drama-documentary, *The House of Hunger*, Marechera is filmed critiquing fellow writers—Musa Zimunya (a university lecturer) and Wilson Katiyo (who had joined the Ministry of Information). These writers had become, in Marechera's term, “bureaucrats” in the pay of Mugabe's state, and he refuted their arguments about the necessity of earning a living, saying “[p]oints of principle [such as the writer's obligation to his primary craft] cannot be given up just because one has got to eat” (Austin). To write, we might say, is to inhabit a “House of Hunger” instead of the early cultural nationalist narrative of independent “Zimbabwe” (Shona for “The House of Stone”). In other words, to write without political patronage is to undertake an act of selflessness at the cost of one's appetites. This under-investment of ego-libido results in a sanity that elects the warping way of sympathetic madness, because, as Marechera claims: “For the writer, actually, paranoia doesn't exist because, after all, fiction—the creation of imaginative worlds, real enough to be quite concrete in the reader's mind—can really make the writer in total sympathy with anyone with those kinds of psychological problems” (Austin).¹⁷ In other words, narrative design on the page concentrates a form of object-libido that redirects and dissipates ego-libido's potential for paranoid system-building in the self. The ego's iteration as an object in narrative (for instance, as the vaguely “autobiographical” narrator of “House of Hunger”) allows a further dissipation into object-libido via its subsequent iteration as double (for instance, as the doppelgänger Edmund). This allows a further dissipation via the double's refraction in other stories (for instance, the unnamed character in “Burning in the Rain” and *his* further subsequent refraction in the narrator of “The Writer's Grain,” who is *himself* further refracted in the evil double). The ego is thus staged in writing as an object that endlessly morphs through a sequence of versions, or is constellated via partial correspondences that do not settle. Instead they shuttle, shimmer, or relay during the transactions of character and the designs of story. The complexity and instability of this libidinal arrangement may

well derange the developmental and schematizing impulses of narrative.¹⁸ However, insofar as it averts the over-investment of ego-libido by establishing an ever-receding sequence of libidinal investments in objects, this libidinal arrangement is also a pre-condition for the ongoing functionality of subject and psyche.

In Marechera's writing and masquerades, delusion is pragmatic and the mechanisms of madness become the first possible basis for sanity. While the self is narcissistically somehow "all of the story," the construction of fictional doubles is part of a non-possessive and self-relinquishing project that is never recoupable for paranoid system-building.¹⁹ The implication of my situated psychoanalytical model is that the narcissistic images that operate "Marechera" require us to read history and the subject through literary obliquity. In invoking this model of the psyche and its dispositions, we are not reading for deviance or mental illness, because Marechera filters his selves and their narratives through occasionally obscure, eclectic, and opportunistic literary pickings. Furthermore, my situated psychoanalytic model is descriptive. It can never be normative or regulative. Quite simply, a subject produced by settler colonialism and metropolitan exclusion already begs fundamental questions of assumptions about "psychic health" or "normalcy." Instead, what we find in Marechera's fiction is a subject toying with its own endlessly estranging or delightful imaging in another's discourses. It is no accident that "House of Hunger" concludes with an old beggar handing over to the narrator a package dropped by the "crimson jacket character" (the police informer, Harry, but also of course a possible Marechera). The beggar tells the narrator: "There are photographs of you and your friends and little notes about what you do. Take them . . . I think Trouble is knocking on our door" (*The House of Hunger* 82). "Trouble," in this narrative context, means a raid by the Rhodesian Special Branch, which has been surveilling the group with Harry's co-operation. Crucially, however, the Shona name "Dambudzo" translates as "the one who brings trouble." Notice too how the photograph—the self-as-imaged in the authoritarian's discourse—invites Trouble. Where, then, is the Trouble here? Is "Trouble" the narratorial self inside the House of Hunger, the imaged self enunciated in the photographs, or the police informant self of Harry leading the Special Branch to the door? Is "Trouble" the writerly self, "Dambudzo," outside the narrative "House of Hunger" but clamouring to conclude it? Is "Trouble" the writerly self, "Dambudzo," who must go hungry in order to write and who is thus, always already, inside the "House of Hunger," but whose avatars rattle across the thresholds of story? The "one who brings Trouble," we might intuit, is never only one, nor even merely double.

The model of the subject that I am arguing for may therefore mean that the forms of identity that Marechera was working with were opportunistic, performative and, above all, ambivalent. My situated psychoanalytical model implies that Marechera's fiction is not so much political as cryptopolitical, addressing its historical referents via the

displacing and condensing mechanisms of the psyche and via the pleasure-giving transports of story. If the inflexibility of colonial or neocolonial cultural codes operates repression, then Marechera offers us hypnocritique—a critique by fantasy or dream. Since dream is always a critique of consciousness delivered via the placement of the self in estranging stories, the cryptopolitical is always minimally available, but it is always and infinitely at work.

Hypnocritique, in my definition, is not entirely object-directed or instrumental. As a literary mode, hypnocritique refuses the presumption of referentiality implicit in mimetic or conventionally allegorical models. Its attempt to act upon the world, to transform material conditions, presumes not that literature has an obligation to say something *about the world*, but instead that literature is *an event in the world*—that literature instils relations, interpellates its auditor or solicits response. Hypnocritique’s rebus-like shadowing of the national or cultural consciousness makes “repression” (in its fullest psychological and political senses) impossible. The mechanism here is quite straightforward. As a cryptopolitical mode, hypnocritique draws its auditor into a structure of fascination that is impossible to resolve. Hence, hypnocritique forces a unilateral tryst with complexity. It offers a cipher without a key, inviting a “clueless” political culture to apply itself to a compelling puzzle, with the result that any repressive regime must work displacements into its own self-theorization in order to accommodate interpretive disturbance.²⁰ Expressed in its simplest form, hypnocritique compels an inflexible political culture to work with self-estrangement.²¹ The unimaginative authoritarian is required to manage his polymorphous suggestibility. This is how fable trumps decree.²²

The model of the subject that I am arguing for may mean that Marechera could not enter into the literature of commitment because there was no single self to commit. It may also mean that Marechera could not enter into the literature of commitment because there was no single just cause (such as student demonstrations) or unjust cause (such as being a police informant) that some possible version of the self did not already inhabit. But, for all of its discomfiting conclusions, my situated model of postcolonial narcissism does at least imply that the impulses underlying Marechera’s chaotic narrative designs were fundamentally sensitive to the contexts that produced them, and that his moments of counter-factual self-characterization were ultimately both revolutionary and transformative in their effects.

We move beyond the terms of Homi Bhabha’s theory of the hybrid when we consider Marechera. Bhabha argues—brilliantly—that “it is difficult to agree entirely with Fanon that the psychic choice is to ‘turn white or disappear.’ There is the more ambivalent, third choice: camouflage, mimicry, black skins / white masks” (120). And yet, Marechera moves us beyond the narrow terms of the debate, at least as Bhabha sets them out. A fourth choice appears for the subject—the project of insistent, enigmatic and spectacular acts of self-rarefaction. Articulation

is usually understood as a paradox of the social—it invokes an implicitly social addressee while individuating the speaker. In Marechera’s case, cryptic writings and enigmatic performances become a paradox of the anti-social. They resist being read from any locus of authority, but they counter-intuitively provoke a community of story. There gathers around “Marechera”—around a certain interpretive “Trouble”—a burgeoning field of memoirs, reminiscences, sourcebooks, archives, films, publishers, friends, creditors, lovers, writers, artists, scholars, students, and admirers. This gathering—devoted to the scattered, effervescent outpourings of a literary tramp—endlessly re-enters a spiral of spectacle, such that a diverse and cosmopolitan community of interest accumulates and celebrates. What is at stake is not Bhabha’s locus of split, displaced, repetitious colonial and Biblical authority, but an originary, blasphemous and founding difficulty with loci: in the beginning, there was the word, and the word was always going to mean “Trouble” for all concerned.

Notes

1. For early critics who see Marechera as alienated or lacking an “African personality,” see Wylie (45-6), Mzamane (203), Omole (597), McLoughlin (151), Kantai (qtd. in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 182), and Gikandi (qtd. in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 214). Musaemura Zimunya observes that the “accumulation of anecdotes [in “House of Hunger”] sometimes gives the impression of a psychoanalytic dossier,” but he dismisses Marechera, saying that he “makes myths for himself, not for the tribe,” leading to the nonsensical claim that Marechera “pushes the frontier of the African psyche until his *angst* begins to sound European and *modern*” (117, 97). Tinashe Mushakavanhu opposes this early critical orthodoxy with the brilliant argument that “the psychologically undergirding structures of social and political power” mean that “one must be willing to take a chance with one’s so-called ‘sanity’ in order to break the rules” (14). Further, “one must be ‘mad’ to question or rebuke what everyone else perceives to be normal” (14-15). The upshot is that such “difficult psychological episodes break the pattern of social and cultural inevitabilities” (15). For Veit-Wild the “question of whether Marechera was clinically ‘mad’ or not is not important for understanding his work” (*Writing Madness* 60); Hamilton concurs, arguing that many readers “have mistakenly thought that Marechera did exactly this—write with his ego, memory, or madness” (4). Huddart reads Marechera in relation to Fanon, but explicitly avoids other critics’ emphases upon “the double-voicedness, the paranoia, and the psychical split consequent upon colonialism, as explored in Marechera’s evidently fragmented fiction” (101). David Pattison, by contrast, sees Marechera’s writing as increasingly incoherent, deteriorating in line with a progressive schizophrenia and an “extreme paranoia” (*No Room* 122, 38); elsewhere, however, Pattison makes the diagnostically inconsistent claim that the

“personal and idiosyncratic nature of Marechera’s writing [was] neither exclusive nor narcissistic” (“Call No Man Happy” 223). Dirk Kloppe gets closest to Marechera’s project, writing that “Marechera’s works constitute, at least to this reader, a kind of textual madness . . . [but] the madness is, in my view, a productive madness” (123-4).

2. Drew Shaw makes this argument in succinct and compelling ways. See “Transgressing,” 7.

3. Dirk Kloppe has stated persuasively that the “external relation between a unified ‘life’ and a discrete body of ‘work’ needs to be reconceived, in the case of Marechera, as an inner margin, an inner split” (124). He elaborates that such internal fracturing is both constitutive of and disruptive of the very concepts of ‘life’ and ‘work’” (124).

4. Helon Habila concurs that Marechera was a “man to whom the boundary between the fictitious and the real is so thin as to be almost nonexistent” (252).

5. Anais Mutekwa states that “[nothing] describes Marechera better than this—an intellectual who stood on the margins of both African and European literary and philosophical traditions” (26).

6. For the conceptual history of fetishism, see McClintock (183-9) and for an exemplary postcolonial critique of Freud’s essay on narcissism, see Spivak (175-202).

7. See McCulloch (70).

8. See Nicholls (*Ngugi wa Thiong’o* 63-4).

9. I am grateful to Flora Veit-Wild for confirming the final incident (personal communication).

10. Bill Ashcroft claims that “[t]here is possibly no writer whose fiction is more enmeshed with his life, no writer whose life seems more like a picaresque novel” (76), while Melissa Levin and Laurice Taitz have written of Marechera’s “fictional autobiographies or autobiographical fictions” (163).

11. David Buuck writes that “Marechera constantly relocates himself (and his written self) within the shifting allegiances and constructions of identity, preferring to refract the self into many rather than invent a cohesive and stable subject position” (121).

12. Gerald Gaylard speaks of Marechera’s “desire for Occidental alterity, a European lover” (“A Melodrama” 162). Flora Veit-Wild

tenderly relates her own love affair with Marechera and her subsequent replacement by a “blond woman” (“Me and Dambudzo” 189-201). See also David Caute, who explores Marechera’s “effortless success” with white women (49).

13. Bhabha writes: “The discovery of the book is, at once, a moment of originality and authority. It is, as well, a process of displacement that, paradoxically, makes the presence of the book wondrous to the extent to which it is repeated, translated, misread, displaced” (102). It is precisely this sense of wonder that Marechera’s passage on the discovery of Arthur Mee’s *Children’s Encyclopedia* captures so vividly. By inserting himself into the book (“Wandering with the Egyptians . . .” etc.), Marechera is already repeating, translating, misreading and displacing the gaze of colonial authority.

14. By this, I do not mean to collapse mixed-race anatomy onto cultural hybridity. Instead, I am suggesting that the reality of the Rhodesian colour-bar in the 1950s means that the child may be read politically in terms of white sexual hypocrisy.

15. Marechera was certainly familiar with Mtshali’s work, since *The Black Insider* quotes the first stanza of another of Mtshali’s poems, “High and Low” (33), and references Wole Soyinka’s 1975 anthology *Poems of Black Africa*, in which “High and Low” appears (293). “An Abandoned Bundle” also appears in Soyinka’s anthology (146) and it is almost certain that this anthology was Marechera’s original source for the allusion to Mtshali’s poem in *Mindblast*.

16. The paranoiac’s delusions of grandeur and persecution often map the overinvestment of ego-libido (for instance, “I am Jesus . . .”) and the withdrawal of object-libido (for instance, “. . . and tomorrow the world will end”).

17. In this sense, Gaylard’s claim that Marechera developed a personal psychological technique through his writing” seems apt (“Marechera’s Politic Body” 76).

18. Bill Ashcroft has rightly observed that “Marechera’s writing is so profoundly structurally innovative, [and] so resistant to the demands of story” (77-8). Laurice Taitz adds that “Marechera’s writing questions itself and the narrative structures that seek to impose continuity and seamlessness” (40).

19. Dobrota Pucherova has argued that “Marechera’s protagonists meet their own doubles, who represent their alternative selves, letting them experience an uncanny sense of being not what one is” (76).

20. Gerald Gaylard has commented astutely on Marechera's "obliquely-connected, covertly articulated rebellion" (*After Colonialism* 69). He has also independently developed the wonderfully suggestive term "parapolitics," which "includes creativity and creates pockets of turbulence within power by speaking with a voice that desires to be outside power" (244). "This desire," he points out, "is literally unimaginable, for how can one begin to be outside of that which is ubiquitous?" (243).

21. Marechera returned to Zimbabwe from England in 1981 to discover that his novel, *Black Sunlight*, had been banned as an "undesirable" book on the grounds of sexual and religious obscenity (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 290-99). It was the first book by an African writer to be banned in post-Independence Zimbabwe.

22. For a comparable argument that positions Apartheid in terms of the literary, see Nicholls, *Nadine Gordimer's July's People*, 34-5.

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