

Mesochronous Marechera: African Aesthetics, Violence, and Temporality in *The House of Hunger*

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Abstract: Within postcolonial literary studies, questions of political commitment or individual identity often accompany aesthetic categorization: for instance, to what extent do an author's stylistic choices reflect an individual or collective narrative of national struggle? Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera's fiction and essays disallow easy assignation as local or universal, African or Western. The vulgar, irreverent aesthetic of Marechera's debut novella, *The House of Hunger* (1978), expanded the definition of postcolonial African writing and at times prompted his categorization as a cosmopolitan or global modernist author. Rather than considering his work as reflective of a hybrid identity, I argue that it proposes a coeval relationship between Western and African aesthetic and material worlds in the post-World War II era. Marechera enacts this historico-aesthetic relationship by representing 1970–80s Zimbabwe with violence and vulgarity. In turn, this representation confronts and subverts the colonial fashioning of Africa as outside history, modernity, and the universal. I read *The House of Hunger* as a theorization of this mesochronous relationship between Africa and the West.

Keywords: Dambudzo Marechera, postcolony, violence, temporality, *The House of Hunger*

It is 1986. Dambudzo Marechera, soon to die, participates in a lecture series in Harare that he convened at the behest of the Zimbabwe German Society. His two talks uncharacteristically follow the contours

of what is implicitly required by the audience and the occasion: speak as an African writer to Europeans about literature; make some connections between the two literary traditions; tread lightly.

Though then only thirty-four years old, Marechera was notorious for his writing, his public persona, and how the two intersected. His reputation—as exile, homeless wanderer, Oxford dropout, libertine who used park benches as writing desks—and the obscene, vulgar aesthetic of his prose, exemplified in *The House of Hunger* (1978) and *Black Sunlight* (1980) (the latter of which was banned in Zimbabwe) surely preceded him. But Marechera's talk, "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature," began not with a tirade against Robert Mugabe or the literati but with a personal anecdote about his discovery of Geoffrey Chaucer, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce. He then followed a meandering path from meditations on the present historical moment to allusions to classical and contemporary writers whose stylistics and philosophies resembled his. Marechera eventually argued that the best work by this panoply of authors (including, of course, his own) ought to be read not nationally or historically but in terms of aesthetic or philosophical affinity. "It is no longer necessary to speak of the African novel or the European novel," he declared. "[T]here is only the menippean novel" ("African Writer's Experience" 101). With this, his most oft-quoted statement, Marechera claimed that the carnivalesque formal qualities of Menippean satire aesthetically unite the literary worlds of Albert Camus and Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and Knut Hamsun, Joyce and Marechera himself.¹ For him, this transnational, transhistorical relationship is inevitable because the Menippean destroys arbitrary limitations within the literary work as well as beyond it. This aesthetic connection obviates the structures of "writing back" to the metropole or pronouncements of the derivative stylistics of African authors. Tucked alongside this claim of aesthetic continuity among African and European writing, however, resides a pitch-perfect articulation of the aesthetic ideal—that literature exists "as a unique universe that has no internal divisions" and floats free of the dictates of "race or language or nation" (101). Though placid on the surface, this was a particularly radical claim—more so than his argument for a Menippean categorization of African and European

literary texts. Marechera's cultural humanist position seems an antipolitical throwback to a world where the literary object can exist absent its author, absent history, and in the case of the postcolonial world, absent the violence of colonialism and its legacies. For Marechera to make this argument in 1986 even as his writing was rooted in the very chaos of that history seems contradictory at best.

Perhaps we can chalk this position up to Marechera's reputation: he was a known contrarian whose intellectual and political positions at times often appeared antagonistic.² But we can just as easily analyze Marechera's desire for that "ideal cosmos" ("African Writer's Experience" 99) and ask why—in this context and elsewhere—deeming his work "African" also implied how it ought to be read and to what end. If Marechera's humanist view of literature seems incompatible with his origins and writing, it is because it belies a tension that has marked modern African literary history. In particular, politics, broadly construed, precedes and defines aesthetics, and the West's rendering of Africa as outside of history continues to prevent African literature from being seen as literary or universal. Marechera's views in this address are provocative, then, not simply because he claimed a cosmopolitan home for himself and other African authors but because in doing so he activated one of the central dilemmas of modern African literature.

Though the range of Europhone African literature has expanded vastly since the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the imbrication of aesthetics and politics, broadly construed, continues to influence the composition of African literature. Prior to the publication of *The House of Hunger*, the African authors that Marechera calls Menippean deviated from the initial project of twentieth-century African literature, which was to remedy colonial-era misrepresentations, often through realist representations of a dignified precolonial past. In the mid-to-late 1960s, the realist corrective project shifted toward critiquing new nation-states via satire and, some argue, a more modernist sensibility.³ More so than the work of his Anglophone predecessors Ayi Kwei Armah and Soyinka, however, Marechera's satire relies on a formal and stylistic mode heavily imbued with the very chaos and grotesquery that his texts criticize. Indeed, the Marecheran aesthetic heightens the

“postcolonial nightmare” (Lindfors 24) by deliberately alienating the reader at every level of content and form. Content: sordid representations of sexuality, domestic abuse, drunkenness, and profanity; form: a disjointed, chaotic narrative from the perspective of mostly unlikeable characters. Marechera’s writing feels less like satire than the experience of being forced to relive someone else’s nightmare—the characters’ demons have somehow become yours, but you may never be able to decipher why you (or they) are being so tormented.

Whether this aesthetic was a self-indulgent, European import or a revolutionary, antinationalist African innovation depended on whom you asked. The answer could fluctuate between “both” and “neither”—sometimes in the same article. Juliet Okonkwo, in her 1980 review of *The House of Hunger*, argues that Marechera’s lewd imagery and vulgar language are not just morally objectionable but “alien to Africa—a continent of hope and realizable dreams” (91). She asserts that “Africa . . . cannot afford the luxury of such distorted and self-destructive ‘sophistication’ from her writers”—particularly those displaying a “decadent avant-garde European attitude” (91). In a more recent appraisal, however, Bill Ashcroft notes Marechera’s outlier position within 1970s African literature and analyzes his style in Menippean terms (those that Marechera proposed) because “the Menippean novel seems a perfect fit for the idiosyncratic nature of his writing” (82). Ashcroft’s reading places Marechera at the purported “turning point of African literature” from realism to modernism and contextualizes the more radical aspects of his work within a cosmopolitan frame. He suggests that the “bizarre, chaotic, allusive, ribald, prurient, and scatological” aspects of Marechera’s work make sense as part of the literary cosmos of Menippean authors (81).⁴

Okonkwo’s and Ashcroft’s responses to Marechera’s work appear to diverge, but they do have something in common: both critics, with varying levels of explicitness, present “Africa” and “African literature” as stable categories and assess Marechera’s suitedness to them.⁵ Although Okonkwo’s criteria are clear, and Ashcroft’s more subtle, both claim that African literature is nationalist and politically reparative. Notice how “African literature” expands to accommodate aesthetic difference when he locates Marechera at its “turning point” but disappears as Marechera’s

idiosyncratic aesthetic situates him in the transnational, transhistorical Menippean world. Thus, in Ashcroft's analysis, African literature can evolve to accommodate modernist aesthetics, but the vulgar, violent aspects of Marechera's work (which most trouble Okonkwo) correspond to an outside literary sphere. Both Ashcroft and Okonkwo suggest that the crudest and most violent aspects of Marechera's work are, if not non-African, then most easily explained by their consonance with texts from elsewhere. Why?

For one, modern African literature has from the beginning been understood as a political project—and “political” is often understood in relation to the nation-state or colonization (in its many forms).⁶ Implicitly, the critic's charge has been to deem whether or not the proper politics have been performed—and ultimately whether the aesthetic project rectifies a historical problem. In the case of Europhone sub-Saharan African literature, the predominant problem to be addressed has been the myth of Africa as the domain of “the half-created and the incomplete, strange signs, convulsive movements[,] . . . a bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos” (Mbembe 3). The Marecheran aesthetic aligns uncomfortably with this description, a misalignment that prompts a crisis of interpretation and categorization that extends beyond a debate about the suitedness of his style to a political project. Categories like the Menippean, cosmopolitan, Afropolitan,⁷ or modernist loosen the grip of historical and geographical immediacy inherent to “African literature” and float Marechera toward a slightly removed scale of comparison—which is to say, away from “Africa.” In that cosmopolitan realm with Joyce and François Rabelais, his chaotic aesthetics become part of an artistic tradition and obviate the designation of them as a local response to a violent Zimbabwe. That neither Okonkwo nor Ashcroft deems Marechera's crudely grotesque formal and thematic innovations to be African suggests the limitations of the analytic approaches made available by postcolonial literary study, especially for those works that seem, on the surface, to be uninterested in a reparative aesthetic project.

The point of this essay is not to decide whether Marechera is a Menippean author or an African one; to resort to preexisting aesthetic

categories that depend on or omit the geographical signifier “African” will only reproduce the dynamic I have just described. Rather, I suggest that if Marechera is a “turning point” in African literature, it is because he reverses the representational order of African literature by confronting the dialectical fashioning of Africa as outside history, modernity, and the universal. Rather than sloughing off or correcting misrepresentations, Marechera’s narratively disorienting and aesthetically turbulent texts show that the chaotic violence and forestalled experience of modernity that the West has designated as particularly African are universal. In so doing, Marechera’s work opens up the possibility that other “universals”—the literary, the human, the modern—are also within the African domain. Perhaps Marechera called his work *Menippean* not because he fetishized a purportedly European category but because he knew that to modify “literature” with “African” implied its mobilization for a political project at the expense of its aspirations toward universality, literariness, or beauty. (Indeed, to analyze the beauty of African aesthetic works continues to be seen as frivolous or colonial.)⁸ In an often overlooked portion of the previously quoted address, Marechera interrupts his list of African and European *Menippean* authors to analyze the post-World War II world. Notice the progression from historical experience to the aesthetic realm:

We are caught in the very act of changing into some other form; we are frozen in that monstrous midway. . . . Though the heat may differ in temperature, the heat is everywhere the same. The degree of pain may differ but the torturer’s technique is the same. We are not at the beginning, we are not at the end—we are at the mid-point of the scream, the eye of the storm. That, for me, is the unifying factor in the scenario of contemporary literature in Europe and Africa. (“African Writer’s Experience” 100)

Marechera argues that the unifying experience of the twentieth century is widespread, disorienting violence that is accompanied by the sense of a frozen present and foreclosed future. Though the local signposts may look different in Zimbabwe than they do in Algeria or Germany,

the violence is “everywhere the same.” His explicit use of the language of degree rather than kind to describe the existential and historical experience of Africans and Europeans after World War II marks the most radical claim of his essay: despite a heat (or violence) that has different intensities and manifestations based on location (where it “differ[s] in temperature”), he theorizes a broadly communal experience of violence. Furthermore, this historical process pauses modernity’s promise of progress and substitutes a grotesque impasse: “We are caught in the very act of changing[,] . . . we are frozen in that monstrous midway[,] . . . we are at the midpoint of the scream.” When unified, these two views—of the locally differentiated but universally shared experience of violence and of the “monstrous midway,” a malformed temporal-spatial midpoint—offer a theory that modifies postcolonial, modernist, and cosmopolitan systems of post-War aesthetics and temporality.

To query the nature of temporality means, implicitly, to query foundational assumptions about the origins and progression of modernity. Within postcolonial and modernist studies (among others), aesthetics and historical consciousness are intertwined. Global modernist scholars contend that a capacious aesthetic category called “modernist” signals the arrival of non-Western authors into a “singular modernity”;⁹ conversely, postcolonial theorists analyze the “third-world” aesthetic as articulating an “alternative modernity”—a nonsynchronous (hybrid, resistant, outsider) position within a de facto synchronous modernity.¹⁰

Marechera’s theory not only universalizes violence, which helps de-particularize it as a sign of the African postcolony; it also describes a shared temporality. Achille Mbembe and Lauren Berlant, respectively, posit the stalled present and its aesthetic counterparts as a feature of either postcolonial or post-War Euro-American societies. Marechera anticipates and enmeshes these discrete geographies by outlining a historico-aesthetic category (the “monstrous middle”) that treats post-War and postcolonial societies as coeval and their literary output as mutually concerned with a forestalled historical moment.¹¹ The historical relationship that Marechera describes is neither synchronous nor nonsynchronous: whereas synchronicity assumes the shared experience of common time—a system of identical phase and frequency, such as

calendrical and clock time—he posits a temporal relationship wherein the frequency is identical but the phase is unknown or different—a mesochronous relationship. In a mesochronous (literally “middle time”) system, each unit keeps time according to the same frequency (minutes, hours), but their phases are not necessarily aligned with a correct or master time. In such systems, not only do phases vary, but they may be unknowable: individual parts may never align; there is no center. They are separate yet unified. To transpose this model to a conception of modernity means conceiving of a coeval, singular modernity that provides latitude for regional, local, and even intrapersonal variation in the articulation or experience of it. Importantly, the unknowable or unknown phases of the units (at whatever scale) allows for autonomy and association, free of an expectation of total reconciliation of parts. Thus, in Marechera’s naming of the postwar present as the “monstrous midway,” he gives a glimpse of a world- and literary-system that is not exactly cosmopolitan, postcolonial, or progressivist.

An approach to literary analysis that utilizes Marechera’s mesochronous perspective can attend to local and intrapersonal aesthetic responses to a broadly global phenomenon without naming them derivative, belated, or even ahead of their time. It also allows for a reconsideration of African literature’s place within the ideal cosmos, not because it proposes an apolitical technique of reading African texts but because it trains our attention toward a range of representations—of the mundane, the oppressive, and the beautiful. In so doing, it provides ill-fitting texts like Marechera’s the opportunity to participate in a broad political-aesthetic project of African literature which includes, but is not limited to, its relationship to the nation-state, the metropole, and the world republic of letters.¹²

This essay takes seriously the nascent theory of mesochronicity in Marechera’s talk and explores how it operates in *The House of Hunger*. It revisits the violence in the novella and rethinks the formal elements that register a temporal impasse. In particular, I analyze the amplitude and nature of represented violence (physical, linguistic, or otherwise) as well as the “formal grotesque” and its relationship to the “monstrous midway,” or the long present. To see what this might mean for both

Marechera's aesthetics and African literature, let us turn to *The House of Hunger*.

I. Violent Language, Violent Style

The most persistent myth about Africa may be that it all comes down to violence. The most prominent recent study of the experience, aesthetics, and pathology of that violence remains Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*.¹³ The book presents the African postcolony as a politico-aesthetic space in which power zigzags from the center (which is the *commandement*) to the populace through a strange acrobatics of farce and excess. Mbembe's interest in the aesthetics of power is entwined with the embodied experience of temporality—what he refers to as “time as lived” in the postcolonial present (16). He writes that the postcolonial subject, in his or her experience of time, has a “contingent, dispersed, and powerless existence” because of the arbitrary movement of power (13). Not only does this create a sense of precarity but the grotesque and “stark horror” of the postcolony arises from the normalization of spectacular violence, of “human and contingent violence with the distinctive feature of committing acts of destruction that, in their starkness, scale, and ‘knock-out’ effects, have the peculiar characteristic of concealing human suffering” (13). This means that human-motivated, arbitrary violence in the African postcolony spectacularly obscures rather than demonstrates human suffering. Because violence requires a particular context to be recognized as violent and the African postcolony and its subjects have been historically scripted as naturally and necessarily violent, individual acts of violence fade into the background.

This description is broadly representative of the Mbembian postcolony: the system he establishes prevents postcolonial subjects from maneuvering from underneath the myth of Africa, made weighty by a dense epistemological archive, or from under the vulgar *commandement* whose modes of power anticipate and absorb all forms of protest. Mbembe describes a closed system in which violence disappears, though the perspective required to view that disappearance hovers outside and above the postcolony. Notice the slipping perspective in the description: Mbembe observes the “starkness, scale, and ‘knock-out’ effects” of this

violence, which suggests a more intimate view of an individual act. But that intimacy disappears by the end of the sentence as he drifts toward a distant, abstracted perspective where the violent act's starkness diminishes amid a uniformly illuminated backdrop of suffering. This perspectival drift—and the inability to hold the individual act of violence, in all its horror and specificity, alongside the broad phenomenon of violence in the postcolony—reinforces the scale and magnitude of the violence that Mbembe analyzes.

Thus, in order for violence to be read as violent, it must somehow be represented anew and conveyed from a perspective that holds in tension the local and global, the epiphenomenal and causal. *The House of Hunger* enacts this doubled perspective, which allows us to see the violence of the postcolony as both normalized and shocking. The novella critiques violence by using obscene language and violent imagery as its main aesthetic mode. It shocks and repulses with Marechera's interpretation of 1970s Zimbabwe's turmoil. In its first sentence, "I got my things and left," the unnamed narrator announces his departure from a literal domicile that is nevertheless hyperbolically and anthropomorphically fashioned as a place where "every morsel of sanity was snatched from you the way some kinds of birds snatch food from the very mouths of babes" and an entity whose eyes "lingered upon you as though some indefinable beast was about to pounce upon you" (Marechera, *House* 11). In this house, the natural order of things is reversed—parents starve their young, for instance—and one's adversary is not only omnipresent but "indefinable," unable to be reined in by language.

Just as the titular metaphor refuses to coalesce into a single stable entity, so does anything that might resemble a plot in *The House of Hunger* resist paraphrase. There are characters who do things, but somehow the fact of their doing seems secondary to the erratic movement of the narrative. The narrator's brother Peter, for instance, is a raging presence in the book and plays a part in most of these grotesque episodes of violence. There are the narrator's friends from school and university who are former co-agitators against the state, were complicit with Prime Minister Ian Smith's white minority government, or are pan-Africanists or Europhiles. But, in the end, the characters act more like placehold-

ers that allow the narrator to tether himself haphazardly to the present, where he surfaces after plunging under the swell of a memory. The novella's episodic narration is constantly interrupted by memories that are triggered by innocuous objects or interactions: a conversation with an old friend, lighting a cigarette and watching the match burn, noticing a stain.

Through the narrator's tightly circumscribed world, the reader encounters private, intimate spaces—the home, the body—that are invaded at every turn by sexual, physical, and emotional violence, the source of which is not locatable but seems to be dragged from an uncontrollable colonial past and a presently menacing public sphere. In *The House of Hunger*, Marechera deviates from traditional Menippean tropes of corpulent or scatological bodies and instead emphasizes their grotesqueness: their graphic, and at times public, sexuality; their doling out or receiving of violence; and their presence in scenarios that involve both sexuality and violence. One of the most vivid descriptions of such violence is a throwaway anecdote that the narrator uses to describe his “street education” (63), particularly his initiation into relationships between men and women—almost all of which are predicated on opposition. After detailing how Peter graphically demonstrated masturbation to him and other neighborhood boys, he discusses prostitution and the normalcy of domestic abuse. “The most lively” example of intimate violence began in the home but “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” (65). The crowd “licked its lips and swallowed,” and then wondered, finally, “how she could have survived such a determined sexual assault” (65). It is not enough that the man publicly rapes his wife: it must be in the thick of an “excited” crowd that seems to be salivating for violence and then can only idly wonder about the woman's physical resilience. Marechera's sentences and excessive description of the event's duration prolong the interminable feeling of this passage. Surely to say that the assault went “on and on” would have sufficed—but no, it went “on and on and on and on,” which in its syntactical strangeness makes us aware

of our own spectatorship, as well as the shocking proposition of the scene itself. The doubled spectacle of this excerpt, wherein the reader is forced to witness the crowd witnessing domestic violence made public, both suggests the chaotic normalcy of this grotesque violence in the postcolony and asks us to think about why we might not look away (and why we might watch).¹⁴

At the same time that the text foregrounds violent spectacles, it critiques characters like Peter who express themselves primarily through violence, as well as how that aggression is interpreted by others: “He kept talking about the bloody whites; that phrase ‘bloody whites’ seemed to be roasting his mind and he got into fights which terrified everyone so much that no one in their right mind dared to cross him. And Peter walked about raging and spoiling for a fight which just was not there. And because he hungered for the *fight* everyone saw it in his eyes and liked him for it” (12; emphasis in original). Because Peter’s acts of violence and general aggression are couched in anti-white sentiment, the community admires them as signs of opposition to colonial domination (Taitz 35). These are the two poles of the representation of violence in the book: on the one hand, the world of the text is populated with normalized violence, and on the other, the novella suggests that the violent actions of the other characters are inadequate to rectify the injustices they face.

Precisely because of the frequency and obscenity of Marechera’s representations, scenes like that of the public rape and others of a similarly gruesome and gendered nature have garnered the rebuke of some scholars, especially feminist scholars. Anna-Leena Toivanen argues that the violence against women in *The House of Hunger* threatens to reduce women’s bodies “to mere meat” and “just stains” (53) and compromises the revolutionary possibilities of the grotesque, baroque, and obscene (56). She suggests that any claim the novella might make to Mikhail Bakhtin’s ludic, revolutionary carnivalesque falls flat because “by engaging in the grotesquely violent aesthetics, postcolonial subjects also participate in *representing* the sexualized and racialized logic of the very discourses they are supposed to oppose” (55–56; emphasis in original). Though Toivanen is right to be suspicious of the gendered representa-

tions of violence in the text, the phrase “the very discourses they are supposed to oppose” is telling. *Supposed to*—Toivanen reads the text, the characters, and the aesthetic as reinforcing a bad representational order and judges that the text ought to be acting otherwise. Indeed, in her closing sentence to the article, she writes that the “Marecheran grotesque seems to escape redemptive readings” (56).

Toivanen’s critical stance is not exceptional: it belongs to an interpretive mode that hijacks the terms used by traditional evaluative criticism and instead of evaluating the fineness of literature determines its ability to perform proper politics. Determining that politics means, typically, reading a text’s content in terms of its performance of a defiantly anticolonial stance à la Frantz Fanon, or in terms of whether, broadly construed, it favorably represents the complex humanity or cultural traditions of postcolonial subjects. When we read about that public rape, intimate violence makes its jagged way through the foreground of the narrative. In much of the criticism on Marechera’s writing, there is an outsized focus on what these sorts of violent representations could mean and how they can make sense—which is to say, how they become sensible and legible—within and beyond African literature.

One can read this hyperbolic violence in terms of its satirical resonances with other contemporary and historical examples, as Marechera himself does, or one can query particular instances of this violence and assess their broader sociopolitical implications, as often happens within some modes of postcolonial critique. The latter approach assumes an orientation to the text that brackets it as a local phenomenon and sees it as an organic representation of the chaos of the postcolony. This reading, if taken to its extreme, would reductively argue that Zimbabwe in the 1970s and 1980s was so exceptionally violent that Marechera could only resort to a surreal and vulgar aesthetic to register its social reality because the real there would be the surreal in the rest of the world (i.e., the West). Such a conclusion places us where we began, with an African space as ur-example of ungovernable barbarity.

Instead of reading violence in *The House of Hunger* in terms of its ethics as Toivanen does, we can instead understand this representational excess as a way of reckoning with the means by which the modern na-

tion-state has annulled the *demos*. By representing the mental and existential impasse of the postcolonial present through grotesque incidents of physical and gendered violence, Marechera asks his readers to see violence as both quotidian and exceptional, particular and universal. His use of diagetic violence in *The House of Hunger* counterintuitively dignifies the African subject by representing the shocking debasement of the individual body and society. In this way, Marechera's aesthetic reenables a reading of violence against African bodies as violent.

But it would be too slick a solution to say that this critical reframing of diagetic violence in Marechera's novella liberates the African author, text, and postcolony from the potent pull of particularity. In order to register the real violence in Zimbabwe as of a kind with the real violence in the post-War world, we must momentarily set aside the individual example of bodily violence and look for a common substratum. In this case, according to Marechera, the frozen, "monstrous" middle time provides preceding logic to those differentiated, local examples. To discern how this historical-temporal logic might structure a textual example, I turn to the novella's form and aesthetic orientation—in particular, Marechera's fashioning of a formal grotesque that registers the temporal violence of the long present, which resonates with modernist or Menippean styles even as it borrows from and revises traditional forms like the proverb or myth. Whether the manifest and most apparent examples of violence can be understood as symptomatic of a violence particular to Zimbabwe as well as indicative of the zeitgeist of the post-War world is my next concern.

II. The Formal Grotesque

If textual incidents like public rape ask the reader to reevaluate the nature and frequency of violence in the postcolony, then the form of *The House of Hunger* structures the experience of that violence into a persistent, uninhabitable present. Though the novella begins with the sentence "I got my things and left" (Marechera, *House* 11), the question of whether one can actually leave, and whether there is anywhere to go once one gets one's things, propels the narrative. The answer seems to be no. As the sun rises, the narrator leaves the home that he calls the

House of Hunger, wanders around, and finally arrives at a beer hall where people are already drinking. He thinks about his brother Peter's incessant "flogging" (11) of his girlfriend (the sordid details of which are disclosed later); he observes black policemen saluting the Rhodesian flag (which represents a nation that was not for them); he remembers his own arrest during a protest against the discriminatory wage structure; he recalls his brother educating him about venereal disease—all in the second paragraph. Despite his purported exit, the potential and actual violence that the house represents persists, as does the hunger:

There was however an excitement of the spirit which made us all wander about in search of that unattainable elixir which our restlessness presaged. But the search was doomed from the start because the elixir seemed to be right under our noses and yet not really there. The freedom we craved for—as one craves for dagga or beer or cigarettes or the after-life—this was so alive in our breath and in our fingers that one became intoxicated by it even before one actually found it. . . . We knew that before us lay another vast emptiness whose appetite for things living was at best wolfish. Life stretched out like a series of hunger-scoured hovels stretching endlessly towards the horizon. (13–14)

In the midst of public and private upheaval, the promise of freedom—which is, in this context, a future condition that would justify and explain the present—intoxicates the narrator. But this embodied excitement, which is from the first an "unattainable elixir," eventually settles back into a revised, seemingly realist and realistic understanding of the future from the vantage point of an emptied, scoured present. The vastness that stretches before the Zimbabwean youth provides neither an open field of exploration nor a clear path toward national progress; rather, the future has already been hollowed out. Regardless, the elixir tantalizes. In this paragraph Marechera describes two coexistent, or at least proximate, "presents": in the first, the realization of freedom feels so imminent that it is alive in one's body; in the second, that very same promise salts the fact of living in a violent space very distant from such freedom.

The novella's description of these coexisting temporalities seems the quintessential mimetic counterpart to Mbembe's description of post-colonial temporality as a "time of entanglement" (16). He posits that multiple temporalities express themselves within the space of the post-colonial present, but through a paradoxically present absence: "[T]he present *as experience of a time* is precisely that moment when different forms of absence become mixed together. . . . [W]hat distinguishes the contemporary African experience is that this emerging time is appearing in a context—today—in which the future horizon is apparently closed, while the horizon of the past has apparently receded" (16–17; emphasis in original). Politically, temporally, the postcolony becomes the site of foreclosure and impasse, where every movement toward revolution is subsumed by the state.

The House of Hunger formally enacts this foreclosed, entangled temporality: the density of activity in the opening paragraphs continues throughout the novella, seeming to suggest progress, but the narrator spends the entire text in the grip of the House. Despite the resolute gesture of getting his things and leaving, if a map were drawn of the expanse of the character's movements, it would span half-inches. He remains within the small square-footage of an unnamed neighborhood, often in a bar, sometimes in a friend's home, and eventually back at the House. The dynamic and disjointed motion of the novella arises as characters move into (and sometimes invade) his space, whereupon the reader is forced to join in the resulting plunge into the ever-expanding realm of the narrator's mind—his memories, musings, muddles. This pairing of continuous narrative shifts and relatively minimal geographical coverage—in a text that claims, at the beginning, to be about a heavily symbolic physical and psychological exit—underscores the novella's thematic meditations on a foreclosed postcolonial condition.

However—and crucially—even as the text describes hunger-scoured hovels and restricts the physical expanse of its world, its form shifts and turns, making space for a reinvigoration of the present not through state-issued promises of modernity or a return to tradition but through a "formal grotesque" that, in its accommodation of the real violence of the present, jostles against the diagetic representation and structur-

ing of time in the novella as a whole. If *The House of Hunger* exhibits a kind of “formal grotesque,” its grotesqueness resides in its incorporation of seemingly incompatible components, as is evident in the earliest definitions of grotesque objects: “[A] kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers” (“Grotesque”). The “grotesqueness” of this prototypical grotesque resides not in its monstrosity but in its intertwining of discrete, unexpected, and categorically distinct elements to create a strange new whole. In the case of Marechera, this formal grotesque can suggest, at first glance, an avant-garde writer violently yoking together the most heterogeneous ideas; indeed, critics like Ashcroft note the modernist and (as previously mentioned) Menippean stylistics that structure Marechera’s works. Alongside the aspects that could be named modernist, however, hums a diegetic and formal engagement with traditional African forms such as the fable, the epic, and the proverb. Rather than include these elements as a nod to a crystalline precolonial past or to mark their sequestration from contemporary modes of storytelling, *The House of Hunger* repurposes these gnomic forms to mesochronously enact the present’s relationship to the modern and premodern past. The “tantalizing elixir” and “hunger-scoured hovels” thereby coexist and mark an alternative engagement with the past and imagine the future without resorting to nativist, cosmopolitan, or pessimistically Mbembian ideology. Thus, not only can the mesochronous describe the text’s diageitic management of an interpretive problem (the problem of violence), but it also describes how the text formally manages and enacts the “monstrous midway” of the post-War present.

The end of the novella—or what signals as the end—offers the clearest example of the formal grotesque.¹⁵ As the book spins toward a conclusion, the narrator, having barely survived beatings, disappointments, and the betrayals of friends and long-held enemies, returns to the place he has long been trying to escape, the House of Hunger. Only a few pages before the end of *The House of Hunger*, he tells a familial origin story that details his father’s death, his mother’s verbal abuse of him as a child, and both the petty and significant slights of his brother. In a different sort

of novella, this story would begin the narrative. But Marechera instead uses the details of his mother's verbal abuse to usher in the story of an old man. A paragraph ends with her berating the narrator for truancy, and a new one begins with what proves to be a misleading conjunction: "But the old man was my friend" (Marechera, *House* 97).

In its first usage in this section of the novella, the term "old man" refers to the narrator's father but in the span of a sentence transforms into an elder who "simply wandered into the House one day out of the rain, dragging himself on his knobby walking stick" (97). The old man, introduced with semantic slickness, contorts language to do his bidding. Just as his aged body seems barely held together but for "strings of muscle" stretched like "a mesh of copper wire" (97), so do the sinews of his stories stretch and give unpredictably: "He told stories that were oblique, rambling, and fragmentary. His transparent, cunning look, his eager chuckle, his wheezing cough, and something of the earth, gravel-like, in his voice—these gave body to the fragments of things which he casually threw in my direction" (97). One does not typically think of fragmentary things as "rambling" or transparency as compatible with cunning. But this storyteller expands and contracts temporal and narrative space by manipulating the interpretive rules associated with traditional myths and fables. Here he tells a story where stock characters and settings of traditional tales—hunters, villages—become strange through constant formal shifting at the level of the sentence and the paragraph:

'A hunter of women. Now to hunt something in yourself is foolish. Because. He screamed in his sleep on the fire of the hunt. When he finally woke up he was up there in the eye of the sky. Fiercely on fire. The sun.

' . . . cast out of village, town and country. Cast out of womb, home, family.' (97)

In his fragment-stories, the old man-storyteller teases with overtures toward a moral tale, only to drop off or begin *in medias res*; at other moments, the stories take the form of fables, of pebbles dropped into the narrative without context, resistant to total interpretation in their free-floating signification. Though this character is presented as an elder who

might have wisdom to dispense about hunting, villages, fires, the sun, or Africa, the fragmentation of already dense genres prohibits the narrator (and the reader) from extracting a final, complete meaning. Not only have the stories long since begun (indicated by the ellipsis in the above quotation), but the stories themselves prove uninterpretable—or endlessly interpretable—because the language signals that they may belong to a mythical realm. The old man provides fables of uncertain didactic purpose, allegories whose symbolism never opens: they disclose too much of the wrong kind of information for his audience to arrive at understanding.

This narrative mode continues for several more paragraphs as the stories inch from the mythic past toward the narrator's present world. The last few paragraphs of the novella are built out of similar half-tales, the penultimate of which is the story of a man who converses with a green dwarf. After the narrative about the dwarf, the storyteller concludes his tale and *The House of Hunger*:

And with that they [the man and the dwarf] parted. Now that road is between the water and the earth and many have grown old and died journeying upon it. And because all men use it, that road is greatly frequented by beggars like me. One day I too chose my spot and sat upon it, waiting for the travelers to pass me by. It was Sunday and early. Soon a solid youth in a crimson jacket strolled up to me and asked if I knew where he could buy a white chicken. Do you know where I sent him? To the white soldiers' whorehouse: they beat him to a pulp. . . . That is when I found this little package. That crimson jacket character must have dropped it. There are photographs of you and your friends and little notes about what you do. Take them . . . I think Trouble is knocking impatiently on our door. (100–01)

In a matter of a few sentences, the narrative steps almost imperceptibly from the realm of the fantastical—from the realm of the green dwarf—to the realm of the immediate and the narratively proximate. The man and the dwarf part ways, and then the storyteller, in what appears to

be a move to establish the plausibility of the tale he just told, describes the road's broadly specific location—"between the water and the earth." This phrase operates as a deixis, pointing toward a traditional domain of knowledge where roads can exist in liminal domains between water and earth; by sounding the depths of folk knowledge, the listener could presumably determine a hidden, symbolic meaning. But in the world of *The House of Hunger*, this phrase recalls an earlier vignette in which the narrator's mother instructs him crudely about how to have sex with women: just "stick it in the hole between the water and the earth, it's easy" (96). The text's narrator and the reader are thus confronted with the question of which interpretive frame to use. Is it a real road or a vagina? While this question remains, "the road" shifts yet again as the old man remarks, "I too chose my spot and sat upon it," so that the connotative and denotative meanings transmute from fantastical symbol to bodily euphemism to (possibly) a realistic road. Thus, the referent of "it" is no longer a symbol or a screen but instead is pulled from the mythical realm into the diegetic world of the old man and the narrator. It is here, on this road, that the old man meets a character in a crimson jacket—Harry, an old school friend of the narrator's from earlier in the text, who by the end of the paragraph (and the novella) will have dropped a set of photographs that proves that he has betrayed the narrator to the police.

In *The House of Hunger*'s concluding paragraph, the metaphorical frequencies that govern the realism of "the road" begin phasing, pushing against and occasionally harmonizing with one another, depending on which interpretive frame is applied.¹⁶ The reader's inability to maintain a stable frame for interpreting the road referred to in the paragraph above results from Marechera's splicing together of generic forms (fable, myth, modern novella) that are differently oriented toward historical time. This difficulty arises from the juxtaposition of mythical and realist modes: myths are timeless (rather than proximate to or representative of "historical reality"); as such, myths and fables become "vehicle[s] of larger, timeless, abstract ideals" (Okpewho, "Rethinking Myth" 19). At the same time that it dislocates the reader historically, the conclusion of the novella suddenly incorporates realism as it points toward the specific and particular correspondence between the mimetic world of *The House*

of *Hunger* and the historical era of 1970s Zimbabwe. Thus, the signifier of “the road” remains constant while allowing a proliferation of metaphorical and intratextual resonances; the sentences surrounding the phrase transform a timeless mythic past into a rooted historical present. This is the work of the formal grotesque in *The House of Hunger*: it incorporates multiple genres that differently engage history and disorients the reader so that a single, coherent interpretation becomes impossible. Temporal play registers the “frozen” aspects of the “middle time” that Marechera describes in his address, while aesthetic play guides the reader toward an interpretive mode that cycles between mythical and historical time. The formal grotesque thereby permits an alternative conceptualization of the relationship between past and present as it shapes a novella whose narrative housing exists mostly in the contemporary present, but welded into that housing are forms that recast supposedly linear relations between the present and the past. Thus, as the content traces the contours of a hollowed-out present (the narrator is trapped in the impasse with little possibility of escape), its form points to the possible expansion of, if not an escape from, that time of impasse.

Just as a grotesque amalgamation of fable, myth, and modern prose forms fashion the diagetive world of *The House of Hunger*, so does its structure multiply resonate within the world literary system. As an aesthetic object, the novella possesses both traditional African epic’s elastic form and temporality and modernist stylistic innovation. Whereas Western theorizations of the epic, particularly Bakhtin’s, understand the epic as an “absolutely completed and finished generic form” in which the past remains utterly “walled off[,] . . . monochromic and valorized” (“Epic” 15), the African epic, in its categorization as a predominantly oral genre that is sometimes written, enacts a dynamic relationship between epic temporality and the present of the performance. Isidore Okpewho writes that the form, content, and duration of the epic expand and contract based on parataxis rather than linear narrative logic (*Epic* 81–82). The “text,” though, neither completely bends to spontaneity nor to the whims of the performer; rather, the epic performance can be seen as a fusion of organic and schematic demands such that it becomes “a narrative collage of affective moments and moods. The prin-

cial emphasis . . . is on the *moments* of the subject's life, and the narrative sequence (in terms of time, the order of events, and so on) is simply a superstructure that may be altered at will by the bard and is by no means rigid. . . . [A] tale is never sung the same way twice" (82; emphasis in original). The "narrative collage" relies on a malleable superstructure that can be "altered at will" by the bard, a superstructure which, even in its "essential structural looseness" holds stable various textual "moments" and patterns (160). This means that the hero will always be born in the same way; his attributes will follow a set descriptive formula (the "noun-adjective combination" [138]); there will be variation between narrative and song (85). Thus, the epic balances formal mandate and performative spontaneity, reinterpreting and integrating the otherwise unattainable epic past into the present. The performance and reception of the epic is always, then, a marriage of contradictions.

The latter portion of *The House of Hunger*, with its use of "gnomic lines and passages, proverbs, and reflections" (Okpewho, *Epic* 181), as well as its disorienting imbalance of temporalities and moments, contains elements of the African epic.¹⁷ In both the epic and the novella, the past is revived in the present, held up neither as a totem of tradition nor as a mandate for the future. Moreover, *The House of Hunger's* formal variation—its use of parataxis, mythical allusion, and temporal bricolage—resembles Western (and Anglophone) modernist authors' stylistic experimentation. Rebecca Walkowitz, in the course of defining a more globally capacious modernism, argues that cosmopolitan style is "wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage, and portmanteau language" (2)—a description that could easily substitute for part of Okpewho's definition of the African epic.

Using these criteria, we could decide that modernist Marechera shores up his fragments against the ruins of an African past—or, if privileging its formal relation to the performed African epic, that it is an autochthonous Zimbabwean text. Rather, this reading of *The House of Hunger* identifies how its unconscious formal aspirations satisfy the criteria of multiple categories, depending on how and by whom it is read—and identifies how the text posits its own theory of temporality, as with the road example. Thus, the mesochronous accommodates multiple views

of the African literary object; it also shows how the literary object itself theorizes a relationship between the colonial past, the postcolonial present, and the (post)postcolonial future that revises the more pessimistic pronouncements of temporal impasse and spectacular violence found in Mbembe's description of the postcolony.

III. The Literary Object in Middle Time

Just before introducing the idea of the "monstrous midway," Marechera remarks: "To *see* takes time; and within time are countless transmutations. Therefore, the evidence of our own eyes is always provisional; therefore, the element of fantasy, in terms of metamorphosis, becomes the only fact we are truly capable of" ("African Writer's Experience" 100; emphasis in original). How to take the time required to see the monstrous change? For Marechera, to deparicularize violence requires excessively violent aesthetics; to see misshapen, frozen time in the post-War world requires the formally grotesque novella. To see and understand African literature in the way that Marechera proposes in "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature" requires revisiting his theories of language, literature, and that ideal cosmos.

In *The House of Hunger*, the villain who betrays the narrator to the police also, crucially, misuses cultural and aesthetic power. Harry, the Judas who met the old man on the road and revealed his betrayal by dropping some photographs, is an old school friend of the narrator. Harry is a womanizing dandy who scorns the township even as he enjoys feeling that he lords over it. His crimson jacket sets him apart and is part of a loquacious stylistic code that he has long used to signify this sense of superiority. "At school," the narrator relates, "he had always tortured me about my lack of 'style'—and lack of money" (Marechera, *House* 21). In the moment, the crimson jacket signals the narrator's memory of his supposed sartorial failure, but it also sets up the reader to see how Harry's style participates in a broader semiotic order—stylistic, artistic, and political—that aspires toward ultimately empty power.

The most poignant example of Harry's posturing comes after the narrator has unconsciously begun to recite one of his poems during a drunken conversation. Harry settles in for barstool philosophizing and

says: “Now poetry . . . is the soul of all civilized nations. Verse. Tiger tiger burning bright. In the forest of the night. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart. When the stars threw down their spears what a rough beast. . . . I’ve never forgotten that poem,’ . . . he leaned forward confidentially, ‘I’ve never told anyone this,’ he said in a low voice, ‘but I write *lyrics*’” (30; emphasis in original). Harry’s posturing about culture and civilization concludes with his confession of writing “lyrics.” Indeed, he has already written a new one in this passage: he quotes William Blake and William Butler Yeats, moving from one to the other and back again, and names the two “that poem,” effectively creating a poetic portmanteau.

Harry’s performance of the Blake/Yeats mashup, as well as his claiming the form of the lyric looks like a (post)colonial subject wielding colonial tools on his own terms: he claims these lyrics, as well as the form, for himself. However, just as Harry’s crimson jacket speaks loudly but emptily, so does his awkward fumbling for the cultural capital of canonical British writers—the poetic equivalent of a Prada label. In his representation of Harry and in the novella as a whole, Marechera pivots between the stylistics of the poet and the provocateur to suggest that obscenity is not found in offensive language, but in using the aesthetic to leverage petty power. Harry’s series of signs—sartorial and poetic—offend not because of their Westernness but because they are embodied performances that display a specious wholeness and arrogant individualism. The ideological power that Harry covets resonates with colonial discourses about Africa. The “verbal economy” of colonial epistemology operates, Mbembe writes, by taking “anecdotes, fragments of the real world, scattered and disconnected things, things one has not actually witnessed but only heard,” and sticking them together to produce a specious discourse that circulates as truth, “a closed, solid totality that it elevates to the rank of generality” (178). Marechera crafts a villain whose *modus operandi* is the performance of total control through the leveraging of discourses of civilization and style for personal gain.

Though the uses of the aesthetic within and for society remain fraught throughout *The House of Hunger*, poetry and the literary persist as sites of possible liberation. Near the end of the novella, the narrator converses

with his friend Philip, who, like the narrator, is a poet. He has a library that includes “Aimé Césaire, LeRoi Jones, James Baldwin, Senghor, and a well-thumbed copy of Christopher Okigbo’s poems” (Marechera, *House* 74). After mentioning that he has been working on a series of poems, all of which “expressed forms of disillusionment, discontent, and outrage,” Philip says, “[t]here is nothing to make one particularly glad one is a human being and not a horse, or a lion, or a jackal, or come to think of it a snake. Snake. There’s just dirt and shit and urine and blood and smashed brains” (74). Though there are many more grotesque sentences in the text, these are notable in how they so efficiently dismiss both the eminence of the human body as well as the mind. Our bodies merely produce shit. Our minds, our rationality, our highest ideals, are reduced to smashed brains. This is one version of a typical Marecheran pronouncement: there is nothing within humanity—nothing that can be promised, no best self that can save us, no government, no nation.

Unexpectedly, though, the narrator answers Philip’s long antihumanist diatribe with this:

Nothing lasts long enough to make any sense. . . . There are fragments and snatches of fragments, not really in the Wallace Stevens manner. The way things have always been. A torn bit of newspaper whose words have neither beginning nor end but the words upon it. A splinter of melody piercing the ear with a brittle note. Nothing lasts long enough to have been. These fragments of everything descend upon us haphazardly. Only rarely do we see the imminence of wholes. And that is the beginning of art. (76)

The narrator emphasizes the ephemeral nature of art and how it welcomes the possibility of the whole through the partial or broken specimen (“[a] splinter of melody,” “[a] torn bit of newspaper”). The narrator’s response does not repair the problem of Philip’s smashed and disillusioned human but rather suggests that art is at its most powerful when it forecloses the delivery of total or final meaning, even as it exceeds the limits of its form, time, or creator. Marechera’s perspective on the human is therefore neither completely nihilistic nor particularly op-

timistic; rather, he emphasizes the potential of the fragment—the partial or broken sign that eludes total explanation or decipherment—as he offers a fragmentary work, *The House of Hunger* itself.

The novella's philosophical musings on humanity and literature were born in what Marechera calls the “seething cesspit” of his childhood (“Interview” 3). But that hardship, he writes, nevertheless enabled him later to represent the “dignified despair” with which his fellow Zimbabweans “went about making something of their lives. These are the ones who influenced me—through their pain, betrayals, hurts, joys” (3). Despite his ambivalence about the social-reparatory potential of the aesthetic work,¹⁸ Marechera gloried in language and its ability to represent the vastness of that pain, betrayal, hurt, and joy. In “An Interview with Himself,” a Q & A (with himself) about his biography and writerly process, Marechera remarks: “Language is indissolubly connected with what it is that constitutes humanity in human beings and also, of course, with inhumanity. Everything about language, the obscene, the sublime, the gibberish, the pontificatory, the purely narrative, the verbally threatening, the adjectivally nauseating—they are all part of the chiseling art at the heart of my art, the still sad music” (7). Marechera is interested in language's range—its potential for reaching the zenith and the nadir of human experience, as it creates art, and his art in particular. As we have seen, the obscene, pontificatory, verbally threatening, and adjectivally nauseating aspects of language are an unavoidable form, and these have corralled the majority of the scholarly attention paid to Marechera's work. If there is an artistic core of his writing, some still sad music, then perhaps it is one that neither excoriates the human nor vaunts it but proposes an alternative way of being, within and in spite of the weight of the nation, the postcolony, and the present.

This is the position from which I want to rethink the aesthetic work of Marechera in particular, and of that broad, unwieldy category of “African literature” more generally. If the mimetic act of creation translates human sensory experience to a purportedly universal form—the movement from aesthesis to aesthetics—the actual aesthetic object, in all its complexity and history, exists somewhere in the middle, in

its toggling among different interpretative, geographical, and temporal frames. The point of interpreting mesochronously is not to decide that Marechera is a modernist or even that he avoids or refuses his “Africanness” (as much as he disavowed that category); nor is it to argue that African storytellers have been modernists all along. Instead, we can see through this example how post-War texts—whether African, Euro-American, or otherwise—might formally register the “monstrous” middle time Marechera describes, and in so doing, open up the range of representation in African literature as well as the kinds of interpretive approaches possible to those texts.¹⁹

The mesochronous is not a new theory of exemplary “hybrid” or “liminal” literary figures or texts: this mode of reading does not fuse opposites or resolve a dialectic. To read Marechera according to this model requires that critics attend to both the histories of misrepresentation of Africa and the possibilities of a violent aesthetics of the half-created, the fragmentary, the strange, and the grotesque—without demanding that they be on the way to something else (i.e., a more robust modernist movement) or that they be indicative of either a broad historical failing or a particular symptom of local eccentricities (i.e., the “postcolonial condition”). It enables a view of the literal violence that Marechera describes, as well as the figurative and represented violence within his texts, as a particular feature of 1970s and 1980s Zimbabwe as well as the effect of the post-War movement of capital; it also, equally, understands it as an example of the sense of present impasse. This mesochronous mode of reading enables a broader view of this literary text and could perhaps enable a new view of those African texts whose orientations and influences seem to bend away from “African literature.”

My reading of the *The House of Hunger* and Marechera’s stylistics—which swing and then hover between the sublimely beautiful and the painfully violent—thus proposes a model for reading via a mesochronous method of analysis: one that places Marechera and his work neither as decidedly African or derivatively European but asks the reader to acquire an ethos of mesochronous analysis that resists critique’s totalizing allure.

Notes

- 1 The Menippean is a satirical mode that attacks institutions, attitudes, and ideas rather than individuals. Marechera's conception of the Menippean was informed by Bakhtin, who defines the mode as "one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 113).
- 2 See Hamilton's analysis of Marechera's intentional, philosophically guided outsider position in his introduction to *Reading Marechera*.
- 3 Critics continue to debate whether this transition was from realism to modernism, as well as what that supposed transition might mean politically. In their studies of Marechera, both Crehan and Ashcroft assume this sequence—and its progressivist assumptions. Crehan in particular argues that realism as a mode and African literature as an institution are hopelessly entwined with the state, which he claims explains why Marechera rejected both. Andrade's comparative analysis of Francophone and Anglophone African literature takes a more Jamesonian approach and argues that modernism is simply a changing and changed realism that reflects new socio-political realities (298, 307).
- 4 I have focused on two critics who are concerned with the African nature of Marechera's writing. We could further narrow the frame to national (Zimbabwean) or regional (sub-Saharan, southeast African), though the realities of postcolonial African publishing, as well as the continental linguistic divisions introduced by colonialism, often render comparative regional projects broadly "African," since the texts discussed may not fall into a neat geographic or cultural category. For projects that have taken a more local view of Marechera's writing—either in the contemporary or historical Zimbabwean context—see Lilford, Shaw, and Musila.
- 5 For more about the historical debates, see Ngúgí, who outlines the ways that African literature was conceived as a primarily Europhone, written category. Mudimbe's texts raise a critique of African literature's Western approach and methodology alongside his more sweeping analysis of the continent's invention as an epistemological lack.
- 6 This has much to do with the imbrication of independence movements, Marxist and socialist politics, and the cry for writers and artists to envision the new nation. Fanon's "On National Culture" is the postcolonial touchstone here.
- 7 "Afropolitan," a moniker coined by Selasi and defended as an alternative to "African literature" describes a category that is very similar to Marechera's raceless, nationless ideal cosmos. That Selasi (along with other contemporary authors) has claimed this new portmanteau even as she argues that "African literature doesn't exist" as recently as 2013 adds further validity to my argument about the perceived limitations of "African literature."
- 8 In her introduction to *Beautiful/Ugly*, Nuttall writes that the study of beauty is seen as secondary to the study of economics and politics—and even more,

- “not simply superfluous but indeed morally irresponsible if not reprehensible” in light of the more “urgent” social issues confronting the continent (13).
- 9 See especially Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms*, Kalliney’s *Commonwealth of Letters*, and Walkowitz’s *Cosmopolitan Style*.
- 10 The most prominent theorists of postcolonial temporality, such as Bhabha, argue for a “nonsynchronous” historical present that resists the totalizing pull of modernity’s “homogenous, empty time” (Walter Benjamin qtd. in Anderson 24). Bhabha argues for the possibility of postcolonial subjects speaking outside, or even between, modern temporality and spatiality (227). Ganguly claims that framing the postcolonial as somehow outside the modern (which then makes modernity able to be resisted) denies how colonialism constructed not merely postcolonial subjectivities but modernity itself. Fabian analyzes the various ways that Africans were excluded from coeval temporality with European colonizers because of spatial logics of center-periphery. See also Larsen, who describes the postcolonial “social experience of a split or dualistic modernity as, more simply, the experience of the present as non-self-contemporary” (140).
- 11 Lazarus locates a version of this anti-progressivist ethos in the work of the “new African naturalists,” a category in which he includes Meja Mwangi, Marechera, and Mongane Serote.
- 12 This last phrase is an allusion to Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*. My reading of Marechera’s work builds on the work of the Warwick Research Collective. They want to “resituate the problem of ‘world literature’ . . . by pursuing the literary-cultural implications of the theory of combined and uneven development” (6). Their description of the literary work within the larger world-system resembles the mesochronous system I have described above, although the Collective’s work focuses more on the movement of capital and its influence on the aesthetics of the semi-periphery: “[T]he value of literary-world systems theory lies in the fact that it enables comparison of discrepant literary subunits and social formations of the world-system, both at the same point in chronological time and at congruent conjunctures in the recurring rhythmic cycles of capitalism” (68).
- 13 A word on terminology: I use “Zimbabwe” to refer to the setting in *The House of Hunger*, although it was known as Southern Rhodesia until 1980. Similarly, I refer to the text as “postcolonial” and bring in Mbembe’s theories of the post-colony as a counterpoint to the setting of the novella even though it was written about an occupied state. Ian Smith’s white minority government declared its independence from Britain in 1965 and named itself an autonomous republic in 1970. The declaration was recognized by Great Britain as an act of rebellion, and the autonomous republic was not recognized at all. The 1970s was an era of civil war, with the black-led ZAPU and ZANU fighting against white minority rule until full independence was won in 1980. Zimbabwe’s political independence is thus not a story of a single straightforward break from a European colonial

- power; the 1970s and Marechera's representation of them hold the elements of a struggle for new nationhood and self-governance as well as the somewhat historically belated desire for emancipation from Great Britain. As such, the entangled temporalities and dynamics that Mbembe describes as representative of the postcolony are also reflected in 1970s Zimbabwe.
- 14 For other analyses of the grotesque and obscene in an African setting, see Esty and Barnard.
- 15 The "end of the novella" is only partially so. What I have referred to as "the novella" during the course of this article is one of several linked stories included in the larger book called *The House of Hunger*. It just so happens that the first one, also titled "The House of Hunger," is significantly longer than the others, which has rendered the other stories (in this article as well as others) critical afterthoughts or strange appendices to the "main" story. It is not clear whether this is how Marechera envisioned it.
- 16 The language I'm using to describe the realism in this passage is inspired by Hayot, who uses "amplitude," among other attributes, to describe the mimetic structure of literary worlds (55). See especially the chapter "Aspects of Worldedness," in which he discusses amplitude and other "variables" of world-making.
- 17 See Julien for the most detailed study of postcolonial (mostly West African) novelists' varied incorporation of oral temporality and structure into their novels. See also Eliot and Jameson for divergent but nevertheless "Western" views on tradition and genre.
- 18 He writes elsewhere in "An Interview with Himself": "I don't know that the writer can offer the emerging nation anything. But I think there must always be a healthy tension between a writer and his nation. Writing can always turn into cheap propaganda. As long as he is serious, the writer must be free to criticise or write about anything in society which he feels is going against the grain of the nation's aspirations" (9).
- 19 Though I have focused on a text that has been variously categorized as modernist, avant-garde, and Menippean, we could orient the scope toward aesthetic texts that have been thought to be merely locally oriented or realist to read for this broader temporal experience.

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