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Undoing Colonial Temporalities. Presentism and the Future of the Post/Past

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the notion of presentism as a way of looking at the fraught temporalities of the *post-*/*de-* 'pre-fixing frontier' in colonialism studies. Drawing on various interpretations of the concept, presentism can be said to manifest when societies become unable to imagine a future or a past, because of structured powers keen on preserving the *status quo*. Using a combination of data from media ethnography and literary criticism, we intend to assess the productivity of an updated notion of presentism for the ongoing debates on the coloniality of power. Instances of arrested and recursive temporalities exemplified in recent Anglophone African novels as well as in Swedish media discourses on migration will serve as case studies. Issues of memory and denial, as well as the ideological claim that enduring phenomena such as immigration should be considered symptoms of a *contemporary* migratory crisis, will be at the centre of our investigation.

Keywords: *presentism, arrested temporalities, defuturing, coloniality, post/de-colonial thought, migration*

Refugees gather like so much undecided pain
to sit in an agonized waiting
for something that may or may not
come. This is the task.
Chris Abani, *Refugees*

1. Introduction

Temporality is notoriously a defining question in the study of colonialism and its implications. Identifying one's understanding of historical change has always been an inescapable concern for scholars dealing with the violent events and perduring consequences of colonization, with the hopes and ambiguities of anti-colonial struggles, and with the fraught situation we usually term *post-* (and sometimes *neo-*) colonial. The question is not only one of definitions and inevitably limiting linguistic formulae. In this sense, the complex distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial theories do not necessarily correspond to a neat divide in the understandings of time and 'the times'.[2]

Many postcolonial scholars have criticized the idea of a linear and progressive temporality that is implicit in the prefix *post*, with its seemingly clear-cut tracing of a definite turning point in time, following which the colonial phenomenon should be taken as concluded.[3] Decolonial thinkers, on the other hand, have fiercely taken to the task the Western-centric idea of modernity itself in the form in

[1] Sections 1, 2, 3 and 5 of this article have been written by Mara Mattoscio. Section 4 (including 4.1 and 4.2) is by Juan Velasquez Atehortúa.

[2] For a recent assessment of the debate opposing postcolonial and decolonial practices, see Madina Tlostanova, "The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Post-socialist Intervention", in Monica Albrecht, ed., *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Newcolonial Present* (London: Routledge, 2019), 165-178. Tlostanova argues in favour of a "deep coalition" between the two and advises to work "with decolonial concepts on a more general level" and with "postcolonial tools … on applied and descriptive levels" (Ibid., 171).

[3] See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Annamaria Carusi, "Post, Post, and Post: or Where Is South African Literature in All This?", in Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1990), 95-101.

which it is usually cast against a supposed 'pre-modernity' and backwardness of the rest of the world. In the colonial project, Europeans have long been "denying the coevalness of the colonized, refusing to recognize that everyone inhabits the same moment in time",[4] so that the characterization of colonized people as living 'belatedly' or 'behind times' has been invoked to justify the violent conquest and subjugation of the desired territories. In the imperialist rhetoric, the Europeans' 'civilizing mission' would have served to guide the colonized societies towards a modernity that they could never, in any case, completely attain.[5] Yet, as Walter Mignolo remarked, "modernity is not an ontological unfolding of history but the hegemonic narrative of Western civilization. So, there is no need to be modern. Even better, it is urgent to delink from the dream that if you are not modern, you are out of history".[6] In other words, the whole idea of a chronological modernity that takes place at the apex of a progressive vectorial time is a corollary of that Western philosophy that posits the European subjects and their history as the centre of the universe, and everybody else as dependant on this vantage point.

In this light, the notions of history and historiography appear themselves fraught with ambiguities. In examining the self-division of the colonial subject and its desire for an unattainable catch-up with 'modernity', Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote for example that "a historical construction of temporality (medieval/modern, separated by historical time) … is precisely the axis along which the colonial subject splits itself. Or to put it differently, this split *is* what is history; writing history is performing this split over and over again".[7] Chakrabarty's reflections on the "artifice of history" in connection to postcoloniality are integral to his critique of the metanarrative of the nation state, whose "theoretical subject can only be a hyperreal 'Europe', a 'Europe' constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonized".[8]

Such radical critique of the Western-centric mindset that reads time as a triumphant linear progress from 'cultural backwardness' to 'sophisticated modernity' (further complicated, as we will see, by Chakrabarty's and others' call for a 'deep time') invites a thorough reconsideration of the notions of past, present, and future, as well as of the meaning of our 'being-in-time'. We will attempt this with an analysis that starts from investigating the recurring theme of 'arrested' or frozen temporalities in some instances of recent Anglophone African literature, and then proceeds to illuminate the philosophical concept of 'presentism' in reference to (post)coloniality. Our exploration of the 'defuturing' mechanisms of the (global) postcolonial condition will be further illustrated through a case study coming from the Global North, i.e. the last three decades' discourses on migration in Swedish media, in which the constant phenomenon of human mass movement is recast as a symptom of a *contemporary* migratory crisis. Applying our theoretical lens both to literary studies and media ethnography helps us to reflect on the pervasiveness and structural entrenchment of presentism in contemporary politics and imagination.

2. Disavowing the Past, Denying the Future: African Literature Raises the Alarm

Rehana Rossouw's 2017 novel *New Times* concludes its opening paragraph with the remark that "when you are oppressed and going nowhere you never rush".[9] In this fictional story centred around the young

[4] Jennifer Wenzel, "Past's Futures, Future's Pasts", in Stef Craps et al., eds., "Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable", *Memory Studies*, 11.4 (2018), 498-515, 504.
[5] Tlostanova pointed out that, in the human taxonomy organized around the Western scale of modernity, "some are assigned a status of the forever-catching-up agents [while] others are placed into the absolute otherness and withdrawn from history and modernity", Tlostanova, "The Postcolonial Condition", 171.
[6] Walter Mignolo, "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience", *Transversal – Unsettling Knowledges*, https://transversal.at/transversal/0112/mignolo/en, accessed 10 November 2020.
[7] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", *Representations*, 37, Special Issue: *Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories* (Winter 1992), 1-26, 13.
[8] Ibid., 18.
[9] Rehana Rossouw, *New Times* (Johannesburg: Jacana Books, 2017), 1.

coloured journalist Ali – inspired by the real-life journalistic experiences of Rossouw herself – the disappointment with the betrayal of the anti-apartheid movement's aspirations in the year following the first democratic elections in South Africa is articulated through an analysis of the waiting times imposed by those in power.[10] At an electoral meeting with former anti-apartheid activist Irfaan, Ali and the rest of the audience have to wait fifty-five minutes past the scheduled starting time before the politician actually arrives and starts speaking – something that induces the protagonist to observe how he seems to be "enjoying the fruits of liberation while the almost one million voters in the Western Cape who voted for the Movement last year wait patiently for their freedom".[11] When Ali investigates the new government's silent adoption of economic policies that privilege foreign capital and cut trade unions out of decision making, she is met with a resistance that translates into slow responses, delayed calls and postponed appointments. Her struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (another instance in which the prefix *post* is applied to something which has not been really overcome) only starts to be relieved when she digs out of memory and into full speech the traces of the most violent episode she has witnessed during the anti-apartheid demonstrations, which were otherwise 'arresting' her in a frozen moment in time.[12] *The Democrat*, the actively anti-apartheid newspaper she has been working for under the regime, is shut down abruptly soon after the first democratic elections because of the financial problems caused by its many lawsuits. On the other hand, in the newsroom of the less radical *The New Times*, for which Ali now works, the impending Rugby World Cup takes absolute precedence over her coverage of cases of apartheid violence she hopes will feature in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this fictional yet historically grounded account of 1995 South Africa, the blood-ridden apartheid past is quickly being forgotten, and the dawn of the AIDS plague threatening the youth's future is hastily dismissed in favour of more cheerful news. In other words, the country is confined in an all-encompassing present in which democratic political aspirations are quickly replaced by short-sighted electoral calculus, newly-arrived international tourists are suddenly preferred over habitual customers in restaurants, and the news of persisting racism is relegated to the magazines' gossip columns.

Rossouw's case is only one of a number of recent literary works from 'postcolonial' contexts alerting the readers to the disquieting pre-eminence of an asphyxiating present over a more extended and expansive temporality. In J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, the first volume of a trilogy dramatizing the story of a migrant family through a paradoxical re-reading of the biblical hypotext, the protagonists Simòn and David have recently landed ashore after a mysterious sea crossing that hints to the passage from life to afterlife.[13] Having spent a few weeks in a dedicated refugee camp, they are finally allowed into the Relocation Centre of the city of Novilla, where they are given new names, assigned an official age based on their looks, and generally treated as if they were only now coming into existence at all. More disquieting still, they are asked to forget everything about their past and behave as if they had never had another life. "'People here have washed themselves clean of old ties'", says the clerk at the Relocation Centre. "'You should be doing the same: letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them'. She reaches down, ruffles the boy's hair … 'Aren't you washed clean yet?'"[14] Yet Simòn still retains, if not clear memories, at least shadows of memories of his past life and desires. In the same way, the child he accompanies keeps referencing other temporal experiences and possibilities, by

[10] In the context of the South African usage of the term, which indicates the specific hybrid identity resulting from the colonial encounter between Europeans and Africans, the protagonist's 'colouredness' also has temporal implications: coloured people are bereft of either "precolonial or European past" and are thus completely grounded in contemporary South Africa. See Grant Farred, *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 8.
[11] Rossouw, *New Times*, 161.
[12] See Mara Mattoscio, "Old News in the New Era: Temporal Misalignments and Wounded History in Rehana Rossouw's *New Times*", *Il Tolomeo*, 21 (2019), 267-282.
[13] See Ileana Dimitriu, "J.M. Coetzee'' *The Childhood of Jesus*: A Postmodern Allegory?", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 26.1 (2014), 70-81.
[14] John Maxwell Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2013), 24.

pointing out that 'David' is not his real name (since he has not always been called that way), and that Spanish – the language they are all required to speak – is definitely not the only possible one, if he can learn, as he does, an 'English song' (in reality a misquoted version of Goethe's "Erlkönig" in the original German).[15] In other words, in a world in which the past must be erased by law and a different future cannot be envisaged, the protagonists keep denouncing the absurdity of limiting life to its present arrangements: they repeatedly and tormentedly wonder whether "the price of forgetting may … be too high".[16]

If *The Childhood of Jesus* could be taken as a speculative, abstract allegory, the danger of an all-encompassing present hampering both historical change and the experience of different temporalities is given even more emphasis in a realist novel such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. In this text, set in present-day Nigeria, Kambili and Jaja's fundamentalist Catholic father forbids them from speaking to their animist grandfather for fear that they might learn the ancient myths and legends of the Igbo tradition. As in Coetzee's novel, the possibilities of speaking one's preferred language depend on the decisions of an unappealable power, which in this case is the Anglo-centric paternal authority, who associates the English language with righteousness, civilization and 'modernity'. His ideal model, i.e. his successful and pro-Western father-in-law, insists that Kambili and Jaja call him "Grandfather, in English, rather than Papa-Nnukwu or Nna-Ochie",[17] whereas his own animist father, who lives a simple life in a rural village, only speaks an archaic variety of Igbo. Fifteen-year-old Kambili and seventeen-year-old Jaja only ever hear a Catholic prayer performed in Igbo when they are allowed to spend a few days with their progressive Aunt Ifeoma and their cousin Amaka, who even refuses, to their uttermost surprise, to take on an English name for her confirmation, as required by the local missionary church.[18] The protagonists' father, instead, has traced a rigid boundary between his desired lifestyle, made of strict Catholic orthodoxy plus modern technologies, and an ancestors' culture he deems 'heathen' and immoral. As a consequence, besides forbidding them all knowledge of their ancestral background, he condemns his children to an inescapable present of fixed, strict, repetitive duties – a present that seems to spring up from no roots and to be heading towards no liveable future. This stifling and mechanical temporality is so limiting that Kambili "understands time only in and through the structured schedule her father has drawn up for her everyday activities; her life is so rigidly routinized that she is unable to react in any significant way to even the most meaningful events".[19] That any attempt at changing this daily routine leads to severe psychophysical violence on the father's part is no coincidence: in this enforced, inexorable present, any desire to reconnect with one's past or imagine a more autonomous future must be harshly punished. And indeed, before accidentally getting the chance to enter into deeper contact with her grandfather and cousins, Kambili's life is so inflexibly limited that she "does not know a possible world outside her home".[20]

The three above-mentioned novels all come from African authors variously navigating the ambiguous realities of post- (or neo-)coloniality, either by being deeply immersed in their countries' socio-political debate (the journalist Rossouw), or by looking at their places of origin from a broader international stage (the young literary star Adichie), or by transcending the specificities of their native

[15] See Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Pathos of the Future: Writing and Hospitality in *The Childhood of Jesus*", in Anthony Uhlmann, Jennifer Rutherford, eds., *J.M. Coetzee's* The Childhood of Jesus*: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 33-56.
[16] Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 72. On the novel's take on temporality, see also Mara Mattoscio, "Ecotones of Time and Space in Two Works by J. M. Coetzee and Igiaba Scego", *Lingue e linguaggi*, 36 (2020), 173-187.
[17] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (New York: Algonquin Books, 2003), 67.
[18] On the politics of language in Adichie's novel, see Emma Dawson and Pierre Larrivée, "Attitudes to Language in Literary Sources: Beyond Post-Colonialism in Nigerian Literature", *English Studies*, 91.8 (2010), 920-932.
[19] Manisha Basu, "Loving and Leaving: The Ethics of Postcolonial Pain in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 43.1 (2012), 67-86, 73.
[20] Ibid., 73.

societies to look at universal dystopias and current global concerns (the literary champion Coetzee). It is thus interesting that, for all their stylistic and thematic differences, all the referenced works focus on a younger generation put in danger by the disavowal of history and the simultaneous denial of an autonomously chosen future. In so doing, the three novels equally signal an underestimated risk at stake for most contemporary postcolonial societies: these seem to be increasingly organized around a violent hegemony of the present. Their predicament could easily be defined as one of 'cultural presentism', i.e. a political and social arrangement in which the historical past is fundamentally disavowed and the future is either denied or downright stolen, while an oppressive present, built on violent power abuses, is cast as the sole existing horizon of life.

3. Presentism and the Coloniality of Power

The classic metaphysical definition of presentism is the thesis that "only present things exist",[21] and more precisely that "nothing exists which is not present".[22] According to this view, there is "no time except the present time" and "no propositions about any non-present times".[23] In fact, according to Ned Markosian:

> if we were to make an accurate list of all the things that exist—i.e. a list of all the things that our most unrestricted quantifiers range over—there would be not a single non-present object on the list. Thus, you and I and the Taj Mahal would be on the list, but neither Socrates nor any future grandchildren of mine would be included.[24]

Yet, the ability to conceive of different temporal dimensions and the necessity to understand change through a narrative perspective are crucial to human consciousness. To follow up on Markosian's example, for as much as Socrates and our potential grandchildren might not be presently alive in flesh and bones, they are definitely existing in our memory or our expectations whenever we set our minds on them. More importantly, our ability to conjure them up in our thoughts means that they have a very powerful impact, respectively, on our philosophical understanding or worldview and on our affective experiences and aspirations. In other words, people and objects heading from the past or glimpsed in an imagined future strongly and effectively influence our actions and choices in our present life – something which has also, if paradoxically, been suggested by the different implications of the term *presentism* as employed by some literary critics. Hughes Grady and Terence Hawks, for example, have used a 'presentist' lens in Shakespeare studies in order to emphasize how classic masterpieces update their meanings in the present contexts,[25] while Elsa del Campo Ramírez pointed out how the cultural materialism from which literary presentism developed is "politically involved and actively committed to challenge the present through the dissident potential of past texts", so that presentism itself might consequently "be injected with potential for ideological struggle".[26] However, such understandings of literary presentism are grounded in a different definition of the word than that provided by classic metaphysical theory: rather than denying the existence of the past altogether, they propose to 'update it' by "focusing not on the context surrounding the *creation* of a text, but on that of its *reception*".[27]

[21] Thomas M. Crisp, "Symposium: Defining Presentism. On Presentism and Triviality", in Dean W. Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 15.
[22] John Bigelow, "Presentism and Properties", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 10 (1996), 35-52, 35.
[23] Ned Markosian, "A Defense of Presentism", in Dean W. Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 51.
[24] Ibid., 47.
[25] Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[26] Elsa del Campo Ramírez, *Paradigms of Postmodern Presentism: Towards the Chicana Decolonization of the Imaginary* (Madrid: PhD dissertation, 2018), 14.
[27] Ibid., 6. My emphasis.

On the other hand, the original and more widespread definition of the concept has implications that go well beyond the literary criticism debate, and rather encompass the whole phenomenological perception of life, i.e. the very significance of being alive in the world. To assume the angle of Markosian's paradox would mean to be constantly frozen in the moment with no chance to narrate oneself into existence. On the contrary, the ability to recognize as real past events and project equally real expectations in the future – a skill which humans share with many other species – is crucial to our experience of life. For Claire Colebrook, "to be able to say 'I' or 'we' is to be composed of an archive that, in turns, generates a horizon of the future. *To be is to be dispersed through time*, but not in a sequence of 'a' past being held over into the future but as a series of possible pasts of various amplitudes".[28] In other words, it is human consciousness itself, for as subjective and fragmented as it might be, to be intimately connected with an idea of one's flowing in time, one's changing through a temporal journey. To be able to account for one's experiences through narratives – that is to say, to trace one's changes across time – is an essential ability through which humanity understands itself.

In the light of this discussion, it will be easy to see how the above-mentioned novels all call attention to a disquieting historical phenomenon of 'arrested' temporality. In South Africa, the anti-apartheid movement of the 1950s-1980s decades had imagined a future democratic government finally free from racial ideologies and willing to assume the poor majority's needs as the basis of its political action. And yet, as Rossouw brilliantly captured in *New Times*, "hundreds of thousands of people" had "died in the struggle like leaves dropping silently off trees; trampled into the mud when democracy arrived like a spring shower and we all went to dance in its sweetness".[29] In the hastiness of change, the political agenda of the new government had quickly incorporated external pressures and aligned itself to the needs of the neo-colonial economic interest. The disenfranchised, the extremely poor and the sick – all disproportionately black – had thus literally lost their rights to their desired futures. It is a situation that Tony Fry calls "defuturing", or "a condition of mind and action that materially erodes (un-measurably) planetary finite time, thus gathering and designating the negation of 'the being of time', which is equally the taking away of our future".[30] In other words, defuturing can be understood as a discursive and affective process of dehumanization and unsettlement that results in being dispossessed of one's future. In a postcolonial condition in which coloniality has become a property of power itself,[31] the priority given to the privileged subjects' interests trumps any other narrative or imaginary. In being suddenly distanced from one's lived and inherited experiences of the past, one loses the affective archive able to open up one's visions of the future.

Interestingly, the tendency of many contemporary political agendas to deny most people their desired futures is complemented by the trend, both in former colonies and in former imperial centres, for public discourses to uphold generally threatening or downright apocalyptic versions of the future. In the Global North, these are often centred on the perceived threat of migrants' invasion, or alternatively on the expected consequences of the fossil fuel exploitation that has been characterizing the Anthropocene at least since the Industrial Revolution. In both cases, such arrested or catastrophic understandings of temporality depend on what decolonial theory identifies as the intrinsic coloniality of power. Thus, the new elite governments of the Global South, while officially heralding a celebration of 'postcolonial changes', generally discourage complex and non-rhetorical analyses of past imbalances, so as to obstruct the realization that their current politics live in a continuum with those imbalances. At the same time, in facing mass migration and climate change, the mainstream political discourse in the Global North casts

[28] Claire Colebrook, "The Intensity of the Archive", in Stef Craps et al., "Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable", *Memory Studies* 11.4 (2018), 498–515, 507. My emphasis.
[29] Rossouw, *New Times*, 239.
[30] Tony Fry, *Design as Politics* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2011), 21.
[31] See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept", *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (March/May 2007), 240-270.

desertification and extreme poverty as an inevitable destiny of the Global South from which the North needs to steer away as quickly as possible, as if it held no responsibility in the history that caused this situation. In this regard, Jennifer Wenzel emphasized that:

> such imagining is ideological because it obscures the unevenness that shapes the past, present, and projected future of climate injustice, where the effects of carbon emissions by the industrial north will be felt disproportionately by those in the Global South. Instead, in these future's pasts, the consequences of carbon accumulation in the future are imagined to look a lot like being on the wrong end of capital accumulation in the present, with little acknowledgement of the shared but uneven history that joins them. *Like so much else, the future will be unevenly distributed*.[32]

However, restoring attention towards the complex and overlapping depths of time might be a strategic way out from the pervading grip of cultural presentism. As Cecilia Åsberg and Christina Fredengren remarked, the Anthropocene "is 'haunted' by its exclusions" and particularly by the concerns of "deep time",[33] which Chakrabarty made famous in the humanities as that history that goes well beyond the written historical records to include the geological, natural, genetic and cultural changes which (also) produced humanity over hundreds of thousands of years.[34] Furthermore, even if the futures we now imagine might be taken by presentists as projections of our present situation, the transformational potential of envisaging a different evolution beyond our here-and-now remains unchanged. It suffices to think of what Wenzel calls the "past's futures", or the many visions that were imagined at certain times through history and were never actualized. Even if these futures stayed virtual, to acknowledge, remember and re-enact them through narrative might mean to make sure that their alternative versions of society stay alive and help to orientate the actualized present towards a future that is at least partly inspired by them. As Wenzel points out, "past's futures are salient because of their difference and distance from the present; the past's *unrealized* visions of a liberated future serve as a utopian surplus and repository of aspirations for a disillusioned present".[35]

The productive coexistence of different folds and embodiments of time is reclaimed and actualized through recorded and unrecorded strategies across the spectrum of the human experience. Madina Tlostanova, for example, called attention to the traditional Amerindian understanding of time as a way out of the 'hegemony of modernity' that freezes other temporal dimensions into irrelevance. Since in the Amerindian model "the past is in front of us, rather than behind", it follows that:

> people's forgotten and discarded needs, wishes and longings, which would be inevitably linked to the local cosmologies, ethics and systems of knowledge [can be] seen not as the dead and museumized past, or as a conservative fundamentalist dystopia, but as a living and breathing present and a promise for the future.[36]

So, to go back to Adichie's portrayal of a 'presentist' Nigerian household, when *Purple Hibiscus*' protagonists Kambili and Jaja finally manage to have a meaningful contact with their paternal grandfather Papa-Nnukwu, they find out that his 'heathen' beliefs are actually a powerful oral archive of fascinating stories and characters. Attending a traditional *mmuo* masquerade in which the spirits of the Igbo tradition are supposed to be coming alive, they start to discover the richness of the culture they have been cut out of and to track down seeds of creative energy and autonomy they had never been

[32] Jennifer Wenzel, "Past's Futures, Future's Pasts", 504. Emphasis in the original.
[33] Cecilia Åsberg and Christina Fredengren, "Checking in with Deep Time: Intragenerational Care in Registers of Feminist Posthumanities. The Case of Gärstadsverken", in Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling, eds., *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of, and after the Anthropocene* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020), 56-95, 69.
[34] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009), 197-222.
[35] Wenzel, "Past's Futures, Future's Pasts", 503. Emphasis in the original.
[36] Madina Tlostanova, "On Decolonizing Design", *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15.1 (2017), 51-61, 55.

allowed to grow until that moment. In much the same way, when *New Times*'s protagonist Ali gets stuck in the arrested temporality of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is only by acknowledging the traumatic experiences of her past that she manages to start imagining a fairer and freer future. She needs to remember the shock of the 12-year-old boy shot dead next to her in an anti-apartheid march and bleeding copiously on her lap, as well as to retrieve and hang on her wall the journal article she had once written on the event, before she is finally able to speak of her past and open a space for a consciously-grounded future. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, on the other hand, the protagonists' refusal to live by the principles of a hegemonic present and an uncontested *status quo* finally takes them to an adventurous escape into a "new life" in which, beyond all mocking biblical undertones, memories can still be retained and alternative presents can be continuously imagined.

4. Migrants' Defuturing and Europe's Past's Futures

Our discussion of presentism, defuturing and alternative past's futures can be further illuminated by complementing these literary voices from the Global South with an analysis of the media discourse on migration in the Global North. Applying our theoretical lens both to literary studies and media ethnography helps us to expose the pervasiveness as well as the various declinations of presentism in contemporary politics and imagination. Sweden, a country once crucial in promoting the international boycott of the South African apartheid regime in the 1980s, has since acquired a more ambiguous position in the 'postcolonial' phase of democratic South Africa, when, as a compensation for its help during the Struggle, it was offered preferential and expensive economic deals that left the post-apartheid South African government drained of resources deemed key for the country's much needed social investments.[37] Sweden's ambiguous positioning with regards to the coloniality of power is also apparent in its way of dealing with the current northbound migratory waves: as a country that in the last few decades went from being at the forefront of migrants' reception in the EU to rejecting most asylum seekers in recent years, it provides the best case study to understand how presentism is central to the unequal distribution of power and resources in the global world.[38] An ethnographic analysis of the news coverage of anti-immigrant violence during the last three migratory waves in Sweden brings to light the changing attitude that fostered the growth of racist political parties in the Swedish parliament and the consequent temporal dispossession suffered, but also actively resisted, by migrants.

[37] See "South African Protest Against Gripen Purchase", *TT Nyheter* (November 21, 2001).

[38] On Sweden's unwillingness to acknowledge its historical racism (including its role in the transatlantic slave trade or the Holocaust) in its 'presentist' national self-image, see also Ylva Habel, with Adrian Groglopo, "Den svenska exceptionalismen och medias rasism" [Swedish exceptionalism and media racism], in *En diagnos av rasism och demokrati i Sverige* [A diagnosis of racism and democracy in Sweden], (March 18, 2018), https://www.antirasistiskaakademin.se/ylva-habel/. Our translation if no other is stated.

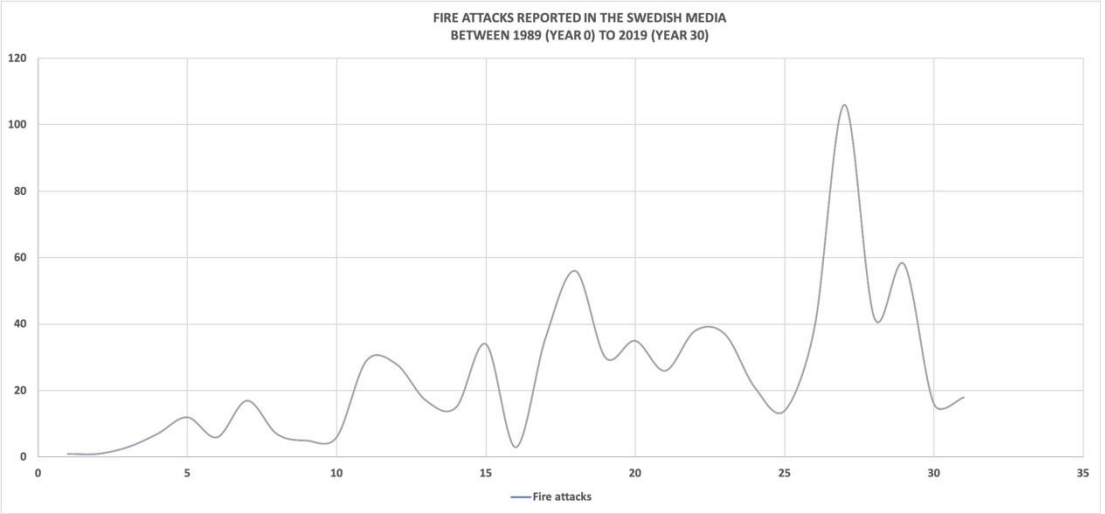

Fig. 1: Anti-immigrant fire attacks between 1989 and 2019 as reported in the Swedish mainstream press. Data retrieved through the database Mediearkivet at http://web.retriever-info.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se. Image by the authors.

4.1 *Three Defuturing Waves for Refugees in Sweden*

If one considers the last three decades of Swedish media reporting on anti-immigrant violence, a clear image appears of how the (constant) presence and social alienation of migrants in the country transformed from a minor political issue into one of the most heated battlefields in the public debate. The first wave of news reporting fires against refugee camps in Sweden, which appeared between 1990 and 1995, was matched by coverage of a serial killer who, equipped with a laser-sight rifle, was reported to be literally 'hunting migrants' at night during the fall of 1991 and into January 1992. *Lasermannen*, the Laser Man, finally injured 11 immigrants before being captured in June 1992 and prosecuted under the name of John Ausonius,[39] following a news coverage so imbued with fictional imaginaries that he was arrested with the help of an 'offender profile' inspired by the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*.[40] Commenting on these events, the comparative religion scholar Mattias Gardell wrote that "during this wave of violence, organized and disorganized racism lived in symbiosis with each other. Of those convicted for the attacks, a vanishing small portion was organized, the majority being 'ordinary local people'".[41]

Interestingly, the temporality of the Laser Man news had a long *durée*. His attacks all happened in the fall of 1991, but the surrounding myth was perpetuated through analyses, books, articles, plays, and documentaries, until another Laser Man appeared to continue his work as a 'migrants terminator'. In his book *Lasermannen*, Gellert Tamas (himself hailing from a family of Hungarian refugees) provided an investigative reportage based on interviews with the racist serial killer, to describe both the man and "a story about Sweden" in which "the politico-ideological opportunity structure facilitated attempts to

[39] Monica Miller, "Figuring Blackness in a Place Without Race: Sweden, Recently", *ELH*, 84.2 (2017), 377-397.
[40] Jan Lind, "Med hans hjälp får brottslingen ett ansikte" [Through his help the criminal is given a face], *Läkartidningen*, 94.45 (1997), 4028-4031.
[41] Mattias Gardell, "En ny våg av våld" [A new wave of violence], *Aftonbladet* (January 8, 2015). https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/7ljzQv/en-ny-vag-av-vald. Our translation if no other is stated.

murder migrants".[42] Even the arrest of *Lasermannen* was taken as an indicator that, although the authorities were able to stop such snipers, this would hardly stop an army of angry "ordinary local people". The liberal media approached the murderer's racist motives as the ultimate rejection of an 'imposed migration', moving the focus of public discussion away from the racial, class and gender oppression that prompted migration and hindered integration in the first place. The violent scenario created by the fires and the anonymous snipers, made more ambiguous by the media's attempts to find reasons for the murderers' attacks, thus paved the way for a naturalization of nationalist and racist positions in the political establishment, which culminated with the emerging of Ny Demokrati [New Democracy], the first racist party to take a seat in the Swedish parliament.

In the meantime, the Swedish public television continued to show off a 'liberal' appearance through a couple of big productions on the issue of immigration entirely imbued with cultural presentism. The first one, written by Italian-Swedish writer Peter Birro and directed by Agneta Fagerström-Olsson, was the series *Hammarkullen* (1997), consisting of four episodes on life in one of Sweden's multicultural suburbs and on its similarities with the increasingly segregated immigrant communities in the rest of Europe. On the one hand, an exotic image of these suburbs was promoted: "Hammarkullen has a positive vibe, here there is always something happening. However, it is not a settlement only typical of Gothenburg, but a suburb similar to any other outside Brussels or Paris".[43] On the other hand, the show shocked the intelligentsia with its portrayal of racial inequalities in a multicultural suburb described as full of drama and misery, and in which stereotyped 'modern' blond Swedes were contrasted to 'pre-modern' black-haired immigrants. The sensationalist and fictitious characters of *Hammarkullen* sparked a wide debate demanding a state intervention to 'integrate' immigrants into the racial, capitalist and heteronormative culture of the nation. *Fittja Paradiso*, the next big production of SVT, programmed in the fall of 1999, attempted to provide a factual description of Fittja, then the most populated immigrant suburb in Botkyrka, as well as in metropolitan Stockholm and Sweden. The show, conducted by Janne Josefsson and including five other field reporters,[44] employed an exotic gaze to explore the landscape of social misery among migrants, to the point that its 'findings' were used as the basis for the biggest urban renewal program of that time, known as *Ytterstadssatsningen*, or the Metropolitan Initiative.

A 'recursive mechanism', as well as a similar set of ambiguities, characterized the coverage of the next big wave of refugees, which, originated by the Balkan war, arrived in Sweden around the year 2000 and, despite being generously welcomed by the government in power, was again accompanied by fire attacks against refugee camps. While the news on anti-immigrant violence reached the highest figures ever up to that moment, the media editorials and opinion pieces still lacked structural analysis and extensive reflections on the dehumanisation of refugees produced by such violence, and failed to expose the links between the attacks and the growth of Sverigedemokraterna [the Sweden Democrats], a new anti-immigrant political party which by 2006 had attracted two per cent of the electorate's vote. Moreover, the coverage of a further sniper operating between 2007 and 2010 in Malmö, together with the sensationalist news on the police investigating him, acted as a boost in the consolidation of Sverigedemokraterna in the Swedish parliament's 2010 general elections, with roughly six per cent of the electorate's vote.

The news of racist fires that became dominant again in the context of the 2015 "refugee crisis" – with the maximum ceiling of arrivals doubled by the end of that year compared to the previous one of the 2006 election – are even more useful in showing the 'arrested' or 'recursive' temporalities of the Swedish political debate on migration. This time, the general society actively promoted the reception

[42] Diana Mulinari and Anders Neergaard, "Violence, Racism and the Political Arena: A Scandinavian Dilemma", *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminism and Gender Research*, 20.1 (2012), 12-18, 15.
[43] Elin Bäckström and Birgitta Svensson, "Spaning: Välkommen till förorten" [Scouting: Welcome to the Suburb], *Expressen* (November 7, 1997).
[44] Viktoria Mirén, "Janne Josefsson Moves to the Suburb: For a New Social Magazine", *Aftonbladet* (August 17, 1999).

and support of refugees. Yet, a new wave of fires was widely reported, against the background of a much stronger presence of the SD party in parliament. This led the coverage of the attacks in corporate media to frame the widespread solidarity toward refugees as 'naïve', and the appearance of the new seasonal murderer (the protagonist of the 22 October 2015 Trollhättan school shooting) as ultimately 'understandable'. In the same days when 21-year-old Anton Lundin Pettersson, equipped with a black Nazi helm, a Darth Vader mask, a cold-steel Viking sword and a combat knife, walked into the *Kronan* municipal school and stabbed teachers and schoolchildren based on their skin tone, Germany was closing its doors on refugees, thus pushing thousands to continue on to Sweden as their very last hope. With the EU unable to tackle the situation and the Swedish refugee-reception system collapsed, the editorials of the liberal press vocally demanded that the borders be closed, linking the new 'emergency' with the intense wave of fires and the Trollhättan massacre. Such media campaign was instrumental in the Swedish Prime Minister's announcement of a set of very drastic decisions:

> Sweden has taken the greatest responsibility in relation to our population, while other EU countries have done very little. Sweden needs some respite. As a consequence, our legislation will adapt to the EU's minimum level of reception, in order to get refugees to apply to other countries.[45]

The closure had a great impact on the refugees' hopes, expectations and imagined futures. Those who had managed to enter before the new restrictions were met with indefinite 'waiting times' that amounted to "a way to slow down, to defer, to deny future plans and to create disruption in the stages of the life cycle".[46] In fact, as Shahram Khosravi remarked about the status of being kept "in circulation", a life suspended in 'waiting centres' is "an indefinite position of *not becoming* in what is supposed to be a 'normal life course.' In the condition of circulation one never gets the chance to finish anything".[47] On the other hand, those who were deported in the months to follow were literally robbed of their desired tomorrow by being "sent back in time [or] 'back to square one'".[48] More in general, however, it is striking to note how the recurrent phenomenon of informal migration – something which can be seen, in a deep-time perspective, as a veritable constant of human and non-human life – has each time been cast as a '*current* crisis' or a '*contemporary* emergency', and thus seen as in need of an (aggressive) resolution or termination rather than of a resorting to collective memories and imaginations.

4.2 *Alternative 'Past's Futures'*

The responses of immigrants in Sweden to the violence described above were interestingly organized around a reclaiming of time. Right at the end of the first wave of anti-immigrant fires, the documentary film *30:e November*, in which the diasporic youth of Alby, next to Fittja, confront the violence of neo-Nazi gangs, literally invites the spectator to mark a date in time as the moment when the members of the local diaspora start raising their own voices.[49] At approximately the same time, the Alby-raised hip hop group called Latin Kings gave a sonic and poetic voice to the multicultural suburbs, showing "a socio-critical tone in their lyrics addressing issues such as the Laser Man, Ny Demokrati, and a 'we' against 'them' mentality".[50] Most notably, the Latin Kings' first album also marked the public acknowledgement of the multicultural urban jargon known as Rinkeby-Swedish, collectively adopted by the youths of the

[45] Karl Anders Lindahl, "Stefan Löfven om flyktingkrisen: 'Sverige behöver ett andrum'" [Stefan Löfven on the refugee crisis: 'Sweden needs a respite'", *Nyheter24* (November 24, 2015). https://nyheter24.se/nyheter/politik/819404-lofven-flyktingar-flyktingkris-tut-stopp.
[46] Shahram Khosravi, "Stolen Time", *Radical Philosophy*, 2.03 (2018). https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/stolen-time.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Daniel Fridell, *30:e november* [30th November] (Film Teknik AB, Stockholm, 1995).
[50] Susan Lindholm, "From Nueva Canción to Hip Hop: An Entangled History of Hip Hop In-Between Chile and Sweden", *Scandia*, 83.1 (2017), 68-97, 85.

Rinkeby suburbs, north of Stockholm.[51] Though the language horrified the Swedish intelligentsia, who urged its extirpation through colonial-style institutional interventions in the suburban schools, it was successfully used by the Latin Kings as a spontaneous expression of the migrant communities' own hybrid culture.

Both the dispossession and the reclaiming of migrants' time became even more crucial in the anti-colonial responses to the second wave of fires and in the news that covered them. In this case, the investigations to catch the sniper in Malmö were progressing so slowly that the local diasporic communities started the search on their own. In October 2010, one month after the general elections, a Norwegian news channel was sent to the city to report on the spontaneous initiative, and portrayed the immigrant protagonists as essentially silly, as well as victims. The YouTube clip that resulted was titled *Laserturken*, or the 'Turkish Laser Man', with a pejorative naming that connected the protagonist, the Lebanon-born and Möllevången resident Fadi Mohamad, to racialized immigrants in general.[52] However, the members of the diaspora saw in the footage the birth of their own star, and happily circulated the clip for the way it dramatized a comic migrant hero engaged in a brutal hunt against the racist sniper. In the feature from the Norwegian television, Fadi announced in his hacking Rinkeby-Swedish that he would "cut his tongue. Cut his ears. I'm going to make a mess with him. After that, I'll give him to the police without a head. We will take everyone with the same last name. All of them are going to die".[53] Due to its stereotypical character that satisfied all the supposed attributes of a real *Turk*, Fadi's hilarious explanation become viral. However, the 300-member multicultural gang that joined him in his hunt prompted the police to create a special 50-officer SWAT unit that finally managed to seize Peter Mang, the sniper. The latter was later revealed to have read a biography of the first *Lasermannen*,[54] and to share his same racist motivations.[55] The novelty in the context of his own attacks was that this time the media's suspiciousness had seemed to be directed towards the victims themselves, to the point that many, as shown by Manal Masri's documentary on her younger brother (one of Mang's victims), had been forced to abandon Sweden after the events.[56] Chased away of their places of origins by (neo)colonial geopolitical imbalances and further brutalized by racist violence in their chosen arrival countries, Mang's victims were thus literally robbed of all the time they had invested in working, building networks, paying taxes, learning the local language and culture, falling in love and maybe having children, to be condemned to a "temporal dis-belonging",[57] their tomorrows suddenly displaced elsewhere.

The hunt conducted by *Laserturken* can be seen as part of a wider post-colonial response from the suburban population against the hegemony of cultural presentism in Sweden. For instance, the 2013 'car burnings' episodes that saw youths from the major Swedish cities riot against police brutality (similarly to the coeval events in France) were a protest against the apparently inescapable internal colonialism directed towards the immigrant population of such suburbs. Interestingly, when corporate media sent its reporters to the riot places, the youth once targeted by the urban initiative designed to extirpate Rinkeby-Swedish began to show their now unexpectedly confident and critical language. Mostly female youth and teenagers, they set up a staff of local chroniclers aimed at contesting the blameful reporting on their suburbs and started writing their own news in a social media project named *Megaphone*. Their role

[51] Christopher Stroud, "Rinkeby Swedish and Multilingualism in Language Ideological Debates: A Bourdieuean Perspective", *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 8.2 (2004), 196-214, 199.
[52] Tabakshi, "Laserturken (Originalet) - Full version", *Youtube* (October 27, 2010). https://youtu.be/esVuKP7k974
[53] Eigil Söderin, "Sanningen bakom Laserturken" [The thruth behind the Turkish Laser Man], *ETC* (November 18, 2010).
[54] Miller, "Figuring Blackness".
[55] Mattias Gardell, *Raskrigaren: seriemördaren Peter Mangs* (Stockholm: Leopard förlag, 2015).
[56] Manal Masri, "Brev till en seriemördare" [Letter to a Serial Killer] (Triart Film: Malmö, 2017).
[57] Khosravi, "Stolen Time".

became essential when they reported the police storming a private flat and shooting an elderly man in the head:

> In all dailies ... [there are] pictures of the balcony where he waves a knife. The 'machete man'... this is a label created so that we the readers shall think: 'oh, he sounds crazy, it is just as well that the police shot him' ... [W]e make him a monster. Then he is not worth shit ... [M]achete sounds jungle. Sounds non-Swedish. Even better.[58]

The general coverage of the 'preventive assassination' of the elderly man, labelled "machete man" by the police, was contested by *Megaphone* through the man's neighbours' testimonies, something which led to the public demand of an independent investigation on the case. Despite the blame put on them by Jane Josefsson in *Uppdrag granskning* [Mission to Investigate], the Megaphone animators inspired youths in other suburbs to start similar structures as a way to struggle for the reactivation of the then-dismantled local welfare services.[59]

A bottom-up initiative showing the majority's willingness to reclaim both political agency and its own time beyond neo-colonial structures can also be seen in the exceptionally generous reception of refugees advocated by most Swedes during the fall of 2015, notwithstanding the racist concerns voiced by the political right. The so-called 'refugee crisis' had come at a time when the self-proclaimed "world's first feminist government" had just been elected in Sweden,[60] after an electoral campaign that had seen a feminist party, *Feminist Initiative* or *F!*, as the new political subject around which all other contenders had had to position themselves. Despite the growing recognition of the interconnectedness of anti-racist, de/post-colonial and feminist instances by Swedish scholars,[61] the new party's invitation to "take racism out" and "let feminism in" the national parliament had been met in the media by an appropriation of the feminist discourse by even the most ambiguous parties, with a 'pink-washing' effect that had left the racist SD with a striking 13 per cent of the electorate's vote. However, when the tragedy of the Syrian war and the refugees' odyssey through the Middle East and Europe was first broadcast via smartphones by the migrants themselves, the Swedish public was ready to support those in need and virtually aligned itself with the instances of the international Refugees Welcome movement. Even when Germany went from showing solidarity to slamming its doors on refugees, and nationalist-ruled Denmark denied its support to those headed to Northern Europe, both the Swedish government and the grassroots organizations still took responsibility for the migrants arriving at the country's doors – a moment marked by the Prime Minister Stefan Löfvén's famous statement that "My Europe does not build walls. We help each other when the need is greater".[62]

We have already seen how the SD's racist propaganda, by repeatedly associating the Trollhättan massacre with a supposed 'emergency' in the refugee reception system, later prompted the Swedish government to withdraw its commitment to the refugee's cause. However, the 'past's future' that was envisaged in the first, welcoming phase of the 2015 migratory wave still retains its aspirational value as a possible alternative version of today's predicament. With thousands of people making themselves available for anything from helping migrants through the border with Denmark, to orienting them at train stations, to distributing food and blankets, while SJ, the national train company, offered to transport

[58] Carl Ulrich Schierup, Aleksandra Ålund & Lisa Kings, "Reading the Stockholm riots: A moment for Social Justice?", *Race & Class*, 55.3 (2014), 1-21, 4.
[59] Kajsa Ekis Ekman, "Uppdrag granskning blir polisens megafon - Mission Investigation turns into megaphone for the Police", *Aftonbladet* (May 15, 2014).
[60] Maya Salam, "This Is What a Feminist Country Looks Like", *The New York Times* **(**March 8, 2019**)**.
[61] Masoud Kamali, Adrian Groglopo, Marcus Lundgren & Simon Andersson, "Integrationens svarta book – Agenda för jämlikhet och social sammanhållning" [The Black Book of Integration – Agenda for Equality and Social Cohesion], *SOU* (Stockholm: Fritzes, 2006).
[62] SVT, *Rapport 19.30* (September 6, 2015).

refugees for free, the solidarity earthquake pointed to a future of mutual commitment in which the privileged seemed ready to share their privileges and those on the move seemed able to open up their encounters towards alternative life paths with respect to past traumas. To paraphrase Donna Haraway, the majority of Swedes in those weeks seemed to be "making kin" with the newly-arrived by "staying with the trouble".[63] Instead of discarding or disavowing this recent past's future, such unrealized vision of commonality and free circulation of people can still serve as a "utopian surplus"[64] that may yet open the future in new ways.

5. Conclusion

Through case studies taken respectively from literature and media ethnography, we hope to have demonstrated that an asphyxiating confinement into an 'arrested' present dimension, accompanied by a dismissal of the complex past and a denial or uneven dispossession of the future, is a defining characteristic of the coloniality of power at play in both formerly-colonizing and formerly-colonized societies. Applying our theoretical lens to such seemingly distant fields as literary and media studies has helped us to highlight how pervasive and structurally entrenched 'arrested temporalities' are in global contemporary politics and imagination. In the light of our analysis, it seems crucial to us that a notion of cultural presentism, understood as an utter isolation of both individual subjects and communities from the flowing and alternative possibilities of time, be taken as central to understanding the constraints and implications of the perduring political colonialism of the present day.

Such a theoretical tool might prove equally useful in overcoming the blockages of the critical analyses that try to undermine the implications of these colonial shadows. If the *post* in the "postcolonial" alludes to a (delusional) closure of the colonial past or an entrance into a new temporal dimension (as well as, for other scholars, to a coexistence of the "colonial" and the "post"), the *de* of the "decolonial" thematises the necessity to invert and counter the mechanics of colonial violence. Both prefixes, however, are predicated upon the idea of one's position with regards to the colonial *past*, while the future risks vanishing further in the process. But while our heads need to keep turning back and make sure our collective memories stay alive, a new focus on the future as the centre of post/decolonial studies seems urgent. As Chakrabarty remarked in his critique of the artifices of historiography, we urgently need to find some space for "other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of 'tradition' that 'modernity' creates".[65] Reclaiming one's futures – both present and past ones – might be crucial in the process of undoing colonial violence and triggering our arrested temporalities back into free flow.

[63] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke U.P., 2016).
[64] Wenzel, "Past's Futures", 503.
[65] Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", 23.