

Part II

RELICS

Interlude

A Brief Reflection on Death and Decolonization

Rice: (. . . *a man perplexed and embarrassed, who desires, like all of us, sympathy*) . . . It may surprise you, sir, but I do not enjoy my present role. I am not by temperament an adventurous sort. Or a harsh one. I have become a military man only because the times demand it. (*A curious, urgent and almost sad defensiveness*) This is my country, you see. I came here when I was a boy. I worked hard. I married here. I have two lovely daughters and, if I may presume an immodesty, a most charming and devoted wife. At some other time I should have liked to have had you out to our farm. This is our *home*, Mr. Morris. Men like myself had the ambition, the energy and the ability to come here and make this country into something . . . *They* had it for centuries and did nothing with it. It isn't a question of empire, you see. It is our home: the right to bring up our children with culture and grace, a bit of music after dinner and a glass of decent wine; the right to watch the sun go down over our beautiful hills . . . And they are beautiful, aren't they? We wish the blacks no ill. But—(*simply, matter-of-factly, a man confirmed*)—it is our home, Mr. Morris.—LORRAINE HANSBERRY

“Major Rice of the Colonial Reserve,” as he is first introduced in Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*, insists he is not a “harsh” man and is attributed by Hansberry a certain “sadness,” an embarrassment, that comes to accompany his violent identity at this moment in the play.¹ He does not rejoice in violence (so he declares here), and yet he represents most concretely the violence of settlement, which, we must note, comes in many forms in *Les Blancs*, and as the play

Epigraph: Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays: The Drinking Gourd/What Use Are Flowers?*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Random House, 1994), 70–71; italics in original.

1 Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 72.

unfolds, we see that very few of the white figures, if any, do not themselves become, in one way or another, agents of violence.

Les Blancs depicts an imaginary African state amid decolonization. On one level, it is a story of a mission, established by Rev. Nielsen to bring medical support and education to the local population. Its story is revealed through the eyes of Charlie Morris, an American journalist who comes to cover the goodness of the place but slowly discovers its ugly sides. What is first being understood by him as a “sacrifice” for the benefit of African natives is slowly revealed in its full colonial meanings.² Through his eyes, we find out that rather than a site for progress (if we assume we can adopt this term uncritically), the mission is a site that constantly reproduces oppression and violence.³ But let us return to Rice’s words in the epigraph.

At least according to his own account of himself, he is not a violent man. It is rather the structure (“the times” that “demand it” but also the fact that “this is my country”—an insistence on belonging amid a process of decolonization—which is what “times” means in this context) that summons violence or positions Rice as an essentially violent power.

Despite insisting that “it isn’t a question of empire,” Rice’s entire scheme of belonging is depicted by Hansberry as imperial: it depends on a strict, color-based division between “us” and “them,” on an assumption that the former’s right to the land is derived from the inability of the latter to cultivate and improve it (“men like myself had [. . . made] this country into something . . . *They* had it for centuries and did nothing with it”), and it is rooted in arriving from an elsewhere and in an effort to import that elsewhere (“culture”) into the occupied space (home as “the right to bring up our children with culture and grace, a bit of music after dinner and a glass of decent wine”).⁴ Rice’s effort to

2 Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 78.

3 Much has been written, in the context of the critique of humanitarian intervention, about such symbiosis. See Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *The One-State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 163ff; Adi Ophir, “The Two-State Solution: Providence and Catastrophe,” *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 8, no. 1 (2007): 117–60; John Prendergast, *Frontline Diplomacy: Humanitarian Aid and Conflict in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996); Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1996] 2009); Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso Books, 2011).

4 According to Veracini, settler colonialism is defined by this form of coming from elsewhere: “Colonialism is primarily defined by exogenous domination. It thus has two fundamental and necessary components: an original displacement and unequal relations. Colonisers move to a new setting and establish their ascendancy.” But settler colonialism has its unique mode of coming to dominate: “If I come and say: ‘you, work for me’ [colonialism], it’s not the same as saying

dissociate imperial formations from “home” is an effort to separate what may be called the “private” from the “political,” and then reinsert the private into the political domain in order to alter the latter’s meanings: presumably *because* it is his home, it is *not* a question of empire (a political question); but at the same time, precisely because an assertion of home has been made, the imperial presence can be justified. This is why a “but” must arrive between the claim “we wish the blacks no ill” and the statement “it is our home.” The two parts of the sentence cannot really coexist, and a long dash after the “but” asks us to pause and ponder the necessary connection between this form of homemaking and causing—even if not wishing to—harm.

Nevertheless, despite any critique that can be made, this *is* his home, and there is something in his words, almost a plea for recognition supported by the stage directions, that foregrounds the tragedy of Rice himself: the tragedy that is settlement, which is the rendering of one’s home into an apparatus of systematically hurting others. This tragedy may become more digestible (as a tragedy) in the case of other white figures in the play, who are less appalling in their worldviews and life practices. DeKoven, one of the doctors working at the African mission, is one such figure, whose ability to clearly see the genocidal nature of the mission’s work is quite rare. He tells Charlie, the reporter, that he came to Africa to save lives (and indeed, “I have saved hundreds of lives; all of us have. I have arrested gangrene, removed tumors, pulled forth babies”), but only two pages later, he admits he “helped provid[e] the rationale for genocide.”⁵ He thus explicitly accepts what Rice seems to acknowledge only in modes that cleanse him from responsibility: that his very presence in the colony is a form of violence and/or necessarily brings about violence. Perhaps, therefore, unlike Rice, when violence is directed against him, he accepts it: “They will murder us here one day, . . . all of us,” he states, but refuses to see this murder as anything but just. Reflecting on how this death—his own death—will be remembered, he says it will be portrayed as an attack of savages, who irrationally killed those who came to bring them progress. But this is not

‘you, go away’ [settler colonialism]” (Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing: Settler Colonial Studies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 [2011]: 1). Most importantly, Veracini relies here on a distinction made by Mahmood Mamdani between immigrants, who come from elsewhere wishing to inhabit the law of the land, and settlers, who come in order to become this law. Mahmood Mamdani, “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 4 (October 2001): 651–64; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

5 Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 112, 114.

the real story, he insists. “The sun really *is* starting to rise in the world, so we might just as well stop pretending it is the middle of the night. *They* are quite prepared to die to be allowed to bring it to Africa. It is *we* who are not prepared. To allow it *or* to die.”⁶ I will return to the meaning of this “or” at the end of this brief chapter.

The play, however, is woven from other stories as well. One of them is that of Tshembe, an African friend of the mission who returns to Africa after a long stay in Europe, having married a white European woman and had a baby with her. His struggle concerning what “home” may mean—the place in Britain where his wife and baby are waiting for him, or Africa that calls him to join the fight for decolonization—is an important thread of the play, which also problematizes the one-dimensional trajectory of “settlement” (usually, from Europe to Africa). Joining the fight means, he knows, drifting away from his family, potentially dying, but also killing the people he loves. It means participating in a discourse of hate, which he tries so hard to refuse. Between him and DeKoven, the tragedy of the violence of both colonization and decolonization emerges in its full brutality and inevitability. To play on Albert Memmi’s formulation of the impossibility of the colonizer who refuses, we can see here the impossibility to transcend the order of violence once the structure of colonization is put in place.⁷ Both DeKoven and Tshembe would like to refuse racial hatred and violence but are pushed—or pulled—into this violence by the reality of colonization.

The impossibility of this refusal is perhaps best captured in the figure of Madame Nielsen, the wife of Rev. Nielsen, who established the mission. Madame Nielsen came to the mission not only to “teach” the locals but also to learn from them; she came to share the land and become part of its habitus (opposite to Rice’s, but also Rev. Nielsen’s effort to change it and bring it the European way of life); she forms deep friendships with local women; and she truly supports the struggle for decolonization. (One can hear in this description Lorenzo Veracini’s or Mahmood Mamdani’s distinctions between an immigrant and a settler.⁸) At the end of the play, when the struggle for decolonization escalates

6 Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 106.

7 Memmi argues that there are two positions that can be adopted by a colonizer: accepting his role in the order of colonial violence or refusing it. But in a chapter titled “The Colonizer Who Refuses,” he displays the impossibility of this refusal: to refuse his role as colonizer would be to refuse everything he is, a death of sorts. I will return to this point as well. See Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Souvenir Press, [1974] 2016).

8 See note 4 in this interlude.

and the drums of war are clearly heard approaching, she sits outside the mission with Tshembe. “You will stay on, then?” he asks her, and she replies: “At my age, one goes home only to die. I am already home.”⁹ Much like Rice’s, Madame Nielsen’s home is a space that is defined partly by violence. But if his home is defined by the violent aggression it necessitates, hers is a site of her own death. “Our country needs warriors,” she urges Tshembe to join the fight, knowing very well that her home is the target of the next attack. Her refusal of the colonial structure (a refusal embedded here in the words *our country*—so different from Rice’s “my country” or “our home”) demands she renounces *herself*, does away with *herself*.¹⁰

In the play, this means Madame Nielsen has to die.¹¹ She does so not as a martyr (a death that would have made her the center of the political situation, rather than the moment of vacating the stage for the struggle of liberation). Instead, she dies—to echo Hansberry’s stage directions from the paragraph featuring Rice with which I opened—“simply, matter-of-factly.” What would it mean to think of such a death as a political act, even a political call? (And I should preface this question by stating that I do not call here for killing all settlers or so many others whose social positions, security, and prosperity generate a world of insecurity for others.) There is at least one easy answer to this question, which I shall outline here only to question it. My own response, which is less of an answer and more of an impasse, will follow.

Veracini recently offered such an easy answer. In a talk with a similar title, he argued that decolonization amounts to killing the settler in the man but letting the man live.¹² Following Patrick Wolfe’s claim that settler colonialism

9 Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 124.

10 As Memmi would put it, this refusal demands that she renounce “part of [herself], and what [she] slowly becomes as soon as [she] accepts a life in a colony.” Ultimately, Memmi claims, to truly become part of the process of decolonization requires a form of self-renunciation that would mean she “no longer recognizes [her]self.” This is why, he tells us, this position is, in fact, impossible (*Colonizer and the Colonized*, 64, 76).

11 Hansberry converses here, as in the entire play, with Jean Genet’s *Les Negres* (The Blacks). Beyond the title, and her own account of how Genet’s play affected her and how she wanted to write a “response,” *Les Blancs* carries many parallels in the plot: the missionary and the military man as main figures, and the fact that the murder of a white woman is at stake. I thank Kristina Hagström-Ståhl for her thoughts on these parallel lines and for much more. For Hansberry’s quote, see Robert Nemiroff, “A Critical Background,” in *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays: The Drinking Gourd/What Use Are Flowers?*, by Lorraine Hansberry, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Random House, 1994), 32–33.

12 Lorenzo Veracini, “Decolonising Settler Colonialism: Kill the Settler in Him and Save the Man” (lecture, SOAS, University of London, June 5, 2017).

is a structure, Veracini's claim is that killing the settler would mean changing the structure. Knowingly or not, Veracini follows arguments made by both Mamdani and Raef Zreik in a correspondence of sorts under the title "When Does a Settler Become a Native?" Both propose, even if in different ways, that with a radical change in the structure of the settler state, the categories settler/native can be dissolved; not, as the title of their dialogue might propose, in ways that turn the settler into a native, but in ways that make this distinction less meaningful, at least in its political bearings.¹³ Decolonization is thus the process through which the settler ceases to be a settler.¹⁴ This provides an institutional/structural path for decolonization without violence and, as such, seems quite tempting.

But if the "I" of the settler, her very being, is shaped by, and immersed in, this structure, as I argued in the theoretical overview and will continue to argue throughout this part of the book, then this change must go deeper than a change in legal categories and access to rights, as Zreik claims when he promotes the idea of equal juridical citizenship, or deeper even than equal access to material resources, as a more Marxist account would insist. To kill the settler in the man is to kill so much of the man himself that the distinction becomes questionable. This is not just because it is analytically messy, but also because, politically, I cannot imagine it taking place: it is to demand that he give up his property (or at least some of it), his language, his cultural references; but also, if I am correct, that he change his "structures of feeling,"¹⁵ modes of desire, and attachments—to places, to people. I do not say that these are not just demands; but these changes are not easily manufactured. And would encounter fierce resistance.

- 13 See Mahmood Mamdani, "When Does a Settler Become a Native? Reflections of [*sic*] the Colonial Roots of Citizenship in Equatorial and South Africa" (inaugural lecture as A. C. Jordan Professor of African Studies, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, May 13, 1998); Raef Zreik, "When Does a Settler Become a Native? (With Apologies to Mamdani)," *Constellations* 23, no. 3 (2016): 351–64; see also Patrick Wolfe, "New Jews for Old: Settler State Formation and the Impossibility of Zionism: In Memory of Edward W. Said," *Arena Journal* 37/38 (2012): 285–321.
- 14 These categories are flattened here and in reality they do not always work in unified "blocks." Settlers can belong to different groups, some more easily "nativized" than others; some were actually natives before becoming settlers. For such a critique, see Yuval Evri and Hagar Kotef, "When Does a Native Become a Settler?" *Constellations* (forthcoming).
- 15 Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.

Although undoubtedly necessary, institutional change consisting of the democratization of the settler state is not sufficient, because it leaves intact the deep structures of racialized hierarchies, violent desires, and attachments to dispossession. These are not *psychological* structures, but *sociopolitical* ones, since they have to do with our modes of living together. As Marx argued in “On the Jewish Question,” liberation that occurs on the (ideological, institutional) level of the state leaves unregulated, even protected, an entire domain of human existence that is still governed by oppression. But whereas a Marxist solution involving a redistribution of material resources is also necessary, it, too, leaves intact a domain of human existence where oppression can reside: structures of feelings, sentiments, attachments, or what Ann Stoler refers to as “‘emotional economies’ of empire.”¹⁶ Thus (still following Marx’s argument), if Bruno Bauer proposes to free humankind from religion by making it a nonstate matter (by freeing the state from religion, by privatizing religion), and if Marx’s response to this proposition points to America as a secular state where religion nonetheless thrives (that is, proof that freedom at the institutional level is insufficient, if not destructive), my response to Zreik or Veracini is to point to America as a democratized settler state where racism and white supremacy nevertheless thrive.¹⁷ Further, it is to argue, together with Marx, that material reality changes consciousness, but, beyond him, to suggest that when we think of material reality, we must think beyond domains of economy and take into account affectual politics as well. All this is to say that I am not persuaded that the settler will no longer be a settler if state institutions become democratic and even egalitarian, or even if the land and its resources are redistributed.

“It is too much to ask one’s imagination to visualize one’s end,” argues Memmi after insisting that this form of annihilation—by self or other; ideological, national, or corporeal—is the only goal of decolonization.¹⁸ “There would be no place,” he states, for the colonizer in the new social order, no matter how close he is to the colonized in his practices and political alliances, how much he struggles with them and for them. “Even if he is in no way guilty as an individual, . . . he shares a collective responsibility by the fact of membership in a

16 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 68.

17 Karl Marx “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

18 Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 84.

national oppressor group. Being oppressed as a group, the colonized must necessarily adopt a national and ethnic form of liberation from which he cannot but be excluded.”¹⁹ To resolve this ambivalence, one must therefore leave or die. Which brings us back to the “or” in DeKoven’s words above: “It is *we* who are not prepared. To allow it *or* to die.” This “or” between allowing (decolonization) and dying can be an exclusive “or,” marking the two options given to the settler: to allow it *or* to die. But it may be that DeKoven says something different here: one must be prepared *both* to allow decolonization to take place *and* to die, to allow it *by* dying (such as in the death of Madame Nielsen) and one is prepared to do neither.

Madame Nielsen prefers dying over leaving—one form of negating the self over the other. Her death, and with it the sounds that may symbolize decolonization, conclude the play. But I am not sure where it leaves us in terms of an answer to the question of this ending’s political lesson.

The question of this political lesson and its addressees is itself quite ambivalent. It foregrounds the colonizer’s role in the process of decolonization and yet immediately negates this role; it manifests the claim that it is not the role of the colonizer to set the terms of decolonial justice (one can leave or die, but not take part, it seems), and yet it shows the existential stakes of the colonizer in this conversation. In this sense, it is a paradoxical question to begin with and the difficulty is not just to answer it but also to pose it. And still, I do not—cannot—call here for either individual, collective, or political suicide. I also do not think that “leaving” is a valid solution. At least if we think of the Israeli/Palestinian context, but probably of most other settler contexts as well, leaving is the privilege of a few and is conditioned on both economic and ethnic advantages. I also do not—cannot—refuse the possibility of alliances, of a shared future, of a horizon where people can live, together or separately, but *live*, protected from the violence of the other or the state. I want to be able to imagine a future, say, with Said, in which the just solution for one is not the destruction of the other. But all I have to work with is Madame Nielsen’s death. Analogies come to an end somewhere, one may contend, in order to move us forward. But I am not quite sure that we have reached this end.

Here I stop writing. I do not know how one writes dead ends or how one writes themselves out of history.

19 Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 83.

AND YET RELINQUISHING hope is itself a privileged position.²⁰ And if the settler has any role in this hope for a decolonial future, if, that is, this hope takes the form of shared life rather than replacement (after Fanon), if it goes beyond the choice to leave or die, then change must occur at the level of desires as well. The following chapter engages with some failures to being moved in particular ways—to feel but also to act, to form, perhaps, a movement (a political one) based on the impasses we met in this chapter and will continue meeting in the next one. But, Michal Givoni reminds us, “what people cannot (yet?) feel is also the ground for the glimmer of hope,”²¹ a glimmer of hope that she finds in the continuous effort to narrate wrongdoings, even in the very insistence on dead ends.

20 Above all, I want to thank Omar Tesdell for insisting on this and on hope. For analyses of hope amid conditions of despair, see Michal Givoni, “Indifference and Repetition: Occupation Testimonies and Left-Wing Despair,” *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 595–631. See also Robyn Marasco’s claim, according to which despair is a vitalizing political power, in her *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

21 Givoni, “Indifference and Repetition,” 2.