Inscribing African History: Contemporaneity and V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*¹

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Abstract
This article proposes a thesis that goes against the negativity of the prevalent assessment of Naipaul’s work: that his literary project partakes in writing third-world history and reconstructing humanism of the global south. In his transnational novels especially, Naipaul often mobilizes contemporaneity as a vehicle to challenge hegemonic European time, and accordingly calls for a new form of rewriting (post-)imperial history. In light of the notion of time and contemporaneity, I read *A Bend in the River* (1979) as Naipaul’s attempt to write a post-Orientalist history of Africa that refuses to be historicized as the West’s Other. Contrary to the popular view that Naipaul consigns Africa to a primitive time zone, this novel enacts an indigenous temporality in parallel with European time which denies that Africa is Europe’s contemporary, unravelling their fundamental coevalness. Through a vivid depiction of (non-)interactions between characters, Naipaul uses literary realism to attempt historiography in African terms, one that contests and expands the way we think and imagine African history.

Keywords
African history, historiography, time, contemporaneity, *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul

¹ I would like to acknowledge the valuable suggestions made by the two anonymous readers and the editors. My thanks also go to Gaurav Desai and Grant Hamilton for their incisive comments on earlier drafts of this article.
The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature. It was my hope to sketch a subject which, fifty years hence, a great historian might pursue. For there is no such thing as history nowadays; there are only manifestos and antiquarian research; and on the subject of empire there is only the pamphleteering of churls.

—V. S. Naipaul

_The Mimic Men_

The overall negative reception of V. S. Naipaul’s works in the Republic of Letters has largely eclipsed his historiographic obsession with Europe’s former empires. Read carefully, each of his major works can bring fresh light to our perception of history. In _A Bend in the River_ (1979), for example, Naipaul presents us with a piece of African history through the personal narrative of Salim, an African Muslim of Indian origin, who leaves his hometown in coastal East Africa to run a shop in a central African town. Salim’s self-reflective story is inextricably linked to the history of the post-independent African country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire) in the 1960s and 1970s.

As with Naipaul’s numerous other novels that aspire to a “true” history of empires, _A Bend in the River_ also displays an extensive reflection on the writings of imperial and post-imperial history in ways that make its protagonist ambivalent toward Western historiography. On the one hand, Salim credits all his knowledge about history to books written by Europeans, without whom “all our past would have been washed away” (12). On the other, Salim shows his vigilance against the Western discourse of history which manipulates rhetoric for its own interests: “If it was Europe that gave us on the coast some idea of our history, it was Europe, I feel, that also introduced us to the lie. . . . Being an intelligent and energetic people, and at the peak of their powers, they could express both sides of their civilization; and they got both the slaves and the statues” (16-17). Herein lies the complexity of Naipaul’s text: while there is an acknowledgement of Western historiography, there also exists a revision that critiques its Eurocentric bias. Without registering this textual ambivalence,¹ Salim’s pessimism toward the deteriorated conditions in postcolonial Africa is liable to be solely read as Naipaul’s complicity with Eurocentric historicism.

Indeed, a number of critics have pointed out what they take to be Naipaul’s evolutionary view of history embodied in his portrayal of characters. Kenneth W.

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¹ For a thorough analysis of such internal contradictions in Naipaul’s work, especially his non-fiction, see Rob Nixon’s _London Calling_.

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Harrow, for example, asserts that Salim’s account of “the superiority of European civilization” is used to “excuse rather than question European intervention in the past and present” (333). In Harrow’s view, Naipaul’s characterization of Zabeth and her people as menacing Other condemns them to “an inferior evolutionary state,” and thereby justifies the colonial and neocolonial aggression of the West (334). Ranu Samantrai also uses the word “evolutionary” to describe Naipaul’s caricature of the African in the novel in ways that betray his “unquestioned understanding of time as linear and forward moving” (50). In her reading, Salim’s contrastive portrayals of the European as masculine and orderly and the newly independent African people as infantile and chaotic lay bare Naipaul’s Eurocentric vision of historical development that sees decolonization as “an aberration in the orderly, progressive process of change” (54). Samantrai’s argument is based on Johannes Fabian’s anthropological insight that Europe constructs the global south through the trope of temporal difference. The western notion of time that Samantrai believes informs Naipaul’s teleological vision of human history consigns Africa to the waiting room of history. In a similar vein, Amit Chaudhuri sees A Bend in the River as contaminated by Eurocentric historicism, suggesting that along with Naipaul’s other transnational novels such as The Mimic Men and In a Free State, this novel presents an eloquent vision of “Africa as history’s waiting-room” (6).

My own reading of A Bend in the River advocates a recognition of the dialectical nature of Naipaul’s narrative. This nature is well captured by Imre Szeman’s remark that Naipaul’s fiction can be read either as “the literary equivalent of developmental and modernization theories or as its almost exact opposite: as an important corrective to the overly optimistic characterizations of the postcolonial world offered by other writers and critics” (98). Regrettably, such a dialectic has rarely been registered by postcolonial critics who call for radical politics, especially so amid the intellectual milieu of the novel’s production in the 1970s when it seemed ethically imperative to celebrate postcolonial African modernity. Stanislav Andreski, a British sociologist, rightly observes that the “vast flood of literature on modern Africa contains few works which do not shun the less pleasant aspects of modernization” (13), and dubs this phenomenon “inverted racialism” (14). While I

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2 Naipaul had often been accused of racism and neo-imperialism in this kind of intellectual atmosphere. In most cases, these verdicts are based on some negative descriptive words he used to depict postcolonial societies and peoples, while taking little account of the equally negative terms and bleak vision he assigned to Europe. Indeed, A Bend in the River draws a pessimistic picture of Africa, but it is drawn in the larger context of global displacement and disorder, a recurring motif shown by Salim’s and Indar’s disillusioning London experience and further, more intensely developed in his next novel The Enigma of Arrival.
do not totally disagree with the earlier critiques of Naipaul, the crucial caveat given by Szeman and Andreski inspires me to explore the seed of a true African historiography sown in the fertile soil of *A Bend in the River*. The fact that Naipaul’s African narrative, from his novella “In a Free State,” two magazine articles “A New King for the Congo” and “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”, to *A Bend in the River* and his last work of reportage *The Masque of Africa*, has sparked huge controversy and bifurcated appraisals bespeak its strong and productive textual effect. Taken together, this chronicle of African societies is not only a valuable expression of its time but also a frank acknowledgement of the link of European scramble for Africa to its postcolonial crisis by which African states are still beset. In *A Bend in the River*, the complex image of Africa Naipaul structurally presents enables readers, particularly the Belgian and the Congolese, to recognize Europe’s colonial legacy and its relevance to Africa’s current mess. It is in this sense that I call for a dialectical reading of the novel as a literary-cognitive attempt at a non-Eurocentric African historiography, one that revolves around characterological interactions against the backdrop of European colonization, Western neocolonialism, political corruption, and inter-ethnic conflicts. In light of the notion of contemporaneity, this article then aims to investigate the ideal historiographic practice that Naipaul seems to be suggesting in the realist novel about Africa. I argue that there is a twofold conception of time embedded in this work: first, the historical time of the West and, second, the sacred time of Africa, whose inter-active contemporaneity not only challenges the hegemonic European time but also promotes a new form of African history.

In this novel, the African woman Zabeth is called forth to the “here and now” at the moments of her business transaction with Salim and is seen through his overarching impression. This intercultural encounter brings two modes of time (and

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3 Given Naipaul’s identity as a British citizen of South Asian descent born and raised in Trinidad during a time when the Africans were the largest ethnic group, his African narrative might lay himself open to charges of cultural appropriation. I think it is always advisable to maintain a healthy scepticism about his African writing, but we should by no means deny his right to do so simply by dismissing it as cultural appropriation. Naipaul’s entire oeuvre spanning five decades has explored the ways of seeing and narrating human migration and displacement (in his own time) on a global scale. A cosmopolitan at heart, he had written extensively on “the worlds I contained within myself,” as he reflects in *The Enigma of Arrival*, using himself as method. (135) His literary project frequently enacts social interactions and encounters between people from different racial, national, and religious groups. In fictionalising the intersections of their experiences as a result of shared colonial history, Naipaul has redrawn the postcolonial map produced by Europe’s colonial mappings, in ways that foreground their fundamental connections and challenge artificial borderlines. *A Bend in the River* is an essential part of the project.
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being) into a commonly shared contemporaneity. Contemporaneity has recently become a buzzword in various disciplines across social sciences and humanities. Particularly relevant to our discussion is “two interrelated components” of the term advanced by John Rajchman: one is its disruption of the West’s grand temporal divisions that underpin European Enlightenment thinking; the other links contemporaneity with globalization (126). Rajchman’s dual sense of contemporaneity gestures toward a temporal mode as decolonized global time that no longer assumes Europe as its natural Greenwich meridian. An exploration of this sense of contemporaneity enacted in a literary discourse might sensitize us to the perils of objectifying the other in the broader extraliterary discourses that isolate the other in an inferior time under the grim gaze of the self. In their first few encounters, Zabeth brings the indigenous, sacred time of Africa into jarring proximity with Salim’s—and to some extent Naipaul’s—temporal sphere, making visible the out-of-jointness of the historical present. Salim is an African but not quite—he is an ethnically Indian Muslim born and raised in Africa. For Zabeth, he is both an insider and an outsider. But this porous position enables him to learn to forge an equal relationship with her in their sharing of time and space.

A prophetess, Zabeth is figured as from a pre-colonial past who, protected by her native landscape and ancestors, travels beyond her territory without fear in the midst of a harrowing civil war—“The Second Rebellion”. But Zabeth’s self-assurance eludes Salim. Out of concern for Zabeth’s safety, Salim kindly reminds her that: “‘One day, Beth, somebody will snatch your case. It isn’t safe to travel about with money like that.’ ‘The day that happens, Mis’ Salim, I will know the time has come to stay home.’” It was a strange way of thinking. But she was a strange woman (6).” Salim’s inability to comprehend Zabeth’s “strangeness” or alterity indicates a cosmological discrepancy between two large racial-cultural groups on the vast continent. Based on a broad division of Africa into “a Muslim Arab area and Black Africa” (Kourouma 32), Salim and Zabeth fall into each of these two groups and bear a distinct set of value systems and attitudes toward traditional African religion. As a perceptive man who has assimilated European civilization, Salim has difficulty understanding Zabeth’s seemingly irrational and somewhat uncanny way of thinking. Nevertheless, with the accumulation of his bodily experience of living in the same landscape, he gradually comes to fathom

4 In her compelling analysis of the novel, Helen Hayward also notes Salim’s unique position, arguing that his insider/outsider position makes it possible for the novel to “consider the basis of its own viewpoint, and to meditate on the validity of the outsider’s perspective” (197).
Zabeth’s inner security as stemming from nature and ancestral worship. Compare the following two passages:

Going home at night! It wasn’t often that I was on the river at night. I never liked it. *I never felt in control.* In the darkness of river and forest you could be sure only of what you could see—and even on a moonlight night you couldn’t see much. . . . The river and the forest were like presences, and much more powerful than you. You felt unprotected, an intruder. (8; emphasis added)

Every man here knew that he was watched from above by his ancestors, living forever in a higher sphere, their passage on earth not forgotten, but essentially preserved, part of the presence of the forest. In the deep forest was the greatest security. That was the security that Zabeth left behind, to get her precious cargo; that was the security to which she returned. (9)

Divergent axiology regarding the human-nature relationship looms large from these two contrasted quotes. Salim dislikes the idea of being on a river at night because he feels out of control in the face of overpowering nature. For him, as well as for people in Europe and the Muslim world generally, nature and the surrounding environment were created by God, pose a menacing presence to human beings, and should therefore be demystified, possessed and dominated. Contra Salim, Zabeth and her people believe in the black African God, a natural God who justly endows all its creatures, the living and the dead, with souls and powers. This traditional African religion, part of whose legacy survives the Islamic and Judaeo-Christian conversions during the long history of first Arab and then European colonialism in Africa, deeply shapes their ecological vision. For black Africans, human beings and nature maintain a symbiotic relationship and live in harmonious coexistence; nature, as well as humankind, is sacred; “the dead are not dead: they never went away, but exist in things, beings and plants” (Kourouma 32). Notwithstanding his Western analytic style of thinking, Salim’s intercultural communication with Zabeth enables him to gradually grasp the latter’s epistemic modality embodied in her innate conviction in the confluence of dead ancestors and nature that produces security in her.

Particularly noteworthy during their encounter is Salim’s willingness and self-restriction in his attempt to comprehend African realities. Naipaul’s
construction of African alterity as ontologically different yet epistemologically translatable in universal terms must be poles apart from the pervasive Eurocentrism that informed (and still perpetuates) the prejudicial idea of Africa as existing in an inchoate temporal realm. This kind of European exclusion of African people and their lifeworld from universal intelligibility has been most blatantly articulated by the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, whose Eurocentric historiography of Africa in the nineteenth century has exerted a profound influence over European’s racist perception of Africa. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes: “The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of Universality” (110). Measured against Hegel’s Enlightenment rationality, the African character has been unconscious of “any substantial objective existence” independent from him and in which he becomes aware of his own being (111). In Hegel’s view, the African character’s inability to distinguish himself as a living individual from the totality of his “essential being” relegates him to a barbarian condition that renders irrelevant any ethical gesture to understand him. As he puts it: “The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state,” and as such “[w]e must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality, all that we call feeling, if we would rightly comprehend him. There is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character” (111).

In contrast with such Eurocentric discourse on Africa, Naipaul’s figuration neither reduces Zabeth to an illiterate, marginalized other, nor transforms her into an object of knowledge whose “primitive” existence on the wild continent synecdochally signifies Africa’s lack of humanity. In fact, the figure of Zabeth enacts a critique of dominant Enlightenment-inflicted notions of human mastery such as we see in the figure of Salim. What emerges from their encounter then is a sense of contemporaneity, a coevalness that refuses to reduce the observed object to a signifier of archaic time and inferior societies. As such, the business transaction presents a temporal intersection where the reader is mobilized to engage affectively in the life and times of black Africans and to view the plurality of time as always already part of our own contemporaneity. At the time-knot converge two fundamental modes of time: the historical time of Enlightenment reason and the sacred time of black Africa.
Two Modes of Time: The Historical and the Sacred

Historical time makes possible human understanding of the nature of things in this world on the grounds that the given entity must be seen as historically developing over time. It holds that the passage of time is indispensable to any rational thinking of an object as developing toward a unity or totality. Such historical time is, in Walter Benjamin’s catch phrase, “a homogenous, empty time” (261). Conceptualizing time in this way, the West has promoted into universal human values such concepts as nation-state, rights, democracy, science, and citizenship that undergird modern institutions. Ideas that are at variance with, or go beyond this European frame of thought would often be identified as irrational or inhuman. The practices of everyday life in some non-Western countries such as sacrifice ritual and ancestral worship seem “superstitious”—the word itself is a European invention—and have been objectified by secular observers as antithetical to rationality. This dichotomy is impatiently described by Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as “the struggle of the Enlightenment with superstition” (329-49). Despite its practical usage as the basis of historical chronology, the idea of a unitary time is proven inadequate, sometimes simply erroneous when it comes to the reading of fiction about Africa. It is this idea of historical time that Salim—to a greater extent, Huismans and Raymond—inherits and that puts at risk the Black African’s ontological difference. However, *A Bend in the River* insinuates a sacred time of Black Africa that disrupts and supplements the historical time of European thought.

The African sacred time may be seen as a living, unmediated time that refuses to yield to any artificial distinction between past, present, and future. It is perhaps best captured by what John S. Mbiti calls “phenomenon calendars,” according to which time is reckoned and constituted by meaningful human activities such as events, phenomena, and action (24). As opposed to the Western “numerical calendars,” Mbiti argues in his seminal book *African Religions and Philosophy*, phenomenon calendars emblematize the inherently African conception of time. In one case, time is a commodity that “must be utilized, sold and bought”; in the other, time “has to be created or produced” and depends on human agency (24). Zabeth’s adherence to phenomenon calendars is made clear by Naipaul’s (and Salim’s) meticulous portrayal of her laborious shopping trip:

[I]t was deep night when Zabeth and her women came to where they had to cast off from the steamer. Zabeth took care then not to give
away the entrance to her village. She cast off; she waited for the steamer and the barge and the lights to disappear. Then she and her women poled back up or drifted down to their secret channel, and their night-time labour of poling and pushing below the overhanging trees. (8; emphases added)

In this scene, clock time yields to the time of human experience. The chain of verbs used to describe Zabeth’s nighttime labor indicates a concept of time that is generated and given meaning by human activities, one that deeply disorients Salim who complies with numerical calendars. Salim is thus awed by Zabeth’s willpower and confused by her life-risking journey: “It was as though she came out each time from her hidden place to snatch from the present (or the future) some precious cargo to take back to her people” (9). These affects, however, induce him to rediscover a “forgotten or ignored” African world that persists throughout human history, “the true, safe world” protected by their ancestors (9). Zabeth’s irruption into “here and now” attests to both the disjuncture of the particular present Salim inhabits and the contiguity between Africa’s tribal, precolonial past, and its post/neo-colonial present.

Moreover, Salim’s temporal disorientation not only enables him to begin to grasp the sacred time that Zabeth and her tribal people live by; he also comes to take in its fundamental contemporaneity and mutual translatability with the historical time of European rationality, not least because, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes in a different context, a relationship of contemporaneity “would have been the condition under which we can even begin to treat them as intelligible to us” (109). As noted previously, though Salim and Zabeth inhabit a disparate set of religio-cultural circumstances, they could still make sense of each other, even if only partially. This reciprocity is expanded at the moment when Zabeth entrusts her son Ferdinand to Salim’s custody in the hope that the boy would be able to choose from alternative modes of life: “Zabeth lived a purely African life; for her only Africa was real. But for Ferdinand she wished something else. I saw no contradiction; it seemed to me natural that someone like Zabeth, living such a hard life, should want something better for her son. This better life lay outside the timeless ways of village and river. It lay in education and the acquiring of new skills” (42; emphasis added). Salim’s observation suggests a resilient vision of time and a compatibility of different modes of being. If Zabeth inhabits a sacred time and her life emblematizes (or is) the traditional Black African ontology, then Ferdinand, who receives a Western-style education and later rises to the post of regional
commissioner, may be seen as inhabiting a new time that emerges from the interplay between historical time and sacred time. Remarkably, the temporal grammar of the passage seems to pull these heterogeneous times together toward a shared contemporaneity, suggesting that Zabeth’s “purely African” being is not at drastic odds with—even embraces—her son’s potential Afropolitanism.⁵

Revealing the two strands of time as coeval is critical to unraveling Naipaul’s historical imagination in A Bend in the River. It offers us a point of entry into African cosmology which in turn might help devise a more inclusive framework for conceptualizing Africanist histories and identities. Adhering to an indigenous heterotemporality, Zabeth and her cohort exemplify a vital force and African mode of being that persist into the modern, postcolonial, and Euro-American capitalist era.⁶ Their mere existence poses a challenge to the dominance of Western time and historiography. More important, Naipaul shows no proclivity to blindly celebrate African agency and autonomy, nor to assimilate an African episteme into Western knowledge systems. Rather, while reinforcing the African autochthony, he also lays bare the harsh existential realities in Africa and thereby helps us make sense of its current crisis.⁷ In narrating the multi-faceted human history of Africa, Naipaul demonstrates his own idea of African historiography.

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⁵ In his new book V. S. Naipaul’s Journeys: From Periphery to Center, Sanjay Krishnan offers an in-depth analysis of Zabeth’s son, in which he also reads Ferdinand as a symbol of a potentially better African future that education might help bring about. For more, see ch. 6.

⁶ There is ample evidence that suggests the political and economic intervention of the United States of America in Congo in the 1960s and 1970s. An analysis of declassified documents shows that the CIA was a key operator in the 1961 assassination of the first democratically elected Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba whom the US administration cast as a potentially threatening vehicle of Soviet communist ideology. Under the cold war climate, Colonel Joseph Mobutu was chosen to become the Congolese protégé, a puppet the US manipulated in order to depose Lumumba government. Under the CIA’s covert operation, Mobutu launched a military coup in 1960, and finally seized power in his second coup in 1965, since which time he started his corrupt rule of the country for 31 years until his overthrow in 1997. For more details on the imperial intervention of the United States, see Weissman.

⁷ In his studies of political modernity in colonial and postcolonial South Asia in Provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty also attempts to resuscitate from Western imperial repression the postcolonial agency at the site of indigenous time, but his insufficient self-critique of the native patriarchal biases might make it impossible perhaps to register Naipaul’s subtle critique of the African patriarchal law when he writes of Ferdinand’s return to his mother’s tribe: “A father could claim his child; there were any number of folk sayings that expressed this almost universal African law” (35); nor could Chakrabarty’s model allow us to agree with Salim’s view of Zabeth’s tribal life as a laborious, undesirable way of living which Ferdinand should be given the option to replace through education.
Writing African History: Two Typical Ways

Concomitant with the sacred time is a ceaselessly flowing and lived history in the making. For Naipaul, such history should simultaneously accommodate Zabeth, Ferdinand, Salim, Metty, and other African people who, coming from various ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, navigate the world differently in the same space. In an effort to rehabilitate the distorted history of former colonized African countries, numerous African historians have attempted to inscribe their “history with multiple pathways that focuses on varieties of human experiences and connections and tells stories of change without presenting linear tales of progress” (Zeleza 114). This inclusive vision of history also holds true for Naipaul, who stands somewhere between the two poles of nativism and cosmopolitanism. In A Bend in the River, Naipaul accentuates this historiographic view by a sharp contrast with two typical ways of inscribing the history of Mobutu’s Zaire. The novel starts out with Zabeth in her encounter with Salim, and yet curiously enough she seems to walk out of the story for the best part of the novel, making only occasional appearances. Despite and because of Zabeth’s disappearance, there is a striking presence of her African aura throughout the novel that haunts Raymond the historian and Father Huismans, the Christian missionary. The historiographic practices of the two white Westerners pale beside the integrative history embodied by Zabeth’s everyday life with its indigenous vitality.

Raymond, a well-known intellectual and the Big Man’s advisor, is portrayed as the most dogmatic kind of historian whose historiographic practice lifts facts from newspapers and casts the local Congolese lifeworlds into total oblivion. In a house party at the president’s Domain, Salim learns that Raymond is working laboriously on a “big book about the history of the country” (172), an academic undertaking he has been preoccupied with for some years. But Salim regards Raymond’s historical work on Africa as unbearable to read, uninformed by African people like Zabeth and their everyday life, needs, anxieties, and fears:

I was always hoping that Raymond was going to go behind the newspaper stories and editorials and try to get at the real events. A race riot in the capital in the 1930s—that ought to have been a strong story. . . . But Raymond wasn’t interested in that side. He didn’t give the impression that he had talked to any of the people involved. . . . His subject was an event in Africa, but he might have been writing about Europe or a place he had never been. (181; emphasis added)
Salim’s remark mildly satirizes Raymond’s exclusionary approach to history for its failure to register African ontology. The ideal form of historiography that Naipaul aspires to adopt is one that seeks to “reconstruct human story”, as is well expressed in his next novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987). The writing of a book about Caribbean history exhausts him, Naipaul’s narrator writes: “But then I had become excited by the story it told. The historian seeks to abstract principles from human events. My approach was the other; for the two years that I lived among the documents I sought to reconstruct the human story as best as I could” (*Enigma* 94; emphasis added).

The two quoted paragraphs above show how deeply Naipaul’s idea of historiography is in tune with the indigenous conception of time as constituted by human experience and phenomenon. Through the portrayal of Raymond as a historian below the mark, Naipaul takes issue with the popular ways of writing Africa in the West. Despite their good intentions, Western historians often lose sight of indigenous specificity and end up with a Eurocentric historiography that erases the non-Western lifeworlds. In Raymond’s case, at best he has little interest in or grip on indigenous elements, such as local culture, oral tradition, native worldview, temporal vision, and modes of being. For Salim, Raymond’s restricted view of history generates writings that tell “a special kind of truth”: “They didn’t lie, but they were formal. They handled big people—businessmen, high officials, members of our legislative and executive councils—with respect. They left out a lot of important things—often essential things—that local people would know and gossip about” (181; emphasis added). Without a bodily experience of the indigenous, Raymond is rather blind to what is really going on in the central African country and gives allegiance wrongly to the Big Man who commands the new army to attack the warrior tribes in his second rebellion. Of particular concern is the political ramifications Raymond’s historiographical research helps bring about. Instead of just being ignorant, his mutilated writing lends itself to political propaganda in the midst of the raging civil war. Underlying the seemingly harmless neglect of the indigenous in his project of writing African history might be the president’s political agenda to subjugate or eradicate the rebellious tribal groups. Either way, Raymond arrogantly writes Zabeth, her people, their spirituality and secular concerns—the “essential things”—out of his text.

Zabeth’s abrupt disappearance from this episode makes Raymond’s neglect especially conspicuous. The sacred time Zabeth inhabits is given way to a historical time on the basis of which Salim comes into contact with Raymond on the Domain
where the Big Man (Mobutu) intends to build a new Africa. The endemic scene of the magical and religious is taken over by the modern and the rational. As shown in the title “The New Domain”, this section leaves behind Zabeth’s “old Africa” and transports the reader into the modern /Western space and time zone, one that finds its full expression in the Western-style local college of the Polytechnic. The Big Man’s modernization movement—based on capitalist cartography and covertly aided by Euro-American community—flattens the African country to a spatial and divided object that excludes Zabeth’s everyday life. In this urban space, “the exaltation of the Domain” under the state’s coercive governance is such that in order to “grasp reality again” Salim has to go back to see “the shacks,” “the rubbish mounds,” “the river and forest all around,” “the ragged groups outside the drinking booths,” and “the squatters’ cooking fires on the pavements in the center of the town” (123). By portraying the new Domain’s ultimate decay, Naipaul directs us to see the Congolese crisis as prosaic and quotidian, quite similar to what Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman terms “the routinization of a register of improvisations lived as such by people” (326; emphasis added).

Overshadowing the manifest spatiotemporal transposition, remarkably, is Zabeth’s spectral presence that calls into question the epistemological validity of Raymond’s historiographical project. As Salim observes, without an affective understanding of African realities Raymond would never get at the “true” Africa:

He knew so much, had researched so much. He must have spent weeks on each article. But he had less true knowledge of Africa, less feel for it. . . . Yet he had made Africa his subject. He had devoted years to those boxes of documents in his study that I had heard about from Indar. Perhaps he had made Africa his subject because he had come to Africa and because he was a scholar, used to working with

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8 For a spatial interpretation of this novel, see Erica L. Johnson’s “‘Provincializing Europe’. Johnson’s article uses Freudian uncanny to illustrate the strangely familiar postcolonial experience of the space both in London and in the African city, arguing that the novel’s “spatial presentation of history successfully provincializes Europe” (227). While I find Johnson’s argument compelling, I sense that it seems to equate what she calls the “architectural/spatial” with the historical, thus risking flattening the rich texture of African history. Naipaul specifically rebuts this very equation in The Masque of Africa: “I used to think that the light and heat had burned away the history of the place. You couldn’t feel that bush or sea had a history. To have a sense of history you needed buildings, architecture; and history came to the place—you seemed to see the change occurring—in Marine Square in the centre of the old Spanish town, and the few ambitious buildings of the British period.” (274-75) Instead, he locates the real history in “a busy river life” and argues for a human-oriented, lived history (275).
papers, and had found this place full of new papers. (182; emphasis added)

Salim’s quip at Raymond reflects unequivocally Naipaul’s critique of an un-affective approach to African history that brushes aside the everyday life of the indigenous, their joys and sorrows. Raymond’s historicist approach can neither recuperate the legacies of indigenous past, nor get to the materiality of the ongoing crisis in the autocratic African country. Zabeth’s lingering in the text throws into sharp relief the impotence of Raymond’s jargon-ridden history of Africa. By foregrounding Raymond’s dry historiography and its deeply flawed historicity, Naipaul calls for a cross-cultural negotiation in the ethical and epistemological project of writing African histories.  

In contrast with Raymond, Father Huismans, a Belgian missionary-priest and lover of Africa, is more admirable in his respect for native sacredness. He sees true Africa dying or about to die, and begins to collect and preserve native things such as masks and carvings in his museum-like room of the lycée, the town school where Huismans is the principal and where Zabeth sends her son for education. Salim is at first surprised by the extent to which “a Christian priest should have had such regard for African beliefs” (61). But soon it turns out that the priest is enthralled only by the African artefacts, local things that for him embody the religious quality of “true Africa”—to the point of reifying the image of real Africa into indigenous essentialism. Huismans literally turns a blind eye to the bleak post-independence African condition fraught with war and conflict, and aestheticizes it into “a wonderful place, full of new things” (62). Of this Salim perceives: “And yet, though Father Huismans knew so much about African religion and went to such trouble to collect his pieces, I never felt that he was concerned about Africans in any other way; he seemed indifferent to the state of the country. I envied him that indifference” (61-62).

Huismans’s indifference to the present state of the country, Naipaul seems to be suggesting, arises out of his European conviction of the eventual advent of modern African states in the near future. Using Salim as a focalizer, Naipaul draws attention to the unexpected reverence Huismans has for colonial ruins or

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9 Cross-cultural interaction in writing history is what Naipaul conceives to be the essence of history. In an interview with Aamer Hussein, Naipaul defines history as “an interplay of different peoples;” “History is an interplay of different peoples, and it’s gone on forever. I can think of no culture that’s been left to itself. It’s a very simple view that borrowing first began with European expansion. Think of all that was brought back by the crusaders from the Middle East. . . . There’s always been this interplay.” (4)
“everything connected with the European colonization” (64). In spite of his reputation in the town as a lover of Africa, Huismans does not reject the colonial past but instead devoutly stores away the relics of early civilization that emblematize that bitter history. Huismans’s nostalgia for the past, along with his utopian vision of the future, dispels his immediate concern for the current situation of the warring country. Westerners’ insistence on indigenous purity, as Arif Dirlik argues, “may well serve as excuses for a reactionary revival of older forms of oppression” in the postcolonial era (Postcolonial 98). Given Huismans’s identity as a Christian missionary,10 “the best symbol of the colonial enterprise” (Mudimbe 47), we have more reason to consent to Dirlik’s view and attribute Huismans’s fascination with local relics to an ingrained colonial mentality.

Huismans’s obsession with the dead relics bears a striking resemblance to Raymond’s flawed history-writing project in terms of their oblivion to the vitality of African lifeworlds. In their respective ways, they both consign Congo’s past irretrievably to an a-temporal prison-house. While Raymond makes a scholarly attempt to organize the past around an assemblage of newspaper fragments that occlude indigenous realities, Huismans objectifies the vibrant past into a bunch of masks and carvings. As William Vincent aptly puts it, “Huismans’ ‘love’ for Africa is simply the love of the imperialist historiographer for his ‘subject’—the subject which exists only to serve a preordained destiny, to ‘prove’ the truth of a predetermined construct.” (341).

In reference to the havoc such imperialist ideology wreaks, Edward Said once made a particular mention of Huismans, arguing that “it is precisely the fervent innocence of [. . .] Naipaul’s Father Huismans, men for whom the native can be educated into our civilization, that turns out to produce the murder, subversion, and endless instability of ‘primitive’ societies” (xix). Naipaul lays bare Father Huismans’s precarious ignorance of Africa through a contrast with Zabeth’s lifeworld, thereby negotiating an intercultural reciprocity: “When Father Huismans first opened the door of that room for me, and I got the warm smell of grass and earth and old fat, and had a confused impression of masks lying in rows on slatted shelves, I thought: ‘This is Zabeth’s world. This is the world to which she returns when she leaves my shop.’ But Zabeth’s world was living, and this was dead” (64-65; emphases added). Here the interference of Zabeth’s living world with

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10 Christian mission has long been associated with European colonialism in Africa. The close affinity between missions and empire was generally acknowledged as a matter of fact by intellectuals in the period of decolonization, and was breathed into new life by the theorists of postcolonialism in the 1980s. See, for example, J. D. Y. Peel, Religious Encounters and the Making of the Yoruba.
Huismans’s colonial archive clearly illustrates how the Western priest obliterates the indigenous lifeworlds in this sub-Saharan African country. Zabeth’s absent presence in Huismans’s museum calls into question the uncanny colonial mentality that undergirds the priest’s fetishistic practices. In his archaeological endeavor, Huismans substitutes dead objects for a living African world, thus essentializing African difference as absolute from “his own idea of Europe” and “his own idea of civilization” (63). With such a radical assumption of African alterity, Huismans looks at Africa as a natural reserve rather than as an animate human world. Building on the idea of essential difference, Huismans mummifies the living Africa, packs off its relics, and locks them up in a Western museum.

What underlies Huismans’ judgment of Africa is not so much a self-critical perception of its living world on African terms as the cognitive principles secreted by the cultural logic of global imperialism alone, bereft of any intermediary intervention of the indigenous. Unaware of the ideological order at work, Huismans nevertheless acknowledges with good intentions Africa’s difference from the West as the dominant standard of reference. But his egalitarian affirmation of African difference is premised on, and then used to reinforce, the Western denial of the fundamental contemporaneity between Huismans and Zabeth, and the Western and the African. As Kwaku Larbi Korang compellingly argues in his critique of a Western scholar who takes up a theoretical position similar to Huismans’s, it is commendable for the Westerner to accommodate the self to a differential knowledge of its non-Western other,

But this quest to do the right thing by the Other only succeeds in shutting this Other out of a worldly [Western] temporality. The Westerner’s present tense, that which puts him on the way to the postcolonial, obligates ethnicized Africa to remain walled up, marking time in a past-continuous. Thus, in spite of the worldly impact of colonialism on Africa, and in spite of a decolonizing response to this impact, the continent is served a restraining order, a critical injunction by the Westerner to remain continuously precolonial. African alterity as such may be accorded respect, but the subjectivity that inhabits this autonomous difference is in no way the temporal equivalent of the opulently worldly Westerner. (48-49)

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11 In a Derridian sense, Huismans sees an unbridgeable différance that lies between Zabeth and himself: their relationship is defined in terms of both qualitative difference and temporal deferral.
Korang’s remarks allow us to meditate further on the temporal compartmentalization deriving from the West’s indigenous fundamentalism.

Despite the fact that he and Zabeth live at the same historical juncture on the same continent, in Huismans’s eyes they inhabit separate spatiotemporal realms. While Huismans sees himself “as part of an immense flow of history” living at the postcolonial moment (63), he relegates his African contemporaries to the time of the precolonial, without any attempt to initiate dialogic interaction with them. As Johannes Fabian famously observes, the denial of contemporaneity “rests on the negation of the temporal materiality of communication through language” (164). Seen in this light, Huismans’s missionary enterprise thus casts the Congolese world into silent history of dead matter, always below the Western History.

As noted previously, Naipaul objects to Huismans’s unmediated vision that substitutes Africana for “true Africa,” the past for the present. Instead, he foregrounds the native land and tribal people as irreducible in Euro-American construction of African history. The literary enactment of interplay between characters from distinct racial communities evokes the conjunctural time in motion of the sacred and the historical, which contributes to an ethical attempt to remove Africa from its confinement in what Western people perceive as the precolonial past. Meanwhile, the aesthetic logic of A Bend in the River unfolds an ethical imperative for the West to acknowledge the contemporaneity of past and present, the sacred and the historical, and the African and the Western. Specifically, the textual invocation of Zabeth to the present, secular, and postcolonial world that Huismans and Raymond inhabit not only constitutes an urgent call for recuperating suppressed indigenous agency, but it also prefigures an epistemological necessity to do so. While Western interest in Africa opens up the indigenous to precious possibilities in regard to native agency and social change, Africa may also be of paradigmatic significance to the thinking of humane relationship and world politics in the global climate.12

Without the transcultural negotiation between the African and the Western, Western historiography of Africa will be rendered ineffectual. This productive dependency on the real Africa as profound intellectual source is figuratively suggested through the critique of Huismans’s museum by Salim and Zabeth’s son respectively in which the collected masks have lost their original power:

That [the invocation of Zabeth’s living world] was the effect of those masks lying flat on the shelves, looking up not at forest or sky but at the underside of

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12 For studies on this aspect, see Arif Dirlik, “Three Worlds or One, or Many?”
other shelves. They were masks that had been laid low, in more than one way, and had lost their power. (65)

It is a thing of Europeans, a museum. Here it is going against the god of Africans. We have masks in our houses and we know what they are there for. We don’t have to go to Huisman’s museum. (83)

Offensively at odds with traditional African beliefs, Huisman’s mummification of “African things” in his museum undermines their original power due to the enforced separation from their native owners. These two quotes seem to imply that a Eurocentric appropriation of Africa in the mythos of the West is doomed to failure on account of its split from African indigenous episteme. By extension, any discreet historicization of the third world as a discursive construct in the Western archive demands an intercultural, transnational intervention rooted in the autochthonous.

As part of Naipaul’s literary project of rewriting non-Western histories, A Bend in the River exemplarily shows the potentiality of the imaginary to reconfigure native elements of Africa as intervening forces against the colonialist distortion of history. By means of characterological encounter and (non-)interaction, the novel mobilizes the simultaneous running of a historical time and a sacred time, interposing the precolonial and colonial in the postcolonial now and here. The evoked idea of contemporaneity demands a rethinking of Africa and its history not as subordinate to the West but existent in its own right. While the West employs its own analytical categories to transform or transfix Africa to the universal, the mutable circumstances of Africa resist the cultural prerogatives that underwrite the West’s epistemological attempt. By casting Zabeth’s spectral presence over Raymond and Huisman, Naipaul draws attention to the indigenous resistance to the West’s proprietary claim to Africa, and imaginatively gestures toward an intercultural negotiation in African terms.

**Conclusion**

Raymond’s knowledge of Africa, stemming from European Africanist discourse and twice-removed from true Africa, objectifies African past into the empty news-record of the present, while Huisman’s preservation of African relics locks up Africa forever in the dead past. According to Friedrich Nietzsche’s three modes of history, we can reasonably conclude that Raymond is a historian who fosters a “monumental” history, Huisman is a proponent of “antiquarian” history,
and Naipaul is a “critical” historian whose ideal history is neither inscribed on the monument nor preserved in the dead objects from the past. Although these modes of history can coexist, Nietzsche reminds us, “each of the three species of history which exist belongs to a certain soil and a certain climate and only to that: in any other it grows into a devastating weed” (72). The epic failure of Raymond and Huismans suggests that the monumental history and the antiquarian history they each practice are “devastating weed,” just like the water hyacinth (a plant brought to Africa from America) Naipaul repeatedly depicts, whose monstrous proliferation has clogged up waterways and threatens to choke out Africa. By invoking Zabeth as the ever-present incarnation of the vibrant, living past, Naipaul’s critical history skewers their flawed historiographical practices, and meanwhile advocates the Western attempt to construct African past. This ambivalent stance brings out the deep structure of contemporaneity embedded in the novel, allowing the reader to experience the history of Congo as neither an objectified body of knowledge nor ahistorical indigenous essentialism but as a dynamic history always in the making. What emerges out of the aesthetic creation of contemporaneity then is not a compromised or hybrid form of African history, so much as an integrative history that engages the reader in an intercultural recognition of, and interaction with the profound variety of human cultures in Africa.

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