A Way of Seeing:
Modernism, Illustration, and Postcolonial Literature

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Abstract

A Way of Seeing explores the illustrated text’s disruptive otherness in the aftermath of high European modernism. The period between 1930 and 1960 in English literature bridges the exuberance of high modernism and the cosmopolitan gusto of the postcolonial novel, and yet it is often characterized as an empty interval, populated by belated modernists, retro realists, and unsophisticated colonial writers. A Way of Seeing rewrites the story of this mid-century period by studying the mutual estrangement between verbal and graphic images on the pages of the illustrated text. The vexed visuality of these texts is the ground upon which mid-century writers figure the difficulty of orienting the self outwards, towards the world.

The writers in this study—Virginia Woolf, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, George Lamming, Denis Williams, V.S. Naipaul, and Chinua Achebe—all include illustrations in order to complicate the representational codes they inherit. In A Way of Seeing, illustration is both a formal device and a theoretical tool used to pry open the overlapping rhetoric of realist, documentary, modernist, and postcolonial representational strategies at midcentury. My focus on the phenomenology of illustration and material, archival form reveals that mid-century literature found its own distinctive balance between modernism’s legacies and realism’s imperatives.

Illustration raises the question of priority; it interrupts and juxtaposes competing representational claims on the same page. It turns the visual image into a field of conflict between orders of representation and between histories of seeing and being seen. The importance given to the visual image in mid-century British and Anglophone literature is a crucial legacy of high modernism, one that indicates new ways of understanding the globalization of the novel in English by the end of the twentieth century.
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I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Tom and Martha Hyde, who have been my first readers since I wrote a story from the point of view of my own feet in the third grade. They pored over every single word of my dissertation while also taking upon themselves many of my other responsibilities this summer—thank you for giving me my own time when I needed it.
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The Anxiety of Illustration

In *A Way of Seeing*, I explore the illustrated text’s disruptive otherness in the aftermath of high modernism. Flaubert knew better than most how subversive visual illustration could be: he saw it as a menace to both his exacting realism and his modernist form. “Never, as long as I live,” he wrote in 1862, “shall I allow anyone to illustrate me, because: the most beautiful literary description is eaten up by the most wretched drawing.” The particularity presented in even the most wretched drawing of a woman—to use Flaubert’s example—makes the literary text “useless.” It can no longer suggest general truths, and the reader will never be convinced of its verisimilitude. Flaubert complained that his reader would not be able to say “I’ve seen that” or “that must be so.” And so he concludes: “A woman in a drawing looks like one woman, that’s all.” By contrast, “a written woman makes one dream of a thousand women.”¹ For Flaubert, a thousand dream women are worth more than a single pinup. But the letter in which Flaubert rants against illustration makes a larger point: realism depends upon a compact with readers that is broken by the singularity of visual illustration.

If illustration disrupts the mechanism of realism, it also threatens the hermeticism of Flaubert’s modern style. In another letter, he takes a stance as “a born enemy of texts that explain drawings, and drawings that explain texts.” He proclaims that “the explanation of one artistic form by another is a monstrosity.”² An artistic form should only explain itself through style—through its control of its own medium—and not depend upon another form of art. But in

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Madame Bovary, Flaubert does stoop, momentarily, to ekphrasis: the verbal description of visual images. As the young Emma Bovary examines her schoolmates’ novels and keepsake albums, her breath gently lifts the tissue covering the engravings, and Flaubert’s prose slips into the second person:

And you were there, too, you sultans with long pipes, swooning under arbors, in the arms of dancing girls, you Giaours, Turkish sabers, fezzes, and you especially, wan landscapes of dithyrambic countries, which often show us both palm trees and pines, tigers to the right, a lion to the left, Tartar minarets on the horizon, in the foreground Roman ruins, then crouching camels;—the whole framed in a very tidy virgin forest, with a great perpendicular ray of sunshine quivering on the water, where, standing out as white scratches against the steely gray background, widely spaced swans are swimming.

The second person conveys the dangerous immediacy with which Emma takes in these orientalist images, but that immediacy jars against Flaubert’s ironic description of the untidy, unrealistic jumble of exotic landscapes. Whose voice are we hearing in this passage? This is a question frequently asked of Flaubert, first, perhaps, in the 1857 obscenity trial where the prosecutor insisted on describing the objectionable bits of Madame Bovary as “pictures,” “paintings,” and “tableaux.” One answer is that the second person address simply conveys the naiveté with which Emma approaches these images. But another answer is that the immediacy of these illustrations—even in their ekphrastic form—elicits that second person address, drawing it out beyond the confines of Emma’s rapturous mind so that it distorts Flaubert’s prose. In this case, the orientalist drawing “explains,” or rather, accounts for, the style of Flaubert’s text. In this reading, even the verbal description of an illustration threatens Flaubert with its otherness—an otherness figured forth, as if involuntarily, by the Orient. If Flaubert’s initial objection to illustration is that it damages the compact of realism, here, an illustration holds sway over the modern style of the text—the book is no longer “held together by the internal strength of its style”

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3 Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin, 2010), 147.
alone. Cultural difference replicates the tension between word and image, a tension integral to the illustrated text, where any claim to autonomy or to referentiality is counterbalanced by an identical claim in a different medium on the opposite page. Thus Flaubert—who, uniquely in these arguments, stands in for both consummate realism and autonomous style—expounds his great anxiety about illustration.

**Modernism at Midcentury**

A cultural history of illustration might ask what happens to the form after its nineteenth-century heyday, when Flaubert had to fend off his publishers’ instinct to include engravings. Was it superseded by cheap reproduction in photographic magazines, or perhaps by the rise of painterly abstraction? Did film adaptations render illustration “a mere bondservant of literature”? Rather than pursue these histories, *A Way of Seeing* begins in the 1930s and counterposes illustration to modernist aesthetic autonomy at midcentury. The modernist image, most famously described as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” is pure in form, crystalline. This language of autonomy often becomes a description of form as pure surface, “self-contained” or “self-enclosed.” The autonomous modernist image—whether verbal or visual—is not free from historical necessity but separate from it, bounded by impenetrable, self-regulating, and self-interpreting exteriors. I begin in the 1930s, in the aftermath of high modernism, because it is in this decade that those hard edges start to break down. Illustration no longer illuminates the text—it imbricates not just word and image,

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6 Ezra Pound, “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste,” *Poetry* 1, no. 6 (March 1913).
7 Virginia Woolf uses the term “self-contained” in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”(1923); “self-enclosed” is a favorite concept in the New Criticism and is often taken up in modernist studies. For example, see Tyrus Miller on modernism’s “enclosure of form,” *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 20.
but also viewer and viewed, self and world.

In his 1938 memoir, *Lions and Shadows*, Christopher Isherwood describes Mortmere, a macabre fable imagined by his group of undergraduates at Cambridge in the 1920s. Mortmere was a fantastically anticipated and for the most part unwritten set of stories, but Isherwood and his friends dreamed of an *edition-de-luxe*:

It was to be illustrated, we said, with real oil paintings, brasses, carvings in ivory or wood; fireworks would explode to emphasize important points in the narrative; a tiny gramophone sewn into the cover would accompany the descriptive passages with emotional airs; all the dialogue would be actually spoken; the different pages would smell appropriately, according to their subject-matter, of grave-clothes, manure, delicious food, burning hair, chloroform or expensive scent. All copies would be distributed free. Our friends would find, attached to the last page, a pocket containing banknotes and jewels; our enemies, on reaching the end of the book, would be shot dead by a revolver concealed in the binding.\(^8\)

Mortmere would not just be supplemented with paintings, music, smells, rewards and retribution—it would be realized. The revolver becomes an extreme figure for an illustration piercing the boundary between text and reader. Just a few years later, in the United States, James Agee engages in a similar fantasy. He is consumed by the possibility that the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) is unnecessary, or even damaging, beside Walker Evans’s photographs:

If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.\(^9\)

Both Isherwood and Agee partake in the fantasy that the illustrations that accompany a text have

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a different sort of purchase on reality—where language must signify, photographs, recorded speech, smells, and revolvers simply are. And yet both fantasies contain these wild illustrations between the covers of a book: they cannot give up on the category of the literary text entirely. In the 1930s, as modernist autonomy fractures, its self-contained and enclosed forms open up to the world—even if the results turn out to be mere “parlor games,” as the literary production of the 1930s has often been described.10

This turn has been described as “late modernism,” a phrase that seeks to name a transitional period between high modernism and postmodernism. While theories of late modernism do explain how writers in 1930s reacted to their historical and political contexts, the term advances a view of modernist artistic production as eclipsed and quickly receding into the past. By contrast, I seek to show how modernist preoccupations live on and are transformed in the postwar period and the era of decolonization. However, theories of late modernism do raise important points about the persistence—and in some critics’ view, the creation—of modernist aesthetic autonomy. In his book titled Late Modernism, Tyrus Miller describes the weakening of the strong symbolic forms evident in high modernist texts. In or about 1926, the “modernist enclosure of form” reopens “onto the work's social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourses.”11 This opening of the text to external circumstance and political, social, and economic pressure indicates writers’ skepticism about modernist “mastery of form” even as the same writers orient themselves to the quickly-forming high modernist canon itself. This is the main characteristic of late modernism for

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10 The idea of British writing in the 1930s as the work of a cliquish, adolescent group forming around W.H. Auden was perhaps first put forward by F.R. and Q.D. Leavis and then Samuel Hynes’ influential The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s (London: The Bodley Head, 1976). Since then, attention has turned to a broader view of 1930s writing—see in particular Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009).
11 Miller, Late Modernism, 20.
Frederic Jameson in *A Singular Modernity*. He argues that modernism, as defined by the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, is a “belated construct” of the era following World War II. Thus, what differentiates modernism from late modernism is that late modernists are stuck working within a new mandate: the form of aesthetic autonomy.\(^{12}\) I turn to the illustrated text at midcentury because it, by definition, cannot contain self-enclosed, autonomous forms: another form of art stares back across the page. How can the word be the thing, as William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens might have it, or the paintbrush capture “the thing itself before it has been made anything,”\(^ {13}\) as Lily Briscoe puts it, when both word and image interlock on the page?

Illustration also opens the literary history of modernism up to the influence of the visual arts over the same period, a connection that forms a large part of Jameson’s argument in *A Singular Modernity*. The idea of aesthetic autonomy preserved and elevated in each artistic medium was trumpeted by Clement Greenberg from 1940, in his “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” to 1960, with the publication of “Modernist Painting,” and beyond. “Modernist Painting” was first disseminated globally on the Voice of America before it was published and anthologized throughout the following decade in the United States. In that essay, Greenberg upholds the flatness of the picture plane as the autonomous essence of modernist painting: “It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained, however, more fundamental than anything else to the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism.”\(^ {14}\) In *A Way of Seeing*, I track how the language of autonomy in the visual arts reverberates in criticism of midcentury literature. The discipline of literary criticism is still very


much shaped by the making of the modernist canon, and putting midcentury criticism in a global frame draws out the continuities, contrasts, and categorical confusion between even such commonplace terms as “modernism” and “realism.”

Late colonial and early postcolonial writers recognized that the anxiety produced by the illustrated text often revolves around cultural or racial difference, and they make use of illustrations, ekphrastic visual images, and the language of phenomenology to write their way onto the world stage. If, at midcentury, Greenberg turns the surface into the guardian of autonomous form, late colonial and early postcolonial writers turn to the surface of visual representation as a way to erode the self-enclosed forms of literary autonomy. This turn is often described as a return to realism, but I see it engaging, rather than refusing, the discourse of modernist autonomy at midcentury. I read the mutual estrangement of word and image in the illustrated text as problem of proximate surfaces: surfaces that touch but also approximate and trouble one another.

Alan Wilde describes the mid-century turn to the surface wistfully: “Surface may have a complex dimensionality of its own.” As A Way of Seeing moves into the postwar period and the era of decolonization, that dimensionality frequently becomes, to use Frantz Fanon’s word, epidermalized. At midcentury, the proximate surfaces of the illustrated text become a way of figuring the tension between aesthetic autonomy, political necessity, and racial visibility. Bill Schwarz makes the point that the era of decolonization was strangely invisible in England except

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15 Alan Wilde traces this new “allegiance” to “the contingent world of surfaces and appearances” to the 1930s. See Alan Wilde, Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981), 65.

16 Ibid., 186.

17 Fanon writes: “If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:—primarily, economic;—subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority.” Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 11. For more on how this process of “epidermalization” can also turn surface representations into protective, shining armor, see Anne Cheng, Second Skin: Josephine Baker & The Modern Surface (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).
for the influx of non-white immigrants to England’s shores. Thus, “the invisibility of decolonization came to be overlaid by the visibility of race.” Stuart Hall makes a similar observation when he describes “the shadow of race” falling across the first wave of diasporic colonial artists in London starting with the Notting Hill riots of 1958. Illustration becomes a way of confronting the visibility of race in an era that was caught up in global currents of difference and alignment, violence and the ethics of literary representation.

This midcentury generation of late colonial and early postcolonial writers—the writers of the era of decolonization who made their way in London’s literary circles or sent first novels to metropolitan publishing houses—recognized the impossibility of fully autonomous ways of seeing. They were well educated in the history of English literature, which, by this time, included the doctrine of modernist autonomy. But Stuart Hall argues that this generation saw “‘modern art’…as an international creed, fully consistent with anti-colonialism which was regarded as intrinsic to a modern consciousness.” Modernist aesthetic autonomy persists in this period, but it is shaped by the anti-colonialism of this first generation of interlocutors. In his forthcoming Commonwealth of Letters, Peter Kalliney argues that in postwar London late colonial intellectuals worked from within metropolitan institutions of high culture to reaffirm the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. The expanding racial geography of the English language and literary culture required an anchor, and aesthetic autonomy could be claimed as a space of relative freedom. But simultaneously, writers claimed the privilege and autonomy of their own cultural

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20 Ibid., 6.
traditions, politicizing modernism even as they made use of it as a cultural formation.\textsuperscript{21} For that reason, I avoid the term “late modernism” in \textit{A Way of Seeing} because the term it points to—“postmodernism”—is not the terminus of this project. The transnational scope and movement of modernism at midcentury leads, instead, to postcolonial literature.

If midcentury postcolonial writers were the first, and often the most discerning, interlocutors of modernism, the novels, essays, and images they produced are frequently lost in the understudied interval between early twentieth-century metropolitan modernism and late twentieth-century postcolonial hybridity. To recoup this loss, I approach modernism in reverse, \textit{from} the era of decolonization, or, to quote Raymond Williams, with “something of its own sense of strangeness and distance.” Williams went on to recommend, in an offhand remark in his essay on modernist perception, that this might involve “looking, from time to time, from outside the metropolis: from the deprived hinterlands, where different forces are moving, and from the poor world which has always been peripheral to the metropolitan systems.”\textsuperscript{22} In \textit{A Way of Seeing}, I look at modernism in both the literary and the visual arts from the decolonizing world.

**The Structure of Encounter**

Because the anxiety of illustration is frequently articulated through cultural or racial difference, and because modernism at midcentury operates on the “complex dimensionality” of the surface, my method for reading illustrated texts is structured around the encounter.

“Encounter” breaks down into the etymological incongruity of “in” plus “against”—it is undoubtedly an overdetermined term. In postcolonial studies it suggests allegorical images of


\textsuperscript{22} Raymond Williams, “Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism” in \textit{Politics of Modernism} (New York: Verso, 2007), 47.
Amerigo Vespucci landing in the New World; in modernist studies it is used to describe Picasso and Matisse roaming through the Trocadéro museum in Paris or the meeting of sewing machines and umbrellas upon operating tables. I read illustrations through a structure of encounter that is material, temporal, and phenomenological. On the material page, the reader’s eye flickers between word and image, encountering first one, then the other, and then back again. J. Hillis Miller has written one of the few theoretical accounts of the English tradition of illustration. He considers *Sketches by Boz* (1836)—a text with the apt subtitle *Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People*—alongside George Cruikshank’s engravings, and he finds he must ask: “Which illustrates which?” Miller is interested in the way the juxtaposition of textual and graphic referentiality creates a “reciprocally sustaining, reciprocally destroying vacillation” between text and image. Both text and image claim to represent an empirical world in the mode of nineteenth-century realism, and yet both seem to merely refer to one another, locking *Sketches by Boz* into an almost modernist auto-referentiality.23 Despite his historical analysis of Dickens in the context of Cruikshank, Miller’s deconstructive reading of illustration renders the illustrated text vaporous and practically immaterial: it “shimmers” with meaning, in his words. By contrast, I placing mid-century literature in its archival context in order to pursue the material circulation of the image and the global traffic of aesthetic forms.

Encounters also happen in time, but they do not require a specific temporal duration or direction. They can be brief, prolonged, repeated. In *The Pleasures of Exile*, from 1960, the Caribbean novelist George Lamming sets out to explain “the migration of the West Indian writer, as colonial and exile, from his native kingdom, once inhabited by Caliban, to the tempestuous

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island of Prospero’s and his language.”24 This midcentury migration is just the latest encounter in a long history: “we have met before,” Lamming insists.25 And yet this encounter will also be repeated into the future: Caliban and Prospero are reciprocally and eternally bound together. Prospero needs Caliban and fears him: “he is afraid because he knows that his encounter with Caliban is, largely, his encounter with himself.”26 This encounter with one’s self is often prompted by visual images in Lamming’s novels of the 1950s. The visual image always moves from encounter to encounter; in it a man can encounter himself at different times and in different places. Indeed, in Lamming’s second novel, the ship that brings Caribbean emigrants to London in the midcentury reversal of the colonial encounter is called The Golden Image. Lamming indicates the complicated temporality of encounter, but a “structure of encounter” also recalls Raymond William’s term “structure of feeling,” which attempts to capture the particular feeling of a historical period, viewed, as it must be, “by the visitor, the learner, the guest from a different generation.”27 For Williams, the work of art communicates structures of feeling because it is formed within a specific present and yet must be made present to future generations through the act of reading.28 The temporal interplay between word and image in illustrated texts thus indicates not just the specificity of the midcentury but also the future horizons these writers and artists may have only briefly glimpsed. Tellingly, the illustrations in most of the books in this study were stripped from later editions.

The structure of encounter is, most importantly, articulated at midcentury via the language of phenomenology. Philosophical phenomenology is usually described as a method of paying attention to the appearances of things: it is descriptive, subjective, and concerned with

25 Ibid., 12.
26 Ibid., 15
experience, consciousness, and sense perception. Sartre’s existentialism and Fanon’s early writings on race are both midcentury elaborations of philosophical phenomenology, and they provide a backdrop for many of the writers of decolonization in this study. My focus is how this philosophical stance is figured visually in midcentury literature—how the illustrated text puts alternate views, crisscrossing sightlines, and opaque surfaces on the page for the reader to encounter.

This phenomenology of the visual image permeates Lamming’s novels of the 1950s, and my title, *A Way of Seeing,* comes from his book of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile.* Lamming, who was linked to Sartre in this period and published in *Les Tempes Modernes,* defines colonialism as “simply a tradition of habits that become the normal way of seeing” and “an inherited and uncritical way of seeing.” Lamming aims to describe how it feels for one man to change his way of seeing, and that is how he will take part in the great drama of the mid-century period: “the release of two-thirds of the world’s population from the long and painful purgatory of unawareness.” This definition of decolonization is a phenomenological one: the decolonizing world is both seeing and being seen for the first time, it is becoming aware of itself at the same time that it is being recognized in the old centers of imperial power. While my title comes from Lamming’s chapter “A Way of Seeing,” it also recalls John Berger’s famous 1972 BBC television series and book, *Ways of Seeing.* Berger defines an image as “a sight which has been recreated or reproduced,” starting a new discussion about visual culture, the global circulation of images, and in particular the representation of the female body. In *A Way of Seeing,* I focus on the phenomenological encounter between seeing and being seen and between word and image on the page of the illustrated text while also attending to the rising global culture of images at

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29 Lamming, 157, 76.
30 Ibid., 203.
Contemporary accounts of the era tend to overlook the language of phenomenology and how it informs modernist ways of seeing. While from a contemporary perspective the era of decolonization cannot help but appear as a foreclosed project of liberation, it was also a crucial moment of transition whose language was different than our own. In “The Legacies of Bandung,” Dipesh Chakrabarty stresses the intellectual shift between anticolonial and postcolonial criticism. The language of decolonization took two forms, according to Chakrabarty: “development” and “dialogue.” The texts of decolonization then recirculated in the 1970s and 80s to produce postcolonial theory—a corpus with a very different global imaginary. I focus on that midcentury gap and its global imaginary through the rising culture of images. One of Chakrabarty’s sources is a book of new photographs published in 1956. *A World on the Move* was meant to demonstrate, pictorially, “the end of Western supremacy.” This collection of photographs participated in the same global circulation of images as Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibition from 1955, and Malraux’s *The Voices of Silence*, published and translated between 1947 and 1953. And yet the phenomenology of these globally circulating images—the way they were encountered—remains understudied. By reading the visual images, both verbal and graphic, that circulated in the illustrated texts of this era, I show how the language of phenomenology challenged modernism’s cognitive map of the world.

Frederic Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping describes European modernism as shaped by the fact that a significant portion of the economy was located outside the metropolis, distant

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from daily life and invisible to literary culture. This formulation of modernism depends upon the figure of a “spatial gap” between metropolitan center and “grey placelessness” of the world. In a more recent essay, “The End of Temporality,” Jameson recapitulates this theory in order to draw a contrast between modernism and postmodernism. The crucial turning point in his argument is the era of decolonization, which he describes in abruptly Sartrean language. He writes that decolonization “suddenly released an explosion of otherness unparalleled in human history.” This otherness “confronts me with an immense multitude of others, which I am called upon to recognize as equals or as freedoms.” While Jameson’s aims in this argument have to do with the temporality of postmodernity, here in his account of decolonization he suddenly slips into the first person. Phenomenology has been described as “philosophy in the first person,” and Jameson in 2003 sounds like Sartre in “Black Orpheus,” his 1948 introduction to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. Decolonization, as a spectacle of otherness that exploded modernism’s cognitive map of the world, seems to require phenomenological language descriptive of seeing and being seen. Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” begins: “Here are black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you—like me—will feel the shock of being seen.” Sartre goes on, “For three thousand years, the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen...Today, these black men are

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33 Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990), 45, 64.
34 Fredric Jameson, “The End of Temporality,” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (June 2003): 709. Jameson embeds a veiled citation of Sartre on the recognition of freedom in this line. This Sartrean moment also recalls Jameson’s controversial essay on national allegory, where he describes the first-world reader approaching a third-world text: “We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share.” See Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.
looking at us, and our gaze comes back to our own eyes.”\textsuperscript{36} Fanon will famously reject Sartre’s larger argument about the place of \textit{négritude} in the class struggle, but he does not spurn the language of seeing and being seen.

Fanon’s \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, published in French in 1952, famously revolves around the visibility of race and the imperative: “Look, a Negro!” But his book on decolonization, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} (1961), also begins with the transformation of “the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of history.”\textsuperscript{37} This is one in a series of definitions of decolonization that make up the first few pages of the chapter “On Violence.” The text’s first concrete image is of gazes both ways across the border between the “native” and the European sectors in the colonial city. The colonized subject gazes across, and the colonist “catches the furtive glance.”\textsuperscript{38} Ian Baucom connects Fanon’s image here to modernist ways of seeing in his essay on “Township Modernism.” He argues that modernity renders itself globally visible on the fringes of the Algerian medina in Fanon’s crisscrossing of sightlines.\textsuperscript{39} Baucom triangulates between Fanon, Baudelaire, and Benjamin, and concludes that modernism is a way of seeing from “the zone of occult instability where the people dwell,” in Fanon’s words.\textsuperscript{40} Baucom aims to expand the definition of modernism to include the cultural and aesthetic production of the decolonizing world, and his provocative essay does so by examining the structure of encounter between different ways of seeing. For my purposes, modernism at midcentury is a way of seeing, and it is the decolonizing world that is looking back.


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 5.


\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 228-9, 231.
First Stage, Second Stage

Foregrounding these structures of encounter, I argue, shows mid-century literature to be flexible and open despite its modernist inheritances and postcolonial fate. But periodization arguments should not just draw a fresh set of limits around a body of literature; they should also ask what is at stake in the present when such an argument is made. Why is this literary past useful today? The significance of midcentury literature in English lies in the way it exists in literary time, both belated and originary—a provisional ruin for the currently expanding fields of modernist studies and global Anglophone studies. The question then becomes: why are these fields expanding now, why not in the mid-century period, at the end of empire and the beginning of a new political, economic, and literary order? The midcentury has been characterized by a resurgence of realism, and realism challenges both modernist autonomy and postcolonial critique. In order to lay out the critical confusion over realism and modernism at midcentury, I turn to the illustrated text, where modernist autonomy and realist referentiality “shimmer” on the page. In a larger frame, I read “global modernism” and “global Anglophone” as fields that each operate at the limit of the other, and I seek to demonstrate how generative it can be for aesthetic form to encounter a limit and try to overcome it.

The traditional account of postwar English literature is routed through the visual arts—after the high flights of experimental modernism, “kitchen sink” realism would be grounded in the specifics of post-war England. John Bratby painted the eponymous kitchen sink (fig. 1) and described those specifics as “introvert, grim, khaki in colour, opposed to prettiness, and

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dedicated to portraying a stark, raw, ugly reality.”

Globally, the Cold War was toughening modernism into abstraction and realism into socialist propaganda: New York became the capitol of difficult, high art and appropriated modernism’s international ambitions, leaving realism to be associated with nationalist ardor in the era of decolonization. As a result, postcolonial critics tend to stress the naiveté of the politics of representation in midcentury novels. The groundbreaking nationalist and realist novels of the 1950s and early 1960s must be seen to give way before more radical forms of writing politics and history, such as magical realism. Or they are described as “first stage” novels— instruments of self-description and self-recovery, “realist legitimations of nationalism”—that give way in a second stage to postcolonial disillusionment and post-structuralist critique. This rhetoric of “first stage” and “second stage” literature pervades postcolonial accounts of the midcentury, most stridently in Pascale Casanova’s The World Republic of Letters—the best recent example of how difficult it is to theorize the aesthetics of decolonization.

Casanova aims to bring postcolonial critique, which she characterizes as external and historical, together with the what she calls the internal, textual approach of French formalism. This leads to an unexpected claim: that decolonization was the fulfillment of modernist...
aesthetics. This argument is never put so baldly, but it underpins the structure of the book. Casanova’s subject is aesthetic autonomy, or the ways in which writers “invent their own freedom” from national and linguistic confines. This detachment of art from the social is a definitional hobgoblin of modernism, one whose history Casanova traces through three major stages: the rise of modern vernacular literature in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the new nationalisms of the Herderian revolution in the nineteenth century; and the era of decolonization following World War II. While The World Republic of Letters must therefore cover a sweep of writers from many linguistic traditions, Casanova’s main paradigm is the Irish Literary Revival, from roughly 1890 to 1930, which “furnishes a compact history of the revolt against literary order.” She also provides a compelling view of Faulkner’s global influence and ends with Beckett’s nearly total literary autonomy—his creation of “a literature delivered from verbal meaning itself.” Thus, while her privileged objects of analysis are modernist, her three stages of literary autonomy do not include 1910 or 1922 or any other year assigned to modernist rupture. Instead, she maintains, it is the era of decolonization that provides the historical and political rupture necessary to complete the modernist project of aesthetic autonomy.

Casanova does not directly claim aesthetic autonomy as the obvious literary correlative of decolonization. She does note realist, politically committed currents in mid-century literature. But because of her modernist timeline of rupture and revolt, Casanova must describe realism as a first stage of literary freedom, one necessarily followed by a second and far superior stage. At first, realism “makes literary production a function of politics” and produces “the most conservative narrative, novelistic, and poetic forms.” After these forms have done their work,

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46 Ibid., 47-8, 79.
47 Ibid., 304.
48 Ibid., 347.
“formal preoccupations, which is to say specifically literary concerns, appear only in a second phase.” Autonomy comes to be defined as freedom from referentiality, though Casanova makes no mention of the fact that this polarity was being canonized just at this time by critics in both the literary and the visual arts. The historical phenomenon of decolonization is flattened into a modernist aesthetic to come, an imminent “second phase” that resembles contemporary views of literary globalization. It is just this time lag, this incompatibility between modernist studies and postcolonial critique, that marks the period I study in A Way of Seeing. Modernist autonomy is neither vacated nor fulfilled at midcentury. Instead, it fractures, and that fracture can be read on the competing representational surfaces of the illustrated text.

In contrast to critics like Casanova who are motivated by the recent resurgence of the idea of world literature, many contemporary postcolonial critics advocate a return to the serious study of the politics of realist form. This is in contrast to early postcolonial theory, which tended to see realism as irretrievably marked by colonial notions of individualism, unmediated reality, and historical progress. While critics are increasingly reading midcentury postcolonial literature in the context of expanded definitions of modernism,


49 Ibid., 199-200.
Bhabha suddenly deploys modernism as a weapon against realism. In “Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism,” from 1984, Bhabha seeks to overturn familiar readings of Naipaul’s 1961 masterpiece, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as a universal work of realism. He argues that “Leavisian Universalism” and “nationalist criticism” both operate at the level of “image analysis”—they measure the images presented by the novel against the “originals” of empirical reality (whether that reality be “mankind” or the specificity of the Caribbean experience). By contrast, he seeks to read certain moments in Naipaul’s novel outside of a “realist problematic.” In Mr. Biswas’s moments of colonial fantasy, Bhabha sees a loss of narrative authority and control in the novel “precisely because the very objective of narrative—its plenitude, its signification of a unitary real—is jeopardized.” That is, Biswas’s colonial fantasies shatter the mirror of representation and overturn mimetic certainties because they have no empirical referent in the colonial setting, no referent that is has not already been processed through the certainties of realist narrative. Bhabha will go on in later publications to expand the idea of “colonial fantasy” into the uncanny colonial double, but here, in 1984, he concludes with English modernism:

“The horror! the horror!” said in the heart of darkness itself, and the “ou-boum” of the empty Marabar caves will continue to terrify and confound us, for they address that “other scene” within ourselves that continually divides us against ourselves and others.

In this final sentence, Bhabha abruptly aligns Naipaul with Conrad and Forster, two novelists who apply modernist techniques to colonial content and produce uncertain, fragmented, and impressionistic representations of Kurtz’s fantasies of control and Adela’s fantasies of desire.

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53 Ibid., 115.
54 Ibid., 116.
55 Ibid., 120.
Modernism, this argument seems to imply, can capture something of the confounding uncanniness of colonial representation that has escaped both realism and most literary criticism. While modernism in this mode will evaporate from Bhabha’s later work, this essay indicates the incompatibility between postcolonial theory and midcentury novels like Naipaul’s—modernism must be abruptly yoked in as realism’s opposite for Bhabha’s argument to work.

Together, Casanova and Bhabha show how mid-century literature tends to elude the critical approaches of both postcolonial theory and theories of global Anglophone or world literature. In both of these theoretical frames, realism and modernism are the terms of a simple binary system. By contrast, I take the muddled disorder of the midcentury as an object of study—realism and modernism were not always easily and comfortably opposed, especially in the literature of decolonization. In the next section, I offer a close but counterintuitive reading of a series of literary reviews of Caribbean literature published in London in the 1950s. The reviewers are trying to categorize what we would now call early postcolonial writing; they are thinking about literary referentiality and autonomy, English realism and high modernism. Their confusion over these terms and categories bears comparison to current critical perspectives on mid-century literature.

**Fresh Winds from the West**

The most quoted review of mid-century Caribbean writers in London is Kingsley Amis’s “Fresh Winds from the West,” which appeared in the *Spectator* in 1958. Amis takes issue with

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56 George Lamming was the first to quote Amis’s review, though he does so only to show that Amis uses the West Indian novel to “get off his chest major grievances which have nothing to do with the subject he is discussing.” George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2004), 29. (Amis is indeed retaliating rather than reviewing—the anonymous TLS reviewer managed to slip in a remark about non-English authors depicting whole societies, “instead of the fidgety mechanical mind of a nymphomaniac or a university lecturer to which recent English fiction has accustomed us.” See [James Burns Singer], “England is Abroad” *Times Literary Supplement*, April 18, 1958, 201.)
a TLS reviewer’s claim that “the English novel now lies in the hands of the non-English,” but contemporary critics often cite this article to demonstrate the prominence of Caribbean writing in the 1950s. Critics also cite Amis to argue for the mid-century Caribbean novel’s modernist heritage, an idea Amis suggests only in order to disparage. But close reading of Amis and his TLS antagonist demonstrates that they are not in fact using these terms as we might imagine. The 1958 TLS review makes an aggressive point: its headline reads “England is Abroad,” and it critiques the provincialism of metropolitan literary culture. Since 1910, the reviewer begins, many of the most celebrated poets and novelists in English came from “the fringes of the English speaking world.” He cites Pound and Eliot, Yeats, and “even an Indian, Tagore” as writers involved in the project of “enlarging the intellectual and emotional context in which the English language took place and of creating new forms and symbols adequate to express this enlarged vision.” The reviewer then makes a structural argument: whenever empire contracts, “the material attributes of Empire begin to be dwarfed by its cultural effects,” and a proliferation of this sort of writing occurs. Thus he links canonical high modernists and the three mid-century authors under review through their cultural inheritance of empire—a point that would be at home in today’s criticism. Yet despite the modernist lineage he traces and the talk of inventing “new forms and symbols,” when the reviewer turns to the three books at hand he dwells upon their realism: they depict “whole societies”; their characters operate as both individuals and types; they present “historical insights,” “sound plots,” and “passages of delicate or colourful description.” Only Jan Carew, the West Indian novelist under review, is described as a “stylist” in the modernist sense, and that is because he uses dialect. “When he writes in his highly formalized Guianese he leaves us without any basis for comparison,” the reviewer admits, “because no other West Indian novelist has yet concentrated on this fundamental problem.”

57 The review continues, “Either, like Mr. Mittelholzer, their approach to dialogue is that of a singularly uninspired
Thus what seems like experimental style in London might in fact be realistic: the reviewer asserts Carew’s inheritance of modernist style but backs away from defining or even judging it. Nevertheless, this is the argumentative thread Amis will pick up.

“Fresh Winds from the West” lays out Amis’s well-known antagonism towards modernist “experiment.” He begins:

The idea about experiment being the life-blood of the English novel is one that dies hard. “Experiment” in this context boils down pretty regularly to “obtruded oddity,” whether in construction—multiple viewpoints and such—or in style. It is not felt that adventurousness in subject matter or attitude or tone really count. Shift from one scene to the next in mid-sentence, cut down on verbs or definite articles, and you are putting yourself right up in the forefront, at any rate in the eyes of those who were reared on Joyce and Virginia Woolf and take a jaundiced view of more recent developments. Amis asserts that modernist experiment is nothing but “obtruded oddity” and that anyone who still cares for it is also likely to think highly of the West Indian novel in English. His argument unfolds along the same path as the TLS reviewer’s: early assertions about modernism followed by an analysis of West Indian fiction’s comic realism. Though he states that “adventurousness in subject matter” does not constitute experiment, the logical outcome of Amis’s argument is that the “oddity-fanciers” do in fact equate colonial subject matter with modernist style. The rest of Amis’s review points out—rightly—that although Jan Carew “reproduces dialect carefully and effectively, [his] stylistic offerings are in fact slender.” What Carew has written, Amis argues, is a “contemporary historical novel.” Amis then goes on to praise the comic realism of Edgar Mittelholzer’s A Morning at the Office (1950), Naipaul’s Trinidad novels, and Sam Selvon’s early novels. Amis could have refuted the TLS reviewer by simply arguing that though he makes tape-recorder or, like Mr. Lamming, their prose wears a dog-collar and imitates the highest of Anglican mannerisms.” Mittelholzer indeed was known for the plain objectivity of his writing, but the criticism of Lamming—whose writing is hard to imagine as high church—must refer to his aloof style and austere difficulty.

58 Kingsley Amis, “Fresh Winds from the West,” The Spectator, 2 May 1958, 566.
a strong theoretical argument for the “non-English” inheriting English modernism, in fact what he proves is that West Indians are writing historical realism and the London literati are appreciating it as “odd” and experimental. But Amis has other fights to pick.

Why do these reviewers conflate modernist experiment and colonial realism? Or rather, what does it mean that they conflate style and subject matter? One answer is that in the aftermath of high modernism, in a decade of cultural contraction and retrenchment, readers—both in London and elsewhere—were looking for the historical continuity of literary inheritance. Yet the confusion of colonial subject matter and modernist style also raises a perverse possibility: perhaps in this decade they were the same after all. That is, if style and experiment in the modernist novel bring attention to the surface of the text, to the inadequacy of language to represent the world, and to the subjectivity of the artist’s vision, then perhaps colonial subject matter was just as alien to and alienating in the English novel. Rather than forming a binary pair, realism and modernism depend on the reader’s way of seeing.

Even Selvon and Mittleholzer, writers from Trinidad and Guyana usually described as straightforward realists, can suddenly seem stylists in the modernist mode. Selvon’s first novel, *A Brighter Sun* (1952), opens with an account of Trinidad in the early years of World War II:

> On New Year’s Day, 1939, while Trinidadians who had money or hopes of winning money were attending the races in the Queen’s Park Savannah, Port of Spain, a number of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe landed on the island. There was an almost instant increase in the rental of residences and business places, and later more refugees were refused entrance. A development plan costing $14,000,000 was approved by the Secretary of State for the Colonies but nipped in the bud when war was declared. In April, when pouis blossomed and keskidees sang for rain, local forces were mobilized...⁵⁹

Stylistically, the passage (which goes on like this for two pages) reads like a chronicle of the years 1939-40 in Trinidad. Selvon uses this apparently mechanical and affectless device every time another calendar year passes, tracing both global movements and changes on the surface of everyday life through 1945. Again and again, some odd little detail, a event without explanation, without precedence or consequence, slips into these annals: “A man went about the streets of the city riding a bicycle and balancing a bottle of rum on his head. An East Indian, reputedly mad, walked to the wharf and dipped a key in the sea and went away muttering to himself.” Realist detail, or “obtruded oddity”? The war refugees and mad East Indian are never integrated into Selvon’s depiction of Trinidadian society. They take no part in the story of his main character, Tiger, his marriage to Urmilla, or his entrance into adulthood. Instead, these details startle—they function as pure style. 1942: “In a queue for bread at a baker’s in George Street a fight broke out between two men and one ran for the cutlass which a coconut vendor had stuck in his donkey cart. At least three marriages were hastened because the girls were pregnant.”60 If the realist novel usually avoids drawing attention to its own textuality,61 here is an example of “local color” detail veering off into pure textuality: a world historical account in modernist style.

Similarly, Mittelholzer himself wrote to a friend that A Morning at the Office (1950) was “mere social document (very necessary, however) in the guise of a novel.”62 It tells the story of one day at Essential Products, Ltd., in Port-of-Spain. The office contains a token representative of every race in Trinidad, each with his or her own “psychopathic discomfiture.”63 But the reason this novel is still remembered (if it is remembered at all) is for its conspicuous and almost

60 Selvon, 144.
62 In full, "a mere social document in the guise of a novel, a grand tract nicely dressed up to debunk certain fallacies held by people in northern regions about the people in The West Indies especially the fallacy that makes us out to be a backward, half-civilised people." Quoted in A. J. Seymour, “An Introduction to: The Novels of Edgar Mittelholzer,” Kyk-Over-Al 8, no. 24 (December 1958): 70.
imperious realism, which one character describes as “telescopic objectivity.” Periodically, the narrative halts so that the entire history of a ordinary object—a key, a desk leg, a dent in the office door—can be recounted. Arthur Calder-Marshal, an English writer and critic who frequently reviewed Caribbean fiction in this period, argued that Mittleholzer’s novel showed that West Indians have no historical sense, and so “To a people who have no memory…objects must become the custodians of the past.” But Mittelholzer is just as “telescopically objective” about race, indicating precise skin shades and percentages of Portuguese blood and class status, and in fact this is the subject matter he thought required “social documentation.” Rather than a people with no memory, his characters’ memory is wholly objectified—or “epidermalized,” to use Fanon’s term again. At the end of the novel, a Trinidadian writer describes his new technique of “telescopic objectivity” to Mr. Murrain, the ill-tempered English assistant manager of Essential Products. He stresses the power of the artist to choose his objects and their significance, and this idea gives great comfort to Murrain. This is the only cultural work this new realist technique does within the novel. By treating objects’ histories and racial memory alike, Mittelholzer brings attention to the “epidermal” surface of his text and reveals the selectively objective, penetrating approach of realism as healing and comforting for the English alone.

Neither Selvon nor Mittelholzer would have been read in this way in the 1950s, of course. Here, they demonstrate how the confusion over realism and modernism, “telescopic” depth and surface textuality could have played out. By tracking these debates in mid-century archives, the relatively new field of postcolonial book history can open up the seemingly closed concepts of modernist autonomy and realist referentiality. Archives often turn up lost paratexts and

65 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks trans Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 11.
66 For more on the field in general, see Robert Fraser, Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script (New York: Routledge, 2008).
illustrations, and in the next section I read two versions of an early short story by Chinua Achebe in order to demonstrate how reading for the visual image can enrich the otherwise ossified mid-century categories of realism and modernism.

**The Sacrificial Egg**

Chinua Achebe first published the short story “The Sacrificial Egg” in 1959 in *The Atlantic*. The whole April issue was devoted to Africa “South of the Sahara,” and it included essays on politics, archaeology, and music; poems by Léopold Sédar Senghor and David Diop; stories by Nadine Gordimer and Amos Tutuola. Achebe’s story is preceded by an article on African sculpture by the photographer Eliot Elisofon, who was at the time working for LIFE magazine and serving as a researcher in “Primitive Art” at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. He and William Fagg had just published a book titled *The Sculpture of Africa* in 1958, and Elisofon’s extensive archive of photographs and collection of art now resides at the National Museum of African Art. But, in 1959, Elisofon’s dramatic, black-and-white photographs turn the masks and ritual objects he describes into modernist art objects. He writes:

![Fig. 2: Eliot Elisofon, “Bakota Funerary Figure,” Collection Edith Gregor Halpert, New York. The Atlantic (April, 1959)](image-url)
Without the indoctrination of having seen paintings by these modern artists [Picasso, Braque, Derain, Vlaminck, Matisse], we would have considered the objects in the selection of photographs accompanying this article to be hideous native carvings best left in the jungle. Art is the great conditioner, and the artist leads the populace, perhaps unwittingly and perhaps unbidden, into new ways of seeing.\(^6\)

The rest of his article provides a passionate introduction to the topic, but Elisofon must use modernist primitivism to hook his readers. His first photograph, of a Bakota funerary figure, nestles up against a small insert of Picasso’s “The Dancer” from 1907 (fig. 2). His second page of photographs depicts Fang funerary figures, specifically the most popular piece from a 1935 MOMA exhibit of “African Negro Art.” The article ends from the perspective of a collector, relishing certain finds, pricing certain items (like the mask The Atlantic chose for its cover, which we learn went for $56,000 in New York in 1958), and dismissing the art of modern Africans as either imitative of the west or meant for the tourist market.

Then the reader turns the page to find Achebe’s modern story, crested by a Elisofon photograph of an Ogoni mask (fig. 3). Achebe

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\(^6\) Eliot Elisofon, “African Sculpture,” The Atlantic (April, 1958): 948. Elisofon provides an interesting figure in the history of modernist primitivism. He was a founding member of the Photo League in 1936, worked for LIFE magazine for decades, and “created an enduring visual record of African life from 1947 to 1973,” according to The National Museum of African Art. He bequeathed the more than 50,000 black-and-white photographs, 30,000 color transparencies, and 120,000 feet of motion picture film and sound materials to the museum, as well as his collection of African art.
begins: “Julius Obi sat gazing at his typewriter.” Julius Obi is an educated clerk in the market town of Umuru; he does not gaze out at the world through the baleful empty eyes of the mask. The story’s two threads are tied together by the titular sacrificial egg. First, Julius is staring at his typewriter because the market is closed—smallpox has emptied the town and kept everyone at home for a full week. Second, Julius exemplifies the conflict between traditional beliefs and his modern education. When Ma, his future mother-in-law, tells him about the deities that inhabit Umuru’s market, he responds politely, but it is clear that his “education placed him above such superstitious stuff.” Then smallpox—or perhaps the deity Kitikpa—strikes, and Ma recommends he stay away from Janet, his betrothed. As he hurries home, “he stepped on something that broke with a slight liquid explosion.” We learn that someone has brought a sacrificial egg to the crossroads in the dusk, and that by stepping on it Julius has “taken the sufferer’s ill luck to himself.” “Nonsense!” thinks Julius, and the empty market week passes. Julius again stands at the window:

It was only a week ago, but already it seemed to be separated from the present by a vast emptiness. This emptiness deepened with the passage of time. On this side stood Julius, and on the other Ma and Janet, who were carried away by the smallpox.

This abrupt ending seems to indicate that Julius did indeed cause Ma and Janet’s death. In this reading, traditional beliefs and offerings continue to have a malevolent fetish power, even—or perhaps, especially—over the most modern, skeptical clerk.

In 1962, this story was republished in a collection by Etudo Limited Onitsha. The illustrator, R. Ndefo, chose not to depict a mask, but rather the moment when Julius steps on the egg (fig. 4). What was a baleful fetish in *The Atlantic* now becomes a sticky mess. Julius, in his

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white shorts and buttoned shirt, lurches and looks down—not out at the reader—to see what is underfoot. Read under the sign of western modernism, the sacrificial egg becomes an object of modernist primitivism much like the photograph of the Ogoni mask. Read in a thin, yellow pamphlet published in Onitsha—Achebe’s model for the fictional market town of Umuru—“The Sacrificial Egg” becomes a work of realism.

Julius is caught in a detailed and specific time and place, one in which tradition lurks underfoot and typewriters are just as probable as deities strolling among the market stalls. The print depicts a fateful moment in a totalized world, and the final lines provide a corrective against the “emptiness” that characterizes both Julius’s sense of time and the market’s breakneck modernization.

Presenting mid-century authors in their historical and archival context does not mean decisively rebranding them “modernists” or “realists.” Rather, I want to show how fluid these categories can be and how revealing of weak points in contemporary critical formations. Critics who address these issues often do so through the strange temporality of the mid-century period. David Scott, for example, has argued masterfully that postcolonial theory availed itself of the

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70 For more on Onitsha Market Literature, the mass publication of pamphlets literary and otherwise in the 1950s and 60s, see Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), for which Achebe wrote the forward. It is worth noting that Achebe also heavily revised “The Sacrificial Egg” in 1972 for the collection *Girls at War*, adding descriptive details, a more censorious narrative position, and a personification of Kitikpa as a terrible and dread artist who “decorates” his victims. This is the version most often collected and republished.
anti-colonial Romance of overcoming: the ultimate vindication and redemption of struggle through progressive time. But those “anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares,” 71 Scott writes, and tragedy is the narrative form better suited to postcolonial inquiry. Tragedy is “a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck.” 72 Thus from the present, tragic time can still include postcolonial possibility. Similarly, Peter Hitchcock asks: “how can one indicate the time/space of decolonization in a form that is appropriate to its extent?” 73 His answer is “the long space,” a chronotope that emphasizes extension and duration in trilogies and tetralogies by mid-to-late-twentieth-century writers. These serial novels produce alternative temporalities to “the slick immediacy of transnationalism.” 74 These critics turn back to the midcentury in order to rethink its temporal relation to the present, and, while they do so through the politics of form they do not engage the lingering preoccupations of modernism. By contrast, I follow the global tensions between realism’s imperatives and modernism’s legacies as they play out in yellowing pamphlets and debate transcripts, and I argue that the mid-century politics of literary form is most evident on the surface of visual representations.

The Mid-century Surface

I have described modernist aesthetic autonomy as protected by the self-regulating surfaces of canvas and text, and mid-century illustration as a field in which to track the fracturing of those surfaces. The proximate surfaces of the illustrated text structure encounters between

72 Ibid., 13.
74 Ibid., 8. Hitchcock focuses on the work of Wilson Harris, Nuruddin Farah, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Assia Djebar.
word and image, viewer and viewed, self and world. Within this frame, the transnational reading practice best suited to mid-century literature in English involves more focus on the prefix, on moving across or through surfaces, and less on the nation form itself—the importance of the nation and nationalism in the era of decolonization has been well-studied. The illustrated texts in *A Way of Seeing* look across national, aesthetic, and racial boundaries and allow what they see—or what they are unable to see—to shape their form.

But are these mid-century surfaces still modernist? Or are they proto-postmodernist? Flatness is both the characteristic feature of modernist painting at midcentury and one of Jameson’s primary metaphors for postmodernism, where interpretable depths give way, he argues, before the multiple surfaces, glossy skins, stereoscopic illusions, and rushes of “filmic images without density” that characterize postmodern culture.75 The modernist surface encloses depths—the narrator of Virginia Woolf’s 1917 short story “The Mark on the Wall” sits by the fire and muses: “I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts.”76 While the adamant surface of modern life encloses and sometimes obstructs access to psychological depths, Jameson’s postmodern surfaces indicate their own depthlessness. Exhibiting “a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense,” these surfaces resemble the disorienting sheet of reflective windows that mark the Crocker Bank Center (now the Wells

Fargo Center) in Los Angeles. The illustrated texts in *A Way of Seeing*, by contrast, stress the proximity, contiguity, and even the reversibility of surface and depth.

Jacques Rancière—a critic who does not adhere to the “first stage, second stage” course of realism and modernism—has argued that “pictorial flatness was never synonymous with the autonomy of art. The flat surface was always a surface of communication where words and images slide into one another.” Rancière is writing specifically on the visual arts and on how Dada, Futurism, and Pop Art all disturb Greenberg’s triumphant narrative of visual modernity. But in his literary criticism, Rancière is also interested in how certain forms of art become visible as art, and he suggests that the surface of the image or the text might be read as a space of communication, conversion, or even equivalence between these forms. In Woolf’s last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), she uses a different term: “real swallows” skim over a painted sheet that has been laid on the grass to represent a lake. The real skims the surface of modernist representation in photographs and curtains in Woolf’s late work, while in early Auden photographs of war in China are resolutely flat despite modernism’s hold on aesthetic form. In the 1950s, Lamming uses ekphrasis to grant the surface, rather than the depths, of colonial photographs sinister power over Caribbean emigrants’ ways of seeing. And in the early 1960s, Achebe commissions a new set of illustrations for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, from a Nigerian artist bent on refashioning the modernist surface with African materials. In *A Way of Seeing*, I read for the competing, communicating surfaces of the illustrated text—the surface is the place where these texts touch up against other ways of seeing and being in the world.

79 Rancière, 75. Neither Rancière nor the mid-century authors in this study are “surface readers,” though this contemporary critical practice does address itself to Jameson’s distrust of the surface. Anne Anlin Cheng describes “surface reading” best when she advocates “a reading practice that is willing to follow, rather than suppress, the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface.” See “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (November 2009): 102.
Outline of the Project

*A Way of Seeing* begins in the late 1930s with two European modernists confronting the global conflicts of the decade. Virginia Woolf and W.H. Auden represent different generations of English modernism, but both participated in what was widely seen as a global war against fascism that demanded a response from artists and intellectuals as well as from politicians and armies. In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf writes about the Spanish Civil War (1936-9), which claimed her nephew Julian Bell in 1937. Like Bell, Auden volunteered in Spain in 1937, but he became disillusioned with the Republican cause after just a few weeks. He and Christopher Isherwood decided to go to China the next year, and their China travel book, *Journey to a War* (1939), indicates the often-overlooked importance of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) in accounts of the global 1930s. Both Woolf and Auden illustrate their books with photographs, and both books were stripped of these photographs in later editions. By reading for both difference and indifference—to use Woolf’s terms—in these illustrated texts, I explore modernism’s representation of violence in the years leading up to World War II.

In the mid-1930s, Virginia Woolf abandoned what she had been calling a “novel of fact” and eventually published two broken pieces of the project: the novel *The Years* (1937) and the feminist anti-war polemic *Three Guineas*. *Three Guineas*, ostensibly a book about the Spanish Civil War, was originally published with five photographs depicting the fascistic sartorial splendor of the British male. But there is another set of photographs that circulates in the text: a set of images of death and destruction from Spain, a set Woolf repeatedly describes but does not include. In the chapter “Facts, Photographs, and Real Swallows,” I argue that exposing the rhetorical interplay between these two sets of photographs allows Woolf to upend the language of surface and depth that so often characterizes modernist form. I conclude by bringing this
Woolf—the critic of wartime photography—into dialogue with Erich Auerbach’s Woolf as she appears in *Mimesis* (1946). In this way, Woolf’s visual reading practice in the 1930s sets the stage for my exploration of realism and modernism at midcentury.

Also in the late 1930s, W.H. Auden published two travel books, both heavily influenced by his experience in the nascent British documentary film movement. *Letters from Iceland* (1937), co-written with Louis MacNeice, and *Journey to a War*, the account of Auden and Isherwood’s search for the front of the Sino-Japanese War, are both heterogeneous books of verse, prose, and Auden’s own aggressively amateurish snapshots. This chapter, “Snapshots, Rushes and Rhymes,” explores Auden and Isherwood’s reliance on flat, banal images and stereotypes of Chinese difference. As in Woolf’s practice of illustration, Auden’s snapshots work at the extreme limit of language, and they show him attempting a poetics of indexicality in reaction to the horror of war. These chapters take two canonical British modernists and orient them towards the global conflicts of the 1930s. Their vexed use of illustrations—images trapped between high modernist form and documentary currency—indicates the complicated temporality of visual perception at midcentury.

I then pivot to texts by early postcolonial novelists coming to terms with their colonial— and modernist—literary educations in the era of decolonization. George Lamming is often thought of as a theorist of language, but his work in the 1950s is also filled with the language of visual perception. My third chapter, “Ekphrasis, Encounter, and Expectation,” focuses on Lamming’s 1954 novel *The Emigrants*, where the colonial “way of seeing” is represented by a set of black and white photographs with sinister power. I place Lamming’s work alongside that of one of his illustrators, Denis Williams, who studied art in London and went on to write the novel *Other Leopards* in 1963. By considering archival material, such as Lamming’s
serialization in Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes*, the illustrations published in little magazines in Barbados and in his first editions in London, and literary debate on the BBC radio program *Caribbean Voices*, I argue that the categories of realism and modernism were contested—and often confused—in the 1950s. Reading Lamming and Williams’s visual images for the structure of encounter between word and image reveals the midcentury as a period of repeated encounter between realism’s imperatives and modernism’s legacies.

My fourth chapter focuses on Chinua Achebe’s groundbreaking *Things Fall Apart* of 1958, which was published with two very different sets of illustrations: the first, by Dennis Carabine for Heinemann’s African Writers Series, is heavily-etched and realist; the second, made at Achebe’s recommendation by the Nigerian modernist artist Uche Okeke, replaced the dark etching with the blank white of the page. In “Image, Ornament, and Illustration” I read *Things Fall Apart* in the context of its early publication history to show how Achebe historicizes modernism as a way of seeing. Achebe is often described as a writer of realism, but in his first novel he also uses the modernist surface of the image to clear space for the African novel in English. By reading for the interplay between word and image, I show how Achebe’s realism, rather than being recursive, in fact avails itself of modernist defamiliarization.

My coda, “Vessel, Apprentice, and Interpreter,” returns to the 1950s by way of two belated works: V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and Derek Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound* (2000). These antagonists—Walcott gave Naipaul’s *Enigma* a bitter review when it first came out—are not finished with the midcentury. They both return to it through the conjunction of word and image: Naipaul’s novel verbally retouches, again and again, Constable’s views of the English countryside, and Walcott illustrates his book-length poem with twenty-six of his own paintings. Both writers are concerned with “the apostolic succession of the reproductions” under
the conditions of postcoloniality. This phrase of Walcott’s encodes the temporal dynamism of the visual image at midcentury—the way it structures the encounter between literary reproduction and literary succession, “now” and “then.”
In her 1932 “Letter to a Young Poet,” Woolf distances herself from the youthful frustrations of the Auden generation. “Is poetry dead?” they demand, and tear their hair, but Woolf will only respond with a description of how it feels to read their poems: “The poem is cracked in the middle. Look, it comes apart in my hands: here is reality on one side, here is beauty on the other; and instead of acquiring a whole object rounded and entire, I am left with broken parts in my hands.”

Woolf is contrasting the wild inspirations of poetic rhythm in the young poet with his equally urgent desire to represent the actual, the colloquial, the mundane realities of the present day. The young poet breaks his machine, she remarks, “because he will clog it with raw fact.” At the beginning of the 1930s, as Woolf looks down at the broken fragments in her hands, she can imagine fusion, a mingling of beauty and reality, rhythm and raw fact. She advises her young poet that “All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments.”

This is the high modernist at the window, gathering fragments of experience and melting them into an aesthetic whole, “rounded and entire.” And yet Woolf, despite the distance she assumes between herself and the younger generation of English poets, will struggle throughout the 1930s with the same problem: raw fact can clog not just the machine of the poem.

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81 Ibid., 190.
82 Ibid., 191. This seems to be an image from A Room of One’s Own (1929) where the speaker has her head out the window and sees a couple getting into a taxi: “For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion.” Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own (New York: Harbinger, 1959), 101.
or the novel, but the mind of the high modernist at the window as well. At the beginning of the decade she began work upon a hybrid form that would combine aesthetic vision and raw fact. But by the end of the decade she was left looking at the broken parts of the imagined form in her hands.

In 1932, the same year as “Letter to a Young Poet,” Woolf began work on The Pargiters: A Novel-Essay. This hybrid form would alternate factual essays with fictional chapters purportedly extracted from a massive family saga chronicling the Pargiter family from 1880 to the year 2032. Despite criticizing the younger generation of poets for their desire to include the realities of the age in their work, Woolf aspired to write not another “novel of vision,” but a “novel of fact.” By tracking the two broken pieces of this project that were eventually published—the novel The Years (1937) and the feminist anti-war polemic Three Guineas (1938)—I make the case that Woolf’s late interest in “facts” does align with the callow alarms of the Auden generation. The Great Depression, the rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the Sino-Japanese War, and the threat of another world war all coincide with movements that seek more space for fact in the work of art—the English documentary film movement gets its start in 1933; LIFE magazine becomes a deluxe venue for photojournalism in 1936; the travel genre proliferates; and the term “reportage” is coined. Stephen Spender salutes electric pylons in verse; Christopher Isherwood and Auden write from the decade’s political stages—Berlin, Spain, and China. Meanwhile, Woolf experiments with facts and their relation to aesthetic vision. Her writing of the late 1930s, taken as the whole it was meant to be, makes a heterogeneous illustrated text—part novel, part polemic, part scrapbook—that resembles Auden’s two disheveled travel books of prose, verse, and photographs that I turn to in the next chapter. In

these mixed forms, both Woolf and Auden use the “raw fact” of photographic illustrations to disrupt the aesthetic principles of modernism. They both advocate visual reading practices that upend the rhetoric of surface and depth that so often characterizes modernist form. And finally, Woolf and Auden both turn to the banal—the cliché, the stereotype—as a defense against a disordered world sliding once again towards war.

“Letter to a Young Poet” recommends the consolations of high modernist form against an irrecoverably fragmented world. The “rhythmical sense” Woolf describes seems to be a facet of consciousness, an almost uncontrollable intimacy with the sensory world that generates aesthetic synthesis in the mind of the artist. In 1927, Woolf famously uses the visual arts to render this sense when Lily Briscoe draws a line in the center of her painting, thinks “I have had my vision,” and concludes *To The Lighthouse*. Modernist vision and rhythm depend upon a subjective, aestheticizing mind giving meaning to the world around it. This form changes for Woolf in response to the highly charged politics of the 1930s—more of the world makes its way into her vision. Throughout the decade, Woolf kept a series of scrapbooks she titled “Notes & Cuttings.” The scrapbook form is structured by both vision and rhythm and provides a frame through which to view Woolf’s writing of fact in this period. Woolf’s albums are pasted with newspaper clippings and photographs, letters and circulars, quotations from memoirs and from biographies, all eccentrically titled, cited, and indexed by Woolf herself. The scrapbooks begin in 1931, break off for a while, and then continue through the abdication crisis and coronation in 1936 and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. For all her careful indexing of the material, Woolf’s perspective is curiously absent from these scrapbooks. The three volumes contain no marginalia, no scrawled arrows or links; the reader can only parse her rhythms of reading, clipping, and pasting. Vision is also key element of these scrapbooks—they document the increasing
importance of the photograph both in cultural life and in Woolf’s understanding of “fact.” These notes, cuttings, and photographs are meant to document raw fact, yet they read as fragmentary, opaque, and jumbled, the detritus of a decade before it knew it would be memorialized as low and dishonest.

The mass consumption of photography documented in these scrapbooks aligns with recent descriptions of Woolf’s late style in the 1930s. While most critics agree that after the triumph of The Waves (1931), Woolf sought to “demystify” her style, John Whittier-Ferguson connects her focus on repetition and the recycling of tired language with the doomed sense of political recurrence endemic to the 1930s. The coming world war would repeat 1914, or as Woolf wrote in her diary in 1938, “1914 without even the illusion of 1914.” From The Years and Between the Acts, Whittier-Ferguson extracts examples of platitudes, hackneyed phrases, received ideas, botched quotations, clichés, conversational static, catch-phrases, and recycled bits of her other books. In a line whose style matches the one he is discussing, he remarks that in the late 1930s “Woolf writes as though she were always looking over her shoulder.” Textual repetition and recycling, broken rhythms, and misplaced rhymes all are the work of “a literal-minded narrator who is determined to describe things without becoming distracted by lyricism, rhetorical constructions, or complex speculations about the inner lives of the characters.”

Whittier-Ferguson does not include Three Guineas in his convincing assessment of this aspect of Woolf’s late style, but both sets of photographs that circulate in that text participate in the same

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87 Ibid., 237.
world of cliché: news snapshots quickly supplanted by the next day’s paper, the horror of war photography toughening into visual propaganda. By reading Woolf’s late work as a heterogeneous whole, I argue that her turn to photography opens modernist aesthetic vision to the world as facts. At the same time, Woolf uses clichéd imagery as a defense against that rapidly disintegrating world.

This chapter begins with *The Pargiters*, where the tension between “fact” and “vision” is transposed into categories Woolf is well known for putting into direct conflict: Edwardian realism and Bloomsbury modernism. *The Pargiters* became *The Years*, a best-seller in the United States that earned Woolf a *Time* magazine cover, and I emphasize the visual images associated with that novel before turning to *Three Guineas*. *Three Guineas* includes two sets of photographs—it was originally published with five images clipped from the daily papers that depict the “sartorial splendor” of the British male. But there is another set of photographs that circulates in the text, a set of photographs from Spain that Woolf describes but does not include. By putting these two sets of photographs into direct comparison, I argue for Woolf’s status as a major philosopher of the visual image in the 1930s. This aspect of her late style opens out to the world, but not in the way Erich Auerbach described in *Mimesis* (1946). By putting Woolf the theorist of the visual image into conversation with Auerbach’s Woolf, I show how Woolf’s turn to the surface in the 1930s is sustained in her posthumous novel *Between the Acts* (1941). This chapter ends with three fragments from *Between the Acts*, each of which represents the dissolution of high modernist antipathy between surface and depth.
A Faithful and Detailed Account of a Family Called Pargiter

Woolf is well known for claiming that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed.” This change requires a corresponding aesthetic response that would break the conventions of Edwardian realism. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf argues against the pattern of realism exemplified by the scrupulous naturalism of Arnold Bennett. The literary accumulation of detail for its own sake does not automatically reveal “life itself,” to use her phrase. How can a writer break the pattern of conventional realism? Woolf answers this question when she objects to Bennett’s novels on the grounds that they are not “self-contained”: he and the other Edwardian writers were primarily interested in “something outside” the book. The Woolf who stands at the window watching taxis and daffodils is not primarily interested in them because they are outside her window. She is interested in their aesthetic fusion—inside her mind, inside the book. Woolf’s bogeyman is the sort of realism that assumes an unproblematic identity not just between detail and character but also between language and world—in Frederic Jameson’s words, it is an epistemology posing as an aesthetic. She objects both to the pattern of this type of realism—its reliance on surface details to reveal the inner depths of characters—and also to its epistemological claims. But this does not necessarily make the facts and details she does include in her novels less particular or less expressive; it simply places them in a different hierarchy than that of the English realist novel. The Pargiters will not be able to break this

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89 Ibid., 327.
91 I specify the “English realist novel” because Woolf herself is so exact in defining her bogey man as English, rather than French, for example, or Russian. Of Mrs. Brown, she writes: “The English writer would make the old lady into a ‘character’: he would bring out her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts.” Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 325.
conventional pattern, and its increasingly awkward form will cause Woolf to abandon “the novel-essay” entirely.

Critics have long sought to appraise Woolf using her own criteria from the influential 1920s essays on realism and modern fiction. According to Peter Brooks, in Woolf’s novels “the exterior world dissolves in the chemistry of consciousness.” Yet the real still imposes itself and offers its resistance: “the real maintains its policing function, through money, social class, things, and through the final limit set by death.”92 That is, the realist subject is in a position of mastery; in Woolf consciousness is overmastering, but it is most often the consciousness of a European metropolitan subject giving meaning to the world she sees around her. The “real,” as Brooks points out, is still the real of the realist English novel: money, class, and empire. To be clear, in her literary essays Woolf objects to the pattern and conventions of realist novels, but not necessarily to realism’s perspective of “essential order, coherence, culmination and Culture.”93 Rather than reproducing the polarity between realism and modernism that Woolf preferred in the 1920s, I read for the visual images that travel from The Pargiters into The Years and Three Guineas. The problem of illustration puts the rigid concepts of realism and modernism into dynamic relation.

Why did Woolf abandon the novel-essay she imagined so passionately at the beginning of the decade?94 The essayistic portions of The Pargiters grew from Woolf’s 1931 speech on professions for women at the National Society for Women’s Service and drew upon the research Woolf was beginning to amass in her three albums of notes and cuttings. By 1933, though she

94 Tuesday, January 20, 1931: “I have this moment, while having my bath, conceived an entire new book—a sequel to A Room of One’s Own—about the sexual life of women: to be called Professions for Women perhaps—Lord how exciting!” Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 4, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 129.
continued to chronicle the Pargiter family and to amass her scrapbook research, Woolf abandoned the “novel-essay” form. The unfinished manuscript of *The Pargiters* extends to five fictional extracts, all set in 1880, and six essays. It becomes clear while reading through this material that Woolf simply could not hold to the formal division between novel and essay. Each form begins to contaminate the other. The essays begin with the conceit of an audience, perhaps still the National Society for Women’s Service, and she argues that in order for her to discuss the professions some history is required: “We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago.” Woolf will take it upon herself to cause this “transformation” in her audience by reading chapters from her unpublished novel, “a faithful and detailed account of a family called Pargiter.” Fiction will transform her audience, but Woolf also recommends *The Pargiters* for its strong basis in fact: “I hope that I am not making an empty boast if I say that there is not a statement in it that cannot be verified,” she writes (8-9). Woolf’s style of lecturing is always arch—is she boasting about her scrapbook research here? Or teasing her audience about their faith in the novel’s realism? After making this claim about the factual basis of her fiction, she begins *in medias res* with Chapter Fifty-Six and a line that is totally unverifiable: “‘I wish the kettle would boil,’ said Milly” (11).

After this opening, Woolf writes the essay sections as a critic, making formal points about her fiction, adding historical context, facts about her characters and, for example, statistics on women’s education in 1880. But in the second essay Woolf cautions her readers against becoming too caught up in these facts:

But we do not want to spend too much time over these details. In reading a novel, if it is a novel of any value, we must now and again shut one eye to the detail, and try to realize the structure; that is, the conviction which, though never explicitly stated, is yet always there, in a novel of any merit, controlling the apparently inevitable succession. (30)
For the Pargiter family, according to Woolf’s essay, these controlling convictions are love and money. And so she details the several kinds of love gathered around Captain Pargiter’s tea table at 56 Abercorn Terrace on the evening of March 17, 1880. We also learn that Captain Pargiter inherited some fifteen hundred a year from his father, Canon Pargiter. And that his wife, Rose, brought him eight or nine hundred more. And that in addition he had his Navy pension. These are the crucial details of the English realist novel—numbers that allow readers to place characters in a society. As Pamela Caughie argues, *The Pargiters* is set in a static world, and Woolf’s approach to this world is empirical: she details “the conventional and the natural, the permanent and the transient, the contingent and the necessary, the profound and the superficial.”

And yet we learn these empirical details often not in the novel excerpts, but in the essays. The detail of literary realism has begun to contaminate the factual essay form Woolf envisioned. So again she must caution against paying too much attention to mere facts:

> Hence perhaps it may be advisable to dwell for a moment—not too much upon the jingling of hansom bells, and the shaded lamps which were as familiar in 1880, as the hoot of cars and the clarity of electric light are to us, but upon the more important differences which such a scene, though at such a place only some fifty years ago, reveals.

(33)

The hansom bells jingle in our ears and we see the Pargiter girls in shaded lamplight even as Woolf duly records the prejudices that deterred girls from attending Girton around the year 1880. The essay has become factual not historically, through carefully plotted proofs, citations, or footnotes, but in a more novelistic way, through amassing and arranging details of everyday life. More importantly, this essay has begun to read like a realist novel; the controlling convictions in the earlier passage are not modernist convictions of aesthetic wholeness, but marriage

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settlements, Navy pensions, and women’s education. In these passages, Woolf begins to show something like distrust of the very idea of a “the novel of fact.”

In the later Pargiter essays Woolf abandons the conceit of the lecture hall entirely and engrosses herself in sober and factual character analysis. Yet she still falls back on the techniques of the novelist: her ostensibly dry essays are teeming with fictional dialogue and free indirect discourse. The goal of the essays has become to reveal—not just to add fact, but also to add interiority and characterization to the fictional extracts. Woolf cannot resist including a full conversation between Kitty Malone and her mother on the subject of “Papa” in her fifth essay, nor can she then resist revealing Kitty’s real love interest, George, the farm hand, in both omniscient detail (he kissed her behind the haystack at age 16) and free indirect discourse: “Why must one talk to the rowing man about rowing, and to the reading man about reading?…Why did she like Edward better, and Lord Lammermuir better, and Alan Hammond better, and—to confess the truth which she had never told a soul—George, the farm hand, best of all?” (115).

Woolf’s “novel-essay” falls apart when it becomes apparent that she was writing a realist novel—a novel whose motive was to reveal the controlling convictions of love and money, and whose tools were the tried and true tools of realism: faithfully documented detail and an all-knowing narrative stance.

In The Pargiters, the divided “novel-essay” form simply brings the pattern of English realism to the fore by insisting upon an impossibly even alternation between fact and fiction, reality and beauty, truth of fact and truth of vision. The pattern becomes evident when posed as a problem of illustration. At first, Woolf’s fictional Pargiters were meant to illustrate certain facts: “perhaps a quotation from the novel may help to bring the scene into a better perspective” (38), she suggests at one point. And yet the perspective of fiction must always fall short of reality; she
begins another essay by noting that the previous chapter was “a very imperfect illustration” (50). As the novel-essay form drags on, the question arises: which element, essay or fiction, is prior? Is it the facts or the fictional characters that are the illustration? One of the reasons the two forms begin to contaminate each other is that neither seems to be prior in Woolf’s imagined “novel of fact.” Both elements of the novel-essay illustrate—they literally cast light upon—an empirically observed world outside the text. Caughie argues that the motive of The Pargiters “is to expose restricting conventions and traditions that thwart female development, so that we must look through these to something stable beneath.” This motive—looking through surface detail or illustration to a stable empirical world—is also the motive of realism.

George Levine argues that literary realism “always implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there.” Woolf abandons the novel-essay form only after the two separate elements begin to blend together to produce the form of the realist novel. Instead of “discovering,” or illustrating, each other, the language of the exacting essay writer and that of the visionary novelist begin to aim for a “non-verbal” empirical world. At the very beginning of The Pargiters, the possibility of a “self-contained” novel-essay (to use Woolf’s term from “Mrs. Brown and Mr. Bennett”) seems possible in the archness of Woolf’s essayistic voice, in her implied audience, and her fanciful beginning at Chapter Fifty-Six. Yet Levine also argues that realism’s practitioners tend to “avoid the implications of their own textuality”—in order to use language to get beyond language they cannot call too much attention

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96 Caughie, 96. Caughie also usefully critiques Mitchell Leaska’s introduction to The Pargiters as being too credulous of Woolf’s own distinctions between fact and vision, novel and essay, surface and depth: “He assumes, as do most critics of this work, that explicit language is honest; indirect prose, duplicitous”(95).
to themselves. They must profess to be almost anti-literary. Woolf’s arch literariness is what disappears as the faithful and detailed account of *The Pargiters* drags on.

*The Years* as it was finally published in 1937 certainly cannot be described as faithful and detailed. With all the essayistic explanation removed it reads as episodic, fragmentary, and uncentered. Woolf broke the pattern of English realism with which she began and ended up writing a novel that seems to have very little pattern at all. Eleanor Pargiter, who was one of the girls at the tea table at Abercorn Terrace in 1880, wonders in the present day, “is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen?...a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure: that there was a pattern. But who makes it? Who thinks it?” The modernist novel Woolf produced eschews the pattern of realism in favor of the fleeting perceptions of pattern amidst an accumulation of years, scenes, and characters. The “novel of fact” has been reconceived as a novel built upon absence, upon the cuts and edits Woolf made to the text: years seem to be arbitrarily skipped; scenes convene and dissolve unpredictably; characters come and go. There is, however, one image that Woolf holds over from the writing of *The Pargiters* to include in *The Years*. The manuscripts of *The Pargiters* are marred with inkblots, inkblots that Mitchell Leaska reproduces in his compilation and notes are “the author’s own ink drawings in the manuscript” (fig. 5). The first inkblot, which adorns the second essay, consists of just three strokes that resemble a typographical asterisk. By the second chapter, this has proliferated into a dark blob with bristling lines, next it becomes something resembling a squashed spider, then an aggressive sea urchin, and finally, appended to the sixth essay, a flower with petals. In *The Years*, Eleanor twice draws a dot with lines raying outwards,

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98 Ibid., 9, 15.
100 Woolf, *The Pargiters*, iii.
once at Abercorn Terrace and once at a political meeting. Finally, in the “present day” section, at the Pargiter family party, she recalls this drawing:

Perhaps there’s “I” at the middle of it, she thought; a knot; a center; and again she saw herself sitting at her table drawing on the blotting-paper, digging little holes from which spokes radiated. Out and out they went; thing followed thing, scene obliterated scene. (348)

This is an image of the form of The Years: in the novel thing follows thing, scene obliterates scene, and yet what holds it together is not necessarily a subjective “I” (or “eye”), nor is it an empirical reality on the outside, but instead a knot—or perhaps a hole—at the center.

Earlier, the difference between the modernist and realist novel was laid out using the simple binary of inside and outside, subjective fusion or empirical world. Here, the inkblot indicates another possibility, one Woolf continued to experiment with after The Years. For Alan Wilde, the inkblot is a phenomenological image.\textsuperscript{101} It indicates a different order of representation than that of Mrs. Dalloway, for example, where Clarissa looks into the mirror above her dressing table to collect “the whole of her at one point.”\textsuperscript{102} The inkblot is centrifugal, it reaches out to the world and puts the self in relation to others. If Bernard asks, at the end of The Waves, “how to describe the world seen without a self?” the vision of The Years and Between the Acts situates


the self among the things of the world. In Wilde’s reading, Woolf’s late work rejects “the instrumental attitude toward the phenomenal”—where exterior things are avenues to inner vision—in favor of new meanings that emerge from the interplay between self and world. Wilde’s strident contrast between early and late Woolf retains the modernist dualism he sees phenomenology overcoming: his inkblot seems to represent the self at the center reaching out to the world. But these inkblots in fact begin, in The Pargiters, as marks of the pen on paper; when they are incorporated into The Years they are figured as dots and then holes before the passage in which Eleanor wonders if perhaps she is drawing an “I,” a knot, a center. I prefer the image of a knot/hole, the trace in a board left by a joint or shoot that has been cut away. Woolf’s own ink drawings resembled tangled knots but also black holes, and they stress the point of connection between these two figures. The phenomenological reading holds, but in addition to being a figure of self and world, these drawings also figure text, or ink, in relation to world.

The Years ends with Eleanor at the window, having her vision:

“The roses? Yes…” she said. But she was watching the cab. A young man had got out; he paid the driver. Then a girl in a tweed travelling suit followed him. He fitted his latch-key to the door. “There,” Eleanor murmured, as he opened the door and they stood for a moment on the threshold. “There!” she repeated as the door shut with a little thud behind them. (412)

If Eleanor is the modernist at the window, with roses and taxi cabs dancing in her vision, does this indicate fusion or closure? Space and time have been traversed: in 1929, in A Room of One’s Own, the speaker at the window has a vision tied to a couple getting into a taxi-cab. But by 1937

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103 Wilde, 146. Writing about Between the Acts, Wilde connects this openness to postmodernism (he is writing in the mid-1980s): “Accepting the contingent and unresolved in a way we now recognize as postmodern, the novel does not stop there but affirms nonetheless—or, more accurately, as well—the possibility of engendering from the diversity, facticity, and openness of experience new modes both of expressing and of being in the world”(161). Rather than endless postmodern play, in my view Woolf’s late work still holds open the possibility of modernist closure, even in the face of political upheaval in the 1930s.
that couple seems to have arrived at their destination and crossed a threshold. Yet *The Years* does not end with this vision but with Eleanor’s repeated question to her brother, “And now?” and then a dull narrative observation on the weather. The open-ended question perhaps gives utopian point to this fragmented novel. But the final sentence, “The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace” (412) is a clichéd indication of how such scenes achieve closure on a fine summer morning.\(^\text{104}\) Like the knot/hole, *The Years* reaches out to the world, “And now?” but also pulls back, defending itself against the world it describes with tired, flat language.

**Very Positive Photographs**

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf’s argument depends upon repeated references to photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses sent from the front lines of the civil war in Spain. But the photographs serve a rhetorical rather than an illustrative purpose in the text. The reader never sees them, and Woolf chose to illustrate *Three Guineas* with a different set of images. Like the knot/hole at the center of *The Years*, these two sets of photographs—seen and unseen—are permanently coupled. The absent photographs do the most work in the text; and indeed the photographs included in the early editions were stripped from later editions and only restored in the late 1990s in Britain and the early 2000s in the United States. The Spanish photographs perform the duties of a refrain: the language used to describe them is repeated almost word for word; they are immediately recognizable in the thicket of the argument; and they mark endings. Or rather, they mark points in Woolf’s argument beyond which language cannot go. Woolf’s prose trails off into ellipses as often as the Spanish photographs appear: “But here the words

\(^{104}\) John Whittier-Ferguson, 246.
falter on our lips, and the prayer peters out into three separate dots because of facts again." If photographs are simply “statements of fact addressed to the eye” (10) as Woolf cunningly asserts at the start of *Three Guineas*, then Woolf’s use of the Spanish photographs and the ellipses they generate marks her distrust of such statements. Any fact that is endlessly reproducible, immediately recognizable, and deadly to language is no fact at all, but rhetoric.

This reading of the Spanish photographs stands counter to much of the critical attention they have garnered in recent years. Embedded in text, the photograph stands out for its very materiality—the black and white image addressing the eye seems to speak forth immediately and candidly from the page. Woolf herself makes this point—she calls the Spanish images “very positive photographs” (102). They seem irrefutable: they have witnessed destruction and are testifying to it, just as Goya famously did in *The Disasters of War* (1863), his series on war and devastation in Spain. His most famous caption reads simply: “I saw it” and is followed by similar statements of material fact: “And this too,” “This is bad,” “This is how it happened…” (fig. 6). The rhetoric of witnessing became a large

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part of the global circulation of information from Spain, and in fact Woolf’s scrapbooks include a 1937 pamphlet titled *The Martyrdom of Madrid* which is described as “inedited witnesses by Louis Delaprée.” Delaprée was a correspondent for *Paris Soir*, and his outraged pamphlet is filled with the rhetoric of photographic witness. He begins: “What is going to follow will therefore be a simple book-keeping of horror. But it will also be a witness that I demand to all to believe up to the unbelievable,” and continues, “All the images of Madrid suffering martyrdom, which I shall try to put under your eyes—and which most of the time challenge description—I have seen them.” Delaprée’s “book-keeping of horror” goes on to make easy use of the literary language of photography in his descriptions of the siege of Madrid. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War is often cited as the first war extensively documented by photojournalists, newly armed with Leica 35 mm cameras. Why then, does Woolf only describe these images, and publish other ones?

Critics who write about photography in *Three Guineas* note the archness of Woolf’s definition of photographs as “statements of fact addressed to the eye,” but to analyze these images they also seem to require them to be “positive,” Woolf’s other, and perhaps even more tongue-in-cheek term. Woolf never published a simple or positive photographic illustration in any of her

Fig. 7: Illustration from *Orlando* (1928).

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Virginia Woolf, *Reading Notebooks*, Monk’s House Papers, University of Sussex. Delaprée’s friends published the pamphlet when they learned the editors of *Paris Soir* were censoring many of his dispatches. Lines cut from the newspaper are included in the pamphlet in italics. See Merry L. Pawlowski, “‘Seule la culture désintéressée:’ Virginia Woolf, Gender, and Culture in Time of War,” in *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*, ed. Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker, Merry G. Perry (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004), 215-33. Woolf cites Delaprée in her *Three Guineas* footnote about Sergeant Amalia Bonilla, the woman who has killed five men (210).
books. In *Orlando*, Woolf includes manifestly staged images of her fictional biographical subject but captions the photographs in standard biographical prose: “Orlando about the year 1840” (fig. 7). In *Flush*, another fictional biography, this time of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel, Woolf includes a frontispiece that portrays a high Victorian lady with her dog. Some think that the sitter is Woolf herself, in fancy dress. In addition, Woolf’s term “positive” seems to imply a philosophical/literary position—that these photographs faithfully and realistically report the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. In this frame, Woolf’s description of the Spanish photographs seems to echo one of the iconic images of novelistic realism. She writes:

They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a birdcage hanging in what was presumably was the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spilikins suspended in mid-air. (14)

In *Le Diable Boiteux* (1707), Alan René le Sage has the devil Asmodeus remove all the rooftops of Madrid to reveal to a Spanish student what goes on in private (fig. 8). This gesture echoes down through the tradition of the realist novel in both France and England; yet here bombs have ripped the rooms apart in Woolf’s destructive game of spilikins, and she will never attempt to describe the photographs in positive, realistic detail again. From this point on they become a

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refrain—an indication of the failure of descriptive or realistic language—generated by the simple phrase “dead bodies and ruined houses.”

Despite the fact that the Spanish photographs are shaped, or, to put this even more strongly, subsumed, by an impoverished linguistic refrain, recent critics give these photographs special place because of what they depict—dead bodies and ruined houses. In her investigation of modernism and violence, Sarah Cole writes: “For Woolf, photography does what other kinds of representation can perhaps only dimly emulate: it gives violence its due.” That due is not directly linked to photographs’ ability to represent violence, but rather, their ability to generate an affective response:

Pictures like this one, in Woolf’s view, encourage a response appropriate to the destruction they depict. Their power is in direct proportion to their attempted

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transparency—we might call it their ‘realism,’ or their identity as ‘reportage,’ considering
the new resonance of photojournalism in the Spanish Civil War…. At this moment of
crisis, photography is given a special role to play in denouncing and resisting war, as its
seeming transparency of medium thrusts the sheer visuality of violence in front of the
viewer, who is instantly pressed to respond. (56)

“Transparency” operates in this passage as a synonym for “realism,” “reportage,” and the whole
apparatus of “very positive” representation. Cole admits that this mode runs counter to Woolf’s
own in Three Guineas, but while she notes that to have actually included these images would
have turned Woolf’s arguments over to their “genuine and perhaps irreducible power,” she does
not admit that the fact that these photographs remain unseen may demonstrate Woolf’s distrust of
their power, or perhaps even empty them of that power entirely.

While the Spanish photographs become a set refrain, the other set of photographs—
showing the English male in all his sartorial splendor—get no mention in Woolf’s text at all.
They do have captions, but the captions describe their subject matter using the indefinite article:
“A General,” “An Archbishop.” Before turning to this second set of images, I will quickly point
out that these divergent presentations in fact achieve the same thing: both sets of photographs are
stripped of meaningful caption, context, and, in effect, their transparent lens on the outside world.
How can they represent accurately if we do not know what it is they represent? Photographs of
war, Susan Sontag writes, “wait to be explained or falsified by their captions.” Perhaps Woolf,
she wonders indignantly, “is simply assuming that a photograph should speak for itself.”111 A
number of critics, including Cole, have tried to reframe the Spanish photographs with
appropriate context. Interestingly, these images do not appear in Woolf’s scrapbooks, but they
have been traced to a German air raid on the town of Getafe, near Madrid, on October 30, 1936.
Horrific images from Getafe were quickly distributed as propaganda by the Spanish Communist

111 Sontag, 9-10.
Party and were published in London in the *Daily Worker* on November 12, 1936 as documents of fascist brutality. Woolf would have been well aware that these images were being exploited as propaganda to encourage French and English involvement in Spain. And perhaps this simple fact explains her reluctance to publish them—they had already participated in an argument for war, while *Three Guineas* is explicitly opposed to war in all its forms. But propaganda photographs also have their own conventions and clichés, a certain etiquette that already makes their claims to transparency problematic, if not impossible. Sontag writes, “photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate.” Thus Woolf’s descriptive refrain doubly “reiterates” and “simplifies” these propaganda images. Elena Gualtieri points out that the birdcage hanging in the bombed out room was already a cliché by the time Woolf used it. The language that subsumes these photographs and incorporates them into the text of *Three Guineas* is full of “worn-out phrases and the attendant refusal to animate [or indeed, “agitate”] these images.” Woolf presents these images first and foremost not as “statements of fact” but as rhetorical objects, and her flat, clichéd language acts as a defense against a world in which photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses can become weapons in their own right.

Contrast the Spanish photographs with the five portraits Woolf did publish in *Three Guineas*. They appear throughout the text in proximity to Woolf’s discussion of “the clothes worn by the educated man in his public capacity” (23). These photographs do have captions: first appears “A General”—he is the elderly Lord Baden-Powell, beribboned and bemedaled, grinning

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113 Sontag, 6.

114 Gualtieri, “*Three Guineas* and the Photograph,” 170.
at the camera in a tall plumed hat (fig. 9). Next comes “Heralds” blowing trumpets in elegant uniforms; “A University Procession” with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin; “A Judge”—namely, the Lord Chief Justice Gordon Hewart—walking in full wig and gown; and lastly, “An Archbishop,” who is in fact the Archbishop of Canterbury Cosmo Gordon Lang, with scepter, robe, and miter (figs. 10-13).\footnote{Julia Duffy and Lloyd Davis, 128-40; and Alice Staveley, “Name That Face,” \textit{Virginia Woolf Miscellany} 51 (Spring 1998): 4-5.} The use of the indefinite article in these images’ captions undercuts their ability to be “very positive photographs.” In fact, the men in these images would have been instantly recognizable in the 1930s, and, in the editorial correspondence surrounding the publication of \textit{Three Guineas}, the photographs are referred to by the proper name of their subject.\footnote{Garratt & Atkinson to the Hogarth Press, March 3, 1938. Hogarth Press Archives 571, Special Collections, University of Reading, Reading, UK.} Rather than making the photographs instantly legible, Woolf intends her readers to read differently, to read these photographs for what they do not show—indeed, to read them negatively.

\textit{Three Guineas} aims to link the threat of war to fascism both abroad and at home; the text grew out of the lecture “Professions for Women.” When it was serialized in the United States in early 1938, it was titled “Women Must Weep—Or Unite Against War.”\footnote{Virginia Woolf, “Women Must Weep” and “Women Must Weep—Or Unite Against War,” \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} (May and June, 1938).} In its final form, it appears as three letters written to men in response to the question “how are we to prevent war?” \textit{Three Guineas} is both a work of feminism and a work of pacifism, and the two sets of photographs directly link militarism to patriarchy, public tyranny to private tyranny. Systems of oppression and exclusion are alike, Woolf argues, if only we can see them clearly. The five photographs she published in \textit{Three Guineas} are not meant to be read as “fact” but as representations of a gendered view of the world. Early in the book, Woolf explains to her male
interlocutor: “Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes.” She goes on, “Let us then by way of a very elementary beginning lay before you a photograph—a crudely coloured photograph—of your world as it appears to us who see it from the threshold of the private house” (22). The set of black-and-white photographs seem to fulfill the role of this
crudely colored photograph, and indeed Woolf goes on to describe male dress and ribbons and medals with amazement and wonder. But then she writes, “When we have expressed an opinion upon the surface we have done all that we can do. It is true that the surface may have some connection with the depths, but if we are to help you to prevent war we must try to penetrate deeper beneath the skin.” When a woman looks at these photographs, she can remark upon their surfaces, but she must also be reminded of how those surfaces conceal “many inner and secret chambers” she cannot enter (28).

In order to penetrate those depths, Woolf outlines a new type of reading practice. As opposed to the Spanish propaganda photographs, the five photographs she publishes seem casually and arbitrarily clipped from the daily newspapers. The female reader has free access to the papers—to “history in the raw,” in Woolf’s words (9)—and must create new and unfamiliar contexts for the images she finds there.118 Elena Gualtieri points out that the photographs Woolf chose to publish tell the major story of late 1936: not the war in Spain but the abdication of Edward VIII. Each of the men in the photographs was involved in the English domestic crisis, and the abdication effectively pushed foreign news off the front pages. For Gualtieri, in calling attention to these photographs Woolf marks the moment when “political and social power shifts from the realm of institutions to that of the production of images.”119 Woolf’s publication of images of English patriarchy rather than “dead bodies and ruined houses” mirrors the way the daily papers replaced the war in Spain with what Woolf described in her diary as “Mrs Simpson

118 Dalgarno writes: “In effect she deconstructs the relationship of image to text when she represents the functions of institutions not as generals, judges, and professors, but as decorations and costumes. The unprinted war photographs in comparison are the photographs of those without institutional clothing, the bodies whose images ideology regularly conceals from sight” (171). Amy M. Lilly points out that in 1935 Woolf was involved in a Cambridge anti-fascist exhibition that consisted of documentary and historic photographs, news clippings, and charts marking the rise of fascism. Woolf wrote a letter to the organizer after learning that there would be no treatment of “the woman question” in the exhibit. See “Three Guineas, Two Exhibits: Woolf’s Politics of Display,” Woolf Studies Annual 9 (2003): 29-54.
snapped by lime light at midnight as she gets out of her car.”

At the beginning of *Three Guineas*, Woolf describes the difference between these sets of photographs as one of surface and depth. In effect, reading the published photographs without the mediation of the codes of patriarchy results in a focus on their surfaces, the decorations and ribbons. And imagining the unpublished photographs of war without the mediation of the visual codes of propaganda results in a deeper focus on the political and militaristic ideologies that have caused the “dead bodies and ruined houses.” Woolf’s reading practice here is negative in that it reverses surfaces and depths, making both visible but each still antithetical to the other.

The feminist politics Woolf advocates in *Three Guineas* reflect the negativity of this reading practice: she champions poverty, derision, chastity, elasticity, secrecy, and indifference as the principles of her Outsiders’ Society. The Outsiders Society will practice an indifference to patriotism and to war that is less apathy than impartiality based in fact and in reason (127). The Outsiders’ indifference grows out of their difference: the hefty textual apparatus of Woolf’s extensive footnotes and scrapbook research that documents gender inequality. Just as the Spanish and the English photographs make a pair, and just as Woolf’s negative reading practice reverses surfaces and depths, difference and indifference are twinned throughout *Three Guineas*. The Outsiders will use indifference to seek peace “by the means that a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the different values which result from those difference have placed within our reach” (134). The twin of difference—difference clearly perceived, researched, and analyzed—is not similarity, but indifference.

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120 Virginia Woolf, *Diary Vol. 5*, 39.
121 Woolf’s formal strategies enact these negative principles, despite readings such as Elaine Showalter’s that describe *Three Guineas* as hampered by its “narrative strategies” and “strenuous charm.” Toril Moi attacks this position as “realist” criticism: “Showalter thus implicitly defines effective feminist writing as work that offers a powerful expression of personal experience in a social framework…. Showalter’s position on this point in fact strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism, precluding any real recognition of the value of Virginia Woolf’s modernism” or her formal play. See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 282-5, 294.
There is something of the poverty, elasticity, secrecy, and indifference of the Outsider’s Society in *Three Guineas*’ most common typographical motif: the ellipsis. Like the “dead bodies and ruined houses” refrain of the Spanish photographs, the ellipsis is not merely a set of marks on the page but almost a phrase in itself, a motif that conjures a single impression: the absence of adequate language. Woolf always calls attention to her use of this motif; at the very beginning of the book she writes to her male correspondent “But…those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try and speak across it” (6). Three years is the length of time Woolf has, presumably, been gathering her facts. It is also the length of the university-level education she was denied. It is the number of her correspondents, her guineas, and it is also the number of dots in an ellipsis. The three dots recall the three strokes of the asterisk that Woolf drew in the margin of *The Pargiters* and let grow into the inkblot of *The Years*. Later in *Three Guineas* this typographical representation is given a new name:

…What possible doubts, what possible hesitations can those dots stand for? What reason or what emotion can make us hesitate to become members of a society whose aims we approve, to whose funds we have contributed? It may be neither reason nor emotion, but something more profound and fundamental than either. It may be difference. Different we are, as facts have proved, both in sex and in education. And it is from that difference, as we have already said, that our help can come, if help we can, to protect liberty, to prevent war. (123)

An ellipsis is used when language no longer serves. The three dots are impoverished, secret language, indifferently silent. But they are also elastic, to use Woolf’s other term. The ellipsis connects two grammatically dissimilar elements in a sentence. Rather than just pointing out difference, *Three Guineas* also dwells upon the mechanics of connection. For example, Woolf addresses her male correspondent:
First, then, let us consider how we can help you to prevent war by protecting culture and intellectual liberty, since you assure us that there is a connection between those rather abstract words and these very positive photographs—the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses. (102)

Woolf has already positioned her two sets of photographs as anything but “very positive,” and she will go on to define these “rather abstract words” in simple, concrete terms (culture is “the disinterested pursuit of reading and writing in the English language” and intellectual liberty is “the right to say or write what you think in your own words”) (108-9). The connection she intends to draw here is between the abstract and the concrete, the surface and the depth, the free and the compelled—she is recommending a reading practice that allows room for both in an image, a fact, or a term.

To this end, Woolf concludes her book with a visual representation of connection, an ekphrastic image of a photograph manipulated in the darkroom of her text.

For as this letter has gone on, adding fact to fact, another picture has imposed itself upon the foreground. It is the figure of a man; some say, others deny, that he is Man himself, the quintessence of virility, the perfect type of which all the others are imperfect adumbrations.[…] He is called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator. And behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies—men, women and children.[…] It suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other. (168)

We know this face, this human figure. He is the Leviathan; he is also the picture from the evening paper in The Years. Eleanor swears when she sees him, shocking her young niece, and tears the blurred photograph in two (313). In Three Guineas, Woolf does not tear the image but instead superimposes it, building a composite image that includes both the institutional pomp of her published photographs and the dead bodies and ruined houses of the Spanish photographs.
The Dictator or Tyrant is “the perfect type”; his eyes glare; he is wearing a uniform and medals; “other mystic symbols” glisten upon his chest. He carries a sword. He is the epitome of the splendidly uniformed men in Woolf’s published photographs, and he stands athwart the dead bodies and ruined houses in Spain. This is the final image in *Three Guineas*, and it stands alone in its composite visual presentation of the reading practice Woolf recommends throughout. If ekphrasis is the “semiotic other” of the text, it is a rhetorical mode always deeply embedded in difference, otherness, and outsiders.122 And yet Woolf is clear that her ekphrastic image is not meant to merely represent difference, which would only “excite once more the sterile emotion of hate” (168). She argues that the photographic image of the human figure must also release a more productive emotion—the human face staring out even from a “crudely coloured photograph” suggests not only passive spectatorship but also active common interest (168).123 In this way, the image must also suggest depths, “other connections that lie far deeper than the facts on the surface” of the photograph (169). This composite photograph is an image of difference and connection, surface and depth, but it is not an image of aesthetic unity or closure.

I contrast late Woolf, and in particular this photographic superimposition, with the Virginia Woolf that appears in Auerbach’s *Mimesis*. To some extent, Auerbach was also thinking about how to prevent war—his magisterial assessment of the representation of reality in Western literature was very specifically written in Istanbul by a German Jew in exile during World War II. He concludes with Woolf, and indeed Woolf’s style provides a metaphor of his own critical approach in *Mimesis*.124 His famous essay, “The Brown Stocking,” turns the Woolf of *To the

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122 W.J.T. Mitchell argues that “ekphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic ‘others,’ those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or ‘spatial’ arts.” W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 156.
123 All of the photographs Woolf published in *Orlando*, *Flush*, and *Three Guineas* (though again, not in *Roger Fry*), are at the most basic level images of the human figure, despite their staging, posing, and fancy dress.
124 He writes: “Indeed, the present book may be cited as an illustration…. I am convinced that these basic motifs in the history of the representation of reality—provided I have seen them correctly—must be demonstrable in any
Lighthouse into a paragon of realism. Her depiction of the darning of a brown stocking becomes “a more genuine, a deeper, and indeed a more real reality” than previously seemed possible.\textsuperscript{125} Auerbach argues that she does this by achieving a “peculiar freedom” from the exterior world: “the exterior events have actually lost their hegemony, they serve to release and interpret inner events, whereas before her time (and still today in many instances) inner movements preponderantly function to prepare and motivate significant exterior happenings.”\textsuperscript{126} Auerbach marvels at the interplay between interior consciousness and exterior stimulus—the real world has lost its hegemony, it seems “accidental and poor” compared with the depths of Mrs. Ramsay’s interiority. The reality of the present moment, “which the author directly reports and which appears as established fact…is nothing but an occasion.”\textsuperscript{127} This is Woolf as high modernist, aestheticizing “established fact” and freeing herself from its confines. This analysis also seems particularly situated in the context of world war: Auerbach’s description of the modernists’ “transfer of confidence” away from “exterior turning points and blows of fate” is wistful, an indication of different ways to write and live history.\textsuperscript{128}

But Auerbach then goes one step further and argues that Woolf’s democratic style will lead to global “unification and simplification.”\textsuperscript{129} This famously optimistic conclusion depends on a specifically modernist understanding of surface, depth, and difference. To prove his point, Auerbach writes:

\begin{quote}
The more numerous, varied, and simple the people are who appear as subjects of such random moments, the more effectively must what they have in common shine forth. In random realistic text.”\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 540.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 538.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 541.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 547. For more, see Maria DiBattista, “The World Writer,” in Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 129.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 553.
this unprejudiced and exploratory type of representation we cannot but see to what an extent—below the surface conflicts—the differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened...There are no longer even exotic peoples. A century ago (in Mérimée for example), Corsicans or Spaniards were still exotic; today the term would be quite unsuitable for Pearl Buck's Chinese peasants.\textsuperscript{130}

Below the surface conflicts, here figured by swarthy skin or tilling the good earth, there is “a common life of mankind.” Difference is on the surface, the common life underneath, and \textit{Mimesis} predicts a great “economic and cultural leveling process taking place” across the twentieth century. Auerbach’s conclusion, full of utopian yearning and yet also elegiac, depends upon a Woolf whose style levels difference.

But the Woolf of \textit{The Years} and \textit{Three Guineas} turns to the photographic surface to represent difference, not to level it. Are there no longer exotic peoples? Well, she might reply, there are the English. Just look at the facts, these photographic surfaces. But the practice of looking at these surfaces cannot be automatic or uncritical—one can neither remain on the surface nor jump immediately to its depths. After describing the superimposed photograph of the Tyrant or Dictator, Woolf does, for a moment, sound like Auerbach’s Woolf. Looking at this altered, ekphrastic image suggests “that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure.” This is her turn to connection through difference. She goes on, “A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life” (168). She hears, for a second, not “the bark of the guns and the bray of the gramophone,” but the voices of the poets discussing “the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity” (169). But she has learned to read images too well, and she turns back to the photograph, to facts: “Let us then leave it to the poets to tell us what the dream is; and fix our eyes upon the photograph again: the fact” (169). A position of indifference requires acknowledging difference and common interest,

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 552.
fact and vision, surface and depth, in a continuum. From *The Pargiters* to *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, Woolf breaks the pattern of realism—reading the text as if it gives access to the empirical world—but does not replace this pattern with a modernist “I” at the center. Instead, she achieves an image of aesthetic closure and then retreats back to its surface—to the fact of impending war. This retreat partakes of set, mannered language: she gives her correspondent a guinea, and then apologizes for having taken so much of his time.

**Orts, Scraps, and Fragments**

The continuum from fact to fiction, surface to depth, carries over into Woolf’s last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). *Between the Acts* is a novel that is temporarily taken over by an English country pageant that attempts to represent the span of English history and literature in the course of one summer’s day. The surface of the text is a jumble of prose, poetry, and drama; its structure is built around a chain of increasing fictionality, from reader to internal audience watching the pageant to short plays-within-the-play and back out again. J. Hillis Miller sees the text has having “two levels, the fictive and the real, and at the same time it has only one surface. This surface is both fictive and real at once.”

That surface raises the question of illustration again: does the pageant adequately present English history? Does English literature, as represented by the parodic plays within the pageant, illustrate English history? Does the pageant illustrate or help explain how England has arrived at the novel’s historical setting in June, 1939, the last summer before war? Woolf keeps these elements—the novelistic, the dramatic, the

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132 Pamela Caughie writes: “Virginia Woolf creates characters who play characters created by La Trobe, who recreates characters from earlier dramas (Congreve’s, for instance), who are themselves parodies of historical figures, and these figures are characters in another text, the text of English history. There seems to be no end to this chain of creations, unless it is in the prehistoric mud that covered England before human life appeared, the fertile mud from which La Trobe creates anew at the end.” Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*, 53.
historical—mixed but separate throughout the novel, which she imagined as “a rambling, capricious, but somehow unified whole.” I conclude this chapter with three images of the surface continuum between fact and fiction, literature and history—three “orts, scraps, and fragments” that illustrate Woolf’s late style only to disperse into the air.

**Swallows**

In one scene, the pageant’s players lay a painted sheet on the ground to represent a lake, and they plant green stakes as bulrushes. Suddenly real swallows skim over this representation: “Look Minnie!” Etty Spingett exclaims, “Those are real swallows.” Later the players roll up the lake and uproot the bulrushes, and “real swallows were skimming over real grass” (118). Finally, “The play was over; swallows skimmed the grass that had been the stage” (141). The swallow, in its “real” flight through the fictional pageant, has accumulated a vivid set of associations—are these meant somehow to be more “real” than what has been portrayed on stage? Lucy Swithin first notices the swallows in the great barn at Pointz Hall and remarks that they come every year from Africa, “the same birds” (70). She incorporates them into her reading of *An Outline of History* and imagines the same birds skimming the prehistoric land “when the Barn was a swamp” (71). Her brother, Bartholomew, absent-mindedly following her words, half-recites Swinburne’s “Itylus”: “Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow” (75), a poem whose speaker is the mythic Philomel, raped by her sister Procne’s husband, made mute, and eventually changed into a nightingale. Procne became a swallow, and in the poem Philomel laments her

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sister swallow’s ability to forget their history and simply migrate with the changing seasons. Isa, Bartholomew’s daughter-in-law, has very nearly made the same connection—the only time she uses the word “real” is to describe a rape reported in the *Times*: “That was real,” so real that she can see it (15). How do these “real” swallows and their set of associations with prehistory, memory, and gendered violence connect to the pageant’s fictional representations of national history, collective memory, and comic love plots? This incongruity between fact and fiction, which Woolf draws attention to by repeating the phrase “real swallows,” is never definitely resolved. The real simply skims the surface of Woolf’s fictional representations, occasionally drawing close, but always on the move.

**Mirrors**

The classic visual image of realism is the mirror, and Miss La Trobe, the artist-figure in *Between the Acts*, duly includes a mirror scene in her pageant. Here, Woolf may cunningly touch on George Eliot’s famous description of her intentions in *Adam Bede* (1859):

…to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experiences as an oath.135

Miss La Trobe’s mirrors are purposefully defective: cracked, borrowed, unsteadily held up by the pageants’ actors to reflect the audience. For La Trobe, this is an attempt to represent “present time” in the historical pageant. Her first attempt to bring reality into the pageant fails spectacularly: she attempts “ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows, etc.,” but her audience fidgets and wonders why they are being kept waiting. “Reality too strong,” she mutters, “Curse ‘em!” (122). But in the grand finale when the actors appear on stage each holding a flashing

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object, the audience begins to understand. It remarks: “Tin cans? Bedroom candlesticks? Old jars? My dear, that’s the cheval glass from the Rectory!...What’s the notion? Anything that’s bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves?” And it objects: “To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume...And only, too, in parts....That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair” (125). The fragmented mirrors not only shatter the mechanism of George Eliot’s realism, they “snap” their subjects; they “dart,” “flash,” and “expose” (125). The pageant’s audience is being photographed, and when the mirrors prove too heavy for the actors to hold up any longer, the audience sees itself “not whole by any means, but at any rate sitting still. It was now. Ourselves” (126). The pageant of English history and literature ends in the present moment with a representation of the mass consumption of photography. This is not an image of aesthetic wholeness, but of “orts, scraps, and fragments” (127) that, for a moment, indicate collectivity, unity, and then are “dispersed” by the gurgling of the gramophone.

Curtains

*Between the Acts* ends twice, once in the mind of the artist, Miss La Trobe, and again back at Pointz Hall. Like the swallows skimming the lake or the pageant’s mirrors reflecting the audience, the fictive and the real endings are indeterminately bound together. Miss La Trobe lingers in the backstage bushes while the audience and the actors depart; at dusk, she hoists the case of gramophone records and heads into the village. “Then something rose to the surface”; she has a vision of her next pageant:

“I should group them,” she murmured, “here.” It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her. (142-3)
Later, in the village pub, she imagines this scene again: “There was the high ground at midnight; there was the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures.” The curtain has disappeared—the stage at Pointz Hall is a natural terrace of grass that lacks any kind of curtained proscenium arch. Suddenly, words rise up out of the fertile mud of her mind, “Words without meaning—wonderful words…She heard the first words” (144). A few pages later, the Olivers have gathered after dinner; Isa sits in the window, curtains open, watching the pageant fade from her mind (147). “The great square of the open window showed only sky now. It was drained of light, severe, stone cold” (148). The old people go to bed, only Isa and Giles are left in the room. Through the open curtains, the house and the cold sky merge, and the house loses its shelter:

It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (149)

Isa and Giles both are and are not the figures fused in Miss Swithin’s reading of *The Outline of History* and seen by Miss La Trobe in her vision. The metaphorical curtain appears again, yet for Miss La Trobe it is conditional, “The curtain would rise.” Here, the conditional has been realized, made real: “Then the curtain rose.” The ending both is and is not more “real” than La Trobe’s aesthetic vision. History also intrudes: the expanding theater of war has haunted *Between the Acts* from the beginning. That war, which for Woolf “grumbles, in an inarticulate way, behind reality” is viewed from England through blackout curtains.136 In the last image of her novel, the metaphorical and the historical move along a continuum.

Vanessa Bell’s dust jacket for *Between the Acts* is a simple woodcut depicting a closed curtain on a proscenium stage (fig. 14). This is the final image of Woolf’s struggle in the 1930s

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136 In her diary and letters, Woolf repeatedly uses the metaphor of the blackout curtain to describe her view of a war which never seemed entirely real. Noted in Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Final Curtain on the War: Figure and Ground in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*,” *Style* 28, no. 2, (1994): 183-200.
with fact and vision, surface and depth, realism and modernism. But is it an image of aesthetic distance and mediation? Is *Between the Acts* curtained off, autotelic, “self-contained,” to use the term from Woolf’s 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”? Has all art moved, as Woolf wrote in her contemporaneous essay about the figure of “Anon,” into the “theater of the mind”? Or will the curtain open on the very real theater of war? The curtained stage is an image of realism—the curtain will rise to reveal the action on a summer’s day just before the second World War. But it is at the same time almost the last gasp of modernism—it is still possible to imagine the novel as curtained off and aesthetically “self-contained.” From the novel of fact to a scholarly investigation of the rhetoric of fact to a novel that holds fact and fiction in continuum, Woolf’s curtained stage is an image of both aesthetic distance and historical futurity.

Fig. 14: Vanessa Bell, dust jacket for *Between the Acts* (1941).

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Snapshots, Rushes and Rhymes:
W.H. Auden in 1930s China

_Journey to a War_ (1939) is the account of W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s bumbling search for the front of the Sino-Japanese war. Told partly in travel diary form, partly in sonnet sequence, and partly in Auden’s own photographs, it should be a glamorous travel book, declaring the political commitment of a pair of dashing young artists through experimentation with form and medium. Yet the book Auden and Isherwood produce is desultory, even banal. Isherwood records the indignities of travel in the diary; Auden’s photographs consist of tourist snapshots and amateur portraits, and these commonplace details leak into his verse. “Many people will, I think, be annoyed by this book,” one reviewer began.138 Why would a pair of celebrity artists abroad in a world on the brink of war use such a deliberately deflated style?

Auden had already published one travel book, _Letters from Iceland_ (1937), written with Louis MacNeice. It is lighthearted, peppered with inside jokes, and humorously illustrated with Auden’s amateur photographs. It is also heavily inflected by the six months Auden spent working in John Grierson’s Documentary Film Unit just before leaving for Iceland. Auden and MacNeice play with the techniques, rhetoric, and philosophy of the nascent British documentary film movement; they use letters, maps, charts, and snapshots to document and verify their journey while simultaneously arguing that Iceland represents an aestheticized, “unreal island” and is thus fundamentally unavailable to documentary.139 But despite a similar playfulness of

form, *Journey to a War* is a very different book. It seeks to announce not the metaphorical reach of aesthetic autonomy but the political necessity of artistic expression in wartime. Auden’s choice of Christopher Isherwood as a collaborator was a deliberate attempt to counter his own verse parables of modern life with the precision of a realist writer who could write sentences like “I am a camera.”\(^{140}\) If *Letters from Iceland* represents the search for a method that would bring modernist aesthetic autonomy and the documentary impulse together, *Journey to a War* represents the foundering not just of that method, but of the search as well.

I place this contrast at the center of the story of Auden and Isherwood’s emigration to the United States in January, 1939. Just eight months later, Britain declared war and Auden withdrew to one of the dives on 52\(^{nd}\) Street in Manhattan to watch “the clever hopes expire/Of a low dishonest decade.”\(^{141}\) While Auden and Isherwood’s decision to leave Britain was plainly seen as cowardly, less than a year earlier they had chosen to journey *towards* war in China. The reception of *Journey to a War* was colored by the fact that the two literary celebrities had emigrated by the time it was available for review. It therefore seemed they had already given up on the necessity of political engagement on the part of the artist and that their time in China was a mere jaunt. This chapter follows the sequence of Auden’s travels in the 1930s—first to Iceland, then to China, and finally to the United States—but it does not take the travel genre as a major point of examination.\(^{142}\) Rather, I read the heterogeneous form of these books as indicating the tension in the 1930s between modernist aesthetic autonomy and the rising documentary genre—


what Virginia Woolf described as the collision of “vision” and “fact.” The reading practice
Auden and his collaborators MacNeice and Isherwood advocate is both visual and textual; it is
attentive to medium specificity and to the larger stakes of representing human suffering. As a
result, it is skeptical of both the documentary genre and the detachment of high modernist
aesthetics.

Formally, these two books emphasize difference and disjunction. They work through the
overlap of prose, verse, and photograph, but each element of the overlapping reference rarely
seems to unlock the other with satisfying aesthetic or interpretive result. For example, in *Letters
from Iceland*, Auden very specifically positioned the pair of photographs titled “Head” and “Tail”
(Fig. 15) alongside MacNeice’s long diary
description of a pony trip. Is this a comment on the absurdity of artistic collaboration? Evelyn Waugh
would later attack *Journey to a War* as a publisher’s attempt to sell Auden’s poetry by bulking it up with
Isherwood’s reportage; he calls their book a
“pantomime appearance as hind and front legs of a monster.”143 Or are these two photographs just a joke
(from which we should make neither head nor tail)?
The overlapping references that make up the reading practice of both *Letters from Iceland* and *Journey to
a War* work as echoes, citations, rhymes, and

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redundancies. Their disjunctions are most apparent on the surface of the page, but they are not superficial. Instead, they indicate a politics of reference that indicates larger conceptual structures similarly dependent on disjunction, such as the common 1930s comparison of the first world war and the impending war, the pairing of “East” and “West,” and the incompatibility of the modernist and documentary elements in the books.

This heterogeneous, overlapping form is not an example of modernist collage or montage, though it bears the marks of both. In the poem “Letter to Lord Byron,” Auden says *Letters from Iceland* “is a collage you’re going to read.” Yet his offhand use of the term “collage” signals its inadequacy. Collage involves the transfer of scraps of material into a new context. It is a spatial practice of juxtaposition that emphasizes the alterity of the components to the whole that they make up. Auden, by contrast, seems to want to emphasize the weave of similarity between verse, prose, photograph, and caption. Yet this similarity often seems slight, even banal. The fragmented, mixed media of *Letters from Iceland* and *Journey to a War* are not shored up against ruin. Montage is perhaps the more powerful possibility because of Auden’s interest in film. In the late 1930s, Sergei Eisenstein wrote, in italics: “two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition.” This elevation of montage as the temporal juxtaposition of images in order to form a new whole was associated with Russian film in the 1930s—in particular Dziga Vertov’s boisterously rhythmical editing in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The GPO Documentary Film Unit under John Grierson responded to the theorization of montage in the 1920s and 30s, and indeed scholars

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recently discovered Auden’s renditions of Russian folk songs that had accompanied a screening of Vertov’s *Three Songs for Lenin* in London in 1935.¹⁴⁷ Despite this theoretical context, Auden’s use of photography does not shock.¹⁴⁸ In *Letters from Iceland* (and more so in *Journey to a War*) Auden uses photographs to deflate the modernist aesthetics of collage and montage. His juxtapositions are deenergized; they frequently baffle interpretation. Banality acts as a defense against the claims that both high modernism and the documentary movement make upon the poet in the 1930s.

This chapter takes as its central focus the discrepancy between Auden and his collaborators’ formal experimentation on the one hand and their deflated, banal aesthetic on the other. *Journey to a War*, for example, is ostensibly a book devoted to the search for the front of the Sino-Japanese War, and yet the photograph titled “Japanese front line” is both literally and metaphorically flat, a banal tourist’s snapshot (fig. 16). My explanation for this lies in the discursive connections between amateur photography, war photography, and China in the 1930s. First, by the 1930s photography had moved firmly away from pictorialism—the elevation of the camera’s work into art by imitating painterly effects—and into the mass

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¹⁴⁷ Alison Flood, “Unpublished Auden poems surface in film archive,” *Guardian* (22 May 2009). About Vertov, Grierson wrote: “*The Man With the Movie Camera* is in consequence not a film at all: it is a snapshot album. There is no story, no dramatic structure, and no special revelation of the Moscow it has chosen for a subject....[V]irtuosity in a craftsman does not qualify him as a creator.” See *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1966), 127.

¹⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin describes film as linked to modern perception, which “in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle.” See “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 175.
media. The Kodak camera was introduced in 1888 by the Eastman company in the United States, where amateur photography had become a mass leisure activity and given rise to the term “snapshot.” Professionally, “straight photography,” objectivity, impersonality, and “facts” were the order of the day. The first portable Leica with 35mm film became available in 1925, and the first portable flash in 1931. The OED traces the term “photojournalism” to the 1930s, and the Spanish Civil War is widely seen as the first to be documented by mobile, high speed, hand-held cameras like the Leica. Auden and Isherwood repeatedly ran into the already-world-famous Robert Capa in China in 1938—and so Auden snapped his picture (fig. 17).

Fig. 17: “Special Correspondent (Peter Fleming)” and “Press Photographer (Capa),” W.H. Auden, *Journey to a War* (1939).

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It is in China that Auden raises the stakes for his amateur photographic practice. He takes, for the most part, “straight” portraits, but he also attempts to capture the reality of aerial bombardment, civilian casualties, and human suffering. Christopher Bush and Eric Hayot have both traced the interconnections between China in the western, modernist imagination and photography. In his analysis of the Chinese ideograph as a modernist invention, Bush writes:

…‘to imitate the Chinese’ means to transcend the limits of ordinary consciousness by transforming language into a simulacrum of indexicality. Such an indexical language does not eliminate subjectivity entirely, but reduces it to a space of unknowing that is as impersonal, inhuman, and unknowing as a camera—or a Chinaman.  

That is, impersonal, visual immediacy is the province of both the camera, “the Chinaman,” and the written Chinese language. I will explore the issue of indexicality in Journey to a War later in the chapter, but for now I will point out that it disrupts Auden’s sonnet sequence, “In Time of War,” and reveals the fundamental incompatibility between Auden’s modernist form and his documentary ambitions in China. Like Bush, Eric Hayot writes not about China itself, but about “the habit of this reference” that historically links China and sympathy together in the western imagination. He is especially interested in the modern spectatorial relationship to suffering in which China often functions as a “hypothetical,” a particular example that seems so distant in time and place as to delimit universal philosophical claims. While Hayot explores China in English modernism through the “subjectless subjectivity” of Bertrand Russell’s philosophy and his 1922 book, The Problem of China, Auden’s representations of Chinese pain and suffering fit this paradigm, though perhaps with more immediate purchase.  

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152 For more on Russell and the “subjectless subjectivity” of modernism, see Anne Banfield, The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell, and the Epistemology of Modernism (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 70.
impersonality and immediacy of the camera to document China, but they do so to predict the war to come in Europe. What is real in China is still hypothetical in London, though not for long. This combination of China as both immediate and conjectural, real and wholly aestheticized ultimately causes *Journey to a War* to founder in its ambitions. But in Iceland Auden first attempts to mix modernist form and documentary fact.

**Only Heroic Cutting Could Save It**

In *Letters from Iceland*, Auden rhymes “enclosure” with “exposure” in the opening section of “Letter to Lord Byron,” the poem that forms the backbone of the book. He had been reading *Don Juan* on the boat to Reykjavik and decided that the Byronic sensibility—comic, irreverent, passionately political—was the best one for a poet struggling to write his first travel book. He uses a light rhyme scheme and tells Byron he decided to write when “looking round for something light and easy/I pounced on you as warm and civilisé” (181). Nevertheless, the rhyme of “enclosure” and “exposure” bears heavy weight:

Every exciting letter has enclosures,
   And so shall this—a bunch of photographs,
Some out of focus, some with wrong exposures,
   Press cuttings, gossip, maps, statistics, graphs;
I don’t intend to do the thing by halves.
I’m going to be very up to date indeed.
   It is a collage that you’re going to read. (182)

The purpose of a photograph in a travel book is to illustrate—literally to light up—to open the traveler’s written narrative to the immediacy and particularity of a momentary view. “Exposure,” in this sense, can be tied to the idea of documentary truth. Yet Auden insists that his photographs’ exposure to light is faulty—they are flawed, out of focus—and he further complicates their
function with captions clipped from lines of his own verse. Each caption sends the reader flipping back and forth through the book, looking for the source in a poem and trying to make the connection with the photograph. These connections often seem arbitrary, yet the links between snapshot and caption create a weave of references that singly may not lead to new meaning but together bind and enclose the book. *Letters from Iceland* is thus both materially and formally self-enclosed and often frustratingly self-reflexive. Here, “enclosure” indicates modernist forms that are autotelic and self-referential. The ideal of modernist enclosure separates art from the social and political world—all meaning and interpretation should be contained within the form itself. Documentary, on the other hand, claims to dwell not on form but on content, on the camera’s ability to index and expose the world it captures in its lens. This most rudimentary distinction between modernist and documentary aesthetics haunts *Letters from Iceland*, which is both a travel book jokingly intended for tourists’ use and a serious investigation of artistic autonomy. With a light rhyme, Auden captures this 1930s tension between aesthetic enclosure and documentary exposure.

The political reality of the 1930s is only intermittently apparent in *Letters from Iceland*. The heterogeneous bulk of the book consists of: letters in verse and letters in offhand prose; a section titled “For Tourists” detailing what equipment to bring (“a pair of stout gumboots”), oddities of cuisine (“half-dry, half-rotten shark”), and a reading list (“Metcalf: *The Oxonian in Iceland*, 1861”); graphs of the Relation of Habitable Land to Inhabitable Land; Icelandic fairy tales; Viking Laws; and proverbs (“Ale is another man”). The longest section is a campy diary of a horse trek taken in the company of a group of English schoolboys. MacNeice reverses all genders, calling himself “Hetty,” his correspondent “Nancy” and Auden “Maisie.” The section “Sheaves from Sagaland” excerpts short passages from the books in the bibliography and
encloses each with a witty or cutting headline. For example, “Impressions of a Viking: ‘To that place of fish may I never come in my old age.’ – Ketil Flatnose,” or “Iceland Is German: ‘Für uns Island ist das Land.’ – An unknown Nazi” (217). As this unknown Nazi’s appearance suggests, in 1936 Iceland was no escape from European politics. For Nazi propagandists, it was the cradle of Aryan virtue.\textsuperscript{153} Auden and MacNeice come across a NSDP Race Bureau magazine in a landlady’s apartment; they title a photograph of a young blond boy “Germanischer Typus.” In his first letter to Erika Mann (whom he married in 1935 so that she could acquire British citizenship), Auden describes meeting Hermann Goering’s brother at breakfast and exchanging “politenesses” (265). In the same letter, he mentions that news of the outbreak of civil war in Spain reached him just as he finished his poem “Journey to Iceland.”\textsuperscript{154} These references to European politics are as banal as the “politenesses” Auden exchanges with Goering’s brother over breakfast—they are not energized by their inclusion or juxtaposition. If anything, the news from Europe is merely the ground, or as Auden puts it at one point, the “orchestral backdrop” (350), upon which the souvenirs of travel are carefully arranged.

Those souvenirs are, for the most part, snapshots. In another letter to Erica Mann, Auden describes amateur photography in what must be an arch impersonation of 1930s documentary rhetoric: it is “the democratic art, i.e. technical skill is practically eliminated—the more fool-proof cameras become with focusing and exposure gadgets the better—and artistic quality depends only on choice of subject” (277). And yet the subject matter of these snapshots often seems less important than their poetic captions or their arrangement. The fifty photographs included in \textit{Letters from Iceland} are spread throughout the book (bound in octavo, so that one

\textsuperscript{153} Despite the fact that the Icelandic sagas were formative texts in Auden’s own personal canon, he remarks that if the Nazis are intent on creating a society based on them they are welcome to it, “a society with only the gangster virtues” (265).

\textsuperscript{154} In a strange echo, Auden and Isherwood first hear that the Germans have marched into Austria while interviewing German military advisors in China in 1938.
page of photography appears every sixteen pages), and the verse reference for each caption is often pages away from the photograph and even farther from the prose narrative that mentions the taking of the photograph. Auden checked the arrangement of his photographs and their proximity to certain pages of text so meticulously that he felt the need to apologize to his editor: “I’m sorry to be so tiresome but I must have them like that at all costs, or they lose their entire point” (771). Taken seriously, these snapshots must be read for their conjunctions and, especially, for their disjunctions. In another prose letter, Auden writes:

There is no place for the professional still photographer, and his work is always awful. The only decent photographs are scientific ones and amateur snapshots, only you want a lot of the latter to make an effect. A single still is never very interesting by itself. (277-8)

The phrase “a single still” indicates that here Auden is thinking in terms of film—specifically in terms of editing shots into a continuous strip of moving images. While “a single still” may have no effect, his fifty amateur snapshots arranged in sequence should. But in practice, Auden seems to distrust film editing as a metaphor. He captures this distrust with the phrase “heroic cutting” in a letter to William Coldstream, a former colleague at the government Film Unit.

In this verse letter, Auden makes use of the conceit of the documentary cameraman:

“Let me pretend that I’m the impersonal eye of the camera/Sent out by God to shoot on location,” he suggests, “And we’ll look at the rushes together” (346). And so he proceeds to haphazardly “look through” his memories and stories, anecdotes and jokes, noting the details of the journey for Coldstream. He concludes his impersonation of the camera with the lines:

Well. That’s the lot.
As you see, no crisis, no continuity.
Only heroic cutting could save it. (349)
Cutting connects shots—it is where the documentary filmmaker gives shape, sequence, and meaning to his material. Thus the cutting bench is one of the sites of high art in documentary film; it is where the filmmaker creates “crisis” and “continuity.” Yet Auden, despite what he calls this “little donnish experiment in objective narrative” (344), rejects the significance of the individual, objective stills he collects for Coldstream. He also rejects the role of filmmaker, or artist, who can cut these stills into one continuous, meaningful strip. This rejection is most evident when the verse stills are compared with their matching snapshots. For example, in the free verse of the letter to Coldstream Auden writes: “Now there is a whaling station during the lunch hour…. We were tired as you see and in shocking tempers…the motorboat cost 40 kronur…. And here’s a shot for the Chief—epic, the Drifters tradition.” The shot of the whaling station has already appeared pages earlier opposite a prose letter that describes Auden’s horror at the blood and gore: “everyone stuck their spades in the carcase and went off for lunch…. It gave one an extraordinary vision of the cold controlled ferocity of the human species.”

Figure 18: “Whaling Station During the Lunch Hour,” W.H. Auden, Letters from Iceland (1937).
Yet the snapshot titled “Whaling Station during the Lunch-hour” (fig. 18) seems merely descriptive, as does Auden’s verse: “The saw is for cutting up jaw-bones/The whole place was slippery with filth…” (346). This convergence of banal verse and flat image, spread out as it is over so many pages, does not burst forth with its own interpretation. It is only in Auden’s prose letter that the meaning of this image—“the cold controlled ferocity of the human species”—comes clear.

Similarly, the images that face on the page this section of the letter to Coldstream partake in an ultimately banal visual rhyme. They are “The Motorboat cost 40 kronur,” an awkward tourist shot showing MacNeice lolling on deck, and “Epic, the Drifters tradition” (fig. 19). John Grierson, Auden’s boss at the government Documentary Film Unit, made Drifters in 1929 as a homage to the herring industry in the North Sea. Auden’s image of young men rowing mightily captures some of the visual heroism of Grierson’s fishermen battling the waves, and in addition it makes MacNeice as he appears in the

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155 In his biography of Auden, Richard Davenport-Hines argues that this experience was a crucial turning point for Auden’s thought and poetry. See Davenport-Hines, 152.
accompanying photo decidedly unheroic. Both images have a pyramidal composition—a steam pipe runs up the center of the tourist shot and the rower fills the center of the epic shot. Yet while this visual rhyme bridges the cut between these two shots, it provides no interpretive ground. Auden seems to undermine both the flat tourist shot and the heroism of *Drifters*, and thus to deny the ability of cutting, collage, or montage, to make meaning from such disjunctive images.

“Cutting” can also refer to what gets left on the cutting room floor. In this sense, Auden’s travel books are guided less by film technique and more by the logic of the tourist’s scrapbook, with its diary entries, ticket stubs, newspaper clippings, snapshots, and expanses of blank white space. Taken as a whole—a travel book of miscellaneous inclusion and deliberate exclusion—*Letters from Iceland* bears some resemblance to Neil Bartlett’s 1988 book on Oscar Wilde, itself a collection of images and cuttings as well as an impassioned attempt to write a queer history. Bartlett writes: “If you or he can ‘read’ this collection of words and images, with all its attendant justifications, juxtapositions and cross references, you will have a gay story, a history.”

Bartlett’s book attempts to capture something true about Wilde’s trial and the year 1895 through both the compulsive collecting style of a “magpie” and an indirect, evasive form that must be interpreted by the reader. He argues:

The scrapbook is the true form of our history, since it records what we remember, and embodies in its omissions both how we remember and how we forget our lives. We are always held between ignorance and exposure.

The scrapbook embodies history’s omissions materially, whereas even a documentary film elides the cuts between shots in order to establish “continuity” or build towards “crisis.” As the form of

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157 Ibid., 96.
158 Ibid., 99.
queer history, the scrapbook holds its readers between memory and forgetting, between recorded history and omitted history, between enclosure and exposure.

Auden’s own sexuality and the relation it bears to his work is a fraught subject, but Bartlett’s observations add resonance to Auden’s light rhyme: rather than simply aligning enclosure with aesthetic modernism and exposure with documentary practice, this rhyme also suggests a queer politics of form. This explains the rhyming structure of these travel books: a balance between enclosure and exposure that threatens to spill into one or the other but ultimately does neither, favoring the white spaces of the scrapbook page over the elided cuts of the continuous film strip. Auden thus queers the status of the aesthetic in *Letters from Iceland*: he locates it somewhere between the isolation of Iceland and the distractions of England. In the poem “Journey to Iceland” he writes: “For Europe is absent. This is an island and therefore/Unreal” (185). The island represents an escape from political and personal context into art itself. The same poem concludes: “…and again the writer/Runs howling to his art” (186).

About *Letters from Iceland*, Robert Caserio asks: “If homosexuality’s isolated place, its autonomy, cannot survive a return home, should its reconciliation to a censorious context be accepted or tolerated?” In other words, can art and the artist survive a return from the unreal island to an England of prejudice and censure and a Europe of political upheaval? Caserio deliberately pairs homosexuality and aesthetic autonomy here, arguing that it is the travel book’s queer form itself that constitutes a resigned defense against context and a muted way to champion aesthetic autonomy.

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159 Richard Bozorth makes a similar claim: he reads Auden’s poetry for the “games of knowledge” he plays with his readers, ultimately coming to the position that Auden’s forms should be of most interest to the critic. He suggests that for Auden literary form served the purpose queer theory fills today and questions the cost to queer studies of neglecting “the historical functions of the aesthetic.” See Richard R. Bozorth. *Auden’s Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), 255.

The queer form Bartlett champions is also muted and indeterminate. His aim is to “collect, preserve, and inter-connect,” but he insists that “these scrapbooks draw no conclusions.”[161] The term “queer,” used in this way, points to the indeterminacies of history and names a formal quality that destabilizes norms—or genres—and never arrives at firm conclusions. Like Caserio, Heather Love draws a connection between queerness and the aesthetic itself: “the indeterminacy of queer,” she argues, “seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production.”[162] Here, Love describes a modernism defined not by its drive towards aesthetic enclosure and totalizing vision, but an ironic modernism that drifts between such a drive and the recognition of its impossibility. Similarly, in Letters from Iceland Auden cuts between the possibility of a wholly enclosed—or closeted—art and one that incorporates political and personal context and thus risks the possibility of exposure.

If this sort of cutting is defensive, as Caserio argues, can it also be heroic? Auden sends that biting adjective in two directions: towards Byron, the presiding spirit of Letters from Iceland and the exemplar of the traveling English poet and political martyr, and towards John Grierson, the advocate of documentary heroism. Auden is clear that the five-part letter to Byron that forms the “central thread” of the book takes as its inspiration Byron’s ability to look at himself and his society “from the outside” (180). This contrasts with another heroic English poet like Wordsworth, whose heroism is more closely aligned with the Romantic “inward eye” of the poet rather than the “impersonal eye” of the camera. To Byron, Auden writes: “I’m also glad to find I’ve your authority/For finding Wordsworth a most bleak old bore,/Though I’m afraid we’re in a sad minority/For every year his followers get more” (250). Byron’s heroism is directed outwards;

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[161] Bartlett, 96, 98.
it is a performance—he is the master of both self-revelation and public rumor, as Richard Bozorth has argued.\textsuperscript{163} Auden selects Byron as a model who has already mastered the dialectic of enclosure and exposure, performance and poetry.

The phrase “heroic cutting” is also a direct shot at the impulse behind John Grierson’s documentary film movement. Grierson first coined the term “documentary” in the late 1920s and defined it then as “the creative treatment of actuality.”\textsuperscript{164} Grierson valued “creative treatment”—or dramatization—over the technical capture of everyday life on film. In 1929 he cautioned against the massing of detail for the sake of detail alone; everything in the film must contribute to its “poetics.” Grierson was not interested in referentiality, in the massing of factual shots, but rather creating continuity, crisis, and causality. For him, the film must reveal less facts that “the blazing fact of the matter.”\textsuperscript{165} He writes:

[The movie mind] has to feel its way through the appearances of things, choosing, discarding and choosing again, seeking always those more significant appearances which are like yeast to the plain dough of the context.”\textsuperscript{166}

Artistic heroism overcomes “the plain dough of context” and turns the documentary film into a work of art and an instrument of public education. In a later set of defensive and often contradictory claims, Grierson made much of the propagandistic side of documentary film, a view perhaps appropriate for a producer whose patrons included the Empire Marketing Board and the General Post Office. In 1939 he described recent British films, some of which Auden contributed to, as portraying “the common man, not in the romance of his calling, but in the more

\textsuperscript{163} Bozorth, 154.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 138.
complex and intimate drama of his citizenship.”167 While many early documentary films romantically portrayed the working man and the industries that employed him, here Grierson makes clear that he wants to emphasize national civic education. Grierson even admits that his turn to cinema as an instrument “in both the practice of government and the enjoyment of citizenship”168 was influenced by the Empire Marketing Board’s early sponsorship, where his task was to “bring alive” the Empire by portraying it as a vehicle of citizenship, rather than of subjection. Brian Winston’s claim that Grierson was the true inheritor both of the social progress narratives of Victorian realism and the civilizing mission of nineteenth-century colonialism rings true for a man confident in British virtue, technological advancement, and national branding.169 This is the heroism of the artist as national public educator, the role Auden undermines with his term “heroic cutting” (though he would, of course, also lend his name to a generation of poets flirting with socially engaged art).

Yet in the three GPO documentary films Auden worked on, his role seems to have been to raise the everyday images caught by the camera to heroic levels. He contributed verse and some prose scripts to three films: Coalface (1935), Night Mail (1936), and God’s Chillun (written in 1935 but made in 1938, after both Auden and Grierson had left the film unit). In each of these, Auden’s verse concludes the film—or rather, after capturing the details of the coal industry, the Royal Mail train to Scotland, and Caribbean slavery and current colonial policy, these films seems to cry out against the banality of the documentary image and for the kind of heroic meaning poetry can provide. While Auden’s practical criticism of the documentary film movement is often recounted—he pointed out in a 1936 review that movies are expensive to

167 Ibid., 216.
168 Ibid., 207.
make and support can hardly be expected to come from institutions actually willing to “pay for
an exact picture of the human life”\(^{170}\)—in the same review he also describes what he sees as the
fundamental weakness of documentary film:

> Because of the mass of realistic detail which the camera records, no medium has ever been invented which is so well suited to portray individual character, and so badly suited to the portrayal of types. On the screen you never see a man digging in a field, but always Mr. Macgregor digging in a ten acre meadow.\(^{171}\)

Auden’s role at the GPO film unit seems to have been to use poetry to step back from Mr.
Macgregor and contemplate the film’s subject matter at a more universal, almost allegorical,
level.

Benjamin Britten worked together with Auden on each of these films, and the impression
they make now is overwhelmingly one of orchestration. Auden wrote verse to be sung by a
chorus and spoken by a single voice; his lines are often interrupted by percussion or by voices
chanting statistics and facts; his meter frequently replicates the rhythms of the film’s montage.
*Coalface*, perhaps the most avant-garde of these productions, is an assemblage of sound more
than anything else. Auden contributes a song for female chorus, “Be marble to his soot and to his
black be white” sing the miner’s wives, who never appear on screen. Meanwhile, the miners
themselves chant their own job titles as they march underground, and throughout the eleven-
minute film a male voice frequently interrupts with lines from a report of a mine disaster:
“Cannot account for two hundred lamps,” he intones.\(^{172}\) It is the play of realist referentiality and
modernist aesthetics that disturbs critics looking for a clear statement on mine safety and

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\(^{171}\) Ibid., 129-30.

industrial policy. Complains one recent critic, “As the individual shot becomes embedded in the unfolding montage, it…drains the shot of practically all indexical specificity, with the result that while the film declares its concern for the hardships and dangers of the miner’s life, the miners we see are left in a state of iconic generality, reduced to stereotypes.” The modernist orchestration of films like Coalface does run the risk of stereotyping its subject matter, and yet neither Grierson in his theorizing nor the film itself makes any claim to “indexical specificity.”

The aim is, rather, civic education and poetic universalization. While Night Mail, perhaps the GPO’s most famous film, includes long stretches of seemingly “indexical” film—shots of mail sorting, train scheduling, realistic sound and dialogue—the producers apparently felt they needed verse to finish “a narrative that reached an anticlimax.” Auden’s poem, which begins “This is the night mail crossing the border/Bringing the cheque and the postal order,” is known for its replication of the sound of a train racing along the tracks, but in fact two of the four sections of the poem relinquish this meter as Britten’s orchestration changes key and the camera swoops up to an aerial landscape shot. The effect is one of abstracted truth, not indexical referentiality: Auden last line is both general and inclusive: “For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?”

This awkward tension between Auden’s poetic contributions and the camera’s documentary detail also plays out in “God’s Chillun,” a film based on a script Auden and Britten put together in 1935 and called “Negroes.” The film was released in 1938, in the midst of labor unrest in the British West Indies, and mixed Auden and Britten’s 1935 script with footage shot in 1933. This bizarre nine-minute film signals Auden’s increasing interest depicting historical suffering, an interest that grows during his Iceland and China travels into his well-known 1938

175 W.H. Auden, Plays, 423.
176 The West Indian strikes and demonstrations that finally prompted the making of this film also provide George Lamming with the setting of his first novel, In the Castle of My Skin (1953). See chapter 3 below.
poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Auden and Britten’s script includes a chorus that chants the outrages of the slave trade, at one point listing the space allotted to slaves during the middle passage: “For each woman: five foot by one foot four./For each boy: five foot by one foot two….”\(^{177}\) The 1938 producers paired this section of the script with camera work that plays over African sculpture, reenactments of tribal warfare, maps of the middle passage, and blueprints of slave ships. Once in the present-day Caribbean, the producers added commentary by G. Copland Grant, the captain of the West Indian cricket team, who looks distinctly uncomfortable as he claims that all the diverse people of the Caribbean share one thing: “loyalty to the British Crown.”\(^{178}\) The cricketer bemoans the labor situation while Auden and Britten’s chorus lists the exports of the islands. This orchestrated facticity is finally overcome by more banal and general images of the sky, an old woman, and a colonial administrator riding a horse away into a stand of palms. Two stanzas of Auden’s concluding poem are read over these final images:

Acts of injustice done
Between the setting and the rising sun
In history lie like bones, each one.

But between the day and night
The choice is free to all; and light
Falls equally on black and white.\(^{179}\)

Within the sweep of history—a phenomenon seemingly captured not by the banal camera images but only by the abstractions of Auden’s verse—lie real bones. Yet this argument has a corollary: real bones cannot be depicted in verse, which must invest its subject matter with meaning. Hence

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\(^{177}\) Ibid., 425.  
\(^{178}\) “God’s Chillun,” DVD, directed by GPO Film Library (1938; London: BFI, 2009).  
the second stanza, where Auden insists on the universal human right to opt for historical justice, rather than injustice.

This dilemma is echoed in *Letters from Iceland*. In Auden’s verse letter to R.H.S. Crossman, he walks along a river amidst a country fair, taking photographs. He pronounces: “let the camera’s eye record it” and then describes the scene in lines that will provide captions to the following snapshots. He goes on to offer the artist’s prayer: “Let me perceive the images of history,/All that I push away with doubt and travel,/To-day’s and yesterday’s, alike like bodies” (242). The next three snapshots are all of bodies dancing at the country fair, and indeed, to perceive the images of history as bodies is to photograph them, not to versify about them. Yet the artist goes on praying, hoping to see images from Icelandic sagas, to see images from his own journey more clearly, and finally to see the image of the river he walks beside as “history, hostile, Time the destroyer…winding through Europe” (245). The artist wishes to see history metaphorically—that is, not to see bodies and bones, as the camera does. This overriding tension is captured in *Letters from Iceland* by the scrapbook-like arrangement of verse and snapshots, metaphorical meaning and banality, history and particularity. This queerly indeterminate form is taken up again in China, where Auden and Isherwood will question the role of the artist in depicting historical suffering.

**I Am Not a Camera**

In 1938, Auden and Isherwood arrived in mainland China after sailing from England through Suez to Hong Kong. They made their way by boat to Canton (Guangzhou) and then to Hankow, at that time the capital of wartime China (and now part of Wuhan). In Hankow, they feel themselves surrounded by clues that might allow them to predict the future: “History, grown
weary of Shanghai, bored with Barcelona, has fixed her capricious interest upon Hankow. But
where is she staying? (Everybody boasts that he has met her, but nobody can exactly say),”
writes Isherwood in the travel diary he complied from both his and Auden’s journals.180 And yet
despite the feeling that History (with a capital H) might be available to them as artists in China,
Auden and Isherwood disavow the modernist notion of ever joining aesthetics and politics in the
very form of their book. The poet and novelist travel in order to make the kind of proclamation
about a world on the brink of war that only artists could make, but they end up producing only a
banal travel book.

As the study of modernism expands geographically, it lingers over texts that challenge its
protocols, texts that trace aesthetic affiliations on a global scale or stage productive encounters
between “those two great habits of geographic thought,”181 East and West. Yet in this case the
expansive, global reading of Journey to a War bogs down in Auden and Isherwood’s clichéd
representation of Chinese difference, their flat images and aggressive amateurism. Rather than
concluding that Journey to a War simply confirms well-worn stereotypes about the European
modernist abroad, I argue that the book replicates the structure and temporality of stereotype in
its very form. A stereotype can be a defense against a disordered world, and the politics of
modernist form in Journey to a War suggests the possibility of reading less celebratory, more
defensive formations of global modernism in the late 1930s.

The term “stereotype” originally refers to a fixed plate molded from a tray of moveable
type in order to be used repeatedly. It is reductive and flattening, and by the early twentieth
century the term was in use as a figure for generalized beliefs, often about a particular group of

people. But though stereotypes are fixed, their structure has a curiously mobile temporal dimension. Walter Lippmann, an American journalist who popularized the use of this term for cognitive studies in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, points out that the stereotype precedes perception. It “stamps itself upon the evidence in the very act of securing the evidence. That is why the accounts of returning travellers are often an interesting tale of what the traveller carried abroad with him on his trip.”\(^ {182}\) A stereotype is a projection; it anticipates experience. And yet by definition it must also be a replication, a recursive device. Rey Chow’s interest in the stereotype as an aesthetic representation—an imitation, rather than a mechanical replication—leads her to link Derrida’s conceptual use of the Chinese language in *Of Grammatology* with the cliché of the “inscrutable Chinese.” The failure of outsiders to comprehend either the written Chinese language or the “corporeal writing” of the Chinese face is “retroactively projected onto the other as the other’s essential quality: inscrutability.” This retroactive projection may be incorrect, but it can also be creative, in that “the inscrutable Chinese ideogram has led to a new scrutablity, a new insight that remains Western and that becomes, thereafter, global.” In other words, the stereotype “returns”—this is Chow’s word—as deconstructive theory.\(^ {183}\) This confused temporal structure of anticipation and return and the attendant mixture of cliché and creativity describes both the temporality of Auden and Isherwood’s journey in China and the form their travel book takes.

Auden and Isherwood are on a journey that puts China in advance of Europe—they journey *towards* war. Yet in the Western imagination China is fundamentally belated, an ancient culture that has no obvious place in the modern world, and as such it cannot predict the war to come in Europe. This temporal confusion affects even the most basic facts of the trip: on two different occasions Auden and Isherwood trudge towards what they are told is the front line, but


they never know if they have arrived. Instead, they recoup at an anachronistic colonial hotel called, appropriately enough, “Journey’s End.” Looking forward in anticipation and backward in time, *Journey to a War* can also be read as marking a break in literary history. On the return journey from Shanghai, Auden and Isherwood decided to settle permanently in the United States, effectively renouncing England just as it was about to enter the war they had become famous predicting. Yet their gloomy anticipation of world war—expertly lampooned in William Empson’s parodic poem “Just a Smack at Auden” from 1937—derives much of its force from the First World War, a war “the Auden generation” was too young to experience directly.184 Empson’s poem captures this repetitive quality, and indeed participates in the curious temporal structure of stereotype itself. The “boys” Empson mocks are “waiting for the end”; they are caught up in a loop of anticipation and a series of increasingly recursive (and ridiculous) rhymes with the word “end.”185

*Journey to a War* also resembles the stereotype in other ways: it is a book that is interested in surfaces and exteriors rather than depths. It consists of Auden’s six introductory poems, the long “Travel-Diary” by Isherwood, a “Picture Commentary” of sixty-one photographs by Auden,186 and Auden’s sonnet sequence with verse commentary “In Time of War.” Auden’s photographs were cut from later editions, but the interplay between image, prose, and verse makes clear that while the political intention of the book may have been to draw a connection between the war in China and the war to come in Europe, formally Auden and Isherwood resist that narrative and emphasize disjunction above all else. Reading the book

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184 See Isherwood, *Shadows and Lions: An Education in the Twenties* (1938) for this view of the first World War.
185 Empson (who was also in China in this immediate pre-war period) begins his poem with the lines: “Waiting for the end, boys, waiting for the end./What is there to be or do?/What’s become of me or you?/Are we kind or are we true?/Sitting two and two, boys, waiting for the end.” William Empson, *Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 62.
186 Two extra photographs are stills from a Chinese propaganda film called *Fight to the Last* whose set Auden and Isherwood visited.
requires constant attention to the overlap of prose, image, and verse, and yet the connections between these forms often seem idle or superficial. Rey Chow argues that stereotyping always involves imagining the other “transformed into a (sur)face, a sheer exterior deprived/independent of historical depth.” By refusing to reveal or compound meaning and instead keeping readers at the surface of the text, *Journey to a War* frustrates most critical approaches that seek to explain the book’s form. One such approach is to separate and critique the book’s modernist and documentary impulses—but here the curious temporality of the stereotype intervenes, rendering both modernist and documentary form recursive and banal.

In its relentless account of moments of superficial, banal encounter—both in China and on the page—*Journey to a War* becomes less about geography and more about the temporality of modernist and documentary form. Rey Chow ends her discussion of the stereotype by asking: “Does the move to globalize perhaps always involve…a brushing against the other on the outer edge, an edge that is not in existence until the moment of encounter—and from which one can only dart back into the interiority of one’s own speech?” That is, if the stereotype always generates surfaces, how can we account for the movement between those surfaces? Is there a place in the study of globalization for trajectories of recoil or retraction? I suggest that in this case, Auden and Isherwood’s deflated form indicates that the geographically expansive, celebratory mode of modernist studies has temporal implications: it requires a modernism that is

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187 Chow, 66.
constantly evolving, constantly “making it new.” Journey to a War has a different temporal dimension: its modernism is recursive, preempted, and finally, belated.

Journey to a War makes an odd example of literary modernism. Its poems are all sonnets—a poetic form closely associated in English with the First World War and the modernist crisis of representation that sprang from it. But modernism is more subtly indicated through that prophet of personal relations, E.M. Forster. Auden dedicates Journey to a War to Forster, who promises “still the inner life shall pay” (494). Yet the bulk of the book avoids any kind of high modernist association between inner life and form. Isherwood’s travel diary is written with his deliberately objective realism, and Auden’s sonnet sequence “In Time of War” (later titled “Sonnets from China”) does not depict the subjectivity of the poet in wartime—instead it attempts to place the Sino-Japanese conflict in the whole arc of human history, beginning with creation. Thus the dedicatory sonnet seems nostalgic both for the kind of England Forster represents and for the kind of “inner life” celebrated by high modernism. The fact that Forster “still” matters signals Auden’s own sense of belatedness, yet the last lines of the poem also seem predictive. In those lines, Forster’s character Miss Avery comes into the garden at Howard’s End with “the sword”—a German antique that has been used for murder (according to Miss Avery). The sword’s appearance is inadequate to its meaning both in Forster’s 1910 novel and in the context of this 1939 wartime travel book. In the novel, it is wielded with all the barbarism of

190 Indeed, “incessant stylistic revolution” has long been part of the definition of modernism. See Michael Coyle’s account of Bradbury and McFarlane’s and Levenson’s introductions to the field in “With A Plural Vengeance: Modernism As (Flaming) Brand,” Modernist Cultures 1, no. 1 (Spring 2005). Susan Stanford Friedman points out “the way that generalizations about historical periods typically contain covert assumptions about space that privilege one location over others,” but the converse is also true: the new “planetarity” of modernism implies a never-ending, constantly self-renovating temporality whose structure of rupture, newness, and self-perpetuation may not apply equally across the globe. See Friedman, “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies,” Modernism/Modernity 13 (2006), 426.

191 Additionally, Forster “still” matters in the 1930s as a sort of benevolent elder of gay culture. For this, see Wendy Moffat’s recent E.M. Forster, a New Biography. In his extensive revision of the China sonnets for the 1966 collected poems, Auden cuts the word “still,” replacing it with the line “Insisting that the inner life can pay.” He also appends this Forster sonnet to the edited China sonnets, ending the whole sequence with Miss Avery and the sword.

192 Thanks to Meredith Martin for her help with the wartime English sonnet.
English gentility, yet it is also a piece of the Schlegel sisters’ cultured German heritage, and it hangs unsheathed among their books in the library. Miss Avery, a slightly dotty embodiment of rural England, holds the sword up at the beginning of a travel book that predicts another world war against Germany—is it a portent? Or is she striking the first blow? Is this novelistic object different now that it has been translated into poetry?

Fredric Jameson famously uses the descriptive style of *Howard’s End* to account for modernism as a response to the world that is “at one with the contradiction between the contingency of physical objects and the demand for an impossible meaning.” This formulation of modernism depends upon the figuration of a “spatial gap” between object and meaning, one that Jameson links to the structure of imperialism with its separation between metropolitan center and “grey placelessness” of the world. Auden’s use of the Schlegels’ sword highlights a similar geographical gap: it is a Western object utterly out of place in this Chinese setting. In Jameson’s view, modernists find a “solution” to the contradiction between object and meaning in style—in the aesthetic suggestion of spatial meaning. This formulation seems as if it should apply to *Journey to a War*. The modernist spatial meaning of the book is represented in its disjunctive form, in the awkward movement between prose, verse, and image, and in the white space that frames each photograph. But in contrast to Jameson’s cognitive map of modernism’s world, Auden and Isherwood’s stylistic “solution” does not gesture towards totality—it is meager and unrelentingly banal. Christopher Bush has argued that literary modernism’s China was often “part of an ironic and aestheticized staging of its own self-alienation.” That is, China—its culture and especially its written language—provided the West with a model of estrangement

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194 Ibid. 64.
and aesthetic autonomy in the high modernist mold. Thus Auden and Isherwood have ventured out into the semi-colonial “placelessness” of China only to encounter China as a land of elegant artifice—in other words, of style. Their modernism dead-ends in stereotype: they cannot see beyond ideas of Chinese cultural difference that have already made China into a closed and inscrutable work of art.

*Journey to a War*’s modernism thus grates against the real-world, documentary questions that the book pursues, questions about war, cultural difference, and bodily and historical suffering. Auden and Isherwood made an effort to attend press conferences, interview the powerful, photograph widely, and, in the travel diary, write with clarity and precision. But they constantly come across against other, more skilled journalists and documentary filmmakers. In the 1930s, semi-colonial China was in political ferment, with communists, nationalists, warlords, the Japanese, European traders, and missionaries all competing for converts, territory, and economic power. Politically, China was fertile ground for the West: in addition to being a front in the fight against fascism, it seemed ripe for documentary treatment. Auden and Isherwood run into Robert Capa and Joris Ivens filming *The 400 Million* (1939) and hike to the front with Peter Fleming, *Times* correspondent, brother of Ian, and writer of adventurous travel books like *News From Tartary* (1936).

In addition to being preempted on the ground, Auden and Isherwood have difficulty with the basics of the Griersonian documentary form. In order to work in this form, the “documentary man” must be able to identify and capture “actuality,” but the word “real” echoes forlornly

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196 This must have been a great disappointment, as Isherwood recalled Auden just back from Spain, hoping “We’ll have a war of our very own.” See *Christopher and his Kind* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 289. See Moynagh for a convincing account of how for European intellectuals the Sino-Japanese War was seen as a replication of the Spanish Civil War. She argues that Auden and Isherwood are in fact queering the political/tourist discourse on Spain in *Journey to a War*. 
Throughout *Journey to a War*,^197^ during an air raid in Canton, Isherwood finds it difficult to reconcile the sound of planes and his hostess’s offer of tea: “Understand, I told myself, that those noises, these objects are part of a single, integrated scene. Wake up. It’s all quite real” (502). Auden and Isherwood are constantly confronted with the difficulty of distinguishing between “real” documentary material and material that more aptly could be described as performative and stylized, like the Chinese opera they attend. There seems to be no clear divide between art and life: at the opera, they note that the stage-hands lounge “in full view of the spectators” and often serve tea to the actors, thus becoming part of the performance themselves (521). Auden and Isherwood sidestep their inability to interpret documentary material in China by adopting the role of bumbling amateurs. Their travel diary ends with the lines: “And the well-meaning tourist, the liberal and humanitarian intellectual, can only wring his hands over all this and exclaim: ‘Oh dear, things are so awful here—so complicated. One doesn’t know where to start’” (634). Even the self-deprecation here indicates that their documentary approach to China also dead-ends in stereotype: these lines seem to return them to the beginning, replicating their journey rather than concluding it.

In his first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Roland Barthes recounts a brief anecdote about Chinese art that amplifies this reading of the stereotype. For Barthes, China complicates and even defies the categories of “reality” and “art” altogether, a view he extends in his book on Japan, *Empire of Signs* (1970).^198^ He describes a wooden walnut, a perfect imitation of a real

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^197^ This is Douglass Kerr’s excellent description. See Douglas Kerr, “*Journey to a War*: ‘a test for men from Europe,’” in *W.H. Auden: A Legacy*, ed. David Garrett Izzo (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002).

^198^ This citation of Barthes links to my earlier citation of Rey Chow describing Derrida’s Sinophilia. Both Barthes and Derrida were affiliated to different degrees with the Parisian magazine *Tel Quel* in the 1960s. The *Tel Quel* intellectuals and theorists used China for both aesthetic and political inspiration. While their writing helps to elucidate modernism’s understanding of Chinese aesthetics, their politics were very different from the artists and reporters travelling in China with Auden. However, both Mao’s Red Army, in the 1930s, and his Cultural Revolution, in the 1960s and 70s, were embraced by Western intellectuals. Barthes’ travel journals from his trip to
walnut: “in this tradition no sign, absolutely nothing, must allow any distinction to be drawn between the natural and the artificial objects: this wooden walnut must not impart to me, along with the image of a walnut, the intention of conveying to me the art which gave birth to it.”

Thus in the Western imagination China becomes a place that does not distinguish between the real walnut and the walnut of artifice, whereas in the West the art of imitation announces its own status as Art. Just so, Auden and Isherwood cannot make the referentiality of the documentary genre work for them in China—they do not know what counts as “real.” To escape this difficulty, they seem to reduce the documentary imperative to the mere indexical nature of the photograph, but, as we will see, even the index is preempted by stereotypes of Chinese difference.

In the travel diary, Isherwood is explicit about the difficulties of capturing even a

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China in 1974 were recently published, and, like Auden and Isherwood, he seems to have been surprised by the dullness of the experience. See Roland Barthes, *Travels in China*, trans. Andrew Brown (New York: Polity, 2012).  
simple visual image of China—exaggeration seems to ruin both the documentary and the aesthetic approach. Auden and Isherwood approved Faber and Faber’s selection of a frontispiece for *Journey to a War*: a graphic cartoon in red, black, and white depicting Chinese refugees running from Japanese planes overhead (fig. 20). The Chinese are portrayed by the Chinese cartoonist as part-animal, with exaggerated eyes staring up in fear at the sky. Perceived exaggeration could also mar photographs. When Auden and Isherwood encountered Joris Ivens and Robert Capa in Hankow, they were attempting to make a film about China in the manner of Ivens and Hemingway’s collaboration on *The Spanish Earth* (1937). Hampered by censorship—Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist government required that they bring along a shadow cameraman who would film whatever they pointed their camera at—both Capa and Ivens later recorded dissatisfaction with the film.200 Yet Isherwood describes Capa as instead dissatisfied with his subject matter. Just back from the first Chinese victory at the village of Tai-erh-chwang, Isherwood writes: “Capa…had found the Chinese face unsatisfactory for the camera, in comparison with the Spanish. He was plainly longing to return to Spain” (581).201 *The 400 Million* itself—a propagandistic piece emphasizing the United Front of nationalists and communists against Japanese aggression—avoids portraiture. It opens with scenes of destruction and crowds of refugees and seems more comfortable at political meetings and rallies than with individual Chinese faces. At one point, a general with the Eighth Route Army is named and presented to the camera—he is grinning despite the solemn voiceover of the commentator. Suddenly he lets his smile fall, peers into the lens, and then attempts the smile again—Capa

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201 Eric Hayot’s reading of Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* draws an interesting parallel; her explanation of the controversy over Antonioni’s film *Chung Kuo* (1973) depends upon the idea that the Chinese simply do not “see” photographically in the same way as Western audiences might. Hayot writes that Sontag seems to argue that China might achieve a modernity “disconnected from the set of visual practices with which it is most commonly associated in the West.” Hayot, 218.
learned to say “don’t look at the camera” in Chinese before learning anything else. By playing up to the camera, this Chinese general fails to satisfy Capa’s notions of documentary war photography.

Capa would publish photos from China, most prominently on the cover of *LIFE* magazine in May of 1938. There the caption reads, in full:

The moon-faced Chinese boy on the cover is from the camera of Robert Capa. The boy is 15 years old. He is now standing at attention while school-children, only a few years younger, are giving his company a farewell before they leave for the front. This picture was taken in Hankow in March before the great Sino-Japanese battles of the year began. By now he may be dead. If he lives and wins he is likely in the next decade to astonish further a world that has come to look upon his nation as hopelessly backward and outmoded.

This boy is indeed “moon-faced,” even “inscrutable.” Capa shot him from below—he may not even have known he was being photographed—and his helmet casts a crescent shadow over his eyes. This editorial description of the photo captures the confused temporality inherent to the stereotype and to the visual image of China in this period: the boy looks forward towards future victory, though he may already have died for a backward, outmoded nation. Capa’s other well-known image from China is of another boy, “cut down,” according to the caption, in Tai-erh-chwang while trying to rescue his chickens. He lies in the dirt in the same curled position as the birds. These two images resonate with many of Auden’s photographs, especially, as we will see, with his image of “The Unknown Solider” and of dead and decomposing bodies. These are images that avoid the problem of exaggeration, something perhaps more difficult to do in film.

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203 *LIFE*, 16 May 1938. The full edition, including all of Capa’s images, is available on Google Books.
204 *LIFE*, 23 May 1938. The full edition, including all of Capa’s images, is available on Google Books.
The term “scorched-earth policy” has been traced to the Sino-Japanese War, and the film’s press campaign in 1939 literalizes that phrase, hyperbolizing it into a joke:

As a gag ballyhoo in advance of opening, give away small bags of “scorched earth”; appropriately labeled. Copy should mention that the earth comes from Chinese battlefields, etc. And that the bags bring good luck to their owners. Be sure to mention film and playdates.\(^{205}\)

Rather than exaggerating the “scorched earth” of war, *The 400 Million* emphasizes calm, familiarly poetic images of antique stillness, of dust: stone lions, statues of emperors, and a ruined section of the Great Wall. The commentator describes China shaking off the dust of the last century and becoming a modern nation.\(^{206}\)

Isherwood was also troubled by how a newly modern nation should appear on screen. Just after running into Ivens and Capa, Auden and Isherwood visit a film studio to watch it churn out nationalistic propaganda pieces. They see the sets from a film called *Fight to the Last* and include two stills from this film in *Journey to a War*. Isherwood writes:

> [The producer’s] weakness lay in the direction of the actors themselves—he had indulged too often the Chinese talent for making faces. All these grimaces of passion, anger, or sorrow, seemed a mere mimicry of the West. One day a director of genius will evolve a style of acting which is more truly national—a style based upon the beauty and dignity of the Chinese face in repose. (582)

Here Isherwood seems to agree with Capa that the camera exaggerates in China, it turns its subjects into actors. “The Chinese face” should instead be portrayed in its natural state, that of repose—perhaps a bit like an ancient statue slowly crumbling in the desert. In light of the images from *The 400 Million*, Isherwood seems to be hoping not for the camera to capture a modern China, as he insists, but for it instead to give back to him western stereotypes of a venerable yet

\(^{205}\) Bosma, 51. The OED traces “scorched earth” to 1937.
\(^{206}\) “The 400 Million,” DVD, directed by Joris Ivens and John Fernhout (1939).
inscrutable culture. One thinks of Yeats’s carved “Chinamen” whose “ancient, glittering eyes” are all that animates their repose. Similarly, Isherwood accuses Chinese actors of mimicking the melodramatic styles of the west, yet later when he and Auden go to the cinema and see one of these propagandistic films, they wonder “how long it would be before we were applauding similar trash, only a shade more sophisticated, at all the London cinemas” (593). The relays of colonial mimicry disrupt their forward movement and confuse the temporality of their journey.

While Isherwood seems unaware of his reliance on colonial codes of mimicry and exaggeration in his assessment of China, he does admit to the temporal falsity a camera-like view can lend to a scene. He concludes his diary with this observation. On the boat that will take them to the foreign concessions in Shanghai, he gazes out of his cabin’s porthole:

No sooner had we arrived on board than the brass-encircled view became romantic and false. The brown river in the rain, the boatmen in their dark bat-wing capes, the tree-crowned pagodas on the foreshore, the mountains scarved in mist—these were no longer features of the beautiful, prosaic country we had just left behind us; they were the scenery of the traveller’s dream; they were the mysterious, l’Extrême Orient. (623)

The simple act of framing, whether through a lens or a porthole, changes the prose of his travel diary into a dream, a romantic, exotic Orient, one that is—crucially—already a thing of the past. The camera and the conceit of the camera create a distance that plays to colonial understandings of China as an ancient culture not fully incorporated into modernity—a scene of memory rather than something to be captured by the technological innovation of the portable Leica. Just as the stillness of T.S. Eliot’s Chinese jar conquers the vicissitudes of time, so does Isherwood’s concluding image: “This, I thought—despite all we have seen, heard, experienced—is how I shall finally remember China.” Isherwood anticipates the falsity of the stereotype but aligns it with looking back, with departure.
The camera-like view can inflict violence as well as temporal confusion upon its subject. On the very first page of the travel diary, Isherwood and Auden are forced to pay a heavy customs duty on the camera, and then they spend time fantasizing about the sorts of photojournalistic shots they might get. Isherwood writes that they were determined to take pictures, “despite the printed warning against cameras which we had read in the ship’s dining-saloon: ‘During the critical time of the country, anything might be considered as a wrong deed or subjected to a guilty movement…”’ (499). The broken English of this warning implies that the camera has become not the appendage of the tourist but an instrument of war in its own right. Later, when Auden and Isherwood set out on foot towards what they are told is the front, Japanese planes appear overhead:

Whenever they came over, the soldier signaled to us to lie down. It was an unpleasant feeling lying there exposed in the naked field…Auden seized the opportunity of catching the two of us unawares with his camera. “You looked wonderful,” he told me, “with your great nose cleaving the summer air.” (552)

Isherwood tries to maintain the comic tone he has established, but he makes it clear that the Japanese pilot is looking down on a flat field where two Englishmen lie exposed as if they were in a photograph. Auden “shoots” a picture as if he were a soldier, firing in self-defense. The published photograph that must depict this scene alas does not

Fig. 21:“Enemy Planes Overhead,” W.H. Auden, Journey to a War (1939).
emphasize Isherwood’s “great nose” in profile. Titled “Enemy planes overhead,” it is a mid-range shot of an amused-looking Chinese soldier and a ridiculous Isherwood crouching in a shallow trench (fig. 21). Auden himself appears in the paired photograph titled “In the Trenches” looking as if he had just hopped in to light a cigarette out of the wind (fig. 22).

This deflated style also resembles the kind of realism Isherwood was becoming known for. *Journey to a War* was published in the same year as *Goodbye to Berlin*, which famously opens with a description of the narrator as camera, “quite passive, recording, not thinking.” This was a metaphor Isherwood would never really be able to shake off:

This phrase, *I am a camera*, was the title John van Druten chose for the play he made out of the novel, in 1951. Taken out of its context, it was to label Christopher himself as one of those eternal outsiders who watch the passing parade of life lukewarm-bloodedly, with wistful impotence. From that time on, whenever he published a book, there would always be some critic who would quote it, praising Mr. Isherwood for his sharp camera eye but blaming him for not daring to get out of his focal depth and become humanly involved with his sitters.

Indeed, remarks of this sort echo throughout the criticism of Isherwood’s section of *Journey to a War*. If taking a photograph can inflict violence, Auden’s tourist snapshots and Isherwood’s passive realism turn instead to the banal in an attempt to absolve themselves. Isherwood seems

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208 Isherwood, *Christopher*, 58.
aware of this move, and he describes it in a less-often-noted reference to photography in the final section of *Goodbye to Berlin*, “Berlin Diary, Winter 1932-33.” On the last page, the narrator remarks on the unsettling mixture of everyday life going on alongside Nazi violence in the streets: everything bears a “striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past—like a very good photograph.”\(^{209}\) The “objective narrative” of the camera not only places whole cultures and political climates safely in the black-and-white past, it normalizes trauma and suffering.

Thirty years later Auden makes the same point about photography. His poem “I am not a camera” consists of brief aphoristic stanzas, each expressing distaste or distrust of the camera’s various capabilities. “It is very rude to take close-ups,” begins one stanza, and observes that even lovers close their eyes as they zoom in for a kiss. It may be instructive to use microscopes, another stanza argues, but “we should apologise/to the remote or the small for intruding /upon their quiddities.” The poem concludes: “The camera may/do justice to laughter, but must/degrade sorrow.”\(^{210}\) As a comment on the documentary decade and the lead-up to the second world war, Auden’s late poem seems to suggest that the photographers, filmmakers, and war correspondents intent on documenting China had it all wrong: they should have been content with depicting laughter—or what they perceived to be China’s exaggerated style—they should have known their tools could not depict suffering or sorrow. And yet this is Auden’s late view—from 1969, an era defined by a different war. In banal, flat, and often awkward moments in *Journey to a War*, Auden does attempt to depict suffering. Alexander Nemerov argues that Auden’s famous poem “*Musée des Beaux Arts*,” written in Brussels just after his return from China, alludes in its vision of Icarus falling from the sky to the pictures of aerial warfare and bombing victims Auden took

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\(^{209}\) Isherwood, *Berlin Stories*, 207.

in China. In this reading, the ploughman who takes up the foreground of the Brueghel painting
and calmly ignores Icarus’s plight at first seems to be a figure for the apolitical artist. This artist-
figure is placidly unaware of the disaster unfolding behind him and is “intent on producing only
the beauty of his own sacredly isolated lines.”

And yet because of Auden’s experience in
China and the photographs he took there, Nemerov goes on to argue that in fact the painting
positions the artist as one who acknowledges the suffering that takes place behind his back.

This suffering is “not so much ignored as changed into the smooth and meticulous lines of a
cultivated production that deeply acknowledges, and indelibly registers, the suffering it would
appear to exclude.”

Brueghel registers this suffering in the knife he cunningly paints into the
lower left corner of the canvas, according to Nemerov. But rather than locating suffering in
artistic technique and subtlety, Auden seems to locate it in those methodical furrows themselves.
There is something flat and impervious in Auden’s own lines of verse in the sonnet sequence “In
Time of War.”

Each of the twenty seven sonnets in the sequence as it was originally published has its
own theme: Auden begins with creation and the garden of Eden, then describes the advent of
language and the role of the poet. He attempts to describe the Middle Ages and the beginning of
secularization and industrialization in such a way as to untether these phenomena from Europe
and make them global. In Sonnet XIII, he reaches the present day in China, noting that “History
opposes its grief to our buoyant song”—that is, history and art are at odds. In this part of the
sequence, the sonnets are devoted to patients in a Chinese military hospital, refugees, Japanese

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211 Alexander Nemerov, “The Flight of Form: Auden, Bruegel, and the Turn to Abstraction in the 1940s,” *Critical
Inquiry* 31 (Summer 2005): 798.

212 In an offhand remark on the relationship between propaganda and art, Ivens claims Breughel as a fellow
documentarian: “Take Breughel, for example. If he were living, I am sure he would be an excellent documentary
Bakker (Amsterdam Univ. Press, 1999), 251.

213 Nemerov gives more credit to the painting than to Auden’s poem, arguing that Auden is just “a more oblique,
modernist practitioner of traditional modes of commemoration” (810).
bomber pilots, even the pop songs of the era. This sequence is often described as allegorical in its attempt to place the war in China in the context of all human history and to relate it to the war to come in Europe. But read in the context of Auden’s “Picture Commentary” and Isherwood’s meditations on the power of the camera, another feature stands out. These sonnets are also often indexical. That is, they are littered with awkwardly indicative lines, moments where the poetic voice insists on absolute, incontrovertible referentiality. Sonnet XIV begins: “Yes, we are going to suffer, now; the sky/Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real.” These lines overlap with Isherwood’s prose description of feverishly directing his gaze up at the night sky in Hankow, following the searchlights and looking for enemy planes. In Sonnet XX, Auden writes: “We live here. We lie in the Present’s unopened/Sorrow.” Here, now, what’s “real” all chime awkwardly in Auden’s verse.

The index, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, differs from the icon or the symbol in that it bears a direct trace of its object. Thus a footprint indicates human presence, a weathervane gauges the wind, a photograph reveals the traces of light on sensitive paper. But the index also can indicate without a physical trace: the word “this” is indexical, especially when paired with a pointing finger, as are the words “now” and “here.” These terms are empty in that their referents can shift. When used, they signify only one instance, one moment in time. Rosalind Krauss calls this the “meaningless meaning” of the index and connects it to the photograph’s need for a caption, some text that will explain its meaning. In Journey to a War, Auden’s photographs are surrounded and supplemented by text—the overlap of prose, verse, and photograph seems to govern the book, and yet this structure is often obscure, suppressed,

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214 The sonnet sequence has been read as an allegory of universal history, Marxist determinism, and Christian providence.
215 These examples are Mary Ann Doane’s. See “Indexicality: Trace and Sign,” Differences 18, no. 1 (2007), 2.
inscrutable. The “meaningless meaning” of Auden’s images and terms like “this,” “now,” and “real” in his verse remains. We are left with nothing but indexicality: singularity, indication, existence, a “brute and opaque fact,” as Doane puts it. Peirce also makes this point. For him, “reality is insistency…brute, irrational insistency.” Like the banal tourist snapshot, the indexical merely insists on presence, it does not include its own interpretation or explanation. Thus within the structure of Auden’s sonnets lies an indexical strain that participates in the deflated, banal style of the whole travel book.

One such moment emerges from an overlapping cluster of prose, photographs, and verse that centers around the subject of war itself. After an unwanted lecture by a Chinese newspaperman with a map, Isherwood remarks that everything in the presentation “was lucid and tidy and false.” He records Auden’s remark:

War is bombing an already disused arsenal, missing it, and killing a few old women. War is lying in a stable with a gangrenous leg. War is drinking hot water in a barn and worrying about one’s wife. War is a handful of lost and terrified men in the mountains, shooting at something moving in the undergrowth. War is waiting for days with nothing to do; shouting down a dead telephone; going without sleep, or sex, or a wash. War is untidy, inefficient, obscure, and largely a matter of chance.

At this point in the prose diary Isherwood has already recounted the visit to the bombing of a disused arsenal outside Hankow. Of the five hundred civilians they had heard were killed, they saw five corpses waiting for coffins. One of them Isherwood describes in graphic detail—an old woman whose face has already been covered up but whose hand clenches and unclenches. Auden titles what must be this photograph “The Innocent.” Its gruesomeness is outdone by the

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218 Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 100.
219 This remark was first made not in China but on the BBC back in England. Auden and Isherwood were often asked to lecture on conditions in China after their return. See “China,” Midland Magazine, BBC Midland Home Service, 16 January 1939, in Mendelson’s Prose, vol. 1, 489-90.
other photograph paired with it on the page (fig. 23). “The Guilty” shows a decomposing corpse half buried in the dirt with a similarly extending arm. The diary, a hundred pages earlier, describes seeing a dog digging up the grave of an accused spy near the front. Isherwood hears that the spy was a peasant who came to town and blushed when he asked where the general lived, thus confirming his guilt. Auden’s captions gloss over the details of Isherwood’s prose in order to abstract them into an allegory of good and evil, similar to Capa’s image of the dead boy and his chickens. The two photographs on the facing page depict a “Dynamited Railway Bridge” and “Houses (Chapei in Shanghai).” The awkward photograph of the bridge is mostly dark—perhaps Auden took it through a train window. The way the bridge has fallen and is covered with shadow resembles the fallen women covered with a blanket. And the decomposition of the spy’s body resembles the jagged destruction of buildings in Shanghai. The visual rhymes seem to abstract and equalize these images of death and destruction, none of which could, of course, be recorded on the Chinese reporter’s lucid and tidy map.

This overlap of photographic image, allegorical caption, and everyday prose also leaks into Sonnet XVI, which begins: “Here war is simple like a monument…” The sonnet describes the monumentality of war, where “Flags on a map assert that troops were sent,” but adds the living experience of troops, who “unlike an idea, can die too soon.” The seemingly offhand details of Auden’s prose remarks quoted earlier appear again: the map obviously, but also the telephone, the hot water, the men missing their wives. The sestet is less detailed:

But ideas can be true although men die,
And we can watch a thousand faces
Made active by one lie:

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking; Dachau.
Here Auden links East and West in the final line with a semicolon, yet the line is almost impossible to scan. In Chinese, “Nanking” (Nanjing) is pronounced with a rising and a flat tone, but no variation in stress. In German, which Auden studied, the stress in “Dachau” lands on the first syllable, reducing the effectiveness of its rhyme with “now.” In English, it reads as four stressed, or pointed, beats in a row. One can almost hear the finger on the map, jabbing at places that are evil, now.\footnote{Auden’s prescient reference to Dachau refers to its status as a camp for political prisoners. It was established in 1933, but expanded to imprison Jews only after Kristallnacht in 1938.} The pointing finger is one of the best examples of the index, again according to Peirce. It insists upon presence, and the four pointed beats here almost drown out the cluster of
prose and photographic references that supplement and overdetermine this sonnet. But the pointing finger never coincides with what it points to; it must precede it. Just so, the emphasis of Auden’s line falls on the caesura between Nanking and Dachau—East and West are joined but remain fundamentally separate. In completing the rhyme with “now,” Europe is put in the present, China again relegated to the past.

In another overlapping cluster of prose, verse, and photograph, the indexical again partakes in the confused temporality of Journey to a War. The “Unknown Soldier” is a legacy of World War I, a conceit that raises a single soldier’s remains to the level of symbol in order to commemorate all the war’s dead. Yet a symbol, in Peirce’s taxonomy, is arbitrary in that it does not have to bear any physical relation to its referent. The tomb of the unknown soldier, however, holds a body that functions like the terms “this” and “here.” The entombed remains insist upon the death of one soldier, though their actual referent can shift in meaning to encompass any mourner’s son or husband, or indeed, all the war’s dead. The only sonnet Auden wrote while in China takes as its theme the unknown Chinese soldier, and in a letter home he called what would become Sonnet XVIII “a Sassoon sonnet,” referring to the World War I poet Siegfried Sassoon and drawing attention to the almost sacrosanct connection in English poetry between the sonnet form and the subject of war.221 In drawing this connection, Auden admits that any monument to the unknown soldier can be both “simple” and profound as in Sonnet XVI, but also a propagandistic tool; The 400 Million includes shots from the unveiling of the Chinese tomb of the unknown soldier. The event resembles a political rally, complete with speeches, verbal attacks on the Japanese, and confetti. In Hankow, Auden and Isherwood were invited to a tea-party where they were introduced to leading Chinese intellectuals. One of them writes and translates a poem in their honor. “Shoulder to shoulder for civilization fight./Across the sea, long

journey, how many Byrons?” it concludes with a possible allusion to *Letters from Iceland* (575). Auden responds with his sonnet on the unknown soldier, which the local paper, *Ta Kung Pao*, published alongside a Chinese translation the next day. Auden and Isherwood discover that the line “Abandoned by his general and his lice” has been translated as “The rich and the poor are combining to fight”—evidently the wartime censors found it “too brutal, and maybe, even, a dangerous thought,” wrote Isherwood (579).

Despite being turned into a sort of internationalist piece of propaganda, Auden’s poem sticks in the octave to its model of Sassoonian satire: “no vital knowledge perished in his skull;/his jokes were stale; like wartime, he was dull.” The soldier is simply “used” by his general and his lice and vanishes into the dust (a motif that recalls scenes from *The 400 Million*). It is the role of the unknown soldier to be unexceptional and unremembered with any sort of particularity: “He will not be introduced/When this campaign is tidied into books…/His name is lost for ever like his looks.” Yet Auden *does* publish a photograph titled “Unknown Soldier,” an image of a Chinese fighter perhaps on guard duty, staring off into the distance down a village road (fig. 24). This is the last photograph in the “Picture Commentary,” and it is the only one that appears alone, unpaired on the page. The sonnet sequence follows the photographs and thus this image acts as a sort of enjambed rhyme with Sonnet XVIII, despite the claim there that the unknown soldier’s “looks” will *not* be preserved for history. The living soldier in the photograph looks towards the sonnet and, with this rhyme, toward his inevitable death, just like Capa’s cover image for *LIFE*. The sonnet concludes:

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He neither knew nor chose the Good, but taught us,
And added meaning like a comma, when
He turned to dust in China that our daughters
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Be fit to love the earth, and not again
Disgraced before the dogs; that, where are waters,
Mountains and houses, may be also men.

The unknown soldier adds meaning like a comma, a mere mark of punctuation, one that links, in *Journey to a War*, the photographic commentary and the sonnet sequence, and links, in history, the first World War, the Sino-Japanese War, and the war to come in Europe. He looks forward, out of the book, and thus partakes in the confusing temporality of the photograph, which many theorists have described: Barthes calls it “an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then”; Doane the “once-now”; Berger, “a strange historical tense: *I looked like this.*”

Despite the insistent indexicality of this image, it cannot escape the stereotype. Perhaps the

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image simply echoes the temporality of Auden and Isherwood’s China, a place that is simultaneously a dusty antique and Europe’s future. Perhaps the image is just the fulfillment of Isherwood’s desire to see “the Chinese face” portrayed in repose. In both the case of the Nanking/Dachau and the Unknown Soldier cluster of overlapping references, the indexical strain that underlies Auden’s sonnets can also be read as participating in the banality of racial and colonial stereotypes.

*Journey to a War*’s form stresses disjunction over interpretation—the multiplicity of meanings that can be read into any cluster of verse, prose, and image are ultimately flattened by the banality of stereotype. In his flat, insistent lines of verse and his amateur snapshots, Auden seeks to make that very banality signal the universally “meaningless meaning” of human suffering in wartime. Despite embarking for China under the influence of both high modernism and the documentary movement, Auden and Isherwood reject these projects’ shared desire to mingle aesthetics and politics. Their recourse to the banal seems to constitute a defense against the imperative to conjoin representation and education, to depict and thereby relieve human suffering. The index, they seem to say, can only point to its own presence, not forward, to utopia. And yet even in this meager ambition our English travelers resort to stereotypes of Chinese difference. In the Western imagination China is also the land of the natural sign—the ideograph—that signifies without the arbitrary phonetics and symbols of an alphabet. In China, Auden and Isherwood are searching for a signifier—linguistic or photographic—that is adequate to human suffering. But in this they are already preempted. Christopher Bush argues that “…Modernism’s China represents a kind of extended thought experiment in, or allegory of, the
efficacy of the signifier.” That is, modernism’s idea of China and Chinese writing preempts Auden and Isherwood’s efforts to strip the sign down to its bare, banal, “natural” insistency.

The confused colonial temporality of *Journey to a War* not only forecloses the travelers’ forward journey, it makes it clear that their modernism is also belated—perhaps it too is becoming a fixed stereotype. In late 1938, after their return from China, John Lehmann at the Hogarth Press commissioned a similarly illustrated travel book on the United States from Auden and Isherwood. But they soon abandoned the idea. The form had already lost its bearings and become obsolete, as its proposed title made clear—it was to have been called *Address Not Known*.

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*Bush*, xxiii.
The London firm Michael Joseph published George Lamming’s first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, in 1953. The hardcover edition included a frontispiece and endpapers by Denis Williams, another Caribbean artist working in London (fig. 25). The frontispiece portrait is clearly Lamming himself—it is captioned and bears a strong resemblance to the photographs Carl van Vechten took of Lamming during his 1955 Guggenheim Fellowship in the United States. Yet the portrait looks much more like a sculpture than it does a photograph. The shoulders and torso are quickly sketched and nonrepresentational, as in a bust. The eyes lack pupils—they have no focus or direction to their gaze. Read through its historical antecedents, this frontispiece seems to be a paratextual indication of genre: *In the Castle of My Skin* is a semi-autobiographical novel that was perhaps seen to participate in the long history of black writing in English. Olaudah Equiano, for example, published his *Interesting Narrative* in London in 1789, but in the frontispiece portrait, Equiano makes direct eye contact with readers. Lamming, by contrast, seems to deliberately ignore our attention. His authorial persona is aloof, autonomous, even
visionary. This is a portrait of the artist as a young man (and indeed, early reviewers often compared Lamming to Joyce). While it is tempting to read this image as a statement of modernist ambition by a colonial subject in postwar London, its iconography may also have been a racialized publishing gambit capitalizing on the increasing popularity of Caribbean writing in the 1950s. This interpretive tension marks both the frontispiece and the period in which it was published: do Williams’s drawings turn Lamming’s novels into mid-century artifacts, slightly old-fashioned, a bit exotic, and disconnected from what we now call the postcolonial novel? Or are they art objects that consciously participate in the long history of the novel in English and, through Lamming’s visionary gaze, make history in their own right?

It is not over-reading to attend to the sightlines implicit in the portrait that announced this 26-year-old Barbadian on the literary scene in London. The language of visual perception fills The Pleasures of Exile, Lamming’s 1960 book of essays. This work looks back on the Windrush era, which began in 1948 with the British Nationality Act and the docking of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury with 500 Caribbean emigrants. Lamming’s essays are well known for their reworking of The Tempest, with the result that Lamming is often described as a theorist of language in the context of colonialism. Yet The Pleasures of Exile should also be read as a theorization of seeing and sightlines in the era of decolonization. Lamming describes the book as “really no more than a report on one man’s way of seeing, using certain facts of experience as evidence and a guide” (56). “Seeing,” as it is used here, is much more than a metaphor for knowing, and Lamming’s language even in this brief passage reveals the attraction in the 1950s

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224 For readings of Lamming’s novels with a focus on perception, vision, and scopic power of colonialism, see Nicole Rizzuto, “Realism, Form, Politics: Reading Connections in Caribbean Migration Narratives,” Comparative Literature 63, no. 4 (2011): 383-401; and Mary Lou Emery, Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

225 Caliban is colonized and excluded by Prospero’s language, but it is also a “gift,” a “contract” from which neither he nor Prospero can withdraw. See George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2004), 15. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
Like Fanon in the same period, Lamming incorporates the language of visual perception into his assessment of the colonial relation; for him, colonialism is “simply a tradition of habits that become the normal way of seeing” (157) and “an inherited and uncritical way of seeing” (76). Lamming’s philosophical and cultural interests in this period draw attention to the visual images that populate his prose. By reading Lamming’s verbal images alongside the paratextual drawings published in magazine excerpts and in first editions of his novels, I demonstrate how postcolonial literature in English emerged in the Windrush era as deeply concerned with the visual image, especially with how the visual image can register changing ways of seeing and being seen.

As in Woolf and Auden’s illustrated texts from the 1930s, seeing, for Lamming, is never just a metaphor for understanding. For Woolf, seeing is mediated by gender, for Auden, it is mediated by the camera, and for Lamming it is the colonial relation. All three writers turn to the surface of the image to represent and critique these conditions of seeing. Where in the 1930s Woolf and Auden use the banality of the flat image defensively, as a mode of self-protection in a world sliding towards war, Lamming and his Windrush-era cohort of artists and writers cannot avail themselves of this strategy. That mode is, in fact, what they write against—the conventional and banal orders of colonial representation. Compounding this difference,

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226 This attraction was reciprocal: Sartre and de Beauvoir serialized a French translation of In the Castle of My Skin in 1954 in Les Temps Modernes. See George Lamming, “Les Îles fortunées” (Mars-Juin 1954). The title In the Castle of My Skin, which seems of a piece with existentialist language, in fact comes from Derek Walcott’s early poem “Epitaph for the Young.” In the French translation, it simply becomes “the fortunate islands,” a reference to the dismaying “showers of blessing” in the novel’s opening scene.

227 J. Dillon Brown notes that “For Lamming, the postcolonial problem is an ‘inherited and uncritical way of seeing,’” but Brown offers scenes of critical (and uncritical) reading in Lamming’s novels as an antidote. In an article on the Chinese novelist Eileen Chang, Rey Chow describes the easy semantic slippage from seeing to understanding or reading as “the traditional practice of simply de-sensualizing seeing.” When seeing is viewed as other than a convenient metaphor, questions arise about sensory experience, about the surface of the image, and its semiotic status in language. See “Seminal Dispersal, Fecal Retention, and Related Narrative Matters: Eileen Chang’s Tale of Roses in the Problematic of Modern Writing,” Differences 11, no. 2 (1999): 153-76. See also, J. Dillon Brown, “Changing the Subject: The Aesthetics and Politics of Reading in the Novels of George Lamming,” in The Locations of George Lamming, ed. Bill Schwarz (London: Warwick Univ. Caribbean Studies/Macmillan, 2007).
Lamming consciously writes in the wake of modernism, and the critic Saikat Majumdar has gone so far as to suggest that banality and boredom in the colonial periphery actually shaped modernist aesthetics in the metropole. Thus while Lamming’s style is often distinctly modernist—experimental, dense, and difficult—and his aesthetic shaped by exile in the Joycean mode—the artist caught between the collectivity of village life and the loneliness of his metropolitan ambitions—his modernism is always in tension with colonial modes of representation. The frontispiece makes this apparent: is it a portrait of the artist as a young man or is it an exoticized marketing ploy? Is it both? I turn to visual images, both verbal and graphic, in Lamming’s early work because they represent fields of conflict between the legacies of high modernism and the conventions of colonial realism.

The visual image is also the place to pursue the importance of phenomenology for writers in the era of decolonization. In this chapter, I will track Lamming’s engagement with Sartre’s writings from the late 1940s and gesture towards the contemporaneous work of Frantz Fanon. But the link between phenomenology and the visual image elaborates a wider poetics of decolonization at midcentury. The visual images that litter mid-century writing—whether verbal or graphic—present surfaces that disrupt the texture of the novel. These illustrated texts thus draw attention to the surface of aesthetic form itself: to the borders between word and image, between subject and object, between seeing and being seen. Phenomenology is also, in part, a science of surfaces: of appearances, sensations, and their descriptions. At midcentury, Fanon is famous for detailing the phenomenology of the black body: at first, he assumes that underneath

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228 Majumdar does not discuss Windrush or other mid-century novels. See Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013).
the “corporeal schema” with which he approaches the world lies a “historico-racial schema.” But, “assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.” That is, his sense of self is over-inscribed by the surface appearance of his skin. Or, in Gayle Salamon’s words, “The body Fanon describes is all surface.” In the illustrated texts of decolonization, the surface of aesthetic form meets the phenomenological surface of the skin. And as Fanon’s description indicates, this is often a violent encounter. Just as Fanon’s violent description overturns dualistic ideas of surface and depth, body and world, a brief anecdote from Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* indicates the related aesthetic problem of the impossibility of separating the violence of form from its content.

Lamming recalls a question posed to him by a sixth-form girl in British Guiana sometime in the early 1950s: “Mr Lamming,” she asks, “would you say that the praise for your books, and all the things the English critics say about them are only due to the novelty of what you are writing about?” That is, are you merely writing new, exotic content into the traditional form of the English novel? Lamming can only hope his noncommittal answer contains “the right tone of ambiguity and rebuke” (28). The girl’s question assumes a clear and objective difference between content and form, between referent and representation, between reality and art. This in itself is an element of the colonial relation and of the power of colonial modes of representation to differentiate absolutely between self and other. In Timothy Mitchell’s influential reading, this distinction between the representation and the external reality to which it refers is most powerful in the realm of visual culture. Taking the motif of the colonial exhibition as emblematic of the politics of colonial order, he writes, “The order and certainty of colonialism was the order of the

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exhibition, the certainty of representation itself.” Lamming writes that he did not take the time to undo the “certainty of representation” in the Guyanese schoolgirl’s question (he calls it “her assurance”). Instead, he remarks to his readers: “The girl does not yet understand what it means to be colonial” (30). This anecdote (and Lamming’s refusal to engage the girl in discussion) indicates how focusing on the visual image in an emerging postcolonial context can be especially fraught.

One of the ways to understand what it means to be colonial, for Lamming and other Windrush artists, is to understand the ways in which the visual image can transcend the “assurance” of these binary orders of representation. While postcolonial theory teaches us to interrogate the visual image and to extract its ideological content, this too often turns the image into just another discursive text. Lamming and other Windrush writers were interested in the claims and capacities of the visual image itself. How do you make an image at midcentury that resists the colonial order of representation? Lamming refused to produce what he called “documentary” fiction—novels meant to write the colonial subject back into history. He would not fill in the gaps and elisions of colonial representation and thus weaken the past violence of its forms. And yet even as Lamming and his illustrators experimented, in the modernist mode, with estrangement from conventional orders of representation, the “documentary” or realist imperative remained (and still remains) one of the major modes of reception for their work. A brief example from In the Castle of My Skin will demonstrate how Lamming’s modernist style depicts the violence of colonial representation via visual images—images that simultaneously retain the realist imperative to “document” colonial experience.

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Modernism defamiliarizes the routine, interrupts the habitual, and introduces new ways of seeing. In Victor Shklovsky’s famous formulation, “[Art] exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stoney.”\(^\text{233}\) But in the colonial experience, the stone may not, in fact, be stoney. Wordsworth’s daffodils frequently stand in for this phenomenon: they are a canonical literary image that has no visual referent in the tropics.\(^\text{234}\) In Lamming’s first novel, a group of schoolboys apply their philosophy to copper pennies they have just won in a school competition. They begin to wonder how the English king managed to get his profile onto each coin. They experiment with making pencil rubbings of the pennies. They argue about whether or not a photograph of the king has been stuck to the copper. One even proposes the Platonic idea of an original, first penny from which all others are copies. They conclude that the impress of the king’s face must be made by a shadow king, otherwise how would the king have time to do anything else? “The English,” one of the boys explains, “were fond of shadows…and even the king, the greatest of them, worked through his shadow.”\(^\text{235}\) These pennies are, according to John Plotz, “fatally compromised by the very act of imagination that is required to constitute [them] as a lesson of the empire.”\(^\text{236}\) They should circulate as currency, as symbols of exchange, but instead the schoolboys see them as objects, or—in my view—as visual images. Their misunderstanding is based first on the fact that they take the visual too literally: they assume that the pennies must actually bear the physical trace of the English king. Their second mistake is to conclude that shadows can do the work the real king does not have time for, or, in other words, that there is nothing lost between an object and its shadow. By turning pennies into images, Lamming shows


\(^{234}\) See Derek Walcott’s essay “A Muse of History,” Stuart Hall’s essay “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” and Naipaul’s impatience with a fellow Caribbean writer making this point in his essay “Jasmine.”


how much is, in fact, lost between the imperial object and its representation as it circulates in the colonial world. He defamiliarizes the colonial order of representation, but he also makes the empty terms and misplaced referents that characterize a colonial education less shadowy. They have been documented and added into the tradition of the novel.

My readings of Lamming and his illustrators thus depend on a structure of encounter between the modernist inheritance of difficulty and defamiliarization and the realist imperative to write new experience into the English novel. For Lamming, this structure of encounter is specific to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Phenomenology can register the encounter with the visual image; it can describe the recuperative power of accurately portraying the colonial experience and the violence of fitting that experience into forms of art shaped by colonial history. In this chapter, I first describe the role of modernist abstraction for Lamming’s illustrators and in Denis Williams’s 1963 novel *Other Leopards*. I then turn to Lamming’s interest in Sartre in the 1950s and his use of ekphrasistic visual images in *The Emigrants* (1954). I argue that Windrush writers used abstract and ekphrastic images to depict realist scenes of colonial life and to show the ways in which that same colonial experience can distort and empty its objects of meaning, thus upending those very modes of depiction.

**Encounters: Gloria Escoffery and Denis Williams**

Drawing by Denis Williams and the Jamaican artist Gloria Escoffery appear in the yellowing magazine pages and dust jackets that mark Lamming’s arrival on the literary scene in the early 1950s. Before turning to these drawings, I uncover archival material describing the literary debates Lamming, Escoffery, and Williams were involved in at the time. In mid-century London. Caribbean writing was seen as breaking new ground and reinvigorating the postwar
publishing scene (perhaps as a counterpart to the poster campaign that encouraged West Indian emigration to help rebuild “the mother land”). Diana Athill, the editor of V.S. Naipaul and many others at the firm André Deutsch, writes in her memoir that “for a time during the fifties and early sixties it was probably easier for a black writer to get his book accepted by a London publisher, and kindly reviewed thereafter, than it was for a young white person.”237 And yet publishers, reviewers, and the Windrush writers themselves were anxious to avoid charges of local-color writing, exoticism, or regionalism. One of the trade advertisements for *A House for Mr. Biswas* proclaims Naipaul to be “no longer one of the best writers from the West Indies,” but one of the best writers anywhere, as if these were mutually exclusive.238 This is the context in which Lamming and Naipaul debate style on the BBC Radio Program *Caribbean Voices* and Escoffery and Williams illustrate Lamming’s novels. After outlining the parameters of literary debate in the 1950s, I will argue that these drawings should be seen as phenomenological images that stage the encounter between modernist abstraction and realist referentiality.

*Caribbean Voices* employed many, if not all, of the Windrush cohort of writers. It was edited and announced by Henry Swanzy from 1946-54 and by Naipaul from 1954-56 and then discontinued in 1958. Lamming has described the BBC as “the great impersonal hand” (45) that helped to feed West Indian writers, and indeed it played an important role in the explosion of West Indian novels written, published, and marketed in London in this decade. In a 1955 broadcast, Naipaul lamented, “It is said that we all have one book inside us; but that doesn’t make us writers, and I fear that a real danger now exists that many West Indians will be writing

one autobiographical novel apiece and little besides.”

According to Lamming, Henry Swanzy was after “local color” on “Caribbean Voices,” though Naipaul recalls that Swanzy aimed to lift West Indian writing “above the local.” The show collected poetry, short stories, and criticism from writers in the Caribbean and in London, selected and arranged the work in London, and then broadcast it back to the islands once a week. It never appeared on the domestic service in England. It was the perfect example of “the colonial contract as it operated in the wholesale department of culture,” according to Lamming (67). “Local color” was therefore not just for English readers to consume; it was selected and nurtured in London for export back to the colonies and it defined what was and what was not novelistic.

On the air George Lamming frequently used the term “documentary” pejoratively. In 1950, he reviewed A Morning at the Office by Edgar Mittelholzer, the first Caribbean novelist to establish himself in England and a proponent of “social documentation.” Lamming concludes—reluctantly—that Mittelholzer “has done a job that needed doing; he has exposed one of the greatest evils in West Indian society [racial prejudice] even though he has had to sacrifice a considerable amount of art in the process.” His view of Sam Selvon’s realism was

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239 V.S. Naipaul, (1/22/56) “Survey of the Literary Output of West Indian Writers in 1955,” Caribbean Voices (BBC) [typescript]. BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham, Reading, UK. In his recent authorized biography, Naipaul argues that his success was due to the fact that he managed to write his way out of this limited subject matter and onto the world stage. See Patrick French, The World is What It Is (New York: Vintage, 2008), 209, 218-20. C.L.R. James makes a similar point in an interview: “A West Indian writing in England about West Indian life. There is a time when you reach the end; I think Naipaul has reached the end, too.” See Kas-Kas; interviews with three Caribbean writers in Texas: George Lamming, C. L. R. James and Wilson Harris, eds. Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander (Austin: Univ. of Texas at Austin African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972), 32.

240 According to Lamming, “He had a great passion for literature and a very great passion for the region, and encouraged what in inverted commas would then be called ‘local color.’” See “The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming,” conducted by David Scott, Small Axe 12 (2002): 103.

241 V. S. Naipaul, “Personal History: Letters Between Father and Son,” The New Yorker (December 13, 1999), 66.


243 George Lamming, (12/30/1950) “A Review of ‘A Morning At the Office’, by Edgar Mittelholzer,” Calling the West Indies (BBC) [typescript]. BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham, Reading, UK.
similarly unforgiving. Arthur Calder-Marshall, an English contributor to “Caribbean Voices,” begins his BBC review of Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* with the following anecdote:

I remember a couple of years ago talking to George Lamming about the excellences of Samuel Selvon’s novel “A Brighter Sun” which I had just read. George heard me out and then he said, “But when you analyse it, it’s just documentary, you know.” I am fairly used to writers making snooty remarks about the works of other writers….But George Lamming’s remark impressed itself on me….Lamming wasn’t speaking out of envy, but out of a deep certainty that what he wrote would contain a dimension lacking in Selvon.244

In a 1982 speech, Lamming still associated documentary writing with the camera: “The novel does not only depict aspects of social reality. It explores it. It ploughs it up. There are writers who take an easy short cut and go around photographing the absurdities that appear on the social landscape: but they have no plough.”245 Here, photographic, documentary detail can only provide local color; Lamming is after something different, more subjective, and difficult. Something critics at the time called modernism. Calder-Marshall again, on *The Emigrants*: “In [Lamming’s] first book, the Joyce of *Portrait of the Artist* stood at his elbow. Now the Joyce of *Ulysses* is at one elbow and M. Sartre at the other. They tend to interrupt what Mr. Lamming has to say.”246

Lamming’s association of the term “documentary” with the camera recalls Auden’s work in the documentary field in the 1930s and indicates that the term was still current as a challenge to high modernist form. In a wonderful jab at this history—and perhaps at Auden himself—Naipaul includes a Trinidad Film Board van in his 1958 novel *The Suffrage of Elvira*: it is “shooting scenes for a Colonial Office documentary film about political progress in the colonies,

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the script of which was to be written, poetically, in London, by a minor British poet.”

While Lamming, Naipaul, and their cohort of Windrush writers may have been skeptical of using “documentary” and ethnographic techniques to represent the colonial experience, they themselves were not averse to documenting life in London for their listeners back home. In broadcasts titled “Letter from London,” “We See Britain,” “Familiar London Scenes,” and “You and Britain,” they described and explained life in England, often complete with local color detail: descriptions of British window boxes, libraries, and seasons, man-on-the-street interviews with West Indian emigrants, the station master at Paddington, and a London newspaper vendor. A 1954 broadcast of “We See Britain” began: “We open with another snapshot in the series of places of interest in and around London, which West Indians and others who’re coming over here, may have time to go and see.”

Jed Esty has argued that this generation of writers—Selvon, Lamming, Doris Lessing, and Nirad Chaudhuri in particular—aim to “particularize England,” to perform “cultural and ethnographic salvage work” on the imperial center in the era of decolonization. They engage in a project of “reverse-ethnographic visibility” that leads, according to Esty’s account of Selvon and Lamming, to the narration of black subject formation. But an increased metropolitan visibility cannot be the whole story, because the colonial experience must be made visible as well. Whereas documentary techniques can be applied to the metropolis, Lamming and his illustrators turn away from documentary and towards modernism, particularly modernism as it was understood in the visual arts, to represent the colonial world at mid-century.

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248 John Metcalf [host], “Commentary” (*BBC*) [typescript]. BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham, Reading, UK.

Naipaul, in his role as unsparing host and critic on *Caribbean Voices*, objected to both callow, overly-autobiographical Caribbean novels and to Lamming’s difficult, modernist prose. In his 1955 radio review of Lamming’s second novel, *The Emigrants*, Naipaul contrasts Lamming’s style with Mittleholzer’s:

[Lamming’s] attitude, then, is the antithesis of Mittleholzer’s. A man never walks down a road in any Mittleholzer novel. It is a coloured man, or a negro, or a white man, or a Portuguese or an Indian, or Chinese who walks down a Mittleholzer road. Lamming refuses to develop this tourist’s eye. He will not insist on the picturesque detail, on the kinkiness of the hair or the precise shade of the skin.  

Naipaul goes on to say that Lamming’s conception of the novel derives from modernist stream of consciousness technique, but takes it too far, giving his writing an “abstracted, vaguely unreal quality.” He remarks, “I don’t think you can really draw a portrait of one of the characters in a Lamming novel. One gets rather, the impressions of a mind, withdrawn, tucked away in the castle of its skin, ticking over, registering with sharp sensitivity what passes under its review.” He concludes that Lamming “needed some documentary writing,” despite the fact that he “shies away from the ordinariness of documentary.”

In trying to pinpoint the failures of Lamming’s style, Naipaul focuses on the thinness of visual description and the failure of portraiture. Can one draw a portrait of a Lamming character? In 1953 an extract from *The Emigrants* appeared in *Bim*, the Barbadian literary journal. The extract appeared alongside “Scenes of Village Life,” a series of four full-page illustrations by the Jamaican artist Gloria Escoffery (fig. 26). These line drawings—an old woman in a rocking chair, a young boy sitting on the gunwale of a fishing boat—were included to honor *In the Castle of My Skin*, which had just been published in London. Escoffery’s sketches seem not to be scenes

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EXTRACT FROM SECOND BOOK

GEORGE LAMING

The pier ended abruptly on all sides forming within the buildings that bordered it an area wide for the first little bay between land and sea. The surface was tight and even with a low play of gravel while the wind blew freely. The ship had dropped anchor right alongside, making another partition to the enclosure. It leaned its smoke in a curl to the wind and bleated into the presence of the evening. A small building broke the neck of the pier where it met the sudden descent to the sea. It was short and narrow like a watchman’s hovel dug without props against the earth as though the sea had pushed it up overnight in a sudden upheaval. Beyond the warehouses the land made a brief ridge and then plunged into a wide, open space that made way for the approach of the city. Immediately outside the pier land was flat, parcelled out, and would seem, for public entertainment, a small green square with children’s swings and other apparatuses of outdoor sports. Looking along it from further within the city was a large square building with white columns, and doors wide open on all sides. Then the city appeared, sudden and tumultuous, a great office and a bank surrounded by shops that seemed to offer nothing but liquor. This, too, was ill lighted with small glasses and in the centre a large-bowed bottle that gradually slumbered upwards into the holiness of a glass. The door was the same in all the shops: the lobby with small glasses and the bottle over which a larger glass had been placed.

A rich flow of talk went on behind the partitions that separated the shop from the general living quarters. The women seemed to talk all the time except for the hurried pause when they peeped out from behind the curtain to see what was happening in the shop. Occasionally one came out to fill the bottle with every liquid. There was no immediate exchange of money, a kind of self-service, it seemed, and the charges might have been made according to the marks the bottle registered with the bell of the liquid. They were many of them familiar passengers, drank quickly, talking loud and fast in excitement. They thought it safe to talk loud since the people in this city spoke French and might not understand English. The men didn’t speak or understand the other language which might have been unfortunate in different circumstances. They were indifferent, however, and it was therefore a lucky localization. Without a common language it was impossible to make promises. In fact no promise was too large since it could easily be reduced by an admission of mutual misunderstanding. It seemed a pure luxury to sit drinking and speculating on what would happen. The women in the town were very pretty, and curious, and it would appear irresistible.

When the public clock chimed the hour gradually became less crowded, but the people continued their shuffle along the pavement.
at all but portraits of characters from *In the Castle of My Skin*, portraits that are surprisingly free of scenery or identifying detail. The image of the young boy is a curiously spare portrait of the author as a young man. He is no more than an outline, his world indicated by two strokes of the pen above his head. While Escoffery’s title denotes the realist impulse, her attenuated lines portray Lamming’s difficult, “non-documentary” prose.

The title, “Scenes of Village Life,” suggests a mimetic, almost artless, representation of everyday life—a Barbados version of Nancy Russell Mitford’s *Our Village* (1824–32), for example (fig. 27). But Escoffery’s characters are strangely self-contained, even autonomous—
they seem modernist in their absorption. In Michael Fried’s terms, absorbed figures indicate the autotelic indifference of the work of art. But for Fried absorption also leads to thick description and detailed looking, not to these spindly forms. In addition to the opposition between modernist absorption and realist referentiality, another governing opposition seems to be gender. The two female figures gaze out of the frame while the old man and young boy look directly into the eyes of the reader. The women seem outside of time, or just uninterested in it, while the men are conscious of being beheld. In Fried’s famous essay “Art and Objecthood,” he describes the theatrical work of art (as opposed to the absorptive) as uniquely conscious of its existence in time,

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or in this case, uniquely conscious of the duration of that eye contact. He writes that theater has “a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective....”252 In this reading, linear perspective conveys not just the illusion of space and depth, but also of time. Fried trails off into an ellipsis that gestures at the indefinite sense of time conveyed in Escoffery’s portraits: the characters are both seeing and being seen, both in time and out of it. In Bim magazine, each drawing occupies a full page and faces off against the dense typography of Lamming’s prose. These illustrations thus provide relief from the literally and metaphorically impervious surface of Lamming’s style. But their indication of depths—referential depths, historical depths—is conveyed by a few spindly pen strokes and the blank white surface of the page.

Denis Williams also represents history by disturbing surfaces and depths in the endpapers he contributed to Lamming’s first two novels. In a 1952 article in Bim, Escoffery drew a strong contrast between her own artistic development as a woman and that of Williams—she was one of the few women involved in the Windrush generation of artists and writers.253 In the early 1950s Escoffery describes Williams as moving away from “intimate regional preoccupation” and “dependence on local inspiration.” She, by contrast, would prefer to see artists returning to the Caribbean and insists that she will return, “because I must, to make what I can of this internal tug of war of nostalgias for lives I should like to live.”254 Williams too would return, by way of Africa. He left London in 1957 and taught art and art history in the Sudan, Nigeria, and Uganda.

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253 Leah Rosenberg has gone so far as to say that the entire decade was involved in an anti-colonial project of masculinization. See “The Canon/Canonicity: Anglophone Caribbean Literature,” in The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature, eds. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (New York: Routledge, 2011): 347-55. The Jamaican poet Una Marson started Caribbean Voices but left London in 1946; the editor and activist Claudia Jones was a key figure this period but not in the field of literature; Jean Rhys did not publish between 1939 and 1966 (and was believed to have died during the war); Sylvia Wynter published her only novel, The Hills of Hebron, in 1962.
254 Gloria Escoffery, “We Step in the River,” Bim 4, no.16 (June 1952): 242-3.
until 1967. He published two novels, returned to Guyana in 1968, and went on to have a
distinguished career as an archeologist and director of the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology
in Georgetown. But in London in the early 1950s he was clearly working between the two poles
of “local inspiration” and modernist abstraction when he illustrated Lamming’s novels. While
“abstraction” is a term most commonly used in the study of modernism in the visual arts, it is
one Naipaul applied to Lamming’s prose, one linked in the modernist tradition to race
(specifically to the African mask), as well as one that at midcentury was located on the surface of
the work of art by influential critics such as Clement Greenberg.255

In a long 1955 article on Williams, the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris celebrates the
turn in Williams’s work that Escoffery laments. Harris describes Williams renouncing “the
Actual” in favor of personal and technical freedom—in other words, he describes Williams
undergoing a modernist crisis of representation. In 1950, Williams had earned a favorable review
from Wyndham Lewis for his “Human World” series. The mural-sized painting titled “Human
World” is loosely based on a family photograph and depicts West Indian emigrants in London
(fig. 28). A pregnant female figure stares confidently outward from the center of the image while
the industrial horizon of the Thames Embankment smokes behind her. In an astonishing
assessment, Lewis described this image as a “jungle picture,” fecund, vital, and primitive.
“Although these figures are supposed to be in a street, they are unrealistically lined up across the
canvas....All the realistic machinery is dispensed with. It is a parade of symbols,” Lewis

255 See Michael North, “Modernism’s African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration,” in The Dialect of
he suggests that “in painting and in literature, the step away from conventional verisimilitude into abstraction is
accomplished by a figurative change of race.” See also Jackie Goldsby’s forthcoming Birth of the Cool: African
American Literary Culture of the 1940s and 1950s, which will have sections on literary abstraction and on African-
American frontispieces.
exclaims. Whereas Escoffery and Harris see this work as firmly based in “the actual harsh world of time and circumstance,” Lewis just sees style. In a meeting with Williams, Lewis is reported to have remarked upon Picasso’s influence, to which Williams responded: “It is not a case of my going to Picasso, Picasso came to Africa and to me.” In other words, modernist abstraction has historical referents.

But by 1954 Williams had gone in a drastically different direction; he exhibited abstract work, most prominently Painting in Six Related Rhythms, and won £250 in the Young Artists’ Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries (fig. 29). In this work, painting has been stripped to the logics of spatial relations, mathematical order, and infinite motion; the canvas has also been tipped on an angle. Harris compares this work to Piet Mondrian’s. By moving into pure abstraction, Williams renounces the heavy, historic gaze that the female figure in “Human World” gives and also demands from her viewers. He paints, according to Harris, “to free the onlooker, to extend him gloriously out beyond the confines of the canvas…to discover a movement outward, a liberation of the person.” The painting, tipped and tumbling forward, captures the liberating “movement outward” of modernist abstraction in this period. Williams himself described Six Rhythms as “an area in movement, destroying its boundaries.” In this way, abstraction comes to serve as an antidote to provincialism, a form in motion, not tied down in history.

The endpapers Williams contributed to Lamming’s early novels fall somewhere between the two poles of “time and circumstance” and abstraction. They are, in part, detailed portraits of

259 Harris, 187.
260 Ibid., 165.
characters in recognizable settings: the palm tree and ocean waves of Barbados for *In the Castle of My Skin* morph into the chimney pots, teakettles, and gas hookups of London boarding houses for *The Emigrants* (figs. 30-31). Williams’s spidery, overwrought lines in his drawings of the early 1950s convey, according to the first comprehensive collection on Williams’s work, “a sense of social complexity carrying the imprint of a particular age—its dress, hair-style, customs.”

But these portraits seem to reverse the structure of encounter with which I approached Escoffery’s images—here, one male figure is always turned away from the reader, hands in his pockets. Does turning his back to the viewer make him a figure of modernist absorption? Will he withdraw into the realm of pure art? Or is this a conspicuously theatrical gesture? Will he suddenly turn around and speak? Gender also plays a role in these drawings: in the set belonging to *In the Castle of My Skin*, the male figure seems to find it impossible to look anywhere other than over the water, to England, while the female figure remains at home, gazing off into the same near distance as Escoffery’s female figures. In the endpapers for *The Emigrants*, the male figure with his back turned is perhaps walking out of the traditional house of domestic fiction altogether. Are the impenetrable, indifferent surface of these men’s backs an example of mid-century abstraction? In the first drawing, the abstract marks used to indicate the back of the man’s shirt also designate his background. Do these drawings, to paraphrase Williams’s words, free the reader, do they extend “gloriously” beyond the confines of the work of art, are they comported “outward”? Or do the turned backs of the male artist figures indicate their depths of historical vision, a vision they may not be able to escape? As in his frontispiece portrait of Lamming, Williams depicts the encounter between the particularity of the historical moment and the ways in which it may or may not endure in time.

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Figs. 30-31: Denis Williams, Endpapers for George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953) and *The Emigrants* (1954).
The two modes of painting that preoccupied Williams in the 50s can also be seen in his 1963 novel, *Other Leopards*. Williams asserts that he saw no real difference between the literary and the painted image in this period.²⁶² But how can an abstract visual image be represented in words? T.J. Clark describes abstract painting “almost from its inception in and around 1914” as haunted by the idea that it could escape “from words into seeing and being.”²⁶³ Though mid-century abstraction has come under attack for its turn away from the social and political world in favor of the surface of the canvas (and its occlusion of the patrons, institutions, and ideologies that were responsible for its global dissemination), in his novel Williams stresses abstraction’s failure to escape from the historical specificity of high modernist primitivism. For Clark, abstraction has many definitions, but one essential aspect is “the work’s overweening, utopian, slightly lunatic character. History is going to be overcome by painting. Human nature is going to be remade.”²⁶⁴ In *Other Leopards*, by contrast, abstraction does not tumble forward and liberate its viewer from history as in *Six Related Rhythms*. It is historical and recursive.

*Other Leopards*’ main character, Lionel Froad, is a West Indian archeological draughtsman on assignment in Johkara, a thinly veiled Sudan. He excels at reproduction, congratulates himself on being able to “draw the modeling on a grain of sand 1:3 scale.”²⁶⁵ He works for Hughie King, an Englishman bent on proving “some purely original aspect of African culture at Old Karo,” their dig site(55). Froad cynically believes everything they find at Karo to have filtered down from the “parent culture” at Meroë, but he does the drawings Hughie requires: “I did the drawings, iceberg eye, content with the petrified surface. I gave them to Hughie. He was enthralled” (80). Hughie wants to prove not only that the Karoites had their own

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²⁶² Quoted in Williams and Williams, 104.
²⁶⁴ Ibid., 369.
authentic culture, but also that they were black. He suggests to Froad: “You’re trained for the type of thing: anatomical analysis, craniometry, skeletal proportion, pelvic angle, and so on….Whole culture here, man, to be brought into being. Think what it would mean to you personally” (132). Hughie wants to make the visual image replete with facts, with details, measurements, and context. He wants, in Froad’s terms, “to see these people right; to put them…decently into history” (147). Froad describes this potential undertaking as “some tour de force of art-scholarship in which I’d…demonstrate once and for all…the ancient creativity of this Negro kingdom, ergo, my race” (101). Froad calls this project “Hughie’s Burden,” and ultimately it drives him mad.

At the end of the novel, Froad has stabbed Hughie in the neck with a screwdriver, run off into the desert near Meroë with their only jerrican of water, wasted all the water trying to wash, covered himself in mud, and climbed a tree. We realize the whole novel has been narrated from this position. Froad congratulates himself for having freed himself, for being “without context, clear.” (Recall Clark’s description of abstraction as “overweening” and “slightly lunatic.”) He has outwitted Hughie and achieved “a condition outside his method” (214). What is this condition, without context, without history? Williams figures the abstracted position from which Froad narrates the novel with a visual image during the research trip to Meroë.

At Meroë, Froad confronts the tomb of Queen Amanishakete. He has been studying images of her from a 19th century European expedition portfolio, and he has already connected her image on those pages to that of his lover, Eve. This connection has convinced him that the Merotic civilization was black. But confronted with Amanishakete’s image towering over him on a pylon in the desert, he sees her as “cruel, gross, ugly. And awfully beautiful, standing there.”

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She is flogging a group of slaves. He has a vision of all of the Jokhresi and West Indians he knows:

…we were one in her, vessels dipping into time to be filled and emptied, filled and emptied; passive. She had died and gone, yet she was still there, filling and emptying vessels. But how could that be! How could real water exist at the heart of a mirage! How was I to believe that!...What could Hughie’s measurements and contrivings mean to me now; ever! There was no man, no brother, no Mother of Time, no people, nobody. There were only vessels; whole or broken, full or empty. At the heart of the mirage there was no water. (152)

If Amanishakete’s image were to be filled with Hughie’s details and measurements, she would still not be put “decently” in history; she would still be flogging slaves. Despite the gap of millennia she would still participate in Froad’s West Indian (or, as he calls it, “Uncommitted African”) story. Up the tree at the end of the novel, Froad tells himself: “You have reached the heart of the mirage…there is not water here but you are insulated; what does it matter now?” (213-4). In Other Leopards, abstraction, figured as the opposite of Hughie’s “measurements and contrivings,” enters the novel via a visual image of timeless Africa. That is, abstraction returns Froad to the cliché of Africa as primitive, brutal, unhistorical. It also returns Froad to European modernism, since, as Williams put it, “Picasso came to Africa and to me” to discover the primitive art forms that would lead to abstraction in Western art. Williams’s lunatic archeological draughtsman at Meroë refuses to let the visual image remain still and stable—it shimmers in the heat. It repeatedly enacts the encounter between historical, referential depths and the modernist surface, between “being put decently into history” and tumbling, modernist abstraction. Even at the heart of the modernist mirage, Froad thinks of “real water,” and in the final sentence of the novel we can see that real water is going to be a major problem for him as the hot sun rises on a new desert day.
Ekphrasis: *The Emigrants*, Sartre, and the Violence of Form

While Williams counterposes abstraction to Hughie’s facts, details, and measurements, Lamming turns to ekphrasis to trouble the referential depths of colonial photography. In *The Emigrants*, the violence of colonial realism meets the modernist surface in a set of black-and-white photographs repeatedly described, but, like Woolf’s Spanish Civil War photographs, never reproduced. *The Emigrants* continues the narrative Lamming began in his first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, which follows the education of a young boy in Barbados through his departure for higher schooling in Trinidad. *The Emigrants* begins with a young male narrator waiting at a Caribbean port for the boat to England. The first part of the novel, “A Voyage,” describes the debates, disagreements, and expectations of the diverse group of Caribbean emigrants onboard. In the episodic and often-confusing second part, “Rooms & Residents,” the emigrants disperse into the metropolis, encountering not the storybook London they expected but a city of boarding houses, fetes, fog, and disillusion. The final section of the novel, “Another Time,” returns to the point of view of the unnamed narrator and attempts to bring together the various episodes and characters through the narrative device of the black-and-white photographs. In counterpoint to my reading of these photographs, I will describe Lamming’s contemporaneous interest in Sartrean phenomenology and its mid-century theorization of race. But first, the emigrants’ voyage to England sets the scene for the power of the visual image to simultaneously contain the violence of colonial representation and the possibility of passage and transformation.

In *The Emigrants*, Lamming’s characters do not embark for England aboard the *Empire Windrush*, which gave its name to the era. Their their ship is called the *Golden Image*. This odd name seems to turn the myth of El Dorado on its head, locating wealth and opportunity not in the
expanses of the new world but in the metropolis of the old. But the phrase “the golden image” derives from the Book of Daniel, where it refers not to riches but to false idols. The Babylonian King Nebuchadrezzar erects a golden image on the plain of Dura and commands his people to worship it: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse and are thrown into a fiery furnace. Nebuchadrezzar looks on in astonishment as they walk safely amidst the flames and has them hauled to safety and rewarded. If London turns out to be a fiery furnace rather than an El Dorado, Lamming presents the emigrants who survive there as ones who refuse to worship images gilded with the legacies of colonial representation. And yet for the duration of the journey, the *Golden Image* does provide an important, collective, proto-national space for its passengers. It is both a false idol and a space of opportunity.

Lamming spends quite a lot of time clarifying how this space works, and my reading of the *Golden Image* as specifically a visual image will attempt to pry apart Lamming’s difficult, heavily philosophical style. First, the voyage onboard the *Golden Image* is temporary; it lasts only a fortnight. Once on board the ship, Lamming’s first-person narrator disappears, and the narrative sometimes slips into dramatic dialogue. The passengers congregate on deck to discuss their islands’ differences and their shared ambitions: “every man want a better break” (37). In this section, the emigrants begin to articulate, through disputation, a collective West Indian identity. One critic has called this a “literary experiment in nation-building”\(^\text{267}\) that can only be performed on board the ship, a neutral space that exists somewhere between the last Caribbean port and London. These discussions do not continue once the emigrants begin to make their way in the metropolis—a collective West Indian space will not be constituted there. As a result, critics often find this first section, titled “A Voyage,” the strongest part of what will become a

\(\text{267}\) Imre Szeman, *Zones of Instability: Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003), 87. Szeman goes on to argue that this collectivity is “composed only to be inevitably decomposed” (91) when the ship docks, and thus to conclude that emigration itself, or “exile,” in Lamming’s terms, was a mistake.
perplexingly episodic novel. Yet none comment on the fact that it is an image that provides the space for the emigrants to come together, however briefly. This image is broken into two parts: deck and dormitory.

On deck, the passengers are exposed: “The ship’s deck seemed to urge an unusual exposure. People coming together in hurried relationships seemed determined to make use of their time, and talked about themselves with almost complete freedom” (58). The word “exposure” constitutes a sort of refrain, one associated not with private secrets but with collectivity, “the exposure of a situation which these people constituted” (37). This use of the word is in contrast to Auden’s in Letters from Iceland, where “exposure” was a technical term associated with the camera and not with a collective “situation.” When the emigrants congregate on deck in the hot sun they may be exposed as if in a photograph, but Lamming uses the term to refer more directly to the vulnerability of being exposed to the elements, to risk, to damaging publicity, or to new ideas. With the repeated use of this term, Lamming indicates how it feels to be transported by a image: exposure is about feeling vulnerable.

By contrast, down below in the darkened dormitory furtive assignations take place, a passenger threatens Collis, the writer-figure, and Higgins, an emigrant whose ambitions have already been scotched, hides as the ship drops anchor at its destination. In his mind, the dormitory has become a cage for his fellow passengers: “Beyond their enclosure was no-THING. Nothing mattered outside the cage, because there was no-THING” (105). Higgins gains the courage to leave the ship when he looks out the porthole at England and decides that in fact “what mattered supremely was to be there, in England.” England becomes “a cage like the

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268 Imre Szeman’s chapter in Zones of Instability despairs of The Emigrants after the first section. For similar critiques of Lamming, see A.J. Simoes da Silva, The Luxury of Nationalist Despair: George Lamming’s Fiction as a Decolonizing Project (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), and Supriya Nair, Caliban’s Curse: George Lamming and the Revisioning of History (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996).
dormitory vastly expanded” (106)—in this scene, the collective exposure on deck has been enclosed. England will henceforward determine the boundaries and content of what matters for these West Indian emigrants. This passage ends with the lines:

…there beyond the water too large for [Higgins’s] view was England rising from beneath her anonymous surface of grey to meet a sample of the men who are called her subjects and whose only certain knowledge said that to be in England was all that mattered. (107)

In a 1955 review, Stuart Hall insists “The passage on ‘no-THING’ in The Emigrants is particularly bad.” This passage is too philosophical for Hall—it is not believably novelistic. But read in conjunction with the idea of exposure, it indicates that the visual image cannot just be exposed, it must also be contained in order to “matter.”

The dialectic between exposure and enclosure plays out in a metaphor a Jamaican passenger goes to comic lengths to explicate: “West Indies people is a sort of vomit you vomit up,” he says. England, France, Spain, Africa, India, and China all “vomit up what them din’t want, an’ the vomit settle there in that Caribbean Sea.” This vomit “want to find a stomach ‘cause it realize that it is expose’. It stirrin’ itself but there ain’t no pot” (67). Exposure requires enclosure: the pot, for this Jamaican emigrant, is something he confidently calls the West Indies.

While Lamming was (and still is) supportive of the failed West Indian Federation of 1958-62, this is the early 50s, and the Golden Image is sailing for England. The ship can provide a transitory moment of collectivity, but ultimately it does not “matter” the way England does.

Collis, the writer-figure, muses: “now we’re here in mid-ocean when decisions don’t mean a damn because we’ve got no reality to test their efficacy” (53). England provides not just the destination, but the testing ground—the referent—of all that takes place on board the ship. Again,

in contrast to Auden’s use of the term, enclosure is not a sign of the aesthetic. It is referential: England “matters.”

In another highly wrought philosophical passage, Lamming depicts a group of emigrants who fall asleep on deck. This is a moment of exposure without enclosure: in sleep “They couldn’t see,” Lamming repeats, and without the habit of seeing and understanding the world around them, they become mere objects. As such they are capable—perhaps—of a sea change, of becoming something new. “It seemed possible,” Lamming writes, “that the habit which informed a man of the objects he has been trained to encounter might be replaced by some other habit new and different in its nature, and therefore creating a new and different meaning and function for those objects” (83). If something new, like West Indian collectivity, is going to come into being, now is the time. But as the passengers wake up, Lamming asks: “Did it matter? If each had been turned into a mere object, it would not have mattered whether there was a place called England. But it was clear from their talk that it was a matter of terrible importance” (84). Their feelings turn towards England, which becomes the ultimate referential ground for these emigrants. Despite the persistent punning on the word “matter,” it always refers to England. The emigrants’ exposure on deck in the hot sun does not matter without England as a place, concept, and destination.

But just as the *Golden Image* circulates between the Caribbean and London, visual images in the novel are never stable. They are structured by a series of encounters between viewer and viewed, subject and object, realist referents and modernist form. Thus Lamming’s interest lies not purely in the visual image, but in the phenomenology of the visual image. And in

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270 Szeman describes England in this scene as “the inescapable ontological ground” (94), but in my view this passage is crucially about seeing as well as being. The “habit which informed a man of the objects he has been trained to encounter,” as Lamming describes it, is the habit of seeing, and Lamming argues that if that habit changes, then so can the referents and objects of sight. This makes this scene provisional, rather than absolute, and contributes to an understanding of the visual image as a means of transport and circulation.
fact, Lamming was in these years “reading everything by Sartre.” Bill Schwarz has made the

271 Bill Schwarz, “‘Not Even Past Yet,’” History Workshop Journal 57, no. 1 (2004): 110-11. Schwarz is interested in Lamming’s “phenomenology of historical time” (104), or, as he puts it in another article, his ability to subjectivize history and historicize subjectivity. See “C.L.R. James and George Lamming: the Measure of Historical Time,” Small Axe 14 (September 2003): 64. Schwarz follows Fanon’s biographer David Macey, who describes phenomenology as “philosophy in the first person; no other philosophy would have allowed Fanon to say ‘I’ with quite such vehemence.” See David Macey, “Fanon, Phenomenology, Race,” in Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity, eds. Peter Osborne and Stella Sandford (New York: Continuum, 2002), 35.

272 These are issues that become especially fraught in the field of visual representation. I maintain that the Golden Image should not be read as referring to a false idol, but instead as a false idol that is encountered and described in the first person. Reading for the phenomenology of the image requires reading for the ways in which it is experienced, felt, and constituted in the eyes of the self and the other.

This reading practice also demonstrates how phenomenology can disrupt the binaries of referentiality: what is the original and what is its representation when Lamming writes, “The Negro is a man whom the Other regards as a negro”? Lamming made this comment in 1956 at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, where he spoke on the same platform as Richard Wright, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Frantz Fanon. His published address puts this definition slightly differently: “A negro writer is a writer who, through a process of social and historical accidents, encounters himself, so to speak, in a category of men called Negro.” This “encounter” is couched in the language of existentialism;

274 His address was published in slightly shorter form in a number of magazines between 1956-8.
in this speech, Lamming is clearly in dialogue with Sartre. He is reading and responding to Sartre’s lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” from 1945, the influential essays that constitute What is Literature? published in 1947, and “Black Orpheus,” Sartre’s introduction to Senghor’s anthology of Négritude poetry from 1948. Sartre gave the lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” in 1945 to dispel certain popular myths about his philosophical position. In it, he argues that “existence precedes essence” and that “[man] materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself.” Sartre stresses the importance of “the other” in that self-encounter, and Lamming will also take up this particular structure of encounter—a “cross-fire of wounding gazes,” to use Martin Jay’s words. But Lamming focuses on reciprocal ways of seeing that are collective rather than individual—in the 1950s Stuart Hall described In the Castle of My Skin as a “stream-of-social-consciousness” novel. Like Fanon in the 1950s, Lamming will attempt to use Sartre to theorize the collective subjective experience of colonialism.

How might this philosophical background appear in the visual images that circulate in The Emigrants? I have argued that for Lamming phenomenology disrupts the referentiality of the visual image by depicting the violence of form while still allowing the visual image to provide a collective space of transformation, as on board the Golden Image. The black-and-white photographs that circulate in The Emigrants address the violence of form through ekphrasis, the

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275 Bill Schwarz is wary of diminishing Lamming by making too strong an argument for Sartre’s influence. However, he writes that “The movement from Sartre, through Fanon and Wright, to the Présence Africaine First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956 is evidence of the capacity that these intellectual traditions [phenomenology and Marxism] possessed to cross the threshold and create a new black politics.” I am similarly interested in the cultural milieu of the early 1950s, specifically in the various strands of philosophy and literary aesthetics that come together in the visual image. See Schwarz, “The Measure of Historical Time,” 39-71.
278 Hall, 175.
verbal depiction of a visual image. The photographs stage an encounter between the depths of colonial referentiality and the surface of modernist form.

These photographs belong to a former colonial administrator named Frederick, and they seem to hold a sinister influence over the emigrants who view them. Frederick is the only white character of consequence in the novel. The emigrants encounter him at a hostel in London, but he has improbable past connections to some of them—he knew Azi in Nigeria and was engaged to Mis Bis in Trinidad. (Mis Bis fled Trinidad after he jilted her, and their story became a popular calypso, “No Love Without Passport.”) Frederick’s photographs “show him as three or four different people. You couldn’t identify two of them. Sometimes it’s a beard, sometimes it’s as though he had changed his whole complexion” (152). Later we learn that Frederick has played many roles in the imperial world. He has been a district commissioner in Nigeria and a gamekeeper in Venezuela and now is in the process of reinventing himself again. His face changes with each role and is unrecognizable as his own. In fact, he is engaged to the same Mis Bis in London, though she is now known as Una Solomon, and neither is supposed to recognize the other.

Frederick’s photographs corrupt the emigrants’ ways of seeing. Collis, the writer-figure, meets Frederick in a bar and starts to rub his eyes:

They were worrying him again….It was as though his imagination had taken control of his vision, and faces lost their ordinary outline. He wouldn’t recognize the nose as nose, or the eye as eye. The organs kept their form, but somehow lost their reference. They became objects. (212)

As in the passage on the deck of the *Golden Image*, exposed “objects” seem to have no “reference”—they have not been enclosed in a system of representation. Collis is increasingly uncomfortable and nearly driven mad by the sensation of not being able to comprehend form and
reference in the same glance. Collis is one of a couple of emigrants who after arriving in England begin to have difficulty recognizing themselves in the mirror, and the photographs exacerbate this condition. Towards the end of the novel Collis shuffles through the pack of photographs with Frederick, asking about the various characters that have appeared throughout the novel. This narrative mechanism helps readers piece together the emigrants’ bewildering plotlines during the two years they have been in England—the shuffling of the images mimics the episodic nature of the novel. Collis constantly adjusts the light to try and see the black-and-white images better, and later he will begin to complain that all faces appear dim and grey to him, like undifferentiated objects. His way of seeing has been damaged by Frederick’s colonial photographs.

In the final scene of the novel, Collis sits in a club and tries to explain: “I see the faces without their attributes…Your face now, right now,” he remarks to Dickson, “might be just an object without any of the usual attributes” (264). Dickson has just had a devastating experience of sexual objectification: a white woman from the Golden Image rents him a room, befriends him, and seems ready to seduce him. In the words of Dickson’s interior monologue (indented on the page to break from the third-person narrative): “out of them all she chose me I here she there the common language of a common civilization” (255). And yet when the lights go off and he removes his clothes she suddenly turns the light back on so that she and her sister can see him: “They devoured his body with their eyes. It disintegrated and dissolved in their stare” (256). Dickson flees and seeks out his fellow emigrants at the club. When Collis directs this remark to him, he flees again, out of the novel entirely. Mary Lou Emery reads this reversal of the gendered, objectifying gaze in light of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, a text known to Lamming at the time. If, as de Beauvoir argues, objectification is a form of violence, this may explain why The Emigrants ends with the violent beating of a woman. She is the wife of the
character called “the Governor,” and she appears in England on the arm of another man. They have arrived on the second voyage of the *Golden Image*, and her new man claims the assistance of the Governor and the other emigrants at the club, citing the talk of West Indian solidarity during the first voyage. According to Emery, the beating represents the change in the Governor and Collis since their arrival in England: “their eyes have been so damaged that they can no longer see themselves in these recent arrivals.” Their eyes have been trained to see others, especially women, as objects. The violence of representation has been translated into physical violence that undermines any possibility of a West Indian community.

Before turning to these photographs as objects of ekphrasis, the context of Lamming’s interest in Sartre and to Sartre’s theorization of race in this period is required. Frederick’s photographs are clearly racialized objects, but Sartre and Lamming seem to disagree on the connections between race, modernism, and the aesthetic at midcentury. This is, in part, a function of language and national tradition—for Sartre, modernism means surrealism and the poets of négritude, while for Lamming, Joyce and Eliot designate the modernist tradition. At midcentury, Sartre argued that what he called engaged literature would succeed modernism and make it obsolete. Lamming, by contrast, transposes the Anglo-modernist idea of the artist as exile into the era of decolonization. In “Black Orpheus” (1948), the introduction to Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, Sartre describes négritude as an “engaged and even directed” surrealism. “The white surrealist finds within himself the trigger,” writes Sartre, but “Césaire finds within himself the fixed inflexibility of...

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279 Emery, *Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature*, 164. Emery is interested in Lamming’s representation of female subjectivity, which she reads through Dickson, who represents for her “the position of a captured and colonized woman” (165). More generally, Emery focuses on sensory and social acts of seeing in Caribbean “contra-modernism,” which she defines as “the ways in which colonial émigrés shaped and re-circuited the aesthetic, political, and ideological projects of the interwar years and after” (100). She does not discuss Frederick’s photographs, though she does focus on other examples of ekphrastic Caribbean writing in the late 1960s and 70s.
demands and feeling.” Thus the demands and feelings generated by racial subjectivity make the poets of négritude engaged, directed, political writers. Sartre is famous for imposing a politics on the négritude movement and for making race a “minor moment” in the dialectic of history. In his words, for turning race into “historicity.” By contrast, Lamming is not so stridently dialectical. In his 1956 speech at the International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, he traces the continuities rather than the stages of history. His disagreement with Sartre plays out in their views of the artistic stature of Richard Wright, who clearly serves as a racialized figure of historicity for Sartre in this period. In What is Literature? (1947), Wright appears again and again as a privileged example of an engaged writer.

Sartre asks “For Whom Do We Write?” and in answering he notes that Wright’s audience is split. He writes for black readers, but he also writes for “white Americans of good will.” That is, he is “read by both the oppressed and the oppressor.” He writes “subjectively” for his black readers, but accusingly for his white public, whom he must make “indignant and ashamed.” Read through his public, Wright’s work therefore always enacts a “perceptual tension:” every word, every phrase enacts this split, which is experienced by the senses. This is more than a theory of reception; Sartre concludes that this sensory experience—this split—is also “the pretext for the work of art.” Thus for Sartre, the situation of a black writer like Wright in 1947

281 Ibid., 136-7. In Fanon’s words, “Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal” (135). Or, as the critic V.Y. Mudimbe puts it, Senghor “had asked Sartre for a cloak to celebrate négritude; he was given a shroud.” See The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), 85.
283 Ibid., 241.
284 Ibid., 276.
285 Ibid., 80. In French, the phrase is “il en a fait le prétexte d'une oeuvre d'art.” The language also recalls DuBois’s description of double consciousness as both an affliction (“this sense of always looking at one’s self through the
furnishes both the pretext (strange, belittling word choice), the style, and the political consequence of the work of art. Race becomes a way of seeing the world that is necessarily political, and Wright becomes Sartre’s figure for the engaged writer. But in 1956, on the platform at the Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Lamming will gently refute Wright’s racial privilege.\textsuperscript{286} Instead, he insisted on the respect due to private life\textsuperscript{287} in contrast to Wright’s focus on the social “misfortune of difference” that intrudes on the writer’s private world.\textsuperscript{288} According to Lamming, by linking the private and the social the writer can embark “upon a definition of himself as a man in the world of men,” that is, upon a universal definition, not a “split” one.\textsuperscript{289} Lamming thus undoes the tautological racial construction Sartre creates by seeing Wright purely through his split audience.

Sartre’s word for Wright’s split is “déchirure,” a tearing or ripping. For Lamming the word is exile. In \textit{The Pleasures of Exile}, he writes: “The exile is a universal figure. The proximity of our lives to the major issues of our time has demanded of us all some kind of involvement….Sooner or later, in silence or with rhetoric, we sign a contract whose epitaph reads: To be an exile is to be alive” (24). This passage recalls Stephen Dedalus’s famous lines at the end of \textit{Portrait of the Artist}: silence, cunning rhetoric, and exile become the tools of the writer.\textsuperscript{290} For Lamming, exile, not race, is the pretext for art, and this is very specifically a modernist pretext. Exile is intimately connected to high modernist “metropolitan perception”—
Raymond Williams’s term describes the elevation of style in modernist metropolises teaming with exiles like Joyce and Eliot.\(^{291}\) Whereas Sartre sees modernism at midcentury as superseded by racialized historicity,\(^{292}\) Lamming builds on the Anglo-modernist tradition of exile in order to write a Caribbean literature of historicity from exile in London.

Unlike race, exile is not a permanent feature of the “involved” writer. In the future, the phrase “to be an exile is to be alive” will become the “epitaph” of the “involved” writer—simply a way of remembering this era. Similarly, while both Lamming and Sartre ask, “For whom, then, do we write?” (43), Lamming’s answer does not tautologically become the pretext for his writing. The West Indian writer of this generation had a strict English middle class education, but for Lamming, his “general motives and directions are peasant” (38).\(^{293}\) Yet the peasant cannot form a public for his novels, any more than the “large and self-delighted middle class” of Barbados or Trinidad, who do not take “book reading” as a serious business (42). Lamming concludes that the West Indian writer writes for the foreign reader: “The word foreign means other than the West Indian whatever that other may be. He believes that a reader is there, somewhere. He can’t tell where, precisely, that reader is” (43). In the 1950s, exile is a temporary “way of seeing” for the Caribbean novelist, one that will eventually lead him to his readership.

*The Emigrants* is Lamming’s novel of exile; in later work his characters will make their return voyages to the Caribbean. And in *The Emigrants* Lamming addresses the Sartrean problem of racialization after modernism in his ekphrastic description of Frederick’s photographs. These photographs have the sinister ability to turn people into objects, and yet they

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\(^{292}\) In *What is Literature?* Sartre describes French writers around 1930 as suddenly “stupefied on discovering their own historicity.” After World War II, writers realized they must produce a literature of historicity (211-15).

\(^{293}\) The cohort of Caribbean novelists Lamming was a part of in this period was exclusively male. In this essay he cites Vic Reid, Edgar Mittelholzer, Sam Selvon, Neville Dawes, Roger Mais, Andrew Salkey, Jan Carew, and V.S. Naipaul.
appear throughout the novel as ekphrastic objects themselves. There are important similarities between the phenomenological and ekphrastic modes: both phenomenology and ekphrasis are descriptive. Phenomenology examines how objects are constituted in the eyes of the self and the other, or, in Fanon’s words, how the colonial subject comes to see himself as “an object among other objects.” Ekphrasis is a device that attempts to render the visual image in words—to overcome the specificity of another medium, to stop time and narrative development, and to expose the operation of representation itself. It does this by creating objects: Achilles’ shield, Browning’s duchess, Stevens’ jar in Tennessee. W.J.T. Mitchell’s influential account of ekphrasis uses language that resonates with Sartre’s: he argues that the ekphrastic object functions as a “resident alien” within the text and that the “encounter” between modes of verbal and visual representation—between “semiotic ‘others’”—generates the intense ambivalence associated with ekphrasis. Mitchell describes this ambivalence as a mixture of hope and fear, the hope of overcoming otherness, the fear of the collapse of difference. By staging an encounter between representational modes, Lamming turns Frederick’s photographs from images of racialized, colonial power into phenomenological images that express the power of colonial representation over its objects. In other words, if verbal description attempts to possess the visual image, ekphrastic description of Frederick’s photographs calls attention to the ways in which they in turn possess the emigrants who view them.

My discussion of phenomenology and ekphrasis has not yet considered the medium specificity of Lamming’s photographs. Frederick’s images seem very familiar: colonial officials in helmets and shorts posing stiffly for the camera, pictures of “natives,” of hunting expeditions, and recent snapshots of characters now in exile in London. Most of these are colonial images,

294 Fanon, 89.
certain of their referents, placid in their gaze. It is Collis’s description of the surface of these images that makes their familiar content strange: “Collis got the impression that half the face had receded into the helmet. The forehead seemed rudely severed from the nose by the rim which made a protective awning over the eyes. Frederick seemed to have taken shelter under the helmet” (241). This awkward verbal representation of the colonial pith helmet—Frederick’s face described architecturally, or as if it were made up of objects “without the usual attributes”—calls attention to the specifics of Lamming’s use of ekphrasis: what does verbal representation do to the colonial photograph?296

Ekphrastic description dismantles these photographs’ “reality effect.” They have no indexicality, no immediacy, no unconscious details, no punctum. Scholars of colonial photography often look to these areas for resistance to colonial regimes of representation. Photographic excess can make the image open up to other readings and other uses. As Christopher Pinney argues, certain Indian photographic practices refuse “the depth that characterized colonial representational regimes.”297 Pinney specifically locates what he calls “vernacular modernism” on the surface of the photograph, where it refuses the “imprisoning referentiality”298 of colonial systems of representation. But while Lamming’s ekphrastic photographs do direct attention to their surfaces, they also have depths. Their sinister ability to infect their viewers’ sight indicates the ways in which colonial representation generates its objects, its others, and indeed its own referents. Collis’s defamiliarizing surface description does not inoculate him from infection; in fact it seems to be part of the problem. Ekphrastic

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296 For more on colonial photography and its transformation of sense perception and aesthetic form in the nineteenth century, see Zahid R. Chaudhary, Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2012).
298 Ibid., 12.
description makes the violent internalization of colonial representation legible on the surface of the image. Lamming’s ekphrastic photographs can thus be seen to stage a phenomenological encounter that indicates how the surface image can be violently internalized, and yet they leave the surface image intact. They are both violently “epidermalizing,” to use Fanon’s term, and devastatingly referential: there is no hierarchy of surface and depth in these images.

Ekphrasis also stills the pace of narrative, even freezes it, in order to produce a rhythmic alteration between time and space, being and becoming, fixity and flow. In this sense, it is a figure for modernist form: for the calm, frozen surface of spatial, rather then temporal, representation. In The Emigrants, the set of photographs seems as if it is meant to achieve closure—Collis flips through the photos to hear the stories of his fellow emigrants and thus attempts to tie up loose narrative ends. But these images do not become models of aesthetic form in this episodic, disjointed novel. Photographs also trouble the temporality of ekphrasis; they place the subject in historical time. In a photograph, the subject displays his or her own belatedness—John Berger describes this as “a strange historical tense: I looked like this.”

Frederick’s photographs display their own belatedness by telling the story of his life at the tail-end of empire. And yet the elements of this reading can easily be reversed: photographs do, after all, arrest history, enclosing it in a frame. Etymologically ekphrasis means “speaking out” or “telling in full.” So Lamming’s ekphrastic photographs may in fact contrast the colonial order of the photographic archive with the possibility that the modernist surface might speak out and

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300 John Berger, About Looking (New York: Bloomsbury, 1980), 31. See also Sara Blair, who argues that “the timely photographic image opens a distinctive view onto the production and meaning of historicity, particularly in social contexts in which the subject’s place in history is urgently at issue.” Blair, “About Time: Historical Reading, Historicity, and the Photograph,” PMLA 125, no. 1 (2010): 162.
begin a narrative—Collis, is, after all, a figure for the writer. If this reading persuades,
modernism does not entail self-referential enclosure of aesthetic form but rather the opposite: the
modernist surface of these photographs is where Lamming’s novel turns outwards, towards the
world and towards the future.

Lamming titles the last essay in *The Pleasures of Exile* “Journey to an Expectation.” His
expectation was to become a writer in England, and in his 1960 essay he looks back on the 1950s
as a decade of success for Caribbean writers both in England and, increasingly, back home. In
this essay, Lamming retells much of the plot of *The Emigrants* as well as the final section of *In
the Castle of My Skin* in autobiographical, nonfictional form. It is almost as if the successful
writer is un-writing his novels, moving backwards through time to become again the emigrant
with great expectations. That emigrant will learn that exile is not a geographical state but a
colonial one: the exile is “colonized, if black in skin, by the agonizing assault of the other’s eye
whose meanings are based on a way of seeing he vainly tries to alter; and ultimately colonized
by some absent vision which, for want of another faith, he hopefully calls the Future” (229).
These words capture both the violence of seeing in this decade and its pleasures. Just as
phenomenology creates a space for Lamming to make images that collapse surface and depth,
form and content, realism and modernism, these images connect the past violence of aesthetic
form to the expectation of its future liberation from colonial violence altogether.

301 Heffernan argues that ekphrasis is not in fact static, but always includes an embryonic narrative impulse, one that
will enable “the silent figures of graphic art to speak.” Heffernan, 304.
From the very beginning, *Things Fall Apart* was praised for its clean, unadorned style. Heinemann’s 1957 reader’s report begins: “This is an exciting discovery: a well-written novel about the break-up of tribal life in one part of Nigeria.” It ends with a general recommendation to publish: “The writing is simple (I wish that all the names were as simple) and extremely effective…. [T]his is the best sort of plain English.” Much has been written since about the clarity of Achebe’s English, the suppleness with which it accommodates oral rhythms and proverbs, its revolutionary assurance. But is it plain English? What does “plain” mean, at midcentury, in a London publishing house? Perhaps the reviewer is suggesting that *Things Fall Apart* will participate in what was seen as a general return to realism after the intricate experiments of high modernism. Or perhaps he is simply pointing out that Achebe’s writing will be accessible to the metropolitan reader, despite the fact that Achebe’s subject is a distant Igbo village, Umuofia, on the verge of colonial contact. In either case, Heinemann’s reader touches upon a major strand of Achebe’s global reputation: that his style is both self-evident and without ornament. In short, “plain English.”

*Things Fall Apart* quickly became the axiomatic African novel in English, and since then it has been described as “originary” and “archetypal,” a “hyper-precursor” to contemporary

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African literature. Why then was *Things Fall Apart* published with two different sets of illustrations in 1962 and 1963? If the novel was plainly self-evident, why would it need drawings as supplements? If Achebe’s plain style was remarkable for its lack of ornament, why would it benefit from visual ornamentation? One answer is simply that his cohesive, confidently detailed realism elicits stable visual references. Yet neither set of illustrations depicts the details of Igbo life, as, for example, do drawings published in a 1996 edition of the novel intended for schools (fig. 32). By contrast, the competing sets of illustrations from the early 1960s indicate that at midcentury modernism could also work to clear space for the African novel in English. In this chapter, I read these two sets of early illustrations in the context of Achebe’s early publication history, but I also read Achebe’s prose style through the lens of these illustrations. This reading makes *Things Fall Apart* very much a novel of its time: it is the story of a new way of seeing, one emerging with a newly independent nation as it joins a global culture of images.

The plot and structure of *Things Fall Apart* have been described in dramatically different ways. At first, readers tended to focus on the protagonist, Okonkwo, as a tragic figure. The 1959 American edition included the subtitle: “The Story of a Strong Man.” In this reading, Okonkwo’s hubris causes him to make a series of fateful decisions: he kills his adopted son, Ikemefuna, and drives his son Nwoye into the arms of the English missionaries. When another Christian convert unmasks an ancestral spirit he participates in the retaliatory burning of the church and is imprisoned by the District Commissioner along with the other leaders of Umuofia. Upon their release, Okonkwo realizes that Umuofia will not go to war with the colonial administration, and he hangs himself in disgust. This reading is complicated, however, by

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Achebe’s presentation of Okonkwo. He is a bit flat; he is “not a man of thought but of action.”  

He seems more allegorically than psychologically realized, and critics have debated the extent to which Okonkwo is a “representative figure of African historicity.” However, his downfall occurs not because of his steadfast adherence to the communal ideals of Umuofia, but because he regularly distorts those ideals. Thus another reading of Things Fall Apart stresses not Okonkwo but Umuofia itself: Achebe presents this village in the late nineteenth century in all its specificity and coherence. His language is filled with the proverbial wisdom of Umuofia and the details of everyday life. Abdul JanMohamed goes so far as to calculate the preponderance of material that is unrelated to Okonkwo: “Out of the one-hundred-and-eighteen pages that comprise part one of the novel only about eight are devoted, strictly speaking, to the development of the plot.”

Thus what might be “background” in another novel is, in fact, foregrounded. As a result, many critics have described Achebe’s style not just as “plain” but also “flat.”

By reading Things Fall Apart together with its early illustrations, I seek to unsettle a commonplace of Achebe criticism: that his style, in its “plainness” and universality, is essentially “flat,” and that “flatness” is a feature of realism. In his essay on postmodernism and the postcolonial novel, Kwame Anthony Appiah counsels us not to assume that certain aesthetic features can be slotted neatly into western categories like “modernism” or “postmodernism.” In this case, the flatness of Achebe’s style may look like simple realism, but in fact Things Fall Apart very much follows after modernism, a movement that, in the visual arts, “oriented itself to

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309 See David Whittaker and Msiska Mpalive-Hangson, “Texts and Contexts” in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Routledge Study Guide (New York: Routledge, 2007), 30-1. Abdul JanMohamed makes the most convincing argument, describing the flatness of Achebe’s prose as his incorporation of oral culture. For more, see my discussion later in the chapter.
Mid-century Anglophone literature is often read via the structuring gap between nationalist, realist form and belated, Eurocentric modernism. And in fact, this is how Appiah categorizes *Things Fall Apart*: it is a “first stage” novel, one that seeks to create a usable past for a new nation. “Realism naturalizes,” Appiah writes. By contrast, he celebrates “second stage” postcolonial novels that assault the naturalized conventions of both realism and nationalism without necessarily adhering to Western categories of modernism or postmodernism. Susan Andrade criticizes Appiah’s stages for elevating anti-mimetic writing over the depiction of injustice. But while Andrade is correct to point out the bias against realism of critics of the African novel (and the postcolonial novel more generally), neither she nor Appiah allow that a writer of realism like Achebe could also write consciously in the wake of modernism. Achebe’s early illustrations draw our attention to the surface of Achebe’s prose and to the ways it reworks the flatness of the modernist surface. *Things Fall Apart* thus can be seen responding not just to colonial literary representations of Africa, as Achebe and many of his critics have pointed out, but also to high modernist visual representation.

Achebe’s flat style historicizes modernism as a way of seeing, and it does this by remaining flat while refusing modernism’s depths. I argue that, in *Things Fall Apart*, those depths include the legacies of modernist primitivism in the visual arts, or rather, the way modernist primitivism is haunted by all that it disavows. Thus I explore the question of surfaces

310 Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 87. This essay was first broadcast internationally in 1960 before it was published and anthologized throughout the 1960s. It appeared on the Voice of America service as part of a series on mid-century arts and sciences.

311 For a reading that also includes the category of Romance, see Simon Gikandi, “Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History,” *MLQ* 73, no. 3 (2012): 309-328.

312 Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?,” 349.

313 In fact, Andrade describes Appiah as “unswervingly modernist…his point of view entirely in harmony with that of Virginia Woolf” in her 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” This seems unfair to both Woolf and to Appiah, who defines “modernism” in this essay as “some relatively self-conscious, self-privileging project of a privileged modernity” (343), that is, not something the African novel needs to take up nor to clear away with self-consciously postmodern gestures. See Susan Z. Andrade, “The Problem of Realism and African Fiction,” *Novel* 42, no. 2 (2009): 189-99.
and depths within the category of “primitive” art that modernism thought it had dislodged: its ornamentalism. When modernist painters first beheld African masks in Paris in the early 1900s, they saw symbolic forms, not mere ornaments, and their elevation of the mask overturned a long history of European speculation about ornament as a primitive aesthetic.314 I will turn to this history, but first I want put it in the context of Achebe’s own reception history. He has been seen as an “ornamentalist” himself, ornamenting the Western form of the novel with African images. For example, TLS published a short review of Things Fall Apart in 1958 that claimed: “The great interest of this novel is that it genuinely succeeds in presenting tribal life from the inside. Patterns of feeling and attitudes of mind appear clothed in a distinctively African imagery, written neither up nor down.”315 This early reviewer paradoxically asserts that Achebe presents “tribal life” from the inside through images that are completely exteriorized—the novel is clothed in distinctively African imagery. This review asserts that while Achebe’s style may be plain, his African images are still mere clothing, ornament, or decorative cover for the novel form itself.

Eileen Julien has dubbed this the “ornamentalist philosophy…alien, imported modernity, touched up with local African color.”316 She sees Things Fall Apart differently—as speaking outward in order to represent locality to nonlocal others. In this view, the novel’s proverbial, Ibo-inflected language (and, I would add, its exotic visual detail) are not ornamental, but extroverted. However, like Appiah’s “first stage” novels, Julien sees Things Fall Apart as mid-century “niche” form, written “on the cusps of worlds.”317 By contrast with these critics, I am interested in the

317 Ibid., 700.
very exteriority of the visual image—its deliberately flat surface—in Achebe’s first novel. I argue that the visual image intrudes upon the text in order to represent exteriority. Not, as one might imagine, to provide a stable, knowable reference point for a nation on the cusp of independence. Reading for the surface in *Things Fall Apart* thus raises not just aesthetic questions, but also questions of knowledge and interpretation. Postcolonial theory tends to read through the surface of a novel like Achebe’s to discover its depths in either the nation, for Appiah, or the metropolitan setting of its initial publication and canonization, for Julien. Rather than reading for the novel’s depths, I turn to theories of metonymy to describe the surface of Achebe’s prose. Metonymic realism becomes a mode that can incorporate the modernist surface and then turn it to new purposes in the era of decolonization.

This method of reading provides a new view of the last chapter of the novel. Famously, *Things Fall Apart* does not conclude with Okonkwo’s death, but with his death as observed by the District Commissioner, who muses about a book he plans to write: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The novel ends not on a note of realist naturalization, but with an unsettling change in point of view, a reminder of the hegemony of colonial history, and the sudden defamiliarization of the familiar world of Umuofia that has occupied the novel’s previous twenty-four chapters. To argue that this moment is not just a narrative change but also a visual one, I will place Achebe’s early illustrations in the context of one of his most famous essays, appropriately titled “An Image of Africa.” This is the 1975 essay in which Achebe calls Conrad a “thoroughgoing racist,” which immediately made it a part of the canon wars. Yet Achebe routes his attack on Conrad through the canon itself—the canon of European modernism in the visual arts.
In his attack, Achebe will not grant that Conrad’s modernist attention to the changeable surface of appearances and subjectivity of perception is indeed new. It is well known that Conrad wanted, “by the power of the written word,” to make his readers “see,” and he has Marlow break his yarn to ask, “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?”\(^{318}\) But Achebe argues that Conrad’s literary impressionism merely brings “the peculiar gifts of his own mind” to bear upon the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination. The image remains the same. Critics have defended Conrad by showing how his images in fact, indicate European “disorientation” on the imperial periphery.\(^{319}\) The Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris quickly tempered Achebe’s criticisms by praising Conrad for his “capacity for meaningful distortion of images.”\(^{320}\) But Achebe has a specific complaint: he argues that Conrad relegates Africa to mere “setting and backdrop,” and in *Heart of Darkness* Africans become indistinguishable from the jungled river banks they inhabit. Achebe particularly objects to the way Conrad’s phrase “black and incomprehensible frenzy” applies both to humans and to their setting.\(^{321}\) The African “backdrop” is there merely to offset Marlow and Kurtz abroad in the world as modern subjects.


\(^{320}\) Wilson Harris, “The Frontier on Which ‘Heart of Darkness’ Stands,” *Research in African Literatures* 12, no. 1 (1981): 88. Harris concedes to Achebe the barrenness of Conrad’s distortions, adding, in his characteristic prose: “Marlow’s bewilderment at the heart of the original forest he uneasily penetrated reveals unfinished senses within him and without him, unfinished perceptions that hang upon veils within veils” (91).

To counter this view, Achebe makes the historical argument that at the same time Conrad wrote, other Europeans could see that Africans “must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band.” Against Africa as leafy, frenzied backdrop, Achebe holds up Picasso and Matisse first encountering Fang masks which “marked…the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength.” Here, a different “image of Africa”—the mask—reorganizes the European visual field entirely according to the dictates of what would come to be called cubism. Cubism brings European attention to the surface of the artwork rather than to the depiction of depths. It finds its subject in the processes of seeing and the medium of painting rather than in the illusions of linear perspective. It flattens the image, and when it incorporates the “primitive,” it announces its own modernity.

In 1975, Achebe took pride that Africa played a part in the making of modernism, but there is much more to say about modernist primitivism and especially about how it extends into the era of decolonization. Achebe’s art historical source is Frank Willett’s *African Art: An Introduction*, first published in 1971 in London. Willett was a British authority on Ife art who lived in Nigeria from 1958-1963. Achebe quotes a long passage in which Willett describes Maurice Vlaminck showing a Fang mask to André Derain, who in turn shows it to Picasso and Matisse in 1905. Willett includes an image of this mask (fig. 33). 

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324 Accounts of Picasso’s encounters with African masks abound: today most scholars cite André Malraux’s in *Picasso’s Mask* (trans. 1976), in which Picasso visits the Trocadéro museum in 1907 at Derain’s urging.
Willett’s gesture towards the much-debated genesis of cubism concludes his short history of the study of African art in and by the west. His history begins with mid-nineteenth century Darwinian theories of ornamentation and then turns, at the turn of the twentieth century, to sculpture. Sculpture, for Willett, is “the greatest contribution Africa has made so far to the cultural heritage of mankind.”  

He refuses the term “primitive art,” describing it as a product of evolutionary thinking and bound up with nineteenth-century ideas of ornamentation. In order to lay the term to rest, Willett briefly surveys Semper, Haddon, Pitt-Rivers, Balfour, Worringer, Boas, and Frobenius and their interest in questions of aesthetic origins, development, and universality. He shows that nineteenth-century views of African art revolved around the contrast between ornament and sculptural form and were guided by temporal questions. For example, does ornament precede representational art forms and abstract, symbolic forms in all artistic traditions? Does cultural context give significance to form, or can form be communicated, universally, without such details? Willett discredits studies that pursue the primitive as “primary in time,” but his own survey of Western approaches to African art also has a temporal orientation. His story ends abruptly in 1905 with Derain standing “stunned” and

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“speechless” before the Fang mask. Thus for Willett, writing in 1971, the pinnacle of Western understanding of African art is still the moment of modernist primitivism. The questions raised by the study of African ornament in the nineteenth-century are answered—or rather, made moot—by the advent of modernism. In the final chapter of his book he will describe a few contemporary African artists, but his account remains largely shaped by modernist ideas of form.

When Achebe cites Willett in 1975, he embeds his arguments about Conrad and Picasso in a line of thinking about ornament and sculptural form, abstraction and naturalistic representation, modernism and the surface of the work of art. This is the context in which Achebe repeatedly uses what at first might seem like a hackneyed term—“backdrop”—to describe the aesthetic location of the African image in Conrad. I take “backdrop” to refer to a painted cloth that defines the plane furthest from the viewer of a painting or an audience member at the theater. The concept of a backdrop is necessary to linear perspective and the depiction of depth and distance. Yet it is also a surface, and in Conrad it is a “black and incomprehensible” one, impenetrable, illegible. Despite Achebe’s celebration of Picasso, there are similarities between Conrad’s “backdrop” and Picasso’s mask. Both present surfaces: in Heart of Darkness the African backdrop is a “curtain of trees” that suggests to Marlowe that he is one of the first men on a prehistoric earth, taking possession of an accursed inheritance. When Picasso beholds the mask, he is also beholding a surface—he does not see the mask in context, in use, or in motion. Anne Cheng describes Picasso encountering masks as relics, “husks,” “shells,” “the residual skins of dead, racialized objects.” Modernist primitivism thus begins with

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326 These are the terms Achebe quotes from Willett, who is in turn quoting the notorious Fauvist embellisher Maurice Vlaminck, who uses them in his memoir Tournant Dangereux from 1929.  
328 Anne Cheng is working from the account of Picasso’s visit to the Trocadéro museum. She argues that Picasso’s aesthetic vision in that moment “was also a vision that understood seeing not as a mastery of surface, but as its agent. We do not master by seeing; we are ourselves altered when we look.” See Second Skin: Josephine Baker & The Modern Surface (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 21.
exteriority—with an impenetrable surface, an outside limit for the modern Western subject.\textsuperscript{329} That exteriority is then transposed into style: Conrad’s distorted impressions, Picasso’s shattered planes. But despite the fact that in 1975 Achebe prefers Picasso to Conrad—one infused “new life into European art that had run completely out of strength,” the other was a “thoroughgoing racist”—Achebe’s own flat style refuses to disavow exteriority entirely. By tracking these surfaces back into the illustrations published in the early sixties and finally into the text of \textit{Things Fall Apart} itself, I will show how in his first novel Achebe reworks modernist exteriority. If, in Hal Foster’s words, modernist primitivism is a “compensatory form,”\textsuperscript{330} one that turns the spoils of empire into high art, in 1958 Achebe refuses to be compensated.

\textbf{Things Fall Apart and Heinemann’s African Writers Series}

\textit{Things Fall Apart} was first published by Heinemann’s in London in 1958, but in 1962 it was reissued as the inaugural novel in Heinemann’s African Writers Series. This was a paperback Anglophone educational series run out of London, and Achebe served as its editorial advisor in Nigeria from 1962-1972. In those first ten years, it published more than 100 titles, including reprints, new works, and translations. School boards in newly independent African nations mined the African Writers Series for examination material, and Heinemann’s paperback model depended heavily on this market. But new work was also published in hardback in order to be reviewed in the London papers and to sell on a wider international market. The Series has been described not just as creating a market for African literature both globally and on the

\textsuperscript{329} I say “begins” because modernist primitivism almost immediately reads past the surface of the mask to the primitive unconscious. Picasso, in Malraux’s account, called the masks he encountered at the Trocadéro magical “intercessors,” and claimed \textit{Les Demoiselles D’Avignon} had nothing to do with the formal qualities of the masks he found inspirational. For more, see Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” \textit{Modernism/Modernity} 10, no. 3 (2003): 455–80.

continent, but also for creating that literature itself—for nurturing certain writers, selecting certain works, favoring certain forms. The Series certainly made *Things Fall Apart* the phenomenon it is today, but by 1973 even Achebe was calling for local, indigenous publishing: “The role of the publisher as catalyst is no longer adequate,” he writes, “initiating and watching over a chemical reaction from a position of inviolability and emerging at the end of it totally unchanged.” The African Writers Series nearly folded in the 1980s with the collapse of the African oil economies and government cutbacks on educational purchasing, and after a long attempt to gain a more international following it stopped adding new titles in 2000.

African Writers Series novels were published with illustrations only in the first few years. Achebe’s second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, contains illustrations, but his third, *Arrow of God* (1964) does not. Commissioning illustrations may have been an attempt to capture some of the creative energy in Nigerian visual arts in this period. Both of Achebe’s illustrators, Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya, were rising stars and are still well known today. At the same time, the illustrations may also indicate Heinemann’s assumptions about the literacy levels and abilities of young African students. That is, the illustrations may have been pedagogical. In the Series archives, the publishers debated how to present *Things Fall Apart* to students both on the African continent and in the UK. The novel almost immediately acquired a glossary. In the early

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332 Quoted in James Currey, 33.

333 There is an electronic database of the Series distributed by Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections. In this database, “Scanned images are used as a supplement to the keyed text for illustrations, figures and unusual page layouts,” but illustrations are not cited by artist or year commissioned. Achebe’s first two novels included illustrations, as did Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Burning Grass* (1962) and Peter Abraham’s *Mine Boy* (1963).

334 For work on the African Writers Series in the context of higher education, see Peter Kalliney’s *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics*, forthcoming from Oxford.
years, an abridged version was also in circulation, one that “simplifies the more difficult phrases, cuts out the descriptive sexual passages, and replaces native Igbo words with English equivalents (hut for obi, spirit for egwugwu, etc.).” Amidst these sorts of considerations, editors also debated the merits of cover art and Achebe recommended art students in Nigeria as illustrators. Thus the packaging and marketing of *Things Falls Apart* was, from the very beginning, pedagogical. This reading is consistent with one of Achebe’s famous pronouncements on the role of the African novel itself:

> I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares?

Achebe’s illustrations straddle this same divide—they are “applied,” pedagogical drawings meant to serve the text as instruments of interpretation, and yet they also seem to incorporate “pure,” autonomous formal features.

The first set of illustrations published in 1962 interpret *Things Fall Apart* as the story of Okonkwo’s fall. The artist is Dennis Carabine, an Englishman, and he illustrates a realist narrative centered on a “strong man” taking action in the face of history (a reading not uncommon today). The illustrations are heavily drawn, legible, and easy to connect to specific scenes in the text (fig. 34). The frontispiece depicts what many see as the moment when Okonkwo’s fate is determined. He sacrifices his adopted son Ikemefuna despite warnings from a friend who claims “What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families” (67). By making this scene the frontispiece,

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335 HEB box 4, folder 11, Heinemann Educational Archives, Univ. of Reading Publishing Archives, Reading, UK.  
Okonkwo’s decision to strike down his adopted son becomes the tragic turning point of the plot, an allegory of the way his community is destined to succumb to missionary incursions and colonial rule. Carabine’s drawing is consistent with Achebe’s reprisal of this scene in No Longer at Ease, when Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, retells the story of his adopted brother’s murder in order to justify his own conversion to Christianity. Nwoye’s is a biblical interpretation of Okonkwo’s choice. When Bruce Onobrakpeya contributed woodcuts to No Longer at Ease in 1963, he also chose to illustrate this scene. But his version is not a scene of immediate tragic choice. By contrast, his Okonkwo and Ikemefuna seem to be figures in a distant, ancient myth (fig. 35).

The next three Carabine images precede the three sections of Things Fall Apart. The wrestling scene illustrates the novel’s opening lines: “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat” (3). In the next drawing, Okonkwo is beating his son, Nwoye, who will soon leave his father’s home to join the
missionary society. And in the final image, Okonkwo exhorts his clansmen to war against the missionaries and the colonial order that backs them. These are images of action, of violence, and, most importantly, of presence. They present a stable ground that explicates the plot of the novel; they justify the tragedy of Okonkwo, and, by extension, his clan. These illustrations are realist less because of their verisimilitude than because they are so sure of their referents. Those referents range from the structure of tragedy itself to the fact that Africans wear raffia skirts, beat drums, and live under palm trees.

Achebe, as editorial advisor to the African Writers Series, recommended a different artist for the second edition in 1963. That artist was Uche Okeke, a founding member of the Zaria Art Society at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in the late 1950s, and still an influential figure in Nigerian art today. He is most often described as a “modernist” Nigerian artist. “Modernist” not in his inclination towards high European modernism, but because in 1960, the year of Nigerian independence, he advocated a synthesis of what he called “old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake.” This language is reminiscent of Achebe’s line about “applied art as distinct from pure.” Okeke’s “modernism,” in the field of art history, means that he does not work in traditional modes but instead uses those modes to develop a critical practice that responds to colonial and postcolonial modernity in Africa. Okeke begins his 1960 address, which is now known as “Natural Synthesis,” with zeal: “Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past.” Okeke and Achebe share a relationship to time here: the

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colonial past is perishing and artists must look further back in time in order to generate the postcolonial future. Things Fall Apart is set in Achebe’s grandparents’ generation, and Okeke based his drawing style on traditional Igbo body painting and mural design.

Yet neither Okeke nor Achebe turns naively to the pre-colonial past—they are both oriented to future horizons. Okeke concludes his 1960 address by asserting:

> It is…futile copying our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order. Culture lives by change. Today's social problems are different from yesterday’s, and we shall be doing grave disservice to Africa and mankind by living in our fathers’ achievements. This is like living in an entirely alien cultural background.339

This passage shows the similarities between Achebe and Okeke in this period and emphasizes that while both artists can be classified as nationalists in the years surrounding Nigerian independence, they both consciously draw upon pre-colonial tradition from an “alien” position, to use Okeke’s surprising word. They are both writing or painting their way into a workable relationship with the past. Okeke’s drawings for Things Fall Apart refuse the referential depths of Carabine’s realism, and they do so by emphasizing the surface of the image. Yet Okeke’s surfaces are not oriented towards the pre-colonial or “primitive” past, but rather towards the future.

The art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu has done extensive work on Okeke’s development as an artist in this period, and he has also written on the illustrations for Things Fall Apart. Okeke-Agulu argues that Okeke’s images are a visual equivalent to Achebe’s novel in that Okeke developed a culturally specific visual language in the same way Achebe modulated the Queen’s English to include Igbo rhythms and proverbs.340 Okeke’s visual language in this period

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was based on *uli* painting, a traditional practice of female body art and wall painting (fig. 36). So this second set of illustrations may be doubly ornamental (in Eileen Julien’s view of Achebe’s extroverted novel), in that they ornament the text while also gesturing to a history of female body ornamentation. *Uli* favors a repertoire of motifs abstracted from known objects and natural forms, the primacy of line, and the dynamism between the line and negative space it creates.\(^{341}\) Achebe himself draws a connection between *uli* and writing in *No Longer at Ease*, where Nwoye describes the power of the missionary’s written word: “Our women made black patterns on their bodies with the juice of the *uli* tree. It was beautiful, but it soon faded. If it lasted two market weeks it lasted a long time. But sometimes our elders spoke about *uli* that never faded, although no one had ever seen it. We see it today in the writing of the white man.”\(^{342}\) In this passage, written language is likened to decorative patterning, but Okeke-Agulu argues the opposite point: that Okeke’s illustrations for *Things Fall Apart* are, at the level of form, discursive and practically verbal. They are built from a “visual vocabulary,” constitute a “visual language,” and depend upon a “visual dialogue between form and space.”\(^{343}\) In his reading, the visual image can be analyzed in the same terms as a verbal text because its subject

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\(^{343}\) Chika Okeke-Agulu, “The Politics of Form,” 75.
matter is not of primary importance. To clarify, *uli* painting does not provide indigenous subject matter for Okeke—it provides a mode of formal experimentation and a space for “the critical examination of the postcolonial condition.” This emphasis on formal experimentation makes Okeke a postcolonial modernist, and Okeke-Agulu’s valuable reading brings to light the similarities between Achebe and Okeke’s modernist approach to form in the era of decolonization. However, illustrations are not always the visual equivalents of text, and, as the passage from *No Longer at Ease* indicates, text can also be understood in visual terms.

Okeke’s illustrations—understood in their own right as examples of postcolonial modernism—open up Achebe’s text through their emphasis on the surface of the visual image, not its referential depths. His four images line up with Carabine’s: a frontispiece followed by three drawings that precede each of the three sections of the novel (fig. 37). Here we no longer have the story of a strong man. Okeke’s images are difficult to pin to scenes from the text; they rely heavily on the blank white of the page and an accelerating swirl of lines and forms. At first glance, in fact, all four drawings are almost illegible—it is difficult to distinguish background from foreground, figure from ground. While there are a lot of busy, decorative markings (hair is drawn in tight curls, some clothing is patterned), the overall effect is suggestion, not delineation. They seem to be works of modernism in the European tradition because of their difficulty: they do not yield themselves up as representations. And yet what seem like modernist features are clearly taken from *uli* painting. Okeke-Agulu argues that despite the lack of obvious *uli* motifs in these illustrations, the “strident linearity of [Okeke’s] drawing, the total abrogation of form/space boundaries, and the reduction of figural and floral forms to highly simplified, almost abstract gestures secure the connections between these and Okeke’s other work” in this period. The

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344 Ibid., 85.
345 Ibid., 84
first drawing is the frontispiece, and it has two referents, or rather, two facing pages. First, Okeke seems to depict the same wrestling match that Carabine does. The drummers are now on the other side of the circle, so that the negative space at the center can become a compositional element. Where in the Carabine image one might say that the wrestlers occupy the central foreground while the palm trees, mud huts, and raffia skirts are relegated to the surrounding background, Okeke’s drawing seems to signal that his composition will be based on a different spatial order. The viewer is absorbed into the crowd in the lower section of the drawing, and everyone concentrates on the empty circle in the center of the page. Okeke-Agulu reads this circular motif as emblematic of the communal focus of Okeke’s drawings. The center is not, in fact, empty, but reverberating with drumbeats and with the communal energies of the villagers and the spirits. But originally this drawing faced the Yeats epigraph from which Achebe takes his title:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.\textsuperscript{346}

This facing page makes Okeke’s drawing seem like a fairly obvious visual representation of Yeats in the era of decolonization: the communal center of the Igbo world will not hold. And yet the circular motif persists throughout Okeke’s series of illustrations.

The second drawing depicts a scene of judgment—the egwugwu, a masked ancestral spirit, steps into the center space and adjudicates a marriage dispute. In the third drawing, white missionaries enter the central space. They are holding a hymnbook and singing—the “gyre” does not seem to be widening, but tightening. In this scene, the village decides to allow the

\textsuperscript{346} W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” first published in 1920.
missionaries to build their church, but they grant them a patch of cursed land on which to do it. The last drawing depicts a moment in the final confrontation between the masked spirits and the missionaries—the church looms in the background, soon to be burnt to the ground. Rather than depicting a center that is doomed not to hold, Okeke draws the village center as a space of collective action, judgment, and then choice. Okeke does not depict the aftermath of the burning of the church: the imprisonment and humiliation of Okonkwo and other village leaders, Okonkwo’s killing of the colonial court messenger, or his subsequent suicide. Rather than illustrating the tragic history of Carabine’s strong man, Okeke depicts the space of history itself as communal, a space of decision making and possibility. Okeke’s modernist illustrations recast the realist narrative that Carabine—and many subsequent readers—saw in *Things Fall Apart*.

But while Okeke’s illustrations emphasize a different thematic reading of the novel, do they, at the level of form, recast Conrad and Picasso’s modernist primitivism? Unlike Carabine, Okeke does depict masks in his drawings. In the scene of judgment, masked spirits surge into the central space; in the final scene of confrontation, the masked spirits overrun the circle entirely. In both cases, the drawings that depict masks are decidedly more volatile and abstract than the images of the circular village gatherings. But Okeke does not depict the scene that should be crucial to his pictorial interpretation of *Things Fall Apart*. The communal plot (as opposed to the tragic plot of Okokwo) turns on the moment in which Enoch, a Christian convert, pulls the mask off an *egwugwu*, thus killing an ancestral spirit by exposing him to the profane gazes of the uninitiated. The masked spirits return the next day to burn down the church in retribution, thereby causing the colonial administration to intervene. Okeke’s drawings seem to refuse this decisive moment, the moment in which a particular mask is decontextualized and pulled away.

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347 The phrase “profane gaze” comes from Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 186. Uche Okeke does write a poem referencing the Enoch scene (see “Natural Synthesis” in *The Short Century*) and make an oil painting of this scene titled *The Conflict (After Achebe)* in 1965, which I have not been able to locate.
from its background. Okeke’s masks do not face the profane gaze of readers—they are turned to
the business of the clan. They are difficult to separate from the bodies and trees that surround
them. These are images of masks in motion, masks that are almost indistinguishable from the
depiction of motion itself. All the action occurs at the level of the line as it carves through space.
That is, at the surface. While Okeke’s images thus refuse the referential certitude of Carabine’s
images, they do run the risk of simply reviving modernist primitivism in the mode of Conrad or
Picasso.

In Okeke’s last drawing, the masked spirits surge over the central space in a frenzy. They
pierce the circular spatial order that governed the previous three drawings. Describing this scene,
Achebe writes: “The eerie voices of countless spirits, the bells that clattered behind some of them,
and the clash of machetes as they ran forwards and backwards and saluted one another sent
tremors of fear into every heart” (187). This frenzy manifests itself on the surface of the image:
is this, therefore, a work of sensual abstraction, of feminine excess (with its citation of ulti body
art), or even an example of Conrad’s black and incomprehensibly frenzied “backdrop”?348 In
order to read the modernist surface in the era of decolonization—and not to presume that
historical change cannot come to primitivism itself—I turn back again to the text of Things Fall
Apart itself. Okeke’s drawings were commissioned as illustrations, after all, and their visual
forms should be read back into Achebe’s prose.

**Things Fall Apart and the Modernist Surface**

Here it will be useful to recall the ways in which “flatness” is often taken to indicate the
naiveté of realism in literary studies. E.M. Forster famously described “flat” characters as

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348 For the continuities between Conrad and Achebe’s representation of frenzy, see Nidesh Lawtoo, “A Picture of
incapable of surprising in a convincing way. Conventional writing holds to the surface of life rather than plumbing its depths—this is English modernism’s complaint against realism. For the linguist Roman Jakobson, realism is characterized by a preponderance of metonymic relations. Realist prose digresses along a flat, horizontal surface from plot to characters and setting and back again. Cubism also has a metonymical orientation, for Jakobson, in that it emphasizes contiguous relationships on the picture plane rather than metaphorical similarities. In the criticism of Achebe, Wole Soyinka was perhaps the first to note the flatness Achebe’s style in his 1963 essay “From a Common Back-Cloth: a Re-Assessment of the African Literary Image.” Using the by-now familiar metaphor of theatrical backdrop, Soyinka promotes African writers who refuse to portray “the common back cloth of an imposed identity.” That is, writers who do not depict Africa according to western expectations. Like Achebe in 1975, he turns to the visual arts for rhetorical force: “Forgetting that the African is one of the inspirations of modern European art today, the black or white Africanist turns his back on an abstract canvas, protesting that he came to view an exhibition of paintings by Africans.” That is, the “African self-interpreter,” eager to give his or her European audience what they want, disdains abstraction or formal experiment in favor of naturalistic African content, or what Soyinka calls “obvious window dressing.” Rather than acknowledging the African presence in modernism, the writers Soyinka attacks here will only countenance a traditional—indeed, a pre-modern and pre-modernist—image of Africa. In this essay, Soyinka only reluctantly praises Things Fall Apart. He argues that Achebe brings the traditional African backcloth into “relief” by following its

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352 Ibid., 388.
353 Ibid., 390.
“creases and stress lines.”354 This view seems to assert that Achebe’s style is essentially flat, like “window dressing” or the “photographic rites” Soyinka also disparages. Soyinka pushes the metaphor of the backcloth to the breaking point, and Achebe just barely achieves lift-off into three-dimensional relief.

In a nuanced argument for Things Fall Apart as a novel that incorporates characteristics of oral culture into its very form, Abdul JanMohamed relies heavily on the metaphor of a flat surface. He argues that Achebe’s paratactic sentence structure emphasizes equivalence, contiguity, and context rather than the subordination of certain elements and the elevation of others. On “the flat surface of the paratactic prose,” Achebe fashions series of narrative episodes and rhythmic reoccurrences that tell the story of Okonkwo, his village, and the arrival of what JanMohamed calls the chirographic colonial culture. These repetitions, digressions, and proverbs are inherent to oral culture; they refuse to make distinctions between background and foreground.355 If this argument for the image is read with Achebe’s Conrad essay in mind, it becomes clear that JanMohamed’s analysis of what he calls “sophisticated primitivism” is indebted to the flat modernist surface.

Like Achebe, JanMohamed concludes with Picasso:

By deliberately adhering to a flat surface Achebe obtains a result curiously similar to the effect obtained by one of Picasso’s paintings: the illusion of depth and perspective, of the third dimension in symbolic representation, is deliberately wrenched and displaced in order to create a two-dimensional representation that includes within it an abstract reminder about the third dimension. While Picasso drew his inspiration from West African art, Achebe draws his from West European fiction.356

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354 Ibid., 392.
355 JanMohamed, 30.
356 Ibid., 36-7.
This analogy links Picasso’s emphasis on the surface of the picture plane to Achebe’s flat style. If Picasso’s paintings suggest the “abstract reminder” of three dimensionality, Achebe’s written form includes within it ghostly remainders of oral culture. Picasso makes a radical break with the past in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*; Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* documents the destruction of an oral culture by the written word of the novel itself. But there is another form of syncretism here, because there is another “abstract reminder” in Picasso: “the inspiration of West African art,” in JanMohamed’s terms, or the residue of racial difference, the ruin of the cultures that Achebe himself describes. My contention is that for Achebe this parallel secondary “reminder” is not “West European fiction,” not entirely. The analogy breaks down at this point. Achebe revolutionized the novel in English, but he still writes in the Western tradition of the novel—Picasso does not create art in the idiom of the African masks he beholds. If there is a doubled haunting in Achebe’s flat narrative style, it is first, the oral culture whose destruction he describes, and second, the flat surface of modernist primitivism. The reminder, the residue, the ruin, is the way the “image of Africa” was appropriated in European modernism itself.

Earlier I suggested that the flatness of Achebe’s style in *Things Fall Apart* indicated that modernism could clear space for the African novel at midcentury. Here I argue that Achebe’s response to modernism in the visual arts refuses modernism’s terms. Achebe’s flat, metonymic realism does not allow for modernism’s metaphors. Modernist primitivism denies visibility to the African mask by turning it into a metaphor about European aesthetic rupture and rejuvenation. Achebe praises this substitution in his 1975 essay: African sculptural forms infuse “new life” into European art, he writes. More recent critics have tried to challenge this metaphorical substitution by exploring the context and particularity of images of Africa as they circulated in
early twentieth century Europe. But ideas of “resemblance” or “affinity” between the primitive and the modern persist. I argue that in 1958 Achebe’s first novel refuses the metaphors of the primitive. By retaining a flat narrative style, Achebe invokes both oral Igbo culture and the modernist surface, but he operates primarily in the mode of metonymy, not metaphor. Similarly, Uche Okeke’s illustrations interrupt the text of Things Fall Apart with an insistence on the surface of the image. These images direct our attention to the functions of metonymy: to the exteriorizing effects of Achebe’s style, to his displacement of colonial modes of representation, and to the contiguity between text and drawing in Achebe’s early publication history.

Putting Okeke’s images of surface frenzy alongside Achebe’s text draws attention to the famous ending of Things Fall Apart, where the narrative voice does suddenly and uncharacteristically turn to metaphor. In the penultimate chapter, Okonkwo and other village leaders have been tricked and imprisoned by the district commissioner, bailed out, and called to a meeting of the clan. Five court messengers interrupt the meeting in Umuofia, and Okonkwo jumps up to confront them:

In that brief moment the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting.

The spell was broken by the head messenger. “Let me pass!” he ordered.
“What do you want here?”
“The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop.”
In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo’s machete descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He

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358 T.J. Clark writes about Picasso’s interest in African masks: “If there is any truck with magic in these pictures, it is above all with the magic of resemblance.” See Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 194. “Affinity” is the titular term of the notorious 1984 MOMA exhibit. James Clifford criticizes “affinity” as a kinship term and a “universalizing allegory.” See Clifford, 190.
knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: “Why did he do it?”

He wiped his machete on the sand and went away. (204-5)

Okonkwo scorns tumult; it is, for him, the opposite of the organized action of war and the ultimate evidence of Umuofia’s weakness. But Okeke’s illustrations direct our attention to the spatial order of this scene, to its representation of tumult. They serve as reminders of the exteriorizing effects of representations of primitive frenzy and tumult. In silence, then, the men of Umuofia are merged into “the mute backcloth of trees,” and then the waiting backcloth jumps into tumultuous life. Narratively, this is an incredibly odd moment. Up until this point, the narrative voice has been frank, proverbial, occasionally ethnographic, but rarely figurative—it infrequently resorts to phrases like “Obierika’s compound was as busy as an anthill,” or “Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water.” But here at the end of the novel the men of Umuofia are not as silent and still as a backcloth: they are one. And the merging of people and backcloth is what Achebe rejects so strongly in his essay on Conrad. While the next and final chapter of the novel will be told from the point of view of the district commissioner, the famous narrative jump has already happened here, on the visual plane. A metaphor leads us into the colonial way of seeing.

The metaphor of the backcloth is categorical: from this point on we will not be able to see Okonkwo except as a body dangling from a tree. We will not be able to see the world of Umuofia that has been Achebe’s subject; we will only hear the wise Obierika’s short outburst of grief and rage. The curtain swings, and all that is visible is the realized metaphor of the backcloth—Conrad’s “black and incomprehensible frenzy.” In an analysis of the critical reception of Things Fall Apart as a work of realism, Ato Quayson describes the novel as an
essentially metonymic text, in Roman Jakobson’s terms, one that proceeds through the contiguous relation of narrative elements, especially Achebe’s well-known proverbs, tales, and digressions. But Quayson also sees another “symbolic/metaphorical” level to the text: “This level subtends the metonymic text but gathers all the antimonies associated with metaphor: ambiguity, contradiction, irony, and paradox.”359 This is part of a still-necessary argument for reading Things Fall Apart as more than a simple “one-to-one” representation of African reality.360 I argue that it is not in the mode of metaphor, but in the metonymic mode of realism—with its attention to the surface relations of things—that Achebe actually addresses the problem of colonial representation.

In the last paragraph of the novel the curtain has swung, the narrative has moved into the colonial way of seeing, and we are fully within the mind of the district commissioner:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. (209)

At a very basic level, metaphor is a substitution concealed behind the surface of the text—and indeed Achebe’s use of the term “backcloth” hides in plain sight. Metonymy, on the other hand,

360 Ibid., 120.
operates on the surface of the text through contiguity and association. And yet when the metaphorical curtain swings, we are left with two texts and the relation between them: *Things Fall Apart* and *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Achebe’s novel has not simply reversed the order of colonial representation by bringing the backdrop forward. That would create another substitution, a likeness between these texts. Instead, Achebe forces the operation of a primitivizing metaphor like “backcloth” onto the surface of the text—the reader can flick back a few pages and be again within the totalized world of Umuofia. This is the work of metonymy: contiguity, sequence, and combination.

But the famous last paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* introduces a new term, one that has governed much analysis of the novel’s realism. In the district commissioner’s mind, the plot of *Things Fall Apart* becomes a set of undignified details that must be cut out of the colonial text. Details are undignified because they seem ornamental, feminine, everyday, and contingent, and they must be pruned because they always threaten to proliferate. Naomi Schor, writing in a different context, still captures the district commissioner’s anxieties about the detail perfectly.

Because Achebe ends his novel this way, he is often seen as writing those details back into the colonial text, and thus back into history itself. In this reading, Achebe’s realism is a realism of details that are gradually built up into the depiction of a totalized and coherent African world. And yet this reading also suggests that Achebe’s detailed realism operates as a mere metaphor for the universal (a word Achebe lambasts in his critical essays, but one that dogs *Things Fall Apart* to this day).

The illustrations that accompany this sort of universal reading—illustrations

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361 See Barbara Johnson for a reading of “inside” and “outside,” in “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God,” in The Novel, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 257-70. See also Rey Chow, who argues: “The metaphoric operation, premised as it is on an internal code of equivalence (or similarity), is usually hidden from the actual utterance, while the metonymic operation whose principle is that of contiguity (or alignment), is usually detectable in an external or contextual relation of a sign combining with other signs.” Chow, “Seminal Dispersal, Fecal Retention, and Related Narrative Matters: Eileen Chang's Tale of Roses in the Problematic of Modern Writing,” *Differences* 11, no. 2 (1999): 157-58.
that appear in the previously-mentioned 1996 edition of the novel—bear uncanny resemblance to the ethnographic illustrations we might imagine populating the pages of The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes.\footnote{In the Heinemann Educational Archives, editors fuss over one drawing that Achebe refused to allow into this edition. He argued that it was inaccurate, but editors complain that the image was based on a historical photograph. Box 45, folder 3, Heinemann Educational Archives, Univ. of Reading Publishing Archives, Reading, UK.}

\footnotetext[362]{See Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen Press, 1987).}

\footnotetext[364]{See Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen Press, 1987).}
We can, in fact, compare the universalizing details of the 1996 drawings with the exotic details in photographs from one of the colonial texts Achebe sought to counter in his first novel. G.T. Basden was a missionary and an anthropologist who knew Achebe’s father and published two books on Igbo life: *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921) and *Niger Ibos* (1938). Achebe used these books in his depiction of Umuofia: he rewrote and recontextualized many of Basden’s observations and arguments about Igbo culture, but he also made use of many of the details Basden recorded. The photographs that illustrate Basden’s books include detailed captions—they particularize his text, but they also serve as violently externalized representations (fig. 38). Basden himself makes this point in his preface, arguing that it has been impossible for him to sound the depths of the Igbo mind because “the black man himself does not know his own mind.” Instead, he will “set forth in a plain way some of the things which the plain man may see and hear in Nigeria.” The frontispiece to *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* provides a good example of these illustrations: it details “Hair-Dressing as a Work of Art,” but it gives its young female subject a flat, masklike profile. In Basden’s photograph, this image is exotic, particularizing, and violently othered. A similar hand-drawn image in the 1996 edition of *Things Fall Apart* becomes more of a metaphor for the universal situation of a girl anticipating marriage (fig. 39, 32).

In light of these images, Okeke’s illustrations from 1963 appear still more startling and destabilizing, and Achebe’s “plain” style seems all the more revolutionary. Neither Okeke’s

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365 For more on Achebe’s reworking of Basden, see Nicholas Brown’s entry on Basden in *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 40.
drawings nor Achebe’s details ornament the novel by adding visual detail to a universal realist tale. Both Okeke’s drawings and Achebe’s prose emphasize surfaces, but not in the mode of either modernist primitivism or ethnographic photography. Rather, the surface becomes the site of metonymic contact between colonial history and the novels of the era of decolonization.

*Things Fall Apart* is not a collection of realist details that fit back “inside” *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes*. It is a novel that, by maintaining a flat surface, remains resolutely exterior to that colonial text and orients itself towards the future. To put this another way, if Okeke’s illustrations do not make *Things Fall Apart* new again, they do, in the best modernist style, make it strange.
Coda
Vessel, Apprentice, and Interpreter:
Naipaul and Walcott Turn Back

In 1987, V.S. Naipaul published his belated novel of the 1950s Windrush period, The Enigma of Arrival. In this unsettlingly autobiographical novel, the visual image has lost none of its mid-century power. The narrator (whom I will call Naipaul) describes his arrival in London in 1950, his literary ambitions, and his eventual withdrawal from the city to the Wiltshire countryside. His story begins there with the English weather and the surrounding landscape: “I saw what I saw very clearly,” he remarks, “But I didn’t know what I was looking at. I had nothing to fit it into.” Naipaul meditatively turns back to the midcentury to parse this gap between seeing content and fitting it into a form. As a coda to the argument of A Way of Seeing, I propose The Enigma of Arrival as a rewriting of Naipaul’s 1967 novel, The Mimic Men. Looking back on the midcentury, Naipaul understands the temporality of visual images differently; they no longer merely repeat, mimic, or mock. Instead they act as errant migrants, always moving in time.

The Mimic Men opens when Ralph Singh—a student from a Caribbean island called Isabella—wanders up to the attic of his London lodging house to experience snow for the first time: “I had seen. Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?” he asks. In the empty room he discovers “a creased photograph of a plumpish girl in a woolen skirt and a jumper. The photographer’s hand had shaken, so that the photograph, like the photograph in some magazine article on great events, seemed rare, as of a person who would be photographed no more.” She stands in a back garden, “her familiar home,” the narrator imagines, but her image is preserved in

this attic “among the chimneypots of what to the girl from the back garden must have seemed like a foreign country.” He assumes she was his landlord’s mistress, her image now forgotten in a drawer of his writing desk. This photograph becomes an omen for the narrator’s own shipwreck, a reoccurring image of the fragility of individual dignity, a relic of displacement. When he was a child, the narrator repeatedly recalls feeling marked by a “celestial camera:” “I was marked; I was of interest; I would survive,” he insists (114). But instead it is the girl’s photograph that survives, blurred, banal, pitiable. The narrator sums up his response to the photograph with a prayer: “let it not happen to me” (10). But of course it does. Back in the Caribbean, Singh remarks that “the red brick houses [in the photograph] became interchangeable with those others in our tropical street, corrugated iron and fretted white gables….Certain emotions bridge the years and link unlikely places. Sometimes by this linking the sense of place is destroyed, and we are ourselves alone” (185). Like the photographs in Lamming’s novel, this one circulates imaginatively in time and space, spreading isolation and alienation. At the end of the novel, Singh ends up alone, in a red brick boarding house just like the one in the photograph, writing his story.

But in fact his fetishizing of the girl’s photograph leaves him in august company. In 1955, Phillip Larkin began his collection *The Less Deceived* with a poem titled “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album.” It begins pruriently, almost pornographically: the album “yields” and “opens,” the poet’s “swivel eye hungers from pose to pose.” But soon he wonders about the status of photography itself: does it persuade “that this is a real girl in a real place”? Or, he asks, “is it just the past?” Similarly, if Naipaul’s Ralph Singh has indeed been marked by a celestial camera, it does not confer a constructive, tangible sense of his reality; he has instead been

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369 See Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 1-2. (italics in original)
marked as the past, or rather as a mimic of the past, and now, writing his book, he can only hope to become an object of prurient historical attention. The temporality of the neglected snapshot is the temporality of the narrator’s story, a story becoming, in Larkin’s final line, “smaller and clearer as the years go by.” To press this idea further, the temporality built into the phrase “the mimic men” (and all of the theoretical equipment it engendered) resides in an abandoned snapshot.\footnote{In the well-known essay “Of Mimicry and Man,” Homi Bhabha writes: “the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objets trouvés of the colonial discourse—the part-objects of presence.” Here the totalizing view of the celestial camera becomes a literal found object—an abandoned snapshot—that partially, metonymically, signifies the way time will work in the novel. It repeats and returns, but does not press forward. Similarly, Larkin can “mourn” the young girl’s past image, “without a chance of consequence” (her future will lie with another man). Neither Larkin nor Naipaul imagine the possibility that the ekphrastic object—the young girl’s body—will speak out. See Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” \textit{October} 28 (Spring, 1984): 132.} But in \textit{The Enigma of Arrival}, visual images do not simply recede into the past.

Naipaul’s sense of disorientation in the Wiltshire countryside is anchored only by the touchstones of English literature and half-remembered images from his third-standard reader in Trinidad. “The most beautiful picture I had ever seen,” recalls the narrator, was the reproduction of Constable’s paintings of Salisbury Cathedral in his school reader (fig. 40). Now later in life Naipaul inhabits these very scenes. If Constable is known for his immediacy—the flecks of white paint that indicate the play of light on the surface of the things when the easel is taken out of doors—Naipaul cannot see the Wiltshire landscape without the mediation of Constable’s images. Similarly, one part of his afternoon walk reminds him of the design on a condensed-milk label in Trinidad: cows on a green slope, an image “at the very heart of romance, a child’s fantasy of the beautiful other place,” offered up in a country where most people used imported condensed milk or powdered milk (84, 36-7). Especially during the war, Naipaul recalls, advertisements in Trinidad often promoted things no longer made or impossible to procure from abroad. “So I was used to living in a world where the signs were without meaning, or without the meaning intended by their makers,” writes Naipaul (131). It is just this kind of disorientation...
among the signs of the English landscape that allows Naipaul to be reborn in Wiltshire—he experiences a “second childhood of seeing and learning, my second life, so far away from my first” (87). But this rejuvenation comes not because his childhood images of England are confirmed. It comes because he sees the referent of these images—the Wiltshire landscape—change and decay: “That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself, attached to myself,” he explains (15). In this way, the Constable paintings become unmoored: read through this colonial writer’s way of seeing, they become images of cultural alienation, Naipaul’s great subject.

They also become images of the material Naipaul admits he “missed” when he first emigrated to England in 1950:
The flotsam of Europe not long after the end of the terrible war, in a London house that was now too big for the people it sheltered—that was the true material of the boardinghouse. But I didn’t see it….there was a subject there that could have been my own….Because in 1950 in London I was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century. (141)

This is the material covered by Lamming in *The Emigrants* and sketched out by the literary ephemera of BBC radio broadcasts, magazine reviews, and yellowing first editions. But in 1950, Naipaul did not see this material—again, seeing here means more here than a straightforward metaphor for understanding. Naipaul did not see the boardinghouse partly because of his idea of what a writer should be—the Bloomsbury idea of inner vision, he says, “bred…out of empire, wealth, and imperial security” (141)—and partly because his sight is prejudiced by visual images like Constable’s painting. He feels he is an “oddity” (recall Amis’s use of this word in his critical assessment of Windrush writing) walking the grounds of the old Edwardian estate where he rents a cottage. “I felt that my presence in that old valley was part of something like an upheaval, a change in the course of the history of the country” (15). But he cannot formulate that change through the material of the boardinghouse; he can only formulate it through his changing way of seeing the English landscape. Now that he has learned to see anew, he is still attached to Constable’s images, but his attachment has to do with their temporality: that is, their belated encounter with the material of the boardinghouse, their ruin and “out-of-placeness.”

Naipaul’s reclusive landlord withdrew from the world in 1949-50, just when Naipaul himself first arrived in England. Sara Suleri describes the “comic postimperial parable” of their relationship as an instance of inversion: “The narrator’s sense of his own historicity gains in power each time he recounts an episode of imperial evacuation.” But Constable’s images are

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371 Sara Suleri, “Naipaul’s Arrival,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 47. Suleri is interested in the ways in which the landlord’s physical helplessness contrasts with the narrator’s bodily health and “ability to situate his own body as a racial presence in the text.” She describes the landlord’s poems and stories, but not his drawings.
not evacuated in this novel. Instead, they are imbued with the temporality of encounter and the resulting possibility of future change and future decay. Naipaul’s landlord is also an artist, but he does not construct images in the same way Naipaul does. We first meet him in a photograph album from the years when the manor was in its prime—the years of high modernism. In parentheses, Naipaul remarks: “Photographs—snapsshots—melancholy in their effect…being a kind of memento mori in the way a good painting of the same occasion—charged with the spirit and labor of the painter—would never have been” (191). This is not a new idea about photography, but Naipaul’s contrast with painting recalls the laborious ways in which he is himself retouching Constable’s images. The landlord’s drawings, by contrast, are “oddly fluent, practiced, easy…Beardsley-like drawings, of another age” (254). His style has not changed since the years in which the photograph album was made; it exhibits “that absence of restlessness and creative abrasion, that view from his back windows of a complete, untouched, untroubled world” (282). The landlord’s way of seeing has stalled. Naipaul’s way of seeing, as he returns again and again to the same scenes to add a fleck of color or adjust a tone, is that of a painter, charged with conveying the colonial histories, temporalities, and attachments that reconverge in each image.

When *The Enigma of Arrival* was published, Derek Walcott gave it a bitter review in the *New Republic*. Praising Naipaul for the beauty of his descriptions of the English landscape (and for his surprising lack of “acidity in his pleasures”), he refuses to allow Naipaul to subsume the violence of colonial history into the pastoral. He also complains about Naipaul’s title:

The book takes its title from a painting by de Chirico. A wharf. An empty city. A wanderer. A dangerous model already, and one that Naipaul has never used before: the art of someone else. More dangerous because surrealism, or metaphorical painting, is the

Her essay makes an interesting case for the complicated temporality of the novel as veering between the “excessive novelty of postcolonial history and the excessive anachronism of the canon” (25).
imagination at its most second-rate. It is illustrated cliché: every arrival is a journey, etc.…Replace British for Roman, Naipaul for the traveller, the autobiography for the unwritten novel, and we have a neat trick, a prosaic irony.372

Here, ekphrasis—the art of someone else—becomes second-rate, even dangerous.373 Naipaul is merely updating de Chirico’s painting, illustrating it with himself as the traveler—a “neat trick” rather than an aesthetic whole. Walcott views surrealism as elitist, cynical, socially and politically ineffectual (a bit like his opinion of Naipaul himself). He outlines what he calls Naipaul’s “idea of history”: “a man whose background was that of the degradation of indenture, of displacement, has used that background to master his craft, to move from servitude to certainty, and has found that certainty on the imperial soil of England.”374 But ekphrasis is not a mode of “certainty”—it is necessarily ambiguous and caught between semantic codes. While to verbally represent the visual image is to possess it, to overcome its specificity—this is Walcott’s complaint—The Enigma of Arrival hews much closer to what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as ekphrasis’s ambivalence, its hope of overcoming otherness and its simultaneous fear of collapsing it.375 Naipaul’s novel is an illustrated text, one that repeatedly—almost hypnotically—stages encounters between word and image, between Naipaul’s obsessively descriptive prose and Constable, de Chirico, and the many other visual images that populate the pages. These encounters are not sequential, moving from “background” (or local color) to “craft” (or high culture), from Trinidad to England, as Walcott—the poet and painter—may have intuited.

Walcott’s book-length poem Tiepolo’s Hound (2000) is illustrated with twenty-six of his own paintings, most of them made in the 1990s. While Tiepolo’s Hound eludes quick

373 Naipaul does point out the de Chirico’s painting is already “the art of someone else:” Apollinaire gave de Chirico the title, and Sara Suleri questions whether it is “image or idiom” that is more powerful for Naipaul. The two are not extricable—it is the “dangerous” overlap of image and word that makes ekphrasis work. See Suleri, 41.
374 Walcott, 124.
characterization, I place it here, in the context of Walcott’s review, as a response to *The Enigma of Arrival*. Walcott writes about Camille Pisarro’s removal from St. Thomas to Paris to paint and about his own search for the remembered detail of a hound’s thigh in a Venetian painting, perhaps by Tiepolo. It is a poem about the Renaissance “art of seeing” and the Moors and hounds that hover just on the edge of that vision. It is also about Pisarro’s impressionism, and thus necessarily about landscape and light and the seasons, just like *The Enigma of Arrival*. It is about Gauguin in Martinique, about Cazabon’s Trinidad engravings, Craven’s *Treasury of Art Masterpieces*, and Walcott’s father’s copy of *The English Topographical Draughtsman*. These image-citations circulate within the poem in the same way that Naipaul’s circulate within his novel. But Walcott renounces English scenes: “England became its art…but I claimed nothing. Not from this landscape,/the ragged hedges opening Warwickshire…watercolour country, slopes with cows” (150-1). Instead of claiming an English inheritance, these image-citations circulate throughout Walcott’s verse in what he calls “the apostolic succession of the/reproductions… Paintings so far from life fermenting around us!” (14). The unbroken apostolic succession is broken both by the end of Walcott’s line of verse and the idea of reproduction itself: what is being transmitted, faithfully, down through the centuries, is just a copy of a copy.

The images that do illustrate *Tiepolo’s Hound* are not these paintings, but Walcott’s own. Yet Walcott’s watercolors also seem far from life’s fermenting gurgle—they are often described in reviews as “placid,” “delicate,” and “modest.” It is here that Walcott stages his critique of Naipaul’s take on the visual image: his paintings are ordinary views of the Caribbean, and their connection to his verse on the opposite page is often unclear. But at the very end of the book, Walcott finally draws an explicit connection between verse and image: “I shall finish in a place whose only power/is the exploding spray along its coast,/its rotting asphalt and cantankerous

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poor…” (162). The last painting is titled “Breakers, Becune Point, 1995” (fig. 41), and Walcott intones, “Let this page catch the last light on Becune Point” (163), identifying word and image rather than estranging them, as Naipaul does.


*Tiepolo’s Hound* is a positive account of the postcolonial subject as, in Walcott’s phrase, “Vessel, apprentice and interpreter” (132) of the visual image. *The Enigma of Arrival* is more pessimistic, but the three descriptors are true for Naipaul too. *Tiepolo’s Hound* is also positive in the mode of literary realism: Walcott identifies his images with the empirical world. He concludes that it is not important whether Tiepolo or Veronese painted the hound he remembers, only that he can fashion a new fiction “without a change of tense” (133). Thus he claims to have
seen the hound one day at the beach, “still unpainted, on its own ground” (138). Naipaul, by contrast, seems not to believe that anything can ever remain “unpainted.” He repeatedly fantasizes about a novel he might one day write with the title “The Enigma of Arrival.” In it, a traveller will arrive in a classical city and stay until he gradually feels “that he was getting nowhere” (98). This is the feeling Naipaul has when he returns to Trinidad for his sister’s funeral at the end of the actual novel: “There was no ship of antique shape now to take us back. We had come out of the nightmare; and there was nowhere else to go” (352). Here, de Chirico’s ship has departed, and Stephen Dedalus has awoken: this is the enigmatic arrival of the colonial world in history, worked out through the encounter between word and image, between the anachronism of past images and the out-of-placeness of new ones. Naipaul writes, “To see the possibility, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament” (52). In this way, Naipaul aligns himself with David Scott’s argument that the temporality of this mid-century period, while often constructed in the progressive time of romance and anti-colonial overcoming, in fact edges closer to tragedy, a form in which the present must honor limits placed upon it by the past. In tragedy, Scott writes, “history is not leading us anywhere in particular.”

Both Walcott and Naipaul are writing belated versions of the Windrush period, and though their conception of how time works at midcentury is different, they both approach it non-chronologically through the juxtaposition of word and image.

Thus the temporality of image-citations and visual illustrations in mid-century Anglophone literature indicates that postcolonial literature emerged in complicated counterpoint to modernist aesthetics and realist referentiality. Reading visual images through the structure of encounter on the page reveals a temporality that is not linear, chronologically ravenous, or

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377 See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 166. Scott is interested in what he calls “the temporal question of futurity in the history of the present” (43) and how it can help us rethink oppositional criticism adequate to our postcolonial present.
displacing. Instead, the visual image can be read for its accretion of the past and for the ways in which encounters with the present retouch it, adjusting, abrading, and refining the surface of the image. These images should not be read for the stable relationship between seeing subject and seen object but for the mobile relationship between word and image and for their circulation between the hope of overcoming difference and the fear of collapsing it. The “apostolic succession of the/reproductions” structures the encounter between literary reproduction and literary succession, between “now” and “then.”