

“[T]here is not occupation, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.” (Fanon). How does coloniality, in its various guises, affect embodied experience? How might embodied states be indicative of oppression, on the one hand, and of resilience and resistance on the other? Examine the treatment of the body, and embodied states, in any text on this unit.

Fanon’s statement that ‘the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing’, signifies the all-inclusive nature of colonialism, and resultantly, the somatic level at which it is manifested. Dambudzo Marechera’s heavy use of the grotesque body in *The House of Hunger*¹ expresses this corporeal level at which the legacies of colonialism operate and are felt in the postcolonial state of former Rhodesia² under the leadership of Ian Smith. The character’s indoctrinated violent colonial-patriarchal episteme surfaces at such a vulgar bodily level. As Veit-Wild states, ‘the troubled mind speaks through the body’³. It is a colonized mind, an ‘occupied’ mind, that speaks through the colonized, ‘occupied’ body.

While Marechera’s text is often rich in lyrical figurative language, it contains an exaggerated focus on base corporeal features and functions, for example genitals, blood, flesh, sex, eating and defecation. Such images conform to the grotesque body trope theorized by Bakhtin. Bakhtin writes of the concern in grotesque realism with ‘the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth’⁴. But while Bakhtin’s grotesque realism is generally comedic, regenerative and empowers the body-politic through mockery of elites, Marechera’s grotesque body is darkly satirical, degenerative and despairing as it reveals the people’s fulfilment of reductive colonial stereotypes.

¹ Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger*, (London: Heinemann, 2009). All further references are to this edition.

² I will refer to now Zimbabwe as former Rhodesia in this essay.

³ Flora Veit-Wild, *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), p. 131.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 21.

While Bakhtin's grotesque body operates at the level of ordinary people, in the post-colony, the 'aesthetics of vulgarity' are also apparent in the operations of authority, as argued by Mbembe. He notes that 'defecation, copulation, pomp, and extravagance are classical ingredients in the production of power'⁵. In *The House of Hunger*, the grotesque as a symbol of power is readily apparent in the excessive, vulgar displays of sex and violence played out at the bodily level (largely on the female body). These are acts performed by ordinary people, revealing the consumption of an oppressive colonial mentality amongst the body-politic. Thus the grotesque body is both indicative of power and degeneration, both of which are residues of colonialism. Ordinary people are both perpetrators and victims, becoming both the colonisers and the colonised.

This idea of the oppressed turned oppressors constitutes the core of *The House of Hunger*. In the text, postcolonial subjects feel the deprivation of their situation at the base corporeal level; they are culturally and politically famished and parched, trapped in 'The House of Hunger' that is former Rhodesia, where 'all the black youth was thirsty' (p.12). As if to compensate for this deficiency, characters excessively consume one another's bodies via vulgar violence and sex. This material bodily consumption behaviour echoes the actions of the earlier colonisers. The narrator writes of the Rhodesian conquest, 'Lobengula finally agreed to be eaten by Rhodes' (p. 59). This same 'cannibalism' amongst the postcolonial body-politic (via all-consuming sex and violence) denotes the embodiment of colonial ideology, where natives are considered consumable, expendable material objects in the imperialist marketplace. Thus do characters reduce one another to dispensable bodies. Consumption destabilizes the boundary between outside and inside, coloniser and colonised, as the two merge in Marechera's text.

⁵ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 'The Aesthetics of Vulgarity', pp. 80 -108 (p. 85).

In the postcolony, the violated become the violators. Violence reverberates in all corners of life, into the personal locality of the community and the home, operating at the bodily level. Fanon iterates such a destruction of unity via violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*⁶ - Sartre summarising that 'if this suppressed fury [of the colonised subjects] fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves they even massacre each other'⁷. Similarly in the novel, citizens duplicate imperial violence on one another, exercising coloniality as power, as it becomes the only way for them to assert dominance. As is said of Peter, 'because he hungered for the fight everybody saw it in his eyes and liked him for it' (p.12). His violence is a 'hunger', a grotesque consumption that attempts to fill the void of the 'house of hunger'. There is an obscene admiration for the dominance Peter gains in his violent mentality. Later, Nestar even allows the narrator and Philip to beat up her son, saying with shocking banality, 'not in here if you please. The basement is the best place' (p. 70).

Through such violence, black bodies in *The House of Hunger* are reduced to grotesque bodies, displayed as material parts. For example, the narrator says of Edmund post-fight, 'his face was unrecognisable. [...] Most of his front teeth had gone and his jaw seemed to be hanging on by a thread. Great scabs of blood were forming all over his eyes, nose, mouth, and cheeks.' (p. 82). The grotesque body replaces Edmund's uniqueness, as his face is 'unrecognisable' and scabs form over those facial features which define his appearance. Often characters are denied even this kind of description, instead becoming a mere 'stain' - blood on a sheet or as in the narrator's father's case 'there was nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh' (p. 60). People are transformed into symbols of destruction and abjection. This desire for expulsion amongst the body-politic is

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 7-26 (p. 16).

iterated by the narrator - 'on a baser level I could not forgive man, myself, for being utterly and crudely there' (p. 18). Through somatic violence is such a desire achieved, as characters are erased and erase those around them.

With dark satirical tones, the imperial reduction of natives to mere expendable bodies is reiterated in the violent self-destruction of character's in the text. Edmund seems to be aware of this embodiment of typecasts, as after the fight, 'he was whining; jabbering distractedly like an animal [...] he was saying over and over 'I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon, I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon.' He personifies and verbally echoes racist animal stereotypes, denoting how the violence of his nation has made them into the very image constructed of them by the coloniser.

Fanon's argument that 'the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother'⁸ (i.e. by violence) stops short of revealing the violence imposed upon women in the community (Fanon's argument is notable male-centric). But Marechera reveals that the native also defends his personality vis-à-vis his sister, through obscene and grotesque acts of violent sex. The colonial-patriarchal episteme has been consumed. Mbembe iterates this oppressive gendered-sexual violence, writing, 'the act of exercising command cannot be separated from the production of licentiousness'⁹. The text is littered with displays of the 'command' of the sexual perpetrator. For example, Immaculate is 'all sweet and childish and big with sperm' (p.12). Her pregnancy is expressed in grotesque fashion as a male occupation. Her oxymoronic embodiment of both childishness and male sexual conquest is abhorrent, revealing an unequal power dynamic in her relationship with Peter. Further debasing is Harry's comment that "'nigger girls are just meat [...] and I don't like my meat raw'" (p. 24). Black women are reduced to animals, much like Edmund, but

⁸ Fanon, p. 42.

⁹ Mbembe, p. 98.

rather, they are dead animals, ‘meat’ to be consumed. Just as Lobengula was eaten by Rhodes, women are eaten and consumed by men in the postcolony. The sexual dominance of women is intertwined with colonial dominance, just as colonisation is often sexually encoded (the colony seen as penetrated by the colonizer).

Violent sexual domination is often displayed as an exhibition by characters in the novel, blurring the line between private and public. Colonial-patriarchal forms of dominance become all-encompassing achievements to be shared. As Mbembe writes of the *commandement*, ‘the male ruler’s pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates’¹⁰, Marechera exposes how this phallocentric mentality is engrained and enacted openly at the community level in the text. This is perhaps most evident in the scene in which Peter openly masturbates in front of a group of boys:

he was going to prove to us infants that he had actually become capable of making girls – any girls – pregnant [...] he quite casually cradled it in his right hand and began to masturbate [...] and moaning like something out of this world, he came and came and came [...] the gang drew closer and closer and sighed.

(p. 64)

While self-serving, this in act of dominance over ‘girls’, proof of his ability to impregnate them. The phallus is displayed as a tool of supremacy, a symbol of the oppressive patriarchal-colonial framework.

This abhorrant exhibitionism of female oppression is further demonstrated, where the narrator writes of intermarital ‘beatings’,

the most lively of them ended with the husband actually fucking – raping – his wife right there in the thick of the excited crowd. He was cursing all women to hell as he did so. And he seemed to screw her forever – he went on and on and on and on until she looked like death. When at last – the crowd licked its lips and swallowed – when at last he pulled his

¹⁰ Mbembe, p. 86.

penis out of her raw thing and stuffed it back into his trousers, I think she moved a finger, which made us all wonder how she could have survived such a determined assault.

(p. 49-50).

Bakhtin's grotesque is concerned with collective identity, and in the crowd's involvement of the rape is this apparent. Like the admiration the community feels for Peter's violence, there is an unspoken approval of the sexual violence being committed here ('the crowd licked its lips'). No one interferes in the carnival display in which all are involved, all are implicit. As Bakhtin iterates, 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.'¹¹ Even the narrator is involved, having to correct himself to call it 'rape' and not the eroticized 'fucking'.

Through this collectiveness, individual ownership of one's body is lost. Bodies are degraded and materialized – 'penis', 'raw thing' - in carnivalesque, grotesque fashion. The female is perhaps even less than a body, a mere 'thing' to be penetrated. The carnival scene is stripped of any humour, sex concurrent with death here. Instead it is dismally satirical, echoing colonial authority over the body and again colonial reductions of people to commodifiable 'things' as well as racialised depictions of men as hypersexualised. However, in the movement of a figure, and this woman's survival of such 'a determined assault' is a glimmer of resistance apparent.

While postcolonial subjects are rampant violent and sexual consumers, they continue to be consumed, and then expelled by the neo-colonial state. Semantics of disease, decay and excretion abound in the text. The narrator describes 'the stench of our decaying family life with its perpetual headaches of gut-rot and soul-sickness', 'gut-rot' being a heavily repeated phrase. Former Rhodesia is denoted a decaying nation, still being 'eaten' by Rhodes. Excremental imagery denotes colonial

¹¹ Bakhtin, p.7.

bodies as discharge, expulsions of imperialist excess. The narrator speaks of the ‘foul turd which my life had been’ (p. 11) and the reduction of his ‘world to a turd. Its stench got into my food, my painting, my reading and my dreams. Everything I touched turned into a stinking horror’ (p. 43). The self-demeaning scatological metaphors resonate with colonial rhetoric that reduced the colonized body to, in Spurr’s words, ‘filth, shit and disorder’¹². ‘Stinking horror’ echoes Conrad’s infamous words, ‘the horror! The horror!’, of *The Heart of Darkness*¹³, which indicate the savage depravity of humanity in his heavily racialized account. As has been already evidenced, colonial mindsets operate heavily in the construction of the self-image, personally and collectively, iterated via the grotesque body trope. The colonized continue to be debased and debase themselves to expendable, negated parts; the racialised, imagined colonial body frequently becoming actualized in the text.

In the grotesque body of *The House of Hunger* are colonial echo chambers of violence, patriarchy and debasement apparent. Colonised bodies enact colonisation on other bodies and themselves. Violent, domineering relations between characters and reductive expressions of self (articulated at the corporeal level), are predetermined by the hegemonic colonial-patriarchal framework they find themselves in. It is the women of the text who are the greater victims of this framework, suffering through the intersectionality of their race, class and gender. Their ‘occupied breathing’ is three-fold. While this reflection of post-independent former Rhodesia is a bleak one, *The House of Hunger* remains resistant in its exposé of neo-coloniality. Marechera refuses to paint a romanticised picture of historical pre-colonial natives or a utopian vision of the future of former Rhodesia. As the narrator writes, ‘no I don’t hate being black. I’m just tired of saying its beautiful’ (p. 60), Marechera is similarly unwilling to glorify his people for the appeasement of a European or extremist nationalistic audience. Marechera was unwilling to write for nation-building, even saying

¹² David Spurr quoted by Joshua D. Esty, ‘Excremental Postcolonial’, *Contemporary Literature*, 40.1 (1999) 22-59 (p. 28), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208818>> accessed 08/01/21.

¹³ Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2015), p. 66.

‘if you are a writer for a specific nation then fuck you’¹⁴. Instead he attempts to unveil national fabrications, revealing the truth of his state’s situation. Such a truth is vulgar, grotesquely inscribed on the body through violence, sex, decay and defecation. But it holds great potential; Marechera writes, ‘for me, that slow brain death’ of colonial indoctrination ‘can be cured by this kind of literary shock treatment’¹⁵.

¹⁴ Marechera, quoted by Tinashe Mushakavanhu, ‘A Brotherhood of Misfits, The Literacy Anarchism of Dambudzo Marechera & Percy Bysshe Shelley’ in *Reading Marechera*, ed. by Grant Hamilton (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp. 11-24 (p. 23).

¹⁵ Marechera quoted by Mushakanhu, p. 17.

Bibliography

Primary Texts

Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2015).

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger*, (London: Heinemann, 2009).

Secondary Texts

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984)

Joshua D. Esty, 'Excremental Postcolonial', *Contemporary Literature*, 40.1 (1999) 22-59 (p. 28),
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208818>>

Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 'The Aesthetics of Vulgarly', pp. 80 -108.

Tinashe Mushakavanhu, 'A Brotherhood of Misfits, The Literacy Anarchism of Dambudzo Marechera & Percy Bysshe Shelley' in *Reading Marechera*, ed. by Grant Hamilton (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp. 11-24.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 7-26.

Flora Veit-Wild, *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006)