Reimagining the Radical: Gender, Genre, and Anti-Fascism in Women's Writing at Mid-Century

Allison Nick

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Nick, Allison, "Reimagining the Radical: Gender, Genre, and Anti-Fascism in Women's Writing at Mid-Century" (2023). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 2556.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2556

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
REIMAGINING THE RADICAL: GENDER, GENRE, AND ANTI-FASCISM IN WOMEN’S WRITING AT MID-CENTURY

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

ALLISON NICK

MAY 2023
ABSTRACT

This dissertation looks at the work of four women writers—Martha Gellhorn, Elizabeth Bowen, Pearl S. Buck, and Rebecca West—who are united in their transnational commitment to critiquing the global rise of fascism and the fraught democratic imperatives of their own countries. “Reimagining the Radical” focuses on the temporal gap between modernism and postmodernism and is inspired by work from scholars like Marina MacKay, Lyndsey Stonebridge, and Beryl Pong to claim and define mid-century literature. By rethinking the bounds of modernism, “Reimagining the Radical” also seeks to fill the gaps in feminist history—between the suffragism of the early 20th century and the liberation efforts of the 1960s. I argue that these writers use genre experimentation to: reflect on complicated national political alliances; propagate their ideas about wartime violence; disrupt heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality; and expose the global racial inequalities inherent in the imperialist agendas of war. Each chapter of Reimagining the Radical considers how these writers employ a different feminist, anti-fascist rhetorical strategy in their writing. The first chapter begins with a discussion of Gellhorn’s Munich crisis novel, A Stricken Field, in which Gellhorn develops a self-critical style that is self-aware of the shared limitations of both writing and political allyship. The second chapter explores Bowen’s personal and political contemplations of queer inheritance, asserting that, within the temporal and spatial disruptions of war, Bowen embeds her
wartime works with small, indeterminate moments that supplant normative patriarchal narratives with queer, feminist connections. In the third chapter, I argue that Buck’s network of writing and activism forms a violent education that purposefully mediates between leftist and liberal politics and repurposes popular forms of writing in order to reach the common denominator of American reader. The final chapter focuses on West’s development of a visible process, a uniquely feminist approach to interpretation and meaning-making that embraces contradiction. Overall “Reimagining the Radical” is motivated by a spirit of reclamation—of women writers left out of discussions of war, of popular literature underappreciated by modernist studies, and the resulting feminist and queer political imaginings in both arenas that are easily overlooked.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project like this is never a solo pursuit, and I am particularly grateful to have had so many people from near and far guiding me, supporting me, and rooting me on.

I would like to thank my wonderful dissertation committee—Dr. Annette Trefzer, Dr. Ian Whittington, Dr. Jaime Harker, and Dr. Eva Payne—for helping me grow tremendously as a researcher and writer over the past six years. From the start, Dr. Trefzer believed in my transatlantic project and emboldened me to be an ardent and independent scholar. This project’s focus on the 1940s began with Dr. Whittington’s generative British Lit courses, and his careful feedback was crucial to my revision process. I am thankful to Dr. Harker for encouraging me to pursue a gender studies minor and her constant and electric enthusiasm for underappreciated women writers. Dr. Payne’s historical perspective and reading suggestions were extremely helpful for this project’s interdisciplinary moments.

I was able to finish this dissertation with support from the Ernest Hemingway Society’s Lewis-Reynolds-Smith Founders Fellowship: thank you for believing in and funding my writing on Martha Gellhorn. This support allowed me to finish writing and revise the Gellhorn chapter during the Summer of 2022. Thank you to the English Department at the University of Mississippi for creating a welcoming and vibrant academic community in which I could complete my PhD. I would not have completed this dissertation, let alone coursework and
comprehensive exams, without the writing bootcamp and practicum—thank you so much to Dr. Lindy Brady, Dr. Erin Drew, Dr. Ari Friedlander, and Dr. Monika Bhagat-Kennedy for creating space for us to write in community, discuss the forms and expectations of academic writing, and occasionally air our frustrations. So much of this dissertation was sparked by the incredible courses I was able to take during my time at UM: I first wrote on Buck for Dr. Leigh Anne Duck’s modernism course, I started considering the anti-fascism of the 1930s and 40s in Dr. Jay Watson’s Faulkner class, I reflected on women and war in Dr. Katie McKee’s Civil War and reconstruction class, and I began formulating my chapter on Bowen in Dr. Baghat-Kennedy’s historical novel seminar.

I am incredibly lucky to have started this program with a cohort of fellow students that were excited about their work, dedicated to making sure we all succeeded together, and ceaselessly compassionate and caring. To Katie Downes, Seth Spencer, Sy Heying, Katherine Howell, Isabel Norwood, Haley Taylor, and Sara Stephens—your love and support has meant the world! There would not be any words on these pages without my faithful writing group, The Radical Pot Roasts, who read countless drafts, listened to the most impassioned rants, and were always there to lift me up or read a sentence or two on the fly. Sy and Margaret: I look forward to a lifetime of writing with you. A special thank you to Sarah Margaret Pittman for always being there with me at write-on-site; to Sarah Huddleston and Kim Kotel for the walk and talks that jumpstarted my brain and my spirit; to Mary Berman for the best “fun” reading recommendations, and to Nick Sabo, Bailey Moorhead, Gina Young, Cullen Brown, and Susan Wood for what can only be described as shenanigans. Also, thank you to Bailey for doing every step of this degree first so I could follow your perfect example and for always being the best pal a stressed and anxious gal could have.
Thank you to Grace, Sadie, Joanne, Raina, Steph, Collette, and Lily for being my own community of women for going on 14 years—you kept me sane with book clubs and crafting time, you were my practice audience for lectures and presentations, and you always believed I would get here one day even when I wasn’t sure I would. Thank you to the Oxford YMCA for giving me a space to find joy in my body and not just my mind, especially Elizabeth for the yoga, and Aimee and Wendy for the dancing.

There are not enough thank you(s) out there for my wonderful family, who have always been there for me and never once questioned my passion for literature and the humanities. To my mom for the late-night phone calls, her willingness to read anything I recommend, and all those other things I could never begin to list. To my dad for being just as impassioned as I was on behalf of my women writers, who deserve all the recognition in their own right (and not because of any famous husbands), and for making me Greek soup whenever I need a little comfort. To my Aunt Pam for sending the most sustaining care packages; to Teresa for all the video messages; to Phil for always watching the same campy sci-fi shows with me; to April and AJ for never letting me take anything too seriously; to Caden, MJ, and Ceci for keeping my fridge covered in beautiful drawings; to Mia for watching long distance movies with me; and to Isaac for giving me hope for the future by being the wittiest young person I know.

Finally, to my late grandfather, who served in WWII and who also believed in the importance of educating future generations about what it meant to fight fascism—I wish you could have seen this dissertation completed because you always encouraged my love of writing.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... iv

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: SELF-CRITICAL STYLE: THE FAILURE OF WRITING AND POLITICAL ALLYSHIP IN MARTHA GELLHORN’S A STRICKEN FIELD .................................................. 33

CHAPTER TWO: QUEER INHERITANCE: RETRACING THE LINES OF KINSHIP IN ELIZABETH BOWEN’S WARTIME WRITING ................................................................. 72

CHAPTER THREE: VIOLENT EDUCATION: PEARL S. BUCK’S WAR NOVELS AND “TALK BOOKS” ..................................................................................................................... 132

CHAPTER FOUR: VISIBLE PROCESS: METAPHOR AND CONTRADICTION IN REBECCA WEST’S BLACK LAMB AND GREY FALCON ............................................................. 183

CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 235

LIST OF REFERENCES .......................................................................................................... 243

VITA ....................................................................................................................................... 259
INTRODUCTION

“Reimagining the Radical” focuses on four women writers from the 1940s—Martha Gellhorn, Elizabeth Bowen, Pearl S. Buck, and Rebecca West—who were united by their commitment to writing about war while it was happening. Their writing is fostered by their privileged ability to travel, whether as journalists, dual citizens, tourists, or expatriates, which exposed them to lives and experiences different from their own. As a foreign correspondent for Collier’s Weekly magazine, Gellhorn witnessed and reported on war’s effects on civilians. Elizabeth Bowen spent the war years traveling between London and neutral Ireland as a spy for the MOI. Pearl S. Buck drew on her childhood in China and Japan to write about the Pacific Theater for American audiences. In the late 1930s, Rebecca West visited what was then Yugoslavia as a tourist and travel writer, but after the start of the war, her project developed into a treatise on the “corpses of empire” (Black Lamb 280). “Reimagining the Radical” analyzes how these writers use genre experimentation to reflect on complicated national political alliances, disrupt heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality, and expose the global racial inequalities inherent in the imperialist agendas of war.

As difficult as it must have been to process the war, let alone write about it, each of these writers takes up her pen in different ways and for different reasons—sometimes out of guilt or anger, other times out of necessity and from a sense of responsibility, always as a way to
reconcile the injustices of the world or to imagine another future. In our own time of 24-hour news cycles and what feels like an unprecedented steady stream of violence and catastrophe, such a ready willingness to make sense of global politics and engage with it personally and in real-time is exemplary. As Gill Plain argues, even for those women writers who did not directly experience the violence or collective trauma of war, they still “shared what Elizabeth Bowen described as a ‘climate’ [that] gave rise to a complex body of writing that grapples in particular with issues of belonging and exclusion” (“Women Writers” 166). While these writers occupy various positions within the divide between the home front and the war front, they all address the “climate” of wartime by writing about it from a feminist and anti-fascist perspective.

In reaction to her travels as a journalist, Martha Gellhorn wrote a novel about refugees, *A Stricken Field*, because she felt a responsibility to those less fortunate than herself. In a moving letter to Eleanor Roosevelt on February 3, 1939, she writes:

I hate what happens in these times, but ignoring it won’t change it…Myself, alone, I have a wonderful and privileged life and am deeply aware every minute of my benefits and good luck. But that doesn’t let me out. Or maybe that is what let’s me in…But the only way I can pay back for what fate and society have handed me is to try, in minor totally useless ways, to make an angry sound against injustice, and to see what goes on around me that isn’t as good as what happens to me myself.  

Gellhorn’s self-reflection here is striking, as is her ability to acknowledge her privilege—not as an excuse but as an invitation. For her, the climate of wartime offers a chance to expose injustice and the failure of those in power. Her novel is infused with a similar tone of frustration, indignation, and a clear-eyed commitment to recognizing her privilege and failures.

---

1 Digitized correspondence between Martha Gellhorn and Eleanor Roosevelt, including this letter, is available at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum website.
For the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen, whose novel, *The Heat of the Day*, and short stories from this time document life in wartime London, turning to the page meant opening the floodgates: “Each time I sat down to write a story I opened a door; and the pressure against the other side of that door must have been very great, for things—ideas, images, emotions—came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence” (Bowen *Mulberry* 94-5). She saw her short stories as a “search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world,” a form of “saving hallucinations,” “resistance-fantasies,” and “disjected snapshots” and the only way of “embracing to suffocation-point, something vast that is happening right on top of you” (Bowen *Mulberry* 96-97, 99). Rather than releasing Gellhorn’s “angry sound against injustice,” Bowen’s descriptions of writing during the war place her as a conduit: taming, directing, and molding the combined “overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody” onto the page (95). Bowen recognizes the resistive power of fantasy, even of escape; better futures require all the tricks of imagination and hallucination.

Like Bowen, the avid writer and activist Pearl S. Buck thought of writing and reading as a form of resistance, not through fantasy but because writing could serve as a tool of education. For Buck, who lived a large part of her life in China, America’s entrance into World War II was a call to create a “global education” that would expose everyday people to cultures and forms of government different than their own (Conn 277). In a 1943 bulletin for the American Library Association, she writes that “there has been considerable interchange on the higher levels of culture, but very little indeed between the peoples themselves, who cannot be specialists, experts, or travelers. Yet, if the world is to be shaped by democracy, it is the plain people who must know and understand each other” and offers her support to public libraries as the site for cultural exchange (“The East and West” 98). At one point she stated her goal to reach a mass audience as
a desire “to get down to the level of the comic strip, if I can,” a promise she kept by making use of every genre of writing she could, even producing the Johnny Everyman comic focused on multicultural heroism (Conn Cultural Biography 258). Like Gellhorn, Buck could not ignore the hypocrisy of American democracy amidst widespread racism and curtails on freedom like the internment of Japanese Americans. For Buck, the climate of wartime was not always democratic, and education felt like the best weapon at her disposal.

The British writer Rebecca West was perhaps the most aware of the sometimes-languid climate of wartime, “the queer thing…the burden of coping the war brings” (Letters 173). She described the “beastly war” as “the stage of seasickness when you are not sure you are seasick but realise that everything but seasickness has ceased to exist” (173). Finding it “difficult now doing concentrated artistic work” during the war, West found “relief” in the “absorbing work” of a book on Yugoslavia based on her travels in the Balkan region in the late 1930s (Rollyson Literary Legacy 206). Meant to be a snapshot based on her travel journals, West channeled her wartime anxiety into what would become a 1,000-page epic of travel, history, and culture—Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. The self-indulgent project was a “preternatural event” for West:

Why should I be moved in 1936 to devote the following 5 years of my life, at great financial sacrifice and to the utter exhaustion of my mind and body, to take an inventory of a country down to its last vest-button, in a form insane from an ordinary artistic or commercial point of view—a country which ceases to exist? I find the hair raising on my scalp at the extraordinary usefulness of this apparently utterly futile act (Letters 169). Even when writing feels futile next to combat or political negotiation, there is no predicting the “extraordinary usefulness” of trying to understand the world better.
I am drawn to these writers because of what they can tell us about their cultural and literary moment: how they navigated a divisive political setting, how they responded to wartime with imperfect feminist, anti-fascist, and anti-racist goals, how they bravely critiqued the fraught democracies of their nations, and how they experimented with style and genre to advance their political visions. I am also drawn to these writers because of what they can tell us about our moment: how to channel fear and hopelessness into writing, how to be mobilized towards action in the face of injustice and even our failures, and how to reimagine what it means to be radical and rethink writing as a radical act when surrounded by daily violence.

This introduction uses the dissertation’s title, “Reimagining the Radical: Gender, Genre, and Anti-Fascism in Women’s Writing at Mid-Century,” as a structuring element, explaining each main phrase and keyword in turn. First, I will probe the opening title, “Reimagining the Radical,” to showcase how this project seeks to understand what it meant for these writers to write politically. Though they might all be categorized as proponents of political liberalism, I found that their writing is less easily contained and instead offers moments of rupture and possibility that force us to rethink the goals and character of liberal thought. This reimagining of political liberalism results from the intertwined literary and political climate of the 1940s. The next section of the introduction, “Mid-Century,” highlights this project’s interest in the aesthetic and stylistic experimentation that emerged in this later era of modernism and how this period of writing forms a mid-century style. As the third section, “Gender,” shows, this dissertation is invested in women’s perspectives on war and politics. By including narratives beyond that of soldiers and political leaders, we gain a fuller understanding of wartime, and by analyzing feminist responses to fascism and the violence of war, we access a fuller picture of the history of feminist movements. The final two sections on “Genre” and “Anti-Fascism” synthesize how a
reimagining of liberal thought, a mid-century aesthetics, and a feminist approach to writing all lead these writers to develop what I call feminist, anti-fascist rhetorical strategies that rely on a play with genre and style. In the face of the monolithic, masculinist, and racist ideology of fascism, Gellhorn, Buck, Bowen, and West respond with multiplicity, conversation, and self-critique.

**Reimagining the Radical**

The opening title of this project, “Reimagining the Radical,” proclaims its overarching interest in what it means to be radical. None of the writers in this study labeled themselves or were consistently labeled as radical; instead, all of these writers are marked by a disinterest in being categorized, a resistance to any one political sphere, or a complex and changing relationship to political categories. As an example, at the same time that she gave speeches and wrote essays on a wide variety of political issues, Pearl S. Buck consistently claimed that she was “apolitical.” She stated that she was “extremely frightened of any theorist, political or religious,” instead offering her “deep belief in the average person of all countries” (Connell *Cultural Biography* 264). Buck advocated for legislative reform, like the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, but she also believed in the power of a bottom-up movement of social change that started with the people. She consistently resisted the label of communist, but objectively and generously interviewed other women intellectuals with ties to what she called the Russian “collective.” How then to categorize her political goals and vision? As I argue in Chapter Three, Buck was both too radical and not radical enough, but she was able to create space for educating her readers in the gaps between political categories. This project, then, is interested in the perspectives of women writers who defied easy categorization on the political spectrum, whose political ideas were sometimes inconsistent or contradictory, and whose political beliefs changed
throughout their lifetimes of writing. In the following chapters, I will uncover the small, sometimes coded ways they embraced radical political ideas and how they force us to expand our understanding of what it means to imagine and enact change.

My analysis of the complex political viewpoints of these writers contributes to a recent turn in literary scholarship toward better defining political liberalism in relation to both radicalism and literary aesthetics. We typically think of the left side of the political spectrum as ranging from a radical politics focused on revolutionary change to a liberalism that promotes reform and legislation. All the writers in this project are best understood as promoting different shades of political liberalism. However, the political context in which they were writing demanded that they begin reimagining what it meant to be radical and re-evaluate liberalism as a political endeavor. Among academics, liberalism has, rightfully, been under critique for its naivety and sinister potential for upholding violent capitalist ideologies. In *Bleak Liberalism*, Amanda Anderson argues that the history of political liberalism has always been embedded with a critique of itself, a meta-awareness of its limitations and failures. Failure is a theme that recurs throughout the texts I analyze in this project; even as they promote liberalist ideas about equality and individual freedom, these writers struggle to imagine the success of liberal philosophy on a global scale. Martha Gellhorn set up her novel as an elaborate humanitarian plot destined to fail, leaving no hope for a successful or satisfying ending. Elizabeth Bowen could not completely reconcile her love for her family home with her family’s culpability with colonial violence. Though Pearl S. Buck’s focus on education left less room for self-critique, she remained deeply aware that the effects of structural racism automatically undermined any claims of unity or justice. Rebecca West embeds failure in her writing style, choosing to show her entire process of thinking and research, even when she loses hope or does not have all the answers.
For these writers, then, not only does their political vision involve a revision and self-critique of the very liberal values they are promoting, but that revision takes form in how they choose to write. Because literary studies have cemented a negative notion of liberalism as “ideological enforcement,” there has been less focus on the “formal and conceptual dimensions of active literary engagements with liberal thought” (Anderson 100). Anderson proposes that, rather than being in opposition to aesthetics, liberalism has its own aesthetic defined by a “commitment amid bleak conditions” and “a dialectic between skepticism and hope” (11). Though these writers may not reach the extent of aesthetic experimentation of canonical writers of high modernism, they do play with style and genre in ways that showcase what Anderson terms a “bleak liberalism.”

Identifying this category of bleak liberalism helps demarcate the mid-century literary moment and the relationship between modernism, politics, and aesthetics. In the 1940s, especially, the divide between the radical left, the left-liberal, and the liberal was complicated to traverse. The rise of fascism in Europe demanded a leftist/liberal compromise, which resulted in the Popular Front and a lot of give and take in terms of reform—as seen in the rhetorical shift from “worker” to “people” (Rossinow 145; Denning 124). For Anderson, the thirties and forties designate a crucial moment in the history of liberalism when there was an active debate in response to “the rise of fascism, the entry into World War II, and the profound disappointment of the Soviet experiment” (23). At this point, liberalism became a “rejection of the progressive optimism” that could be attributed to both the left and the right. Instead, it focused on a “bleakness” that, while still fighting for change, is aware of the “existential challenges of political life” (Anderson 26-29). In *Making Liberalism New*, Ian Afflerbach connects the aesthetic quality of liberalism to modernism, arguing that “modernist writers engaged changing
liberal ideas in America, and...liberals in turn seized on aesthetic values from modernist cultural production...to reimagine political life" (4). Afflerbach asserts that it was only during the Cold War that liberalism went from “signifying crisis...to signifying consensus,” which led to the “remarkable writing, erasure, and rewriting” of what liberalism meant in the interwar and wartime periods (11). Several of the texts I analyze allow us to chart in real-time the shift brought on by the increasing anti-communism of Cold War rhetoric in the late 1940s. Pearl S. Buck, especially, chooses her words carefully, focusing on “collective” over “communist” and making clear the difference between socialism and communism. A more figurative example comes at the end of Elizabeth Bowen’s novel *The Heat of the Day* (1948) when one of the characters legitimizes her child born out of wedlock to another man by naming him after her husband who died at war, effectively papering over the sexual freedom of wartime with a return to traditional expectations in the postwar period.

The goal of this reclamation of liberal thought and aesthetics and its relationship to modernism is not to cover up the inherent problems of liberalism or the limitations of white writers like Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West. As Janice Ho explains, “theoretical camps as diverse as Marxism, feminism, queer studies, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism alike” have rightly critiqued liberalism for its exclusion and “blind spots” (“Crisis” 13). Instead, by looking more closely at the aesthetic qualities of liberalism and modernism, we can see that liberalism in the mid-twentieth century already contained a critique of itself that “resonates significantly with the bleak radicalism” of later forms of literary studies (Anderson 114). Anderson writes, “as the example of the mid-twentieth century shows us, both traditions seek to come to terms with human suffering and human violence, and in doing so, they express in varying ways a bleak view of their political projects” (114). This is the jumping off point for my project, which is interested
in how these women writers responded to “human suffering and human violence” in radical ways and attempted to revise liberalism in order to oppose fascism.

Unlike Anderson and Afflerbach, however, I am less interested in situating these writers within a male intellectual tradition of liberalism. Instead, this project examines how these writers’ bleak liberalism is innately feminist. In addition to the “dialectic between skepticism and hope” that embraces failure, Anderson also refers to bleak liberalism’s interest in the relation of political ideas and the tenet that “one’s relation to one’s ideas, and to the ideological stances of others, has moral consequences for both individual and collective life” (109). The political relations that appear in this project are specifically feminist moments of connection that happen between women, whether through travel, conversation, or fictional attempts to reimagine patriarchal structures through kinship between women. Gellhorn’s autobiographical main character’s self-critique is facilitated by her interactions with another young woman, a German refugee named Rita. Elizabeth Bowen bypasses heteropatriarchal demands on inheritance by imagining queer connections between women, while Pearl S. Buck creates a whole new form of “talk book” to interview other women intellectuals like Eslanda Goode Robeson. West replaces the masculine symbols of sacrificial violence with detailed descriptions of the strength and endurance of the Balkan women she meets in her travels.

While Afflerbach focuses on how the inherent dualisms of liberalism appear through irony in modernist fiction, this project broadens the generic scope, arguing that these women writers experiment with various forms of writing in response to the crisis of representation created by the violence of wartime. This experimentation is also tied to their feminist perspectives—as I will show in Chapter Four, for example, Rebecca West adds a feminist twist to the dualism between private and public that is often said to dictate liberal political philosophy.
None of these writers are perfect; they all grapple with their privilege and how they are complicit. Sometimes, their viewpoints are limited by their whiteness and relative economic privilege. They are part of a tradition of white liberal feminism that deserves the same critiques as liberalism as a whole; rather than defend this white liberal feminism against its own failures, I am interested in the extent to which these women were aware of and actively responding to their own inadequacies and inconsistencies. As Afflerbach asserts, “the conceptual dualisms structuring liberal thought have yet to be resolved,” and neither have the effects of sexism, racism, and fascism to which these writers respond (36). I hope that by better analyzing their attempts to revise and expand liberalism and create space between political categories for both feminism and anti-fascism, we can continue that revision by learning from their past efforts and avoiding their mistakes in the future.

**Mid-Century Modernism**

As alluded to above, this project focuses on asserting the importance of the mid-century period and its relationship to modernist cultural and literary productions. Considering the nature of liberal thought helps to shine a light on this period when war and the rise of fascism exposed the crisis of liberalism. In general, however, the literature from World War II and the years surrounding the war has been relatively underrepresented in modernist studies until recently. The cultural memory of the particular kind of war writing produced during The Great War and the tendency by scholars of modernism to emphasize the causality between The Great War and modernist styles of aesthetic experimentation led to the misplaced attribution of a gap in literature from World War II (see Fussell, Sherry). In the past two decades and in parallel with the pluralism and interdisciplinary focus of the New Modernist Studies, scholars of British literature like Marina MacKay, Patrick Deer, Leo Mellor, and Lyndsey Stonebridge have brought
critical attention to the writing of World War II and the way that it is both influenced by and divergent from earlier modernisms given the specific cultural and political circumstances of World War II. In order to account for this precarious relationship to earlier modernisms, the writing of the interwar period has been termed “late modernism,” as put forth by Tyrus Miller in his call to shift the focus of modernism away from its origins in order to better consider its end. The re-contextualization of writing from the 1920s and 1930s as “late modernism” opens modernism to a temporal expansion beyond even the 1930s while still eclipsing the possibility that literature from the middle decades of the century might form a unique category of writing.

This dissertation, then, joins the more recent push towards a field of “mid-century studies,” proposed initially by Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge’s edited collection British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century (2007) and followed in the past few years by Oxford University Press’s Mid-Century Studies Series and Claire Seiler’s Midcentury Suspension: Literature and Feeling in the Wake of World War II (2020). By embracing the term “mid-century,” this dissertation seeks to push back on readings that would place mid-century writing in contrast to modernism, unfairly painting it as only the “wake of modernism’s achievements” and as a “literature of retreat” that favors realism over the aesthetic and formal experimentations of modernism (MacKay and Stonebridge 2-3). Instead, as MacKay and Stonebridge have argued, the specific anxieties of the mid-century period helped foster “a distinctive aesthetic in which realisms emerge that are written self-consciously ‘after’ modernism” and that “entailed an uncompromising engagement with the public and private violence of a modernity that was revealing itself as intractable and never-ending” (7-8). This project builds on this reconsideration of mid-century writing by exploring how writers like
The writers in this dissertation engage with political topics not just in what they choose to write about but in how they choose to present those ideas. Mid-century studies share with bleak liberalism a desire to reveal the “more complicated conversations between literary experiment and political culture” in mid-century writing (MacKay *Modernism* 10). To entirely divide politics from aesthetics misrepresents the more nuanced aspects of how writers relate to their writing and their political and historical setting. In *Modernism and WWII* (2007), Marina MacKay argues for the “self-referential” quality of writing at mid-century in response to a “consensus politics” that requires “writers to scrutinize their own social and political investments”—thus what characterizes a mid-century style is the self-reference and self-critique that also furthers their meta-critique of liberalism (10, 2). For example, because of the increasing importance of nationality during World War II, modernist writers entertain a more “self-aware” phase as “their transnational interests” could just as easily be seen as “enlightened internationalism” as “imperial privilege” and suddenly “national identification could mean anything from pernicious parochialism to the freedom from totalitarian occupation” (MacKay *Modernism* 2). This rings true for Rebecca West’s political positioning as she calls out leftist intellectuals for their inability to distinguish between the nationalism of fascism and that of smaller nations seeking independence and liberation. Furthermore, these four writers all use their writing to interrogate their national loyalties and complicity: Gellhorn considers her privilege as an American journalist in a refugee-filled Prague; Bowen cannot escape her ties to a neutral Ireland; Buck sees and criticizes America through the lens of her childhood in China; and West
contends with her precarious authority as a traveler and guide to the geography and history of Yugoslavia.

As women writers with complex geographic and national allegiances, the process of self-positioning is vital and identifies their work with mid-century literature as a whole. Lyndsey Stonebridge argues that the critical positioning occurs between writers and history, particularly a history “whose violence is felt as an extremely poignant type of discontinuity in the very depths of the psyche” (Anxiety 6). For Stonebridge, this positioning via history marks mid-century writing as a “writing of anxiety” that sees history as “an imaginative provocation” and re-envisions the historical “shocks” of the period as a “demand that the imagination should continue to discover ways of being in history—or perhaps ways of staying in it” (Anxiety 6). This idea that the violence of the period provokes literary experimentation regarding historiography is a helpful way of explaining the “imaginative provocation” of women writers who are driven to make their claims in the public and political sphere. In the afterword to Bowen’s Court, for example, Bowen clarifies the connection between the current violence of fascism and her familial and national historiography project. Similarly, Rebecca West indulges long treatises on the history of Yugoslavia to expose the patriarchal tradition inherent in historiography and offer more feminist ways of understanding and rewriting the past.

This project’s transatlantic and transnational focus reveals the British literature leanings of most scholarship on mid-century studies. This bias indicates the limitations of periodizations that often do not apply unanimously across different geographic locations, but that also exposes the need for the kind of transnational work that this project proposes. In a chapter on the American war novel, James Dawes comments on the delayed response to World War II in American literature, remarking that the now canonical works—Norman Mailer’s The Naked and
the Dead, Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five, and Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow—were all published several years after the war ended. Apart from a short discussion on Martha Gellhorn’s wartime writing, most of Dawes’ chapter focuses on these later male-authored war novels. This suggests that a more expansive conceptualization of the war novel that includes civilian perspectives and the work of women writers, as has been put forth by feminist scholars of British literature, might help correct for the apparent lack of immediate writing about World War II in American literature. The difference between the recent attention to the mid-century period in British literary studies and what George Hutchinson calls the corresponding “black hole” in American literature may reflect the shifting status of the two nations during and as a result of World War II (2). While Jed Esty’s imagery of the “shrinking island” attests to the contraction of the British empire during this time, the war increased internationalism in American literature and culture as the United States became a leading world power in the postwar period. Additionally, the disparity in wartime experiences on the home front may account for the relative necessity for immediate or delayed processing of wartime experiences. At the same time, the often unfairly gendered nature of memorialization, classification, and canonization of war writing plays a large part, as I will discuss in the next section.

In approaching the mid-century period transatlantically, this project engages a comparative methodology that is both transatlantic and transnational to better understand how the nonfictional and fictional writing of these four writers echoes their respective nation’s changing status concerning global politics and their particular experiences of World War II. By applying the framework of mid-century studies to American literature, this project illuminates writers like Martha Gellhorn, whose immediate wartime work is less studied than the later
wartime writing of male authors, and Pearl S. Buck, who is not often included as a wartime or Popular Front writer despite her prolific political writing and activism in the 1940s. Conversely, by reading Gellhorn and Buck alongside the work of British writers Elizabeth Bowen and Rebecca West, this project also illuminates important questions and tensions about the political and aesthetic responses of writers at mid-century and how those responses relate to their respective national situations. While this project utilizes a transatlantic approach concerning the national origins of the writers under study, it also focuses specifically on writers whose work reflects their own mobility and transnational interests, which allows for comparisons not only between Britain and America but with other geopolitical places like Nazi-occupied Europe, Japanese-invaded China and Burma, neutral Ireland, and the shifting status of Yugoslavia.

**Gender**

Focusing on feminist perspectives from the 1940s, this project claims women’s writing as war literature and seeks to understand how their writing about the war was tied to their feminist beliefs. As much as the gap in scholarship on the 1940s has to do with the canonization and periodization of modernist literature, it also reflects a similar problem with how we categorize feminist history and the gendered way we classify war literature. Phyllis Lassner points out that the supposed lack of writing from World War II only exists under a narrow definition of war writing that excludes and dismisses the abundance of writing from women during this period (*British Women 2*). Given the diminishing divide between the home front and war front during World War II, limiting the category of war literature to only that of combatant ignores the totality of the war’s effect on both civilian and soldier experiences. For example, Pearl S. Buck’s war novels focus on war-torn and occupied home front spaces in China and center both civilians and soldiers. This project is indebted to the influx of feminist scholarship starting in the late
1990s—from scholars like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Phyllis Lassner, Gill Plain, Jenny Hartley, and Karen Schneider—that sought to redefine war writing through the recuperation of understudied women writers and to focus more specifically on gendered experiences of war. “Reimagining the Radical” builds on this work by investigating the feminist and anti-fascist impulses behind Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West’s attempts to rethink the relationship between politics and gender.

The lived experiences and fictional imaginings of the writers in this dissertation reflect women’s ambiguous and often contradictory role during wartime. Margaret and Patrice Higonnet explain the difficult position of women’s participation during wartime through the metaphor of the double helix: though women may experience new roles, the hierarchical relationship between men and women remains, and those newfound roles stay subordinate to that of men “in their symbolic function, and more generally in the integrative ideology through which their work is perceived” (39). Martha Gellhorn’s experiences encapsulate the double helix: though she had access to a new role as a foreign correspondent, women were still banned from reporting from the war front and thus left subordinate to their male colleagues. She had to lie her way to the Normandy invasion, pretending to be a nurse, to get close to the action. More recently, Sonya Rose has investigated the difficulty in defining the relative liberating effects of the war for British women, ultimately arguing that the policing of femininity and sexuality turned on questions of citizenship and constructed many women as an internal “other” that threatened national myths of unity and morality. In Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day, for example, the character Louie, who is taking advantage of her sexual freedom while her husband is away at war, is deemed by the newspapers a “good-time girl” for her moral laxity and lack of loyalty to the war cause.
The difficulty in characterizing women’s status during the war may help explain the indeterminate position of feminism at this time. As much as this project reclaims women writers, it also reclaims the ways that their feminist perspectives were tied to their anti-fascism and anti-imperialism. In terms of feminist history, the interwar period has been seen as a retraction between the “first wave” of suffragette feminism in the early part of the 20th century and the “second wave” of feminist liberation movements in the 1960s and 70s. Feminist scholars have since rightly critiqued the waves model for its overdetermined timeline and limited focus, but there remains a gap in scholarship on mid-century and wartime feminism. Furthermore, this period did not have a sustained, visible, or centralized feminist organization or movement. As Marlene LeGates writes, “even the term feminism practically disappeared except for pejorative associations” (281). Activist efforts often got rerouted to war efforts, and women were given the facade of increased participation and equality in the public sphere without sustained legal or social changes. In America, the leading organization devoted to feminist issues was the National Women’s Party, which by the 1940s “had become more ingrown in its membership, less democratic in its structure, and increasingly rigid in its ideology” (Becker 11). In Britain, most women candidates attempted to run as part of other political parties rather than forming a feminist-specific party, but “more than 80 percent of them were placed in electoral districts where their party had no chance of winning” (LeGates 295).

Though feminism as a solidified movement may have ebbed during the interwar period, the writers in this project are a testament to the fact that feminist thought did not disappear.²

² In particular, this period saw the formation of a variety of international organizations focused on improving the lived experiences of women globally, including the International Council of Women, the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (LeGates 297). During the 1930s, “feminist internationalists” fought for the League of Nations to consider women’s issues and by 1946, women’s equality was included in the United Nations charter (LeGates 298). 1946 also saw the creation of the Congress of American Women, “a cross-class and racially integrated coalition of activists, businesswomen, and intellectuals” with more than 250,000 members that “called for daycare, national health care, the sharing of domestic work, and
Given the complicated status of feminism as a political movement, it is no surprise that despite having strong feminist themes in their writing, all of the writers in this project had complicated thoughts about the term “feminist” and the focus on gender as a separate category. I am less interested in debating whether these writers count as “feminists” and more interested in the ways they situate themselves in and around more institutional forms of feminism in order to promote a feminist response to war and fascism. Amid active debate about the best kind of feminist reform to pursue, Gellhorn, Buck, Bowen, and West orient themselves in relation to a form of feminism in ways that reflect complicated ideas about gender, race, and class. Perhaps resistant to feminism that relied on biologically essentialist views, Gellhorn wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt that she saw herself “personally to be floating uncertainly somewhere between the sexes” and more drawn to the lives of men because women’s lives were either “too hard, with an unendurably daily exhausting drab hardness, or too soft and whipped cream” (Gellhorn Letters 184). Patricia Laurence describes Bowen as “hostile to the word ‘feminism’ and the movement” (261). She reveals that Bowen’s middle-class, privileged outlook is on display in the statement Bowen made in 1936 that “the woman’s movement has accomplished itself,” and women are now ‘free to do what they ought, what they can, what they have it in them to do: they have no excuse for not

---

non-sexist language” (LeGates 332-3). Unfortunately, this group lost traction amid the conservative backlash and anti-communist turn of the Cold War Era.

3 The National Women’s Party, led by Alice Paul, remained tied to the status quo of “white middle-class male values,” which alienated women writers like Pearl S. Buck, who were beginning to take a more intersectional approach by bringing awareness to both race and gender equality as part of the same problem of “the white male middle class power structure” (Becker 239). The “new” feminists, on the other hand, had more maternalist goals focused on elevating and supporting the work that women did at home and fighting for family allowances to give mothers economic independence (LeGates). Though the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment relied less on biologically essentialist views of gender, the “new” feminists had a more class-conscious approach that considered the material realities of working-class women. The NWP’s myopic focus made it difficult for radical feminists to find their place, often caught between the NWP and the Communist Party, which still maintained “traditional notions about women’s natural submissiveness and subordination” (Weigand 4). Kate Weigand argues that this led to the erasure of the communist and progressive women that were contributing the most “not during the 1930s, when American communism was a fairly large and influential movement, but during the 1945-56 period” and who influenced the later period of radical feminism in the 1960s and 70s (5).
doing it” (262). Buck’s fear of the rigidity of reductive ideology led her to distance herself from feminism consistently: in 1938, she stated, “the only reason why I have not aligned myself with feminism is an incurable, and probably mistaken, ilk of aligning myself with anything” and in 1940 she wrote in a letter, “I myself am not and have never been a feminist or active in woman’s suffrage” (Suh 190). Out of all the writers, Rebecca West was the only one to claim herself a feminist, beginning her career writing for *The Freewoman*, a radical feminist magazine, and arguing for the needs of women at all socio-economic levels. Her writing from the 1940s, particularly *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, however, has often been seen as the start of a more conservative turn later in life.

Despite their hesitancy around the term “feminism” and the more institutional forms it took during this period, Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West promoted feminist perspectives and responses in their writing. Writing offered women a venue to assert themselves and their ideas in the public sphere. As Gill Plain concludes, “the only potential space that could offer any challenge to the homogeneity of masculine discourse was that of the text” (*Women’s Fiction* 29). What better way to resist masculine discourse than for a woman like West to publish a 1,000-page book of her thoughts on history, culture, and empire? These writers take advantage of their privileged mobility, providing them with what Alice Gambrell calls an “insider-outsider intellectual affiliation” (13). Gambrell also identifies a tendency towards “self-revision” in the work of feminist intellectuals that is both a “defense” or “evasion” and also a way to rework the “transparently interpretable and putatively authentic” (34). Gellhorn’s self-critique is motivated by her awareness of the complex and gendered affiliations of being a journalist—present at the sites of catastrophe but tasked with reporting objectively. She thus openly critiques the inculpability of the male-dominated profession. As a spy for the MOI, Bowen traveled back and
forth between war-torn London and neutral Ireland, gathering intel on Irish perspectives. Though she supported the war effort as an air raid warden, she also understood the importance of neutrality as an act of self-determination for Ireland. Buck leverages her “insider-outsider” perspective into a prominent career as a public intellectual. West’s entire project is an act of self-revision—appalled at her ignorance of the importance and history of Yugoslavia, she uses her travels and writing as a form of self-education that embraces a revisionary process. The writers in this project help to define a uniquely mobile, multicultural, and self-revisionist form of mid-century feminist thought that takes an active role in the public intellectual sphere.

**Genre**

“Reimagining the Radical” is interested in how these writers assert their feminist thought by experimenting with genre and style and thus focuses on women’s political writing (fiction and nonfiction). Martha Gellhorn’s *A Stricken Field* contains elements of various genres or modes of representation—journalism, fiction, modernist style, spy and thriller novels, humanitarian and human rights narratives, and refugee literature. Elizabeth Bowen reflects on inheritance in her nonfiction and fiction: *Bowen’s Court* combines a chronicle of her family history with detailed historiography of English/Irish relations while her fiction depends on stylistic ambiguity and negation. Pearl S. Buck translates the same themes and ideas from essays to speeches, serious literary novels to popular sentimental novels to her series of interviews deemed “talk books.” Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* combines travel narrative, historical essay, and cultural commentary. This project considers how these women writers navigate the fractures between historical writing and fiction, between the factual and the subjective through composite nonfictional genres that make space for the personal and the political and work in conversation with their attempts to fictionalize the historical and vice versa.
All of the writers in this study respond to the difficulties of writing and representing war and the inadequacy of language during wartime. According to Margot Norris, the disruptions of wartime lead to “discursive fractures” in the divide between historical, factual writing and subjective, fictional writing that “render modern war writing ‘post generic’” and “fit only to problematize the very concept of genre, to question the representation and ethical fitness of all genres” (23). In Chapter One, I use Gellhorn’s meta-critique of different modes of writing to set up this crisis of representation and the resulting need for new forms of writing seen in the subsequent chapters. That war writing might be “post generic” does not mean that genre as a choice ceases to exist, but that “choices [about genre] will be fraught with compromises and complicities, and with the danger of imposing significances preordained by genre upon historical experience” (Norris 24). Both Bowen and West are aware of the “compromises and complicities” inherent in choosing to write history. They both litter their historical narratives with “discursive fractures” of gender that counteract the patriarchal tradition of historical scholarship. Norris points out that the challenge of representing the unreality of war often leads artists “to the temptation of genres of the unreal, the abnormal, and the extreme—the Gothic, the grotesque, the surreal, the expressionistic,” which is certainly the case for some of Elizabeth Bowen’s short stories, where the ambiguity and uncertainty of wartime make room for queer possibilities (24). For Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West, any attempt to represent the violent experiences of wartime demands experimentation, whether by rewriting traditional forms or inventing new ones.

These writers’ genre experimentation reflects the aesthetic demands discussed in the previous sections of the introduction, all of which coalesce around an idea of self-awareness. Anderson’s “bleak liberalism” characterizes a liberal aesthetics that is critical of itself. Marina
MacKay identifies “self-reflexivity” as a key feature of mid-century modernism. Alice Gambrell identifies a tendency towards “self-revision” in the work of feminist intellectuals. This self-reflection is often prompted by interactions with other women and a desire to confront, reconcile, or celebrate differences. Throughout all of the chapters, I explore how this kind of self-awareness occurs at the level of form and style and becomes an essential strategy for these writers to reimage what it means to be radical and, as I will discuss in the final section, resist against a fascist ideology that avoids criticism and promotes uniformity.

**Anti-Fascism**

In line with their genre experimentation, the question of how writers should respond to fascism also underwrites the cultural debates surrounding this period. For these women writers, their critiques of liberalism and gender and their experimentation with genre and style were intricately tied to their anti-fascist stances. The crisis of liberalism was held in stark relief against the background of the rise of fascism across Europe—as Alice Yaeger Kaplan asserts, “Fascism was…a revolt of human consciousness against so-called undramatic liberalism, against the alienation of the individual from government” (3). Any discussion of the relationship between art and politics in modernist literature has to contend with the uncomfortable overlap between fascism and modernism. Most scholars point to Walter Benjamin’s famous quote, “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (36). Women writers were actively connecting patriarchal formations and fascist regimes and promoting gender equality as a necessary facet of anti-fascist efforts. The most famous example is Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*. However, Pearl S. Buck also sent a letter with her concerns about the rising misogyny associated with fascism to the prominent women intellectuals of her time, including Eleanor Roosevelt.
As a way to foreground the feminist, anti-fascist strategies that I argue these writers employ in their writing, this section will present some of the main features of their anti-fascism and place them in context and contrast with overarching themes of fascist thought. Beyond fears over what the rise of fascism would mean for the world, the prominence of fascist thought had a widespread effect on culture. Janice Ho writes, “the power of fascism in the early 20th century must be considered not just in light of those who explicitly aligned themselves with such a movement, but in light of fascism’s broader discursive impact on even those who ostensibly repudiated it” (“Crisis” 12). The field of fascist studies has understandably struggled with the difficulty of moving between general and specific in attempting to define fascism. Naming an overarching definition of fascism can risk masking the historical specificity of fascist regimes like German Nazism and the harm they inflicted. At the same time, there has been a call for discussions of other forms of fascism beyond the Nazi regime and a more transnational understanding of fascism in its multiple versions. Alice Yaeger Kaplan writes that “when not nauseated by descriptions of fascist oppression,” she finds herself “dizzy” from trying to define fascism; instead, she refers to the way that fascism “feels like an ocean” in its “appeal[] to all people, to all classes, to pacifists in France, to militants in Germany, to neither right nor left, to both revolutionary and conservative” (7).

It might be no surprise, then, that attempting to define the anti-fascism of these women writers is sometimes equally confounding. Erin Carlston attributes this to the fact that “fascist discourses share a vernacular with non- and antifascist discourses of the same period [and] that fascism itself could supply the vocabulary and the methodology of even the most rigorously antifascist critiques” (5). Though this project is not interested in how best to define fascist thought, with an acknowledgment of the “oceanic” nature of fascist ideology, I would like to
consider some of the overarching ideas that can be attributed to what Umberto Eco terms “Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism” to understand how the writers in this project might be influenced by, responding to, and undermining some of these ideas in their writing (5). As both Eco and Kaplan are careful to remind their readers, such a list of characteristics is in no way definitive, and many of the characteristics are contradictory, forming a series of “binding doubles” (Kaplan 24).

The women writers in this project approach tradition and interpretation in ways that counter the monolithic endeavors of fascism. One of fascism’s “binding doubles” is the interplay between the modern and antimodern, or what Eco refers to as a “cult of tradition” that is “syncretistic” in nature (6). Despite a surface interest in technology and what otherwise might be considered “modern,” fascism is deeply rooted in an obsession with traditionalism—an easy example of this might be fascism’s tendency to rely on traditional gender roles based on separate spheres and binarist understandings of gender. Eco extends this traditionalism to how fascism becomes obsessed with a singular “primeval truth,” drawing on disparate traditions, not for the sake of learning but to support the re-interpretation of the same hidden truth (6). Bowen’s wartime writing could be said to be drawn to a similar “cult of tradition.” In Bowen’s Court, she takes tradition as the structuring element, dedicating each chapter to one of her male ancestors. At the same time, in her short story “The Happy Autumn Fields,” she juxtaposes the chaotic and violent modernity of World War II with the idyllic pastoral life of 19th-century Ireland. Nevertheless, as I argue in Chapter Two, Bowen’s return to the traditional is less about reclaiming the past than re-imagining that tradition beyond patriarchal lines of kinship. Instead of one line of patriarchal inheritance leading to one present truth, Bowen imagines the formation of new lines across time and space and between women. Furthermore, a kind of multiplicity threads
throughout all the chapters in this project—the way that Gellhorn, Buck, and West all move between multiple modes and genres of writing and insist on multiple interpretations and expansive definitions that can include more than one thing. Eco writes that for fascists, “thinking is a form of emasculation” (6). As thinking women, Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West take this masculinist anti-intellectuality as a call to arms, responding with the very “critical spirit” that fascism’s “syncretistic faith cannot withstand,” a spirit that embraces criticism, disagreement, and incertitude (Eco 6).

Though these writers, Buck especially, are equally drawn to populist rhetoric and movements, they resist fascism’s contradictory reliance on elitism and racism. The desire for “consensus” requires the creation of an Other in order to “exploit[] and exacerbate[] the natural fear of difference” (Eco 7). The fact that “Ur-Fascism is racist by definition” was something that Buck knew well, and she warned her American readers that their racist ideologies could become the breeding ground for fascism. Fascism, then, combines populism and hierarchy—the masses are bound together against those that have been othered, the “intruders,” and yet they remain subordinate to “the Leader” (Eco 8). As Kaplan writes, “There is a bizarre compatibility of elitism and populism in fascism, whereby every man, in imaginary proximity to the body and soul of a leader, can feel like the Man” (33). This “imaginary proximity” is the key to what Eco calls a “selective populism” wherein the idea of “the People” “is only a theatrical fiction.” Buck, too, is drawn in by populism—her writing is geared towards the popular, and her interviews focus on bottom-up movements in China and Russia—but she sees such populism as a remedy to inequality rather than a theatricality fueled by hierarchy. This involves seeing herself as a mediator rather than a leader, connecting people from across the globe and political spectrum. Though such mediation can play into an “imaginary” sense of unity, I argue in Chapter Three
that Buck works towards an elasticity that allows for diversity in thought and experience rather than a consensus that attempts to erase difference.

Finally, by uniting their anti-fascism with their feminist perspectives, Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West counteract fascist ideas about gender and sexuality that depend on a binary between a masculine “cult of heroism and death,” on the one hand and a “disdain for women” and non-normative sexualities, on the other (Eco 8). For citizens of fascism, a “heroic death…is the best reward for a heroic life” (Eco 8). In contrast, the titular critique in Rebecca West’s Black Lamb and Grey Falcon focuses on the inherent violence of Western Christian obsessions with sacrifice and connects them to patriarchal expectations. Similarly, as I argue in Chapter One, Gellhorn criticizes her desire for heroic or humanitarian narratives and ultimately undermines literary expectations for a satisfying ending. Eco contrasts this cult of heroism with fascism’s misogynistic views, but Kaplan also calls for attention to “how dependent the phallic fascist is on mother-nation, mother-machine, mother-war” and what she refers to as “mother-bound” feelings (11). Similarly, Carlston terms this “matriotism” or the “ideology of motherhood that buttresses patriarchy and militarism” and “conceals gender inequity behind an idealization of maternity, harnesses women’s (reproductive) labor in the service of the State, and suppresses women’s sexuality in favor of the maternal role” (7). In the most general sense, the writers in this project resist this kind of matriotism by asserting themselves in the public sphere, rethinking their role beyond the passiveness of “mother-nation.” Bowen responds to both the reproductive expectations placed on women and the premium put on women to uphold heteropatriarchal lines of inheritance by imagining moments of queer kinship where women forge connections that bypass patriarchal forms of family and inheritance.
Though all of the writers share the same set of general anti-fascist impulses that overlap and build on one another, each chapter of “Reimagining the Radical” considers how these writers employ a different feminist, anti-fascist rhetorical strategy in their writing: Gellhorn’s self-critical style, Bowen’s queer inheritance, Buck’s violent education, and West’s visible process. The structure of “Reimagining the Radical” invites transnational dialogue by alternating between American (Gellhorn, Buck) and British (Bowen, West) writers and by centering a different geographic context of World War II in each chapter (Czechoslovakia; London Blitz and neutral Ireland; the Pacific Theater in China and Burma; and the Balkan states of what was then Yugoslavia).

The first chapter, “Self-Critical Style: The Failure of Writing and Political Allyship in Martha Gellhorn’s A Stricken Field,” begins with a discussion of Gellhorn’s Munich crisis novel, A Stricken Field (1940), which metafictionally sets the stage for the crisis of representation brought about by war and violence that forms the context for the strategies in subsequent chapters. Gellhorn’s novel is a patchwork of different modes of writing—journalism, autobiography, fiction, modernist style, spy and thriller novels, humanitarian and human rights narratives, and refugee literature. Through this meta-commentary on writing, I argue that Gellhorn develops a self-critical style that is self-aware of the shared limitations of both writing and political allyship. Gellhorn assesses different modes of writing by considering their potential to ignore or, at worst, re-inscribe the very systems of violence they seek to expose. She questions the ethics of objective journalism, parodies the sentimentality of fiction, experiments with the multiplicity of a more modernist writing style, and upends the humanitarian desire for a satisfying or happy ending. By contrasting an autobiographical American journalist with a fictional German political refugee, Gellhorn questions what it means to suffer the
dehumanization of displacement, what it means to witness suffering as a privileged outsider, and what role, if any, language and writing can play in mitigating suffering. Ultimately, Gellhorn’s *self-critical style* embraces the inevitability of failure when representing violence and thus models for her readers a sustained commitment to the often complex, messy, and sometimes ineffective process of political allyship in the face of totalitarian systems of power.

While Gellhorn is critical of the limitations of representing violence, Elizabeth Bowen finds in her wartime fiction the possibility of imagining new ways of being in the world through a *queer inheritance*. The second chapter, “Queer Inheritance: Retracing the Lines of Kinship in Elizabeth Bowen’s Wartime Writing,” explores Bowen’s personal and political contemplations of inheritance and its implications for how we come to understand the past and imagine the future. The rise of fascism across Europe prompts Bowen to turn to the past for answers: in *Bowen’s Court* (1942), her multi-generational work of history and family chronicle, Bowen considers her family’s patriarchal line of inheritance and its entanglements with the history of English colonialism in Ireland. By looking at the way Bowen writes about the origins of her family’s property in Ireland and the small moments that she attends to the role of women in her family, I argue that Bowen simultaneously destabilizes historical memory and legacy while also struggling to confront her family’s culpability in the legacy of colonialism. While *Bowen’s Court* sets the stage for Bowen’s anxieties about inheritance, I assert that Bowen’s wartime fiction creates space for *queer inheritance* through a literary style focused on negation and ambiguity. I read “The Happy Autumn Fields,” “The Inherited Clock,” and the novel *The Heat of the Day* (1948) through the lens of Sarah Ahmed’s, Elizabeth Freeman’s, and José Muñoz’s ideas about queer time and queer kinship. Bowen embeds these works about war’s temporal and spatial
disruptions with small, indeterminate moments that supplant normative and patriarchal narratives
with queer, feminist connections and futures.

In the third chapter, “Violent Education: Pearl S. Buck’s War Novels And ‘Talk Books,’” I situate Buck’s vast array of wartime writing—essays, speeches, novels, and a series of interviews she refers to as “talk books”—within the context of popular front literature and the broader literary and political responses to fascism. I argue that Buck’s network of writing and activism forms a violent education that purposefully mediates between leftist and liberal politics and repurposes popular forms of writing to reach the common denominator of American readers. This violent education takes two primary forms. First, I assert that Buck’s sentimental war novels reconfigure the bounds of war literature beyond Western-centric soldier narratives to expose the interconnected violence of patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism. All written as the war was still happening, these novels offer insight into how Buck negotiated a media landscape influenced by propaganda that relied increasingly on racial stereotypes. Though Buck’s fiction often relies on sentimental tropes of popular fiction, comparing the film adaptations of some of her novels reveals her commitment to humanizing her Asian characters and critiquing British and American racism and imperialism. Second, I analyze the way that Buck embeds her multicultural politics into the form of her “talk books” to create an elastic politics that depends on conversation and makes room for disagreement and argument. Buck interviews James Yen about the Mass Education Movement in China, Masha Scott about her experiences of Russian collectivization, and Eslanda Goode Robeson about growing up in America as a Black woman. These interviews help American readers re-evaluate American politics and expand their understanding of democracy and freedom to include experiences different from their own.
Rebecca West and Pearl S. Buck share a propensity for the expansive: while Buck produced an impressive amount of different kinds of writing during the war, West completed *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, a more than 1,000-page tome of travel memoir, history, and cultural commentary. The final chapter, “Visible Process: Metaphor and Contradiction in Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*,” focuses on West’s epic work of nonfiction and her development of a visible process that is a uniquely feminist approach to interpretation and meaning-making. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941) is a fictionalized admixture of West’s travels to what was then Yugoslavia in the late 1930s and her intense research into the long history of imperialism in the region. I argue that West’s visible process—her willingness to show how her ideas grow and develop in ways that do not always fit into neat political categories—is facilitated by her use of figurative language like metaphors, analogies, and symbols. This visible process starkly contrasts a fascist “lack of process” that West attributes to Gerda, her German travel companion who comes to represent the nihilism of fascist thought. While Gerda cannot see past her own biases and privilege, West forces her readers to question how our understandings of the past, particularly the role of imperialism, are filtered through a patriarchal education system and the creation of hegemonic symbols. Though ultimately West struggles to imagine an alternative to patriarchy, her visible process promotes a celebration of difference and contradiction as a feminist, anti-fascist act of resistance.

Finally, in the conclusion, I reflect on how “Reimagining the Radical” resonates with our current political moment. I turn to Celeste Ng’s recent novel *Our Missing Hearts* (2022) as a touchstone for considering the shared themes of women writers from the 1940s and those of today. In *Our Missing Hearts*, Ng imagines a near-to-reality dystopian society under the grips of an American brand of fascism. As Pearl S. Buck warned in her speeches and fiction, Ng’s vision
of American fascism is fueled by racism and the scapegoating of cultural others, mainly Chinese Americans. The novel feels informed by West’s visible process as it charts poet-turned-activist Margaret Miu’s developing radicalism. Margaret’s ultimate act of resistance: collecting the stories of children torn from their families, carrying them on her body, and broadcasting them across the city—a moment that speaks truth to the power of sharing one’s experiences and reminds me of Mary smuggling papers out of Czechoslovakia in Gellhorn’s A Stricken Field. Our Missing Hearts reminds us that fascism demands a vigilant response from every generation and that art offers an ever-expansive venue for nonviolent resistance.
CHAPTER ONE
SELF-CRITICAL STYLE: THE FAILURE OF WRITING AND POLITICAL ALLYSHIP IN MARTHA GELLHORN’S A STRICKEN FIELD

One of the first women to serve as a foreign war correspondent, Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998) spent her career writing about war’s effect on ordinary people.¹ Too often, Gellhorn has been portrayed as an addendum to the life and work of Ernest Hemingway, though the couple was only married for four years. Perhaps because their relationship began during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), at the same time that Gellhorn launched her career as a war correspondent and cemented her antifascist political stance, scholars and biographers have often over-accentuated the overlap in their politics and literary style. This fixation oversimplifies Gellhorn’s passion for writing about the experiences of non-combatants during wartime and her willingness to critique her privileged perspective. While researching a novel on French pacifists in Berlin in 1934, Gellhorn saw her first glimpse of “what these bullying Nazi louts were like and were up to” and by 1936 had decided to make her way towards Spain; at that moment, she “stopped being a pacifist” and became “an antifascist” (Face 10). She submitted an article on Madrid to Collier’s Magazine and joined the ranks of what she referred to as the “Federation of Cassandras,” foreign correspondents who “had been reporting the rise of Fascism, its horrors and its sure menace” to educate readers in Britain and America (Face 12, 2). This chapter will focus

¹ Throughout her career, Gellhorn covered international conflicts in a wide variety of geographic locations, from the Spanish Civil War to WWII, the Arab-Israeli War, Vietnam War, and the Invasion of Panama.
on her 1940 novel, *A Stricken Field*, which describes the Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement (1938). While British writers were trying to process this uncertain period of peace, Gellhorn was actively writing about Spain and Czechoslovakia, where war had already arrived. She refused to let the anxiety of the Munich crisis be understood only in terms of the potential for peace or war in countries like Britain and France at the expense of the real-time suffering of those whose land and safety were most immediately at stake.

Gellhorn’s novel offers a helpful starting point for this dissertation’s interest in the feminist and anti-fascist rhetorical strategies women writers employed in their wartime writing. Gellhorn draws attention to the crisis of representation caused by the violence of war that the other writers respond to in their own ways. In *A Stricken Field*, Gellhorn engages in a meta-discourse on the state of writing itself amidst the widespread suffering already wrought by the rise of fascism. Not only does she experiment with genre by combining journalism and fiction, but she also scrutinizes a range of modes of representation—journalism, fiction, modernist style, spy and thriller novels, humanitarian and human rights narratives, and refugee literature—to continually examine their effectiveness even while employing them in her writing. Through this meta-commentary on war and writing, I argue that Gellhorn creates a *self-critical style* that is self-aware of the limitations of both writing and political allyship but ultimately promotes resistance even in the face of failure. In combining her experiences as a privileged witness with fictionalized accounts of refugees in Czechoslovakia, Gellhorn grapples with the difficulty of representing the pain of others while critiquing the limits of her empathy and desire for a complete and satisfying ending. Gellhorn’s *self-critical style* interrogates modernist conceptions of exile given the period’s mass statelessness and human rights crises by rethinking what it means to write the story of displacement. She also promotes a feminist response to fascist
violence by confronting the difficulty of representing violence and women’s role in such representations. Gellhorn embraces the failure of writing as a way to model the complex, messy, often ineffective process of political allyship in the face of totalitarian systems of power.

***

As is the case for most of the writers in this dissertation, Gellhorn’s political convictions are often difficult to categorize according to a specific political party. Instead, Gellhorn continually aligned herself with the oppressed, making it her life-long goal to record the violence caused by the failures of those in power. Gellhorn was born into a “familial heritage” of service, one of “liberalism, making a contribution, active reform, open-mindedness and thinking for oneself,” but also one in which women were essential and active figures of reform (McLoughlin 20). In 1916, at eight years old, Gellhorn joined her mother in the Golden Lane of suffragettes at the Democratic National Convention in St. Louis, thus acquiring a strong sense of equality from an early age that was furthered by her attendance at the progressive, coeducational John Burroughs School (Moorehead 51, 53). Gellhorn categorized her early adult years as an education in “real life,” and for her, “Real life was the Have-nots” (View 68). Always careful to acknowledge her contingent positioning, she admits that “it was a very high-class education…standing room at ground level to watch history as it happened” (View 68). Gellhorn knew she was lucky to have access to the travel that allowed her to “watch history as it happened.” She remained committed to writing about the lives and experiences of the “Have-nots.”

A telling example of Gellhorn’s unique political alignment comes from her time as a field reporter for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), an experience that informed her collection of short stories, The Trouble I’ve Seen (1936). Upon meeting a group of
agricultural workers being exploited by a corrupt contractor, Gellhorn suggested a dramatic action, like breaking the windows of the FERA office. Gellhorn moved to the next town, but the workers followed her advice about the windows, and a few days later, the FBI arrived to investigate a possible communist uprising. The contractor was arrested, but Gellhorn was fired for, as she proudly told her parents, being a “dangerous Communist” (Moorehead 205). Kate McLoughlin points to this moment in Gellhorn’s life as critical to her insider/outsider political status, particularly her invitation from the Roosevelts (long-time family friends) to stay at the White House after being fired. While her actions with the workers “locate her stance outside the auspices of the New Deal and in critical opposition to it,” her arrival at the White House directly after “places her alongside the more mainstream liberal New Deal believers” (37-38).

Nevertheless, traveling to small towns across the country and witnessing the realities of abject poverty and the ineffectiveness of the relief agencies and those in power helped develop Gellhorn’s unique writing style. Caroline Moorehead posits that “it was in the textile mill towns of North Carolina that [she] finally found the writing voice that she had been looking for…What made it her own was the tone, the barely contained fury and indignation at the injustice of fate and man against the poor, the weak, the dispossessed” (190). By the time Gellhorn started writing about the spread of fascism in Spain and Czechoslovakia, that “fury and indignation” would further evolve into the self-critical style ever-present in A Stricken Field.

***

Gellhorn’s anti-fascist stance in A Stricken Field begins with her reporting on the Spanish Civil War and the novel that she was ultimately unable to write about that time. Gellhorn arrived

[2] Another telling example of Gellhorn’s political positioning is her coverage of Sergei Eisenstein’s ultimately unsuccessful filming of ¡Que Viva Mexico!. As Rollyson explains, “Hardly a Marxist, Gellhorn nonetheless endorsed a film portraying a strong people becoming aware of their power and inevitably pressing forward into revolutionary action” (Beautiful Exile 40).
in Madrid in 1937. Her experiences in the Spanish Civil War would stay with her for the rest of her life. In many ways, her first wartime experience set the stage for the rest of her career in her focus on civilians, her indignation at the indifference of governments, and her belief in the fight for democracy. She planned initially to write a novel about Spain, but, finding that “Spain was too close,” ended up pouring “the emotions of Spain in writing about Czechoslovakia,” where “the enemy was the same; the people were equally abandoned, alone, and related by pain” (Stricken 310). Though A Stricken Field is most specifically a novel about the aftermath of the Munich Agreement, it carries with it Gellhorn’s sorrow from the Spanish Civil War and the violent repetition of the history forming around her. Indeed, the protagonist of the novel, in thinking of how best to write what she has seen, comments that “If I knew how, I would write a lament,” wondering what kind of eulogy could do justice to the paired and haunting images of children singing amidst the shared violence of both Barcelona and Prague (Stricken 82-3). The repetition of violence from Spain to Czechoslovakia forces Gellhorn to confront the limitations of writing as a form of representation and of herself as a writer.

Gellhorn hoped to continue covering the war in Barcelona, but in June 1938, Collier’s sent her to Prague to cover the developing crisis with Germany. A Stricken Field mirrors Gellhorn’s travels; the semi-autobiographical protagonist, the journalist Mary Douglas, has just returned to Prague in the fall of 1938 after a previous visit earlier in the summer. Gellhorn wrote the novel during the anxious first ten months of 1939, but it was not published until March of 1940, when the war was well underway. Thus, the novel has the added element of retrospective

3 In 1940, she wrote to her friend and mentor, Hortense Flexner, that “Nothing in my life has so affected my thinking as the losing of that war. It is, very banally, like the death of all things and it is as if a country that you had worshipped was suddenly blackened with fire and later swallowed in an earthquake…Czecho made me fighting mad and sick with rage: but Spain has really broken my heart.” Gellhorn to Flexner and Wyncie King, San Francisco de Paula, 8 June 1940 (Letters 93).
memory and mourning—one reviewer even called it a “contemporary historical novel.” She later recalled, “safe in Cuba, I wrote out the accumulated rage and grief of the past two years in this one story...” (Stricken 303). A Stricken Field was Gellhorn’s attempt to process through fiction the horrors that she had reported on in 1938.

Although this chapter focuses on A Stricken Field, Gellhorn also wrote four articles for Collier’s during this time, which provide helpful snapshots of the historical and political context happening in Czechoslovakia. After Germany’s annexation of Austria in March of 1938, Czechoslovakia was left vulnerable and the subsequent political maneuverings revolved around questions of ethnic and national identity. The area of most significant contention was the Sudetenland, made up of the regions of Bohemia and Moravia, which though predominantly German-speaking, had been included in the formation of Czechoslovakia at the end of WWI (Caquet 40). Czechs and Germans had been living together in the Sudetenland for generations. However, Nazi atrocity propaganda and the political machinations of Sudeten German politician Konrad Henlein attempted to reframe the military maneuver as a matter of self-determination. As Gellhorn explained it in one of her articles:

The excuse for all this tension is the German minority. Of the three and a half million Germans in Czechoslovakia, about two million are Henlein Nazis. Up until 1935, eighty percent of the Germans were Social Democrats who believed in democracy and got on all right in Czechoslovakia. Then 500 factories failed…the Henleinists blamed the Czechs for the world depression, and felt they were being willfully starved. A radio campaign started, and the German Nazi press took it up, and the towns and villages buzzed with

---

4 The articles are as follows: in August, “Come Ahead, Adolf!” about the Czechoslovakian rearmament efforts; in September, “The Lord Will Provide—for England,” about England’s isolationist reactions to the crisis in Czechoslovakia; in October, “Guns Against France,” about France’s position towards war; and finally, in December, “Obituary of a Democracy,” about the aftermath of the Munich Agreement.
talk: In Germany men eat and work and are happy…in Germany there are no Czechs to
take jobs and humiliate us…Germany is a great nation and the Germans are a great race;
Czechoslovakia is a little country and the Czechs are a small Slavic race. Why should we
be ruled by Czechs? … So the trouble was started. ("Come Ahead, Adolf!" 43)

Though there were many reasons for the Germans in the Sudetenland to be dissatisfied—by the
late 1930s, so many of them had lost their jobs, and unlike the Czechs and Slovaks, they had
never been recognized as a state nationality, which was “a psychological distinction, a question
of sentiment or pride” (Caquet 160)—Nazi propaganda essentially reduced the complicated
situation to an issue of ethnicity and its close ties to national identity, a lead which Britain and
France would follow when it came time for negotiations.

While the Munich Agreement involved complicated political arbitration, Gellhorn’s
writing from this time is most concerned with the effect on the everyday lives of people in
Czechoslovakia, particularly those left without homes or the protection of official citizenship.
While Chamberlain returned to London to a crowd of cheering British citizens, Czechoslovakia
faced the difficult task of evacuating an entire area in ten days and deciding what to do with an
influx of more than 152,000 refugees fleeing the violence of the German soldiers staking their
claim in the new territories (Caquet 441-2). Efforts began with humanitarian aid organizations
like the Czechoslovak Red Cross, which tried to use wartime evacuation camps as temporary
housing for many refugees. By December, a governmental agency, The Institute for the Care of
Refugees, took over the cause. As high commissioner for refugees for the League of Nations,
Neill Malcolm, the lord mayor of London, offered “funds, material aid, and technical help” from
foreign sources (Caquet 475). The failed humanitarian plot in A Stricken Field aligns with
Gellhorn’s experiences and shows a different view of these humanitarian efforts. Having
returned to Prague in October, Gellhorn was appalled at Sir Neill Malcolm, the inspiration for Lord Balham in the novel, who spent two days in Prague and never saw a single refugee. As she explains in the afterword, “so I went to his hotel and…pounded the table…and shouted and pleaded and explained and described” (*Stricken* 308). As Mary does in the novel, Gellhorn coordinated a meeting between Malcolm and Jan Syrový, the Czechoslovakian prime minister, even recruiting former French General Faucher, who had resigned due to the agreement, to help plead their case. Syrový refused. *A Stricken Field* was Gellhorn’s attempt to process her own failed political allyship and the resulting feelings of “fury and helplessness” not just for Czechoslovakia but for Spain as well, and all of Europe really, which had become in her mind “such a miserable collection of lies and chicanery and underneath all such horrible raw dripping cruelty” (*Stricken* 310-11). She sums up 1938: “The moral of that moment in history has lasted for me permanently: never believe governments, not any of them, not a word they say; keep an untrusting eye on what they do” (*Stricken* 307). It is unsurprising that Gellhorn centers the narratives of German refugees desperately trying to make a home for themselves in Prague, grasping at the last bit of hope, resistance, and refuge in the domestic.

*A Stricken Field* opens with Mary’s return to a Prague that has drastically changed since the end of the negotiations in Munich. Despite the narrow economic focus of her assigned interviews, Mary becomes embroiled in the treatment of the refugees that have nowhere to go and are faced with deportation back to a ruthless Nazi Germany. Mary meets Rita, a German communist intellectual who, after spending three years in a Nazi prison, has somewhat miraculously made a home for herself in Prague with her partner, Peter. Through her friendship with Rita, Mary is exposed to and enraged by the plight of the newly arriving refugees. Mary foregoes her unbiased journalistic role and attempts to leverage her privilege as an American
citizen to convince the Czech government to stay the order of deportation and allow the refugees time to find a democratic country to be their host. Despite her optimism, Mary’s coordination proves futile; she is unable even to save Rita, who is forced to listen as Nazi authorities fatally beat Peter while her fate remains ominously unknown to the reader, as she is taken into police custody at the end of the novel. Before leaving for Paris, Mary agrees to smuggle a bundle of writing out of Prague, a collection of firsthand accounts of Nazi violence.

***

As the bundle of firsthand accounts indicates, a large portion of the novel’s plot is literally and physically about writing, but so much about how the novel is written is also about determining what form of writing can accurately and genuinely capture the horrors of war and displacement. Contemporaneous reviews paint *A Stricken Field* as a failed conglomeration of genre, questioning Gellhorn’s authority and reliance on fictional tropes. Edith Walton calls out “the flavor of autobiography,” with the “verdict” being that “as a character Martha is still miles ahead of Mary,” who “we [as readers] wish…were less noble and more real.” Two reviewers express concern over the way that Gellhorn fictionalizes the perspectives of refugees: Wallace Stegner contrasts the “sheer horror” of her novel with the “variable humanity” of Lion Feuchtwanger’s *Paris Gazette*, wherein “a refugee is not necessarily gilded and haloed by his trials” while an unnamed reviewer for *Time Magazine* emphasizes the novel’s veer towards the sentimental and the stylistic choice to include the suspenseful torture plot (Stegner 459; “Glamour” 92). The harshest criticisms center on Gellhorn’s choice to blend journalism and fiction—Walton concludes that “considered a novel it is something of a failure” and prefers

---

5 Perhaps to soften the blow, the reviewer offers this critique parenthetically: “(Rita, romanticized mistress of a romanticized revolutionist, is refugee heroine of author Gellhorn’s story within a story—an artificial device, justified mainly by a climax scene which adds a graphic chapter to inquisitional literature.)” (“Glamour” 92).
Gellhorn the journalist: “Why she did not tell this story in the first person, and as a record of her own experience, I really cannot imagine” (92). Similarly, Hauser finds that the characters and plot are too similar “to the heroic pattern,” particularly Rita and Peter, whose storyline appears as though “invented to add more human interest to a good and truthful newspaper story” (10).

While the reviewers seem to agree that Gellhorn’s narrative is not objective enough, too “noble,” “gilded,” and “heroic,” I am more interested in Gellhorn’s meta-commentary on these different registers. The novel moves between Mary’s frustration with her fellow journalists, her inclination towards romanticizing the refugees, and the struggle to represent the situation’s violent reality in a way that calls attention to the failures of objective, sentimental, and more modernist registers alike.

The self-aware and self-referential nature of Gellhorn’s meta-commentary on forms of writing in A Stricken Field identifies her writing most closely with a late or mid-century modernist style that is uniquely feminist. Phyllis Lassner details how A Stricken Field, as an exemplary case of WWII writing, responds to and challenges the “mythic” status of the Great War and the resulting “defense of pacifism” in the construction of literary modernism (“Camp” 1). Lassner identifies Gellhorn’s genre experimentation as “a modernist interrogation of itself” that “questions...the modernist war text that transcends, universalizes, or mythicizes” to the elision of the historical specificity of WWII (“Camp” 2-3). Rather than claim Gellhorn as an extension of an earlier tradition of modernism, this chapter situates her writing in the more recent categorization of mid-century writing, as outlined in the introduction, that is characterized not only by an interrogation of modernism but also a self-referential politics that reflects the period’s unique questions about violence, language, and human rights. Additionally, instead of casting Gellhorn’s refusal to universalize and mythicize in relationship only to modernism, I frame that
same refusal as a feminist insistence that the personal is always political in resistance to patriarchal expectations for objectivity and fact in narratives of war. While this chapter is also interested in how Gellhorn “finds a self-critical modernist form,” I argue that Gellhorn’s self-critical style is informed by an array of narrative traditions, of which modernism is only one example (Lassner “Camp” 5). Furthermore, not only does Gellhorn respond self-referentially to the formal characteristics of writing, but she also offers a self-critique of her attempts at political allyship as a privileged writer, traveler, and witness.

This chapter, then, seeks to unravel Gellhorn’s matrix of modes of representation—journalism, fiction, modernist style, spy and thriller novels, humanitarian and human rights narratives, and refugee literature—to reveal how Gellhorn modernizes, hybridizes, and defies genre expectations and limitations. Gellhorn’s genre experimentation facilitates a self-critical style that models for readers a complicated process of political positioning and allyship that necessitates the constant critique of the oppressive potential of the narrative patterns she employs. At the same time that Gellhorn uses writing as a tool of education, she also questions the potential for writing to serve as such a tool when so many of its primary forms risk ignoring, or at worst, re-inscribing the very systems of violence and power it seeks to expose.

Gellhorn doubts if any forms of writing can ever wholly represent the lives of others, a shared tension that scholars like Elaine Scarry, James Dawes, Joseph Slaughter, and Edward Said have located in these various modes of writing. Scarry discusses the potential for fiction and imagination to serve as an impetus for political action. She writes that “literature, it seems fair to conclude, is most helpful not insofar as it takes away the problem of the Other—for only with greatest rarity can it do this—but when it instead takes as its own subject the problem of Imagining Others” (“Difficulty” 48). While much of A Stricken Field is written as the former by
imagining the suffering of the refugees for an American and British audience, I argue that
Gellhorn’s self-referentiality attempts to consider more consciously “the [very] problem of
Imagining Others” and the difficulty of honestly and authentically telling the story of what she
witnessed (Scarry “Difficulty” 48).

Similarly, the plot elements of A Stricken Field align with the criteria that James Dawes
associates with a burgeoning subfield of human rights novels in American literature and that
Joseph R. Slaughter attributes to what he terms “humanitarian storytelling” (Slaughter 49).6
Dawes differentiates between humanitarianism, which “assiduously avoids the political so that it
can be more effective in its primary work: alleviating suffering,” and human rights, which “is
nothing if not political” and attempts “not to mitigate suffering but to confront and disable the
systems causing suffering” (Novel 14). In A Stricken Field, Gellhorn locates the challenges of
allyship in the overlap between humanitarianism and human rights, particularly by interrogating
her own reliance on a narrative arc and denouement that depends on the success of individual
humanitarian efforts.

Gellhorn’s (and Mary’s) desire for successful humanitarian solutions is also a desire to
solve and humanize the experiences of refugees, a task that Edward Said argues will always be
the failure of a literature that demands redemption. Said critiques canonized “literatures of exile”
(his examples of which are James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov) for their potential to “obscure
what is truly horrendous,” the “crippling sorrow of estrangement,” inherent in the experience of
refugees in favor of “heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes” that work only to
“serve [the] notions of humanism” (“Reflections” 373, 375). Not only is the underlying

6 Though Dawes focuses on more recent novels, there’s a way in which Gellhorn’s A Stricken Field, written at a
moment when worldwide understandings of human rights and humanitarianism were undergoing drastic changes,
might prefigure or mark the beginning of what is now a more prolific genre.
humanistic and redemptive endeavor of literature at odds with any attempt to represent the “irremediably secular and unbearably historical” realities of exile, but the category of literature of exile often conflates the conditions of exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés, which have varying degrees of choice and politicization (375). In presenting both the cosmopolitan expatriate through Mary’s journalistic travels and the political exile and refugee through Rita and the other refugee characters (and the final bundle of writing), Gellhorn critiques not only the privileged stance of expatriates who have the money and papers necessary to leave the sites of violence, but also her humanistic desire to create a narrative out of the refugee experience.

Gellhorn’s self-critique of narratives of exile further marks her writing as uniquely mid-century modernist. Lyndsey Stonebridge argues that during this period writers responded to “the changed meanings of exile [with]...new forms of political thought, creative imagination, and moral courage” (Placeless People 8). While literary theory has given much consideration to how “the trauma of the Nazi genocide had set new terms on how literature could represent historical experience,” as Stonebridge asserts, “a similar accounting of modern statelessness...has proved more elusive” (Placeless People 8). Building off of Said and in alignment with Lassner’s positioning of Gellhorn regarding canonical modernism, Stonebridge attributes this gap in scholarship to the continued cultural ethos of an earlier modernist “universalizing human narrative of literary cosmopolitanism,” which has served to obscure the experiences of refugees in favor of the “exiled writer as melancholy observer of modern life” (Placeless People 9). In focusing on writers at mid-century, Stonebridge zeroes in on a moment before “literary humanism could reassert its authority in the post-war period” when writers took seriously the “task...to forge a style capable of responding to the new rightlessness” with an ethics sprung not only from “a place of pathos” but also out of a desire to grapple with the complicated web of
“rights, citizenship, and sovereignty”—a time when what Gellhorn calls “having a country” “was at its most vexed” (*Placeless People* 19, 20; Gellhorn *Stricken* 17). Though Gellhorn is still clearly influenced by some forms of “literary humanism,” she does attempt to utilize those forms in service of a self-critical examination of their limitations and potential for continued violence. Stonebridge offers up mid-century writing as the starting point for determining what “fictional home” might be best suited for “the era of the refugee,” and I argue that Gellhorn’s development of a *self-critical style* is in direct response to this question (*Placeless People* 44). Mary thinks to herself in *A Stricken Field*, “there will have to be a terrible justice blowing over the world, to avenge all the needless suffering,” but the novel as a whole, wonders what justice writing itself can offer a world where suffering seems endless (*Stricken* 119-120).

***

One way that Gellhorn considers “the problem of Imagining Others” is through questioning the ethics of an objective journalism that avoids the imagining in the first place. Through the character of Mary and in contrast with her fellow male reporters, Gellhorn exposes the gendered nature of the profession and the masculine premium placed on objectivity. Reviewer Marianne Hauser, quoted above, critiqued *A Stricken Field* for adding too much human interest “to a good and truthful newspaper story,” a surprising comment given that Gellhorn’s journalism was praised because of her eye towards the impact of war on the lives of everyday people. This contrast, however, indicates the changing field of journalism at mid-century. The era of New Reportage turned journalism into a “politicised genre” that sought to educate through a “reasoned objectivity”—what Gellhorn calls “a walking tape recorder with eyes” (McLoughlin 25, 62). Though the expectation was for detached, factual reporting, the reality of much New Reportage relied on a personal and often emotional connection between
reporter and subject. Such was the paradoxical tension inherent in the “theoretical demands” of New Reportage: “the indispensability of both the writer’s presence in the field and his or her absence from the text” (McLoughlin 28). Similarly, McLoughlin identifies this tension in Gellhorn’s reporting through the relationship of a carefully constructed “tonal control” marked by “slips” or “blips” in which Gellhorn’s emotional and political positioning break through (60).

The expectation for reporting to be impartial reveals the gendered nature of reporting, which was underpinned by a traditionally “partial, male-oriented construction of knowledge, reportage and ‘news’ that produced a patriarchal framework for the professionalization of the occupation” (Chambers et al. 6). While Gellhorn’s career encapsulates many of the challenges women face in the field of journalism—delegation to arts and culture, frequent sexualization, and official restriction from the scene of more serious news, such as the war front—her refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations of objectivity is an underappreciated aspect of the feminist and anti-fascist critique in her body of work. Since women correspondents were barred from the traditional reporting zones on the front during WWII, they were often responsible for “spearhead[ing] the rise of a more accessible and contextualized form of journalism and a corresponding shift away from a strict emphasis on facts” (Chambers et al. 29). Deborah Wilson, in adding Gellhorn’s journalism to the more contemporary category of what Martin Bell calls a “journalism of attachment,” writes that “featuring an authority figure as the subject of her stories

---

7 For example, the publication of Vincent Sheean’s *Personal History*, a hybrid book that combines the autobiographical with the historical, marked a turning point from solely objective reporting and towards a more personal perspective where the journalist “was an emotional participant, searching for the meaning of what he experienced” (Hamilton 200).

8 In terms of international journalism, the interwar period also saw an increase in demand for news from abroad. Though the United States remained “deeply isolationist,” Americans themselves “were enthusiastically internationalist” (Hamilton 195). America’s refusal to intervene in global matters was often the motivation behind foreign reporting—as Rita imagines of Mary, journalists had the power to expose Americans to the horrors occurring in Europe and thus sway public opinion. In some ways this was true of Gellhorn’s reporting for *Collier’s Magazine*, which in 1936 had a circulation of 2.4 million and which involved longform, often delayed articles that had less demand for immediate factual reporting and allowed more room for reflection and analysis (McLoughlin 9).
was of little interest to her” and that “she eschewed objective intellectual analysis” in favor of “giving a voice to those who would not otherwise be heard” (Wilson 120). Gellhorn’s journalistic style—often described as emotive or human interest—embodies a combined feminist and anti-fascist turn away from the patriarchal authority of objectivity and towards a more democratic reporting that considers not just the actions of those in power but the people affected by those actions.

In *A Stricken Field*, Gellhorn sets up a stark contrast between the disillusioned male reporters who, though affected by the situation in Prague, attempt to numb their guilt with drinking, and Mary, whose desire to help demonstrates her awareness at the way objectivity rings false in the face of atrocity. As Mary remarks “pleasantly” to the old-school journalist Thane, “I do not write news like you gents. I write history” (9). While Mary’s statement is meant as a kind of bravado, the cleverness of the line points to the complicated relationship with objectivity that both fields continue to try to reconcile. History may claim objectivity in relying on primary sources like journalism, but in its pursuit of objectivity, journalism may inadvertently create bias in the erasure inherent in neutrality. Though Mary knows that “a journalist could not afford to get worked up over the various treachery and suffering he saw, any more than a surgeon could take the pain of his patients personally,” she cannot help but think “there’s more to it, this time” (230). Mary’s indictment of indifference is both personal—emerging from the guilt of her privilege, for “how could you be cool about it…you’d be in the same fix yourself if you didn’t have a passport and money in the bank”—and professional, a practical realization that “you’ve got to have opinions. You can’t help it” because “there is right and wrong. You bet your life there is” (230). In self-reflective moments like these, the novel utilizes the autobiographical to transcend Mary’s naïve perspective. A few pages later, when she realizes her efforts are futile,
she admits bitterly to how easily the prescribed role of journalism can become an excuse for turning a blind eye to suffering: “But I’m a journalist, she thought, I’m only supposed to write, I’m only supposed to tell what happens, I’m not supposed to do things. Oh, and not for friends, not supposed to take care of your friends either; go on, find some better excuses” (235). The harsh self-criticism of this small moment feels poignant because of its cognitive dissonance. Mary allows herself the moment of recusal while maintaining the self-critique that limiting her role to objective journalism is just another excuse and not a particularly good one at that.

***

While the journalists struggle with the ethics of objectivity, the one novelist in the group is portrayed as unabashedly on the prowl for fodder for his next novel, which signals the potential for fiction to rely on the sentimental in a way that leads to appropriation or even fetishization. As he prods Mary and Thane to tell more of Rita’s story, the narrator describes the novelist as “interested again in the conversation, hearing a name that meant a face, a story, something you could store up and later alter in your imagination until it had a shape” (26). He listens intently to the story of Rita’s suffering—forced to watch her brother tortured to death, sent to prison herself—“with that nervousness and groping need of someone who would have to put out of his brain, year after year, people and situations, whether he was able to or not” (26). Struck by the novelist’s desperation and utilitarian perspective, Mary refuses “to hand Rita around as dinner table conversation,” to allow the re-telling of Rita’s story to become what James Dawes calls “the injury entailed in making a story.” (Bearing 214). There is no divide between Rita and her story so to re-tell the narrative of her injury is in some way to also re-enact that injury. If journalism risks morality in favor of the objective, then fiction risks it in favor of the sentimental. Rita’s experiences become alluring to the novelist not because of the moral
indignation of the situation (which makes Mary physically uncomfortable upon hearing the story) but because of the very fictionality of the story being told, which makes it readily adaptable for novelization. Of course, this is precisely what Gellhorn herself has done in writing *A Stricken Field*. Though Mary is Gellhorn’s main autobiographical stand-in, the novelist’s attempt to steal from real life for his writing also functions as autobiographical self-critique.

Gellhorn also uses techniques of modernist fictional style to facilitate such imagining and acknowledge the failures of fiction to do the imagining for us. Though the novel most closely follows Mary, Gellhorn’s use of a mobile narrator allows the reader insight into what other characters are thinking, often in a way that allows critical distance between the reader and Mary to highlight her often naive and exploitative gaze. Nevertheless, though the mobile narrator aids in critique, it is also the primary device through which Gellhorn herself tries to imagine the lives of the refugees, a task which Scarry concludes is full of limitations even in literature “where the ability to imagine others is very strong” (“Difficulty” 46). In having Mary question how successfully she can write what she has seen without falling prey to a sentimental gaze, Gellhorn invites us as readers also to question her own ability to do so.

The inset story in Chapter 7, which almost functions as a stand-alone vignette, is the best example of Gellhorn’s use of the mobile omniscient narrator to critique the ethical dilemma of representing the pain of others, particularly her desire to humanize the refugee experience. By leaving behind Mary, the reader’s privileged American touchstone, this chapter gives the appearance of authentic and unfiltered access to the experiences of two orphaned refugee children, Karel and Elsi. In addition to portraying the children’s sudden onslaught into homelessness, the chapter also offers a detailed and heartfelt description of an older, blind woman attempting to navigate the migration of refugees from the Sudetenland into Prague.
In this chapter, Gellhorn utilizes the limited perspective of the children as well as that of the older blind woman as a narrative tool of defamiliarization. The upheaval caused by the deracination of so many homes and families is accentuated and further metaphorized by viewing the experience from these non-normative perspectives. For example, the disjuncture of migration is over-dramatized by a description of the blind woman navigating the mass movement: “She rode in a cart (whose cart? All the voices were new to her), and something of metal cut into her hand and, touching it, not wanting to be curious or troublesome in the stranger’s cart, but only hoping to find out what it was so that she could rest her body comfortably, she felt that it was a sewing machine...” (99). Though this description attends to the material realities of blindness, in a novel so concerned with seeing and witnessing, the blind woman’s perspective in this chapter carries extra metaphorical weight by drawing a parallel between blindness and statelessness on the grounds of their shared difficulty in traversing a world that does not make accommodations for the realities of their existence.

This exercise in fictional imagining is contrasted with Mary’s gaze on the orphaned children in the next chapter, whom she glimpses from afar. Mary is not entirely unaware of their situation—she sees the “soiled pinafore” and the “little boy’s stocking falling down”—but her gaze is reminiscent of a sentimental style of photography (109). For her, the image of the children blurs between romantic and pitying; she is not so naive as to be unaware of their situation among the displaced, but she also finds them “an enchanting pair” with their “round fluffy yellow heads and round cheeks” as if they were only any other happy adventuresome child “walking across the fields” (109). The limitations of Mary’s imagination call attention to Gellhorn’s imagining in the inset chapter. The dramatic irony suspended between the version of Karel and Elsi’s lives we get in the previous chapter and the one we get from Mary’s glance
turns on the word “enchanted.” Is the reader’s glimpse of Karel and Elsi’s life in the previous chapter enchanting? They certainly are not “walking across the fields,” an image that implies a kind of pastoral idyll, and there is no mother with them to be “foolish with pride.” Yet, despite the strong emotional effect of the inset chapter, there is also a focus on the resiliency of the children that attempts to make them admirable or enchanting—to try to return to them through literature a dignity that cannot be so easily returned. As much as the inset chapter critiques Mary’s romanticized viewpoint, it also offers a self-critique of Gellhorn’s attempt to imagine the lives of the refugees, pointing to the difficulty of fictionalizing someone else’s suffering even in an honest, less romanticized attempt.

The example of the inset chapter, in addition to signaling the ethical problems in fictional techniques like the mobile omniscient narrator, also speaks to the question of characterization in human rights novels. Dawes highlights the use of a technique called “restorative exposure,” or “a device that calls attention to the ethics of ‘crowded’ narratives by giving backstory to minor characters” (Novel 92-3). Scarry also counts characterization as a limitation of literature’s ability to imagine. There can only be so many characters, and so literature deals only in the realm of “personal compassion” without translating that compassion to a “statistical” realm of whole populations (“Difficulty” 46). Rita summarizes the problem of population in her response to Mary’s idealistic desire to save even the seventy-two refugees they know about and have access to. When Mary insists that “‘seventy-two people is enough,’” Rita responds, “Not in this world…not seven hundred or seven thousand or seven million. It does not matter in this world’” (71). This exchange gets to the heart of the moral limitations of humanitarian efforts that can often only help the few in the face of the many and only through efforts that treat the symptoms without addressing the cause. Rita’s insistence on the totality of the populations affected is also a
way of resisting Mary’s literary desire to let the seventy-two stand in as an acceptable requisite for solving the whole situation. In some ways, Rita and Peter become the literary stand-in for the experiences of thousands of refugees. However, Gellhorn still litters her novel with small moments of imagining that give stories, even if partial, to some of the otherwise empty faces that Mary witnesses. In addition to Karel and Elsi, as readers we also meet, in differing levels of narrative closeness, the refugee in the police station; the refugees Rita is trying to help, particularly Sofie and Katy; and the soldier at the train station. These are still only the seventy-two amidst the “seven hundred or seven thousand or seven million,” but including these other perspectives adds an extra layer that perhaps raises the novel above allegory, though as discussed above, the separation between authenticity and sentimentalization in these moments of restorative exposure are often difficult to tease apart.

***

The novel’s repeated metafictional references to spy or thriller novels draw further attention to the fictionality of Mary’s experiences. Gellhorn wonders at the ability of fiction to capture a reality that already feels so unreal. When she arrives at the hotel in Prague, she remarks, “how like a cheap international-spy story it was” and calls the masses of wealthy Europeans staying in the hotel “the usual camp followers of catastrophe” (10). Mary is critical of herself and her fellow journalists for the thrill or pleasure they feel in bearing witness to catastrophe. However, given that A Stricken Field is itself an international story of catastrophe and intrigue, even at times of spies, this moment implicates us as readers as part of the “camp followers of catastrophe” (10). This thread continues towards the end of the novel during Mary’s last-ditch efforts to do something on behalf of the refugees. She describes the paranoia she feels when meeting with a refugee as “mad...unreal, all of us acting like spies or escaping criminals.”
Her attempts to prepare to smuggle the package of papers out of the country are taken from “spy stories and all that” where secrets were “sewed in the lining” (202, 282). These examples highlight the unreality of the situation, which can only be explained through the overt fictionality of genres like spy novels, thrillers, and detective stories. However, these genres also depend on the same kind of stock forms that often underpin the sentimental and undermine the political ethics of imagining.

The end of A Stricken Field starts to feel like a spy thriller because that is what novelistic expectations for denouement call for. As Mary slowly realizes, the human suffering she has witnessed cannot fit into conventional narratives that rely on redemption. The presence of what Dawes calls “detective novel tendencies” reflects the dilemmas of plot—most notably, the struggle to balance “the hope of a just conclusion” and the “tantalizing promise of recompense” with a “skept[icism] about the satisfaction that any justice can deliver” (Dawes Novel 193-4). When Mary considers the story she will write from this trip, the problem of plot is embodied in the minutiae of paragraphing: “She wanted to place her knowledge in paragraphs (a good opening sentence? she thought), so that it would be easy to handle when she came to write it. But it did not fit in paragraphs and she could not see it…There was no beginning, no middle, no end.” (118-9). The story of human suffering caused by the stripping away of rights cannot be narrativized. Even as Mary leaves with the package of writing successfully smuggled through customs—the only act of retribution left to her—the “problem of the satisfying ending that must not satisfy, the ending that must not end” remains (Dawes Bearing 202). She thinks, “Nothing is settled, I am only leaving.” (299). Mary’s difficulty in adapting what she has seen into the confines of conventional writing metafictionally encapsulates the problem of Gellhorn’s novel
itself. How can *A Stricken Field* end if its story has “no beginning, no middle, no end” (118)? How can readers be satisfied when we yearn for a story that ends with hope, escape, and safety?

This hope for a satisfying ending also has to do with Mary’s unrealistic humanitarian expectations for herself as a privileged witness—she may not be able to change the political outcome of the Munich Agreement, but with her American passport and political connections, she should be able to at least give extra time to the refugees desperately trying to find a place to go. For Slaughter, humanitarian narratives like this rely on “enchanting narratives of Western saviors” and “the commodification of ‘horror stories’” in order to elicit sympathy and therefore action among readers (49). In many ways, Gellhorn adheres to this kind of storytelling in *A Stricken Field*: she includes Mary as the “knight-errant” figure, a touchstone for readers that at times supplants identification with the refugees themselves with an identification with Mary’s frustrations and guilt. This works by making Rita’s suffering a “novelistic problem of ethical suspension” and Mary’s attempts to save Rita the “imaginary identification that simply gratifies our desire to do something by making reading a form of righting” (Slaughter 51). And yet, not much is enchanting about *A Stricken Field*. I argue, instead, that Gellhorn employs a failed humanitarian narrative precisely to expose the limits and fantasies of Western liberal humanitarianism. When Mary’s plan to heroically delay the refugee expulsion order falls through, she chastises herself for even imagining it could happen in the first place because “only that was a fairy story and that was not the way things worked and in fact, as before, you sat still and watched history roll on like a rock crusher” (199). In alignment with the novel’s interest in the relative sympathetic power of different kinds of writing, Mary refers to her humanitarian narrative as a “fairy story” bringing to mind the same kind of fabulist and too perfectly moralized storytelling that Slaughter uses as the structuring mode of his analysis of literary
humanitarianism. Not only does Gellhorn refuse to follow through on the humanitarian narrative she has set up for Mary throughout the first half of the novel, but her critique of humanitarianism as a narrative excuse goes so far as to include the kind of disillusionment that results from failed humanitarianism.

Again and again, *A Stricken Field* attempts to make use of the conventions of the spy novel and the humanitarian novel—Rita seeks out the house where Peter has been taken, Mary attempts to stop the expulsion of refugees through diplomacy, then when that fails she daringly resorts to the smuggling of important information. Ultimately these setups end without comfort or catharsis but instead with the very paradox of human rights literature and humanitarian work: that “we must seek recompense even though we know there can never be any recompense” (Dawes *Novel* 195). As James Dawes explains, “such anti-climactic narrative maneuvers…are self-conscious attempts to resist one of the basic features built into not only the novelistic form but also human rights work itself: namely, the idea that individuals have stories which run to completion” (196). Thus, Rita does not sneak into the house where Peter is being detained to save him heroically but instead is forced to listen to his torture and subsequent death before being detained herself, the conclusion of her story left unknown to the reader. Mary’s efforts to leverage her privilege to facilitate an international diplomatic intervention fail before they even start. *A Stricken Field* re-enacts for its readers the failure of narrative to fully bear witness to catastrophe or make meaning from what has been witnessed.

***

Rita’s placement outside the torture room and her inability to save Peter highlight the shared failure of narrative and humanitarianism, but this scene also calls attention to Gellhorn’s stylistic choices in representing the violence of torture. In order to acknowledge more
specifically the precarity of representing violence without reproducing its traumatic effects, I argue that Gellhorn further resists the expectations of the human rights genre that would require a torture scene for narrative consequence by having Rita and her physical body serve as an empathetic conduit for the violence enacted upon Peter. James Dawes writes that “war turns individual private spaces into a single, vast private space: the private space of atrocity,” and thus, in the human rights novel, the “summary image of the state’s capacity for violence is the home invasion” or “violated homes” (Novel 92, 57, 61). Dawes borrows from Elaine Scarry in order to argue for the symbolic power of homes and their violation. For Scarry, “the room, the simplest form of shelter,” is both “an enlargement of the body” and a “miniaturization of the world, of civilization” (Body 38-39). In the torture room, however, the space meant for shelter, “is itself converted into another weapon, into an agent of pain” (Scarry Body 40). The torture scene is an important aspect of the human rights novel, but it brings up a lot of questions about how to represent such state violence without glorifying or re-inscribing the violence itself. In keeping with Said’s critique of the humanism of literatures of exile, Simone Weil commends The Iliad’s lack of dramatization in descriptions of violence: “the bitterness of such a spectacle is offered to us absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero’s head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends” (Weil 84). Weil’s concept of “dilution” encapsulates Gellhorn’s attempts to utilize the “spectacle” of violence to incite sympathy in her readers while continually undermining the desire for consolation that comes from fictional narratives of redemption.

This tension between dilution, spectacle, and narrative is central to the novel’s climactic torture scene, particularly the positioning of Rita in this scene and the invisibility of the acts of

9 Similarly, Scarry writes of the “dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside [that] gives rise to…an almost obscene conflation of private and public” in the act of torture (Body 53).
torture. Both Phyllis Lassner and Jean Gallagher note the “visible absence” of representations of bodily violence in the torture scene, which happens off-page as an “unseen fact” and from the perspective of Rita, who can only hear and not see the acts of violence being perpetrated by the Nazi interrogators (Lassner “Camp” 5; Gallagher 60). Gallagher argues that Gellhorn “makes visible but refuses to specularize the scene of torture” in order to resist the re-enactment of “torture’s display,” which can just as easily be co-opted for “journalistic commodity” (Gallagher 64-5). I agree that such an absence signals Gellhorn’s concern over fictionalizing, sentimentalizing, or commodifying the bodily pain of others in such a way that extends or reproduces the act of violence being described. I am also interested more specifically in how Gellhorn makes use of Rita’s perspective and her body as an empathetic conduit for the violence that neither she nor the reader is witnessing. Scarry attends to the way that pain destroys “a person’s world, self, and voice” and thus disrupts language itself, but Elizabeth Anker argues that discourses of human rights and trauma often “yield a highly truncated, decorporalized vision of the subject—one that paradoxically negates core dimensions of embodied experience” (Scarry Body 35; Anker 2). While in many ways the torture scene in A Stricken Field functions according to the structure of torture that Scarry outlines, I would like to focus on Rita’s embodiment in the scene and suggest that her body carries her traumatic history and thus reproduces the bodily responses of torture for readers without requiring the direct representation of bodily injury. Lassner writes, “at this particular historical site Rita can only represent that which cannot be imagined but nonetheless must be known” (“Camp 5). However, of all people, Rita can imagine what is happening to Peter in the room above her because she has herself been tortured in a Nazi prison. Rita becomes an intermediary, something akin to what Scarry calls an “analogical
verification” through which the reader can attempt to know the “incontestable reality” of a violence that cannot be imagined (Scarry 

Part of Rita’s intermediary role involves once again the set-up and rejection of fictional and humanitarian demands on plot. Gellhorn describes in detail Rita’s journey to find the house where Peter is being held: she visits a friend to obtain the house number, seeks out the side entrance, struggles to unlatch the gate, recovers a garbage pail as a stool for climbing over a wall, shimmies down the coal chute in the dark before finally finding a position from which she can hear through the pipes what is happening in the rooms above. This series of actions mirrors Mary’s humanitarian attempts to negotiate a delay in the deportation orders, thus setting up the narrative trappings of suspense. However, at the same time that Gellhorn plays into narrative expectations for a daring rescue plot, she makes clear that such a denouement is already foreclosed: “The only other thing [Rita] knew was that she was going to Peter. Not to do anything, not to speak to him or save him. But only to go where she had to go, to do the last free thing she would ever do” (254). As much as Rita’s actions seem carefully planned, she actually “had no plan now; she never had a plan…she expected nothing and hoped nothing. There was no end to this” (260). Like Mary’s dilemma of paragraphing, Rita’s dangerous escapades are not in service of any clear narrative trajectory—once again, this is what James Dawes calls the real story of human rights, one in which you follow a story knowing that it has no end. Why, then, does Rita seek out the place where Peter is being held and tortured? The omniscient narrator informs us that “she had to go, to the last free thing she would ever do,” suggesting that this is the only act of agency left to Rita. Rather than a daring act of rescue, Rita’s decision to stay hidden in the coal chute is a radical act of empathy that reconfigures the humanitarian role as one of empathetic conduit for the experiences of others rather than active savior.
Instead of seeing the bodily pain of torture being enacted on Peter, we as readers witness Rita’s bodily reactions to what she hears, and thus her role as empathetic conduit is bodily as well as psychological. At the first sound of the voices, “the cold, shaking sickness of fear came over her” and when they begin the interrogation, “She did not understand this but she felt, in her throat, the way her throat was choking shut, that it was terrible.” (258). Rita may not be able to represent to us what is happening, she may have “lost the power of imagining,” but her body, a body that has seen and experienced torture before, knows what the sound of the voice “and the way the words were spaced, so slowly, so threateningly” truly means (260, 262). Even before she realizes that the man being tortured is Peter, his “pain she heard and felt, eating into her,” but after she realizes that it is Peter, her physical empathetic connection to him becomes stronger (265). As she listens to Peter being beaten, Rita herself risks slipping from consciousness, “fighting off a darkness that dragged over her, a darkness in which her mind floated, away from her,” and in the moment that Peter dies, “Rita closed her eyes into…a darkness that was over everything without limit, without end, not soft or peaceful or anything but final” (271, 266). As she gets up to leave, the effects of Rita’s empathy are made physical: her arms are “aching” and her legs “were paralyzed as if they had been long and tightly bound, the pain beyond her eyes, the dry throat and mouth” (272). Instead of inhabiting Peter’s perspective in this scene and risking re-enacting the violence committed, Gellhorn relies on Rita’s traumatic history and embodiment to communicate the effects of violence to her readers.

It seems especially important here that Rita is a woman—she is a symbolic corollary for the violence and pain that cannot be fully known or represented. If this is Gellhorn’s solution to the crisis of representing violence, is it a feminist one? On the one hand, Gellhorn gives significance to the empathetic power of Rita’s embodiment. In the language breakdown caused
by Peter’s pain, Rita can communicate the incommunicable through her body. At the same time, however, this solution comes at the expense of Rita and women more generally by placing them in the role of a martyr rather than an active savior. In the final chapter, Rebecca West explores in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* the Western masculinist tropes of martyrdom that have led to a cultural obsession with pain and violence. By making Rita the intermediary here, Gellhorn risks transferring that obsession with martyrdom onto Rita and the symbolic role of women more generally.

A small moment of storytelling between women in the novel, however, adds nuance to this overlap between language, violence, and gender. As much as pain threatens to break down writing and language, Dawes argues that novels about human rights can also be about “the capacity of language to rebuild worlds broken by violence,” which might also be true of the smuggled package of testimonies at the end of the novel (*Bearing* 227). Scarry, too, argues for a re-focus on small moments of communication that lead to “a partial reversal of the process of torture itself” (Scarry quoted in Dawes *Bearing* 229). In this scene, one of the refugees recounts to Mary her experience of being in prison with Rita, where the “five hundred women” were not allowed to talk. They learned to communicate instead by “knock[ing] on the walls...from one cell to the other, you know how to make the alphabet, the simple way, not Morse, one knock for A, two for B” (*Stricken* 51). Through this slow and laborious mode of communication the women “made a revolution...to get permission to say to each other, ‘Guten Nacht’ when we marched back to the cells after supper” (51). The prison enforces silence on the women precisely because language and the ability to communicate are central to personhood and survival. The hope that the women will regain their humanity through found moments of stolen communication is impossible despite their resistance. And yet, in the retelling of the story, the image of the
women’s resistance, the “planning and scheming” of the “delegation of pale, half-crazy women making their demands” has the most impact on Mary. Gellhorn finds merit in resistance against a foreclosed future, particularly in a community of women united in their desire to reclaim language. The questions at the heart of this anecdote are a microcosm of those in the novel as a whole, and, more importantly, they force readers to look self-critically at both the role of writing and language (might there be power in a narrative that has no end?) and the role of women (does the failure of the women’s revolution discount the community they built?) in representations of violence and the political act of imagining.

***

The difficulty of confronting failure and the power of resistance even in the face of failure are core concepts in the novel that unite Gellhorn’s interest in both writing and political allyship. The end of the novel remains particularly bleak, but if there is any hope left, it is in the bundle of writing that Mary agrees to smuggle out of the country—an action, on Mary’s part, that requires real personal risk and a faith, not in the heroism of her own narrative, but in the truth-telling power of the refugee stories and experiences gathered in the bundle. If there is a place for humanitarianism, perhaps it is in an allyship that self-critically recognizes the failure of self-promoting narratives of heroism and instead promotes and facilitates the narratives of others, even if that means forgoing a successful or satisfying denouement.

Just as Gellhorn explores different forms of writing throughout A Stricken Field, she also offers different perspectives on political allyship, presented through the metaphor of witnessing. As Jean Gallagher has shown, A Stricken Field is a novel preoccupied with seeing, but it is also about the “failure of seeing” and how witnessing can aid in realizing one’s own failures (45, 52). Gallagher situates this failure in the context of a militaristic and “fascist visuality that requires its
subjects to see inherent and permanent difference” and thus argues that Gellhorn utilizes “a politicized, antifascist female gaze” to construct “American readers as antifascist observers” (52, 46-7). I want to explore how this antifascist gaze promotes a self-critical, recursive allyship.

While Dawes’ concept of “restorative exposure” helps to characterize the varied representations of refugees in the novel, Gellhorn also offers a “restorative exposure” of those with varying levels of privilege, suggesting that, as much as the refugee experience is not monolithic, neither are the intents and perspectives of the witnesses (Novel 93). The differences in these privileged perspectives are often gendered—Mary’s determination to help the refugees, as discussed above, is framed as a refusal to commit to the objective journalism that her male peers cling to as their excuses—but also has to do with age and experience, as Mary, unlike some of the more experienced writers, has yet to see too much in her work as a journalist. Through the characters of Lord Balham, Mary, and Rita, Gellhorn considers how witnessing acts as a vehicle for both political allyship and the failure of such efforts; it is in the very act of failing, I argue, that Gellhorn unites her self-critical style with an ethics of political allyship.

Through the character of Lord Balham, the “Special Commissioner for Refugees of the Society of Nations” modeled on Neill Malcolm, the League of Nations official that Gellhorn met with while in Prague, Gellhorn provides an example of an extreme form of privileged witnessing. Lord Balham fails to even see the refugees during his visit to Prague, which enrages Mary and underpins Gellhorn’s critique of the ineffectual bureaucracy of international relief efforts. What he does see is Mary’s youthful optimism and commitment to political allyship, which forces him to reflect on his failures as an individual. When Mary first confronts Lord Balham about the refugee situation, the mobile omniscient narrator reveals the systemic problems inherent in his position: “They had given him the title and the honor and the secretaries, but there was no
government behind him… he had no power and he knew it” (165). This description is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s critique of bureaucracy as a system where “everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act” and thus “the rule of Nobody” produces a “tyranny without a tyrant” (On Violence 81). That Lord Balham is a representative of the Society of Nations makes Gellhorn’s critique more acute; the international organization dedicated to peace is nothing but a bureaucracy of individuals with no force or power and perhaps just as tyrannical as those they are meant to oppose. At the same time, there is also a deeper level of critique embedded in the way Lord Balham so readily alludes to the powerlessness of bureaucracy. For Lord Balham to attribute the plight of the refugees to “the rule of Nobody” renders conveniently invisible the power and complicity of the leaders of democratic countries like Britain and France that have “the power to act” but refuse to get involved.

Despite having Lord Balham criticize these larger systems of power, Gellhorn does not forego the realm of individual responsibility. Lord Balham’s realization of his failures is precipitated by his gaze on Mary and requires a second-hand reliance on both her youth and optimism as well as her actual witnessing of the refugees in Prague. He noticed in her the “grand and lost feeling of being young, of believing you could move mountains; and immediately, because you so passionately willed it, produce something good where all was evil” (166). This forces him to analyze his capacity to shirk responsibility by admitting to himself that to “be wisely realistic, deploring cruelty and corruption but admitting in advance one’s total helplessness against them, is only a form of laziness” (165). The disillusionment of being a cog in the wheel of bureaucracy may speak to the insidiousness of bureaucracies. However, that disillusionment can also become a mask, an excuse for those like Lord Balham to give up on the fight before it even starts. This moment mirrors Mary’s realization that the expectations of
objective journalism might function more like an empty justification than warranted professional boundary. His romanticized gaze on Mary also reminds Lord Balham of “the huge but always possible hopes he held, and how slowly, year after year, he grew more tired, seeing that he could not make them come true” (173). In the relationship between individual action and systemic power, the scale of youth to experience plays a role. Just as Rita becomes an intermediary for the reader’s witnessing of the violence of the torture scene, Mary becomes an intermediary for Lord Balham’s witnessing of the refugee situation in Prague. There is a sense that Mary’s naïveté allows her to maintain optimism in the face of terrible odds. However, Gellhorn also seems to imply that as a woman, and in contrast to the jaded men around her, Mary is unable to disconnect witnessing from empathy from action. As she says to Lord Balham “unpleasantly,” “If you saw someone beating a horse that couldn’t get up, you’d do something about it” (164). Though Mary’s plan fails as Lord Balham predicts that it will, these moments of self-awareness from Lord Balham add nuance to the critique of Mary’s privileged innocence, for his failure to act may be just as much a product of the laziness of experience as the powerlessness of bureaucracy and her naïveté might also be the refusal of cynicism that is required of allyship.

Though Mary is the exemplary witness that prompts Lord Balham’s political awareness, her gaze is not without its failures. Through repeated descriptions of the refugee’s faces, Gellhorn questions the role of sentimentality in allyship and activism. Judith Butler uses Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of the “face” to explore the “relationship between representation and humanization.” Levinas argues that the “face,” which produces “sounds…[of] agonized, suffering” alerts those that witness it to “what is precarious in another life or, rather the precariousness of life itself” and thus enters the realm of ethics (Butler 135). Indeed, Mary is continually affected by the faces she sees, which remind her of the “precariousness of life.” For
example, when Mary visits the refugee house, she “found she was holding her breath, staring at them” and notices that “all the faces were the same, narrow weariness, with trouble marked painfully on the foreheads between the eyes, the bitter mouths close and curving down” (67). Meanwhile, when she arrives at the train station at the end of the novel, “all the faces looked stupid with exhaustion; the eyes searching around the room, for nothing, were empty even of questions or of fear” (242). These descriptions capture the extremity of suffering for those unaware or unable to see the atrocity of displacement firsthand. Descriptions that focus on the face are ready landing sites for the sentimental—the influence of photography and cinema is certainly strong here as well. What Mary notices about the faces is not their anguish or emotion but their hardness and emptiness. They bear the marks of “weariness” and “exhaustion,” but she is surprised by their lack of “despair” or “even of questions or of fear;” these are the faces of those that have been subjected to what Simone Weil calls “the other force” that turns human beings “into a thing while still alive” (185). The process of representing the human face of suffering involves accentuating the way that these faces have been dehumanized by their statelessness.

Butler argues that such a paradox is inherent in Levinas’s conception of “the face:” “How do we come to know the difference between the inhuman but humanizing face, for Levinas, and the dehumanization that can also take place through the face?” (141). Gellhorn addresses this paradox by highlighting the potential for insincerity in Mary’s gaze. For example, one of the refugees reacts strongly to Mary and Rita, asking them “What have you come for, you and the foreigner? Leave us alone. We do not ask you to come and stare at us as if we were animals” (66). Also, when Mary takes a taxi to the train station where the refugees are leaving from, the taxi driver thinks to himself that “she was going to stare at the poor people, he thought, just for a
sightseeing trip, like a tourist” (234). As much as Mary’s witnessing is the novel’s driving force, provoking her to contact Lord Balham and ultimately smuggle the bundle of papers, her witnessing is also a failure. And yet, it is in the very act of failure and the resulting self-awareness of failure that Butler argues we should place our hope. Butler concludes by showing how Levinas, rather than weighing in on one side of this paradox, embraces “the impossible representation”—“for representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure” (144). The *self-critical style* that Gellhorn creates in her novel does precisely this: it shows the failure of a wide variety of modes of representation (objective journalism, modernist fiction, humanitarian narratives, literatures of exile) to adequately represent the violence of war and the horrors of the refugee experience. In translating these failures of representation to the individual failures of allyship by Lord Balham and Mary, Gellhorn ties together the impossibility of witnessing, writing, and political action to educate her readers about a self-aware form of allyship rooted in a recursive willingness to fail.

Mary’s obsession with Rita’s face throughout the novel offers a final concluding example of Gellhorn’s self-critique of both the failures of representation and allyship while also highlighting the importance of presenting Mary and Rita as a foil. When Mary first meets Rita, she finds Rita’s face striking in its lack of humanity—“Rita didn’t really have a face: just eyes, a mouth, a nose, set coldly and without color on the taut skin” (30)—but Mary is also struck by something desirable but unnamable in Rita’s face, “she had something none of us had, certainly” (30). What is it that Rita has that they do not? Is there something alluring about Rita’s suffering? Later, Mary is more directly envious of Rita’s appearance: “you wished you could look like that yourself; you knew…the way she looked would enter into the main waiting for her; you wanted to reach out and touch her and take for yourself what she had behind her skin, behind her eyes,
and her smooth throat” (30). This mixture of admiration and jealousy also has vague sexual undertones. There is a suggestion both of desire for Rita and to be like Rita, as if something about the tragedy of her experiences makes her more sexually appealing and as if Mary desires the authenticity of those experiences for herself. This kind of fetishization reoccurs towards the end of the novel as Mary comes to terms with being unable to save Rita. Mary imagines Rita in one “of those very old, unknown pictures…of a blood-clear gaunt saint completing his martyrdom” (284). She uses the features of Rita’s face, “the great dark eyes, the pallor, the obstinate mouth,” to elevate her to the status of martyr, imbuing her with the “legend” and nobility of a saint (284). This is precisely the sort of “heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant” narrativizing that Said argues cannot represent the actual experience of refugees and which Mary cannot resist (“Reflections” 373). Furthermore, the heroic qualities that Mary imposes on Rita function to facilitate her personal growth; through them she comes to realize the novel’s only attempt at a moral lesson: “Perhaps if you are as faithful as this, you can see more truly and you can see farther ahead. Perhaps if they will not be defeated, they cannot be defeated. The doubting ones like me do not deserve to win. We stop fighting. It is not just a bundle of paper that I am going to have an awful time hiding. It is the proof that everyone is not beaten yet” (284-5). Rita has a similar epiphany as she listens to Peter being tortured, finding in his refusal to speak a moment of triumph amidst her failure to prevent his death. Even as she seems to critique the dependence on such heroic narratives, drawing a neat conclusion is hard for Gellhorn to resist as well. However, the narratives that Gellhorn chooses to romanticize here are not ones of success but ones of resistance and bravery in the face of failure.

While Mary’s last thoughts of Rita are romanticized and sentimental, the last image the reader sees of Rita undercuts Mary’s attempt to present Rita as a martyr and starkly reveals the
failure of Mary’s powers of representation. The last we see of Rita is a description, once again, of her face by the policeman who finds her on a park bench, “rested there as free as the dead are free” (275). The policeman wonders, “where would a woman have come with a face like that…blackened and streaked” and is struck most strongly by her eyes, “But it was her eyes that he could not understand. They were wide open, and they blinked in the light, they were not blind, but they were as flat, lifeless, and hard as stone…It was something awful, he thought, not human at all” (276). Rita’s story might serve the role of inspirational martyrdom for Mary, but this description of her “flat, lifeless” eyes and complete lack of humanity underscores the fact that any story of the experience of the stateless is always the story of “force,” of rendering living humans into “things,” into “something awful…not human at all” (Weil 276; Stricken 276). Told separately, Rita’s story would succumb entirely to the tragic and cynical, and Mary’s story would falsely rely on the humanitarian comfort of heroic narrative arcs. However, by combining their stories, Gellhorn forces her readers to consider the failure of narrativizing and the potential for writing about suffering to fall to either extreme. Instead of abandoning any one mode of storytelling because of its failures, Gellhorn creates a contradictory matrix of genres that does precisely what Lord Balham, Rita, and Mary learn to do over the course of the novel—fail, acknowledge that failure, and be brave enough to fail again.

The connection between Mary and Rita throughout the novel, like the resistance of the women in prison, sparks reflection on what it means to suffer, what it means to witness suffering, and what role language and writing can play in mitigating suffering. In the next chapter, Elizabeth Bowen also considers what kind of resistance the connection between women can offer, in this case, against the heteropatriarchal lines of traditional kinship. While Gellhorn is figuring out how to fictionalize the realities of war responsibly, Bowen uses fiction to imagine
new forms of being in the world and new ways of connecting with people that do not rely on patriarchal inheritance. Gellhorn uses the autobiographical Mary to interrogate the masculinist expectations of journalism. In the next chapter, Bowen turns to the related field of historiography to reconsider her family’s role in the history of colonialism and violence.
CHAPTER TWO
QUEER INHERITANCE: RETRACING THE LINES OF KINSHIP IN ELIZABETH BOWEN’S WARTIME WRITING

In a 1959 interview for the BBC, the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) reflected on the war years, saying I went on writing and writing away—not, I think, altogether wrongly, but feeling, ‘Well this is the one thing I can do and what’s the point of stopping it? If it’s any good at any time, it’s some good now.’” (Jordan 129). Despite wartime’s intellectual and material disruptions—the halted supply of paper slowed the publication process, and many writers struggled to reconcile the personal and political responsibilities of writing as a practice—Bowen wrote continuously throughout the war (Jordan 84-87). Her work from this time includes the non-fictional account of her family’s history in Ireland from Cromwell’s invasion to the Irish War of Independence, Bowen’s Court (1942); two collections of short stories written during the war, Look at all Those Roses (1941) and The Demon Lover and Other Stories (1945); as well as The Heat of the Day (1948), which she worked on throughout the war but did not finish until after the war’s end. Bowen’s varied wartime experiences lend her writing from the time a unique perspective. She spent large portions of the war in London. She served as an Air Raid Precautions Warden and experienced the Blitz firsthand when a V-1 flying bomb destroyed her Regent’s Park flat. She also traveled back and forth between London and her family’s Irish estate in County Cork, officially to complete historical research for Bowen’s Court but unofficially as a
Ministry of Information spy, conducting interviews and writing extensive reports on Irish neutrality. The themes of her personal wartime life—the disruption and displacement of time and space during the war and the difficulty of balancing dual familial and national allegiances—appear in her public writing, both fictional and non-fictional. This chapter focuses specifically on Bowen’s personal and political contemplations of inheritance in her wartime writing and its implications for how we come to understand the past and imagine the future. For Bowen, inheritance is physically located in the house that she inherits, psychologically manifested in the “continuous, semi-physical dream[s]” that “run…through a family living in one place,” and ideologically connected to the shared violence of colonialism and fascism (BC 451). Through the lens of queer time and queer kinship, this chapter will show how Bowen uses her fiction to reimagine inheritance outside heteropatriarchal kinship lines.

In the self-reflective afterword to the 1964 edition of Bowen’s Court, this theme of inheritance emerges concerning the idea of fantasy, both a fantasy of domination and obsession, which she charts in her family history, and a “resistance-fantasy,” which she attributes to her wartime stories (Bowen Mulberry 97). Bowen argues that the ideological overlap between war and colonialism hinges on the “fantasy” of her ancestors, one characterized by “the idea of power” (BC 455). Her own family and the “pattern” of the Anglo-Irish more generally act as a “microcosm” for understanding much larger systems of power and oppression:

---

1 Bowen’s lover, Sean O’Faolain, described her duality as “heart-cloven and split-minded…romantic-realistic, yearning-sceptic, emotional-intellectual, poetic-pragmatist, objective-subjective, gregarious-detached, and tragico-humorous” (LRB 1982). Anna Teekell summarizes Bowen’s complex understanding of her own nationality: “As an Anglo-Irishwoman, she was indeed a hybrid, joking that she felt most at home ‘in mid-Irish Sea.’ Bowen was capable of serving as an Air Raid Precautions (ARP) warden in Marylebone and writing a defense of Ireland’s neutrality in the New Statesman. She included herself in a British ‘we’ in letters to Virginia Woolf, yet made the definitive statement, ‘I regard myself as an Irish novelist’ (not an English or an Anglo-Irish one) in The Bell.” (130).
Fantasy is toxic: the private cruelty and the world war both have their start in the heated brain. Showing fantasy, in one form of another, do its unhappy work in the lives of my ancestors, I was conscious at almost every moment of nightmarish big analogies everywhere. Also the idea of power governed my analysis of the Bowens and of the means they took—these being, in some cases, emotional—to enforce themselves on their world. I showed, if only in the family sphere, people’s conflicting wishes for domination (BC 455).

“Fantasy,” in the sense of a psychological tendency towards imagination, becomes toxic when subject to an obsession or compulsion that allows for “domination.” In the case of her own family, the “fantasy” is one “vested in property” and particularly the maintenance of “a property having been acquired by use or misuse of power in the first place” and passed down through a patrilineal line (BC 455). For Bowen, the inheritance of this “fantasy” takes form in Bowen’s Court, “a house built of anxious history,” which nevertheless becomes the “picture of peace” for Bowen during wartime, a comforting “illusion” or fantasy of safety and security (BC 457). As much as the house serves as a physical reminder of her family’s colonial history, Bowen also feels a strong love and attachment for her family home—this incongruence between the personal and historical implications of inheritance is something she grapples with often in her wartime writing.

The word “fantasy” occurs again in another piece of Bowen’s retrospective writing, a preface to her wartime story collection The Demon Lover, written for its re-publication in 1962. In the preface, Bowen refers to the stories’ shared aesthetics of “saving hallucination” or “an unconscious instinctive, saving resort” (Bowen Mulberry 96). She also calls these hallucinations “fantasies” and “resistance-fantasies” and wonders “whether in a sense all wartime writing is not
resistance writing?” (Mulberry 97). Looking back at her wartime stories, Bowen focuses on the importance of identity in the relationship between survival and the fantastical. At the time, “individual destiny became an obsession in every heart” because “you cannot depersonalize persons;” her resistance against a fascism that creates “a vacuum for the uncertain ‘I’” lies in the “search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world” and the “small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination” (Mulberry 97). In this instance, the same “fantasy” and imagination that threatens to become obsession and dominance in her family history acts instead as a form of resistance, a way to escape and survive the violence and displacement of the war. While the fantasies of Bowen’s family revolved around the place and space of home, property, and Ireland, the “resistance-fantasies” of the short stories also depend on temporality. A slippage occurs when “the past...discharges its load of feeling into the anaesthetized and bewildered present” and in the “between-time” and “leveled-down” time of the “non-impulsive major routine of war” (Mulberry 98). Out of the disrupted temporality of wartime, the “impulsive movements of fantasy” are produced, fantasies that find hope and escape even amidst a dangerously foreclosed future (Mulberry 98). Bowen’s anti-fascist feminist strategy involves responding to patriarchal imperatives of fascism with resistive fantasies of queer inheritance and queer kinship.

In Queer Phenomenology, Sara Ahmed offers a queering metaphor for reconsidering this discrepancy between fantasy as obsession and fantasy as resistance that further illuminates Bowen’s wartime reflections on inheritance and legacy. Ahmed identifies the “lifelines,” the “forms of social investments,” that contribute to our various orientations and demand “the promise of return” through reproduction (17). It is the “lifelines” of her family’s Anglo-Irish inheritance and tradition that Bowen both romanticizes and interrogates in Bowen’s Court. For Ahmed, such an examination of “the politics of ‘lifelines’ helps us to rethink the relationship
between inheritance (the lines that we are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line)” (18). Bowen’s own life reflects the idea that “it is not automatic that we reproduce what we inherit;” while she did inherit Bowen’s Court, she did not have any children to continue the family line, and ultimately sold the house in 1959 (Ahmed 17). In her wartime writing, Bowen grapples with what Ahmed calls “the pressure” of inheritance, especially the tug and pull of an inheritance that is both problematic and nostalgic (Ahmed 17).² Just as fantasy can also be a site of resistance, Ahmed points out the irony that “a lifeline” is “also an expression for something that saves us,” that “gives us the capacity to get out of an impossible world…without the expectation of return” (18). Ahmed’s version of “lifelines” unites the tradition of inherited lines with queer possibility by allowing for the option to “follow the gift of the unexpected line that gives us the chance for a new direction” (18). If, in Bowen’s Court, Bowen follows the “pressures” of a “lifeline” related to the fantasy of power, then what kind of “unexpected lines” and “new directions” might the “resistance-fantasies” of her fiction imagine? If the often violent patriarchal and imperial structures of her family inheritances demand reproduction, what kinds of feminist and queer “lifelines” emerge in the gaps and disruptions of wartime?

Scholars align Bowen’s interest in her own Anglo-Irish “lifelines” with a Burkean conservative theory that heralds a belief “in the moral effects of property, in benevolent imperialism, in tradition, [and] private ownership,” but this oversimplifies Bowen’s careful consideration of inheritance in her wartime writing. (Lee 26).³ Hermione Lee argues that the conservatism that Bowen “inherited is not a political opinion so much as an attitude to man’s

---

² For the 1964 edition of Bowen’s Court, Bowen added the final section to the afterword in which Heather Bryant Jordan argues one can see “Bowen’s sense that she has disappointed the expectations of the past…she notes the shame attendant on letting her family down” (181).
position in society” while Heather Bryant Jordan writes that “Bowen described herself as a ‘philosophical descendent’ of Burke, which more than anything meant she saw herself as the guardian of a tradition, an ideal, and all of the best that remained from the past” (Lee 26; Jordan 62). While for Bowen such a guardianship does often take the form of what Renée C. Hoogland calls a “love[ for] the very old-fashionedness of the austere mansion, Bowen’s Court” and a nostalgia for the 18th century height of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, her relationship to both the past and the politics of inheritance is not a straightforward continuity with the earlier Anglo-Irish conservatism of Burke and her ancestors (11). The rise of fascism during the 1930s along with her affair with socialist critic and scholar Humphry House forced Bowen to reconsider her conservative politics even if only temporarily, particularly “the values in her own life that Fascism defended” and the “psychological roots” of “the possessiveness [that] corrupts people and relationships” (Laurence 137-8). Both Jordan and Hoogland note that she grew more critical of the Anglo-Irish in the postwar years; Hoogland writes that “the financial anxiety [of maintaining Bowen’s Court] …strengthened the author’s ambivalence about the power and prestige her male ancestors had derived from her property’s imposing presence in the Irish countryside” (Hoogland 11). Lara Feigel references an article Bowen wrote in 1940 for the first issue of the Irish magazine, The Bell, where Bowen questions the sustainability of the Big House but ultimately decides that the Big House can be a space of community rather than isolation; a place where we can “‘scrap the past, with its bitternesses and barriers, and all meet, throwing in what we have’” (Bowen qtd in Feigel 112). To say that Bowen understood the past and the

---

4 Nor is it entirely in-line with more contemporary neoliberal ideas. Janice Ho argues that Bowen’s conservative opposition to the postwar arrival of the welfare state “is not solely a product of an elite contempt for the masses” but representative of a larger bipartisan concern over “Britain’s mid-century transition into a fully interventionist state” (Nation 112). Ho reads the repeated presence of neutral Ireland in Bowen’s wartime writing as a “recurring desire to imagine a space outside the reach of a totalitarian wartime state” (Nation 112).
authority of inheritance only through the lens of Burkean conservatism misrepresents Bowen’s earnest struggle during the war years to reconcile the “big analogies” between her familial history and current events, as well as the way that colonialism, war, and fascism all depend on the violent compulsions and dominations of heteropatriarchy.

Instead of taking for granted that Bowen uncritically and seamlessly “inherited” the lifeline of Burkean conservatism, I argue that when read through the lens of queer theory, Bowen’s wartime writing offers subtle disruptions to heteropatriarchal lines of inheritance that repurpose these “lifelines” of tradition into ones of resistance and possibility. This chapter looks to recent work by scholars like Elizabeth Freeman, José Muñoz, and Sarah Ahmed that considers the temporality and spatiality of queer experiences.\(^5\) Theories of queer temporality make room for aligning “radical queer theory and politics” with the same ideas of tradition and kinship that Bowen’s wartime writing explores. Rather than aligning queerness only with the present, I argue that Bowen’s preoccupation with the past, even when nostalgic or romantic, works to imagine “queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity” (Muñoz 16). As much as Bowen feels connected to her family legacy, mainly through her emotional attachment to Bowen’s Court, she is also resistant to the way her inheritance depends on patriarchal ideas of dominance and power. In her non-fictional work from this period, Bowen’s Court, Bowen struggles to reconcile her positionality in regards to the past, present, and future, at times lucidly critiquing the violent heritage of the Anglo-Irish and at others glossing over such a legacy in favor of a more romantic

---

\(^5\) A handful of scholars have read Bowen’s work from a queer perspective, but, as Patricia Smith and Patricia Coughlan illustrate, Bowen’s wartime writing is often overlooked in favor of the more explicit same-sex relationships in both her early and late novels. The most notable exception is Renée C. Hoogland’s *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*, where she argues for Bowen as “a truly radical, innovative, and critically practicing feminist” whose work takes “destabilizing sexual subtexts” as a “central issue” and spends two chapters discussing *The Heat of the Day* (20). Corcoran and Ellmann also entertain queer readings of *The Heat of the Day*. 
image of her own family. Without the veneer of objectivity in writing historiography, in Bowen’s fiction, the equivocation of Bowen’s Court gives way to possibility, to the imagining of a “belonging” and “being long” outside the confines of heteropatriarchal temporalities, of “something that might at least theoretically extend and endure,” even the “potentiality” of “queer utopianism” (Freeman “Kinship” 298-9; Muñoz 3). For both Freeman and Muñoz, such imaginings are not always overt and often require looking for queerness in unexpected places: in the “cultural debris” that “includes our complete, partial, or otherwise failed transformations of the social field” and a “queer visuality” that demands that we “squint...strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” (Freeman Time Binds xiii; Muñoz 20). In what follows, I squint and strain at how Bowen completely, partially, or fails to reimagine inheritance and her love of tradition and family beyond heteropatriarchal expectations of marriage, procreation, and control.

Not only does reading Bowen alongside theories of queer temporality allow for a more nuanced understanding of Bowen’s fixation on inheritance and tradition during the 1940s, but it also allows for a rethinking of Bowen’s unique aesthetic style and its relationship to representations of wartime. Nearly all scholars of Bowen’s work comment on her opaque and complex writing style, a convoluted style of indeterminacies and double or triple negatives that seems to reach its height in her wartime writing, particularly in the novel The Heat of the Day. Maud Ellmann writes that “Bowen’s fiction is ‘a trap baited with beauty,’ which constantly outsmarts the interpretative methods brought to bear on it” (4). Attempts at “interpretative methods” have aligned Bowen’s opacity with the gothic tradition of the Anglo-Irish Big House novels, the coded language of wartime propaganda and espionage, and a proto-postmodern
interest in identity and metafiction. Rather than counter any of these influences, this chapter seeks to understand how Bowen’s style might be in service of a queer possibility enhanced by the time and space of war. Muñoz writes that “often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic” and points specifically to the importance of “indeterminacy” as a “methodology” of “potentiality” and the “anticipatory” (1-3). Muñoz identifies Shoshana Felman’s concept of “radical negativity” as a component of a queer utopian aesthetic—embedded in the negation of a negative, a common practice for Bowen, is “a mode of critical possibility” (12-13). I argue, therefore, that the “coded” nature of Bowen’s wartime writing is, therefore, double—inspired by the layers of secrets and betrayal of wartime and Bowen’s own MOI spying, but also allows for encoding possibility into the very disruptions and interruptions created by war and violence.

The temporality and spatiality of war have been well examined, but the potential for overlap between the joint disruption and anticipation of wartime and queer time that I locate in Bowen’s wartime fiction has received less attention. Beryl Pong argues that “…to live in wartime is to live in a state of historical disorientation and temporal dislocation” and that the wartime of WWII specifically “stands at the fulcrum of a changing way of understanding war: from one with largely expected temporal boundaries to one without—from war as event to war as open-ended and everyday” (4). Pong’s exploration of the specific temporalities of WWII, however, does not include the potential for or created by queer temporalities. In Tense Future, Paul K. Saint-Amour suggests that queer temporalities have much to offer the field of nuclear criticism (and the study of wartimes in general). For Saint-Amour, “nuclear criticism” attempts

---

6 See Hermione Lee, Maud Ellmann, and Thomas Davis.
7 See Megan Faragher, Thomas Davis, Anna Teekell, Janice Ho, and Stefania Porcelli.
8 See Neil Corcoran and Damian Tarnopolsky.
to understand the trauma of “a seemingly foreclosed future” and the prospect of annihilation, but “a queer temporalities approach” draws attention to how even when “the future is imagined as open...a particular kind of subject or desire” remains foreclosed (30). Queer temporalities offer the possibility for creation, asking “what new forms of resistance, community, affiliation, or expression might be produced” and suggesting that “an evidently closed, apocalyptic futurity, far from draining our acts of responsibility or critical purchase, might be the only condition under which a certain kind of critique may be tendered, or a certain kind of kinship imagined” (Saint-Amour 30). In Bowen’s wartime fiction, queer time and the disorienting space and time of war overlap: the anticipatory waiting and foreclosed future of war create a time and space for queer possibility. In the fissures created by war, Bowen can imagine a past, present, and future outside the heteropatriarchal tendencies for domination and obsession that produce war to begin with.

This chapter follows Bowen’s investigation of her inherited “fantasies,” both of obsession and resistance during the violent disruptions of WWII. Beginning with *Bowen’s Court*, I discuss how Bowen’s critical afterword and its claims for the political motivations of the historical and familial chronicle might change how we read the rest of the non-fictional work. By looking at how Bowen describes her family origins and embeds what would otherwise be a strictly patriarchal narrative with small moments of feminist interjection, I explore how *Bowen’s Court* simultaneously reveals Bowen’s attempts to destabilize understandings of history and legacy while also using that instability to mask her family’s culpability in the legacy of colonialism. Moving from Bowen’s non-fiction to her fiction, I consider how the imaginative realm, in contrast to that of historiography, allows Bowen more room to envisage new forms of kinship and inheritance. In two short stories written during the height of the war, “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “The Inherited Clock,” Bowen illustrates how war’s temporal and spatial disruption
might call attention to and allow for ways around heteropatriarchal and chrononormative ideas of kinship and inheritance. In both stories, the appearance of normative, patriarchal narratives is upended by moments of indeterminacy that suggest a queer, feminist future that is dependent not on severing connection to but finding new relationships and interpretations of the past. Finally, I conclude the chapter by looking at Bowen’s only novel of the period, *The Heat of the Day*, which was published in the aftermath of the war and which offers a kind of ironic realist “taking stock” of the possibilities and foreclosures of wartime and what that will mean for postwar Britain. Bowen contrasts the possibility of *queer inheritance* in the subplots of Louie and Roderick with Robert’s inheritance of a crypto-fascism dependent on reasserting masculine ideas of domination.

**Destabilizing the Past: Bowen’s Court**

While finishing *Bowen’s Court* in 1941, Bowen wrote to Virginia Woolf that “the last chapter [the afterword] seems to, or ought to re-write retrospectively all the rest of the book” (Bowen *Mulberry* 217). This is a surprising claim to make of the final ten pages of a 450-page historical account. Yet, it is mainly in the afterword that Bowen gives a critical explanation for *Bowen’s Court* itself, why she wrote it and what she thinks can be learned from this deep dive into her own personal, family history and that of Ireland’s political relations with England. She explains that her turn towards historiography was inspired by current events, in which “the wartime urgency of the present...seemed to communicate itself to one’s view of the past” (*BC* 454). Amidst the violence of wartime, Bowen returns to the violence of the past, particularly that of her own family: “The past—private just as much as historic—seemed to me, therefore, to matter more than ever: it acquired meaning; it lost false mystery” (454). This interest in the “private” yet “historic” past became her “means to approach the truth” and an attempt to forge a political,
ideological connection between WWII and colonial history. If “war is not an accident: it is an outcome,” then Bowen frames her family chronicle as an investigation into what has led to WWII (454).

The writing and publication history of Bowen’s Court reflects the precarious political positioning of Ireland’s neutrality during WWII. Bowen began writing the book before the war officially began, in the summer of 1939. Anna Teekell argues that the writing of Bowen’s Court is intricately tied both to her ancestral connection to the Big House tradition and her wartime espionage work: “Bowen’s information gathering for her family history underwrote her intelligence gathering for the MOI, and…it was her work for the MOI that granted Bowen the travel permit necessary to write Bowens Court” (131). Though others, like Clair Wills, see Bowen’s Court as a cover for her MOI work, Patricia Laurence points to a letter from Bowen to Humphry House where she says the “Bowen’s Court book, something between a chore and a tour de force, has become rather an obsession—more so than any novel” (184). The book came out in June of 1942 after some difficulty in finding a publisher. According to a letter written by John Hayward, Bowen’s standard publisher, Jonathan Cape, “turned it down on the grounds that it contained too much controversial material about Anglo-Irish relations,” and had become “increasingly difficult and touchy…inclined to exercise a tiresome personal censorship on anything that strikes him as ‘subversive’” (Jordan 114). Neil Corcoran comments on the mystery of Bowen’s Court and its presumed audience, remarking that “sometimes…we may feel that the material has rather more significance for Elizabeth Bowen herself than it can ever have for us” (22). Was Jonathan Cape responding to Bowen’s afterword and her radical indictment of the fantasies and obsessions of colonialism as something akin to fascism? In what ways might Bowen’s Court be both “subversive” and not subversive enough?
Bowen’s use of the word obsession to describe the writing of Bowen’s Court is interesting, given her explanation of her own family’s “dominant…factors” of fantasy, particularly the obsession with the family will and a lost, buried treasure. Born in Dublin in 1899, Bowen’s early childhood was split between city life in Dublin and summers in the rural countryside of County Cork at Bowen’s Court. The fear of a “hereditary instability” clouded the Bowen family line; Bowen was prohibited from learning to read until age seven to avoid overtaxing her brain and causing mental illness (Ellmann 27). At the age of six, Bowen’s father, Henry Cole Bowen, was voluntarily hospitalized for psychological distress. Bowen’s father was diagnosed with “anemia of the brain” and “subacute mania,” with the cause listed as “hereditary” (Laurence 23). Bowen’s grandfather was known for his moodiness and unpredictability, and so Henry Cole Bowen’s psychological distress was understood as a genetic disorder passed through the family line and to which Bowen herself would have been vulnerable (Laurence 27). At one point in Bowen’s Court, she explains her inability to find the architectural plans for the building of the house and acknowledges her propensity for the inherited psychology of obsession. She describes how she “searched Bowen’s Court for them with a thoroughness that towards the end became almost fanatical” (167). She reminds herself, “I must not let this grow on me, like the Nicholls treasure” (167). Here, it is almost as if what she is in danger of inheriting is not so much a “fantasy” for power but obsession itself, a single point focus that allows no other options to exist, a denial of multiplicity which she then also connects to the univocality of fascism.

In the afterword to Bowen’s Court, Bowen provides a self-reflective critical framework through which to read her wartime writing—one based on the “nightmarish big analogies” between colonial occupation and fascist occupation that manifest themselves in a psychological inheritance of “fantasy.” Without the afterword, however, the extent to which the text of
Bowen’s Court makes such a connection is limited. Does Bowen’s afterword change how one reads Bowen’s Court? Does the afterword make explicit a political argument that had to remain implicit due to widespread censorship in neutral Ireland during the time? Or does the afterword attempt to recapitulate and reframe a familial historiography that often seems to resist being too radically culpable? Heather Bryant Jordan argues that Bowen’s Court “bears the mark of having been written by someone with the peculiar vantage point of dual nationality” since as much as “Bowen recognizes the painful injustices” of the colonial occupation of Ireland, “she insists that the Bowens, and the house they built, have enriched the social and moral welfare of Ireland” (119, 112). In what follows, I consider how Bowen writes about her family’s origins and the agency and contributions of the Bowen women in light of her critical argument in the afterword and the equivocation of her dual allegiances. Even though Bowen may struggle to hold her family fully accountable for their role in the injustice of colonialism, her historical narrative in Bowen’s Court contains moments of interpretation and imagination that disrupt and destabilize the standard patriarchal structure and historical legacies of the book.

Bowen writes the origin story of her family history and the Anglo-Irish more generally through understatement, negation, and indeterminacy, all of which call attention to the instability of origin narratives while also using that instability to gloss over her family’s culpability. In the afterword, she admits that “the stretches of the past” that she writes about “have been, on the whole, painful” since her “family got their position and drew their power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong” (BC 453). In the beginning chapters of Bowen’s Court, however, the “inherent wrong” of the situation is less clear-cut. For example, she writes that the “north-east

---

9 As Clair Wills explains, the neutral stance of the Irish Free State under Eamon de Valera involved a “refusal to acknowledge—publicly, at any rate—the moral dimensions of the war” and was “aided by the extremely strict censorship in operation throughout the war, which forbade publication of any story that could be deemed partial to one side or the other, thus in effect banning any news that might create anti-Nazi (or anti-British) sentiment” (123).
County Cork gentry began rather roughly, as settlers” (BC 18). To say that the violent colonization that led to the establishment of the Anglo-Irish gentry “began rather roughly, as settlers” is undoubtedly an understatement. It remains ambiguous whether Bowen uses this understatement satirically or whether it suggests her inability to fully acknowledge this violent past.

In the first chapter of Bowen’s Court, Bowen describes the Irish landscape through negation, accentuating its “prevailing impression [of] emptiness” (3). She explains that it is not a “lack of people that makes the country seem empty” but instead an “inherent emptiness of its own” (5). This insistence on the “inherent emptiness” of the Irish countryside is striking in a book that charts the colonial occupation of Ireland and the role of an invading ruling class. This descriptor could serve to emphasize the violence of English invasion and occupation—the disruption that Cromwell brought to the emptiness of Ireland—or it could undermine that violence by imagining Ireland as an already empty place, available for the taking—the ideological logic of Terra Nullius used to support colonialism. Of course, it could also accentuate how rural her family home is in the relatively unpopulated area of County Cork. When describing the change in the family’s relationship to Bowen’s Court that occurred with her father’s inheritance of the house, Bowen laments the end of its time as a “symbolic hearth, a magnetic idea, the focus of generations of intense living” (403). This emptiness mirrors the decline of the Anglo-Irish way of life and becomes a moment of transformation, of possibility for the house: “It may be said that Bowen’s Court met and conquered the challenge of emptiness—but on the house the conquest left its mark: it is to these first phases of emptiness that I trace the start of the house’s strong own life.” The increased emptiness of the house forces Bowen to “come to terms with something already there” (403). Out of the negation of Anglo-Irish decline
rises the possibility for strength, for a new life, for the house, and maybe Bowen too, to reclaim its legacy. Bowen makes use of the slipperiness of the various connotations of the word and concept of “emptiness” to ambiguously describe the inherent emptiness of Ireland and the changing “emptiness” of Bowen’s Court from settlement to decline to destruction. What is inherent in the idea of “emptiness” is the conceptual tension between the potential of transformative possibility and the foreclosure of colonial occupation.

This conceptual tension hinges on how you tell the story of colonial occupation, as Bowen illustrates in the two main family legends surrounding the start of the family’s Anglo-Irish line, Colonel Bowen. Neil Corcoran provides a reading of the Apparition story at the start of *Bowen’s Court* as a “return” of a “colonial history” in which the “Anglo-Irish dispossessors are themselves dispossessed…[and] become living ghosts” (33). I want to consider the other main “origin” tale about Colonel Bowen, who arrived in Ireland with Cromwell—the “much prettier story” of the hawk and of how her family received their Irish lands (*BC 48*). Bowen begins the tale by setting the scene for the story’s interpretative indeterminacy, making clear that it is indeed a “tale” and thus “more than a legend.” (67). It has been passed down by “word of mouth,” and thus, “like all stories retold with gusto, it has its variations” (67). Bowen assures the reader that she “will give the version that most appeals to me.” However, I would argue that in the very admittance of variation and the discussion of the version she likes the best, Bowen offers insight into her preference for how to represent the violent past of her family (67). By choosing which version of the story to tell, Bowen highlights the instability of history itself; the past changes based on who does the telling, and a legend spread by word-of-mouth depends on the mutability of history and its inheritance. According to the story, Colonel Bowen, who was
very fond of his hawks, had a run-in with Cromwell, who killed one of the hawks. As Bowen writes:

Here the two versions vary — one has it that Bowen, on thinking the matter over, considered himself rightly rebuked, whereupon he fought with such zeal and outstanding courage, and became in every way such a model, that he became due for some award. The other (which seems to me the more pleasing) has it that, Bowen’s incalculability and fierce temper making him more and more a man to be reckoned with, efforts to square him were set on foot. At all events, Cromwell sent again for Bowen, said, “You know how these things happen,” and said he was sorry about the hawk. He then proposed to give Bowen as much Irish land as the second hawk could fly over before it came down, Bowen to choose the spot from which to let off the bird (68).

Even though “a hawk rockets straight up through the air and hangs where it is until it drops on its prey,” Bowen still prefers the latter explanation, even if it requires mythologizing to explain the large amount of land that Colonel Bowen was granted. She suggests that “his hawk was a mythological bird” or “his familiar,” which would account for its long flight (68-9).

The difference between the two versions of the story is telling—the first would see the land as an award for her ancestor being a particularly ruthless and successful colonizer and would connect the acquisition of their land to the behaviors of colonization. The second story requires an explanation of myth or magic and distances Colonel Bowen from the violence. Bowen even mentions that Cromwell disliked Colonel Bowen’s hawks because “it might, like all kinds of sport in Ireland, lead to fraternization with the country people” (67). Thus, the trickery behind the story of the hawk may, in Bowen’s mind, align Colonel Bowen more with the Irish than the English. Indeed, this may be true—Colonel Bowen was Welsh (from the Gower region),
an area that, according to Bowen, had a lot of parallels to Ireland, namely being “forcibly colonized” (38). However, as much as Bowen is careful to be cognizant of the injustices of her family’s history, her preference for the more fairytale-like version of this story also betrays her inclination to romanticize or mythologize the past. She acknowledges the interpretative uncertainty of her version of the story but still chooses the version that relies on fantasy to mitigate the “inherent wrong” in her family’s “rough settlement” in Ireland. Here we see the struggle within Bowen’s writing of the two types of “fantasy” that she identifies—her creative ability can both resist and destabilize power structures. However, it can also cement and stabilize her fantasy and obsession with her family tradition and the nature of its origins in Ireland. Paradoxically, in choosing what version she prefers, Bowen highlights the instability of larger historical narratives even while choosing the version of the story that brings stability to her family’s origin narrative.

In her discussion of the actions and positions of the women in her family, however, Bowen responds to this stability with small interjections that open the space for a feminist possibility that is more fully expressed in her fictional writing from this period. For the most part, Bowen’s Court is a chronicle of patriarchal inheritance: each chapter is titled after one of Bowen’s male ancestors, succession indicated with roman numerals. Corcoran, however, identifies the book’s “subliminally corrective and revisionist feminist impulse” (23). I argue that in these revisionist moments, Bowen uses the variation and multiplicity of family folklore and legend to imagine the missing perspectives of the women in her family (23). In this way, she

\[\text{10 Bowen makes several other comparisons between Wales and Ireland, often in an effort to distance her own family from the violence of colonization. She recognizes the cycle of violence that Colonel Bowen’s move from Wales to Ireland represents: “His Gower had fretted under colonization. In Ireland he was to colonize” (BC 38). Yet, she also writes that “Wales seems to exclude the stranger, Ireland seduces him,” implying that rather than the Irish being forced to assimilate according to the conquering English, the settlers that would become the Anglo-Irish are the ones assimilated into Ireland. This idea continues later when she describes Colonel Bowen’s grandchildren: “These were the first Bowens to be born in Ireland, and already they felt indigenous” (98).} \]
gives voice to an alternative kind of inheritance that runs counter to the patriarchal obsessions of
the men and often crosses class lines. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, Rebecca West makes
similar feminist maneuvers in the historical parts of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*; both writers
counter the patriarchal expectations of historiography, though West is perhaps more outright in
her call for a more feminist approach to education.

The first example of Bowen’s subtle feminist revision comes from a local legend in the
nearby town of Doneraile, a “parliamentary borough” before the Union, which Bowen gives
significance to by claiming it as the hometown of “the only lady Free Mason” (*BC* 6). According
to “popular story,” she hid in a clock, heard the Free Mason’s plans, and was asked to join their
number. Bowen, of course, admits that “her family says she happened to fall asleep on a couch”
but that she “support(s) the idea of the clock,” which would make the tale one of “design” of
female agency, rather than “accident” (6). As with her family’s origin legend, Bowen offers a
tale with multiple versions and admits to the one she prefers, a reminder that there is not one
version of history. She, as writer, and we, as readers, have a choice in which version we prefer.
This small interjection also brings to mind Bowen’s short story “The Inherited Clock,” which I
will discuss below, in which a clock also plays a vital role in interrupting the ongoing ticking
seconds of patriarchal inheritance. In this case, the clock, the symbolic stand-in for a consistent
historical progression, is also the hiding place for the young woman, whose gender leaves her
outside of the historical narrative but whose hidden presence allows her to make her mark on
history nonetheless.

Several of these feminist interjections involve an intersection of gender and class. For
example, the legend of Eliza Bowen, whose “activities were not bounded by the demesne walls,”
started a lace-making school, which “is said to have made the christening veil for Queen
Victoria’s eldest child” but also gave her a “knowledge of the people” and a “tradition of work” that was not always present in Bowen history (BC 279). An extended parenthetical anecdote provides a similar gloss on Bowen’s grandmother, whose actions were in direct contrast to her grandfather’s strict rules as a landlord:

(It is said that my grandmother in some cases interceded, or, where she knew intercession could only fail, used to wait on rent days, inside the glass door to the passage, to slip the required sum, from her own pocket, into some hand that came empty and damp with fear. Robert never knew of such dealings — they were reported only after her death and his. Robert’s eldest daughter Sarah has also told me — though I must say, before I can vouch for this, that her memories were in all cases dramatic — that she used, as a young girl of seventeen, to be sent by her father on an outside car round the outlying farms to collect rent, and that when hard cases so much softened her feelings that she could not continue to press for what was due, she would face the exposed drive home to her father not only numb with cold but “crying with fear.”) (BC 363-4)

Through the use of parentheticals here, Bowen embeds in her writing style the instability of the narrative of gender and class position that Bowen is ascribing to her grandfather and his predecessors. Though Bowen remains committed to portraying her male ancestors as fair, if strict, landlords, these descriptions of the Elizas and her grandmothers suggest a view of domination dictated by masculinity and class status. By including these counter-narratives, Bowen embeds her otherwise stable family history with different versions of the story that align with feminism and an awareness of class distinctions. If there is a solution to the patriarchal inheritance of power and obsession, perhaps it is in these moments where Bowen imagines
women’s roles by interjecting, crossing class divides, and promoting a “tradition of work” for the betterment of others.

These moments of feminist interjection often take the form of a kind of “speculative history” in which Bowen imagines the perspectives of her proto-feminist ancestors and attempts to highlight and fill the absence in the historical record through fictionalization. For example, Colonel Bowen’s will (1659) cautions strongly against his son marrying Elizabeth Cushin, whose story is lost to time. Bowen wonders, “Was Elizabeth Cushin, child of the dispossessed Garrett, as lovely as she was unfortunate? Did she walk like a living ghost the lands her father had owned, and was John—in the woods, up the stream, on the side of the mountain—constantly meeting her? Had the two been surprised together? All sorts of romances jump to the fancy—the dashing young soldier and the forlorn girl.” (BC 77) Similarly, she wonders about Colonel Bowen’s daughters, Mary and Hester, “whose sex did not even allow them capital letters in their father’s will” and their role in the family drama before concluding in a harsh declarative sentence, “They were not important, and they left little trace” (77-78). The pairing of imaginative questioning with declarative sentences works in ironic tandem—the official and patriarchal historical narrative may not deem them important, but Bowen’s desire to know more about these women proves their importance. The family will may foreclose their status with lowercase letters, but Bowen pieces together and imagines their perspectives from the traces they left behind.

Queering the Past: “The Happy Autumn Fields”

This imaginative impulse—to forge a connection to the past, mainly between women, through the speculative—is the central feature of Bowen’s short story “The Happy Autumn Fields.” In her review of *Bowen’s Court*, unpublished in her lifetime, Eudora Welty connects
Bowen’s “powers of sympathetic recognition,” her ability to imagine the lives of her ancestors on display in *Bowen’s Court* with the more literal “psychic identification with lives in the past” that occurs in “The Happy Autumn Fields” (28). This style of “psychic identification” underpins both works’ more significant preoccupations with inheritance and the effect that the legacy of the past has on the present and future. In “The Happy Autumn Fields,” Bowen’s attempt to connect the present of wartime Britain with the colonial past of Ireland reflects her fixation on ideas of patriarchal and heteronormative legacies and inheritances.

First published in 1944, Bowen wrote “The Happy Autumn Fields” in August of 1944 from a friend’s apartment after her own house in London was destroyed when, in Bowen’s account, a “V1, landing across the road, blew 2 Clarence Terrace hollow inside, wrecking every room” (qtd in Jordan 140). The story alternates structurally, through what Anna Teekell calls a “shuttlecock effect,” between a 19th-century country estate and London during the Blitz (77). In wartime London, Mary has discovered a box of old photographs and letters that connect her through what Beryl Pong calls a “hallucinatory, dreamlike metempsychosis” across space and time to a Victorian family out for a walk in the countryside as a last hurrah before the boys in the family return to school (127). Specifically, Mary seems psychically linked to Sarah, whose close bond to her nearest sister, Henrietta, is interrupted by the arrival of the eligible neighbor, Eugene. Mary’s bond with Sarah is also interrupted during the wartime present of the story by Mary’s partner, Travis, who fears for her safety and urges her to leave the unsafe structure. Unwilling to let go of her connection to the past, Mary bargains with Travis to stay two more hours. She falls back into her reverie as the family gathers in the drawing room at dusk. Mary’s connection to

---

1 Both “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “The Inherited Clock” were published in the *Cornhill* in January and November 1944 respectively. They were also published as part of the UK collection *Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945) and the US edition *Ivy Gripped the Steps and Other Stories* (1946).
Sarah is severed permanently when the ceiling above her falls through and disrupts her dreamlike stasis for a final time. Having read through the letter box, Travis returns and informs Mary that a startled horse killed Eugene and that Sarah and Henrietta never married and likely died young.

Though the story does not identify the Victorian setting as the Irish countryside that Bowen herself knew so well, in the preface to A Day in the Dark, Bowen admits that the setting is “unshakably County Cork” (Bowen qtd in Jordan 139). The Victorian Irish parts of the story seem inspired, as Corcoran points out, by the family diaries that Bowen quotes extensively in Bowen’s Court (Corcoran 22). The diary entries themselves are perhaps only mildly interesting to the average reader, but Bowen’s indulgence in quoting them reveals her wartime desire to retreat “deeper into her heritage” and to some extent “guard[] the survival of her own ancestry” (Jordan 140). As I discussed above, in the “Afterword” to Bowen’s Court, Bowen admits that her exploration into the past has been “painful” since her “family got their position and drew their power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong” (BC 453). The structure of Bowen’s Court, however, maintains a link to the past dependent on patriarchal inheritance with only small moments of feminist interjection. In privileging the queer, homosocial kinship of Sarah and Henrietta alongside the non-genealogical kinship of Mary and Sarah, Bowen offers another way to forge a relation to the past, one not dependent on patriarchal lineage. In Bowen’s Court, Bowen can only guess at the women’s lives left out of the official narratives, but in “The Happy Autumn Fields,” she fully imagines their lives, their bonds, and the legacies they leave behind.

---

12 The majority of entries are written by either Sarah Bowen or her sister Mary, which is perhaps how Bowen chose the names in “The Happy Autumn Fields.” Most entries note a walk and the weather with the repeated notations of “a fine day,” “a very fine day,” “weather fine” a kind of litany of the overall “high pitch” of living that Bowen attributes to the Anglo-Irish (BC 19). The entry for August 16th documents that “Henry and Bob went back to school” (354). The only real drama in the entries is the death of an older relative.
On the surface, “The Happy Autumn Fields” appears as a story of nostalgia and escape, as both Hermione Lee and Jessica Gildersleeve have argued, wherein Bowen highlights the “poignant antithesis between the rich melancholy Victorian world and the thin inadequateness” of a modern, war-torn present and thus configures memory and the past as a component of survival (Lee 135). However, the relationship between past and present in the story is not so easily characterized as a one-directional movement from a fragmented present to an idyllic past. In thinking about temporality, Beryl Pong describes the story as “less linear and more palimpsestic or conjoined,” which allows for a “mutual permeability” spatially and temporally (Pong 127-129).¹³ In reading “The Happy Autumn Fields” through the lens of Elizabeth Freeman’s queer kinship, I propose that Bowen creates a palimpsest of temporality that involves the disruption of heteronormative expectations of patriarchal inheritances and imagines a new form of queer kinship. As much as Bowen’s fixation on the “mutual permeability” of England and Ireland hinges on questions of class, her wartime writing also constellates around questions of inheritance and its intersectional dependence on both class and gender. When reading this story through the lens of gender, the possibility for queer kinship becomes apparent, allowing for a glimmer of hope or a way forward amidst the narrative of decline.

The immediate nostalgia of “The Happy Autumn Fields” is upheld by what appears to be a total adherence to heteronormative ideas of family. The story begins with “the family walking party” led by Papa in his patriarchal role at the front of the line (Collected 671). The rest of the family follows in “threes and twos,” divided by gender, with Sarah and Henrietta, continually separated and othered as the story continues, at the back. Papa is “satisfied” by having made the

¹³ Both Neil Corcoran and Thomas S. Davis read the “palimpsestic” nature of the story in terms of overlapping versions of the gothic, arguing that rather than constituting separate modes, Bowen simultaneously evokes a traditional Anglo-Irish gothic and a wartime gothic to accentuate their mutual “dislocations” (Davis 182, Corcoran 149).
“instinctive choice” to walk closest to his “most womanly daughter,” whom it is implied earns his favor for having been successfully “sought in marriage” (671). Mary’s second transportation to the past offers a similarly picturesque and stereotypical view of a heteronormative family with the children “grouped” around Mamma at the “hearth.” The drawing room is her domain, “which for all its size and formality was lyrical and almost exotic” (680). The narrator emphasizes the “equilibrium” of the room as part of Mamma’s reign in this sphere: “everything in the drawing-room was muted, weighted, pivoted by Mamma” (680). As much as Mamma’s association with the hearth space grants her some power in the moment, her freedom is tied to this “feminine” space because “it was understood that she would not have spoken thus [about her “sentiments”] from her place at the opposite end of Papa’s table” (680). The gendered spheres of traditional Victorian society are made clear but are not without limitation—Mamma and Pappa may have their respective places, but Mamma’s ability to express her viewpoints is still limited.

The implicit drama of these Victorian passages adds another level to the story’s exploration of gender and sexuality. Henrietta and Sarah are less disrupted by the thought of the brothers’ temporary leaving—as Sarah remarks, this will mean that the sisters “‘will be back again by one another at table’”—than by the impending permanent disruption of their older sister’s marriage, which marks a change that will eventually lead to their own marriages and subsequent separation (Collected 672). This drama is revealed with the arrival of Eugene, “the young neighbouring squire,” whose smiles and gestures register to Sarah as a “sublime act” and to Henrietta as a threat to their sisterhood (675). As Maud Ellmann argues, the drama of the past is thus the drama of “the idealized world of childhood unraveled by the blitz of sexuality” (172). When Eugene joins the walking party, the disruption of his presence is symbolized by his horse, which he leads “slowly between the sisters. Or rather, Sarah walked on his left hand, the horse on
his right and Henrietta the other side of the horse” (Collected 675). For Ellmann, “the horse stands for the forces of desire and aggression that overturn the world of innocence, toppling the furniture of childhood” (172). However, as much as the disruption is one of adulthood into childhood, it is also distinctly gendered. The homosocial bond that the sisters have is physically interrupted by Eugene, his horse, and the heteropatriarchal expectations of marriage that he represents.

The “idealized world” of the past is not only made ideal by the evocation of childhood but by the strength and depth of Henrietta and Sarah’s queer bond. In formulating a theory of queer kinship, Elizabeth Freeman borrows from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “practical kinship,” a system of “connections” that serve “as a realization or even substitute for ‘those uses of kinship which may be called genealogical’” (“Kinship” 305). Specifically, “practical kinship” involves a “‘shared substance’ between bodies that Freeman argues is most helpful as ‘a way of thinking about queer belongings in a temporal as well as a spatial sense…not only for otherwise mortal bodies, but between bodies otherwise separated in time” (305). The “shared substance” of Henrietta and Sarah’s relationship is made clear throughout the story. Not only are they affected by physical closeness—Sarah “swam with love at the nearness of Henrietta’s young and alert face”—but at times they seem to share the same physicality: “They looked around them with the same eyes” and “The sweet reciprocal guilty smile that started on Henrietta’s lips finished on those of Sarah” (Collected 672, 673, 672). Their connection is so strong and obvious that “the sisters were seldom known to address or question one another in public; it was taken that they knew each other’s minds” (681). For Sarah, the evening “hour of subtle light” belongs to Henrietta and “to be with her indoors or out, upstairs or down, was to share the same crepitation” (679). The word “crepitation,” which refers to the crackling sound or sensation associated with
aching or broken joints or bones, captures the extreme physicality of their relationship—they may not share the same body, but they share the same aches as though their bodies were the same.

Rather than being a product of their shared genealogy, their connection seems dependent on their corresponding otherness. Sarah is set apart from the rest by her extrasensory abilities: “It was Sarah who located the thoughts of Constance, knew what a twisting prisoner was Arthur’s hand, felt to the depths of Emily’s pique at Cousin Theodore’s inattention, rejoiced with Digby and Lucius at the imaginary fall of so many rocks” (671). On the one hand, Sarah’s perceptiveness is tied to her supernatural connection to Mary. On the other hand, it also accentuates Sarah’s ability to know the psychological and physical feelings of those around her. While Sarah is set apart by this extrasensory ability, Henrietta is marked by her gender non-conforming. This is seen in her relationship with Papa, “who found Henrietta so hopelessly out of order that he took no notice of her except at table” (673). Given the tendency to read this story in terms of coming of age, it is possible to read Henrietta’s lack of conforming as a refusal to become an adult. However, through the lens of queer kinship, her othered status is also marked as a refusal to follow the heteronormative pattern laid out for her. As Henrietta laments, “…but then I am not a man, and am still less likely ever to be a bride” (680). The metaphor of coming of age means something different for Henrietta, not only because it would sever her bond with Sarah, but also because it involves compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity.14

The thought of a disruption to the “shared substance” of Henrietta and Sarah’s bond is rendered in dark, almost violent terms, highlighting the inherent destructive force of

---

14 When the twilight hour that belongs to Sarah and Henrietta is interrupted by the arrival of Eugene, Henrietta “lock[s] the hour inside her breast” and has to behave “in young imitation of Constance the Society daughter” further showcasing the way that the break in Henrietta and Sarah’s homosocial bond means a compulsory conformity for Henrietta (679).
heteropatriarchal expectations. At the thought of not waking up next to Henrietta anymore, Sarah “prayed they might lie in the same grave” (672), and Henrietta proclaims somewhat ominously, “‘You and I will stay as we are…then nothing can touch one without touching the other’” (672).

When Sarah flirts with Eugene, Henrietta uses their connection to gain Sarah’s attention: “at once her pain, like a scientific ray, passed through the horse and Eugene to penetrate Sarah’s heart” (675). The “shared substance” of their bond, when not allowed to remain idyllic and unaffected, has the potential for mutual pain. Though the “scientific ray” of pain passes between Henrietta and Sarah, Henrietta is aware that the true culprit is Eugene: “It is you that are making something terrible happen,” she cries before ominously threatening, “Whatever tries to come between me and Sarah becomes nothing” (683). The negation of any imposing threat, in this case, Eugene, is also simultaneously the possibility for continued connection between Sarah and Henrietta—Henrietta does not have the language to name the quality and intensity of her connection to Sarah. Hence, she resorts to describing it through the negation of its opposite, or Sarah’s expected marriage to Eugene. This outburst comes in response to Henrietta and Eugene’s shared concern for Sarah’s uncertain and anxious behavior that remains from her connection to Mary’s fractured and war-torn present.

What Claire Seiler calls the “suspension” of wartime—the way it demands waiting and anticipation and thus causes time to feel as if it has stopped—overlaps with the temporality of queerness, creating room for lineages of queer kinship in what would otherwise be a past foreclosed by patriarchy and a future foreclosed by war. Henrietta’s outburst widens the scope of Sarah’s feelings of “formless dread” to include not only the disruption of war from Mary’s temporality but the disruption of marriage in Henrietta’s own time (681). Eugene is just as capable of “making something terrible happen” as the war is, and so the “feeling of dislocation”
might be attributable to a patriarchal system that extends across time and space (683, 681). It is less a question of whether the past is a welcome escape from or prefigurement of the present, but how they become Beryl Pong’s “palimpsest” of past and present violence that is dependent on patriarchal legacies of power and control. As in much of Bowen’s wartime writing, this temporal palimpsest is figured by clocks and watches. The return to the Victorian past causes the bleeding over of Mary’s feelings of anxiety and dislocation, but the return to the present signals a break with time as Mary’s watch stops working.

The most important implication of queer kinship comes from Mary’s connection to Henrietta and Sarah. Whereas the “shared substance” between Henrietta and Sarah may be “for otherwise mortal bodies,” the dreamlike connection between Mary and Sarah is one “between bodies otherwise separated in time” (Freeman “Kinship” 305). As the end of the story reveals, these women are not her ancestors, yet the gothic supernatural connection forges a non-patriarchal inheritance or kinship connection between Mary and the two women from the past. In a play on the word “belonging,” Freeman refers to “queer belonging” as “the longing to ‘be long,’ to endure in corporeal form over time, beyond procreation” and thus “to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to ‘hold out’ a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one’s own time” (“Kinship” 299). In “The Happy Autumn Fields,” the concept of “being long” is similarly evoked through Mary’s “outflung hand” that bridges the spatiotemporal break between the story’s two settings and signals the bodily nature of Mary’s and Sarah’s connection (Collected 675).

Mary and Sarah’s connection depends partly on the suggestive power of the box of old photographs that Mary finds in her house in wartime London. Freeman argues for the power of “objects [to] serve to suture kin relations,” the quintessential example of which is photographs.
Because photographs “function as tangible evidence of queer life,” they can be “handed down generations or across the boundaries of households” in order to “establish connections similar to the ones they represented” (“Kinship” 307). Freeman also notes the simultaneity of “visual technologies” like photography and the onset of “mainstream families themselves” (307). The family diary quoted in Bowen’s Court documents this in the entry for May 4th: “Mr. Rice, the photographer from Mallow, arrived in the morning, he took several views of the house and of us in groups, and he took Mama and Papa on horseback. Miss Flavelle, Sarah, Lizzie and St. John sat in the wagonette. Henry, Mary, Charlie and I stood on the steps. And last of all he drew one of nearly all the laborers” (BC 329). In “The Happy Autumn Fields,” the box of photographs that Travis calls “morbid” and “comic but lyrical” contains a very similar “set of people—a beard, a gun and a pot hat, a schoolboy with a moustache, a phaeton drawn up in front of mansion, a group on steps…” (Collected 678). It is not the visual documentation of “mainstream families” that sparks Mary’s interest but the “carte de visite of two young ladies hand-in-hand in front of a painted field” that makes her feel “racked by that oblique look of Henrietta’s” and “personal shock at having seen Sarah for the first time” (Freeman “Kinship” 307, Bowen 678). This is the moment that “sutures the kin relations.” The photograph is the remaining evidence of Sarah and Henrietta’s queer bond and as “a metonymic notion of reproduction” facilitates the spatiotemporal connection between Mary and Sarah outside patriarchal genealogical lines (Freeman “Kinship” 307).

The relationship of the men in the story to the photographic or visual signals their interruption and disruption of the stronger, “shared substance” of the girls’ queer bond. Sarah’s

---

15 Travis also finds in the box another object, a lock of hair from which Mary recoils in horror. Sarah Wasson argues that the lock of hair functions more as a cursed object. It seems that while the visual reproduction offers a feeling of kinship, the more direct bodily substance is unwelcome (118).
gaze on Eugene, for example, is described in photographic terms: “she looked at him as though he, transfigured by the strange light, were indeed a picture, a picture who could not see her,” but in this case, the photographic does not facilitate further connection and Eugene, unlike Mary, is “a picture who could not see her” (Collected 679). Sarah may feel something for Eugene, but the connection is not the same. Mary’s friend or lover, Travis, “had his own part in the conspiracy to keep her from the beloved two” (667). When Travis insists that Mary leave and forgo her dreams of the past, Mary “began to feel he was now unmeaning” as though her newfound kinship with Sarah and Henrietta has rendered Travis and her relationship with him unnecessary, without meaning. Rather than the past seeming fictional and distant, the “story” of Travis and Mary feels “like a book once read she remembered clearly but with indifference” (677). Again, Mary’s connection to Sarah can only be understood in a negation of their connections to both Eugene and Travis. If Eugene cannot see her and Travis is now “unmeaning,” it is only because Mary and Henrietta can see Sarah, and Mary has found the opposite of “indifference” in her connection to these women in the past.

The story’s ending offers a final note of ambiguity, but an ambiguity that once again creates more room for possibility. Travis reveals that Eugene was killed when his horse was startled and presumes based on the “negative evidence” that Sarah and Henrietta died young and unmarried. Without the “positive evidence” of Sarah and Henrietta’s queer kinship, beyond the one photograph, any knowledge of their life is reproduced through what did not happen—Sarah did not marry Eugene or anyone else, and there is no mention of either of them in official records. Is this a tragic foreclosure or a triumph of the story’s heteropatriarchal resistance? Did Sarah and Henrietta die young or did they occupy a space outside the record of the patrilineal? Was Eugene’s death natural, suggesting that the romance of the past was not as perfect as we
may choose to remember? Anna Teekell suggests that Eugene’s horse was startled by the same
bomb that causes Mary’s roof to fall in, pointing to the war as a disruptive yet potentially
queering force that allows for new kinship paths (156-7). The latter reading offers an interesting
opportunity for thinking about the claims about inheritance and fanaticism in both colonialism
and fascism that Bowen makes in her preface and for the temporal permeability that other
scholars pick up in the story. The temporal disruption becomes circular. Mary’s connection to the
past is prompted by the photographs handed between generations. However, her wartime present
is also able to instigate the very disruption (Eugene’s death) that allows for or prompts the need
for that connection in the first place. Rather than a linear and patriarchal progression of
inheritance, Mary and Sarah’s supernatural connection, facilitated by wartime dislocations,
creates a new form of *queer inheritance* that is mutually palimpsestic with the past, present, and
future.

When Mary is thrust back to her wartime present at the end of the story, there is a sense
that the modern cannot reach “the pitch” of the past: “the source, the sap must have dried up, or
the pulse must have stopped” (*Collected* 683). And yet, when “the one way back to the fields
was barred,” Mary began weeping, “no longer reckoning who she was” (683). The lack of
“reckoning” is literal since Mary’s psychosomatic embodiment of Sarah is over—she knows she
is Mary and no longer somewhere between Mary and Sarah. It also suggests that a more
figurative “reckoning” is over, that perhaps she has arrived back in the wartime present with
some kind of knowledge or self-knowledge from her experience in the past. The violence of
World War II motivated Bowen to confront the violent history and legacy that she inherited from
her family. In *Bowen’s Court*, she has difficulty moving beyond her nostalgia, but, in this story,
she repurposes that nostalgia to imagine a new way of connecting to the past that does not depend on the hereditary ideas about kinship and inheritance that underpin fascist ideology.

**Imagining a Queer Future: “The Inherited Clock”**

Like “The Happy Autumn Fields,” another of Bowen’s wartime stories, “The Inherited Clock,” hinges on the psychological power of an object. In the previous section, I argued that the photographs that Mary finds in her bomb-damaged house help to forge a new line of connection to the past, one that does not depend on heteropatriarchal forms of inheritance. For Mary, nostalgia about the past opens a space for new possibilities of queer kinship. The titular “inherited clock,” however, offers an opposite configuration of inheritance, serving instead as a constant and haunting reminder of the trauma of the past and the trauma of time itself. As a preservation of the past, the photographs act as a gateway for Mary’s connection to Henrietta and Sarah; the clock, as a marker of the march towards the future, only offers possibility in its imagined annihilation. If “The Happy Autumn Fields” celebrates queer kinship as an alternative to patriarchal lineage and anticipates the disruption posed by heteronormative marriage, then “The Inherited Clock” illustrates the burden of inheritance and the destruction required in imagining and embracing a new kind of future.

In the story, Clara, though she has no memory of its significance, inherits the “skeleton clock” from her elderly Cousin Rosanna. The clock is notable because it “has not stopped ticking for over a hundred years” (*Collected* 624). The forward movement of Clara’s life has been dependent on the receipt of her inheritance from Cousin Rosanna—unmarried and in her thirties, Clara hopes the inherited money will encourage her married lover to secure a divorce. However, the clock, as the physical corollary for the rest of the inheritance, is not a welcome arrival. Clara finds the clock to be “threatening to a degree its oddness could not explain” and causes her to
“anticipate feeling her sanity being demolished” (628). The clock’s ticking drives Clara out into the blacked-out streets of London, where she gets lost. As the story unfolds, Clara learns, through the imposed guidance of her cousin and fellow heir, Paul, that the clock is indicative of a past moment of trauma for Clara. Paul forces adult Clara to re-enact the traumatic act of her childhood—sticking her finger in the open gears of the clock to stop its ticking—to unlock the memory. Though adult Clara’s finger remained untouched, young Clara’s hand was “black and blue with several small ugly cuts” (624). The trauma of the moment is tied to Clara’s injury, her guilt at disrupting the continuity of the clock’s timekeeping, and the ominous occurrence that the disruption only remained secret due to the sudden death of the man who wound the clock. The story ends ambiguously and unsettlingly: after remembering the past, Clara concedes the clock to Paul, who no longer wants it so urgently. Clara decides to “sit with [her] memories…to spend some time getting to know them,” insisting to Paul that she “would never know [the clock] was there” (640).

The clock appears threatening to Clara because of its overdetermination as a symbol of Freudian psychoanalysis and the return of the repressed. Unsurprisingly, scholarship on this story has focused solely on this Freudian impulse. Corcoran writes that “the story is an almost literal realization of the Freudian return of the repressed, with the clock also acting as an emblem of Clara’s entrapment in the past” (155), Gildersleeve comments on how the story “demonstrates at once the compulsion to repeat an earlier trauma” (90), and Birrier connects memory in the story to “Freud’s concept of Nachträglichkeit—‘belatedness’ or ‘deferred action’” (4). I want to interrogate this trend in scholarship that takes for granted the story’s support and reliance on a strictly Freudian understanding of time and trauma. For Clara, the process of interpreting the past is determined by Paul, who is also the source of much of her past trauma. Paul “reads” her story
through the male-centered and heteronormative discourses of a psychoanalytic theory dependent on trauma and injury. In the specific context of wartime, the signification of the clock overlaps with that of a time bomb, or the delayed-action bombs that were dropped during World War II and designed to explode after impact to increase damage. Thus, the symbolism of the clock has less to do with its historical longevity or traumatic reminder and more to do with the queer potential inherent in its destruction. By continuing to read Bowen’s wartime fiction through the lens of queer time and space, I will consider more critically the story’s reliance on psychoanalytical theory; the relationship between queer temporalities, psychoanalysis, and inheritance; and how the space and time of war might open up multiple ways of “reading” Clara’s inheritance and the relationship between her past, present, and future. Ultimately, I argue that in “The Inherited Clock,” Bowen employs a “coded” language style dependent on indeterminacy and multiplicity that encapsulates the struggle of reconciling an inheritance associated with trauma and violence while still allowing for the potentiality of embracing a different kind of future.

Clara’s temporality in the story—her years of remaining unmarried, waiting for her affair with a married man to turn into something more, and being “stuck in the past” as Paul condemns her—is set against the constant, uninterrupted timekeeping of the skeleton clock. In Time Binds, Elizabeth Freeman presents queer temporalities in contrast to a “chrononormativity,” which she defines as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” or the way that “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (Time Binds 3). Clara’s waiting does not move her towards “maximum productivity,” which as a woman would mean marriage and reproduction; instead, “she had been subject to waiting as to an illness; the tissues of her being had been consumed by it” (Collected 631). Here,
Bowen describes Clara’s waiting as an embodied experience that affects the very “tissues of her being.” Her life is marked by the fear that “the past should be able to injure the future irreparably” (631). For Clara, time is not progressively linear; the past and the future are connected in ways that limit her “socially meaningful embodiment.”

The story may focus on Clara’s individual experience of being out of sync with society’s chrononormative expectations, as represented very obviously by the clock, but individual experiences of temporality are also tied to more collective feelings of belonging. For example, though the war often disrupted normative experiences of temporality, those disruptions often still worked chronobiologically because they were meant to create a sense of nationhood and belonging through collective action. Part of the myth of the “People’s War” hinges on the collective experiences of time spent waiting through air raids and lives interrupted by the time/space of the war. Freeman argues that through a process of “chronobiopolitics,” often facilitated by “the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses,” not just individuals but also “entire populations…experience belonging itself as natural” (Time Binds 4). In this way, “properly temporalized bodies” are understood through “teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals” (4). Having not experienced “schemes” like marriage and childrearing according to the correct timing, Clara stands as “other” to the chronobiopolitical forces regulating individual bodies and whole populations.

Thus, when confronted with the temporal regularity of the clock, Clara reacts negatively to the clock’s presence. As Gill Plain explains, “For women…the ultimate futility is to look for meaning in the ‘ticking of the clock’” because of “the capacity of clock time to destroy the equilibrium of women” (175). When she first reencounters the clock as an adult, even in
daylight, it is “threatening to a degree its oddness could not explain” (*Collected* 627). Clara tries to tell herself that she is only unnerved by how “shocking [it was] to see the anatomy of time,” but she already anticipates that there is something more—“if she did not yet feel she could anticipate feeling her sanity being demolished, by one degree more, as every sixtieth second brought round this unheard click” (628). The clock’s regular pattern of minutes does not comfort Clara; instead, it eats away at her sanity. Of course, the clock’s effect on Clara has to do with the trauma from her childhood that she cannot remember, but the very act of being “stuck in the past,” as Paul diagnoses her, indicates the same kind of backwardness that is often associated with queerness and queer time.

If Clara occupies a temporality outside of “chrononormativity,” then her foil in the story, Paul, is associated with an institutional uniformity, one that has not always been to the benefit of women in particular, and one strongly connected to a patriarchal form of psychoanalysis. The narrator ironically describes how Paul’s “uniform fitted and suited him just a degree too well, and gave him the air of being on excellent terms with the war,” suggesting that he benefits from and finds comfort in a sort of masculine uniformity. Paul also inherits Rosanna’s house, Sandyhill. Though he “did not conceal his intention of selling it,” he also admits that “it might do well, he expected, for a private asylum, when peace should bring back happier days” (626). The story proceeds with Paul giving Clara some form of psychoanalytic treatment by insisting that she relive the past to confront the future despite knowing that doing so might be distressing. Before beginning his forceful retelling, he warns her, “If you have forgotten, you must have some rather too good reason—in which case, don’t I err in bringing the whole thing up?” Clara’s affirmative response to this is left out of the text and only indicated through ellipses as Paul continues with his story with only the implication by absence of Clara’s consent.
When read through the lens of queer time, the story’s straightforward Freudian narrative, and Paul as the champion of this narrative, become less straightforward and trustworthy. Though it seems like Paul is helping Clara confront the past, Bowen’s coded language suggests a more sinister motivation lurking beneath the surface. Mary’s “outflung hand” in “The Happy Autumn Fields” signals her bodily connection to Sarah, but a similar gesture by Paul in “The Inherited Clock” figures a very different kind of kinship, one defined by a shared inheritance that proves to be ominous. When Paul appears in Clara’s apartment uninvited, in an attempt to steal back the clock that’s causing her to “go crackers,” he sits beside her on the sofa and “leaning a little towards her, he placed one hand, like a hostage, or like an invitation to read his entire motive, palm upwards on the brocade between them. His nearness enveloped Clara in a sense of complicity, frightening because it was acutely familiar, more frightening because she could not guess at its source” (634). The gesture implies perceived victimhood and ominous scheming while highlighting Clara’s unexplained uneasiness around Paul. His open palm may appear to express congeniality and a desire for connection, but his openness betrays his “motive” and expresses a desire to manipulate instead. Corcoran argues that the “source of [Clara’s] sexual dependency [is] in her sadistic treatment by both her aunt and her cousin” (155). Though Rosanna may have created the situation of Clara’s trauma by naming her heirs so early, the memories that resurface throughout the story all involve Paul tormenting Clara in some way—placing the glass globe of the clock over her head, insisting that the kiosk by the lake at Sandyhill contained the “headless ladies,” encouraging her to put her finger inside the clock. If occupying a queer temporality is predicated on injury, then Paul has been the arbiter of this injury throughout Clara’s life. Thus, though Paul’s eyes “expressed no more than good-natured fondness, and his manner regretful conciliation, both conveyed a threat for which no memory
could account” (Collected 635). Paul, associated with the uniformity of the military and the institutional setting of an asylum, occupies the chrononormative counterpart to Clara’s queer temporality and thus forces her to read her past and story psychoanalytically, as a trauma that must be confronted, a pathology that must be fixed, and a queerness that must conform to heteronormative expectations.

In the figure of Paul, Bowen combines the institutional aspects of chrononormativity with Freudian ideas about trauma and the past. Freeman charts the way that Freudian theories of the repressed determine “queer intempestivity” as the “perverse…catalyst for encountering and redistributing the past” (Time Binds 8). Thus the “stubborn lingering of pastness”—as Paul charges Clara with—becomes “a hallmark of queer affect” (8). Paul’s Freudian “reading” of Clara imagines her as unable to properly “redistribute the past.” However, as a counter to the chronobiopolitics of state institutions, Freudian theory, and even clocks themselves, queer temporalities offer the possibility that “time can produce new social relations and even new forms of justice that counter the chrononormative and chronobiopolitical” (Freeman Time Binds 10). By reading this story against Paul’s Freudian narrative of chrononormativity, new possibilities for Clara and the meaning of her inheritance and relationship to the past emerge.

In addition to Paul’s potential underlying antagonism, the story remains unclear about the importance and meaning behind Cousin Rosanna’s inheritance, specifically her decision to name her heirs as children. Does Rosanna re-inscribe the patriarchal power of inheritance by pitting her heirs against each other and forcing Clara to endure the same kind of “waiting” that she experienced? Or does she attempt to redefine inheritance according to her and Clara’s shared queer temporalities? Aunt Addie attributes Rosanna’s love for the clock to its temporal stability—“It has not stopped ticking for more than a hundred years!”—as if Rosanna’s
obsession with the clock and with continuing its legacy indicates allegiance to an uninterrupted heteropatriarchal chrononormativity (*Collected* 624). Similarly, the narrator remarks that “it gratified Cousin Rosanna, herself an only child, to watch these two high-spirited only children quarrel,” implying that Rosanna relishes her ability to lord her power over the young heirs (625). She, too, is the one to create competition between the two, specifically over the inheritance of the clock. She tells Clara to “keep a careful eye on Paul, or he’ll get his hands on it before you can say knife” (628). And yet, the narrator is careful to admit that though “it might have been thought that Rosanna, in selecting heirs near in age and of opposite sexes, entertained some romantic spinsterish project that they should marry…this cannot have been so” because Paul’s marriage was “not adversely seen” except by Clara (625). If Rosanna is taking pleasure in occupying the role of patriarchal power, she is not interested in joining together the divided halves of her family line (Clara grows up with her “widowed mother” and Paul with his “prosperous doctor father”) through heterosexual marriage.

If queer temporalities “can produce new social relations,” then, for Bowen, such reconfiguring of relationships also means countering the burden of inheritance itself—as much as the clock represents normative time and the traumas of the past, it is also representative of the inheritance Clara receives from Cousin Rosanna. Since “belonging” is a question of temporal synchronicity, inheritance is a structuring feature of “chronobiopolitics.” As Freeman writes,

> The logic of time-as-productive becomes one of serial cause-and-effect: the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future. These teleologies of living, in turn, structure the logic of a “people’s” inheritance: rather than just the transfer of private property along heteroreproductive lines, inheritance becomes the familial and collective legacy from which a group will draw a properly political future—be it national, ethnic, or
something else (*Time Binds* 5).

What kind of legacy does Rosanna leave for Clara, and what kind of future does the clock end up representing for Clara?

Surprisingly, it is Paul who suggests that a different kind of “social relation” might have inspired Rosanna’s choices in inheritance. When Clara asks why Rosanna had insisted on giving Clara the clock when Paul had already asked for it, he responds, “I can only think, because you were a fellow-woman. It was Rosanna’s way of saying, ‘Over to you!’” (*Collected* 638).

Although Rosanna often slipped him money, Paul perceives the clock as a slight against his gender: “‘I was a man, so she liked my going without.’” (638). Paul also connects Rosanna and Clara’s shared waiting: “Therefore Rosanna waited, throughout what are called one’s best years—not only for money, exactly like you and me, but for a young man, like, if I may say so, you” (637). For Paul, however, the kinship forged between Rosanna and Clara via the inheritance of the clock was part of Rosanna’s power play in keeping her heirs from having “both love and money” like she had expected but never had. However, Paul’s interpretation completely misses the possibility that Rosanna relished in her wealth because it provided her freedom outside the confines of heteronormative expectations. Maybe inheriting her wealth late foreclosed her future, or maybe it opened it up, allowing her to find independence. The divide between future and possibility hinges on Paul’s interpretation of events. The story could be interpreted from Paul’s perspective, with the clock a reminder of Rosanna’s cold-hearted attempts to foreclose Clara’s romantic future in the same way that her own was halted. The clock could also signal Rosanna’s connection to Clara and an acknowledgment of and maybe even celebration of their shared queer temporalities, their lives that are out of sync with the expected heterosexual rhythms of love, marriage, and even children.
At this point, I would like to consider how the story’s wartime setting contributes to the narrative’s indeterminacy. In many ways, wartime’s pervasive, collective trauma takes a back seat to Clara’s childhood trauma. Cousin Rosanna’s house, Sandyhill, is “disqualified” from serving as “a hospital or a repository for children” because of its “officially dangerous position” (626). Due to the lack of servants (presumably needed for the war effort), the house has slowly been closed, contracting down to only a few rooms in use but otherwise spared of damage. The grounds, however, were the site of “Sandyhill’s only bomb; the blast had wrenched the shutters off the kiosk, and, by a freak of travel, obliterated the glass winter-garden projecting west of the house” (626). When Clara returns to Sandyhill, however, “she glanced, without shock as without feeling, at the site of the winter-garden—here some exotic creepers had already perished against the exposed wall” (629). The site of the bomb’s destruction is not shocking to Clara; instead, Clara is taken by the immutability of the scene: “these sombre pleasure-grounds, unchanging as might have been a photograph of themselves, were charged for her with a past that, though discontinuous, maintained a continuous atmosphere of its own” (629). Clara is surprised at how close her memories of the past remain in the winter-garden and are unsettled, not by the bomb, but by the possibility that there was something “she could not remember,” the “opening and splitting wider of a crevasse in her memory” (629). The image of the “crevasse” brings to mind the detritus of explosion, suggesting an overlap between the space created in her memory by trauma and the physical spaces created by the violence and destruction of war.

This overlap occurs most strongly in the layered signification of the skeleton clock with a time bomb, which ultimately connects the less overt violence of inheritance, particularly one rooted in trauma, with the violence of war and London during the Blitz. If the clock represents Clara’s inheritance, then what she has inherited is a ticking time bomb that threatens to lay bare
the traumas of her past. As Bowen alludes to in her afterword to *Bowen’s Court*, the violence of World War II forced her to confront her inheritance and her family’s legacy of colonial violence. In “The Inherited Clock,” Clara’s struggle to incorporate the clock, and her past, into her future life suggests that rather than always facilitating a linear thrust towards the future, what we inherit can cause more temporal disruption than progression.

The clock itself represents a kind of “masculine” linear time with which Clara is out of sync, but the disorienting space of London during the blackout offers Clara the possibility of a temporal and gender liberation via the annihilation of the clock. She thinks about getting rid of the clock on a “sleepless night” and an “unnerving return home,” which suggests that the disorienting space of blacked-out London during the blitz incites her sudden desire for action. She turns the lights out and joins the city’s complete blackout (*Collected* 635). In a story that otherwise relies on literary or psychological realism, this passage in which Clara considers destroying the clock is the sole moment of imagination, of fantasy. Clara indulges herself by imagining what would happen if she followed through on this act of violence, an act that “would sound like a bomb” (*Collected* 635). She imagines that the clock would “anticipate” its own “annihilation,” perhaps in the same way that Clara and her fellow inhabitants of London were anticipating their potential for annihilation. She waits for “the infinitesimal check, some involuntary metallic shudder” to signal such anticipation (635). She continues to imagine the destruction of the clock, with its disemboweled “body” on display for the “early goer to work” to “bend his torch on the cogs, uncoiled springs and incomprehensible splinters” (635). In her essay, “London, 1940,” in which she writes about her own experience with time bombs, Bowen personifies the buildings and streets around her, transferring the violence typically associated with war to the buildings and things that are now being destroyed. Clara’s description of the
disemboweled clock is reminiscent of both the personified house with an “open gash” that bleeds dust in Bowen’s essay and the “unexploded bomb” at Regent’s Park that “makes a boil in the tarmac road” (Bowen *Mulberry* 23-24). The destruction of these longstanding nonhuman fixtures—houses, the clock that’s ticked for 100 years—becomes the physical correlative for the psychic injury experienced by anxious waiting and the fear of a foreclosed future. It also contrasts with Bowen’s anxiety about her typewriter in “London, 1940.” Whereas Bowen feels anxious imagining her uncovered typewriter, the vehicle of her imagination and creation, left exposed to war’s destruction, Clara’s fleeting moment of liberation involves the violent destruction of the clock.

Clara’s power to imagine is not limited to the possibility of liberation; she also imagines the opposite of annihilation. In this case, the imagining depends on the unrealistically fantastical—that “gravity failed,” that somehow the clock’s “tick stayed up here without the clock,” or even more amorphously ominous, that “the nothing that had shown through its skeleton form continued to bear its skeleton shadow” (635). In her imagining, the successful annihilation of the clock is the more realistic scenario, and yet the unreality of the clock’s ability to haunt keeps her from following through. Instead, she “quails” “before the conventionality of her own nature,” ultimately finding “reprieve” from her own will, and security in the fact that she was “not the woman…who could drop a clock from the window.” What sort of “nature,” what “kind of woman” is required to stop the ticking of time? The overlap between the clock and a bomb, between the stopping of time and annihilation, suggests that the “historical disorientation and temporal dislocation” of wartime might also bring with it a potentially welcome disruption of chrono- and hetero- normative expectations (Pong 1). And yet, just as Mary must face her failure in *A Stricken Field*, Clara cannot go through with the annihilation. As much as she wants
to see the end of the clock and even takes pleasure in imagining its “guts” displayed on the sidewalk, Clara is self-aware enough to know that the annihilation of the clock and the queer temporality suggested by that annihilation are only future possibilities, ones she is incapable of fully embracing.

**The Postwar Present: *The Heat of the Day***

Bowen wrote the short stories “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “The Inherited Clock” amidst the “overcharged subconsciousness” and “lucid abnormality” of London’s “war-climate,” but her only novel from this period, *The Heat of the Day*, presents a more varied wartime context (Bowen *Mulberry* 95-6). Bowen began writing the first five chapters of the novel in the early 1940s but didn’t return to revise and finish the novel until after the war had ended in 1945. As both Hepburn and Seiler point out, the novel is thus imbued with “three historical vantages:” the remembered time of 1940, the present of the novel in 1942, and the narrator’s later mid-century perspective (Seiler 165). Bowen’s hope for *The Heat of the Day* was that it would act as a “present-day historical novel” capable of presenting the atmosphere and experiences of recent history with some distance. At its publication in 1949, the novel sold well—over 45,000 copies—despite concern from Bowen’s publishers over her often-convoluted style (Laurence 111). I have already discussed how the two short stories reimagine, through the overlap of wartime and queer time, new possible connections to both the past and the future outside of heteropatriarchal expectations. By reading *The Heat of the Day* from a queer perspective, I hope to discover what happens to these moments of queer possibility in the ironic light of the postwar present. The novel’s end demands a vision of what the future will be like after the war, but Bowen purposefully leaves that moment ambiguous, a hopefulness consistently undermined. In the negation and absence of closure, Bowen insists on the possibility of *queer inheritance* in the
subplots of Louie and Roderick, which contrast sharply with Robert’s inheritance of a crypto-fascism dependent on reasserting masculine ideas of domination.

The novel combines three plots—an espionage and love triangle that takes center stage and two subplots that focus on two younger characters and the postwar futures they hope to enact. In the main plot of the story, Stella Rodney, a middle-aged divorcee, is confronted by a mysterious man named Harrison, who blackmails her for sex with the knowledge that her lover, Robert, is a fascist spy. Stella and Robert met during the intense air raids in the Autumn of 1940. After a series of cryptic conversations with Harrison, Stella eventually confronts Robert only to learn that he has indeed been passing information to Nazi Germany and has fascist ideological leanings. Through some altercation, accident, or suicide, Robert falls from a roof and dies.

Meanwhile, in the first subplot, Stella’s son, Roderick, inherits an Anglo-Irish estate, Mount Morris, from a distant relative, Cousin Francis. Roderick also learns that his father, Victor (now dead), had cheated on Stella, but Stella had taken the blame for the end of their relationship. A smaller plot of the story also revolves around a young working-class woman, Louie. Louie’s husband is away at war, and she takes in another young woman, Connie, as a boarder. Louie is something of a “good time girl”—while her husband is away, she seeks the companionship of other men. She also grows close with Connie, and they share a bed. Louie’s story eventually intersects with Harrison and Stella, and she becomes obsessed with Stella. In the end, it is revealed that Louie is pregnant, her husband has died, and she names her baby after her husband and Stella’s first husband, which both legitimizes the paternity of her child and connects her to Stella.

Scholarship on *The Heat of the Day* has recognized the novel’s reflection of Bowen’s interest in inheritance, tradition, and gender and has focused on its equivocal tone, especially
given the ambiguity of the ending.\textsuperscript{16} Hermione Lee and Bennett and Royle focus on the novel’s hope, while others like Corcoran and Plain note how the ending undermines any optimism about the future.\textsuperscript{17} Though scholars have examined the gendered implications of tradition in \textit{The Heat of the Day} and others have acknowledged the queer subtext in the novel, I build on this work by considering how queerness in the novel underpins, opens up, or explodes Bowen’s struggle to reconcile her nostalgia for tradition and her hesitation to follow the heteropatriarchal lines imposed in the inheritance of that tradition. If the novel’s hopeful vision of the postwar era is located in Louie and Roderick, what happens to that future if we read those characters as queer? If foreclosures and returns continually unsettle the novel’s attempts at optimism, then perhaps we should look to the negations, the absences, and the subtext for queer possibility and potentiality.

Given the triangulation of the novel’s multiple plotlines, it is natural to pair the subplots of Louie and Roderick—as Anna Teekell points out, their repetitive names, Louie Lewis and Roderick Rodney are double positives (133). While Hermione Lee sees them as united plot lines that usher in a hopeful new vision of the postwar future, others, like Kristine Miller, see them as oppositional futures, with Roderick’s inheritance representing “the problems of protecting the traditional status quo” and Louie’s plot signaling the “radical prospect of friendship across class lines” inherent in the myth of “The People’s War” (44). And yet, as I will show below, neither of these subplots is so easily characterized as either optimistic or pessimistic, traditional or

\textsuperscript{16} Gill Plain writes that the novel inhabits “a set of deeply encoded anxieties about the value of tradition, the disruptions of war, and the paralysis of gender” (\textit{Women’s Fiction} 166).
\textsuperscript{17} Hermione Lee argues that while Stella’s main plot might fall into pessimistic territory, the “possibilities of pride, hope, and survival” are located in Louie and Roderick’s subplots. Similarly, Bennett and Royle argue that Bowen “points toward the possibility of another thinking of the political...by way of notions of radical difference” (93). Neil Corcoran attributes to the novel “an optimistic register of potential” that “aims to ally and reconcile divided traditions” while also paying close attention to the way the novel “seems obliged to unsettle or distress its own potential affirmations” (190-1, 197). Gill Plain reads the novel the most pessimistically, arguing that though it presents an “opposition...between a desire for the preservation of tradition and a depiction of the exclusivity of that tradition,” any “hope offered in its chronicle of disruption” is undermined by its final note of “confirmation of the patriarchal myth...a replay of the same old story for women” (\textit{Women’s Fiction} 173, 187).
radical—instead both plotlines are imbued with the same ambiguity and indeterminacy that emerges in Bowen’s short stories. I would also like to consider the pairing of Louie and Roderick’s subplots, but rather than seeing them as strictly oppositional “class fantasies” or positive images of the future, I would like to consider the ways the indeterminacy of their stories supports a reading of them as queer.

Like Clara in “The Inherited Clock,” Louie and Roderick are characterized by a pastness or out-of-time-ness indicative of queer temporality. Louie is described as having “an infant lack of stereoscopic vision,” which causes her to see “then and now on the same plane” and to “defer[...in a trouble of half-belief to either the calendar or the clock” (Heat 15). An evening of “rainy dusk” causes her to “return[] with sensual closeness to seaside childhood” and “the pudding-softness of the hot tarred esplanade or her bare arm up to the elbow in rain-wet tamarisk” (15). At the start of the novel, though Louie is listening to a concert in the park, “she was in effect again in the park rose garden, where she had been walking that afternoon” (15). The afternoon in the park involved “her Air Force friend” and the memory of her husband Tom, but it is the sensual erotic of the “great globular roses” that “burned more as the sun descended, dazzling the lake” rather than the erotic of heterosexuality that seems to pull Louie back to that moment when she “repeatedly stooped to touch petals, her raspy fingertips being every time entered by their smoothness” (15). While Louie seems to occupy a temporality of overlap between past and present, Roderick is characterized by his pastness. Stella observes that the army has changed Roderick’s face, making him feel “anachronistic” (53). As a soldier, Roderick’s sense of a future is foreclosed—“war had laid a negative finger on alternatives”—but he finds comfort in his inheritance of Mount Morris from Cousin Francis, which “establishes for him and was adding to day by day, what might be called an historic future” (50, 52). The temporality of
the phrase “historic future” is intriguing, indicating that the house simultaneously encapsulates pastness and futurity. Part of this concerns its location in Ireland: “by geographically standing outside war it appeared also to be standing outside the present” (52). Thus, in their characterizations, Louie and Roderick are united by a shared queer temporality, one that is counter to heterosexuality and chrononormativity, and one that finds hope for the future in the queer possibility suggested in the negation and uncertainty of their respective legacies.

Louie’s non-normative sexuality—she appears attracted to both men and women and lives in a quasi-lesbian domestic partnership—comes to fruition with her encounter with Stella and the connection between wartime and queerness. Louie’s attraction to Stella is described in language related to contagion, which reveals an overlap between fears about the space and time of war and homophobic ideas of queerness as infectious. Early in the novel, the narrator remarks on the “malarial” conditions of the ruins. The descent underground during air raids prompted much concern about stagnant air and crowds of people sharing such a small space. Sara Wasson discusses the fears that emerged from the bomb shelters, which were seen as “‘a perfect breeding place for various physical infections’” (Constantine FitzGibbon qtd in Wasson 9). The fear of contamination also involved “language of evolutionary deterioration and a sense of moving into a prehistoric past” (Wasson 10). This theme of contagion appears when Louie reflects on her unexpected meeting with Stella:

Louie felt herself entered by what was foreign. She exclaimed in thought, “Oh no, I wouldn’t be her!” at the moment when she most nearly was. Think, now, what the air was charged with night and day—ununderstandable languages, music you did not care

---

18 Janice Ho argues that Ireland represents a “spatial freedom” from the regulations and interpellations of the state (Nation 114). Beryl Pong disagrees, pointing to the way that Ireland is still affected by the war even in neutrality through rationing, etc (113).
for, sickness, germs! You did not know what you might not be tuning in to, you could not say what you might not be picking up—affected, infected you were at every turn. Receiver, conductor, carrier—which was Louie, what was she doomed to be? She asked herself, but without words. She felt what she had not felt before—was it, even, she herself who was feeling? She wondered if she would ever find Stella’s house, the steps at whose foot they had said goodnight in the dark, again; still more she wondered if she would want to. “But this is not goodbye, I hope,” had been said—but what, how much, had she meant to mean? This fancy taken to Louie, this clinging on, were these some sick part of a mood? Here now was Louie sought out exactly as she had sought to be: it is in nature to want what you want so much too much that you must recoil when it comes. Lying in Chilcombe Street, grappling her fingers together under her head, Louie dwelled on Stella with mistrust and addiction, dread and desire (Heat 278)

The uncertainty of this passage suggests a coded anxiety of queerness—what, indeed, is Louie doomed to be, and what does she want from Stella? The fear and anxiety around queerness in this passage are reminiscent of the negative affects of queerness that Heather Love terms the “dark, ambivalent texts” of “feeling backward” and which she locates in an aesthetics of “modernist melancholia” (4-5). However, given Bowen’s interest in queer forms of kinship elsewhere in her wartime writing, the negative association between queerness and infection might also imply a new way of inheriting queerly. Rather than a familial inheritance, Louie forges a connection to Stella via the “charged air” of wartime. What makes Louie “recoil” is not the infection but the surprising realization that she was now “sought out exactly as she had sought to be;” the negative affect of this passage is located in the overwhelming possibility that a connection with Stella might mean.
Does the “charged air” of wartime allow for the spreading of other kinds of sexuality? Louie’s relationship with Connie suggests that there might be more possibility for queer sexualities given wartime demands on living space—with her husband gone, Louie takes Connie in as a boarder to cover the rent and justify having such ample space to herself. The fact that Stella and Louie cross paths reflects the atmosphere of wartime London, where those that remained in the city found different routines and experiences. Lara Feigel describes the sexual freedom of wartime London by quoting the diary of Bowen’s lover, Charles Ritchie: “‘Wartime London was a forcing ground for love and friendship…for experiments and amusements snatched under pressure…I am temporarily cured of my mania for seeing things in a straight line…time no longer seems to be slipping away from me’” (164). For Ritchie, who inspired Bowen’s descriptions of Stella and Robert’s romance, wartime creates a new temporality directly related to sexuality. The narrator describes Stella’s perspective on London during the height of the blitz as a “new society of one kind of wealth, resilience, living how it liked,” “holding inside itself an ideality of pleasure” (*Heat* 102). At that point, “it could be established, roughly, that the wicked had stayed and the good had gone;” those left were the “people whom the climate of danger suited” (102). Of course, Stella’s experience of wartime London is probably quite different from Louie’s and Connie’s. However, these descriptions suggest that the empty strangeness of a London where standard patterns of life have been disrupted allows people to connect and interact in entirely new ways.

In a classic queer conundrum, Louie is caught between a desire for Stella and a desire to be Stella, but in this case, sexual desire provides the possibility for the disruption or confusion of class structures. Louie thinks suddenly, “Oh no, I wouldn’t be her!” but then later “dwelled on Stella with mistrust and addiction, dread and desire,” drawn to the way that Stella “walked like a
soul astray” (*Heat* 279). This mixture of desire, identification, and suspicion becomes more intricate, given the disparate socio-economic situations of the two women. Is Louie attracted to Stella romantically/sexually, or is she attracted to the class fantasy that Stella represents? Hoogland points out that non-normative sexuality in the novel is confined to the character of a lower social class, which limits the novel’s radical potential. Meanwhile, Kristine Miller argues that Louie, through her interest in Stella, represents “the possibility of radical feminine friendship across class lines,” and Ellmann places Louie’s connection to Stella within a tradition in Bowen’s work of pairs between older, eloquent women and younger, articulate women (Miller 153-4, Ellmann 165).

The extent to which Louie’s plotline might offer a vision of queer possibility depends on how one reads the ambiguity of the ending of the novel. What kind of legacy does Louie’s baby usher in? “Christened Thomas Victor,” the baby’s name simultaneously secures his patriarchal legitimacy by falsely connecting him to Louie’s late husband and indirectly connecting him to Stella via her late husband. For Miller, the ending presents an unrealistically hopeful depiction of working-class, single motherhood and thus undermines the connections between classes elsewhere in the novel (154). On the one hand, the ending could be read as entirely optimistic and thus could reveal Bowen’s blind spot in imagining the perspective of working-class women—while her interest in inheritance makes room for queer possibility, she does not take into account, apart from Louie, what inheritance means outside of an upper-class tradition. On the other hand, the impossibility of Louie’s hopeful ending, the fact that she lies, and because of societal expectations, must lie, her way to a patriarchal lineage for her son, undercuts the promise for the future that the ending seems to offer. Ellman reads Louie’s baby as a “product of verbal intercourse between the older and the younger women” and a “union of eloquence and
inarticulacy” and thus is queered by its association with Stella (165). And yet, that association with Stella is only created via a triangulation of masculine names and figures and will most likely remain a secret. In the novel’s last lines, Louie gloriously holds the baby up in sight of the “homecoming bombers,” a picture-perfect exaltation of peace. As a symbol of the postwar future, the baby is caught in the middle between a patriarchal tradition that Bowen views as an ironic falsehood and a queer possibility that she can’t fully imagine yet.

While Louie’s subplot revolves around the ambiguity surrounding her baby’s legacy, Roderick’s subplot deals more directly with a material property inheritance. As Gill Plain argues, “it is in the story of Roderick’s inheritance that Bowen identifies the contradictions inherent in patriarchal ideas of tradition and continuity” (177). Roderick inherits the Anglo-Irish estate, Mount Morris, from his father’s relative, Cousin Francis. Roderick’s “historic future” places him as the lynchpin between the tradition of the past and the possibility of the future, “situated on the borders of two narratives” (Plain 178). The fantasy of his new life in Ireland provides an escape from his present situation as a soldier, a situation which his mother Stella fears will “obliterate” Roderick and lead to a “dissolution never to be repaired” (Heat 50). For Roderick, Mount Morris becomes “the hub of his imaginary life, of fancies, fantasies only so to be called because circumstances outlawed them from reality,” a particular kind of imaginary future that “did not amount to desires, being without object; nor to hallucination, for they neither deceived him nor set up tension” (52). These fantasies “filled those pockets of vacuum underlying routine” to the point that “the reality of the fancy was better than the unreality” of Stella’s apartment (52). For Roderick, this inheritance becomes a kind of “resistance fantasy” to which he can return to again and again to escape his life as a soldier.
The will from Cousin Francis, however, adds a level of ambiguity in the way it is written not unlike the ambiguity surrounding Cousin Roseanna’s decision to leave the clock to Clara in “The Inherited Clock.” Francis leaves the house to Roderick “in the hope...that he may care in his own way to carry on the old tradition” (Heat 77). Roderick balks at the punctuation: “But I want to know which he meant. Does he mean, that I’m free to care in any way I like, so long as it’s the tradition I carry on; or, that so long as I care in the same way he did, I’m free to mean by ‘tradition’ anything I like?” (95). Roderick is not the only one to apply an interpretive lens to his inheritance. While attending Francis’s funeral, Stella chats with a relative named Colonel Pole, who strongly believes that Roderick should sell the house. In Colonel Pole’s view Roderick’s “generation will have no use for” a big house and estate—since the “future is in their hands,” his generation will need to “travel light” (89). In another small moment, Robert refers to “Roderick’s legacy,” but Stella corrects him by saying “Roderick’s inheritance” (176). This running through-line of how to make meaning from Roderick’s inheritance of Mount Morris in some ways seems like a sub-plot piling onto the novel’s overall obsession with interpretation (Teekell points out that this passage repeats the words “mean” and “meant” 8 times) and intention as designated by the main spy plot. And yet, read alongside Bowen’s other wartime writing, which reveals her own preoccupation with inheritance, the narrative thread of Roderick’s inheritance raises a series of central questions. Is there a difference between a legacy and an inheritance? Is it possible for Roderick to create “an historic future” at Mount Morris, one that is continuous with the tradition of the past but redefines that tradition in a new way? Might Roderick’s inheritance from Cousin Francis create a queer lineage, and if so, is that lineage anti-patriarchal?

Scholars disagree on how to read Roderick’s orientation towards the tradition that he inherits. Hermione Lee notes his desire to “make things right,” leading to a “sense of will for
survival in his inheritance.” Karen Schneider, on the other hand, like Kristine Miller, aligns Roderick with the traditional and patriarchal, particularly a “male desire for absolute authority” (93). None of these readings take into account Roderick’s potential queerness. Neil Corcoran is the only scholar to acknowledge a potentially coded queer narrative in both Roderick and Cousin Francis. However, his reading relies on a vision of the future that depends on casting heterosexual coupling as positive and productive and queerness as a form of “extinction.”

Corcoran locates productive possibility for the future in Stella, who, he argues, “acts as the corrective agent for her son’s deluded and dangerous romanticism” by imagining a marriage between Roderick and Hannah, a young Catholic servant at Mt. Morris (194). Corcoran writes that “if homosexuality is coded into this ‘story’ and also into Roderick’s story, then the true Anglo-Irish heritage has become the impossibility of consummating sexual relationships between men and women. And, as the ‘tradition’ conceives of itself, this is its extinction, whatever anyone manages ‘in his own way’” (199). I argue instead that in leaving Mount Morris to Roderick, Cousin Francis creates a queer line of inheritance, one not so different from that forged between Cousin Rosanna and Clara. Roderick is aligned with the past and tradition, but with one already coded with queerness from the start. In my reading, I would flip Corcoran’s perspective: the hopeful future is located in the queer inheritance of Francis and Roderick, which may be capable of bypassing the violent expectations of heteropatriarchy, whereas Stella’s visions of Roderick’s future wife and marriage are an ironic fantasy that the same system can produce different results.

Roderick and Cousin Francis share an ironic foil in their orientation towards the past and future. Roderick discovers a “saving fantasy” in his inheritance’s “historic” pastness, despite his locus as the next generation that carries the future in his hands. Cousin Francis, on the other
hand, is the epitome of pastness and has chosen “with regard to heating, lighting, and plumbing…to keep Mount Morris in, almost, its original state” with the farm and land “worked with few aids unknown in his grandfather’s day” (Heat 83). And yet, Cousin Francis is “entranced” by the modern, the “systems, outfits, fit-ups, gadgets and all forms of mechanized labour, constantly wasting time “flirting” with “an air-conditioning plant, a room-to-room telephone, an electric dish-washer and a fireproof roof” (83). This foil suggests the burden of inheritance and its relationship with temporality. Cousin Francis desires the modernity of the future but feels obligated to maintain the house in the same earlier tradition from which he inherited it. Roderick, however, is meant to embrace a new postwar generation that Colonel Pole says must now “travel light,” but he finds more comfort in the security of a past tradition. In passing the house to Roderick, in claiming him as a son outside the particular patriarchal lineage, Cousin Francis creates a jumble of modernity and tradition. As I discuss in the introduction, Umberto Eco and Alice Yeager Kaplan identify this contradictory mixture of modernity and tradition as a feature of fascist thought. Does this point to an uncomfortable overlap between queer time and fascism? Is a new temporality created from “an historic future” that embraces tradition and modernity? Does that new tradition risk reinscribing the same power dynamics of heteropatriarchy?

The conclusion to Roderick’s story is left unknown, leaving Bowen’s contemporary, Rosamond Lehmann, to ask in a letter—is Roderick at Mount Morris? Just as Clara cannot destroy the clock, Bowen cannot fully realize the implications and results of a queer inheritance. However, the sub-sub-plot of Cousin Nettie indicates that Roderick’s queer inheritance may be different from the previous traditions. Corcoran reads Cousin Francis as queer based on his and Nettie’s inability to have children. Of course, on the surface, Nettie’s narrative implies her
failings—unable to have children, she does not meet the heteropatriarchal ideal. As Plain argues, her “madness… is bound up in a failure of motherhood” (174). Kristine Miller reads Nettie’s “nothingness” and insularity at Wisteria Lodge as a refusal to face what is going on in the world and a desire for retreat (148). Hoogland, however, identifies Cousin Nettie’s storyline as “one of the most outspoken condemnations of dominant regimes of power/knowledge in Bowen’s work” (177). At the same time that Cousin Nettie represents the tragic outcome of the generations of Anglo-Irish women whose presence Stella feels when she enters the drawing room at Mount Morris, she also exercises her choice to leave and exist outside of that tradition. 19 As Schneider points out, her madness is a “false story,” one that she actively embraces, just as Stella chooses to live the “false story” of her infidelity (96). For Nettie, Wisteria Lodge is a refuge, not from the war only but from the larger fantasies of patriarchal domination and control that govern things like war and the confining gendered spaces of the Anglo-Irish tradition that rendered Nettie “cloudless.”

Cousin Nettie immediately identifies a kinship with Roderick, saying that they are the same, suggesting that perhaps Nettie and Francis’s unproductive marriage results from a mutual queerness. As I have shown elsewhere in this chapter, Bowen’s reliance on negation, the “nothingness” of Cousin Nettie’s retreat, actually makes room for queer possibility, for Cousin Nettie to be embracing her own otherness. The tragedy that remains in Cousin Nettie’s story is that the drab Wisteria Lodge and the “false story” of insanity are the only viable spaces outside of heteropatriarchy in which Nettie can find refuge. That Roderick insists on visiting her is

19 This scene when Stella enters the drawing room is reminiscent of the separate sphere of the drawing room in “The Happy Autumn Fields.” Stella recognizes the violence of a tradition that confines and cordons off women, and as Corcoran argues, she recognizes the need to either restore or destroy such a tradition (193). And yet, her imaginations and fantasies for what a new version of that tradition might look like involve confining Roderick to heterosexuality—she imagines her future daughter-in-law and then in a moment of what Schneider calls “female generativity,” she imagines that daughter-in-law emerging from her own self, a “new Eve—autonomous and courageous, woman-born” (103).
important, however. He feels he has inherited her too and does not want to seem a “usurper.” On the one hand, his tone implies a kind of inconvenience, but I think there is also an earnest desire to safeguard the new tradition of his “historic future” in a way that does not repeat the trauma of the past: he offers her the chance to return to Mount Morris if that is what she wants. Though the novel does not conclude Roderick’s story, this moment of good faith with Cousin Nettie implies that maybe in accepting Cousin Francis’s queer inheritance, Roderick will be able to enact a new kind of tradition. As Erin Carlston points out in the writing of other women modernists, Bowen may share the same language and rhetoric of fascist thought, but ultimately, she uses this language of modernity and tradition to different ends, particularly by suggesting that Cousin Francis and Roderick’s queer line of inheritance avoids reinforcing a traditional status quo. The attempt to embrace the modern is not a facade to hide a deep commitment to traditional ideas about gender and patriarchy, as is the case with fascist thought. Instead, Cousin Francis and Roderick are trying to find ways to reinvent and reimagine modernity and tradition simultaneously. As with Clara and the clock and Louie’s hopeful future, Bowen is unable to fully imagine these queer futures, but she embeds the possibility of them into moments of negation and ambiguity.

The anti-fascist impulse of Roderick’s desire to reimagine patriarchal inheritance is further emphasized through a contrast with the novel’s unambiguous example of fascist thought: Stella’s lover, Robert, who turns out to be a spy and crypto-fascist. When Robert finally reveals his treason, he tells Stella that he is drawn to the “order” of the enemy by his disillusionment with the “dead currency” of language like the word “freedom,” which he sees as a “vacuum” (Heat 302). He exposes the connection between fascism and patriarchal ideas of masculinity in one simple line: “who could want to be free when he could be strong” (302). Stella attempts to
make sense of Robert’s sudden betrayal, but when she latches on to his mention of being wounded in Dunkirk, he clarifies that his fascist leanings are not recent. Instead, they are his inheritance. Robert describes being “born wounded; my father’s son” and identifies his turn to fascism as a “new heredity” that “bred my father right out of me” (307). His childhood becomes associated with a weak and emasculated tradition—he says of his family, “It never suited them that I should be a man” (313). This wasted tradition is indicative of the failures of the whole country: “A class without a middle, a race without a country. Unwhole. Never earthed in—and there are thousands of thousands of us, and we’re still breeding—breeding what? You may ask: I ask” (310). For Robert, fascism offers a “new heredity” that can make up for the failures and limitations of the heteropatriarchal family, not by, as with Louie and Roderick, finding a new tradition, but by returning to and reinforcing the needed “strength” and “order” that heteropatriarchy promised in the first place.

Robert’s confession puts Stella’s visits to his family home, Holme Dene, in context, revealing how Robert’s childhood primed him to find in fascist ideology a way to assert or reclaim his masculinity. In a nod to “The Inherited Clock,” one of the first things that Stella notices about Holme Dene is that unlike other items that had been moved about from other rooms “the grandfather clock…must have stood there always—time had clogged its ticking” (Heat 117). Unlike Clara’s clock, this one has been permanently stopped, signaling Holme Dene as a site of rupture in the chrononormativity of a familial tradition. As members of a rising middle class separate from the landed elite, Robert’s family cannot claim 100 years of continuous clicking—Stella cannot help but wonder, “middle of what?” and see the “Kelways suspending in the middle of nothing” (125). The way the narrator describes the set-up of the house implies the inevitability of Robert’s crypto-fascism: the house “had been planned with a
sort of playful circumlocution” that perpetuated a lifestyle of hiding, spying, and surveillance where “everyone knew where everyone else was and, in time, what everyone else was up to…it had not been possible for anybody to leave the house unseen” (287-8). Since the war, the house had “condensed itself into very few rooms—swastika-arms of passage leading to nothing” (289). Holme Dene “had been a man-eating house…conceived to please and appease middle-class ladies” (289). Robert’s father, the emasculated Mr. Kelway, is described as “lock-shorn, without the bodily prestige of either a soldier or a manual worker, as incapable of knocking anybody about as he was of bellowing” and thus buys Holme Dene in a desperate bid for the respect and “prestige” of masculinity that he lacks. While Robert inherits his father’s “unformulated anarchical dreams” and the “unstated indignities suffered” that “remained burned deeply into [his] mind,” the “fiction of dominance” is passed on to his mother and sisters, continuing the cycle of emasculation (289). In Robert’s middle-class family, the promises of power and domination that come with the tradition of heteropatriarchy are falsehoods that drive him to seek a reclamation of masculinity in fascist ideology.

The illusion of Robert’s middle-class and heteropatriarchal childhood is represented by the surreal detail of Robert’s bedroom, which is covered with “sixty or seventy photographs, upward from snapshots to crowded groups” all of Robert and hung by his family (127). Robert tells Stella that these are “imitations” of real moments, an “illusion:” “Each time I come back again into it I’m hit in the face by the feeling that I don’t exist—that I not only am not but never have been” (129, 133). Robert’s photograph wall is reminiscent of the surreal moment when Mary looks at the photograph of Sarah and Henrietta in “The Happy Autumn Fields.” Sarah and Henrietta’s photograph is the one remaining testament to their existence as unmarried women and the single piece of physical connection between Mary and the girls. In contrast, Robert has a
wall full of endless photos, an adoring shrine to his life and existence, but all he sees is an
illusion because “what else but an illusion could have such power” (133). The plethora of photos
of Robert remind him of the self-defeating promise of his manhood and thus contrast sharply
with the single photo of Henrietta and Sarah, which must embody all the hope and possibility of
their queer kinship.

Louie and Roderick offer parallel queer subplots that use ambiguity and negation to offer
glimpses of queer forms of inheritance. While their plot lines leave us wondering what the
postwar period will bring and whether it will have room for queer futures, Robert ends the novel
dead with the hope that the end of the war means the end of the line for his “new hereditary.” By
giving us a glimpse of how Robert inherits his predilection for fascist ideology, Bowen further
emphasizes the feminist and antifascist qualities of the moments of queer inheritance and queer
possibility found in her wartime writing. Robert may die clinging to the “fantasy of domination”
missing from his father and childhood, but the “resistance fantasies” of Louie and Roderick (and
Mary, Sarah, Henrietta, and Clara), even if ephemeral and not fully realized, persist on in the
very uncertainty of their endings. The next chapter, on Pearl S. Buck, moves away from Bowen’s
opaque and ambiguous modernist style to consider Buck’s much more direct and polemic use of
popular forms like the sentimental novel as tools of education. Like Bowen, however, Buck’s
“talk books” from the late 1940s attempt to envision politics and peace in the postwar era.
CHAPTER THREE
VIOLENT EDUCATION: PEARL S. BUCK’S WAR NOVELS AND “TALK BOOKS”

The writer and humanitarian Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973) was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938 for her novel *The Good Earth* (1931) and a pair of biographies about her missionary parents. Buck spent most of her childhood and early adult life living in China, where her father and first husband served as Presbyterian ministers. Though later in life, Buck became outspoken in her criticism of missionary work, her time in China inspired much of her writing and activism, affording her a complex dual identity not unlike that of Elizabeth Bowen discussed in the previous chapter. Though she is best known for her early Chinese novels, Buck wrote more than seventy books in various genres, fifteen of which were chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club (Conn “Pearl S. Buck” 43). She was also a prolific humanitarian, calling attention to causes ranging from racial discrimination in the military and the fight for Indian liberation to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion laws and an indictment of Japanese internment. Buck is often overlooked as a literary figure, particularly in discussions of Popular Front literature from the thirties and forties. This chapter defines Buck’s literary and educational methods to reclaim her wartime writing as a uniquely feminist and anti-racist example of Popular Front literature. In this chapter, I will explore how Buck’s vast and varied writing from the 1940s—five novels, three collections of essays and speeches, two films, and a series of written interviews she deems “talk books”—encapsulates a *violent education* for her audiences. I
identify two main features of Buck’s *violent education*. First, in her wartime fiction, Buck rewrites the conventions of the war novel by expanding its parameters to the experiences of both combatants and non-combatants in non-Western geographic spaces. This allows her to expose and critique the interconnected violence of patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism. Second, in her nonfiction, Buck develops an elastic politics that models for her American readers a political understanding of ideas like democracy, freedom, and equality that makes room for difference, disagreement, and dialectical conversation across cultural, national, and racial lines.

The phrase “violent education” comes from Buck herself: in the foreword to *American Unity and Asia* (1942), she explains her decision to publish a collection of essays by writing that “during the months just past, people all over the world have not only been fighting in a war—they have also been undergoing a violent education” (7). Because World War II was fought on multiple continents and geographic “theaters of war,” it came with a learning curve for American citizens. Buck claims the global importance of her public writing and the political urgency of her dual perspective, which gave her authority on places like China and Japan where she had lived and traveled. The essays in *American Unity and Asia* take the familiarization process one step further, making it one of self-familiarization as Buck calls out American racism as fuel for Japanese propaganda. Buck’s phrase, *a violent education*, works on multiple levels and thus encapsulates the expansive and multiplicitous political and cultural perspectives in her wartime writing. Her writing provides her readers with an education in the violence happening across the globe. For example, her novel *Dragon Seed* (1942) describes the violent Japanese invasion of China, specifically the widespread murder and sexual assault of Chinese civilians during the Nanjing Massacre (1937). Her education is also violent: she forces her American readers to confront their stereotypes about different cultures and “othered” geographic spaces and invites
them to reconsider the truth about their own positioning. Her series of “talk books” published in the late 1940s use conversation and disagreement to violently educate her readers to see beyond the burgeoning Cold War propaganda.

More specifically, her phrasing here highlights the tensions about the gendered nature of war and war writing that I discuss in the introduction. Buck places the violent education she is offering on equal footing with those “fighting a war,” suggesting that the typically “masculine” efforts of soldiering on the war front are just as crucial to the war effort as the typically “feminine” home front efforts of education.¹ In calling education violent, she raises the non-combatant perspective to the same level as that of the combatant experience. Furthermore, Buck promotes a specifically feminist education that focuses on internal transformations of awareness, self-realization, and empathy. In her wartime fiction, Buck widens the definition of wartime writing and blurs the difference between categories like soldier and civilian or home front and war front. In her collection Of Men and Women (1941), for example, she presents gender inequality as a wartime concern, repurposing wartime language like “democracy,” “freedom,” and “dictator” to further her argument for equality between men and women.

Finally, Buck’s phrase is helpful because it is also careful to attribute both fighting and education to “people all over the world,” accentuating her global perspective and the urgent need for more cross-cultural understanding. Buck’s authority to provide this violent education is not just as a woman writer but as a distinctly mobile woman writer whose childhood in China and whose travels to Japan and Korea as an adult allowed her to demarcate a space for her writing in

¹ The oxymoronic implication of Buck’s phrase, a violent education, is all the more striking given that Virginia Woolf had just four years previously offered women’s education as the basic foundation for her pacifist agenda in Three Guineas. If, as Woolf argues, increased education and, specifically, increased education for women, is the antidote to the patriarchal venues of war and violence, then how can education itself be violent? On the one hand, like Woolf, Buck sees the education her writing can provide as an important solution to the ongoing problems that war only serves to accentuate, but at the same time that solution is not without its own disciplinary implications and may even require the same kind of violence it ultimately seeks to combat.
the political sphere. Her novel *The Promise* (1943), about the campaign in Burma (now Myanmar), offers a stark indictment of British and American racism and points to how imperialist beliefs and practices undermine the Allied war efforts. Buck’s *violent education* is thus a demand that writing about war must reconcile what a fight for democracy truly means: a fight not just for freedom from fascism but from the gendered, racial, and imperial injustices that plague democratic nations as well. In a review of Buck’s “talk book,” *American Argument* with Eslanda Goode Robeson, Sterling North belittles the “outspoken women” by calling their conversation “often irritating” and “violent in their feminism” (*The Washington Post*, Feb 6, 1949). And yet, I argue that Buck’s often irritating, outspoken, and violent feminism, alongside her anti-racism and anti-imperialism, is precisely what makes her worthy of more serious study.

**Pearl S. Buck in Context: Popular Front Literature and Feminism in the 1940s**

Despite her extreme popularity and esteem at mid-century, scholarship on Pearl S. Buck has been limited mainly to her 1931 novel *The Good Earth*. As a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Pulitzer Prize, and a Howells Medal, Buck’s erasure from the canon appears odd at first (Conn “Pearl S. Buck” 43). Her biographer, Peter Conn, writes that she is “obscured beneath a caricature that belies her complexity and her achievement” (Conn “Pearl S. Buck” 48). Indeed, as a woman who wrote middlebrow novels about East Asian places and characters predominantly for women readers, Buck is easily caricatured. Her extensive oeuvre, however, relates to larger debates about the memory and revision of literary history in the thirties and forties. I argue that reclaiming Buck’s writing from the 40s allows us to better understand the overlap between literature and politics in the period by offering a more nuanced picture of Popular Front literature.
The critical dismissal of *The Good Earth* has partly led to the lack of scholarship on Buck’s writing from the 1940s, but those critiques also offer valuable tools for approaching Buck’s later work. Scholarship on *The Good Earth* has been “caught between two poles:” at the time of publication, it was both lauded for its agrarian themes and honest representation of China and criticized for its simple style (So 54). More recently, the novel has been read through the lens of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which has led to some harsher critiques of both the exoticization and Americanization of the Chinese peasants in the novel. Though these critiques are not unfounded, they have contributed to the “caricature” of Buck as a white writer whose Orientalist stories about China gain popularity over more authentic writing by East Asian writers (Conn *Cultural Biography*, see Vials). While I agree with this critique, I also recognize the significance of Buck’s commitment to creating a more comprehensive network of Asian perspectives, which I discuss in more detail below. The tension in scholarship on *The Good Earth* has shadowed Buck’s later, less acclaimed writing. However, scholars like Richard Jean So, Chris Suh, and Colleen Lye offer more nuanced methodologies for studying the “mediation” in Buck’s larger oeuvre. So reads *The Good Earth* as a “coeval” and “reciprocal” text that combines American and Chinese forms and is equally Americanized and Sinicized by its transpacific readership. Chris Suh argues that Buck oscillates between traditional orientalism and Judy Wu’s concept of “radical orientalism,” which “revers[es] the power relationship between the East and West to portray the East as a source of inspiration to improve the west” (Suh 177). Though Buck’s writing often falls prey to romanticized or eroticized representations of East

---

2 See Jaime Harker’s *America the Middlebrow* for a discussion of Buck’s multicultural middlebrow authorship; Karen J. Leong’s *The China Mistique* on how Buck’s popular internationalism “engaged American orientalism in ways that normalized China and made China more familiar and comfortable as a concept for the public” (56); and Colleen Lye’s framing of *The Good Earth* as an agrarian response to globalization in *America’s Asia*.  
3 Similarly, Harker asserts that while Buck does rely on the “exotic” aspects of China for an American audience, in doing so Buck “walked the tightrope between sameness and difference better than did most middlebrow writers” (110-111).
Asia, her commitment to using multiple forms of writing to critique America’s racist and exclusionary forms of democracy makes characterizing her work in one way too reductive.

The tendency in scholarship to focus most strongly on Buck’s writing from the 1930s reveals the unstable cultural memory and the recent revision of literary history from the thirties and forties. The conservative and anti-communist Cold War rhetoric of the 1940s dismissed the radical writing of the 1930s as anti-modern and overwrought social realism (Balthaser 7). Much work has been done to reclaim the radical proletarian literature of the thirties and the literature that came out of the Popular Front more broadly. Michael Denning began this revisionist history by arguing that rather than an opposition to modernism, the “aesthetic ideology” of “social realism” of the “cultural front” was a “central modernist innovation” that combined modernism with mass culture. Others, like Chris Vials and Benjamin Balthaser, have built on Denning’s work by highlighting the importance in popular front literature of both realism and anti-imperialism, respectively. Not only is Buck largely left out of these revisionist histories, but the writing of the 1940s is less defined in contrast with the radical writing of the 1930s. Though scholars like Denning, Vials, and Balthaser tend to lump this entire period as “the 30s and 40s,” their focus is often skewed towards the distinct radicalism of the 1930s. In a discussion of Voice

---

4 Chris Vials offers a helpful summary of the Popular Front: “The Popular Front was an international social and cultural movement initially set in motion by the Soviet-dominated Communist International in order to combat the rising influence of fascism, and it assumed a life of its own in each national area” (4). In the United States, the early 1930s are typically characterized by a radical proletarian literature that morphs into a broader antifascist coalition with the start of the Popular Front in the US in 1935—marked linguistically by a shift from the “worker” to the “people.” The unofficial pact between Hitler and Stalin in 1939 caused an abrupt disruption to the US Popular Front as many abandoned the cause. This leaves somewhat of a lacuna as to Popular Front literature in the 1940s.

5 Chris Vials argues that Popular Front literature revived and adapted the realism of the late 19th century to create a “mass-mediated realism” that “intertwined class, race and ethnicity into complex subjectivities” (6). Benjamin Balthaser moves beyond the characterization of this period as an “attempt to forge a democratic culture within the bounds of a populist, national frame” in order to consider “how pervasive anti-imperialist thought was among broad swaths of cultural workers and activists” (3-4).

6 Colleen Lye does “suggest that [Buck’s] writing can be situated within the framework of 1930s realism” even though she “did not strictly qualify…as an author of proletarian literature” (208). Lye focuses solely on The Good Earth in her analysis, however.
of America, Holly Cowan Shulman defines the 1940s as a “shifting intellectual and cultural climate” from the more radical, social realist 1930s to the conservative 1950s (7). By downplaying the 1940s, a decade of transitions between the Popular Front and widespread anti-communism, literary scholarship has overlooked the precise nature of the shifts and transformations of this crucial decade. Buck’s writing from the 1940s offers an excellent example for better understanding this transitory period of the 1940s. Her violent education of the war years overlaps with the characterizations of the “cultural front” given by Denning, Vials, and Balthaser. She fully embraces an assemblage of popular forms of media, moving through multiple genres and publication venues to reach a wide audience. She brings questions of gender, race, and class into her antifascist messaging. She undergirds her cultural comparisons with a robust anti-imperial critique of Britain and America. She attempts to redefine democracy through the lens of non-Western geographic spaces. She should be the perfect example of popular front writing, yet her writing after The Good Earth is not studied in this context.

One reason Buck is left out of discussions of popular front literature is that this recent trend in revisionist history has been wedded to reclaiming radical, leftist, and communist politics. Though scholars like Denning concede that the “cultural front” was more widespread than that dictated by membership in the Communist Party, attempts to correct the erasure of the Cold War era have tended to focus solely on the radicalism of the thirties. Therefore, the more complicated and/or transitory writing of the forties seems to be left to the wayside. A figure like Buck appears both too radical and not radical enough. As Conn summarizes, “she was also the victim of political hostility, attacked by the right for her active civil rights efforts, distrusted by the left because of her vocal anti-communism” (Conn “Pearl S. Buck” 48). Doug Rossinow, however, looks to the Popular Front as a crucial moment when liberals and Communists were aligned in
their goals. The slogan became “democracy”—a term that Buck wields in a lot of interesting and sometimes contradictory ways in her writing from the forties—rather than “socialism” (145). In the fight against fascism, the differences between leftism and liberalism became less important than their common goals. Richard Jean So stresses the importance of studying a network of intellectuals whose political ideologies were more fluid given their reciprocal and cross-cultural engagements. However, his discussion of Buck tends to silo her as a more conservative liberal and focus solely on one text, *The Good Earth*, despite the wide range of her writing. If we read Buck’s writing from the forties as a network of texts, we can consider how her political ideology may or may not have developed from that of *The Good Earth* and better understand the broader political context to which she responded.  

Richard Jean So uses the word “mediate” to describe Buck’s writing and political positioning in *The Good Earth*—I think this word applies well to her writing in the forties as well, but for different reasons (So xxvii). The goal of Buck’s *violent education* is to reach the common denominator American reader, and thus she purposefully mediates between leftist and liberal ideas in the search for those shared goals. This mediation risks falling prey to more conservative rhetoric that flattens difference and Americanizes experiences, but it also allows for impulses towards something far more radical. If we reduce Buck to the “caricature” of an Orientalist or a strictly liberal viewpoint, then we miss the very work she is trying to do in the cracks between political ideologies.

---

7 Chris Vials offers a helpful anecdote: Despite making use of realist technique well, the Left ignored *The Good Earth* because of its “agrarian nostalgia” which served to whitewash the Chinese farmers into an “essentially hearty yeoman of the American republican tradition” and focus on individualism over collectivism (125). With the publication of her later wartime novel, *Dragon Seed*, however, Buck was “retroactively embraced by the communist press as a realist” because *Dragon Seed* centered a collective struggle against imperial Japan (126). Vials does not give substantial consideration to *Dragon Seed* or Buck’s other wartime writing, but this anecdote suggests that at least the communist press thought Buck’s writing and politics had changed between *The Good Earth* and *Dragon Seed*.  

139
Buck’s writing is also situated in the gaps and cracks of the feminist history of the period, which I described in more detail in the introduction. Scholars are somewhat divided on Buck’s feminism: Peter Conn and Robert Shaffer argue for Buck’s feminist writing as an impactful precursor to later liberation movements, while Chris Suh offers a more detailed view of Buck’s struggle with “the intersection of gender, class, and race.” 8 Buck consistently distanced herself from the term feminism. In 1938 she stated, “the only reason why I have not aligned myself with feminism is an incurable, and probably mistaken, ilk of aligning myself with anything,” and in 1940, she wrote in a letter, “I myself am not and have never been a feminist or active in woman’s suffrage” (Suh 190). And yet, at the same time that she denounced the label of “feminist,” Buck was publishing her most feminist work, including *Of Men and Women*. This 1941 collection framed the fight for democracy in terms of the fight for women’s equality. Criticized for her ahistorical cultural claims and lack of class awareness, Buck’s feminist writing did momentarily gain the attention of the National Women’s Party, the leading organization devoted to feminism at the time (Suh 177-8; Becker 11). As I discuss in the introduction, the NWP’s uncompromising focus on the Equal Rights Amendment “made it impossible for other feminists to cooperate with them” as long as it remained tied to the status quo of “white middle class male values” (Becker 69). In 1940, Buck gave a speech at an NWP conference in favor of the ERA. However, the NWP reprinted the speech without Buck’s critique of American women or her call to the NWP to pay attention to the struggles of African American women. Buck promptly distanced herself from the NWP, but her work was largely ignored by more leftist and socialist feminists of the

---

8 Shaffer argues that Buck provided a gendered critique of Cold War policy in her writing. Shaffer compares Buck’s methods and political ideas to more contemporary work by feminist scholars in the field of international relations and foreign policy. According to Shaffer, Buck exhibits a “people-to-people” approach to foreign affairs, which focused on “ordinary people” rather than “leaving diplomacy to government officials” (“International Relations”153). This also meant a more global understanding of women’s issues since the “people-to-people approach highlighted the similar concerns of women the world over, seeking to defuse nationalist rivalries stressing transnational bonds of gender” (“International Relations”160).
period who “criticized Buck for believing that women were primarily victims of a ‘classless tradition’ that confined them to the domestic sphere” (Suh 198). In recovering the work of more radical feminists, Kate Weigand explains that the standard narrative presents feminists as caught between the Communist Party, which still maintained “traditional notions about women’s natural submissiveness and subordination,” and the National Women’s Party, which “rejected every goal but equal rights for women” (4). Though Weigand resists the absolutism of this narrative, I think it does ring true in many ways for Buck.

Though her views are not above critique for their blind spots, Buck’s refusal to be categorized reveals her commitment to a wide range of social justice issues that she saw as equally important and interconnected. Stuart Christie suggests that part of Buck’s radicalism has to do with her unique and potentially intersectional politics, writing that Buck’s “ability to correlate otherwise diverse struggles collectively” resembles what has “more recently been theorized as intersectionality” (9). I am hesitant to claim that Buck ever arrived at a practical intersectional politics. For example, though the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) did commend her writing on feminism and race, Buck never associated with or promoted the work of groups like the NACWC as she did with the NWP. I am interested, however, in the ways that Buck’s violent education, in its reliance on her unique dual perspective and her resistance to one-sided or singularly focused activism, prefigures or approaches a more intersectional understanding of the interconnected systems of power that seek to limit and control people’s freedom.

The network of education, humanitarianism, and activism that Buck creates through her violent education reached its fruition in the 1940s. More than anything, this network showcases Buck’s commitment to various social justice issues. For her, the fight for democracy was not just
a fight against the rise of fascism in Europe but a fight against inequality across the globe, efforts that made her of increasing interest to the FBI—her surveillance file was started in 1937 and reached over three hundred pages.9

Buck renewed her attention toward East/West relations with the outbreak of war between China and Japan. She began writing more politically oriented articles for Asia Magazine, which her husband and publisher, Robert Walsh, had taken over in 1934. In 1941, she became president of the magazine and fought vigorously for the increased publication of Asian writers. In a statement on her new role, she writes, “I am a great believer…in people speaking for themselves…Too much is written from the outside looking in, and far from enough is written from the inside looking out. Especially is this true about the people of Asia.” (Conn Cultural Biography 244). In 1940, she reviewed Restless Wave, the autobiography of a Japanese woman, Haru Matsui, who had been educated in America before returning to Japan. In 1941, she urged the John Day Company to publish My Narrow Isle, the autobiography of Sumie Sen Mishima (Conn Cultural Biography 233). Buck and Walsh also founded The East and West Association in the same year, an educational and cultural organization meant ““to help ordinary people on one side of the world to know and understand ordinary people on the other side”” (Conn Cultural Biography 245). In 1945, the East and West Association began a publication series called People through Books, which featured a different book each month, including Carlos Bulosan’s America is in the Heart and Mine Okubo’s Citizen 13660 (Shaffer East West 6). They also managed the China Emergency Relief Committee and United China Relief to raise monetary aid for China’s struggle against Japanese aggression. They were actively involved in efforts to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act, and Buck was among only a few white intellectuals to speak out against

9 See Stuart Christie for an analysis of the FBI’s reading of Pearl S. Buck.
Japanese internment. She was also outspoken about Indian independence and the liberation of Korea.

She became increasingly concerned about the threat that fascism represented for women in particular, and, after America joined the war, she turned her attention more strongly to issues of racial discrimination. In the fall of 1940, she sent a letter to other prominent women, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Bourke-White, and Margaret Mead, expressing her anxiety about the increased gender discrimination that had accompanied the rise of fascism. She had previously been involved in efforts to establish a federal anti-lynching law and to decrease racial discrimination in union organizing. In 1942, she chaired the ACLU’s Committee Against Racial Discrimination alongside prominent leaders in the Black community. She gave the 1942 commencement address at Howard University, urging the graduating students to unite with other non-white people across the globe to demand freedom and equality. As the war continued, Buck, who had always been critical of Churchill’s colonial attitude toward Asia, became increasingly worried about America’s “colonial mentality” (Conn Cultural Biography 290). She wrote to Dorothy Thompson in 1942 that the war was “fast becoming a tool in the hands of those who want neither freedom nor equality in the world… We are headed straight for an Anglo-American hegemony, and a hegemony ruled by reactionaries” (Conn Cultural Biography 269). Buck knew that racial prejudice at home was tied intricately to colonial practices abroad and thus repeatedly argued that an anti-colonial stance was the only way to unite with the people of Asia to win the war. Buck refused to put aside social justice issues in favor of war efforts because she knew how interconnected these issues were.
Rewriting the War Novel

In alignment with her publishing and activist efforts, Buck’s fiction from this period reconfigures the war novel as a tool of violent education to enlighten her readers on the impact and meaning of war in Asian spaces, to critique British and American racism, and expose the way that both fascism and imperialism rely on patriarchal ideas about gender. As I discuss in the introduction, while scholars in British literature have begun widening the category of war literature beyond that of combatant perspectives, scholarship on American World War II novels has focused on a stream of later postmodern soldier accounts (like Slaughterhouse-Five or Gravity’s Rainbow) mainly written by white male authors and focused on “an alienated, seemingly shell-shocked, solitary male” (Foertsch 33; Dawes “American War Novel” 62). Buck’s war novels hardly reach the formal experimentation of postmodern retrospectives. However, I argue that Buck’s novels do their own work to redefine the genre of war literature by reconfiguring the divide between soldier and civilian, a crucial development in World War II literature, according to James Dawes (“American War Novel” 62). Rather than replacing the soldier with the civilian, however, Buck presents a whole cast of characters who are a mix of combatants and non-combatants and who move from soldier to civilian and back again, depending on the situation. She also relocates the war novel geographically, calling attention for her American readers to the non-Western spaces experiencing violence. In this way, Buck reveals that the divides between home front and war front, civilian and soldier, and private and political are often trappings of a Western and imperialist outlook on war. By experimenting with the war novel and in contrast with more official forms of propaganda, Buck can address sexism, racism, and imperialism all at once in a way that exposes the interconnected violence of
patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism and holds Western countries accountable for their role in creating and propagating these power dynamics.

The publication history of Buck’s wartime novels also reveals the complexity of the broader circuits of cultural production during this period and their relationship to state-sponsored avenues of propaganda. The five novels Buck wrote from 1941 to 1945 can be divided into two categories. China Sky (1941), China Gold (1942), and China Flight (1943; 1945) were all serialized first in Collier’s Magazine before being published in novel form by the John Day Company. As a whole, these novels engage a more sentimental or sensational register meant for a popular audience. They all occur in China but center on white Americans living in China as the main protagonists. China Gold, in particular, uses China as a romanticized setting for a young and wealthy white woman to live out her search for freedom and love. In China Sky, an American doctor, Sara, working at a hospital in China, must treat a Japanese prisoner of war, Yasuda, on behalf of the Chinese guerrilla fighters. Yasuda recruits a Chinese doctor and the privileged American wife of Sara’s coworker in a treasonous plot. China Sky was also turned into a Hollywood film with racist changes to Buck’s plot and characters that reveal Buck’s commitment to offering a more nuanced variety of Asian perspectives. China Flight follows the plight of three Americans—a young woman journalist, a soldier, and an older woman in charge of an international rescue for women—stuck in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. They must resist the violent punishment of Shigo, a Japanese commander. Though these novels contain sensational thriller and romance plots, Buck uses the shock and sentiment of more popular novelistic forms to facilitate her anti-imperialist critiques.

The other two novels, Dragon Seed (1942) and The Promise (1943) were serialized first in Asia Magazine, which was bought by Richard Walsh and flipped by Walsh and Buck from a
fluffy travel magazine to one of more serious intellectual caliber that sought to publish as many diverse voices from across Asia as possible. These are more literary novels that feature Asian protagonists and offer interesting rhetorical choices in the way they present the Pacific War to American audiences. The first novel presents a grim representation of the civilian experiences of the Nanjing Massacre during the Japanese invasion of China. The novel is full of starkly violent passages that garner sympathy for the Chinese characters and highlight the cruelty of the Japanese invaders. The novel works to garner American distrust of their newly declared enemies, the Japanese, a goal that is exaggerated in the film adaptation of the novel (featuring Katharine Hepburn in yellow face as one of the main protagonists). In The Promise, however, the lines between ally and enemy become blurred. The novel follows Chinese soldier Sheng and a group of Chinese nurses led by Mayli as they join the Allied forces to stop the Japanese attack on the Burma Road. The Japanese remain the central enemy but are relegated entirely off the page. Instead, the narrative weight of the novel depends on determining whether the Chinese soldiers can trust their American and British allies. Ultimately, the British soldiers abandon their Chinese allies by cutting off a bridge access point and leaving the Chinese soldiers to fight the Japanese alone. No less polemical than the first novel, Buck turns her attention away from the damaging effect of Japanese imperialism and instead offers a searing critique of British and American imperialism and racism.

In The Promise, Buck’s critique of imperialism is facilitated by a diversity of Asian perspectives, many anti-Western, even as they join forces with Britain and America. Buck drives home her argument in her essay collection American Unity and Asia that the Allies’ war effort will be hindered by their racism and imperialist interests in Asia. The most obvious example of this comes from the perspective of the Burmese people that the Chinese soldiers encounter in
The Promise. One Burmese man exclaims, “Between the Chinese and the English, we Burmese are pinched as a beggar pinches a louse between his thumb and forefinger—The English! They govern us for their own good, and the Chinese steal away our business. The truth is we hate you all” (101). This undermines the official image of the British army as welcome liberators of or even allies with the Burmese people against the Japanese. The Chinese soldiers learn the extent of British imperial interests in Asia when they are kept away from the battlefront because “...the English do not want the people of Burma to see you armed with foreign weapons and fighting under your own leaders...” and thus be inspired to fight for their independence from Britain (108). Here Buck illustrates the success of Japanese propaganda and their goal to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which entailed the “liberation of the peoples of the Orient from the shackles of Western Europe.” (Japanese foreign minister Yōsuke Matsuoka qtd in Yellen 4). Buck recognized the kernels of truth that Japan was now capitalizing on—the violence of imperialism experienced by countries like Burma made the Japanese promise of pan-Asian unity against white Europeans enticing. While the Japanese army “...sent their messages over the air in the language of the people of Burma, telling them that they come to free them from the white men’s rule, telling them not to be afraid,” the messages that the Allies send to try to counter this propaganda are arrogantly written in English. Towards the novel’s end, the Chinese soldier, Sheng, is hit by a stray bullet that turns out to be a nail fashioned by a Burmese civilian aiding the Japanese. The Japanese victory is met by celebrations from the Burmese people, “...who were excited and triumphant at the defeat of the white men who had ruled them” (220). In her 1942 essay, “Tinder for Tomorrow,” Buck warns that “...a world based on former principles of empire and imperial behavior is now impossible. It cannot exist” and instead calls for America and Britain to prove to their “...allies India, China, the Philippines, and Malaya” that they are “...all-out
for democracy, for total justice, for total peace based on human equality” through self-
examination of their racism and a promise of independence (American Unity 25, 27). Buck
reiterates this point in The Promise by providing multiple Asian perspectives to show that the
failing campaign in Burma was hindered by British racial superiority and imperial interests.

While the Burmese characters have no interest in siding with imperial Britain, the
Chinese soldiers are caught between a desire to defeat Japan and a distrust of the white
superiority of the Allies. The titular “promise” refers to the promised military support from
British and American forces to assist the Chinese resistance of Japan. While this “promise” could
be a propagandistic symbol of cross-national unity, Buck instead portrays the disagreement and
discussion among the various Chinese characters over whether they should trust these Western
allies. As in her “talk books” discussed in the next section, conversation becomes a tool for more
nuanced cultural understanding. When the “One Above” (referring to the Chinese president,
Chiang Kai-Shek) dictates that Chinese forces be sent to help Britain’s failing offensive in
Burma, the young Chinese soldier, Sheng, discusses the plan with the General. Sheng reacts as a
soldier, ready and willing to follow orders, but the General harbors concerns about blindly
trusting Britain. The General does not wish to “fight on soil that is not our own” and risk treating
the people of Burma the same way the British empire has treated them, but he also fears that the
British army will “not treat us as true allies” (20). When Sheng relays the General’s concerns to
Mayli, a young Chinese woman who spent much of her childhood in America, Mayli disagrees,
and the two lovers fight over whether the Western powers can be trusted. Mayli thinks of “those
great cities and the factories and the rich, busy peoples, and all the wealth and the pride
everywhere” and knows that an allyship with America and Britain is China’s only chance to
withstand Japan. She tells Sheng, “The people of Mei (America) do not despise us…they despise
only the black-skinned people” (31). Though Mayli begins the novel as the voice of faith in the prowess of America, by the end of the novel, her interactions with American soldiers, who see themselves as “White Heroes” superior to both the Burmese people and the Chinese soldiers meant to be their allies, forces her to change her mind (207-8).

The novel’s central metaphor—the promise of the allies to send aid to the Chinese that is ultimately broken—becomes the repeated vehicle of the failure of narrative promise, reminiscent of the failed humanitarian narrative in Gellhorn’s A Stricken Field. Buck continually sets up the encounters between soldiers from different nations with the underlying sentimental assumption that some mutual understanding will form, that racism might be overcome through shared experiences, but such a hopeful promise never comes to fruition. This causes one contemporary reviewer, Ben Burns, writing for the Chicago Defender in 1943, to lament that Buck’s “good-intentioned zeal on the race issue goes so far overboard that she has totally failed to leave any hope for betterment” and instead offers “a dismal, defeatist picture” and “a blow to unity of the democracies” (15). Indeed, the novel leaves no room for any reconciliation—by the end, the British and American betrayal of their Chinese allies is complete. Among the Chinese characters, conversation allows for a difference in opinion and for American readers to understand the Chinese perspective on allyship better. When the Chinese and British characters are put together, however, conversation is not enough to overcome American and British racism. There is one scene in particular where Buck portrays the playful curiosity of the Chinese women about the white soldiers they encounter and vice versa. It seems like a moment when they could bond over their shared curiosity and difference, but instead, the soldiers cannot see past their own prejudice and racism.
Finally, the changes made to the RKO film version of *China Sky* reveal Buck’s attempt to lend cultural specificity to what would otherwise be a spy thriller and romance as well as Hollywood’s investment in presenting a clear-cut and entirely positive image of Chinese-American allyship. A long, drawn-out fight scene is added to the film’s end in which the American, Dr. Gray, fights heroically alongside the Chinese guerrilla fighters. The anti-American Chinese doctor who betrays his country and aligns himself with the anti-white perspective of the Japanese becomes a half-Korean, half-Japanese character in the film. Instead of his betrayal stemming from his experiences with racist microaggressions in America and a desire to see his people gain power as in the book, in the film, his national and familial background automatically allows him to be easily swayed by the Japanese. Additionally, Buck’s version of the Japanese prisoner of war, Yasuda, offers small details that humanize him and make him a more sympathetic character than the one-dimensional, evil character in the film, such as his Buddhist belief system, his love for his family back home, and his remorse for being forced to kill in this war. This sympathetic portrayal of a Japanese soldier is somewhat surprising compared with Buck’s stark portrayal of Japanese brutality against the Chinese in Nanjing in *Dragon Seed* and Japanese imperialist and patriarchal commitments in *China Flight*. Perhaps her willingness to remind her American readers of Japanese humanity waned as the war progressed, or perhaps *China Sky*, published a few months after Pearl Harbor, was Buck’s attempt to counter widespread anti-Japanese sentiment and propaganda. While Buck is not averse to propagandizing, she avoids particularly hyperbolic forms of anti-Japanese sentiment; she maintains the tone while resisting the racist content.

While the multiple Asian perspectives in her novels highlight the complex racial situation of the Pacific Campaign, Buck’s version of the war novel also makes clear that ideas of
imperialism and violence are intricately tied to patriarchal ideas of gender hierarchy. In the first chapter of *Dragon Seed*, Buck portrays the peaceful daily life of Ling Tan’s family before the Japanese invasion of China. The central drama of these chapters revolves around Ling Tan’s second son, Lao Er, and his relationship with his wife, Jade. The couple has been married for several months but struggles to find sexual and marital harmony. Lao Er harbors insecurities about Jade’s desire to be with him. Jade secretly knows how to read and has cut her hair to purchase a book. Eventually, the husband and wife reach a tipping point and finally speak to each other and address the issues each had secretly harbored. Buck writes, “...Who could have believed, Lao Er asked himself, that a man and a woman could come closer together through speech than through flesh? Yet so it was with them that night, with Jade, his wife, and with him” (24). Lao Er’s parents assume that he has beaten his wife into submission, but the couple has found peace through diplomacy instead of violence. What seems like a trivial, slice-of-life story is really Buck’s thesis statement about war and international relations—the same kind of metaphorical comparison between the interpersonal and geopolitical that Rebecca West utilizes in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, as I will discuss in the next chapter. The interactions between men and women are a subset of the same kind of relationships that dictate war and imperialism. Without honest understanding between different parties, the result will be violence—specifically violence disproportionately affecting women.

Buck’s representation of women in her war novels—a rare feature for the genre to begin with—takes on a variety of forms and issues related to the gender and sexual politics of war. As Valeria Gennero has argued, *Dragon Seed* explores “the sexual politics of war” and “the intimate connection between gender and imperialism” by contextualizing the sexual violence of war in a larger system of gendered violence. According to Gennero, Buck employs a “form of descriptive
economy” wherein she describes the prevalence of rape in the invasion of Nanjing but avoids overly detailed descriptions. This allows the impact of the violence to “build up episode after episode, rape after rape, so that, paradoxically, horror is amplified by virtue of the subdued tone in which it is told” (111). In contrast to this descriptive economy, *China Sky* and *China Flight* feature sentimentalized plots about tragic women victimized by the same sexual politics in *Dragon Seed*. In *China Sky*, a young Chinese nurse, Ya-Ching, becomes a tragic symbol of Dr. Chung’s rise to power and desire to emulate Western imperialism. Jealous of the rich and beautiful, Siu-mei, whom Dr. Chung hopes to make a good match with, the unattractive and pock-marked, Ya-Ching offers herself to Dr. Chung. In the moment, Dr. Chung “felt a power rise in him over this helpless woman...he liked power over anyone” (155-6). Ya-ching ends up pregnant, betrays Dr. Chung by disrupting his plan to help Yasuda, and drowns anonymously while trying to flee the city. Whether through descriptive economy or sentimental tragedy, Buck makes clear that there is no real divide between the home front and war front in China and that because of their subordination to men, women are just as susceptible, if not more, to the violence of war.

Most of the war front experiences in *The Promise* are filtered through Mayli’s perspective. The inability to fully categorize her in the binary between civilian and soldier further disrupts the gendered divides during wartime. Mayli insists that she and her women follow the same path as the soldiers, and from her perspective, we see the variety of responses to the sheer violence and meaninglessness of war and death. In a particularly harrowing scene, one of the nurses is found dead by suicide, unable to process the pain and suffering she has

---

10 Though outside of the scope of this paper, Buck offers a complicated and often contradictory portrayal of sex workers across her wartime novels, which is probably inspired by her own interaction with young women fleeing sex work in her early adult years in Shanghai.
encountered. Only at one point, towards the end of the novel, left alone to retreat, do the women become aware of their precarious position. Alone in the jungle, they hear men’s voices approaching and remember their unique danger as women. Mayli even experiences a battle firsthand, when her entire unit, including the doctor whom she works with, is attacked. Mayli is the sole survivor (by luck or the need for narrative plot), and her experience in this attack mirrors Sheng’s battle.

Buck also reverses the expected war narrative by attributing a prominent PTSD subplot to one of the women characters, Sheng’s sister Pansiao. Pansiao reports for duty as one of Mayli’s nurses, but after the events of the Nanjing Massacre, she has regressed due to trauma. Mayli realizes that “she was one of those who would never be anything but a child” because her “memory had broken itself off…for this young girl had learned to escape what she hated and feared, which was this war, and she escaped by willfully not knowing what happened around her” (118-9). This causes Pansiao to lose any sense of right and wrong, often taking things from others without realizing what she is doing. Mayli has to warn the other women to treat Pansiao with kindness rather than anger because she “was wounded in her mind” (121). Pansiao’s desensitization to violence helps her later in the novel. While the rest of the women struggle to care for the dying soldiers, Pansiao’s “little mind had chosen to see no meaning in horror any more. She watched a man die and could feel nothing because she had seen it too often before, and death was part of life for her now. Blood and wounds and stench she let pass by her and she fixed her mind on something of her own” (163). The experience of PTSD is not one of soldiers alone; by describing in detail Pansiao’s psychic injury, Buck reverses American expectations and exposes the privilege of being able to think of the war as something that only happens to men in battle. Given the novel’s anti-colonial attitudes, such a reversal also suggests that proclaiming
World War II the first total war relies on a Western, imperial perspective that does not consider the violence colonialism has already enacted on home spaces and civilian lives across the globe.

The bravery and capability of the Chinese women in *The Promise* are contrasted with the privileged wife of the American doctor in *China Sky*. A fictional representation of Buck’s main arguments about restless, privileged American women in her essay collection *Of Men and Women*, Louise Gray arrives in China in a whirlwind of racism and superiority. She recoils at the sight of a Chinese baby falling, admitting her “disgust” of Chinese people (123). Louise encapsulates the idea that American privilege and racism will lead to fascism. As her husband ultimately concludes, Louise “thought the Orient must be romantic and full of that damned charm everybody talks about. She didn’t expect it to be what it is—work and sickness and poverty and filth and crowds and all this bombing going on” (133). Louise’s perspective is the reverse of that of Elaine Brian in *China Gold*, who travels to China in search of freedom and has the kind of romantic experience Louise is looking for when an older Chinese woman serves her tea and offers to take her in as her daughter. While the bravery of the Chinese people inspires her husband, Louise expresses more of an affinity for Japan, which she perceives to be “neat and clean and ordered,” like her memories of visiting Germany as a young woman (43). This affinity allows the Japanese prisoner of war, Yasuda, to convince Louise that her husband is wrong about the Japanese, inviting her to visit his family there one day and ultimately to join his treasonous plot in exchange for relief from the Japanese bombings. In *Of Men and Women*, Buck argues that the “development of women as human beings” is the “Achilles heel of fascism” (168).

In contrast, Louise represents what Buck calls “gunpowder women.” Louise is full of “restless idle energy” but lacks ambition or purpose, “so privileged that the world makes no demand on her” (*Of Men and Women* 79, *China Sky* 42). Her restlessness, combined with her
racist attitudes, ultimately makes her an ally with the fascist perspective. In the film version of *China Sky*, of course, Louise is made to be more sympathetic and less racist; too fragile to withstand the constant threat of bombs, she turns to Yasuda as a way to stop the attacks, oblivious to her act of treason. In the book, however, she remains committed to her perspective to the end, convinced that “some day they might all thank her” and that “nothing—nobody—would ever get her to say—to believe—that she had done anything wrong in making them all safe” (252). For Buck, the fascist ideology of Japan and Germany is not a separate entity but intricately tied to racial and gender inequality in America.

A final example from the novel *China Flight* showcases Buck’s attempt to illustrate how power dynamics can cut across gender and race while reminding her readers that the imperialism at play in the Pacific Theater results from white supremacist, Western ideas of superiority. The novel’s central tension is between Shigo, an officer in the Japanese army, and a group of Americans living in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. While the Japanese prisoner of war in *China Sky* is humanized through small details of his family and religion and the Japanese invaders in *Dragon Seed* are seen as a brutal, nameless barrage, Shigo’s backstory and characterization focus on understanding his obsession with power and control. Buck connects this obsession to a patriarchal desire for control of women as Shigo becomes fixated on the young American reporter Jenny and holds her captive in an attempt to woo her. At the same time, Shigo takes advantage of having the American soldier Daniel as a prisoner of war by reversing the racial superiority of foreign influence in Asia symbolized by the rickshaw.

Similar to Dr. Chung in *China Sky*, Shigo was educated in America and has spent time in England and Europe—he insists to Jenny that he is “not an ordinary man,” but a “man of the world,” “a cosmopolitan,” and thus “will not take advantage of this barbarous situation between
us” (21, 28). Buck psychologizes Shigo, calling him “a strangely divided creature, half of him man of the world, gentleman, civilized and educated in the ways of civilization; the other half brutish, impatient, cruel” (99). Shigo’s global experiences make him admire and detest both the Western world and his Japanese culture. Jenny appeals to him because they are both “cosmopolitan” while he is disgusted by the “Japanese women [who were] such servile slaves [that] they tempted a man’s foot to kick them!” (11). Shigo’s psychological torture of Jenny is attributed to his desire for “approval and the satisfaction of being liked and admired, as well as feared for his power,” a desire which is a product of the racism he experienced in his travels—“all white people despised all Japanese, he told himself, and groaned with self-pity” (99).

Furthermore, Buck connects Shigo’s obsession with forcing Jenny to love him with the larger Japanese imperial project: “Yes, the Japanese—were they not destined to rule over the world? And he was a Japanese. He was already a man of influence and power, and he belonged to a master race. And as he thus made himself large, he saw Jenny smaller and smaller. A helpless American girl—why should he be afraid of her? Why even did he want her, except for a moment?” (129-30). To win Jenny would also be to win the war—domination is a shared facet of sexism, racism, and imperialism. Thus, Shigo’s intentions and psychology can only be understood by considering all of these together.

Throughout the first half of the book, Shigo is fighting his impulses for domination—wanting Jenny to love him but refusing to drop to the “coarse” level of the common solider by forcing himself on her. Of course, his more “civilized” approach is nonetheless an act of domination. Jenny waits in fear, wondering, “What would happen to her if she did not yield? This was the terror of her days and nights. This was what kept her taut, like a bow strung always from the arrow that was delayed” (84). On the one hand, Shigo’s faux cosmopolitanism acts as a
racist othering of the Japanese as an enemy—he may think he is cultured and civilized, but he will never truly be so. A description of Shigo’s eyes furthers this reading: “His eyes, she thought, so large, so clear, were nevertheless the shape of a snake’s eyes, and the peculiar fold of skin above them made them look lidless when they were open. But his voice was the voice of a cultivated man—as he said, a man of the world” (25). Buck resorts several times throughout the novel to commenting on the eyes of the Japanese characters as a signpost of their villainy—in contrast to the Chinese characters who risk their lives to save Jenny and Daniel. Shigo may be able to speak as a “man of the world,” but his eyes, as an outward indicator of his race, betray his intentions. This racist othering is surprising for Buck and may reveal the limits of her anti-racism in response to Japanese violence against China while also revealing the expectations for popular and sensational writing at this time.

On the other hand, Buck connects Shigo’s behaviors back to Western origins, indicating that the “civilized,” “cosmopolitanism” that Shigo is emulating has always relied on domination in the first place. Shigo is plagued by a self-pity created by white supremacy—“So he was always misjudged by the white people—so were his people all misjudged!” (152). When Jenny ultimately attempts to escape out a window and is badly injured, Shigo feels “a strange sense of triumph” for “he had her absolutely in his power” (131). Looking over her sleeping body, Shigo is reminded of Ovid’s “Pygmalion:”

She was too beautiful to be touched. “You are a goddess,” he murmured fervently, “carved out of ivory, carved out of marble. I have carved you—perhaps only I can bring you to life again.” He remembered some old story he had read in Western mythology of the beautiful statue that a sculptor had loved and brought to life. The strange mystic side of him exulted in making a mystery now of this woman whom, in so absolute a fashion,
he possessed. “I do possess you,” he murmured. “I have the power over you. No one can take you from me now.” (150)

The reference to the “Pygmalion” locates Shigo’s objectification and dehumanization of Jenny and his desire to “possess” and control her in Western culture and tradition.

Buck further connects Shigo’s impulse for domination to Western imperialism in his interactions with the American soldier, Daniel. Instead of traversing Shanghai in his automobile, Shigo presents “a new and shining ricksha” and demands that Daniel pull him. He tells Daniel, “It is quite fitting. Did you know that it was an American who first invented the ricksha? Yes, it was in Japan, and he hired Japanese to pull him about in it…Americans so enjoy the ricksha—pulled by Japanese. Now you will doubtless enjoy it also, but between the shafts” (78). Here, Shigo refers to one theory about the origin of the rickshaw: an American Baptist missionary in Japan, Jonathan Goble, created the rickshaw from a baby carriage in order for his invalid wife to be pulled around the city (Lu 348n5). Though the invention of the Rickshaw is dated to 1869, its origin is less clear, with multiple inventors credited and a possibility that it was invented in Japan and France independently. The rickshaw was introduced to Shanghai in 1873 by a French merchant traveling from Japan and thus was associated with foreign influence, both Western and Japanese (Lu 68). In the early 20th century, the rickshaw became a symbol of Chinese “backwardness” and the oppression experienced by the rickshaw pullers. However, it was also an essential source of income for many people (Lu 67). Buck addresses this in *The Good Earth*, particularly in a scene where the main character pulls a rickshaw for a wealthy American woman not unlike herself. She also promoted Lao She’s novel *Rickshaw Boy* (1937), which explores in detail the life of a rickshaw puller.
In *China Flight*, Shigo reverses the racial and economic hierarchy implicit in the rickshaw by forcing Daniel to pull him around Shanghai with crowds of Chinese people watching. The scene is especially sensationalized, with the reader meant to pity Daniel’s humiliation and, therefore, the humiliation of America itself: “In this daze he heard rifle shots, the slush of the mud in the street sprayed his clothes, but he did not care. He still wore his uniform, the uniform of a United States Marine. It was the thought of mud on his uniform that made him suddenly think again” (92). However, in having Shigo attribute the rickshaw to an American missionary, Buck complicates the sympathy in this scene—Daniel is to be pitied and Shigo condemned. Once again, this kind of power dynamic is Western to begin with, and thus Shigo is only emulating the racist treatment he has witnessed and experienced at the hands of American and British imperialists.

This critique is further complicated by a “silly memory” Daniel retrieves while pulling the rickshaw: “He had gone to the World’s Fair one summer and had seen American boys pulling play rickshas about. He had not liked it then. There had been something degrading in the idea of a man behind shafts, even in play. But this was not play.” (91). Most likely, Buck is referring to the Chicago World’s Fair in the summer of 1933, which offered rickshaw rides around the fair and featured a 2,500-meter rickshaw relay race won by two students from Cornell (“Rickshaw”). A photo from the Purdue University archives shows Amelia Earhart “being pulled in a rickshaw by a college boy” (“Amelia”). The exposition also included a series of bronze portraits by sculptor Malvina Hoffman titled “The Races of Mankind,” which included a Chinese rickshaw puller (Hoffman). The appropriation of a form of transportation that relies on lower-class, Chinese individuals being treated like beasts of burden for a leisure activity in an American setting illustrates the racial and class dynamics at play. That Daniel was bothered by the
degradation inherent in the form of transportation even at the World’s Fair seems overly generous on Buck’s part, a way perhaps to absolve Daniel so that he can remain sympathetic for the readers. In a way, it points out the limits of Daniel’s empathy—he only seems to find the rickshaw degrading when pulled by a white person—and, therefore, the limits of Buck’s readers. This scene is shocking because, in reversing the racial dynamics, Buck forces her readers to imagine Daniel, and by extension themselves, as the rickshaw puller rather than the rider and to confront their assumptions about who does the pulling and who does the riding.

In many ways, what is most surprising about Shigo’s character is that Buck offers this multi-layered critique of Western imperialism amidst what would otherwise be a sensational wartime romance and thriller. Daniel and Jenny escape the clutches of Shigo and are smuggled out with the help of the Chinese guerilla fighters. Buck packages her violent education in a popular form for the widespread readership of Collier’s Magazine and uses shocking and sentimentalized scenes—of Jenny under sexual threat from Shigo, of Daniel pitied by a crowd of Chinese people watching him pull the rickshaw—to force her readers to think more deeply about the origins of domination and control. Her violent education involves a truly populist form of experimentation with writing; she is willing to use any form or style of writing to convey her message.

“Talk Books” and Elastic Politics

In the postwar period, Buck’s violent education involved the creation of a new form, a series of interviews she termed “talk books” that facilitated an elastic use of political language focused on multiculturalism, conversation, and attention to disagreement.11 I argue that Buck

---

11 A sustained analysis of Buck’s essays and speeches from the early 1940s is outside the scope of this project, but it would be interesting to chart how Buck’s use of political language develops from the essays and speeches to the “talk books” later in the decade.
constructs an elastic politics that makes use of the period’s broadening ideas about democracy and freedom in order to make room for difference and multiplicity. Though Buck’s writing from the 1940s is hardly perfect—at times, her singular focus on reaching as broad an audience as possible leads her to use sentimental tropes and cultural comparisons—I am interested in considering how she corrects the mistakes of the past and how her writing and political argumentation develop as she seeks to unite writing and activism.

Buck’s reconceptualization of political language, like democracy and freedom, is part of a larger trend in left/liberal politics of the period. According to Doug Rossinow, the antifascist alliance demanded that progressives “leave the content of democracy vague” and instead see “democracy as the embodiment of a certain spirit, a populist ethos that celebrated the little people of the working class” (184). Though Buck is often criticized for her lack of class consciousness, this Popular Front context helps to characterize Buck’s political perspective better.\(^1\) Richard Jean So has argued that in *The Good Earth*, Buck created a “natural democracy” that located a more populist version of democracy in Chinese history but often avoided discussions of class or racial conflict and aligned itself too easily to individualistic capitalist goals. Indeed, Buck’s early writing exposes the danger of widening political ideologies to such a point of unity that you risk losing sight of the political standpoint to begin with, much as *The Good Earth*’s populism devolves into individualism by the end. However, I would like to give more room for Buck’s ideas to develop, be complicated, and change in response to criticism. Buck’s rhetoric of democracy continues beyond *The Good Earth* but also changes and

\(^1\) The Communist press condemned the individualism of Wang Lung’s trajectory in *The Good Earth*, and women organizers called out Buck’s lack of sympathy for the experiences of working-class women in *Of Men and Women*. Perhaps this was part of Buck’s conservative blind spot. Her literary fame had afforded her a level of wealth she had never experienced as a missionary daughter and wife. She had also witnessed levels of extreme poverty in her travels to China, India, and Russia as a child, which may have made it difficult for her to see beyond the relative ease and wealth of life in middle-class America to the very real effects of the Depression.
adapts. The issues of class and race that get submerged or erased in *The Good Earth* become the very focus of her work in the 1940s as Buck turns toward a more pointed critique of the wide variety of systems of power that contribute to inequality. The shift to a focus on democracy rather than economic class alone had widened radical political organizing, and I argue, through her use of an elastic politics, Buck took advantage of this new rhetorical language to fight for justice based on gender, race, and class. The multiculturalism of Buck’s elastic politics has its roots in her unique experiences as a child to missionary parents in China. Buck’s biographer, Peter Conn, calls her “ideologically homeless” because she was often dismissed by both the left and right ends of the political spectrum. Buck herself, however, named this indeterminate ideological allegiance “bifocality,” and thus claimed her refusal to align with any one politics as a deliberate tactic:

I became mentally bifocal, and so I learned early to understand that there is no such condition in human affairs as absolute truth. There is only truth as people see it, and truth, even in fact, may be kaleidoscopic in its variety. The damage such perception did to me I have felt ever since, although damage may be too dark a word, for it merely meant that I could never belong entirely to one side of any question. To be a Communist would be absurd to me, as absurd as to be entirely anything and equally impossible. I straddled the globe too young. (*Several Worlds* 52)

This “bifocality” is a knowledge of two places at once and a lens through which she could see the inconsistencies created by white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, and economics. During the Boxer Rebellion (1899), Buck discovered for the first time that her “worlds no longer interwove” and that she “was American, not Chinese.” She experienced firsthand the lumping together of racial prejudice: “I could not understand why we, who were still ourselves and
unchanged, should be lumped with unknown white men from unknown countries who had been what we were not, robbers and plunderers. It was now that I felt the first and primary injustice of life.” (Several Worlds 33) Though her childhood as a foreigner had been relatively privileged, the increased and justified contempt for foreign influence forced Buck to confront her racial identity, a confrontation that most white Americans had the luxury to avoid or ignore.

If Buck’s bifocality makes her ideologically homeless, then what I term her political elasticity is also her biggest strength because it allowed for nuance in her understanding of politics and culture. When her family was in danger of attack during the 1927 Nanjing incident, she maintained a balanced understanding of the situation; she calling out the imperialism of both the American military presence that allowed her to escape to safety and the missionaries being violently targeted. 13 Though she would have never called herself a communist, she was not unilaterally anti-communist; she condemned Chiang Kai-Shek’s unfair suppression of communists in China and praised the communist attention to improving the quality of life for everyday people. In a time when ideological factions defined the geopolitical scene, Buck was insistent on a “kaleidoscopic” understanding of politics. To commit to one ideological perspective—communism, feminism, etc.—meant prioritizing one issue over another.

A large part of Buck’s “kaleidoscopic” vision was influenced by the missionary work she witnessed as a child. Peter Conn has framed Buck as a “secular missionary,” with her writing and humanitarian efforts taking on the rhetorical impulses of preaching without the religiosity (Cultural Biography 4). The “damage” of her bifocality also involved a fear, informed by the uncompromising religious views of her parents and other missionaries, of any ideology that

---

13 During this incident, the National Revolutionary Army, the military force of the Kuomingtang under Chiang Kai-shek (and a combination of Nationalist and Communist soldiers), rioted and looted foreign-owned businesses, houses, etc. in Nanjing, then a treaty port. Warships from the United States Navy and the Royal Navy responded by firing on Nanjing.
demanded absolutism. Furthermore, the extent to which Buck became openly critical of missionary work illustrates her lifetime of changing ideas and her commitment to forming her own opinions. And yet, Conn’s explanation of Buck’s writing and activism as “secular missionary” work is not wrong. There is a way in which Buck’s political rhetoric is itself singularly ideological, wrapped around the central concept of democracy and equality for all. Does she replace the Christianity of her upbringing with a liberal humanism? Or does she revise the inflexibility of religious belief by embracing an open-minded and elastic vision of politics? As I discussed above, her “bifocality” approximates something like intersectionality. However, her attempts to write about these intersections often devolve into imprecise cultural comparisons, particularly in her collection of essays, *Of Men and Women*. In her postwar series of “talk books,” however, Buck finetunes these cultural comparisons by interviewing intellectuals from different countries and allowing them to describe and defend their ideas about government, democracy, and issues of gender and race.

In 1945, as the war reached its final stages, Buck turned her attention to creating a postwar world of international peace. These plans included the series of “talk books” in which Buck interviewed someone with a distinctly global perspective. The collective goal of the “talk books” was the further education of Americans on global issues at a time when their attention was already turned toward global matters. The series contained five books total, but for this

---

14 Buck recognized the selfishness inherent in the righteous purpose of missionary work: “And yet I knew intuitively that they were not in China primarily because they loved the people, even though during years they did learn to love a people naturally lovable. No, they were there, these missionaries, to fulfill some spiritual need of their own. It was a noble need, its purposes unselfish…But somewhere I had learned from Thoreau, who doubtless learned it from Confucius, that if a man comes to do his own good for you, then must you flee that man and save yourself” (*Several Worlds* 50). In a rhetorical turn common in Buck’s writing, she locates her religious skepticism first in a foundational American literary thinker, but ultimately in a much older Chinese tradition. Buck’s lifetime was spent fighting the hypocrisies that emerge when “a man comes to his own good for you” and for a world free of such injustices was rooted in her religious experiences as a child.
chapter I will be focusing on the following three. In *Talks About Russia* (1945), Buck interviews a Russian woman named Masha Scott about her early childhood in pre-revolutionary Russia, her experience of the October Revolution, and her time working in the planned industrial and socialist city of Magnitogorsk. *Tell the People* (1945) was a 25-cent pamphlet published with the American Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations in which Buck interviews James Yen, a prominent Chinese organizer famous for his involvement in the Mass Education Movement to improve literacy in rural China. Finally, in *American Argument* (1949), Buck interviews the writer and anthropologist, Eslanda Goode Robeson, about her experiences in America as a Black woman (1949). In these “talk books,” the political vision behind Buck’s *violent education* comes to fruition. The form allows her to recreate her bifocality and her kaleidoscopic vision for her readers. At this point the “natural democracy” of her earlier writing has transformed into an elastic politics or a more multicultural form of liberal humanism that seeks to redefine liberalism in a way that corrects its tendency to erase difference for the sake of unity. If a “natural democracy” sought to unite people across the globe through a shared democracy but risked flattening the differences between people, then this more elastic

15 The other two “talk books” are *How it Happens, with Erna von Pustau* (1947) and *Friend to Friend, with Carlos P. Romulo* (1958).

16 Masha was the wife of John Scott, a socialist writer who had spent 10 years in Russia where he met Masha. He published a book about his experience there, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel*. Peter Conn suggests that Buck turns to thinking about Russia in 1945 because she saw it as an “alternative to empire” as she proclaims in the speech “American Imperialism in the Making.” (Conn *Cultural Biography* 291). As Conn explains, Buck “like many on the left at the time, overestimated the sincerity of Soviet talk about self-determination” (*Cultural Biography* 291). In 1945, Buck’s earlier concern at the violence of Stalin’s purges and the Nazi-Soviet pact turns towards optimism in her desire to find a replacement for British and American imperialism. In the preface to the interview, however, Buck stresses the “uneasy feeling” she got reading a New Yorker article that made her want to know more about Russia and its people (*Talks 7***).

17 Peter Conn explains that though now “a historical footnote” both Magnitogorsk and James Yen’s Mass Education Movement were popular examples in the 1940s because they “offere[d] specific, practical responses to the social and economic chaos that threatened to engulf the postwar societies of Europe and Asia.” (*Cultural Biography* 293)

18 The first Black woman chemist in the pathology department at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, Eslanda Goode Robeson also studied at the London School of Economics and earned a PhD in Anthropology (Ransby 25). She worked as a freelance journalist and a U.N. correspondent (Ransby 25). In addition to *American Argument*, she also wrote a biography of her husband, the actor Paul Robeson, and an anthropological book based on her travels to Africa.
understanding of democracy makes room for difference and celebrates growth by including a wide variety of political experiences underneath one shared desire for equality. Because these “talk books” take the form of a conversation, they make room for disagreement, and, in American Argument particularly, force Buck and her American readers to confront the failures and inconsistencies, what Amanda Anderson terms the “bleak liberalism” of what democracy and freedom mean in their own country.

In the form of these “talk books,” Buck experiments with the overlap between writing and activism in a way that facilitates elasticity in political understanding. Approximating an oral history, the “talk books” are interviews written in prose. Some of them (Yen and Scott) remain closely aligned with the interviewee, with only occasional interjections from Buck, while others (Robeson) have long passages of reflection from Buck that are interleaved with Robeson’s responses. Buck’s recording process is unclear to readers. Did she record the interviews and translate them word-by-word into prose? Was someone present to transcribe the interviews, or were they conducted via writing? Is this her fictionalized account of the interview? In the case of Robeson’s interview, did Buck add her reflections later? Or did she transcribe her thoughts during the interview? How much were the participants able to change or embellish their interviews later?

Buck embeds her liberal humanist approach to politics in the very form of the “talk book.” On the one hand, the format of the interviews takes on a kind of immediacy and intimacy—the readers are pulled into the conversation, invited to reflect on their own related ideas and experiences. On the other hand, an element of suspension of disbelief is required to maintain the accuracy and authenticity of the interviews. A “Publisher’s Note” at the beginning of American Argument, which contains the most interludes of Buck’s writing and ideas,
addresses this directly, stating, “The two American women who made this ‘talk book’ together met on terms of complete equality. They agreed at the outset that neither would alter or censor what the other had said, and they have kept this agreement.” Given the book’s title and focus on “argument” and disagreement, the publisher’s note serves to cement the conversation’s authenticity, but it also draws attention to the very performance inherent in a conversation edited into prose and meant to be recorded.

In tense moments, the interviews straddle the sameness and difference between interviewer and interviewee. In American Argument, for example, the interview is set up so that Buck, on behalf of her reader, must confront the two Americas experienced by herself and Robeson. As Buck explains,

Eslanda gave me great help. Every time I began a sentence by saying, “In our country,” which I did at least once every half hour, she stopped me firmly, “Which country?” she demanded. “Your America and mine are not the same.” At first, I found this interruption irritating. To define one’s terms before one gets a chance to talk is to put a bridle on a horse. But I soon learned to be grateful for it. When I speak of America I have to define my terms because there isn’t one America. Maybe there isn’t any America at all (3). This dialectic, in which Buck must expand and reorient her world view to incorporate that of Robeson, is a crucial feature of the “talk books” as a genre and Buck’s elastic politics.

A moment of shared language in the interviews with James Yen and Masha Scott forms the basis of my argument for Buck’s elastic politics. Both interviewees use the word “elastic” to describe American experiences compared to their own experiences in China and Russia, respectively. To be elastic is “to be stretched without permanent alteration to size or shape,” something that can be “stretched or expanded to suit circumstances,” and “not easily depressed”
or “buoyant” (OED). As I will show below, Buck’s politics in the “talk books” becomes increasingly elastic, able to stretch to include a larger spectrum of viewpoints, which helps explain her optimism and contradictions.

In *Tell the People*, in which Yen discusses the “mental stagnation” of the rural Chinese due to their lack of literacy, Buck interrupts to add, “but we have plenty of that mental stagnation right here in America” even though most Americans can read and have access to radio and movies (31). Buck wonders how to stimulate her fellow Americans to “see beyond our own horizon” even when they can already read (30-1). Here, Buck calls out American privilege and refuses to let her American readers view what Yen refers to as his people’s “mental stagnation” as an “othered” state of ignorance not applicable to America. Buck describes Yen’s response: “James Yen’s brilliant eyes twinkled. ‘Yes, you have a sort of illiteracy, too. But it is easier than ours—call it an elastic illiteracy. You have at least the tool of literacy and that is the first step’” (31). The way Buck notes that Yen’s “brilliant eyes twinkled” suggests a kind of playful critique, even perhaps a way for Buck to soften or prepare her readers for the coming criticisms. Yen’s use of “elastic” here is opaque, perhaps meant to agree with Buck’s observation of American privilege. Americans may be ignorant of the world, but their illiteracy is not from a lack of opportunity or lack of the “tools” needed to learn. There is also a suggestion of agency embedded in Americans’ elastic illiteracy. In calling American illiteracy elastic, Yen is pointing to the way that Americans “stretch” the meaning of illiteracy beyond the ability to read and instead to a lack of cultural or global literacy and a lack of critical attitude to politics. Yen also refers to how they purposefully expand their illiteracy to suit the circumstances or what is convenient for them. A more literate knowledge of the larger world would require a fundamental change in thinking and perception. American literacy is just elastic enough to not severely alter
their worldview; they may be able to read but remain purposely limited in what they are willing or interested in reading about.

The word elastic appears again in *Talks about Russia* with Masha Scott. When Buck asks if Masha believes in freedom, she responds with a critique of American understandings of democracy:

You know, democracy and freedom are such favorite words here in America, but I want to say they are actually very elastic words. From one point of view, freedom is freedom, but from another point of view it is not. I don’t want to talk of what Americans call freedom, but I want to say that from the Russian point of view we believe we have democracy and freedom. We believe this, first, because we have equality of nationalities; second, because we have equality of economic opportunity; and third, because we have the right to criticize (85).

Once again, the use of “elastic” is opaque and makes Scott’s argument a bit unclear. She might be saying that Americans are using democracy and freedom too elastically without realizing it, to the point that the terms have lost meaning. Alternatively, perhaps she is saying that Americans need to consider these words more elastically to include other versions of what democracy could be. She then provides a reasonably specific, and perhaps un-elastic, definition of how she defines democracy and freedom in Russia based on three criteria. Buck adds to the conversation by saying, “It is a new idea to America perhaps, that democracy can be interpreted differently, in different countries.” Here is the crux of what Buck hopes to promote: that Americans be more politically elastic and allow more room for different interpretations of democracy and freedom beyond the American version.
It is likely coincidence that these two interviewees use the same word to critique American global and political knowledge. It is hard not to wonder whether this word might actually be Buck’s. Yen and Scott use the word in potentially opposite ways—Yen critiquing American illiteracy for its elasticity, Scott arguing that Americans need more elasticity in their political understanding. And yet, in both instances, the “elasticity” in question gets to the heart of Buck’s critique of everyday Americans—their insular and isolated viewpoint that allows a continued belief in the singularity and superiority of American democracy. Whether Buck would use this word herself or not, I find it useful to frame Buck’s political ideology across the 1940s. This tension between an elasticity that allows for ignorance and the need for more elasticity to incorporate difference is what makes Buck’s political stances so complex and hard to define. If elasticity involves an ability to be “stretched without permanent alteration,” then for Buck, political language could be stretched to incorporate difference without altering the original meaning. If elasticity also involves the ability to “expand to suit circumstances,” this accounts for Buck’s unique sense of geography and audience. Finally, if elasticity involves being “not easily depressed” or “buoyant,” then that encapsulates the steadfast energy and enthusiasm of Buck’s political vision and activism. However, contained in all of these definitions is the danger of allowing political ideas to be elastic, the threat that comes with expanding and altering: the risk of watering down or weakening.

There is a riskiness to my argument here, in the slippage between the political ideologies of her interviewees and that of Buck herself. But in a way, that very slippage plays back into this idea of elasticity and the goal of Buck’s “talk books.” Her interviewees, rather than Buck herself, become the spokespeople for understandings of and versions of democracy that allow for expansion and alteration from nation to nation and culture to culture. While conversation and
disagreement are part of this form to varying levels of success (as I will discuss below), I argue that the form of the interview also allows Buck to promote these elastic political ideas without calling attention to herself or the elasticity. It makes sense that she would turn away from the more outright and direct form of essays and speeches used during the war, which often fell prey to the simplification of propaganda, and towards the form of “talk books” precisely when the American political sphere is beginning its march toward the “red scare” of the Cold War. A small moment in *American Argument* illustrates the complex political situation that Buck is very carefully navigating. She writes, “For it is always the people who pay, whether in the United States or India. It is dangerous to talk about the people these days because it sounds Communist, I am told. Nevertheless, the people are everywhere and it is true that they are the ones who suffer and pay, whether in the Soviet Union or in the United States.” (116) As American politics is becoming increasingly circumscribed in its political understanding, Buck turns toward conversation as a tool to confront what American democracy stands for globally and imagine what it could mean under the banner of justice and equality. Ironically, part of Buck’s political elasticity involves situating herself and her interviewees outside politics. As Jane Degras puts it in a review of *Talks about Russia* for *International Affairs*: “Mrs. Buck is a veteran in the army of those who modestly disclaim any knowledge of or interest in politics, but continue to write of political subjects” (452). In part, this claim to apoliticism is a way for Buck to center her humanitarian perspective. However, it also creates distance from specific political ideologies like communism that might alienate her readers (or get her in trouble with an increasingly anti-communist FBI).

---

19 Buck’s FBI file was started in 1937 with her association with the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and was added to throughout the 1940s with attention to her international focus and civil rights efforts (Conn *Cultural Biography* 261, 299). Though she had no ties to the Communist Party, she was “periodically smeared with accusations of disloyalty” (Conn *Cultural Biography* 317). For example, in 1949, her name appeared
In the interview with James Yen, Buck turns the conversation towards the relationship between the Mass Education Movement (MEM) and the government to distance populist methods of organizing from modes of governing. Yen argues that “if you want to have freedom to experiment, you must keep out of politics” (56). Buck pushes him on this idea, asking, “What about America, where the people elect their own government?” (56). Yen, however, sticks to his opinion, arguing that even in America, “to preserve your intellectual integrity,” an educational program like his should “make the essential knowledge available for the people and applicable by the people” (57). The language construction here is reminiscent of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which foregrounds Yen’s commitment to creating “democracy from the bottom up” (26). A strikingly similar moment occurs in Buck’s novel The Promise when a young Chinese engineer Charlie, who has recently returned from studying in America, is asked if he is a communist. His reply: “I don’t know what you mean when you say communist…I’m a man of the people…Of the people—for the people” (83). Later in the novel, when an English soldier calls Charlie a racist slur without realizing how hurtful such a word could be, Charlie confronts the soldier’s racism and tells him, “You can call me a communist.” (196). This example unites a distinctly American belief in the people with communism but also plays on American fears by showing that it is ultimately Western racist and imperialist views that force Charlie to claim communism. Similarly, in promoting a program like the MEM, Buck carefully skirts the line between democracy and communism, taking the populism and collective efforts of communism but bringing them under the fold of democracy.20

---

20 In the Review of Politics, Harley F. MacNair discusses Tell the People in these terms: “Communism—or rather, the attempt to develop Communism—is one of the methods adopted by certain groups in China as a means of bringing in ‘Democracy’ at least temporarily. Another means for bringing in, and permanently effectuating, Democracy is that adopted by James Yen” (382). MacNair’s focus on “methods” and the difference between a
In *Talks about Russia*, Buck sets her rhetorical positioning outside of politics from the very start: “I have never been interested in politics, because I do not consider politics basic. Politics, like religion, depend entirely upon the people behind them. It is the people I want to know” (7). Buck’s insistence on being outside politics while also focusing her interview on Russia at a moment when anti-communism was on the rise seems purposefully contradictory. She also makes sure to point out that she has chosen Scott to interview because she wanted someone who “was Russian first not Communist” because “Communists, like all other human beings with causes and religions, put their cause first…anyone with the virus of a cause can suffer and enjoy suffering for his cause. I wanted to find someone who did not enjoy suffering, who wanted to live and find pleasure in life” (9). This insistence on people over politics mirrors the rhetorical turn taken by the Popular Front in the late thirties and forties, but it also reveals what I argue is Buck’s attempt at making politics more elastic. To focus solely on economics and class struggle obscures the experiences of women and ethnic and racial minorities, for example, two topics that Buck steers her conversations with Scott and Yen towards. At the same time, I am interested in Buck’s disavowal of politics as a rhetorical move. She is writing about politics, but given the American political climate of anti-communism, she makes clear her anti-communist stance while also working to differentiate between “communism” as a political or economic definition and the collective and solidarity efforts that she sees as inherently democratic—Yen’s “democracy from the bottom up.”

A playfulness with word choice and political terms becomes a key feature of Buck’s elastic politics. Buck distinguishes a “Communist” and a “Collective.” She writes of Scott, “I

---

democracy set in quotations and one not captures the careful reconfiguring that Buck does in interviewing James Yen. The MEM was a distinctly non-Communist (i.e. non-revolutionary) method of modernizing, however it should be noted that Chinese Communist leader, Mao Zedong, worked as a teacher for the MEM in the 1920s.
wish I could reproduce exactly the quiet pride with which Masha states the fact, ‘I am Collective.’” (11). Unlike a communist, “A Collective has no political theory and belongs to no party…A Collective is one who has been part of a certain way of life, a practical system of economics and agriculture” (12). While Buck remains opposed to the political system of communism (as she discusses with Eslanda Goode Robeson, she is particularly opposed to the process of “liquidation” of dissenters), she is intrigued by the “charming village scene” of Scott’s post-revolution childhood “where the people, as they lived and worked, were carrying out one of the greatest experiments in human history, that of co-operation with one another, instead of competition.” Buck proclaims that she has “no interest in the political theory that lay behind it” but is inspired by the concept of “co-operation, not competition” (43). A phrase that she repeats several times in American Argument, as well. She recognizes that the Russian system is “as different as possible from the system we Americans like best,” but incites her readers to see what can be learned within and between that difference.

What Buck’s elasticity with language could allow Americans to learn from Russia is a system that, at least from Scott’s perspective, addresses inequality more effectively. Buck focuses on the changes that the revolution brought to Scott’s family’s quality of life. Scott describes the changes in her mother: “But Mother took the October Revolution as the liberation of the people and particularly of her. She grew so proud! For after Revolution we had equality in Russia for men and women, and Mother used this equality to be proud with Father” (25). For women, the Revolution meant access to education and increased participation in “village affairs and in local business” (31). Under collective farming, her family experienced more economic and social security. Scott also describes the change in Russia’s multicultural policy, from a series of pogroms and massacres under the czar to a more equal approach after the revolution that
celebrated and included multiple languages and cultures (59-60). Scott goes so far as to describe her shock to discover that America was so uncultured as to maintain a system of racial injustice. Of course, contemporary reviewers were divided on the authenticity of Scott’s portrayal of post-revolution life. Vera Alexandrova in the Russia Review wonders “What difference would it have made had Pearl Buck interviewed a regular member of the Russian Communist Party?” while a reviewer for the Washington Post insists that “her simple, beautifully told story is very obviously not propaganda” (Alexandrova 109; “Talk” S6). This question of authenticity is at the heart of these “talk books,” and yet Buck’s disavowal of politics and insistence on hearing Scott’s experiences of collective living is perhaps the genius of her “elasticity” because it forces her readers to seriously consider the “collective” outside the trappings of communism.

Though Buck never promotes communism as a system of government, her line of questioning allows Scott to claim the democratic elements of the Russian collective. The Popular Front alliance of antifascist nations under the guise of democracy was complicated because the Soviet Union was not a democracy. Thus, many leftists and liberals allowed that “either political or economic democracy qualified one for membership,” and thus social or economic democracy came to mean “a system of social provision, and not...popular control over economic resources” (Rossinow 183). Scott sees America as a bourgeois democracy and is critical of America’s ruling class. Buck tries to define it as a “democracy based on individualism and competition,” but Scott pushes further to say that “your individuals have great limitations. It is only a rich great powerful individual hero who is absolutely free” (86). From her perspective, Russia has a “socialist democracy,” which Buck argues is “based on equality and the general good” (86). Here, claiming Russia as democratic depends on defining democracy in terms of the social and differentiating between types of economic democracies. As Buck does in other work that
compares America to China, she also sees the comparison to Russia as an opportunity to reverse criticism back on America. She questions Scott about how collectivization handled those who did not conform, taking the side of “American interest in the non-joiner” because “the average American does not understand how under your system you guard against the lazy man” (40). Partly, this allows Buck to act as a stand-in for the questions and resistance that American readers might have, but it also subtly furthers her critique of American individualism.

I want to end this section by exploring how Buck’s treatment of disagreement and tension in the “talk books” is part of her elasticity. The more professional and business-like form of *Tell the People* leaves less room for Buck to push back on Yen’s ideas. In *Talks about Russia*, Buck often awkwardly skirts around disagreement. As Peter Conn argues, Buck’s “earnest sense of identification with Masha Scott ultimately damages the book, since she consistently retreats from debate [and] softens her tone” (*Cultural Biography* 296). When the topic of violent treatment toward Kulaks arises, Buck avoids engaging in the heart of her disagreement with communism. Buck states, “‘To us it was wrong to do away with people who did not agree with the system. This is not our way. But we will not argue, please. I wish to learn how it was in Russia.’” Buck’s narration then adds to Scott’s response, “She looked at me hard for a moment, swallowed arguments, and went on.” (46). A similarly tense moment occurs when the discussion of freedom of the press as a component of democracy comes up. Masha argues that America’s press does not serve the people because it offers contradictory viewpoints. Instead of hashing through the disagreement, the discussion ends in concession: “‘I acknowledge that America has some democracy,’ Masha said kindly. ‘I acknowledge also that Russia has some democracy,’ I said, not to be outdone in kindness” (85). In another moment, Buck narrates, “I changed the subject” (49). Are these moments a bit of elasticity on the part of Buck and Scott, a renewed willingness
to see the other’s point of view rather than immediately disagreeing? Or is it an awkward refusal to engage differing opinions? The form also makes it hard to gauge where Buck’s ideology lies in reference to those she is interviewing—perhaps as it should be. At times it seems like Buck’s probing is a form of “devil’s advocate” on behalf of her readers—a way to help them better understand her interviewee’s argument by posing the questions she imagines her readers having. At other times, it seems like Buck avoids questioning further out of kindness or politeness. This inconsistency presents disagreement as an essential part of Buck’s elastic politics but also highlights the limitations of Buck’s efforts at open conversation in *Talks about Russia*.

In *American Argument*, on the other hand, and as the title indicates, Buck moves past this forced politeness—as one contemporary reviewer states, this book “has raised the discourse to the level of spirited debate”—in such a way that offers perhaps the clearest vision of how this conversational form facilities an elastic politics that reaches closest to intersectionality. While in other examples, Buck’s elastic politics allows Americans to incorporate different political ideologies and methods into their conceptual understanding of democracy, in *American Argument*, we see Buck acknowledge the difference and privilege of her own experiences. From the start, Buck admits that this book is a *violent education* for herself: “Some books are written for others to read, some are written for the clarification of one’s own mind. This one is written for the clarification of my mind about my own country.” (3) And yet, anything that Buck learns in her conversation with Robeson is also a demonstration of the process of learning for her readers.

As with *Talks about Russia*, Buck explains and defends her choice in conversation partner, stating that she chose “an American different from myself in as many ways as I can imagine” because “America is full of differences” (2). Though the underlying tension in *America
Argument is their differing attitudes toward the Soviet Union—Buck avoids the topic but then reserves an entire chapter for them to “face Russia”—Buck is still careful to distance Robeson from the Communist Party. In her preamble to the conversation about Russia, Buck writes of Robeson, “She is not a Communist. I would not have wanted to spend hours with her had she been one, for every Communist I have ever met in any country has been a simple person whose thinking was fairly stereotyped” (122). In a surprising experimentation with the form she created, Buck, presumably in a later review process, has a sub-conversation with Robeson via italicized footnotes. Robeson adds a note to Buck’s statement calling out Buck’s strict anti-communism as the “kind of prejudice which we Americans have been taught” and which “staggered me at every point…it proves what a thorough job has been done by the propagandists on many different levels” (122). Robeson goes on to say that “If Americans continue to slam doors around them, against their fellow men of different color, religions, economic and political beliefs, national origin, station in life—why then, very soon indeed, they will find themselves all by themselves in a badly ventilated room” (122). Buck then responds to Robeson’s note with a note of her own, insisting that even if Eslanda were a communist, she would not have “slammed a door between us.” Buck also admits that she still would not have written the book if Robeson had been a communist because “Were you a Communist, you would not be the same person I know as Eslanda. Were you the devotee of a possessive church, were you absorbed in selfish devotion to money-making, were you subject to a military machine, you would be changed. When the self is

21 In 1934, Robeson traveled with her husband to the Soviet Union, and her biographer, Barbara Ransby, writes that “she and Paul got a glimpse of a predominately white society where official state policy stood in opposition to racism and colonialism” (30). Robeson felt an affinity for the Soviet Union’s attention to anti-racist and anti-colonial views and remained supportive of the Soviet Union even after most radicals became disillusioned by Stalin’s violent regime (35-6). During the Cold War, they were targeted by the FBI for their openly radical opinions, and Eslanda was called as a witness for Senator McCarthy’s anti-communist committee, where she spoke out about racism and targeted the legitimacy of the committee itself (32-33). In 1958, the Robesons moved overseas to England and the Soviet Union until 1963.
yielded up to a creed or a cause or a system, the personality changes. It is no longer free.” (123). The change in form—from a conversation in prose to a conversation via footnotes—disrupts Buck’s authorial power as editor of the conversation. Even as Buck added many pages of her viewpoints and reflections in between their conversations, Robeson could read and respond to those additions. Even though they disagree, both Buck’s and Robeson’s responses encapsulate Buck’s elastic politics. Robeson is cautioning against a limited Cold War politics that would automatically pit democracy against communism—Buck’s exact goal in both expanding the scope of what democracy can mean and holding it accountable to what it promises. Buck’s response, on the other hand, in remaining resistant to ideology, exposes the motivation behind her elastic politics in the first place. It is no coincidence that Buck compares political devotion to religious devotion; her upbringing had taught her what harm a totalistic and inelastic worldview can cause. She also draws connections between large systems that seek to control people and thus ultimately hinder their freedom—political ideology, religion, capitalism, imperialism/militarism.

In a way, perhaps Buck is right: there is something shared between her and Robeson that allows the book to work as a conversation that can productively move past “creed, cause, or system” (49). Though Buck also claims Scott as a non-communist, Scott’s connections to that system are strong and perhaps limit the ability for their conversation to go deeper. Part of what makes American Argument different, however, is Buck’s willingness to engage in self-reflection. Their disagreement over the Soviet Union comes to a head over individual freedom. Buck tells Robeson, “I know I would not enjoy living under communism for I am so individualistic that I want my own possessions, from my own toothbrush to my own farm” and that “I, myself, am one of these people who fear communism, at least in practice as I have seen it, because it
demands that one give up too much of his individual freedom. That terrifies me.” Here, Buck’s comments oscillate between a genuine concern over the violence required of communism-in-practice and perhaps a “devil’s advocate” position of American individualism that she imagines most readers occupy. As Robert Shaffer summarizes the conversation, “while espousing a noncommunist viewpoint, [the fact] that Buck wrote such a book with Robeson indicates her condemnation of the Cold War Mentality” (“International Relations” 156). This is the fun of the form—Buck can lay out various concerns and demonstrate the art of disagreement, but in doing so, she ultimately promotes Robeson’s viewpoints just as much as her own.

This strategy becomes all the more critical when Robeson calls out the privilege behind Buck’s concern for individual freedom: “I notice the people who keep talking about the sacredness of individual freedom have quite a lot of it themselves. They are the ‘haves,’ the people who either have what they want already, or expect to be able to achieve it in the reasonable future. So they naturally don’t want any changes made, thank you!” (129). Buck narrates her response: “To this I could say nothing. Yes, I suppose in most ways I am one of the ‘haves.’” (129). Buck ends the chapter on Russia on a bit of a cop-out, resigned to the impasse of their opinions: “Eslanda and I had not made the least headway with each other about Soviet Russia. I respect her right to her own opinion, and certainly she has the advantage over me in having been there. But my doubts remained unresolved” (134). And yet, in the next chapter, Buck models her reflections for her audience, admitting, “I pondered longest over what she had said about freedom. I have never been willing to give up the slightest iota of personal freedom” (136). After reflecting, she returns to the topic again. This is where the tables turn—instead of Buck clinging to politeness, Robeson hesitates to call out Buck, cautioning that “It sounds impertinent when it comes out in words. Buck responds “Never mind! This is just what I ought
to know!” In this moment, Buck forces her viewpoint to become elastic and allows their conversation to confront the core of the issue that might otherwise be masked by “difference in opinion” or “difference in politics.” Robeson tells Buck, “If you will examine your precious ‘freedom of the individual’ carefully, you will see how very expensive it is, in terms of what happens to the rest of our population who haven’t got it.” (150) Buck’s response: “This was strong stuff and I swallowed hard.”

Perhaps this is where the buoyancy of Buck’s elastic politics comes in. She recognizes that from Robeson’s point of view, her ideas seem “utopian” or idealistic, “always in love with great ends” with less consideration of the means—the point on which they disagree. Thus, Buck’s final admission may also be a great utopian end to the “talk book” itself. She leaves her readers with a determined hopefulness:

What Eslanda said about me applies to all Americans. She asked me if I were willing to give up a little of my precious individualism, if thereby all people could have more freedom to be themselves, and she asked me if I were willing to give up some of my privilege so that others could have more privilege, and she asked me if I were willing to give up some of my present security in order to make the world more secure for everybody. Well, Eslanda, the answer is yes. I am willing and I am ready. (206)

Is this the result of the conversation itself? If Buck has not converted to communism, has she re-evaluated the core principles that made her fearful and distrustful of a governing system like communism? 22 As idealistic as it may be, Buck can find common ground with people of “opposing” political viewpoints, and she models that process of elasticity for her readers. In the

---

22 It is interesting to note that Robeson makes a point of distinguishing between communism and socialism: “Now don’t holler communism, because I’m not talking about communism! I’m considering socialism, as a matter of fact…” (150).
form of her “talk book,” Buck finds the perfect structure for playing with conversation and
disagreement by acting out different viewpoints or by entertaining communist ideas while
maintaining the pretense that she would “never talk to a communist.” Under the guise of
apoliticism, Buck has made politics more elastic to confront her privilege and shift her political
understanding without the trappings of political loyalty.

For Buck, the fight against fascism necessitated populist forms of organizing through
writing and education. Her violent education meant combating American illiteracy, of global
issues and political knowledge, through conversation and exposure to different ways of living
and governing. In order to encourage Americans to shift their political perspectives, Buck took
advantage of the many popular forms of media available to her—from sentimental novels to
essays and speeches to a new form of writing and interviewing called the “talk book.” While
Buck responded to fascism with multiple written forms and perspectives, the next chapter
considers how Rebecca West engages multiple genres in one book. Buck and West share a desire
for increased knowledge and a willingness to confront differences. West’s visible process of
thinking, learning, and working through contradictions combats the uniformity of fascist
ideology in much the same way that Buck’s elastic politics remains buoyantly committed to
avoiding unilateral or one-dimensional geopolitical perspectives.
CHAPTER FOUR
REBECCA WEST’S VISIBLE PROCESS IN BLACK LAMB AND GREY FALCON

A journalist, literary critic, biographer, and novelist, Rebecca West was a famous public intellectual during her lifetime. Due to her gender and what has perhaps unfairly been perceived as a conservative turn later in life, her work has been historically underappreciated. However, more recent attention from feminist scholars like Bonnie Kime Scott has centered her work more prominently under modernism, perhaps more so than any other writer in this dissertation. West was born Cecily Isabel Fairfield in London in 1892. Her Anglo-Irish father was unreliable and left the family when West was only eight years old. The family moved to Edinburgh and faced financial struggle, a humble origin that accounts for West’s attention to class issues in her writing. Despite the disruptions of her childhood, West was exposed to an intellectual and political environment at a young age. Her father often hosted artists and intellectuals from both sides of the political spectrum, and as Carl Rollyson relates, “She could never remember a time, she once said, when she did not have a ‘rough idea of what is meant by capitalism, socialism, individualism, anarchism, liberalism, and conservatism’” (Rollyson “God that Failed”). Her first career aspiration was the stage; she took the name “Rebecca West” from the Ibsen play Rosmersholm. In 1911, she began writing articles for the Freewoman, a women’s weekly known for its radical views on suffrage, sexuality, and marriage, and The Clarion, a socialist publication. She became a notorious figure in the press due to her affair with H.G. Wells—she
drew his attention after writing a review of his novel *Marriage*. The couple never married but eventually had a son together. She is perhaps best known for her journalistic coverage of the Nuremberg trials in *A Train of Powder* (1955) and the trial of British fascist William Joyce in *The Meaning of Treason* (1947). This chapter focuses on her work of epic nonfiction, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), part travel narrative and history of the Balkans, part anti-imperialist treatise, and West’s development of a *visible process* in her writing that acts as an anti-fascist, feminist practice that embraces contradiction and considers the possibility and limitation of figurative language as a tool of meaning-making and education.

As a concluding chapter to this larger project, much of West’s life and work reflect the interests and goals of the other three chapters on Gellhorn, Bowen, and Buck. Like Gellhorn, West is using her writing to respond to appeasement and the Munich agreement, calling out the privilege inherent in the pacifism of Britain and America. Both West and Gellhorn are aware of their status as privileged travelers in these othered geographic spaces, particularly regarding people displaced because of war and imperialism. For example, West includes some uncomfortable encounters with young women begging and her and her husband’s attempts to provide monetary aid to the people they encounter. And yet, West’s encounter with Yugoslavia perhaps has more in common with Buck’s personal and romantic attachment to China than with Gellhorn’s harsh self-critique—at one point, West refers to Yugoslavia as her “mother country” (*BLFG* 1). She also shares with Buck and Bowen their critique of empire, mainly through the lens of gender. With connections to Scotland and the Anglo-Irish, West seems similarly caught between the benefits and horrors of empire as Bowen. They both turn towards history for answers: West refers to her travels in Yugoslavia as “a strand of wool that would lead me out of a labyrinth in which, to my surprise, I had found myself immured” (*BLFG* 1089). The strands of
wool give her knowledge of the maze even if she never truly finds her way out. West’s political nonconformity and willingness to critique the violence of communism at this time caused her to be dismissed, much in the same way that Buck was, by other leftist intellectuals. As I will discuss in this chapter, West put a premium on the “process” of political understanding, which often makes her writing contradictory and difficult to “read” according to any one political category or definition. However, by looking more closely at this visible process in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, I hope to better understand what being radical meant for West at a time of overlapping politics and geopolitical urgency.

Though written as a single, continuous trip, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon (BLFG)* is a fictionalized amalgamation of three separate trips West took to Yugoslavia in the late 1930s.¹ In the spring of 1935, West went on a British Council lecture tour to Greece, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia; she went again in the spring of 1937 with her husband; and a third time in the summer of 1938 (Glendinning 164). The book combines these trips into an extensive journey through regions that West defines as Croatia, Dalmatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, Old Serbia, and Montenegro.² West’s guide in the book, Constantine (a Polish Jewish transplant to the region and pro-Yugoslavia), was based on the writer and scholar Stanislav Vinaver, a press officer to the Yugoslav Council of Ministers during West’s visits. Constantine and his German wife Gerda become a running point of tension during the book’s second half, as West and her husband struggle to reconcile their political differences with Gerda and lament Gerda’s effect on

¹ The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was formed in 1918 after WWI. It united the Slavic people previously under Austro-Hungarian rule—Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs—under one state. The country was invaded by the Axis powers in 1941 and occupied throughout the war. In 1945, the country was renamed the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia under a communist government led by Josip Broz Tito. The rise of nationalism in the late 80s led to the Yugoslav Wars starting in 1991, which resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia into what is now the separate countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.
² This digital humanities resource provides a travel map of West’s journey in the book, connecting the place names in *BLGF* with their modern names (Polczynski 2022).
Constantine’s behavior and sense of worth. *BLGF* was not published until the fall of 1941 in New York and early 1942 in London, well after the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia—West dedicated the book “to my friends in Yugoslavia, who are now all dead or enslaved.” At the time of publication, *BLGF* was well-received, and seen as the apotheosis of West’s writing career. However, the book’s cultural impact has changed throughout the 20th century, with West being criticized later for the book’s pro-Serbian leanings and the book taking on perhaps unfair political significance during the Yugoslav Wars in the early 1990s.

West begins the prologue of the book with the assassination of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia (1934), which motivates her to learn more about this region that has become so important politically. She goes on to consider the series of assassinations that occurred there during her lifetime: the assassination of Empress Elizabeth of Austria (1898), King Alexander of Serbia and his wife Draga (1903), and the Sarajevo *attentat* of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife (1914), which led to the start of World War I. Their travels begin with an uncomfortable encounter with a group of puzzling German tourists on the train and continue in Croatia with friends whose views on Yugoslavia as a united Slavic nation differ significantly. In a commitment to an oppositional conversation that Buck would appreciate, West reproduces large chunks of their dialogue for her readers. Throughout her travels, West visits several Easter services, both Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, and indulges her fascination with the symbolism of these two services and the history of religious heretic groups in the region. While in Bosnia, West devotes much of the book to her investigation and exploration of the motivations behind and conditions that led to the Sarajevo *attentat*. She even meets with the sister of the young man who made the first failed assassination attempt.
The book’s title highlights the two most significant symbolic moments in West’s travels. The black lamb refers to a fertility rite performed on St. George’s Eve in Macedonia—a lamb is sacrificed at a rock in The Sheep’s Field. West is disgusted at the violence of this practice and finds it symbolic of society’s shameful obsession with sacrifice, “the repulsive pretense that pain is the proper price of any good thing” (827). West traces this problem of sacrifice throughout Western Christian culture. The grey falcon, meanwhile, refers to a Serbian epic poem about the defeat of Serbian forces by the Ottoman Empire at the Battle of Kosovo in the 14th century, which Constantine recites for West when they visit the site of the battle. A falcon appears to Tsar Lazar and offers him a choice between a heavenly kingdom and an earthly kingdom, and the leader chooses a heavenly kingdom. This represents another kind of sacrifice, equally pointless in West’s mind, as Tsar Lazar becomes a martyr but leaves his people to be overtaken by the Ottoman Empire. In the epilogue, which has a much stronger propagandistic tone than the rest of the book, West connects the obsession with sacrifice (black lamb) inherent in pacifism (grey falcon) with the policy of appeasement taken by the Western countries towards Nazi aggression and expansion. She criticizes her fellow leftist intellectuals for not differentiating between the nationalism of small countries and the nationalism of imperialism and fascism—what Marina MacKay calls a “tentatively post-colonial sensibility” (MacKay Modernism 55). At the end of the book, she details the heroic resistance of Yugoslavia in choosing to fight Germany despite knowing they would lose—in this case, the symbol of the grey falcon becomes repurposed as a glorious insistence on life even in the face of death. The impact of West’s titular examples has been well discussed in scholarship on West; in this chapter, I consider how West’s symbols are

---

There is some suggestion that the epilogue was a direct piece of propaganda commissioned by the Ministry of Information. In 1980, and in response to criticism of BLGF, West wrote to her solicitor about her reliance on official sources “could I possibly know what was going on except through the Foreign Office? Who do they think suggested I wrote a final chapter to my book except the Ministry of Information?” (Glendinning 171).
indicative of her larger interest in the process of meaning-making and how figurative language like symbols and analogies assist and disrupt this process.

That *BLGF* is a book about finding meaning is evident from its sheer length (1150 pages) and niche topic (travel in and history of Yugoslavia). In his introduction to one edition of *BLGF*, Geoff Dyer notes West’s “inexhaustible capacity for self-fueling discussions” (26). Indeed, the narrative encompasses various topics from landscape, art, history, psychology, gender, empire, and religion. Though West’s travel itinerary might be guided and well-planned, her account of her travels meanders wondrously through her thoughts, reactions, and extensive research. In some ways, this reliance on the personal for structure is what makes *BLGF* fun to read. I certainly found myself struggling through the pages of historical summary for the more relatable moments when West argued with her husband, had an awkward bodily encounter with a priest, or watched in awe of the “hard, mechanical magic” of a belly dancer (*BLGF* 308). Marina MacKay pushes back against this (sexist) tendency among “West’s admirers” to discuss *BLGF* in “apologetic terms” and thus either assume the book to be “unreadably boring” or to only “try to access the text’s more private concerns” by reading it as memoir or, in a more extreme instance, marriage advice (“Immortal Goodness” 178). MacKay argues instead for more consideration of the very political nature of West’s writing in *BLGF*, which ultimately highlights how the personal and political are inextricable throughout the narrative.

The tendency towards apology when discussing *BLGF* might have less to do with the books’ readability, however, and more to do with the difficulty of performing any cohesive “reading” of the text as a whole. My interest in West’s *visible process* is inspired by a desire to embrace the difficulty of West’s writing and avoid collapsing her contradictions in service of a particular interpretation. West is careful to make this point herself. In the epilogue, West insists
to a young scholar preparing a thesis on her work that she would make a terrible subject for study: “I had never used my writing to make a continuous disclosure of my personality to others, but to discover for my own edification what I knew about various subjects which I found to be important to me” (1084). It is as if West disavows any claim of BLGF’s public-facing purpose—this book was simply an exercise in autodidacticism, not meant to be read by anyone else. Of course, the rest of the epilogue is pointedly propagandic, meant to startle her British and American readers out of their isolationist stupor and, therefore, clearly meant to be read. West’s self-diminishing insistence on the book’s subjectivity is perhaps false humility. However, it also reveals what might be the only “continuous disclosure” of BLGF: West’s lack of continuity or, more positively phrased, her willingness to embrace contradiction. As Stacy Burton cautions, “to analyze Black Lamb requires asking what complex relations obtain among the narrative’s disparate strands and thinking through their contradictions without necessarily resolving them” (131). Even MacKay admits that “if, as a declared anti-imperialist, socialist and feminist, West looks a perfect subject for a rethinking of modernist politics, there are important idiosyncrasies that make her an awkward fit for a straight-forwardly recuperative agenda” (Modernism 44-5). These “idiosyncrasies”—like her sometimes insistence on a benevolent form of imperialism, her reliance on a biologically essentialist understanding of gender, or her ethnocentric romanticization and generalization of Slavic culture—make it tricky to define her politics in any concrete or consistent way.

---

4 West probably would not have enjoyed John Gunther’s summary of BLGF as “not so much a book about Yugoslavia as a book about Rebecca West” (Glendinning 164).

5 In a discussion of West’s approach to history, Seamus O’Malley offers a helpful discussion of West’s “ethnocentrism [that] ascribes self-consciousness and textual sophistication to Britain or Western Europe and withholds it from Yugoslavia” and her ambiguous attitude to British imperialism that is only lightly critical and mostly absent from the book (158, 173).
As many of the chapters in this dissertation illustrate, such idiosyncrasies too easily become excuses to dismiss people when they cannot be placed neatly into a category or method of interpretation and perhaps help to explain the inconsistent history of scholarship on West. As David F. Farley summarizes, “…recent studies of West have struggled to place her work within either a modernist or a feminist tradition, a doubly vexed project made more difficult by the sometimes-intractable nature of West’s writing, which at times seems resistant to either approach” (153). Thus, scholarship on BLGF has revolved around debates regarding West’s approach to gender, imperialism, and their intersections. Though West has been praised for her early radical, socialist feminist writing—see Jane Marcus’s edited collection, The Young Rebecca—many scholars, including Loretta Stec and Clare Colquitt, have argued that Black Lamb and Grey Falcon marks a turning point in West’s career toward a more conservative understanding of gender. Bonnie Kime Scott attributes this criticism to West’s “consistent recourse to conflictual binaries, her focus upon heterosexual relations, accompanied by ambivalence regarding homosexuality” (125). In readings of BLGF, Loretta Stec points out West’s conservative views of gender. She connects them to her nostalgic interest in nationalism, ultimately arguing that West promotes an anti-utopian vision of “nationalism as the defensive ideology that will save Europe from fascist domination...[through] a nostalgic logic of gender domination” (139). In contrast, Bernard Schweizer offers a defense of West’s radicalism in BLGF. Rather than retreating into conservatism or favoring nationalist liberation over feminist liberation, Schweizer terms West’s perspective a “liberationist” one that parallels the oppression

---

6 Anna Hoag also considers West’s nostalgic tone in BLGF, but ultimately argues that by highlighting the gendered nature of the Yugoslavian landscape, marking it as “representative of sublimated femininity in the form of mysticism and nature,” West is able to “creatively reinvent[] an English environment where women are integral to the national agendas” (159).
of both nations and women (*Radical* 80). Finally, more recent work on *BLGF* by Timothy Wientzen and Marina MacKay has sought to contextualize West’s writing within the political sphere of the late 1930s. Wientzen offers a reading of West’s nationalism as an “embodied” collective experience that starkly contrasts the tradition-less nationalism of fascism (Wientzen 108). MacKay situates West’s political views alongside her contemporaries—a context in which “the right-left lines were certainly starting to look blurrier,” and Britain’s status as a global empire had already begun deteriorating (*Modernism* 57). Such contextualization helps address West’s contradictions as a reminder that political categories like “left” and “right” are not as discrete as they seem and that discourses of thought about gender, imperialism, or fascism circulated widely among and between political allegiances and ideologies.

West’s views on gender and imperialism are worth reconsideration—not because I want to determine whether West was truly feminist or not, or whether and why she might have become increasingly conservative in her later years—but because trying to tease out the connections she is attempting and sometimes failing to make between imperialism, fascism, and patriarchy will reveal the “process” of her autodidactive project. In reality, West’s writing in *BLGF* is sometimes “liberationist” and sometimes “anti-utopian” or “nostalgic,” sometimes she responds in anger and disappointment at the violence caused by empire, and sometimes she can’t help but nostalgically defend a previous version of British imperialism. At times she offers a direct and fierce feminist insistence on the essential role women should play in public affairs, and, yes, there are moments that she falls into what Stec terms “feminist despair” (192). On the one hand, West’s writing and viewpoint seem overly allegiant to great binaries—something that would undoubtedly set her against more contemporary feminist and queer theory work that seeks

---

7 Phyllis Lassner also offers a counter narrative to West’s supposed conservative turn by analyzing depictions of the fascist threat and the Jew in West’s work from the 1930s and 1940s (“Shadowy Other”).
to disrupt such binaries. Is it possible, however, that her own “process” and “contradictions” offer their own feminist ruptures? What might we find by attending to West’s movement between categories, her juxtaposition of opposing views, and her willingness to share all manner of thoughts still in development and reactions that cannot be succinctly summarized?

**Visible “Process” as Radical Practice?**

I want to offer West’s own word—“process” and, more specifically, a “process” made visible—as a way of reading West’s writing and characterizing the kind of reading and interpretative work West does in *BLGF*. In his introduction to the book, Geoff Dyer notes that “process” becomes a “key word” for West (26). The word appears most memorably when West and her husband discuss their infuriating travel companion, Gerda, by concluding that she “has no sense of process” (*BLGF* 799). The word, however, appears repeatedly throughout the book—to describe the processes of life that West believes are more available and visible in Yugoslavia or to comment on the processes of history that have led to today. It is part of West’s early declaration of the entire project: “I had come to Yugoslavia because I knew that the past has made the present, and I wanted to see how the process works” (*BLGF* 54). Given that, as a 1,000-plus page tome, *BLGF* relies on a kind of “show your work” style of thought and writing, it is unsurprising that scholars are united in recognizing West’s willingness to expose her process and her reliance on contradiction.8 I would like to dig deeper into how West formulates a visible *process* as a practice of feminist, anti-fascist writing that makes room for inconsistencies. This

---

8 David Farley writes that West “refines her ideas though a process that precludes either the priority of the eye or the mind, of either the concrete or the abstract, of either the deductive or the inductive” (132). Carl Rollyson argues that “no single opinion she offers should be viewed in isolation, no thesis need mar her novel of history. She writes, in short, a self-correcting masterpiece” (*Literary Legacy* 209). Debra Rae Cohen writes that West “depicts her own process as necessarily interactive, intertextual, intergeneric” (156). Lassner looks to West’s “zigzagging process of her thinking” as emblematic of the fact that “process for West is never linear, but recursive, questioning, and it even demolishes earlier conclusions whose pieties turn into dogma when taken for granted as truth” (“Shadowy Other” 44).
chapter considers how West understands her process in *BLGF* as a counter to fascist lack of process. I also put forth my own definition of West’s *visible process* as an act of interpretation that actively seeks pleasure in the facilitative yet inexact power of figurative language as a tool of education and understanding. West’s writing is full of idiosyncrasies because she is willing to show us her process, including the moments when she disagrees with herself or is unable to fully embrace her otherwise feminist, antifascist goals. Her writing is also full of figurative language—metaphors, analogies, symbols—and she uses these to interrogate the process of meaning-making and the relationship between traditional forms of epistemology and patriarchal and imperialist agendas.

Before I turn to how West conceptualizes her process, I would like to consider how the multiform genre of *BLGF* enables her *visible process*. Debra Rae Cohen argues that West’s “palimpsestic use of genre” is a distinctly intermodernist form of writing that “renders structural the thematics of her anti-fascist, anti-imperial critique” (152). If fascist thought is monolithic and prescribed, then West fully embraces an anti-fascist “perpetually self-revising process of understanding” (157). West’s use of the travel narrative genre is the most obvious example of experimentation that makes room for her process. Such a sprawling account of travel becomes an education in itself. Rather than an education bound by facts and information like a textbook, it is a personal process of knowledge gathering that reflects the raw complexities of actual people in the world. The whole point of a travel narrative is to describe the process of getting from one place to another, so it is only fitting that in describing her physical process of travel, West can better write out her metaphysical process of thought and understanding. Thus, symbols, metaphors, and ideas can build and layer on each other as she travels, they can change meaning as she observes and witnesses more things, and they can end up meaning more than one thing by
the end of her project. There is also an element of fictionalization underpinning \textit{BLFG}. West combines multiple trips into one, reproduces pages of conversations as if verbatim, and often uses herself and her husband as “characters” to make a point. There is tension between the facade of spontaneity that the book as a travel narrative presupposes and the organizational fictionalization that West applies to the book to make it cohesive. The fact that West still allows the book to be full of honest thought and contradiction illustrates how deliberately West was guided by process; West wrote her own process into the book on purpose. The idea of a \textit{visible process} that I examine in what follows depends on and is constantly in conversation with West’s broad interest in multiple genres like travel writing, historical studies, philosophical musings, etc.

I am also interested, however, in the more minute ways that West’s process appears on the sentence level, in figurative language that often responds to and expands the conventions of these genres and modes of writing.

For West, art is a political necessity, but only an art that makes room for process instead of ideology, thus allowing room for re-interpretation. In the epilogue, West recapitulates the political purpose of the rest of \textit{BLGF}:

An artist is goaded into creation on this level by his need to resolve some important conflict, to find out where the truth lies among divergent opinions on a vital issue. His work, therefore, is often a palimpsest on which are superimposed several incompatible views about his subject; and it may be that which is expressed with the greatest intensity, which his deeper nature finds the truest, is not that which has determined the narrative form he has given to it. The poem of the Tsar Lazar and the grey falcon tells a story which celebrates the death-wish; but its hidden meaning pulses with life. (1145)
Though West’s epilogue argues for military intervention and against appeasement, she also argues that “creation” is inspired by the need to “resolve some important conflict.” Through art, one can sift through “divergent opinions” to find “the truth.” For West, however, those “divergent opinions”—indeed an understatement of the worldwide political scene of the late 1930s—while unsustainable, are a crucial part of the process. Only by wading through the “palimpsest” of “several incompatible views” can the artist find a truth to settle on, and sometimes that “truth” is unexpected or even the opposite of the given “narrative form.” West is formulating a “reading” practice that depends on a “process” of reading contradictions and making room for them to mean something other than they seem to mean. As the last sentence points to, this kind of reading practice is most evident in her overarching discussion of the black lamb and grey falcon as guiding and ultimately misleading symbols of Western thought. West’s epilogue concludes with a reclamation of the grey falcon imagery in light of Yugoslavia’s decision to fight and lose against Nazi Germany—in this case, rather than a symbol of pacifism, the grey falcon gets rewritten as a symbol of continued resistance in the face of overwhelming defeat. As much as West calls attention to the sedimentation of these symbols and their bolstering of patriarchal and imperial ideas of sacrifice, she also leaves room for them to be re-interpreted to mean something else.

In a 1940 essay for the collection, *I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Twenty-Three Eminent Men and Women of Our Time* (to which Pearl S. Buck also contributed), West refines this idea of process, connecting it to a philosophy of pleasure. She presents her “I Believe” essay in opposition to a belief in any “creed:”

I have, as I have said, no faith, in the sense of a store of comforting beliefs. But I have faith in a process, in a particular process that is part of the general process of life, though
it is sometimes annulled by it. I find an ultimate value in the efforts of human beings to do more than merely exist, to choose and analyze their experiences and by the findings of that analysis help themselves to further experiences which are of a more pleasurable kind (West “I Believe” 372-3).

West replaces the “comforting beliefs” that seem to circulate too easily during wartime with “process,” particularly a process that involves actively seeking pleasure. To have faith in a belief or creed is passive—it falls in the realm of “merely exist[ing]”—but to have faith in a “process” is to be active, to “choose,” “analyze,” and “further” a very particular kind of experience—a pleasurable one. West’s process then is a mode of interpretation that seeks pleasure, something not so far from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reparative reading: a “desire” that is “additive and accretive,” that “wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (150). Though West certainly makes use of more paranoid forms of interpretation—particularly in her long-form investigation of the Sarajevo attentat or her suspicious reading of the symbolism of the black lamb and the role of sacrifice in Western theology—the “palimpsest” of her project as a whole, the way that she looks to Yugoslavia as an example of survival, and her desire to seek out answers to the problems of patriarchy and imperialism illustrate her embrace of the reparative. Though there are times when West gives into “feminist despair,” I argue that her method of visible process is ultimately reparative; as Sedgwick writes, “it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices” (Stec 192; Sedgwick 150).

West presents this process of “choosing” and “analyzing” towards pleasure in stark contrast to fascism’s lack of process. West sets up this contrast from the beginning in her discussion of the assassination of Empress Elizabeth of Austria by the Italian anarchist Louis
Luccheni in 1898 (when West was six years old). West proclaims that “Luccheni has got on well in the world,” drawing a throughline of discontent and violence between Luccheni and Mussolini while also describing the difference in “magnitude” of the fascism of the late 1930s and the anarchism that came previously (17). The “modern representative” of this kind of violence “has struck down power itself by assuming itself and degrading its essence,” a “cancellation of process in government [that] leaves…an empty violence that must perpetually and at any cost outdo itself” (18). Without process, fascism is an endless perpetuation of “empty violence.” In contextualizing BLFG within prominent discourses about Pavlovian reflex theories, Timothy Wientzen connects West’s characterization of fascism as lacking process to her understanding of nationalism as “a shared, bodily susceptibility to stimuli” such as material culture. Thus, Wientzen argues that West “sees fascism as the attempt to manufacture new, facile traditions without regard to the organization practices of its citizens and the long, shared history of the nation” and is a direct result of rapid modernization (127). This is the same “new hereditary” that lures Robert into treason in Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day, though, as Wientzen illustrates, this manufactured new tradition is an illusion. The “cancellation of process” inherent in fascism exposes the sham of its obsession with nationalism. In contrast, Yugoslavia’s visible process indicates a more authentic (according to West) nationalism based on shared experiences.

The fascist “lack of process” is represented on a more interpersonal level through the character of Gerda, who, as West’s husband rants for several pages, “has no sense of process” (799). Interestingly, West attributes this moment of philosophizing about fascism to her husband, though the extent to which she quotes him suggests that the ideas are all, or in part, West’s. As I noted above, the reproduction of long passages of dialogue attributed to one character exposes the fictionality of BLGF. This feature contributes to the book’s obsession with process and marks
the passage about Gerda and process as crucial. Gerda lacks process, but West and her husband, by having a long conversation in which they attempt to understand why Gerda is the way she is, are overflowing with process. Gerda, on the other hand, “wants the result without doing any of the work that goes to make it” (802). Gerda’s lack of process appears in different forms. On the level of friendship, she desires to travel with them but “does not make the slightest effort to like [them].” In terms of economics, she is entirely oblivious to the means of production and has “forgotten that everything which is not natural is artificial and that artifice is painful and difficult” like looking at a loaf of bread and ignoring the process that is required to make the loaf of bread. In one example that West finds particularly offensive, Gerda unintentionally ruins the Easter celebration by impatiently handing out eggs to the children, a ritual reserved for the priest. She does not understand the spiritual meaning of waiting for and finally receiving an egg from the priest. Gerda’s lack of process makes her a terrible travel companion, but it also makes her dangerous. She has “the conqueror’s point of view” that comes with ignoring the capitalist and imperial processes that allowed for her success and being overcome by “a terror of losing the results of process, which are all they know about” (800). Though West and her husband want to view Gerda as an isolated process, they both know that “she is an international phenomenon” (803). Thus, Gerda as a character becomes symbolic of the war brewing in Europe. Furthermore, Gerda’s effect on her Jewish husband Constantine makes clear what will result from those like Gerda. West writes of Constantine: “It was as if in his abandonment to Gerda’s nihilism he had withdrawn his consent to every integrating process, even to the circulation of his blood” (836). What starts as a lack of processes in a theoretical understanding of the world becomes, for Constantine, a lack of the very literal vital processes of his own body.
If Gerda represents the resulting fascist thought from the admixture of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism without process, then West sets up her commitment to process in *BLGF* in opposition to fascism. I would like to fully claim West’s *visible process* as a radical, feminist, anti-fascist, and anti-imperial practice. However, on some level, such a claim would go against the intention of making such a process visible and reparative. In showing her process, West also reveals the moments when she is not feminist, when her thinking might seem to overlap with fascist ideas, and when she is still invested in the idea that imperialism could be benevolent or necessary. West demands that we find pleasure not in the clarity or uniformity of a set ideological vision but in the messiness of figuring out what we believe beyond the accessible and readily available “comforting beliefs.” The rest of this chapter is motivated by West’s messiness, inability to be categorized, and her contradictions and ambiguities. In the following sections, I analyze how, through this *visible process*, West forces her reader to consider (1) how we come to know about the past through education, (2) how we configure the geopolitical as analogous to the interpersonal, (3) how we create symbols and who or what we choose to symbolize, and (4) how contradiction is a necessary part of making meaning of the world around us.

**Disrupting the Process of Education**

West’s sense of process in *BLGF* involves a feminist rewriting of the traditionally masculine process of history and its recording and retelling. West is well aware that history is cemented and recapitulated by those in power, which has historically and globally been men. She makes this clear through an aside that showcases both her wit and her complexity. At Salonae she admits that “the sum does not work out” and writes to a group of young school girls:
Remember, when the nuns tell you to bewail of the deceptions of men who make love to you, that the mind of man is on the whole less tortuous when he is love-making than at any other time. It is when he speaks of governments and armies that he utters strange and dangerous nonsense to please the bats at the back of his soul. This is all to your disadvantage, for in love-making you might meet him with lies of equal force, but there are few repartees that the female governed can make to the male governors (166).

Though West is being facetious, she uses humor to highlight the tragic unfairness of the inferiority of women in public/political spheres. Though the joke might undermine the damage done to women in sexual and romantic relationships with uneven power dynamics, it also highlights how an obsession with a purity culture can often obscure the fundamental inequality that women face on the grounds of politics and government. The humor opens up space for imagining what society might be able to avoid ruining and instead build if women were given equal power to men. Instead, men continue to be the “governors” that lead countries to war, and the “process” of history as inherently patriarchal and imperial remains unchanged.⁹

These ironic quips help to set up one of the larger goals of \textit{BLGF}: to interrogate these historical processes-turned-dominant narratives through gender parity. Feminist goals and geopolitical ones are not separate for West, but rather have always been tied together. West argues that women need a more active role in the political sphere. The best way to achieve this is through education and an understanding of history that subverts the masculinist tradition. As Marina MacKay has argued, this is not so different from Virginia Woolf’s argument in \textit{Three

---

⁹A similar quip occurs while discussing the writer Gabriele D’Annunzio, whose militaristic efforts at Italian nationalism came at the expense of the people living in the region on the Dalmatian coast where West visits. West writes, “All this is embittering history for a woman to contemplate. I will believe that the battle of feminism is over, and that the female has reached a position of equality with the male, when I hear that a country has allowed itself to be turned upside-down and led to the brink of war by its passion for a totally bald woman writer….Here in Fiume the bald author had been allowed to ruin a city: a bald-headed authoress would never be allowed to build one” (124).
Guineas, and it certainly prefigures later feminist arguments like Adrienne Rich’s “Claiming an Education” or Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture feminine* (MacKay “Lunacy of Men” 141). West’s desire to subvert masculine traditions in education and language matches Cixous’s call that “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (319). In her 1,000-page epic work, West is “seizing the occasion to speak” for herself and for the women she encounters in her travels (Cixous 323).

West presents this educational framework for the rest of *BLGF* almost immediately in the prologue by setting up a binary between “female idiocy” and “male lunacy,” but her use of metaphorical language undoes the essentialism of her own binary. While lying in a hospital bed, West hears the news of King Alexander of Yugoslavia’s death and understands not only the global ramifications of his death but what it will mean for women like herself, mainly that: “air raids unprecedented by declaration of war would send us and our loved ones to the next world in the breachless unity of scrambled eggs” (3). The nurse, however, is surprised at West’s consternation, asking West if she had known the King of Yugoslavia, for in her mind, a personal connection could only account for the level of West’s distress. From that encounter, West develops one of the central binaries of the book, female idiocy and male lunacy:

Her question made me remember that the word “idiot” comes from a Greek root meaning private person. Idiocy is the female defect: intent on their private lives, women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain. It is no worse than the male defect, which is lunacy; they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outlines of every object but not the details indicative of their nature (*BLFG* 3).
This is one of the inherent tragedies of total warfare—women are destined to the same “breachless unity of scrambled eggs” as everyone else but have no say in the public affairs that lead to war in the first place. The difficulty with arguments like these, of course, is their tendency to rely on gender essentialism by offering “feminine” powers of nurturing or creativity as the antidote to the “masculine” powers of violence and destruction. MacKay suggests, however, that “we would want to avoid using West’s apparent essentialism about gender roles (idiots and lunatics) as a way to re-domesticate her arguments” (“Lunacy of Men” 128). Indeed, though West is creating a gendered binary, her language carefully exposes the way that, though such divides may seem biologically natural and therefore determined, they are learned, and thus can be unlearned.

This subtle difference hinges on West’s metaphor in the above quote. Women are rendered “idiots” because they “follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain.” The language here encapsulates West’s use of contradiction—it is the “fate” of women to be cast in the darkness of idiocy, and yet they “follow” that fate which implies some element of agency or choice. The darkness is “deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain,” which suggests the finality of biology but only through metaphorical relationality—female idiocy is not directly caused by malformed cells in the brain, but it is a darkness that is just as deep, one that appears as evolutionary, but is in fact not. Similarly, the contrast between the darkness of female idiocy and the shadowed moonlight of male lunacy implies that both parties have room to be enlightened, to better see the details of the world around them. Though West’s typology might seem fixed, her figurative language makes room to think beyond and against the types she has created.
Later in the prologue, West admits her female idiocy in having no recollection of the portentous assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Sarajevo assassinat, and sets the stage for the rest of the book as an action to remedy female idiocy. West writes, “I was then very busy being an idiot, being a private person, and I had enough on my hands. But my idiocy was like my anaesthetic. During the blankness it dispensed I was cut about and felt nothing, but it could not annul the consequences. The pain came afterwards” (13-14). Once again, simply because of her social status as a woman, West is “busy being an idiot,” but that condition is not permanent. West once again turns to simile to say that her ignorance is “like anaesthetic:” it eventually wears off, and just because she was rendered oblivious to the situation, it does not mean she is immune to the consequences. This moment of self-admission casts the entirety of BLGF in a new light. West’s indulgence in genre, her turn toward the minuitiae of history, and her outward and public exercise in the learning process is also a journey of self-enlightenment. Left out of the significance of the Sarajevo assassinat and Yugoslavia more generally, West seeks to remedy her female idiocy by turning to the historical, much like how Elizabeth Bowen attempts to confront her family’s complicity through the study of English-Irish relations. It is no coincidence that a large chunk of the book involves West’s careful explanation and investigation into the motivations behind the assassination. Furthermore, West makes a point of meeting with and interviewing the sister of one of the assassins. For West, not only is it necessary for women to wake up from their idiocy, but they should do so in a way that does not repeat or play into the power structures created by male lunacy. As I will discuss in more detail below, part of West’s educational method involves considering and bringing to the forefront the viewpoints of women throughout history.
West’s goal of breaking the pattern of female idiocy through a process of education connects her feminist and anti-imperialist critiques. This is made most apparent when West visits Salonae, the remains of a Roman City, and is joined in her tour by a large group of “little girls, aged from twelve to sixteen, in the care of two or three nuns” (163). West finds the young girls more agreeable than their English counterparts, but the sight of the schoolgirls also leads into a long reflection about education. While Woolf argues in *Three Guineas* for the importance of educating girls as part of working towards global peace, West argues here for how girls should be educated. She worries that the young girls at Salonae “were receiving an education with a ‘masculine bias’” (163). For West, this has little to do with the gender of their teachers, for “they were being educated by nuns, who are women who have accepted the masculine view of themselves and the universe, who show it by being the only members of their sex who go into fancy dress and wear uniforms as men love to do” (163). Instead, the “monstrous male rubbish” being instilled in them has to do with a patriarchal and imperialist understanding of history, particularly the history of the Roman Empire. In a decidedly non-essentialist understanding of patriarchal systems, West acknowledges how women, like the nuns, can play into, benefit from, and recapitulate a patriarchal standpoint. West reflects on her education in Scotland and the fact that she learned Latin and not Greek, a discrepancy that she argues contributes to an unfair view of the Roman Empire and the workings of empires in general. She was taught about the Roman Empire “with far more emphasis than was justified by the facts...that the Roman Empire was a vast civilizing force which spread material and moral well-being all over the ancient world by its rule” (164). West points to the lack of “real evidence that the peoples on which the Roman Empire imposed its civilization had not pretty good civilizations of their own.” (164). She even goes as far as to compare the “posterity” of the Roman Empire to current events: “posterity
might doubt the existence of our contemporary French and English culture if the Nazis destroyed all records of them” (164). The question of what the young girls are being taught is directly related to how we remember the past, particularly a past full of colonization and imperial rule. An essential step towards anti-imperialism and anti-fascism involves disrupting how we record and teach history. West’s insistence on being attentive to process—of how the Roman Empire came to be and who was there before—starkly contrasts a fascist lack of process that depends on destroying any evidence of change or disagreement.

West disrupts historical accounts by shifting the focus to the influence of the women who have been forgotten. While Bowen embeds minor feminist interruptions into her account of English/Irish history in *Bowen’s Court*, West’s fascinations with women in history take on a fuller force and serve to underpin her overarching desire to lessen the anesthesia of female idiocy. West remarks, “It has always interested me to know what happens after the great moments in history to the women associated by natural ties to the actors...they are things you are never told” (*BLGF* 418). Thus, though she consults the records and historiographies surrounding the Sarajevo attentat, she also interviews the sister of Chabrinovitch, the young man who made the first assassination attempt on Archduke Franz Ferdinand and gives the sister’s experiences and interpretations the same weight and importance as that of scholars. Loretta Stec argues that West “does not consider the possibility that women might rather band together in the face of a common enemy and resist” (151). As I will discuss below, there are moments when West takes such a bleak outlook. In looking at exceptional women in history, however, West highlights the important governing and even military role that exceptional women have played in historical events, suggesting that gender roles have not always been fixed and thus do not have to continue so. For example, West discusses Empress Elizabeth and commends her “statesmanship” in
developing the idea for the “dual monarchy” of Austria and Hungary and wonders what might have happened in the region if Elizabeth had been given a chance to rule beyond the confines of her marriage, which when it went south also disconnected her from matters of governance. West is also entranced by the “military exploits” of Jeanne Merkus, “one of the most engaging figures in the margin of the nineteenth century” (BLGF 271-2). West explains Merkus’s incredible, gender-defying life as a mystic, member of a comitadji in support of the Bosnian revolt, and member of the Serbian army. One account describes her attempting to “fire a mine to blow up a Turkish fortress among the mountains when all the rest of her troop had taken to their heels and failing because the dynamite had frozen” (272). West laments the historical legacy attributed to Merkus: “she never achieved martyrdom, and the people for whom she offered up her life and possessions were poor and without influence. She therefore...earned a rather ridiculous notoriety instead of the acclaim she deserved” (272). By telling the story of Merkus’s incredible life, West rights the wrongs of the historical record showing not only that women deserve a place in political and military affairs but that they have already held such roles in the past.10

The question of Merkus’s missed status as a martyr connects to West’s larger philosophical critique of sacrifice, which though West does not explicitly say so, certainly seems implicitly tied to conceptions of gender and toxic masculinity that depend on violence. In the case of Merkus, the fact that she is a woman denies her the glory of martyrdom. In another example—the political sacrifice of Draga, the wife of Alexander Obrenovitch, King of Serbia during the late 19th century—West exposes how women too often become the sacrificial lambs

---

10 Similarly, In Trogir, on the Dalmatian Coast, West meets with a professor who recounts a moment of resistance in 1919 to the Italian army in which “one woman ran at four men in charge of a machine-gun and took it away from them, and many others chased out runaway Italians who had taken refuge in the courtyards of the houses, beating them with their fists and tearing away their helmets and belts” (BLGF 186) The professor refuses to tell West the names of the women “because it is a very disagreeable thing for a lady to have to commit such violent acts” (186).
of the political maneuverings of “male lunacy.” Alexander and Draga are one of a series of important assassinations that West remembers from her childhood—as a child, it was memorable for its “nightmare touches,” but as an adult, West “realized that when Alexander and Draga fell from that balcony the whole of the modern world fell with them” (11). West is drawn to the figure of Draga because the people of Serbia disproportionally hated her: “she was hated as few women since the beginning of time, as no cruel mother, as no murderess, has ever been loathed” (549). West considers the various reasons for this extreme hatred—rumors that Draga had been promiscuous as a young woman, that she was sterile from an operation and therefore lying about being pregnant, that she was part of a plot to place an illegitimate heir on the throne—and dispels each one in turn.

West instead sees the way that Draga becomes a stand-in, a sacrificial lamb like that of the book’s title, for her husband’s failings as a ruler: “because the woman a man loves is in a sense his soul...they thought of Draga as Alexander’s soul, and therefore their enemy, and therefore utterly evil” (551). This stand-in is uniquely gendered and tied to Draga’s intended role as queen mother, a role which, if left unfulfilled, would threaten the unity and prosperity of the nation as a whole. As West writes, “The people’s mind was nursing an image that it always likes to hate and dandle in its hatred, the woman who is death, who is a whore and barren. They were moved to new folk-lore by this story, which troubled them by allusions to all sorts of dangers specially feared by the blood, to threats against kingship, to pollution of the race” (556). The tragedy of the assassination is that Draga did not need to die for the change in power to occur. Yet, in the mind of the people, “Alexander had been murdered because he was Draga’s husband...as if his murder were secondary to hers...as if the murders were purgations of a plague” (565). West stresses the renewal of the country because of Draga’s assassination:
“Serbia was young again, it was refreshed, it tossed its head and threw off its sleep and faced the morning in its strength, because Draga was dead because the bad woman had been killed” (565). West brings to the light the absurdity of an age-old story. Rather than hold the male leader accountable, his wife, apparently his “soul,” becomes the scapegoat for the nation’s problems. Here, West points out that the symbolism of sacrifice is directly tied to the symbolic overdetermination of women as mothers and thus the life and prosperity of the nation—a much different critique than the nostalgia for motherhood that she promotes in other places in the book.

In another moment of contradiction, West returns to the idea of female idiocy and male lunacy in the epilogue. When West and her husband find themselves in the middle of a student demonstration concerning the massacre of several Croat people at the hands of Serbian police, West is surprised to notice amidst the chaos two women still at work weeding the flower beds. She writes, bringing this theme full circle from the epilogue,

They were being idiots, private persons in the same sense as the nurse in my London nursing-home, who was unable to imagine why the assassination of King Alexander should perturb anybody but his personal friends. They were paid to pull up weeds, and they wanted the money, so they continued to pull them up, even when the students raised a shout and brought some gendarmes down on them not fifteen yards away. As I looked at those devoted behinds, bobbing up and down over their exemplary task, and the smug face of the automatic rebel, I thanked God for the idiocy of women, which must in many parts of the world have been the sole defender of life against the lunacy of men (BLGF 1079).

Though West is rather astounded by the nurse’s lack of global understanding at the beginning of the book, and that astonishment becomes the fuel for the entire project, by the end she is
comforted by the privacy of these women who have continued their job of beautification despite the violence around them. This is a contradictory turn, but rather than suddenly discounting West’s ongoing thesis that women should be more involved politically, this example teases apart the binary of private and public in the opposite direction—maybe we could all do with more time spent as private persons. As I discuss in the next section, West spends much time comparing the geopolitical to the interpersonal and here she makes clear that part of her argument is that by attending to the personal and interpersonal more, we might be better “defender[s] of life against the lunacy of men” (1079).

**Processing Through Metaphor**

One feature of West’s “process” is the use of metaphors or comparisons to give context and help her (and her readers) better understand the political history of Yugoslavia. Often this takes the form of speculative “as if” comparisons to England, Ireland, and America that compare Yugoslavia to other known nationalist and imperialist settings. Anna Hoag has argued that some of these comparisons allow West to “rewrit[e] the narrative of English nationalism” by transplanting a feminized Yugoslavian landscape onto England” (152). I want to focus, however, on West’s use of metaphors about interpersonal relationships, particularly sexual or romantic ones. These metaphors connect the power imbalance inherent in both imperialism and patriarchal understandings of marriage. Though Loretta Stec has argued that West favors nationalist liberation over feminist liberation, Schweizer explains that for West, “the social status of women is linked to the political status of underdog nations seeking independence from the imperial yoke: both are trying to shake off ancient bonds of oppression and both are hampered by prejudice and scorn loaded upon them from the superior, patriarchal powers that rule their world”—a logic that reveals the larger importance of West’s use of analogies (*Radicals* 95). In many instances, these
analogies force her reader to examine the behavior of nations on the scale or ethic of interpersonal interactions. However, the metaphors also showcase the complexity of agency in situations where nationalism and imperialism coincide and come into conflict. These analogies are interesting because they do not always work, but they do make space for a more nuanced understanding of imperialism that prefigures postcolonial arguments about the legacy of colonization.

The most substantial use of interpersonal metaphors to explain geopolitical situations comes at the start of the journey with West’s discussion of the interactions between the Croatian people and the Austrian empire, inspired by a visit to a statue memorializing Josip Jelačić (Yellatchitch in BLGF). As West explains it, starting around the Middle Ages, Austria coerced the Croats into “a standing army to defend the Austrian Empire” in exchange for “certain privileges which were chiefly legal fictions” (52). Yet, in “one of the most peculiar passions known in history,” the Croats were devoted to the Hapsburgs and Hungary, who “enslaved” them until the crisis of 1848 when Jelačić led a revolt against Hungary as a pawn of the Austrian Empire. Austria, however, did not give the Croats their promised autonomy and instead began “the equal brutality of Germanization,” ultimately handing them back over to Hungary “as their chattels” (54). Here is where West swoops in with a metaphor to emphasize the wrong treatment of the Croats:

I do not know of any nastier act than this in history.* It has a kind of lowness that is sometimes exhibited in the sexual affairs of very vulgar and shameless people: a man leaves his wife and induces a girl to become his mistress, then is reconciled to his wife and to please her exposes the girl to some public humiliation. But, all the same, Austria did not forget 1848…It left the statue there, just as a reminder. So the Croat helots stood
and touched their caps to their Hungarian masters in the shadow of the memorial of the
Croat General who led them to victory against a Hungarian army…That is the strangest
episode of sovereignty I have ever chanced upon in any land. * It must be remembered
that this journal was written in 1937. (BLGF 54)

West’s analogy here is not immediately apparent. Is Croatia the mistress? Or the husband? Is
West alarmed by the mistreatment of the Croats at the hand of these competing empires? Or is
she baffled by Croatia’s willingness to be attached to an empire? In a discussion of the collective
public memory of Jelačić’s statue, Jeremy F. Walton highlights the complex history of the
monument “not merely [as] a ‘symbol’ of Croatian history, but a mechanism for (re)producing
national(ist) memory” (696-7). Jelačić’s loyalty to both the imperial Habsburg military and the
nationalist hope for a unity of South Slavs—two goals that should seem at odds—reveals the
“porousness, contradictions and contingencies of nationalist enclosures of history and territory”
and “decenter[s] hegemonic visions of imperial pasts” (701). West’s use of an interpersonal
metaphor here captures the difficulty in assigning roles of victim and perpetrator. The
“nastiness” of this moment in history is the fault of the empire/husband, who orchestrates the
“public humiliation.” Yet, we cannot overlook the wife’s complicity and the extent to which the
“mistress” had a choice in her loyalty and ultimate downfall is left to be determined. The part of
the metaphor that West leaves out, however, is really what makes this “the strangest episode of
sovereignty:” the fact that this memorial to the “nastiness” of empire also functions as a
celebration of Croatian nationalist history. The mistress may be the tragic bystander of imperial
interests, but that moment of loyalty overlapped with a moment of self-liberation (or perhaps
became one in retrospect). Interpersonal relationships between man and woman and geopolitical
relationships between nation and empire are united for West because of their incomplete and
imprecise lines of allegiances and power. West is beginning to ask: how do we talk about oppression without overlooking agency, and how do we talk about liberation or sovereignty while acknowledging the entanglement of complicity?

West turns again to “analogy to the sexual affairs of individuals” when discussing the oppression of Croatian culture due to their control by the Hapsburgs. West explains that “their greatest achievements have been merged in the general triumphs of the armies of the Hapsburgs, who were at pains that they should never be extricated and distinguished,” and thus, they have lost the “vividness in local tradition” (55). Marina MacKay points out that West is arguing that nations “invent themselves through imaginative and narrative structures,” the legends and heroic stories that make up a national mythology (Mackay *Modernism* 64). Nevertheless, once again, West is best able to understand and explain the impact of these kinds of stories by considering them on an interpersonal level:

As we grow older and see the ends of stories as well as their beginnings, we realise that to the people who take part in them it is almost of greater importance that they should be stories, that they should form a recognisable pattern, than that they should be happy or tragic. The men and women who are withered by their fates, who go down to death reluctantly but without noticeable regrets for life, are not those who have lost their mates prematurely or by perfidy, or who have lost battles or fallen from early promise in circumstances of public shame, but those who have been jilted or the victims of impotent lovers, who have never been summoned to command or been given any opportunity for success or failure. Art is not a plaything, but a necessity, and its essence, form, is not a decorative adjustment, but a cup into which life can be poured and lifted to the lips and be tasted. If one’s own existence has no form, if its events do not come handily to mind
and disclose their significance, we feel about ourselves as if we were reading a bad book. We can all of us judge the truth of this, for hardly any of us manage to avoid some periods when the main theme of our lives is obscured by details, when we involve ourselves with persons who are insufficiently characterised; and it is possibly true not only of individuals, but of nations \textit{(BLGF 53)}.

As with the discussion of the school girls in Salonae above, West is making a point about education and memory—art is necessary as a vehicle of memory, particularly a nation-forming one. She is also making a point about the form art should take—the “cup into which life can be poured and lifted to the lips and be tasted”—and the need for stories, like myths, that “form a recognizable pattern.” The comparison to the interpersonal allows West’s readers to understand this idea without analyzing the discursive elements that help to create nations because the same kinds of stories and forms help us create our sense of self, leaving us lost when “our lives [are] obscured by [too many] details” or when those around us “are insufficiently characterized.” Nations, like individuals, rely on the same kinds of stories to avoid fracturing and fragmentation.

The idea that what is true of individuals might also be true of nations is contested throughout the book. West asks readers to consider the analytical work analogies bring to our thinking. What does one gain in comparing individuals and nations? What does one lose? These questions emerge during a discussion that West has with her husband after visiting a tourist house in Herzegovina, a place that, for West, perfectly illustrates the “stink” of the “corpses of empires.” Though elsewhere West seems to believe that a benevolent form of imperialism exists, in this case, she argues that “the hideousness outweighs the beauty” in response to her husband’s reasoning that “I do not think you can convince mankind…that there is not a certain magnificence about a great empire in being” \textit{(280)}. For West, however, it is in translating the
behavior of nations into interpersonal terms that their hypocrisy, violence, and corrupt power become undeniable. The conversation between West and her husband offers a meta-analysis of her metaphorical process:

“But how absurd the behaviour of nations is,” I exclaimed. “If I ran about compelling people to suffer endless inconveniences by joining with me in a defensive alliance against someone who might conceivably injure me, and never took proper steps to find out if my companions were strong enough to aid me or my enemies strong enough to injure me, I would be considered to be making a fool of myself.” “But the rules that apply to individuals do not apply to nations,” said my husband; “the situation is quite different.” And indeed I suppose that I was being, in my female way, an idiot, an excessively private person, like the nurse in the clinic who could not understand my agitation about the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia. But it is just to admit that my husband was indulging his male bent in regard to international affairs, and was being a lunatic. *(BLGF 280-1)*

Here, the analogy to interpersonal affairs becomes a litmus test for the unchecked power of nations and empires. Why shouldn’t the rules that apply to individuals also apply to nations? What is gained and/or lost by making these comparisons? Though West self-deprecatingly admits to her own “idiocy” in trying to simplify geopolitical terms in such a way, her husband’s lunacy in this moment, his commitment to aggression and violence as a political necessity, subtly and unintentionally advances her argument for bringing the personal and private back into international politics. Of course, as West illustrates in other parts of the book, interpersonal behavior—like Gerda’s prejudice and lack of cultural awareness—can just as easily underpin the political imperatives of an entire nation or empire. Though Gerda’s behavior might be
recognizably bad to West’s readers, the bad behavior of empires is more easily concealed until West translates that behavior onto the interpersonal level.

These metaphors reveal the complexity of agency in both interpersonal and geopolitical relationships. In Sarajevo, West reflects on the relationship between Catholicism, Bogomilism (a dualistic Christian sect), and the Ottoman Empire in 15th-century Bosnia. According to West, when the Catholic Church proclaimed the Bogomils as an enemy of Christianity, the Church in effect turned the region of Bosnia over to the Ottoman Empire, who offered “the Bogomils military protection, secure possession of their lands, and full liberty to practice their religion provided they counted themselves as Moslems and not as Christians, and did not attack the forces of the Ottoman Empire” (301). To explain the complex result of this agreement, West once again turns to the relationship between men and women, this time describing “a kind of human being, terrifying above all others, who resists by yielding” before indicating that it “be supposed” that this human being “is a woman” (302). West then describes a slow process in which the woman, though subordinate in the relationship, gains power over the man under the auspices of compliance: “He marvels at the way she allows him to take possession of her and perhaps despises her for it. Then suddenly he finds that his whole life has been conditioned to her, that he has become bodily dependent on her, that he has acquired the habit of living in a house with her, that food is not food unless he eats it with her.” (302). The man, because he “is a hating rather than a loving animal” eventually begins to “suspect that she let him come into her life because she hated him, and wanted him to expose himself before her so that she could despise him for his weakness” and thus is faced with the choice of finding someone else to love or “translate himself into another person, who will be accepted by her, a process that means falsification of the soul” (302). Either way, the woman comes out of this situation “strong and
serene.” West ends this long description with her typical statement of fact: “twice the Slavs have played the part of this woman in the history of Europe”—under the rule of Napoleon and the Ottoman Empire. West describes the Bosnian nobles as founding a city, Sarai (presumably to become Sarajevo) where “they lived in a pride undiminished by conquest, though adapted to it” (303). For them the difference between Islam and Christianity was not so pronounced: “they had won their independence by a concession no greater than they would have made had they submitted to the Roman Catholic Church. So they sat down in their new town, firm in self-respect, and profited by the expanding wealth of their conquerors” (303).

This is a tricky analogy. I can see how Loretta Stec might argue that West falls into “feminist despair” (192). She makes these comparisons based on generalizations and perhaps unfair surety about how large groups of people felt. It seems dangerous to suggest that all Bosnian people wholly benefitted from coming under the rule of an empire however willingly they chose that route (how much of a choice was it really?). Perhaps these analogies fall short in a way slightly different than West’s husband argues—it is not that nations have responsibilities that excuse them from behaving with the compassion and decorum of individuals but that one cannot sum up the feelings and behaviors of an entire nation to that of an individual. Once again, West’s comparison adds nuance to the binary between conquerors and conquered by framing the experience of being conquered in terms of choice and agency and showing the ways that “yielding” could be its own form of resistance. In this interpersonal analogy, we see the complexity of West’s thought process—one hand, West grants the woman in this type of relationship a power beyond that of dominating toxic masculinity; at the same time, however, she portrays the woman as a manipulative femme fatale, which, in countering the image of a submissive victim, only creates another set category of secretly vindictive manipulator. There is
also the even more complicated implication that women, like the nun teachers in Salonae, might be participating in patriarchy—a participation that may have different degrees of choice. West focuses on the agency within and around domination but cannot imagine an alternative to domination in some form.

These interpersonal metaphors come full circle as West and her husband struggle to reconcile their interpersonal relationship with their guide Constantine and his wife, Gerda—an example that connects West’s use of analogy to the larger political context of the late 1930s. In the epilogue, West analyzes the “embarrassment and uneasiness” of their “grief” over the disrepair of this friendship. She feels as if their “bitter personal dispute” should reflect a mutual amount of bad behavior, but ultimately the broken relationship was only due to “merely impersonal differences” (1074). West feels “childish” and “ill-bred” at not being able to “transcend such differences.” However, she corrects this train of thought by reminding herself that “the world had altered” and “now different races and nationalities cherish different ideals of society that stink in each other’s nostrils with an offensiveness” (1074). She concludes that their different perspectives cannot be reconciled: “that the subject of our difference was political and not sexual or financial made it less and not more reparable” (1074). Not only does the interpersonal offer a way of understanding and holding accountable the actions of nations, but relationships between people are essential in and of themselves and are indicative of the larger political sphere. That West and her husband cannot overcome their political differences with Gerda ties into West’s larger argument against appeasement in the epilogue. The goals, perspective, and “lack of process” of Nazi Germany, as encapsulated by Gerda, are not simply differences in culture or opinion that can be overlooked or appeased. While Pearl S. Buck devotes so much of her work to conversation and cultural sharing, here West forces her readers
to confront moments when compromise and discussion will not be enough to counteract a fundamentally uncompromising worldview.

**Process as Feminist Symbol (Re)Formation**

Though the book’s title focuses on the already well-established symbols that West reads and re-reads throughout the book, West’s process also involves building an epistemology based on her own symbols created from what she witnesses through her travels. As Debra Rae Cohen explains, West models “that dangerous moment where metaphor happens…an exposure of historiographic processes that is deeply intermodern” (163). In understanding how symbols get made, West can make and re-make her own set of symbols which are uniquely focused on what can be learned from the Yugoslavian women she encounters. At times, however, this reaches a level of romanticization or fetishization of the Slavic people, culture, and customs, similar to Pearl S. Buck’s depictions of China.

West often contrasts angry (and handsome) young men with stoic older women in her search for both the effects of empire and solutions to the problems of empire. In the early parts of the book, West and her companions cross paths with several young men publicly expressing an incommensurate level of anger. While visiting a castle in Trsat, “a darkly handsome young man, a Dalmatian on holiday” begins shouting about a signage discrepancy related to the price of admission (119). In Split, another angry young man rants about the uptick in German tourists in the area and their behavior, while in Senj, a man has an outburst about cold soup (128). While other travelers are surprised and disgusted by these eruptions—some nearby German tourists even call one of the young men a “savage”—West sees the reoccurrence of these instances as indicative of “Dalmatian history,” which is full of hundreds and hundreds of years of “conquest” and “misgovernment” by an array of empires (119). West sympathizes with their anger,
conceding that “in such a shambles a man had to shout and rage” and sees it as a reasonable and necessary response to “the plight of these people.” (119). For West, these moments of rude behavior become symbolic of the act of resistance. She writes that “It was good that he shouted. I respected him for it. In a world where during all time giants had clustered to cheat his race out of all their goods, his forefathers had survived because they had the power to shout, to reject cold soup, death, sentence to piracy, exile on far mountain slopes” (128). These angry young men fit into West’s larger critique of sacrifice and the kind of toxic masculinity that develops from an obsession with death and violence.

If the angry young men that West sees repeatedly force her to question the lasting effects of empire and the ways that discontent is bred, then it is in several different encounters with Slavic women that West locates the answers that she believes this region can offer about how to live, to resist, and as she so succinctly puts it to find “a constant and loyal state of preference for the agreeable over the disagreeable” (400). While visiting the Dalmatian coast, West witnesses two ill women,” a girl of sixteen…[and] an old woman, so immensely old that she had nothing to do with the substance of flesh,” being carried on stretchers through the street (201). The tragedy of the young girl— who was “extravagantly beautiful…[but] had wholly lost the will to live”—is contrasted with the older woman, who was “compounded of glittering intelligence…resembling the hard parts of an aged and gnarled lobster” and had “an air of unconquerable appetite” like “a twisted hieroglyphic expressing the love of life” (201-2). West is clearly struck by the symbolism of this moment but is also surprised at her ability to bear witness to it, arguing that in Western Europe, such a sight would not have been so public. This region fascinates her because processes like this, of life, death, and illness, are so visible. For West, the disparity between the two women illustrates the Finnish concept of “sisu”—a kind of tenacity or grit “which insists on
continuing to live no matter what life is worth” (200). Here again, West latches onto the visibility of “process:” “But the point is that here in Yugoslavia I did not have to poke about among the detritus of commonplace life to find allusions to this process: an old woman and a young girl came out into the street and gave a dramatic rendering of it in the presence of the people. It is that quality of visibility that makes the Balkans so specially enchanting” (200-1). As much as West is enchanted by the Orthodox Easter service and her visits to grand churches full of beautiful iconostasis and frescoes, she most closely locates the spiritual truth of this region in its women.

If men are the site of anger and discontent, women offer strength and sustenance. The title might refer to these grander symbols of sacrifice and martyrdom, but West’s narrative subtly creates a new series of symbols through the women she encounters. In an act that is perhaps simultaneously fetishizing and respectful, West raises this elderly woman to the level of art, a “hieroglyphic” meant to be read and interpreted and held up as the source of spiritual guidance. Similarly, a woman who offers to wash West’s hand with perfume as “the most gracious farewell imaginable” represents an embodied embrace of the pleasure in life that West finds unique to this region (400). West is delighted by this gesture, in part because she imagines the fastidiousness of other Western women, who would no doubt find such an act “ghastly” with the “most frightful scent” (400).

Similarly, while attending an Easter service in Macedonia, it is not the symbolism of the liturgy that strikes West, but the sight of “a peasant woman sitting on a window ledge who was the very essence of Macedonia...the miracle of Macedonia made visible before our eyes” (636). West is drawn to this woman because of her connection to the past and her embodied experience of the region. West compares the woman to “the many Byzantine Madonnas to be seen in
frescoes and mosaics” and notes “an embroidery of stylized red and black trees which derived recognizably from a pattern designed for elegant Persian women two thousand years before” on the woman’s sleeve (636-7). For West, the Byzantines are commendable because of their “real spiritual process” and their ability “to live in dignity and decency for four centuries in the knowledge that they were doomed, that one day they would be destroyed root and branch by the merciless Turks.” However, West’s interest in this woman is also a question of epistemology: the history of the region and the Byzantine empire is something that “we know with our minds...but this woman knew it with all her being, because she knew nothing else. It was the medium in which she existed.” West locates “a symbol of...beliefs about society” in the woman’s body—the way she holds her needle and the stiffness of her back as she works. West oscillates between romanticization and a feminist insistence on locating the symbolic in women, a move that prefigures some factions of the women’s liberation movement. On the one hand, it seems ridiculous to locate the entire history of the Byzantine empire in this one woman. Yet, at the same time, West turns the importance of the Easter ceremony away from the Church, the priest, and even Christ, to this woman working away at her embroidery. In contrast to the young men who respond, understandably, with anger, West commends these older women who have faced suffering firsthand and still find a way to find pleasure, to look toward the “magnificence and its adoration” that is inherent in the Easter service.

Finally, near the end of her travels, while in Montenegro, West feels suffocated by the implications of the sacrifice of the black lamb she witnessed at the Sheep’s Field. She writes, “Montenegro was something like a prison. Though it was airy as heaven, instead of airless, like other prisons, it was stony like a cell, and it reeked of heroism as strongly as institutions reek of disinfectant; and the straitened inhabitants were sealed up in space with the ideas of slaughter
and triumph as convicts are in their confinement with guilt and punishment” (1010). West and her companions begin a steep drive into the hills but must stop to wait for the car to cool. While waiting, they encounter a woman walking along the road. The woman takes out her knitting needles and wool and begins knitting while she stops to tell them her tragic life story. She tells them, “I am walking about to try to understand why all this has happened. If I had to live, why should my life have been like this? If I walk about up here where it is very high and grand it seems to me I am nearer to understanding it.” This perspective becomes an important symbolic moment for West:

This woman was of no importance. It is doubtful whether, walk as she would on these heights, she would arrive at any conclusion that was of value even to herself. She was, however, the answer to my doubts. She took her destiny not as the beasts take it, nor as the plants and trees; she not only suffered it, she examined it. As the sword swept down on her through the darkness she threw out her hand and caught the blade as it fell, not caring if she cut her fingers so long as she could question its substance where it had been forged, and who was the wielder. She wanted to understand the secret which Gerda denied, the mystery of process. I knew that art and science were the instruments of this desire, and this was their sole justification, though in the Western world where I lived I had seen art debauched to ornament and science prostituted to the multiplication of gadgets. I knew that they were descended from man’s primitive necessities...But I did not know these things thoroughly with my bowels as well as my mind. I knew them now, when I saw the desire for understanding move this woman. It might have been far otherwise with her, for she had been confined by her people’s past and present to a kind of destiny that might have stunned its victims into an inability to examine it. Nevertheless
she desired neither peace nor gold, but simply knowledge of what her life might mean.

*(BLGF 1012)*.

Like the woman at the Easter service, this Montenegrin woman gives West “an answer to [her] doubts” through a different way of knowing, one that is embodied—West realizes her own knowledge is through her “mind” but not her “bowels.” Rather than finding factual information, West discovers the importance of pursuing knowledge as a process, not of conclusions, but the search for meaning. For West, this Montenegrin woman offers a much more powerful symbol than either the black lamb and grey falcon precisely because she understands the “mystery of process” in ways outside the confines of traditional (masculinist, capitalist, imperial) epistemologies. In the final line, West makes a bold claim by raising the search for knowledge above both money and peace, calling out her pacifist peers that would embolden a fascist denial of such a process for the sake of their own immediate peace.

**Process as Contradiction: Gender and Empire**

West’s process of symbol formation adds overlapping layers of meaning, whereas Gerda’s form of fascist thinking would prefer to remain on the surface. Rather than dealing in the realm of true or false, fact or fiction, process and symbols add depth and complexity—a feature of West’s writing most evident in her willingness to embrace contradiction. It can be challenging to tease out a firm conclusion about West’s viewpoints on gender and imperialism because her writing is full of contradictions. For West, the problem of empire is also a problem of gender, but her exploration of these two topics often oscillates between a resigned essentialism and a desire for change. I want to turn to two sets of contradictory examples through which West attempts to work through her ideas and which illustrate how West’s process makes room for contradiction.
The first two examples show the tension in West’s writing between a conservative desire for traditional gender roles, on the one hand, and a critique of the fascist militaristic outcomes of an obsession with women’s matriarchal role, on the other. West visits a “tablet giving thanks to the English troops who occupied the island” during the 19th century. In a line of thought quite far from the anti-imperialism she espouses elsewhere, she argues that “We English were then a different breed. We could build. We could administer….Now we would build tin huts all over the place, would have been compelled from Downing Street to kick the natives in the face for fear of encouraging revolutionary movements which did not, in fact, exist, and would have ended up with the evil reputation of oppressors without any of the fruits of oppression” (207). Though she is critical of what British imperialism has become, West still maintains a nostalgic narrative for a past version of the empire that was benevolent and has since been disrupted—“Something has changed us. The life we lead does not suit us” (208). In the next moment, West sees three men working dutifully on building a motor boat, which allows her to connect the dots between this change in English behavior with a change in gender. To West, these men are the picture of masculinity, a masculinity that has been lost through industrialization in England:

These were men, they could beget children on women, they could shape certain kinds of materials for purposes that made them masters of their worlds. I thought of two kinds of men that the West produces: the cityish kind that wears spectacles without shame, as if they were the sign of quality and not a defect, who is overweight and puffy, who can drive a car but knows no other mastery over material, who presses buttons and turns switches without comprehending the result, who makes money when the market goes up and loses it when the market goes down; the high-nosed young man, who is somebody’s secretary or in the Foreign Office, who has a peevishly amusing voice and is very
delicate, who knows a great deal but far from all there is to be known about French pictures. I understand why we cannot build, why we cannot govern, why we bear ourselves without pride in our international relations (BLGF 208).

West connects a socialist (Marxist) critique of capitalist industrialization to an investment in a particular form of traditional masculinity. The men working on the docks still perform their own labor, whose hands still “shape materials.” The series of Western men that West describes are just agentless members of an economic system that grants them little control. The gender critique that coincides with this economic one implies a kind of homophobia that depends on a more rigid idea of gender essentialism—because these Western men are disconnected from labor, they are less manly and thus wear “spectacles” and have “delicate, amusing” voices.11 This moment brings to mind the difficulty faced by communist feminists during this time since a lot of the communist messaging and organizing often upheld traditional gender roles and essentialist ideas about masculinity and femininity, just as West does here.

West ends this section by proclaiming, “It is strange, it is heartrending, to stray into a world where men are still men and women still women.” Victoria Glendinning connects this phrase to a similar phrase in the writing of British Fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley. As Erin G. Carlston has argued, this shared language is not so surprising given that during this time, “fascist discourses share a vernacular with non- and antifascist discourses of the same period…and fascism itself could supply the vocabulary and the methodology of even the most rigorously

---

11 Loretta Stec discusses further West’s homophobia in this section in relation to her nostalgia for fixed gender roles and “her discomfort with the slightest gender confusion” (147). Bonnie Kime Scott offers a more complete and perhaps generous picture of West’s ideas on homosexuality: “Still, figuring out her attitude toward homosexuality seems to have been a long-term project for West. In Family Memories she recalls that, as ladies, her grandmother and mother were expected to be ignorant of homosexuality, even when her uncle got into trouble for being at a gay brothel when a murder occurred. West ponders the love arrangements of Proust, one of her favorite authors. She sets up different categories of gays. She rehearses the arguments for and against toleration of homosexuality, worrying finally about men’s danger to one another” (90).
antifascist critiques” (5). Similarly, as discussed above, Marina MacKay situates BLGF within the “political binaries of the 1930s” revealing a time when “the right-left lines were certainly starting to look blurrier” (Modernism 57). That West’s more radical critique of economics and empires is underpinned by a rather conservative understanding of gender roles reflects such a contradictory and overlapping political context.

Carlston focuses specifically on how ideas about motherhood become a shared discourse between fascist-leaning male modernists and anti-fascist Sapphic modernists, which is also true for West. While traveling in Dalmatia, West and her husband visit the home of an older woman, who immediately starts flirting with West’s husband. West is not taken aback but is instead impressed by her confidence, which she attributes to a societal reverence for mothers. West argues that “her life had for the most part been secure because in her world men had been proud to be fathers, and had marvelled gratefully at women for being fine-wrought enough to make the begetting of children an excitement and sturdy enough to bear them and rear them, and had thought of the mother of many children as the female equivalent of a rich man” (210). This woman is able, even in old age, to embrace an “unbroken pride [as] lovely as the trumpet of a lily” because of the appreciation and status given to her ability to bear children. West then drops into a dystopian register to imagine how this woman’s experiences might have differed in a society where men “have either lost their desire for children, or are prevented from gratifying it by poverty or the fear of war” (210). In such a case, West assumes that women would be “half hated and perhaps more than half, for her sex,” and the womb would transform from a “talisman” to a “source of danger.” This future gender inequality is once again tied to industrialization: West finds the threat of this future “implicit” in the woman’s worry “that her husband and all his forebears had been sea captains, and that her sons were still of the tradition and not of it, for they
were agents for great steamship lines” (210). As with the men building the motor boat above, West fears that severing the ties between men and their labor or craft will have a negative impact on how women are viewed and treated by their husbands, which implies that this dystopian future already exists in more industrialized countries like England. Though West is warning against inequality based on gender, her solution aligns more closely with fascist ideas about the glorification of motherhood and traditional values.

This viewpoint becomes more aligned with an anti-fascist and anti-militaristic perspective in a later example, however. In Serbia, while visiting a model of a memorial created by the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, West becomes enraged by the format of the memorial, a soldier’s tomb with a roof “supported by immense calm caryatides, Serbian peasant women, the mothers of the calm boys” (486). West is initially upset by the presence of “wreaths that had been laid on the memorial by various official bodies,” including one given by Nazi Germany and one by Italy. West interprets for her readers what made these wreaths so horrifying: “It was a kind of buffoonery almost unmatched in private life which had made these powers lay their wreath on a grave sacred to a people whom they meant to send to its grave as soon as possible” (487). Together, these elements—the format of the monument, which shows Serbian peasant women holding open the tomb of their sons, and the “buffoonery” of the fascist wreaths laid on the monument—fill West “with feminist rage.” She is angry that the monument “represented peasant women without contrition” or remorse for the grief caused by the death of their sons. West writes bitingly, “Since men are liberated from the toil of childbirth and child-rearing, they might reasonably be expected to provide an environment which would give children the possibility to survive and test the potentialities of humanity. The degree of failure to realise that expectation revealed in this disgusting little room could not be matched by women unless ninety
percent of all births were miscarriages” (488). Here, West is less concerned with glorifying motherhood than with placing the blame of violence and the burden of peace on men. This argument comes closer to an anti-fascist critique of what Carlston terms “matriotism” or “an ideology of motherhood that buttresses patriarchy and militarism” (7). What angers West about the monument is that the peasant mothers are quite literally buttressing the military efforts of the state, and the presence of the Nazi wreath only further connects such matriotism to fascism. Though West may be clinging to the nostalgia of the traditional versions of masculinity and femininity she encounters in Yugoslavia, she has no desire for a kind of matriotism that “conceals gender inequity behind an idealization of maternity, harnesses women’s (reproductive) labor in the service of the State, and suppresses women’s sexuality in favor of their maternal role” (Carlston 7). In the example of the older woman above, West glorifies her “maternal role” alongside her sexual confidence and flirting. That West compares the death toll of war to a ninety percent miscarriage rate starkly puts the burden of peace, or even the survival of humanity, onto men; men are failing to protect humanity at an alarming rate, which if it had been done at the hand of women would certainly be criminalized.

The second set of paired passages delves further into the injustices women face and how that relates to war and the desire for peace. In two instances—one in Bosnia and one in Macedonia—West observes a group of women and concludes their situations in terms of gender. In Bosnia, West can approach the everyday experiences of the women she witnesses through the lens of transnational feminism, recalculating what feminist liberation looks like in different cultural and geographic spaces. In Macedonia, however, West struggles to look past her realist understanding of how feminism might counteract the need for military resistance.
While in Sarajevo, a remarkably diverse city in terms of religion, West is surprised to find a culture at odds with the accounts of the “Victorian travellers in these regions [that] used to express contempt for the rayas, or Christian peasants” often forming a narrative that these people were “formidable” and that “their women have to wait on them while they eat, must take sound beatings every now and again, work till they drop, even while child-bearing, and walk while their master rides” (327). West, however, argues that the women in this region “do not look in the least oppressed,” that they “look heroes rather than heroines, they are raw-boned and their beauty is blocked out too roughly,” but they are nevertheless “free in the spirit” (327). According to West, the women she observes in the marketplace “passed the chief tests:” even the elderly women were happy, and their faces were not “marked by hunger or regret;” the women “had been able to gratify their essential desires;” and most importantly “in some sense these women had never been enslaved. They had that mark of freedom, they had wit” (327-8). West watches the women gossiping and telling jokes, pointing out one woman in particular who “was distinguished not because she was witty but by the degree of her wit” (329). Part of West’s respect for these women adds nuance to her argument about education and forms of knowledge. She points out that “none of these women could read,” but that “they did not suffer any great deprivation thereby” because “these women were their own artists, and had done well with their material” of which West points to the “folk-songs of the country” as an example (329). Based on this artistry, West “suspect[s] that women such as these are not truly slaves, but have found a fraudulent method of persuading men to give them support and leave them their spiritual freedom” (330). Here West describes a kind of liberatory compromise similar to the “resistance by yielding” that she refers to in the metaphor discussed above wherein women “pretend that they are inferior to men” and thus manage to keep men from “interfer[ing] with what women are
saying and thinking with their admittedly inferior powers” (330). This, of course, contradicts the book’s very framework—her whole project is about recognizing that women should have equal weight in topics of politics and public affairs—and yet, West is also refusing to render these women without agency and subject only to tragedy just because they do not fit the expectations for Western ideas of feminist liberation. West recognizes that such compromises are not ideal; she states that they are “an enormous risk to take” since “these symbols of abasement always include an abnegation of economic and civil rights” and do not work well “in the modern industrialized world” (330). Her biggest problem with situations like these is that “it is a conscious fraud on the part of women, and life will never be easy until human beings can be honest with one another” (330). And yet, she refuses to strip these women of “honour” because this is a “world of compromises” and the women she saw were “grimly happy heroes [who] stride and laugh, obeying the instructions of their own nature and not masculine prescription” because to see them any other way only reproduces the patriarchal systems they are trying to find ways to resist.

The women in Bosnia, whom West expects to see as unhappy but finds witty and artistic in their own right, contrast with the women in the Black Mountain Villages of Macedonia, whom West is surprised to discover show the extreme effects of gender inequality. These villages “were never fully conquered…during the five hundred years of the Turkish occupation” and thus “are famous for the dour and fierce character of the inhabitants and the beautiful embroideries worked by the women” (647). As West and her husband witness a traditional dance, West is shocked to find “a profoundly depressing element in the scene, which was, quite simply, the women.” West attributes this mainly to the heaviness and modesty of the women’s clothing but ultimately concludes that such clothing is “usually imposed by a society that has formed neurotic ideas
about women’s bodies and wants to insult them and drive them into hiding, and it is impossible for women to be happy in such a society” (673-4). This observation leads to several pages of reflection by West. The women’s lack of vitality confounds her because of the precise artistry of their embroidery: “the women who sewed these embroideries were plainly not lacking in the capacity for excitement” (674). And yet she remembers hearing that this region is renowned for the fact that the “wives are so harshly treated by their husbands that if they are left widows nothing will induce them to remarry. No degree of privation could approach in horror that masculine tyranny” (674). While West concedes that the Great Powers had deliberately corrupted this area, England included, she is inspired by “their legitimate determination to defend the tables and benches we sat on, the musty wine and the hard-boiled eggs and the sheep’s cheese, the woman and her child, the breath in their bodies, from the criminal intentions of the silly-clever in great cities, who fancied that the rape of these might secure them some advantage” (676-7). Of course, as the women dancing the kolo illustrate, this “legitimate determination” depends on strict and oppressive gender roles. Though one young woman speaks her mind bravely at a meeting, West concludes that she is the exception to the rule and that “the general attitude of men to women was still maintained. All the women in the village were treated as if courage or cunning on their part was inconceivable, as if they were lucky to be used as beasts of burden. This cannot have been agreeable, even to the woman who had established herself as an exception” (677). This is the point at which West most strongly falls into “feminist despair:” She writes forcefully, “We must admit here a process that at one and the same time makes life possible and intolerable for women” (678).

West falls back into a biologically essentialist view of gender, arguing that men are physically superior to women. Thus, women must give in to their inferiority and allow men to
defend the community. This argument of biological essentialism is interesting because, once again, West divides epistemologies of mind and body: the human condition is to know that “life is preferable to death” in “our bowels and muscles, but the mind has never convincingly proved it to the mind” (678). The Montenegrin woman above exemplifies this—her embodied epistemology is more desirable to West than the traditionally masculine realm of mind and fact. Her feminist desire to promote the knowledge and experiences of women is still tied to a biologically essentialist view of gender.

There is an element of realism in West’s argument, for she is describing what she sees, the difference between the women in the Black Mountain villages and those who experienced control by the Ottoman empire: “The women in the Skopska Tserna Gora were repaid for their subordination by a certain mitigation of their lot, which is proved real enough when it is compared with the darker misery of the women on the plains below, who suffered far worse at the hands of the Turks, but which was far from giving them security in any ordinary sense of the word” (679). Here patriarchy and imperialism are both intertwined and at odds—the women in the villages traded imperialism for patriarchy while those in the plains lost security. West can still not imagine an alternative; there is no Jane Merkus in this situation, joining in the fight alongside the men. However, she is not arguing that this is how it should be or that this is how it will remain. She writes, “Even when the men of the community derive an adequate amount of strength from the suppression of their women, the situation is ultimately unsatisfactory; for it undoes itself, to the confusion of both parties” (679). Eventually, during peacetime, women will seek the equality they deserve, and men will be left behind, which for West creates a “disharmony” that will be difficult to overcome because there will be “no present” that women “can make [men] out of [their] liberty [that] can compensate him for his loss of what he gained
from her slavery” (679). The dilemma of inequality between genders is tied to war; West argues that “until there is achieved a settled condition of world peace hard to foresee anywhere nearer than the distant future it will always be more necessary that the revelation should be male” (679). West knows that war depends on patriarchal oppression, but she cannot imagine a peace brought about via gender equality rather than the reverse.

These two examples are difficult to reconcile. In both examples, West remains a realist—unable to imagine an alternative to patriarchy—but in the first example, she is still able to celebrate the women’s liberationist practices, while in the second, her concern for the immediate political situation and the need for military responses causes her to lose sight of her feminist goals (though I do not think she relinquishes them entirely). And yet, to read this passage about the Black Mountains as a summary of West’s complete outlook on gender is to lose sight of the book’s entire process. Yes, she gives in to despair in the Black Mountains, but she also spends so much of the book attempting to locate hope in women. And the fact that she spends so much time praising the intricate and beautiful embroidery work done by the women in these villages suggests that even here not all hope is lost.

Even if contradictory, this kind of careful response sets West’s visible process against Gerda’s assumptive and cursory reactions throughout the book. West may not have any immediate solutions to the problem of gender and imperialism. However, her commitment to showing her process through figurative language allows her to think deeply about the effects of imperialism on women and demand that her readers consider the interplay between the personal and the political. Like the rest of the writers in this dissertation, West is willing to embrace her failures and limitations as part of the process of fighting for a new and better world. As I will reflect on in the conclusion, West’s visible process feels even more relevant today, given the
widespread educational reform efforts that seek to dismiss and conceal the processes of history that have created current inequalities. Without a “sense of process,” we risk giving in to the “comforting beliefs” of an overly simplified past and miss the pleasure of analyzing the palimpsest of human experiences.
CONCLUSION

On my desk is a sticky note where I have been collecting ideas for this conclusion.

“Our Missing Hearts—great contemp example.”

“Buck on freedom—pandemic.”

“Writing and change?”

“Gellhorn on twitter.”

Some notes are more useful than others, but now that I am finally reflecting on this project and process, the first note on the list has stopped me in my tracks: “current relevance, fascism today.”

Such a task seemed so obvious and dare I say easy—I could fill a whole notebook with the countless ways this project has resonated with current events in the past few years. What started as primarily a literary interest—there was modernism and postmodernism, but most of my favorite writers were publishing in the years in-between, how can we characterize mid-century writing?—became a quest for answers to questions that were as relevant in the 1940s as they are today. How do we navigate a time of divisive political ideologies? What role can art play in countering the violence enacted by larger systems of power? What does it mean to fight fascism, promote freedom, and defend democracy? Looking at that post-it note now, however, I am paralyzed by the prospect of responding to the ways that our present moment feels like the thirties and forties all over again. Don’t we already know not to let history repeat itself?
I start making a list of the current political context for this project: Trump. Brexit. Pandemic. Ukraine. Refugee crises. A whole slew of antis: antisemitism, anti-Asian, anti-trans, anti-books, anti-critical race theory. I put the term “fascism” into Google News, but I can’t even bring myself to click on the titles from the last two weeks:

“Banning ideas and authors is not a ‘culture war’—it’s fascism.”

“Ron Desantis: A fascist for our time.”

“We’re reaching fascism’s ‘inflection point’—again.”

“The Fight against Fascism in Brazil is Being Led by Young Activists.”

“Is Italy’s Prime Minister Georgia Meloni a fascist?”

What can I even say? As I try to write about fascism today, I am once again amazed at Gellhorn’s, Bowen’s, Buck’s, and West’s ability to do so in their own time, whether directly or indirectly. I think of the ways their words have hung over me for the past two years:

During a late-night phone call with my mom about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I wondered what Gellhorn would think. The same kind of refugee crisis she wrote about in A Stricken Field was happening again. Would she be appalled at the lack of intervention? Would she worry about whether America could intervene without making it worse?

When large numbers of Americans refused to wear a mask to protect themselves and others against COVID, all in the name of “freedom” and “democracy,” I thought of Pearl S. Buck’s insistence that “democracy is not individual liberty,” that “there must be serious curtailment of individual liberty in a true democracy,” and that America would never have a true democracy until we confronted the country’s widespread inequality (Of Men and Women 111-12). As people lined the streets to protest George Floyd’s murder, Buck’s vigilant warnings about America’s racism seemed even more pertinent.
Surrounded by what seems like daily announcements about educational reforms meant to erase the violence of history, I thought about how Bowen and West turned to history for the answers, for that “strand of wool that would lead [us] out of a labyrinth” (West *BLGF* 1089). Can we, like Bowen imagines, find new ways of connecting to the past, create new “lifelines” that help us avoid repeating the mistakes of those that came before us? What could West’s *visible process* look like today? How can we respond to oversimplification and surface-level thinking with deep, thoughtful, and sometimes messy analysis?

More than anything else, this project has become an antidote to paralysis. Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West felt just as angry and disillusioned and powerless as I do today. Still, my greatest takeaway from studying them has been their willingness to write anyways. My hope is renewed by the women writers today who are taking up their pens once again to fight fascism. So, I want to end this project by looking at a contemporary novel that, like the writers from the forties, is responding directly to the politics of our time.

While reading Celeste Ng’s 2022 novel, *Our Missing Hearts*, I was struck by how much of it resonated with parts of my dissertation. As a contemporary touchstone, *Our Missing Hearts* reveals that so much of what I have gleaned from reading women’s responses to fascism in the forties is still part of women’s responses to fascism today. It offers a glimpse of what it might mean to build on the anti-fascist methods of the past and adapt them in resistance to new iterations of the same desire for power and control.

Ng’s not-so-distant America is now dictated by a series of laws called PACT, the Preserving American Culture and Tradition Act, that focus on protecting American values and making it legal for books to be destroyed and children to be taken from their families (327). The story begins by following a twelve-year-old boy named Bird as he tries to solve the mystery of
his missing mother, Margaret, a poet-turned-activist. Bird uncovers a network of librarians circulating the scraps and details of separated children with hopes of reuniting them with their families. Readers eventually hear of Margaret’s journey to political awareness and her development of an artistic act of non-violent resistance that involves broadcasting across the city the stories of families separated by the government.

Most importantly, *Our Missing Hearts* seems inspired by Pearl S. Buck’s constant warning that inequality and racism in America would lead directly to fascism. Reminiscent of the anti-Asian scapegoating that occurred during the height of the COVID pandemic and continues today, Ng imagines PACT as a weakly coded excuse for racist legislation, primarily targeting Asian Americans. In this case, the assertion of American nationalism depends on creating a racial and cultural “other.” While Buck is the only writer to address racial inequality directly, I am reminded of Rebecca West’s portrayal of Gerda as a stand-in for fascist ideology. Gerda’s nationalism also leaves no room for difference, as seen by her repeated disgust at the presence of Romani people in Yugoslavia. Just as children are being removed from their families in *Our Missing Hearts*, so too does Gerda offhandedly promote the removal of the Romani people. The effects of state-sanctioned removals are also a large part of Gellhorn’s portrayal of German refugees in *A Stricken Field*—like Bird, traveling alone in search of his mother, the orphan children, Karel and Elsi make the trek to Prague.

The racist fascism of *Our Missing Hearts* is all the more impactful given that the novel is not so distant from our reality. The novel takes place in a barely dystopic world—as Ng writes in her author’s note: “Bird and Margaret’s world isn’t exactly our world, but it isn’t not ours, either” (327). Though none of the writers in my dissertation use the dystopic register, the fear of what could be hung over their time as much as it does today. Ng’s use of the dystopic offers an
opening for future directions for this dissertation’s much more narrow look at how women writers experiment with genre as an anti-fascist strategy. Katharine Burdekin’s novel, *Swastika Night*, is the most obvious example, in which Burdekin imagines a world where the Nazis win and their patriarchal Christian nationalism has eradicated all other traditions and placed women as a subservient class. West even has a small moment in her epilogue where she imagines the world blanketed under everlasting snow, “enclosing at last a silence that does not thaw in the spring sunshine” (*BLGF* 1115). Bowen dips ever so slightly into the speculative in “The Happy Autumn Fields,” and Buck recapitulates popular, sentimental novels. Still, mostly these writers are moving between non-fictional genres (like journalism, historiography, and interviews) and realist fiction. What might genres like dystopian literature or science fiction and fantasy, or even historical fiction have to offer as tools of critique and possibility? The long list of women writers that could have been included in this dissertation consists of those like Burdekin or Storm Jameson and Naomi Mitchison, who were also actively responding to the politics of their time but writing historical novels and science fiction instead.

Ng herself connects her novel to the turmoil of the thirties and forties via an epigraph and reference to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, whose work deals with the difficulty of writing amid widespread censorship in Stalinist Russia and could have fit right in with the rest of the writers in my dissertation (I could also imagine a more transnational version of this project with writers like Akhmatova or the German writer, Anna Seghers). Akhmatova’s life and writing inspire Ng’s fictional character, Margaret, to resist through writing in much the same ways that I felt inspired by the writers in this project. Ng expresses this inspiration much better than I ever could through Margaret’s poetic reflection on Akhmatova’s efforts: “Instead of silence, she chose fire. Each night she wrote her lines on scraps of paper, working them over and over,
committing them to memory. At dawn she touched a match to the paper and reduced her words to ash. Over the years her words repeated this cycle—resurrection in the darkness, death at first light—until eventually their lives were inscribed in flame” (241). Though none of the writers in my dissertation were writing under such extreme circumstances, they share with Akhmatova and Margaret a sense of urgency towards writing as the only recourse for resistance at their disposal.

Margaret’s own attempts to inscribe lives in flame is the scene that stuck with me the most. Tapping into the network of librarians, Margaret tries to gather and document as many stories of families that have been separated as she can:

She scribbled them down, in a notepad she carried in the left cup of her bra, the writing so small you’d almost need a magnifier to read it. When that notebook was full, she got another, then another, tucking the old ones into the pocket of her jeans, the side of her stock. Bearing them on her body. At night, she leafed through the pages, engraving the names and stories on her heart. (239)

While reading this, I immediately thought of the moment in Gellhorn’s *A Stricken Field* when Mary hides the bundle of first-hand accounts under her clothes to smuggle them out of the country. At a loss for her own words, Margaret, like Gellhorn, finds hope in amplifying the stories of those less fortunate than her. The scraps of information and notes that the librarians hide in their books and that Margaret eventually relies on to piece together the stories for her broadcast also brought to mind Elizabeth Bowen’s “The Happy Autumn Fields” and the scraps of Henrietta and Sarah’s life, the one sustaining photograph of their existence that allows Mary to connect to them in the past. There’s something metaphysically powerful about writing as a way to connect two minds across space and time, but there is also something remarkable about
the tangibility of paper, of holding someone’s story in your hand: proof that they existed. In the face of erasure, how can we make lives tangible and enduring?

The novel’s reliance on material culture as a form of communication makes me wonder about the role of the internet and social media in art-making and resistance today. In a review of *Our Missing Hearts*, Stephen King notes the lack of social media in Ng’s version of fascist America. Though there is a lot of overlap between the forties and today, the expansiveness of our current media landscape is one of the most significant differences. Would West be able to publish a 1,000-page book now? What would Gellhorn be like on Twitter? Her letters are full of self-reflective diatribes and pithy indignant rants. Is it purposeful that Ng’s moment of guerilla art hearkens back to radio and broadcast, the dominating form of media during the 1940s? If we are to respond to fascism in the same ways that Gellhorn, Bowen, Buck, and West do, then do we need to adapt those methods to the forms of media today? Buck was ready to write for any form of media she could, anything that her readers (or even listeners or viewers) might encounter. What does that kind of experimentation look like now?

Today things seem different. The crisis of liberalism in the 1940s has become a crisis of neoliberalism today. The authors in this dissertation embrace a bleak liberalism that recognizes its own failures and limitations. They stretch the bounds of liberal humanism to make room for difference and contradiction, for honest conversation. They remain committed to the ideals of democracy even if they are vigilant of its failures in their own countries. But what faith can we have in democracy when our democracy is being used to fascist ends? Even if Ng’s faith in democracy may be less than her predecessors, like them, she turns to art for the answers. In her author’s note, Ng describes her research for the book, including extensive reading about non-violent protests and guerilla art. Ng, too, is searching for the best way to respond, resist, and
enact change without causing more violence. Perhaps, then as now, we can write our way to a better future.


“Amelia being Pulled in a Rickshaw.” Chicago World’s Fair, Purdue University Libraries Archives and Special Collections, 1933.


---. *Demon Lover and Other Stories*. Jonathan Cape, 1945.


---. My Several Worlds: A Personal Record. Open Road Media, 2013.

---. Of Men and Women. The John Day Company, 1941.


Colquitt, Clare. “A Call to Arms: Rebecca West’s Assault on the Limits of ‘Gerda’s Empire’ in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.” *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1986, pp. 77-91.


Gellhorn, Martha, “Come Ahead, Adolf!” *Collier’s Weekly,* 6 August 1938, 13, 43-44.


---. “Obituary of a Democracy.” *Collier’s Weekly,* 10 December 1938, 12-13


“Glamour Girl (Book Review).” *Time Magazine,* Vol 35 Issue 12, p. 92


---. The Literary Legacy of Rebecca West. Open Road Media, 2016.


VITA

ALLISON M. NICK

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy, US and British Literature (Minor in Gender and Women’s Studies), University of Mississippi (2023).

Dissertation: “Reimagining the Radical: Gender, Genre, and Anti-Fascism in Women’s Writing at Mid-Century.” Committee: Dr. Annette Trefzer, Dr. Ian Whittington, Dr. Jaime Harker, Dr. Eva Payne


Bachelor of Arts, English, Bachelor of Arts, Anthropology (Minor in Creative Writing), Washington University in St. Louis, (2013).

PUBLICATIONS

“How to Become a Stronger Writer” in A Holistic Approach to Active Learning and Student Success, edited by Rebekah Reysen and Jeremy Roberts. A publication of the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience Academic Support Programs at The University of Mississippi, February 2021.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Primary Instructor, U. Mississippi

- GST 201: Introduction to Gender Studies (Spring 2022 and Fall 2021)
- GST 201: Introduction to Gender Studies (Fall 2021)
- ENG 448: Blitzed: British Culture in the Second World War (Fall 2020)
- Fall 2020, Undergraduate Capstone Course
Co-Instructor with Dr. Ian Whittington, Synchronous Online
Writing 101 (Fall 2018)

Teaching Assistant, U. Mississippi

ENG 220: Literature and Economics (Spring 2021)
Asynchronous Online

ENG 226: Survey of British Literature 1800 to Present (Fall 2019)

ENG 225: Survey of British Literature to the 18th Century (Spring 2018)

ENG 224: Survey of American Literature since 1860 (Fall 2017)

Instructor, Duke University Talent Identification Program, Durham, NC

Myths and Legends, Rollins College, Winter Park, FL (July 2019)

The Haunting, LSU, Baton Rouge, LA (June 2018)

Graduate Co-Instructor
Community Workshop on Little Dorrit, Dickens Universe (July 2018)

PRESENTATIONS

Conferences


“Gender, Race, and Nationality in Pearl S. Buck’s WWII Writing,” Women Representing Women in the Transnational Context, North East Modern Languages Association Conference, Baltimore, Maryland (2022).


“The Proto-Feminism of Female Soldiers in Civil War Sensational Literature,” Gender in American Literature from the Civil War and Reconstruction, Envisioning a Feminist and Queer South: Southeastern
Women’s Studies Association Conference 19, Oxford, MS (2019).

“Henry James’s In the Cage and the New Woman Novels of the 1890s,” Literature of the Fin De Siecle, South Atlantic Modern Language Association Conference 90, Birmingham, AL (2018).

“It was war time where there were grown people...’: The Personal Made Global in Eudora Welty’s ‘The Winds,’” Eudora Welty Society, Crossroads of Cultures: South Central Modern Languages Association Conference, San Antonio, TX (2018).


Campus Talks


Workshops


FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Lewis-Reynolds-Smith Founders Fellowship, The Ernest Hemingway Foundation and Society (2022-23)

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, U. Mississippi, The Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies (2021-22)

Mentor of the Year Award, Academic Support Programs, U. Mississippi (2021)

Dickens Universe Essay Contest Winner, U. Mississippi, English Department (2018)

Leanna Boysko Essay Prize for Literature, Washington University, English Department (2013)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Writing Center

Fellow, Writing Center Open Educational Resource Institute, U. Mississippi (2021)

Research Assistant, The Post-Pandemic Writing Center: Valuing Asynchronous
Tutoring, Dr. Rachel E. Johnson, U. Mississippi (2021)

Writing Consultant, Undergraduate Writing Center, U. Mississippi (2019, 2021)

Editing and Publishing


Indexer, Exposing Mississippi: Eudora Welty’s Photographic Reflections by Dr. Annette Trefzer, University Press of Mississippi (2021)

Electronic Extension Publications Editor, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL (2015-17)

Public Humanities

Docent, Burns Belfry and Lamar House Historical Museums, City of Oxford, Mississippi (2020-present)

Library Page, Cone Park Library, Gainesville, FL (2013-14)

Research and Mentorship

Graduate Student Mentor, Academic Support Programs, Center for Student Success & First-Year Experience, U. Mississippi (2020-present)

AP Grader (Research), Advanced Placement® (AP), The College Board, (2021, 2022)

Research Assistant, Dr. Karen Raber, Dr. Monika Bhagat-Kennedy, U. Mississippi (2020)

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Secretary, OUTGrads Program for LGBTQIA+ Equality (2022-23)

Peer Writing Facilitator, English Graduate Student Board, U. Mississippi (2021-present)

Scholarly Events Coordinator, English Graduate Student Board, U. Mississippi (2018-present)

Fiction Reader, Yalobusha Review, U. Mississippi (2020-present)

Officer board, English Graduate Student Body (2017-present)

Founding Member, OUTGrads Program for LGBTQIA+ Equality (2017-present)

Volunteer, Glitterary Festival, U. Mississippi (2022)

Participant, U. Mississippi Writing Practicum (2018-2021)

Panel Chair, Eudora Welty Society, South Central Modern Languages Association Conference (2019)
Volunteer Ambassador, Southeastern Women’s Studies Association Conference (2019)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Society for the Study of Southern Literature
Modernist Studies Association
British Association of Modernist Studies
Northeast Modern Languages Association
The Space Between