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'Provincializing Europe': The Postcolonial Urban Uncanny in V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

Erica L. Johnson

V. S. Naipaul is somewhat infamous in postcolonial circles. As a world traveler and chronicler of global history, from the American South and Islamic fundamentalism in Iran to Indian diasporic histories on four continents, he is regarded alternately as a leading critic of the colonial condition and as an intellectual collaborator with that same regime. He is praised for the crystalline clarity of his prose and criticized for his skeptical characterizations of nearly every society that he represents in his work; he is read as a Caribbean, Indian, and English writer.¹ His biographer Bruce King concludes that Naipaul, who was born and raised in Trinidad, dispenses with geographical identity and “regard[s] himself as a former colonial who became a homeless cosmopolitan” (3). With regard to Naipaul’s African works, though, King identifies Naipaul’s stance as one deeply critical of colonialism and the representational schema of colonial historiography. King goes so far as to class these novels with those of Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe in their shared project of understanding a question—“how, in the complex coming together of the ‘post’ and the ‘colonial’ [do] the present and the past inform one another[?]”—articulated by the editors of an essay collection devoted to the question of postcolonial historiography (Fuchs and Baker 329). Naipaul’s configuration of time through space in *A Bend in the River*, his allegorical 1979 novel based not-so-loosely on the post-independence period in the Congo (then Zaire),

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presents a deeply insightful response to this question. Naipaul's rearrangement of temporality through space, evident in his characters' experience of a postcolonial form of the urban uncanny, leads to a metaphysics of post-coloniality whereby the terms "post" and "colonial" enter into a mutually haunting, as opposed to sequential, relationship, illustrating Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that in ex-colonial locales, "historical time is not integral . . . it is out of joint with itself" (16). The novel's uncanny chronotope, legible in its urban spaces, structures Naipaul's portrayal of post-colonial and postimperial nations as well as his unique view on the meaning and utility of the marker of "post" in these two interconnected contexts.

A Bend in the River opens with a particularly nihilistic view of colonial history. While his many critics go after what they see to be an implicit teleology in the novel, these readings take Naipaul's despairing vision of cyclical growth and decay, of consecutive failed civilizations, as a chronology in which, to quote one such analysis, "decolonization is an aberration in the orderly, progressive process of change" (Samantrai 54). Samantrai opens his analysis of *A Bend in the River* with the charge that the novel reflects "the neocolonial vision of V. S. Naipaul, perhaps the most widely read contemporary apologist for European colonialism" (50). Adebayo Williams, who calls Naipaul "a tortured and tormented soul stranded by choice, an outcast by vocation, a cultured *déraciné* and *homme désengagé*," responds to such criticism with the circumspect observation that "despite his foibles and eccentricities, there is an inner consistency, a troubling integrity about most of what Naipaul has to say, however outlandish and outrageous these may be, that they demand serious engagement" (16). Finally, Imre Szeman offers an apt overall assessment of Naipaul criticism in his observation that "Naipaul's writing is seen either as the literary equivalent of developmental and modernization theories or as its almost exact opposite: as an important corrective to the overly optimistic characterizations of the postcolonial world offered by other writers and critics" (98). As Szeman concludes, though, this dual-pronged approach, while it accurately reflects critical trends, does not sum up the complexity of Naipaul's work. What becomes evident in the larger conversation about Naipaul is that getting past his looming persona is not easy and that he has established himself as a contrarian to entire communities of scholars and writers; moreover, he reprises his views from text to text,

as Kevin Foster amply illustrates in his analysis of the overlap between Naipaul's writing about Argentina and India—and, for that matter, about Africa. As these critics demonstrate, reading a single text of Naipaul's in isolation from his other works and getting beyond the Nobel-winning author's status on the global literary scene pose an interesting challenge. That said, my goal is to read *A Bend in the River* in dialogue with a body of postcolonial criticism concerned with the nature of postcolonial time and space, beginning with that of Chakrabarty, in order to demonstrate that Naipaul's novel effectively provincializes Europe.

As Chakrabarty so eloquently argues in his seminal book, *Provincializing Europe*, post/colonial history disrupts longstanding Enlightenment and subsequent Marxist models of historicism whereby “we must see [anything in this world] as an historically developing entity . . . as some kind of unity at least in potentia—and, second, as something that develops over time” (23). Chakrabarty shows how anti-colonial nationalist movements, for example, reject “stagist” history in large part as a response to the idea of modernity, predicated as it is on eurocentric historicism. For colonized nations, European views of history culminate in a double bind: whereas self-government is viewed as the highest form of political modernity, colonial powers use the same argument to deny self-government to populates deemed “not yet” capable of this form of sovereignty. The notion that political modernity can be summed up in a universal model of human relations, and one that perfectly mirrors capitalist democracies found in the West, is a central tenet of colonial discourse. These are issues taken up in Naipaul's novel, which presents a rigorously skeptical portrait of the overdetermined concept of progress.

This portrait must be read contrapuntally, however, for if one reads *A Bend in the River* through the European tradition of historicism, or even through that of authorial intention, one might conclude that decolonization indeed interferes with progress, with modernity. In fact, Naipaul's own views on modernity are admittedly unsympathetic as he voices them in his companion piece, *A Congo Diary*. In his account of his 1975 river journey from the inland city of Kisangani down the Congo River to Kinshasa, Naipaul conceives of Zaire melancholically as an African vacuum, asserting that weakness, vulnerability, ignorance, and arrogance carry the day. His diary comments are rarely well received, but the footprint that he lays down for *A Bend in the River* is evident in his insistence that history in

Zaire “begins with [one’s] own memory of events: the past does not exist” or that “history has disappeared,” “Even the Belgian colonial past” (*Congo* 6, 13). “And no one,” he laments, “African, Asian, European, has heard of Conrad or *Heart of Darkness*” (13). Naipaul’s emulation of Conrad in such comments, along with the fact that he borrows Conrad’s diary title for his own, does indicate a eurocentric view of Africa on Naipaul’s part. Hence, it is all the more interesting when this historical commentary, along with Naipaul’s impressions of the ruins of Kisangani, resurface sometimes verbatim in his novel as targets of the author’s irony. For example, in *A Bend in the River*, the “European graft” is seen not as a progressive path toward modernity, but rather as one of many layers in an endlessly repeating historical cycle. Basically, Naipaul mocks the notion that European colonialism should be accorded the singularly important role that it is given in Western historicism by folding into his novel the often overlooked presence of tribal, Arab, and Indian power in central and eastern Africa. Even in his pessimism, then, Naipaul inscribes a spatio-temporal structure to *A Bend in the River* that anticipates recent work on the process of globalization. By repeating his despairing pronouncements from his diary as critical expressions in his much more complex and sophisticated work of fiction, Naipaul unravels his own proclaimed eurocentrism and, by extension, expands usefully upon postcolonial critique.

To begin, Naipaul reconfigures temporality in such a way that progress and modernity are displaced as inherent qualities of postcolonial nationhood. As Chakrabarty points out, the concept of progress—which Naipaul eschews—undergirds colonial relations in the sense that the colonizer “progresses” one step ahead of the colonized, and therefore the particular path taken by European societies toward, for example, nation formation, is established as the only path toward political modernity. The problem is that if “‘political modernity’ was to be a bounded and definable phenomenon, it was not unreasonable to use its definition as a measuring rod for social progress” (Chakrabarty 9). More specifically, this bounded form of political modernity, based on the particular socio-economic histories of Europe, is defined not by the philosophical universals of freedom and human rights, but by material specifics of industrial development and nationalization. *A Bend in the River* identifies the ongoing imprint of European hegemony in the decolonization process and contends that

“progress” toward modern nationhood entraps postcolonial nations in the antechamber of European modernity.

Naipaul’s novel thus provincializes Europe through its temporal and spatial schemas by revealing European signs taken as universals to be the discreet, geopolitically specific concepts that they are. In his arrangement of temporality, he dispenses with European historicism’s embedded, universalized concept of political modernity, *cum* the capitalist, industrialized nation state, thus providing a spatial iteration of Chakrabarty’s critique of historicism. This critique is at its most concrete when Naipaul shows modernity to be a contingent, shifting concept by juxtaposing European and African locales that contain equal measures of “modern” and “traditional” life. The *fort-da* motion of the characters between formerly metropolitan and colonial countries serves as a crucial means of decentering the colonial binary of “center” and “periphery,” and this assimilation of opposing terms can be viewed as part of a larger project named by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her titular “critique of postcolonial reason.” Spivak cautions that “Colonial Discourse studies, when they concentrate only on the representation of the colonized or the matter of the colonies, can sometimes serve the production of neo-colonial knowledge by placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past, and/or suggesting a continuous line from that past to our present” (1). In a move similar to that made by Chakrabarty, Spivak invokes the mutually implicated and continuous flow of postcolonial time and space: the “past” flows through and informs the present and, by extension, the “colonies” are no more isolated in space than they are in time given that the existence of the colonies is predicated on the *contact* between people from imperial nations and people from colonial locales in the first place. This flow has reversed and rerouted itself from the occupation of colonial places by Europeans to the migration of former colonials to Europe, to cite one example of its fluidity. The point is that assessing the modern world in discreet, compartmentalized spaces or times is limiting and inaccurate. By extension, to locate colonialism in the past or in a bounded geographical space would be to corroborate the very model of historicism that Naipaul rejects in his portrayal of modernity as an unrealized Western concept. Instead, he presents modernity as but a contingent element of postcolonial and postimperial urban life.

Indeed, the most effective way in which Naipaul provincializes Europe is through the bi-national urban topos of the novel. Urban experience is

often identified with metropolitan nations in contrast to rural or agrarian colonial countries, in part because of the economic legacy of industrialized nations bleeding raw materials from the colonies for import to metropolitan manufacturing centers. Yet beyond the terms of capitalist production, the idea that cities are tokens of Western civilization is both misleading and another means of suggesting that colonial civilizations trail European progress. Naipaul uses the geography of postcolonial and postimperial urban topoi to relativize a series of descriptive binaries from those of urban/undeveloped to those of post/colonial.

To sum up, the uniqueness of Naipaul's contribution to current postcolonial theory lies in his configuration of the post/colonial binary in its spatio-temporal properties. There has clearly been a trend among postcolonial critics, first, to move beyond viewing the term "postcolonial" as a merely temporal expression of the real process of decolonization and to view it as a more entrenched philosophical binary and, second, to deconstruct this binary. The relationship between the two components of the term have been described by Arif Dirlik as "condensations," by Ella Shohat as "contingencies," and by Stuart Hall as "supplementarities" or as *différance*—the point being that the utility of the term "postcolonial" lies precisely in the variously defined dialogue between its prefix and root (501, 251, 247). Barbara Fuchs and David J. Baker, who assess these dialogues in their essay "The Postcolonial Past," say as much when they conclude that while the implicitly historical link between "post" and "colonial" may be "productive but chronically irresolvable," historical questions

reflect the dilemmas out of which postcolonial criticism reconstitutes itself. They have proved intractable, as Dirlik rightly says, largely because they reflect a troubled temporality intrinsic to much postcolonial thinking. . . . The relations between what is site and time specific and what endures across those sites and times remains mostly unthought. Sorting out the "now" and "then" of colonialism would require a good deal of exacting comparative work. (333)

Interestingly, this essay responds to the problematic temporality of the term "postcolonial" by moving from the question of "When?" or

“Where?” to that of “Who?”—in spite of the emphasis on site-specificity. *A Bend in the River* therefore contributes to discussions about postcolonial temporality by delving into the question of “Where?” The novel’s emphasis on spatiality through its depiction of postcolonial and postimperial nations as spaces inscribed with a common temporality works to neutralize differences between Europe and Africa, pulling them instead into a common orbit around a difficult but shared past.

Finally, Naipaul participates in the larger conversation regarding the relationship of “post” to “colonial” by depicting an uncanny relationship between the two components of the term. The notion of the uncanny derives from Freud’s essay on the *unheimlich*, or the strange and unexpected conflation of diametrically opposed elements of human experience. Freud describes “the uncanny [as] that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”; it is the coming together of strangeness and intimacy, the disturbing overlap between terror and comfort (1). Uncanny experience plays out throughout *A Bend in the River* quite literally, but the concept’s utility is theoretical as well. By definition, Freud explains, “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (6). A multitude of meanings are attached to the word *heimlich*—which translates to homelike, intimate, comfortable, hidden, and secret, to name but a few of the associations that it encompasses—and consequently these concepts and their opposites mutually contain one another through a particularly temporal dynamic. That is, the overlap of opposing categories occurs through one’s experience of past events in the present. The uncanny moment is one in which material from the past erupts into a present moment unexpectedly and inappropriately. This repetition of past material in the present is one that Freud emphasizes in his diagnosis of the uncanny experience as one in which repressed psychic material *recurs* and in fact prompts a “compulsion to repeat”: “[f]inally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or characteristics or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same name through several generations” (8). Viewed as an element of uncanny experience, the past is never safely locked away, but rather forms a distinct thread in the fabric of the present. In the mutual disintegration of two distinct terms—whether terror and comfort or past and present—and in the specifically

temporal schema of the uncanny, there are clear applications to Naipaul's deployment of the "post" in the trope of postcolonial representation. *A Bend in the River* is seized with an ever-present colonial past clashing with an impossible postcolonial future. Situated in an uncanny present, Naipaul's novel maps this temporal condition onto a specifically urban architecture richly expressive of the haunting nature of imperial relations, globally. As P. S. Chanhan points out in an article on Naipaul's depiction of history as "cosmic irony," "his narrative is pervaded with the rhetoric of 'then' and 'now.' What this contrastive strategy often invokes is what Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, calls 'the feeling of absurdity,' which lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation" (21). This confrontation can also be understood not as an oppositional conceptual space, but rather as a conceptual overlap and repetition of "then" and "now": Naipaul's novel breaks the binary concept of confrontation down into the self-referentiality of opposites and thus demonstrates the temporal and spatial continuities of the postcolonial world. In short, *A Bend in the River* exceeds postcolonial demarcations of time that assume a break between the past and the present, most notably in its spatial layout. Through architecture, landscape, and geography, Naipaul depicts the uncanny nature of postcolonial existence.

The Urban Uncanny

A Bend in the River relies heavily on a topos that—despite the personal reflections of Naipaul and the presentism of most of his characters—does confront the reader with layers of colonial as well as postcolonial history. The town at the bend of the river (an unnamed Kisangani) is composed of colonial and postcolonial fragments, from the razed European suburb, which lies in vine-strewn ruins, to the sparkling "New Domain" that the post-independence President—modeled closely and obviously on Mobutu Sese Seko—builds as a testament to modernity. The city houses the nation's past, present, and future in such a way that these temporal frameworks become enjambed in one another. What results is a postcolonial urban uncanny, in that the colonial past—entirely expressed in the spatial layout of the city—intrudes upon characters whose lives span colonial and postcolonial periods in history even if these characters share a desire to "trample on the past" (113).

The novel's Sisyphean protagonist, Salim, journeys inland from what has long been his Indian family's home on the east coast of Africa, remarking as he does that his journey is both Conradian in its interior thrust and a well-trod slave route that he follows in reverse—and here we see the doubled vision of the narrator who both ventriloquizes Conrad (“as I got deeper I thought: But this is madness”) and debunks Conrad's phantasmal “heart of darkness” by populating and historicizing the central African terrain (4). Most of the novel then plays out in the town at the bend in the river which goes through different iterations of history, although the overall dynamic of history is evident in the section headings of the novel's four-part structure: beginning with “The Second Rebellion” and ending with “Battle”—the journey here is from war to war—the headings allude to Naipaul's entropic vision.

The narrative unfurls through the life-and-death cycle of the town. In fact, one could trace a narrative of the town, which morphs from the “half destroyed” “ghost” town that Salim first encounters to the modern “hoax” of the New Domain, the President's trophy enclave, which houses both a polytechnic college and a convention center and which lapses back into the encroaching bush and, in turn, the destroyed European suburbs on which it is built. Thus, the temporal cycle of modernity and decay can be understood spatially in the paradox of the New Domain that houses colonial as well as postcolonial history in its very architecture. For example, its name evokes King Leopold of Belgium's particularly brutal colonization of the Congo, carried out through his allotments of *domaines privées* to the most vicious of colonial agents. Intended as something of a *domaine publique*, the President's New Domain stands not as the symbol of a new social order, but rather as a reminder that everything new stands upon the ruins of the past—and will likely be consumed by them. As Salim observes of a propaganda photo, “the message of the Domain was simple. Under the rule of our new President the miracle had occurred: Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass and sat in cushioned chairs covered in imitation velvet,” a message whose subtext Salim reads as “the success of the European graft” (101). Modernity is seen not just in its eurocentrism, but in its artificiality, and the notion of historical progression toward modernity is openly parodied. Eventually the New Domain cracks and buckles palpably, but even in its glory days, “The big swimming pool near the building that was said to be a conference hall de-

veloped leaks and remained empty. . . . The Domain had been built fast, and in the sun and the rain decay also came fast” (102). Lest this description of structural failure be taken as a comment on the failure of postcolonial “progress,” this passage finds an unsettling parallel in Salim’s earlier response to the deserted European suburb on which the Domain is built. In his first impressions of the town, a town which “had nearly ceased to exist” by the time of his arrival, Salim describes the ruined suburb as “unnerving” (27). Salim notes: “Sun and rain and bush had made the site look old, like the site of a dead civilization. . . . But the civilization wasn’t dead. It was the civilization I existed in and in fact was still working towards. And that could make for an odd feeling: to be among the ruins was to have your time-sense unsettled. You felt like a ghost, not from the past, but from the future” (27). The space of the town is a *revenant* space. Its lack of architectural/spatial progress works as a corrective to teleological historicism, for no longer is modernity a solid presence in the future, but rather a passing and, even worse, *repeating* moment in the life of the town at the bend in the river.²

The postcolonial urban uncanny not only plays out in Africa, but in fact finds its clearest expression in London, again razing the playing field of eurocentric semantics and historicism. As Freud points out, one prevalent consequence of an uncanny encounter is that “‘the subject’ identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self.” Freud provides the example of a traveler lost in a foreign city who unintentionally returns to the same, anxious place time and again, thus encountering the strangely familiar within the foreign. This central, urban metaphor of Freud’s work accords with Salim’s experience in London, a city in which he loses all sense of direction (north, south, east, and west all collapse) only to discover that the points of reference that actually guide him through the city are deeply familiar: they are African points of reference. Thus, the non-teleological nature of time is evident not only in the constant erosion of the African city, but in the larger process of erosion that is repeated in London, and it is through this transcontinental urban space that Naipaul effectively provincializes Europe.

Salim approaches London as a center to the African periphery from which he journeys, but Naipaul presents this binary only as a basis for

Salim's disenchantment with what he has erroneously been taught to view as a modern, cultural European center.³ Instead, Salim experiences the breakdown of culturally, politically, and even geographically differentiated space through his sojourn. Moreover, Salim's trip to London is presented not as a novel enterprise, but as a repetition of his friend Indar's earlier trip. It is Indar who gives voice to both characters' experience of travel when he says,

But the airplane is a wonderful thing. You are still in one place when you arrive at the other. . . . You can go back many times to the same place. And something strange happens if you go back often enough. You stop grieving for the past. You see that the past is something in your mind alone, that it doesn't exist in real life. You trample on the past, you crush it. (113)

And indeed Salim discovers that "the Europe the airplane brought me to was not the Europe I had known all my life. . . . But the Europe I had come to . . . was neither the old Europe nor the new. It was something shrunken and mean and forbidding" (229). Salim suspects that the great, modern city of privilege exists, but what he experiences is a repetition of the town at the bend in the river: "they traded in the middle of London as they had traded in the middle of Africa. The goods travelled a shorter distance, but the relationship of the trader to his goods remained the same" (230). This observation speaks not only to an overarching economic system of which London and the African city form mere components, but to the flattening of difference between here and there, then and now. If the bush continually encroaches on the African city, that African city is here relocated to a similarly shrunken London—and both cities are in a self-consumptive state.

Thus, the binary of metropole vs. colonial outpost collapses in Salim's experience of London as what Maria Tatar, in defining *das unheimlich*, terms a "border area between the familiar and strange" (171). Traversing London, Salim is unsettled by his recognition of African-style markets and merchant relations as well as by his observation that a common population inhabits both locales, causing him to reflect that "It was so easy for people like us to think of great cities as natural growths. It reconciled us to our

own shanty cities. We slipped into thinking that one place was one thing, and another place another thing” (232). Naipaul undoes his own spiteful implication that “great cities” and “shanty cities” reflect the populations who build them by depicting London and Africa as coextensive spaces inhabited by a common population. His gaze, as he moves through the city as something of a postcolonial *flâneur*, takes in not the foreignness of a European city, but the familiarity of Africa: “In the streets of London I saw these people, who were like myself, as from a distance” (230). Naipaul continues to insert the referent of the “great city” from which this population is “cut off,” but again he undercuts the veracity of any such greatness by keeping it as a distant and unsubstantiated illusion. No one in the novel ever arrives in a great city, a modern city, or a city with a distinct national population; instead, all cities are the same in that they house African, Indian, Arab, and European populations and exemplify built environments in various stages of decay.

The conflation of London and former colonial outposts is also evident in the city’s architecture, which features, for example, stone benches and bridges inscribed with dolphins and camels. As Indar marvels, “Camels and their sacks! Strange city: the romance of India in that building, and the romance of the desert here” (151). London is thus seen in its colonial consumption, but not in such a way that the metropole merely co-opts colonial details; rather, the arrival of colonial material imprints upon and transforms London itself. The spatial and social repetition of African history in London belies the urban binary between modern city and colonial outpost, leaving Salim with the sense that the city’s inhabitants are “lost in space and time, but dreadfully, pointlessly busy” (241). Possessed of this spatio-temporal disorientation, Salim explores his own status as one of the city’s “lost” inhabitants. In a classic expression of the uncanny experience of London, he finds that he has to face his own strangeness, his own internal division, manifest in his terror at having to “face my solitude, the other man that I also was. I hated that hotel room. It made me feel I was nowhere. It forced old anxieties on me and added new ones, about London, about this bigger world where I would have to make my way” (231). Salim’s cleft identity reflects the collapse of a colonial ideology that structures his consciousness up to the point of his arrival in London: that is, he had expected to arrive in a new, foreign, modern city and to “progress” from a colonial locale to a metropolitan center. Instead, the notion of pro-

gression is stymied along with the accompanying categories of modernity, novelty, and arrival. As Susan Bernstein explains in her discussion of “the ambulatory uncanny,” the figure of the “uncanny guest” bears within him or herself “the will to homelessness,” an assessment that aptly describes Salim as a traveler for whom the distinction between un/homely becomes irrelevant (1117). On this point, Bernstein comments

Uncanny is the word always falling away from itself into its opposite, yet affirming itself in doing so. The uncanny comes into being as a violation of the law of non-contradiction. Like a ghost, it “is” and “is not.” The opposition between subject and object also falls away with the erosion of the structure of identity; subject and predicate can no longer keep their boundaries intact. The uncanny is not a stable concept (subject) to which the predicate of a clear definition can be attached. (1113)

London does not provide an expected contrast to Salim’s African city but rather figures as a repetition of it, producing what Bernstein explains to be a paradigmatic uncanny anxiety: “the fear that I am a double, a copy, an imitation, and not a self-originating essence” (1126). Salim finds peace of mind in London only by entering conceptually into the spatio-temporal continuities and repetitions of the novel, “play[ing] London against Africa until both became unreal, and I could fall asleep” (240). In other words, he relinquishes the distinction between the two spaces in an acknowledgement that neither is a privileged space of belonging and that he is therefore a perpetual stranger.

The collapse between London and Africa—the collapse of a former imperial order—results in spatial sameness with a historical corollary: as King puts it, “the historical vision [is] of meaningless change and decay rather than actual newness and improvement” (124). Again, this dynamic of history is evident in the cyclical changes to the New Domain, whose “scruffy,” overgrown form greets Salim upon his return to Africa and prompts the following observation: “This piece of earth—how many changes had come to it! Forest at a bend in the river, a meeting place, an Arab settlement, a European outpost, a European suburb, a ruin like the ruin of a dead civilization, the glittering Domain of new Africa, and now

this" (260). Summoning the ghosts of pre- and post-colonial Africa, Naipaul presents a spatial and historical dynamic whereby the past is repressed and haunting rather than "past" in any strict chronological sense. In charting the changes to "this piece of earth," Salim—now apprised of his own homelessness—observes a relentlessly equivocating space and his vision reproduces the palimpsestic nature of history. Layers of the place are razed and inscribed, razed and inscribed, in such a way that mythic tradition—so bitinglly ironized through the novel's caricature of Mobutu and his appropriation of tribal identity—and modernity play out as a doubling or dividing of a historical moment uncanny in its bifurcation. Whether we recall Freud's explanation of the uncanniness of encountering one's psychic material projected onto a double, or Bhabha's explanation of how, in an uncanny/unhomely moment, public and private space breaks down into an unqualified doubling of transhistorical space, we see that uncanny experience results from the collapse of semantic difference between what were assumed to be qualitative divisions in mind, space, or history.⁴ Naipaul's novel thus performs a crucial function of postcolonial critique in its equivocation between the two cities in light of J. Roger Kurtz's point that "it is important to avoid the concept of the postcolonial city as a 'juvenile' or 'immature' form of a European city, just as it is important to avoid viewing the postcolonial novel as an 'underdeveloped' form in relation to European literature. We must reject the notion that the African city (or the African novel) simply recapitulates the stages of European urban development (or literary development only on a later timetable)" (156). Kurtz's dovetailing of urban and literary forms points to just how consequential Naipaul's urban topography is in its simultaneous representation of spatial, historical, and, by extension, literary tropes of postcolonial and postimperial cities. To factor in Chakrabarty's repudiation of stagist, progressive history, the "pre," "post," and "colonial" layers that Salim observes condition his gaze simultaneously. The town at the bend in the river, like London, appears to him as a perpetual ghost town in its housing of ghosts past, present, and future.

The National Urban Uncanny

These overlapping temporalities and spaces restructure postcolonial narrative lines, whether from colonial past to postcolonial present, from periph-

ery to center, or from colony to nation. There is a trajectory in *A Bend in the River* toward the “new nation,” as is evident when Salim returns from the contracting and increasingly decrepit nation of England to face nationalization in Africa. In his rendering of nations and nationalization, Naipaul anticipates a globalized view of the overlap and interconnectivity of ultimately inseparable localities once bound together by imperialism. Naipaul’s contribution to postcolonial critique and related work on globalization culminates in his depiction of the nation state, which embodies European political modernity, as a questionable vehicle for freedom and self-determination in the postcolonial world.

He does this by locating the unnamed African city and London within the context of national spaces that overlap and repeat one another in a mutual confrontation of unexpected, eerie sameness. The national space of England recedes around London and there is a sense of the claustrophobia of this contraction in the tense cosmopolitanism of the inhabitants Salim encounters there. Salim is spooked by his unexpected encounters with Africa in London because his perception of a city populated by “puppets in a puppet theatre” of the world unsettles the colonial-orientation system upon which he relies prior to his journey (230). Once in the global city of London, Salim concludes that “I could say that I was in London, but I didn’t really know where I was. I had no means of grasping the city” (232). With its blurred national boundaries and its mixture of “foreign” locals and unexpectedly familiar populations from Salim’s part of the world, London appears as a strange repetition of Salim’s African city. The diminished national space around London thus illuminates the larger theme of modern nationhood, a theme that Naipaul explores most explicitly through the African President’s agenda of “nationalizing” his country. The President’s approach to nationalization further undermines the legitimacy of the nation in the novel in that he seeks to create a nation by excluding all non-African populations, a strategy that also encloses, diminishes, and limits the new nation. These two models—one of incorporation and one of exclusion—produce the same results for Salim, who experiences his foreignness in both national spaces. On his journey back to Africa, he muses,

That idea of going home, of leaving, the idea of the other place—I had lived with it in various forms for many years. In Africa it had always been with me. In London, in my

hotel room, I had allowed it on some nights to take me over. It was a deception. I saw now that it comforted only to weaken and destroy. . . . There could be no going back; there was nothing to go back to. We had become what the world outside had made us; we had to live in the world as it existed. (244)

The “world as it existed” is indeed inhospitable, and never more so than when it is “nationalized,” a process that ostensibly advances postcolonial countries away from their colonial past if not toward the promises of modernity. However, given the novel’s uncanny chronotope, stamping the space of the country with an ethnic iteration of national identity only creates a situation in which the nation is inhabited by non-citizens—or spectral citizens—as is England in Salim’s experience.

The confluence of English and African space and populations that becomes evident to Salim during his journey speaks to a cross-hatching of national spaces in the postcolonial world: just as postcolonial time is uncannily repetitive and endlessly layered, the temporality of the nation is similarly configured through the uncannily interconnected spaces of the two cities between which Salim travels. As Szeman points out, space is a privileged trope in postcolonial literature precisely because spatial representation is linked to the possibilities of nation formation. Szeman argues that “the nation in the decolonizing world is thus envisioned as a potential buffer against modernity as much as it is seen as a sign of independence, that is, as an enclosed space (geographically, politically, culturally) that modernity cannot easily penetrate, a specific space (or place) as opposed to the abstract ones (or nonplaces) increasingly produced by modernity” (6). Taking “modernity” as a eurocentric concept, one can see the significance of nation formation as a means of carving out a “new” space that is not necessarily “modern,” just as the President attempts simultaneously to contain modernity in the New Domain and to appropriate tradition through his discourse of tribalism and his emphasis on ancestral belonging. This particular design of the nation strives to construct modernity on the foundation of the past, but as Salim observes, returning to a place, much less a past, is impossible; the process of nationalization therefore does not produce a new nation for its *citoyens* and *citoyennes*, but rather a new space of unbelonging. Salim returns only to be disinherited, imprisoned, and ex-

pelled from the new nation: “Nationalization: it had been a word. It was shocking to face it in this concrete way” (255).

Furthermore, the new nation remains unnamed: it is always “Africa” or “African,” terms that metonymically diminish the nation that forms around Salim before casting him out. From the continuum between city and continent, Naipaul undermines the categorical promise of the nation in the postcolonial world, whether in the former metropole or in the former colonies: England is constricted and “Africa” is restrictive. Rather than simply presenting a nihilistic view, however, Naipaul enhances his depiction of the urban centers of these spectral nations by revealing the contaminated nature of national space in which the cities are located. Haunted by a colonial past built into the very architecture surrounding them, the characters in Naipaul’s novel inhabit a world of disturbingly undifferentiated distinctions. Salim brings his urban schema to bear directly on the nation when his plane touches down after his London sojourn in the “President’s city.” Here, he sees *yet again* a “city, while decaying in the centre, with dirt roads and rubbish mounds just at the back of the great colonial boulevards, [which] was yet full of new public works” (249). This emphatic, final repetition of urban space defined by decay and innovation—by death and life—establishes the paradoxical status of the new nation as a modern entity comprised of dying parts. The buckling architecture and disenfranchised populations in Salim’s Africa underscore Naipaul’s sense of the nation as not encompassing and organic, but rather broken in its foundations and populated by citizens rendered ghosts. As a result, Salim is a spectral *citoyen* in that his return to the once-familiar space of the shop in which he once lived becomes an encounter with his own foreignness: his possessions remain in the rearranged spaces that the shop’s new African proprietor has created yet Salim is met at the threshold of his familiar abode by the news that he is a stranger to it.

In portraying the process of nationalization as “*un pé pourrie*. A little rotten,” as the new shop owner Théotime puts it, Naipaul speaks to what Pheng Cheah characterizes as “national culture’s degeneration into an oppressive ideology” (256, 8). As Cheah points out, it is necessary to rethink the relationship between postcolonial nationhood and the liberatory ideals that independent nationhood is supposed to embody.⁵ Naipaul expands upon this imperative by showing the ways in which a former imperial order circumscribes postimperial as well as postcolonial nations. Cheah

proposes that “the most apposite metaphor for freedom today is not the [organic nation] but the haunted nation,” and he goes on to explain that

the nation is spectral because it is nothing but this interminable crossing of the border between life and death. . . . Spectrality, which is the mutual haunting or constitutive interpenetration of nation and state . . . is also the irreducible possibility of the becoming-ideological of nationalism, where the nation becomes a mystification the state deploys in the service of global capital. (12, 346)

Hence one explanation for the uncanny chronotope in *A Bend in the River* is that the new nation is a neocolonial formation pressed into the service of elite economic interests both within and beyond national boundaries. As Deepika Bahri says in an assessment of the role that newness plays in postcolonial temporality and spatiality, “we must concede that *novelty*, the shibboleth of capitalism and the new world order, is the sign under which both the global and the postcolonial operate in the First World. Novelty and exceptionalism are signature characteristics of global capitalism” (483, emphasis original). Salim does seek out the interstices of the nationalized economy in an effort to consolidate enough money to ensure his own mobility, yet his experience of nationalization undercuts the presumption that novelty heralds progress. Cheah’s point about the spectral nature of postcolonial nationhood aptly characterizes Naipaul’s entire portrait of the new nation, from its spatial layers of construction and destruction to the unhomely nature of dwelling and citizenship that we see among his characters. To this point, Naipaul offers the concomitant point that postimperial nations are similarly spectral through his depiction of the urban uncanny in former metropolitan as well as colonial settings. In both cases, *A Bend in the River* successfully unravels the teleological narrative of progressive modernity by dwelling emphatically on the present and revealing the persistently haunting contradictions produced by colonial relations in the first place. Breaking with the trend of reading a liberatory narrative into the simple fact of postcolonial nation-formation, Naipaul reflects instead on the relationship between these two forces as they play out in a persistently haunted spatio-temporality.⁶

Naipaul poses challenges to us. His biographer acknowledges that A

Bend in the River has “angered those intellectuals who insist that all post-colonial literature should consist of resistance to imperialist, capitalist white patriarchy”—and indeed Salim’s misogyny and problematic racial commentary certainly disqualify the novel as a comprehensively or overtly anticolonial work (King 18).⁷ Naipaul departs from the postcolonial theme of reclaiming or celebrating precolonial civilization in his opaque and at times Conradian portraiture of Africa. “Authenticity,” Naipaul has said, “is rejection of the strange, the difficult, the taxing; it is despair” (qtd. in King 118). His strange and difficult novel may be what Theodor Adorno, in speaking of modernist literature, characterizes as a “damaged vehicle of historical truth” due to the fraught politics of its mimetic representation, but its spatial presentation of history successfully provincializes Europe and provides the groundwork for rethinking postcolonial as well as postimperial histories (qtd. in Wise 60). To place this novel in the broader context of the author’s oeuvre, Naipaul’s transatlantic and diasporic approach to his African narrative is perhaps what informs his vision of the town at the bend in the river as a source and destination, haunted and haunting. The novel’s final scene is typically read as an expression of defeated modernity, as Salim floats away from the town on the great river, which is increasingly choked by massive water hyacinths whose rubbery, tenacious spread creeps and consumes throughout the narrative. However, in this novel, a novel defiant of stagist historicism, there is only one progression—and a spatial progression at that: it is the journey that Salim makes from the east coast to the west coast of Africa, for the river will carry him down to the Atlantic Ocean. In his continuing transit to the threshold of the continent, Salim reroutes the bivalent journey of colonialism by locating himself on the map of an interconnected, complex, and often hostile world.⁸

Notes

1. Bharati Mukherjee, for example, cites Naipaul’s eloquence while resisting the force of his pessimism in her essay, “Imagined Homelands.”
2. Compare to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
3. While London is not the colonial center of the (Belgian) Congo, Naipaul’s insistent use of the term “Africa” for Salim’s African nation enables a metropolitan-colonial

relationship between the two locales of London, on the one hand, and the town at the bend in the river, on the other.

4. See the introduction to Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1–18).
5. Cheah's overarching project is to examine postcolonial nationhood vis-à-vis "the broader issue of the actualization of freedom itself," an endeavor which he accomplishes through a close reading of German philosophy and several postcolonial literary texts (8).
6. It is on this point that Naipaul's novel is subject to criticism on the charge that it fails to valorize postcolonial nationhood as such and that, by extension, the author favors an earlier colonial order. It is the latter part of the argument—the idea that he favors any existing paradigm of the nation whatsoever—that my reading refutes.
7. Salim is unapologetic about his sadistic relationship with Yvette, and there is no question that he exoticizes Africans by depicting them as, variously, mysterious, childlike, and intractable.
8. More specifically, he undoes the journey of Conrad's Marlow, constituted as it is by a round trip from European civilization to African anarchy. In Salim's travels, Africa is the point of origin and the location of a multitude of civilizations.

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