CHAPTER 1

Where Is Poland? What Is Poland?

THE AMBIGUOUS REPUBLIC

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Translated by Michał Zając

There is no such thing as one Polish culture. Even understood in the most broad and simple sense, that is, as a collection of all the cultural achievements made by Poles together, one immediately faces problems with understanding the concepts of 'Polishness' and 'cultural achievement' themselves. The historical, geographical, legal, ethnic, religious and linguistic changes – and differences – create such a diversity that it is impossible to find one commonality through which one homogeneous sense or meaning can be teased out. Even though schooling – for example – reproduces such simplifying, patriotic models, it does not mean they translate into a consistent interpretation. Lastly, every narrative within cultural studies reveals and names as much as it covers and conceals; this is because it cannot be constructed without emphasizing certain facts while silencing others. The 'one culture', then, breaks up into a multitude of cultures. The monologue of the centrally defined discourse of Polishness passes into a polyphony of peripheries, into a dialogue of subcultures of borderlands, into a chorus of those who are to be silenced by the homogeneous centre.

The ambiguity of Poles' cultural narratives can be easily put into binaries: openness versus closedness, neighbourly kindness versus xenophobia, civil rights versus slave serfdom, religious tolerance versus pyres for heretics, freedom for the nations of Europe versus fierce fights against Ukrainian independence movements, the bulwark of Western Christendom versus the reluctance of the 'rotten West'. It is difficult not to see that what stands at the source of this series of handy dichotomies is the founding opposition that is immersed in the darkness of the collective subconscious: an inferiority and superiority complex. In other words, it seems that somewhere at

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the beginning of the Poles' collective experience reside primal resentments as well as thwarted ambitions, the fears of a subaltern deprived of subjectivity and a hegemon's unsatisfied pleasures. If we were to translate them into the popular phrases of Polish culture, then, on the side of humiliation there would be the old Polish advice for the serf peasantry: 'hear much, say little, should you wish to stay healthy'; while on the megalomania side, there would be the Romantic call of Adam Mickiewicz: 'Poland, the Christ of Europe'. The first speaks of the exclusion of the agricultural worker, who is not recognized as a rightful subject but rather treated as farm livestock; whereas speaking is the privilege only of a human being – specifically, the landowner. The latter reveals the complex of a suffering master who has been deprived of power and who seeks compensation in the religious deification of his loss.

When, in *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* (*Uncanny Slavdom*, 2007), Maria Janion was discussing the sources of the popularity of pagan themes in Polish Romantic literature, she went back 1,000 years. In her view the process of the Christianization of Slavic lands during the period from the tenth to the twelfth century did not proceed completely without conflict, nor voluntarily, as the national myth of the 'Pole-Catholic' suggests. What happened was more like when the New World was colonized by Europeans. It was not only about the conquering of lands, or transforming the socio-political organization from the tribe into the state, but also about eradicating the local beliefs and imposing – along with the new religion – a completely new vision of the world; thus, a new identity. And because the process was coercive and introduced under military pressure, it generated trauma. To strengthen her argument, Janion recalls, from Karol Modzelewski's *Barbarzyńska Europa* (*Barbarian Europe*, 2004), the preserved descriptions of the toppling, chopping and burning of the pagan gods, which Christian missionaries conducted with the support of a military escort and in front of the entire village gathered by force to watch the show. 'The reverberation of this pagan despair', says Janion, 'went on for centuries and – as a historical trauma – could not pass without leaving a trace in Polish culture.'[1] Indeed, the enthusiasm for the spirituality of Slavic paganism among the poets of Polish Romanticism resounded not only in the trauma of just lost independence, but also in a crisis of Polish identity, as well as in the deep feeling that something had gone wrong with this 'Polishness'.

[1] Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna: Fantazmaty literatury* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), p. 17. See also Karol Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska Europa* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2004).

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While the next three centuries of the Polish Middle Ages were marked by a strengthening of Western Christianity in the Vistula river basin and by the struggle for power between particular rulers' interests, an important change was to occur in the fifteenth century, heralded by the Polish–Lithuanian union of 1386. Huge Lithuanian and Ruthenian territories were joined to the recently united Kingdom of Poland, which resulted in the creation of a multinational, multilingual and multi-confessional state – the largest in this part of Europe. In addition to Latin, the Polish language, as well as Old Russ – most closely resembling today's Belarusian – appeared in writings. The new lands were treated like conquests of war, and 'civilization' came to the forefront of the Poles' cultural expansion; expansion that was clearly defined by the colonial idea of the 'Bulwark of Christianity', as they liked to see and call themselves. Christianity was already established in the territories annexed to Poland, except that it was the Eastern Rite; so, in fact this was all about installing Roman Catholicism in these lands.

However, before the colonization of the Eastern Borderlands took the form of forced Polonization and Catholicization, a great cultural opening came about with the Renaissance. In the history of Poland, the sixteenth century is sometimes called the 'golden age', not only because of the state's growing military power or the rapid enrichment of the nobility, but also because of the high level of culture and education. The sons of the nobility studied at Italian, German and French universities, and sought perfection in literature in Latin as well as in the national languages, including Polish, but also Old Russ, Lithuanian and German. The first Bible in the national language was printed in Vilnius in the early twenties of the sixteenth century, which was a translation by Franciszek Skaryna into the old Belarusian language. The first Polish translation of the Bible appeared almost forty years later. In parallel with the Polish-language poetry of Jan Kochanowski, the first books in Lithuanian (*Catechism* by M. Mažvydas, 1547) and old Belarusian (*Lithuanian Statutes*, 1529), as well as trilingual dictionaries (e.g. Latin–Polish–Lithuanian), were published. Protestant and Calvinist reform movements enriched the soil of Polish religiosity, the Polish knight caste was forced to share its privileges with the knights of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and of Livonia, and national languages broke the monopoly held by the ubiquitous Latin – in short, a multinational and multicultural kingdom was created in the middle of Europe.

If there must be a closure after a grand opening-up, then for Renaissance Poland the beginning of this backward movement is the Counter-Reformation.

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University education in the seventeenth century was gradually reduced to the thoughtless memorizing of Latin formulas in the fields of poetics and classical rhetoric. This was accompanied by a growing religious obscurantism and intolerance; the gloomy culmination of which was the banishment of Arians from Poland in 1658. Boasting the honourable name of 'paradisus haereticorum', the Rzeczpospolita (the Republic, officially translated as the Commonwealth) became an arena of religious persecutions and the recurring supremacy of Catholic hierarchs connected by an alliance of interests – but usually also family relations – with magnates who were growing in strength. The weakening of royal power together with the country's declining economy – which was turning away from trade and services back to inefficient and stagnant farming based on the slave labour of serf peasants – all took Poland back at least two centuries compared with Western Europe. While capital-based economics was developing in the West and industry was being born, cities in Poland were collapsing. The centre of social and cultural life now moved to the countryside, to palaces and manors, where it got bogged down for good until the middle of the eighteenth century, when the cultural enlightenment movement tried to bring it out and move it back to urban centres.

The decline of Polish culture during the Baroque era and the so-called 'Saxon night' was accompanied by an incredible increase in ambition, but also by a caste megalomania on the part of the Polish nobility, who liked to call themselves Sarmatians and claimed to have a special role to play in the arena of the country's history. On the basis of a pretentious self-isolation, the Sarmatians declared themselves to be a unique formation, directed by 'God and history' to perform special civilizing tasks, and deriving their own origins from the books of the Old Testament.[2] In the field of culture the task was to establish and maintain their feudal hegemony at all costs, especially in the so-called Eastern Borderlands, that is, on lands acquired as a result of the expansions during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Cultural and religious diversity – a reality in the renaissance – gradually transformed into a handy myth that masked the work of Polonization and colonization, and which served the Jesuitical Sarmatism in its attempt to subordinate – with various results – Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian lands.

In this exaltation of Polish nobility, Jan Sowa recognized the Lacanian problem of 'veiling the Real' by means of illusions and denials. Moral superiority, complacency and pride in a (seemingly) well-functioning

[2] An example of this delusional mythology is the essay by Wojciech Dębołęcki, *Wywód jedynowładnego państwa świata*, which was printed in Warsaw (1633) with the personal support of the king.

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latifundial economy obscured the inconvenient fact that the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (the so-called 'Nobility-Republic'), as a state, was a fiction. It was neither public nor common, because it belonged entirely to only about 15 per cent of the population; nor was it Polish, because, ethnically speaking, Poles were a minority in it. Nor was it a *res*, that is, 'a thing', in the sense that it represented a phantasmatic delusion, which effectively concealed the true state of affairs. As Sowa emphasizes in his conclusion, using the language of Marxist economics: 'the Polish nobility was an agent of Western capitalism, engaged in agricultural production oriented to the Western market, and organized on the basis of slave labour'.[3]

The transformation of the colonized pagan Slav into the Sarmatian colonizer of the Eastern Borderlands captures perfectly the deep dichotomy in Polish culture. On the one hand, the trauma of the violent deprivation of local self-identity, on the other, the illusion of unlimited power over others who were to be deprived of their own identity in an analogous way. While in the sixteenth century in the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Ukraine one can find texts printed in several national languages, what reigned there, 100 years later, was a restored Latin with some Polish, or rather a strange mix of both these languages, mildly called 'macaronic language'. In Sarmatian times during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the largest output of literary production consisted of diaries, calendars and the kind of useful prints that were written in the manors of the nobility or in parishes, using terrible Polish, with a large amount of Latin inclusions, and with such twisted stylistics that it is sometimes difficult to understand them. If Lithuanian, Belarusian or Ukrainian words sporadically appear here and there, it is only in religious prayer books, which served as tools for the conversion of local serf folk to Catholicism. When the age of enlightenment arrived in Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century, Poland needed enlightenment in almost the literal sense, that is, in order to wake up from the 'Saxon night'.[4]

These tensions, within what is broadly understood to be Polish culture, came to the fore particularly strongly after the disappearance from the map of Europe of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the

[3] Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla: Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), pp. 196–7.

[4] The term 'Saxon night' is not precise because it suggests that it was the Saxon dynasty – that is, the two kings Augustus II the Strong and Augustus III – which was responsible for the fall of Poland in the eighteenth century. In fact, the reign of both Wettins in Poland was the effect rather than the cause of the progressive destruction of the state.

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eighteenth century. The selfish narrative of the Sarmatians not only collapsed but became completely compromised as a result of the military and political failure of the fading state. The particular interests of the various magnate courts and bishops, self-interest and the wide-spreading clientelism within the nobility resulted in the country being divided between invaders with virtually no fighting. A ruthless economic and political reality came to the fore and eradicated the myth. The desperate intervention by the Warsaw rationalists – who, with vigorous Enlightenment didacticism, as well as criticism of the Sarmatians' flaws, tried to come to the rescue – did not help. In this respect, Franciszek Bohomolec's drama *Małżeństwo z kalendarza* (*A Calendar Marriage*, 1766) seems to be symptomatic. It portrays a local nobleman, Staruszkiewicz, who prefers a dishonest and indebted hypocrite for his son-in-law, rather than a decent German officer, only because the first is a nobleman, a Pole and a Catholic.

Polish Romanticism is the key epoch for the Polish national-patriotic narrative. It was then that the literary works that were most important for collective identification were created, the authors of these poems being renamed prophets. It was also then that a new understanding of the Polish nation was born; one that included not only the nobility, but also the broadly but vaguely understood folk-people, who were sought out by the elites to be involved in 'national matters'. The idea of restoring political freedom to Poland became a characteristic indicator of Polish Romanticism. The other side of the Polish Romantic narrative is that the broad masses were uninterested in Poland regaining independence because they did not identify at all with the country. For peasants, deprived of elementary civil rights, the name of the political state that oppressed them was in fact of no consequence. In addition, in the Romantic discourse, despite the modern terminology, the abolition of serfdom itself was still unclear. As is known, this was finally carried out by the partitioning powers, but contrary to the position held by the vast majority of the gentry. Another side of the Polish Romantic narrative reveals the intricate complexity of the colonized colonizer, who was deprived of an illusion and forced to confront the object of self-denial. This entailed saying goodbye to a lost homeland, which had never belonged to Poles alone, and dreaming that it would return, unchanged – the same that led to the fall.

This Romantic narrative also addresses the question of the essence of the Slavic soul and of Polish national culture. Adam Mickiewicz, who was brought up in a household of Polish gentry, but at the same time lived among the Lithuanian and Belarusian people, drew his cultural experience

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from these diverse realities and gave them an equal voice in his early works. His Belarusian ballads (1822) are written in Polish. *Dziady* (*Forefather's Eve*, parts II and IV, 1823; part III, 1832; part I, 1860) is named after a pagan festival. Part II, based on a pagan rite held in a Christian cemetery, involves a Slavic *guślarz* (shaman) calling on the spirits of the dead to help them free themselves from worldly obligations. The poetic novel *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828) tells the story of a brave Lithuanian duke who abandons his home, family and great love, as well as his throne, to defend his pagan homeland against a Christian colonizer from the West. In *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), the emblematic Polish national poem, Mickiewicz begins with the words 'Lithuania! My homeland!'

Throughout the nineteenth century, in the lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, two processes were happening in parallel. On the one hand, patriotic literature and art flourished; patriotic, meant in the broad sense referring to the myth of the lost land of happiness of the Sarmatian empire. And on the other, the gaining of voice by other ethnic cultures, those who might not necessarily be described as minorities, since they were often the majority in their territories. The imagination of the representatives of the Polish national discourse revolved around two unsuccessful independence uprisings, one in 1830 and the other in 1863, as well as the post-Sarmatian mythology of the former Eastern Borderlands that arose from them; and that – according to the formula of Bogusław Bakuła – constituted a 'translucent image of paradise, good and lost community', and at the same time 'a symbol of suffering and sacrifice'.[5] In other words, in a paradoxical affective transaction, they brought both consolatory profit (the vision of Arcadia) and painful loss (the core of trauma). It is also worth remembering that the Polish national imagination was, in a way, dominated by the perspective of the Russian partition. It was Russia that was the main enemy of Poland. After regaining independence, when the myths of the 'good partitioners' (i.e. the 'Austria Felix' and the 'Prussian order') glowed among former subjects, there was nothing like it in the former Russian partition. The vast majority of the Polish patriotic narrative has been shaped against Russia.

The other process relates to the multicultural diversity of the lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth that came to the fore. The national movements of the Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians were born, and became oriented in two directions, that is, against the former

[5] Bogusław Bakuła, 'Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty polskiego dyskursu kresoznawczego (zarys problematyki)', *Teksty Drugie*, 6 (2006), 15.

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colonizer, yet towards the culture the colonizer instilled. The representatives of these movements, in many cases, came from Polish communities and had Polish education and erudition. It is from this heritage that they drew their inspiration for independence-related activities that were – more often – in favour of their chosen identity rather than their inherited one. This was the case of the prominent Lithuanian painter and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, who spoke Polish almost all his life, and began learning Lithuanian only a few years before his death. It is this type of identity narrative that gains strength over time on the Polish periphery, and rises in contrast to the patriotic discourse, which clearly weakens at the end of the nineteenth century.

The clash between national and multicultural discourses was clearly exemplified by the joining of Vilnius to Poland during the interwar period. After regaining independence in 1918, one of the most important political issues for the new Polish Republic was to regain its former frontiers – the actual and symbolic repetition of the gesture of Sarmatian colonization. This 'joining of Vilnius to Poland' was also some kind of symbolic repetition of the former Polish–Lithuanian union. In the light of the emergence of an independent Lithuania, and from the Lithuanian–Belarusian perspective, this was nothing but another political rape, carried out by Poles on the lands of the former Grand Duchy. The former sovereign returned with a whole arsenal of old and new complexes to once again vassalize and dominate the eastern-borderland subaltern, and then to strengthen the conquest by political, educational and cultural expansion. This was the purpose of the influx of Polish elites to Vilnius in the 1920s, who then implemented the government's official plan and strengthened Poland's presence in the reclaimed (raped) area while maintaining an erection and demonstrating male strength over the weak. It is one of the outstanding cultural paradoxes that in this same Vilnius the ideological and literary group Żagary (Zhagary, the Kindles) was formed, concentrated around a magazine of the same name. It could be said that the ideological work of nationalists brought about counterproductive effects. The young Zhagarysts developed a local patriotism, which was understood to be a cult of the small homeland; they openly fought nationalism and the national ideology's chauvinism, and established strong cultural ties with Lithuanian, Belarusian and Jewish intellectuals.

The most outstanding representative of this group, the poet and Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature Czesław Miłosz, openly declared his bond with Mickiewicz's version of Romanticism's heritage and at the same time fought fiercely against Polish colonial aspirations in Lithuanian–Belarusian lands.

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After more than 100 years, the same contradiction in Polish cultural discourses that shaped the work of the young Adam Mickiewicz also spoke in Miłosz. Born in the 'nest of Lithuania', the Kaunas region, and raised in a Polish gentry house surrounded by Lithuanian villages, Miłosz used to call himself a Lithuanian who wrote in Polish. In this way, he referred to the multicultural heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and at the same time he reminds us of important meanings that were hidden and extraneous to the nationalistic ideology, but inherent in the famous invocation 'Lithuania! My homeland!'

Jewish populations began to settle in Poland in the Middle Ages, and it is mainly thanks to them that, for several centuries, some form of trade outlasted the weakened Sarmatian economy. Jews lived in their own, fairly isolated communities, governed by their own laws; they professed their own religion, spoke a different language, and at times also had their own treasury and their own tax policy. Within Polish legislation they always functioned with separate principles, which were usually adapted to the current needs of the rulers. These historical conditions meant that Jews were both an indispensable element of the national puzzle of the Sarmatian republic and a convenient target for racial hatred or anti-Semitic pogroms. Their mobility, together with their strong international ties, had an extremely invigorating impact on an otherwise stagnant country; their level of education and skill played a critical role in the dissemination of knowledge, especially in the provinces. Nevertheless, whenever social tensions reached dangerous levels, it was usually Jews who were the first victims of plebeian aggression, skilfully fuelled by landowners and Catholic clergy, who often achieved the cancellation of their Jewish debts in this way.

During the gloomy times of the 'Saxon night', Hasidism emerged in Poland. The father of this powerful religious and intellectual movement was Israel ben-Eliezer, known as Baal Shem Tow, or the Master of the Good Name. This poor Jew from the Eastern Carpathians lived among a simple pastoral people known as the Hutsuls. It was here that he experienced a revelation that led him to develop a teaching that deviated from the Talmudic tradition, being oriented towards an ecstatic religiosity based on worshiping God mainly through dancing and singing. Jacob Frank, the initiator of the Frankist movement, which originated and developed in the second half of the eighteenth century in Podolia, near the Hutsul homeland of Baal Shem Tow (so also within the territory of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth) went even further. The essence of this new Jewish heresy was the deep interconnecting of

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Judaism, Christianity, Orthodoxy and Islam into one great pan-religion, which would unite all the nations of Central Europe.[6] The Frankist movement survived for only a few decades; however, the consequences of its activity can be observed in Polish culture to this day.[7]

The intertwining of the homogeneous and heterogeneous discourses in Polish culture (Polish cultures) also comes to the fore in the twentieth century. After twenty years of interwar independence, Poland again fell under the rule of its eternal enemies, first Germany, then Russia. The Nazi occupation and the Holocaust led to the activation of old traumas and prejudices, which through the centuries had built up a discourse of the harmed Slavic subaltern. It seems that the horror of such an experience would result in long-lasting changes and the uprooting of old resentments. However, when Poland once again regained its independence after 1989, both narratives emerged simultaneously. All over again, Poles start to rediscover their multicultural heritage, to return to small homelands, forgotten peripheries, blurred borderlands; once again they are amazed by the fact that they are living among many neighbours, with whom they must shape their relationships anew. From a multicultural perspective, the 'return to Europe' was enclosed in quotation marks because they had always been in this Europe. But what Poles also discover are their claims of colonial influence in the former lands of the Commonwealth, as well as, within themselves, the hegemonic pride of Western '*Kulturträger*', but also their old-Sarmatian claims to their position as masters. It is in this sense that Andrzej Leder spoke about the 'dreamed-over revolution' in Poland during the twentieth century: modern economic and social changes (the elimination of serfdom and gentry-landlords, land parcelling and the enfranchisement of peasants, industrialization, etc.) were carried out by external oppressors, which is why Poles do not identify with them.[8] And when they regain their independence, they summon the old demons once more.

When Poland enthusiastically joined the European Union in 2004, the narrative of openness, dialogue of cultures and good neighbourliness dominated. In Poland in 2020, after five years of national-Catholic discourses in political power, the other narrative now dominates, the closed one, which was so persistently condemned by Witold Gombrowicz, for

[6] Any understanding of Polish culture should include the centuries-lasting Polish–Jewish borderland – which, as an 'internal borderland', is devoid of physical borders.
[7] See Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, trans. Jennifer Croft (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021).
[8] See Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja: Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

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example. Fortunately, culture has a strong independence gene, so the stronger the ideological pressure, the more firm the resistance.

THE GLOBAL ARCHIVE AND THE PERIPHERY

Dorota Sajewska
Translated by Simon Włoch

'In Poland, Hamlet's riddle is what is to be thought about in Poland'[9] – with these words the Polish theatre reformer Stanisław Wyspiański summed up his belief in the need for unsparing contextualization of even the most universal stage works. Wyspiański's premise appeared in a text he wrote over a mere couple of weeks at the turn of 1905, which, thanks to its first commentator, Stanisław Lack, went down in Polish theatre history as *Studium o Hamlecie* (*Hamlet Study*).[10] Concealed beneath the minimalistic graphics of the manuscript's cover emblazoned with the enigmatic inscription '*Hamlet*, SW, 1904' is a work that is inarguably fragmentary and hybrid, truly interdisciplinary, containing elements of drama, poetry and essay, or even traces of an avant-garde manifesto, director's notes and stage design. Resting at the core of this work straddling theatre practice and theory are Wyspiański the playwright's meetings and discussions with the actors – the 'persons of action'[11] – whom the artist recognized as the bedrock of theatre as a living art form. These personal encounters are intertwined in a reading of a drama essential to modern European theatre, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Confronting Shakespeare's work with his own contemplations on the nature and aims of contemporary theatre, Wyspiański, rather than accentuating the universality of this figure embroiled in complex individuation processes, searches for historical–cultural analogues, spotlighting the distinctiveness and peculiar peripherality of the Polish Hamlet's experience. Believing that *dramatis personae* must always act 'in real territory',[12] Wyspiański suggests the Polish staging of *Hamlet* take place at the Kraków cathedral in Wawel Castle, a site which has for centuries held a key role in political life as the 'Altar of the Homeland'. Emerging as the stage for the Polish Hamlet is thus a ritual place, the venue for Polish kings' coronations and the country's foremost necropolis holding the tombs of her monarchs and national heroes. In this, Wyspiański beckons artists and

[9] Stanisław Wyspiański, *Hamlet* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1961), p. 99.
[10] For the most recent translation, see Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Hamlet Study and The Death of Ophelia*, trans. Barbara Bogoczek and Tony Howard (London: Shakespeare's Globe, 2019).
[11] Ibid., p. 7. [12] Ibid., p. 14.

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audiences alike to face up to some utterly Polish concerns: to the ghosts inhabiting Wawel Cathedral and to the 'tradition of death' it represents. Such a contextualized interpretation of *Hamlet* in *Hamlet Study* leads to an expansion of the meaning of *theatre* – Wyspiański indirectly points out the complexity of theatre as a social practice, a cultural form of memory and an archive of the national community's rituals and social gestures.

Wyspiański's work found recognition in the theory and practice of Poland's greatest theatre experimenters from Leon Schiller and Juliusz Osterwa to Jerzy Grotowski, Konrad Swinarski and Jerzy Grzegorzewski. Why is it that, in tackling the figure of Hamlet, the great twentieth-century Polish theatre reformers chose to mediate their contact with the source material via a modernist hybrid work of art? My thesis is that Wyspiański's work compelled Polish artists to ponder modernity from the perspective of the periphery and to tap into the specificities of Polish culture as a culture lying on the fringes of European culture. This is a culture closely dependent on the centre identified with the processes of modernization, yet one that still reveals its distinctiveness through its traditional social and religious structures, economic underdevelopment and political instability. Thanks to a vantage point of this kind, I hope to reveal in such a defined Polish culture and the history of Polish theatre cultural dynamics different from those discussed so far in handbooks on the history of Polish theatre. Through the analysis of the performances I have chosen, I hope to answer the questions 'Where is Poland?' and 'What is Poland?' and to show the local specificity of Polish culture on the map of global politics and in the global cultural archive.

In its complexity, *Hamlet Study* not only concerned itself with matters of aesthetics but also tried to come to grips with the locality of Polish culture. Wyspiański's interpretation of *Hamlet* (and Hamlet) at Wawel Castle, featuring Polish actors and addressing Polish issues, made it possible to reflect on 'the ways in which modernity is characterized from the perspective of the periphery' and 'the ways in which the centre encodes the periphery in accounts of modernity'[13] as ostensibly universal values. Marie Louise Pratt defines peripherality as a form of centre-dependent marginalization – political, economic and cultural in nature:

> To be marginal or peripheral is precisely not to be disconnected from a centre but to be intimately connected in particular, highly meaningful

[13] Mary Louise Pratt, 'Modernity and Periphery: Toward a Global and Relational Analysis', in *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 22.

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> ways that are local, not in the sense that one sees only part of the picture but in the sense that one sees the whole picture from a particular epistemological location that is not a centre.[14]

One would be hard pressed to come up with a better definition for Wyspiański's position as an individual representing 'peripheral modernity',[15] who, on the margins of the original, reinterprets, rewrites and re-enacts Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a work which itself underpins the idea of the centre's modernity. Travestying the words of Harold Bloom, who in his *The Anxiety of Influence* formulates the telling phrase 'Shakespeare invented us, and continues to contain us',[16] I could thus posit that it was Stanisław Wyspiański who invented and continues to contain us as agents of Polish modernity. On the one hand, Wyspiański attempted to 'invent' Polish culture anew, examining it with scepticism and without the typically Romantic fascination with transforming a peripheral culture into a great and universal culture. On the other hand, however, the playwright's deep roots in European tradition prevented him from linking local history with global history. Despite his critical view of Poles' social conduct and collective imagination, for Wyspiański, Poland, deprived of political independence, remained a utopian possibility conjured against the backdrop of the changes taking place throughout the European continent. The same optics informed the perception of the national uprisings of 1830–1 and 1863–4, as well as that of the Galician Slaughter of 1846 and the Proletarian Revolution of 1905.

Any reflection on the relations between modernism and periphery cannot fail to omit the question of colonial regimes, in this case, Poland's place in this order of things. The perspective that develops is that of Poland as a victim of colonialism resulting from the sequential partitions imposed by three empires on the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772, 1793 and 1795. The fact that Poland was stripped of its statehood for 123 years and the resulting general sense of injury did much to obscure the local colonial project in the Polish collective consciousness. That local colonialism can be traced back to the historical act of the annexation of the Duchy of Lithuania implemented under the Union of Lublin in 1569 and, most significantly, to the colonization of Ruthenian lands. The eastward expansion taking place in the territory of Ukraine in 1569–1648 was a significant element of Polish Early Modern politics, which

[14] Ibid., p. 30. [15] Ibid., p. 29.
[16] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xvi.

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may be described as *polski kolonializm kresowy* (Polish borderland colonialism) and, in turn, understood as a peripheral variety of Western European overseas colonialism.[17] In support of such a perspective is the fact that Poland's colonial campaign, carried out concurrently with those of European powers such as Portugal, Spain and England, involved the exploitation of Ukrainian peasants at the hands of Poland's Orthodox nobility. Though Poland's colonization of Ukrainian lands, unlike Western European colonialism, was a product of the system of nobility and feudalism, the position of the Ruthenian peasant enslaved by the feudal lords, as Daniel Beauvois suggests, was not dissimilar to that of black slaves in the colonies.[18] It was, after all, no coincidence that in the seventeenth century the native populace of Ukraine was collectively referred to as *czerń* (blackness), arising from the sixteenth-century usage of this word by the upper classes to denote Polish peasants and commoners.

Yet, it was only in the nineteenth century that the awareness of Western imperialism inspired fantasies of Poland possessing colonies in Africa and South America. These fantasies resurfaced with sustained zeal when Poland regained independence and were actuated initially with the 1924 establishment of the Liga Morska i Rzeczna (Maritime and River League) and then in 1930 with the formation of the Liga Morska i Kolonialna (Maritime and Colonial League). In the League's official programme General Gustaw Orlicz-Dreszer outlined the organization's aims:

> Our objective is to contribute to the great imperial growth of Poland, which today considerably surpasses the boundaries of its own state and possesses the right, thanks to its multi-million population expansion and its presence within other countries and colonies, to transform from a European state to a world state in the manner of other great nations.[19]

The sense of Poland needing to make up for its backwardness in comparison with Western powers spawned a number of far-reaching and rather absurd expansion plans, like an idea to settle Polish colonists in Guinea and French Equatorial Africa or to capture Angola and Mozambique from the Portuguese, as well as some real action, like the purchase of land in Argentina and in the Brazilian state of Paraná or meddling in the domestic politics of Liberia. The year 1934 saw

[17] See Henryk Litwin, *Napływ szlachty polskiej na Ukrainę 1569–1648* (Warsaw: Semper, 2000).

[18] Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński: Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914*, trans. Krzysztof Rutkowski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005).

[19] Cited in Marek Arpad Kowalski, *Kolonie Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw: Bellona, 2005), p. 311.

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a fundamental reversal regarding the question of colonization. In the wake of Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the reaction of European governments to this, the notion of Polish colonial expansion was for the first time associated by the press with the plight of the Jews.[20] The editors of *Morze* (*The Sea*) augured that the settlement of Jews expelled from Germany in Angola heralded the need to expatriate European Jews to Palestine and waxed fanciful about initiating a campaign similar to the 1937 French project of expatriating European Jews to Madagascar. Towards the end of the 1930s, the plans for Polish settlement abroad were replaced by increasingly vehement calls for the Jews to leave Europe, which were interpreted by the League's publicists as a specific manifestation of Polish nationalism, arguably stemming not from ideology but from 'the dynamic growth of the nation in an over-populated state'.[21]

In reality, at the threshold of the Second World War, Poland was absorbed in a discourse on modern racism which stemmed from Europe's colonial practices as much as from the intensification of nationalistic sentiments throughout the continent and which manifested itself in growing anti-Semitism and yearnings to expel Jews from Poland. According to Patrick Wolfe, a characteristic trait of racially constructed identities is the fact that they arise 'in and through the very process of their enactment'.[22] Seeing it this way, 'as performed and contested on the ground [. . .] race emerges not as singular or unified but as a fertile, Hydra-headed assortment of local practices'.[23] Therefore, in analysing a given culture, what emerges as crucial is to trace not the racist doctrine itself but the performative acts that shape notions of race and implant them into the life of a given society, even if all of this initially takes place on its fringes. The appearance of 'race' in the discourse is most often in response to a crisis related to the situation of having to share the social space with others. In the study of theatre historiography, the adoption of a cultural perspective that accentuates the processes behind race formation seems particularly relevant on account of the existence of modern nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies which, in the case of white and Catholic Poland, assume their current form of growing fear and aggression towards all varieties of *Otherness*.

[20] Grażyna Borkowska, 'Polskie doświadczenie kolonialne', *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2007), 19.
[21] Lemanus, 'Emigracja żydowska', *Morze i Kolonie*, 1 (1939), 3.
[22] Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), p. 5.
[23] Ibid., p. 10.

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It is the performative nature of practices shaping race as a 'trace of history' (Wolfe) that ties in with my proposed understanding of the history of Polish theatre as a constellation of fragments recurring in new contexts.

Assuming theatre could be a cultural medium in which social behaviours are subject to critical observation and artists' fantasies may be interpreted as metasocial commentary, I intend here to take a closer look at two productions which can be treated as such fragments: Jerzy Grotowski's *Studium o Hamlecie* (*Hamlet Study*, 1964) and Zygmunt Hübner's *Murzyni* (*The Blacks*, 1961). I propose to interpret the two performances, both from the early 1960s, from the perspective of the modern notion of race, and thus in the context of the geopolitical changes taking place in peripheral Poland before the Second World War and thereafter. Here the war is treated not only as a grave crisis which precipitated the breakdown of social, political, economic and cultural structures but also as the moment when Poland as it is known today – ethnically homogeneous and monoreligious – was born.

Without a doubt, both directors are figures emblematic of different yet at the same time complementary models of Polish theatre. Jerzy Grotowski produced experimental theatre that sought new forms of expression on the cultural fringes and was ultimately a theatre anthropologist focusing in his laboratory setting on the performer's work on himself and on human self-discovery. Zygmunt Hübner, meanwhile, was the architect behind the country's finest stages – first, Stary Teatr in Kraków and later Teatr Ateneum in Warsaw – and the author of the book *Polityka i teatr* (*Politics and Theatre*, 1988), a synthesis on theatre's entanglement in the power structures of socialist Poland. *Hamlet Study* is directly related to Wyspiański's text, whereas Jean Genet's *The Blacks* may be interpreted as a (post)colonial variation on the subject of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare appears in both Grotowski's and Hübner's performances, as part of their critical examination of the periphery, as the one who gave life to Early Modern theatre but was himself entangled in dilemmas arising from race and colonialism.

Grotowski's performance, staged at Teatr 13 Rzędów in Opole in 1964, I believe, is the only manifestation of such an interpretation of Wyspiański's play in Polish theatre history – an interpretation exploring the work's peripheral perspective. The idea for this production was born once Grotowski had moved on from his active pursuit of the utopian vision of building a communist society.[24] After October 1956, the director co-founded the Kraków-based Revolutionary Youth Union and went on to lead the Political Centre of the Academic Left, thus finding himself at the heart of

[24] See Agnieszka Wójtowicz, 'Grotowski *politicus*', *Kwartalnik Opolski*, 2–3 (2013), 39–63.

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a leftist movement that condemned Stalinism as well as capitalism while fighting for freedom and democracy within a socialist system. In 1957, Grotowski wrote on the need to devise an anti-Stalinist version of socialism, at the same time underscoring that '[e]very reality is a disappointment compared with the dream, but that cannot mean that the fight ought to be abandoned'.[25] Two years later, he and Ludwik Flaszen opened an avant-garde theatre in Upper Silesia, in a small town that had until recently belonged to the German Reich. Perhaps it was that instance of Grotowski finding himself in a place so far removed from the cultural and artistic centres that became a direct impetus for him to begin working on the 'contemporary version of *Hamlet*, *Hamlet from "Rural Poland"*'.[26] Grotowski, I believe, was interested not so much in portraying provincial Poland but in portraying Poland itself as a province of Europe. For him, it was about a kind of peripheral encoding of Shakespeare's work so that the themes raised, images conjured and music heard made for the most radical possible confrontation with Polish spectators. That is why Grotowski also stressed that the objective was 'to create an atmosphere so that the production would be of a Polish character *par excellence*'. That way, the performance might have been 'difficult to watch by someone familiar with Shakespeare's work but unfamiliar with the issues of our country', but could discuss 'Polish Hamletism', to become 'a skewed mirror of the interpersonal prejudices that happened to take shape under our skies'.[27]

The performance, which for half a century had remained on the fringes of academic debate – be it the director's own commentary or monographic studies of his work – has in recent years become one of the artist's most often talked about works.[28] Proving crucially influential to the re-evaluation of *Hamlet Study* as a truly revolutionary performance, both in terms of aesthetics and in terms of politics, was the shift in Polish theatre discourse precipitated by the study of the Holocaust. In the context of the subsequent emergence of various publications coming from the

[25] Cited in ibid., p. 40.

[26] Jerzy Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw: Instytut im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Instytut im. Jerzego Gotowskiego, 2012), p. 100.

[27] Interview 'Nowe "Być albo nie być" w Teatrze Laboratorium, z Jerzym Grotowskim rozmawiają Stanisław Nyczaj i Jerzy Wróblewski', in *Przedążyć pęd ziemi*, ed. Stanisław Nyczaj (Kielce: Ston 2, 2009), p. 99.

[28] See Agnieszka Wójtowicz, *Od 'Orfeusza' do 'Studium o Hamlecie': Teatr 13 Rzędów w Opolu (1959–1964)* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2004); Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013); Wanda Świątkowska, *Hamleci Jerzego Grotowskiego* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Instytutu im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2016).

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burgeoning field of memory studies, the reiteration of the fundamental fact that in this performance Hamlet is a Jew and that the court is a Polish Mob spawned new interpretations of Grotowski's hitherto marginalized work. In such a light, *Hamlet Study* not only revealed its prophetic nature as something of a performative foreshadowing of the anti-Semitic events of March 1968,[29] but, more than anything, propelled the initiation of a movement of anamnesis – to restore Poles' erased memory of the Holocaust as an event that transpired on Polish soil, in front of the eyes of the Polish population, and as an event belonging to Polish history and culture.

This emergence of an appropriate historical and political context also crystallized to an exceptional degree the words of the performance's co-creator, Ludwik Flaszen, who in *Hamlet Study* described the Mob seen through the eyes of Hamlet the Jew as 'a conglomeration of primitive, harsh individuals, powerful in their number and physical strength, a crowd who can only fight, drink and die with grim abandon'.[30] This juxtaposition of Hamlet the Jewish intellectual unfettered by the commoners with the rethinking of the Holocaust discourse compelled many scholars to equate aggressive mobs with the peasantry. This kind of class distillation was doubtless informed by the psychoanalytic study of Polish postwar society carried out by Andrzej Leder in his book *Prześniona rewolucja* (*Sleepwalking through a Revolution*, 2014). In it, Leder shows how the revolution perpetrated in Poland in 1939–56 by its enemies – first the Germans and then the Soviets – brought about fundamental changes in the collective imagination of the Polish population; how the extermination of the Jews and the elimination of the gentry and prewar elites effectively resulted in Polish society undergoing a specific process of 'peasantification'. Leder argues that, because Poles did not experience this revolution actively and consciously, it remains to this day a site of repressed memory requiring psychoanalysis, a methodology capable of having emancipatory effects on Polish historical and political consciousness.

In fact, the utility of the psychoanalytic method in examining Polish culture had already been pointed out by the authors of *Hamlet Study*

[29] Recently, Leszek Kolankiewicz recalled this in 'Świntuch, bluźnierca, pantokrator, guru, heretyk, Grotowski', *Didaskalia*, 147 (2018), 23. Earlier, Ludwik Flaszen wrote that '*Hamlet Study*, created in 1964, unfinished, performed just a few times for small groups of spectators, was an indicator of the process that revealed itself fully in March 1968.' Ludwik Flaszen, ' Grotowski *Ludens*', in *Grotowski & Company*, eds. Ludwik Flaszen, Andrzej Wojtasik and Paul Allain (Holstebro: Icarus, 2010), p. 254.

[30] Ludwik Flaszen, 'Hamlet Study', in *Grotowski & Company*, p. 99.

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themselves, who wrote: 'The work consists of the collective excavation of hidden aspects of the psyche which can be expressively useful.'[31] Nevertheless, the collective study of Polish postwar society via the use of theatre led Grotowski and Flaszen to rather different interpretive conclusions. On the one hand, the performance was meant to be 'a drama about Slavic, Polish peasants [. . . or] maybe about the Poles as a peasant nation?' but, on the other, it was supposed to offer not 'the truth about the nation, but about the fiction based on the subject of the nation; perhaps also a tragic warning against superstitions – containing some shameful truths that might become reality'.[32] Moreover, the Mob not only wears the mask of a local community but also – as pointed out convincingly by one of the leading scholars of Grotowski's theatre, Leszek Kolankiewicz – takes on the form of those unassailable heroes of Polish history, the Warsaw insurrectionists. The drastic scene in which the mob, evoking in the audience a clear association with the resistance movement, exerts violence on a Jew elicited outrage from the father of Polish theatre history, Zbigniew Raszewski, who described the scene in which the insightful Jew is confronted by the soldiers as follows:

> Hamlet tries to explain to them that their outbursts border on madness. He thrusts himself at each of the soldiers, one by one, with the Talmud in hand, and each of them spits in his face. The soldiers, who even sing insurrectionist songs, distinctly bring to mind insurrectionist formations like, for example, the Zośka Batalion. Who among us does not remember the photograph in which the laughing Zośka soldiers embrace the Jews from Gęsiówka, which they liberated? We all remember and we probably all cherish it.[33]

Raszewski's statement echoes an argument recurring among members of the elite, especially among the anti-communist intelligentsia, about the ideological innocence of the heroes of national history. That was the case even in the light of the fact that the exalted image of the Home Army soldiers was challenged even during the war by the Central Committee of Polish Jews,[34] which in March 1945 put forth an accusation detailing the

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ludwik Flaszen, 'Hamlet in the Theatrical Laboratory', in *Grotowski & Company*, p. 103.

[33] Zbigniew Raszewski, 'Teatr 13 Rzędów', in *Misterium zgrozy i urzeczenia: Przedstawienia Jerzego Grotowskiego i Teatru Laboratorium*, eds. J. Degler and G. Ziółkowski (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Instytutu im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2006), p. 235.

[34] The Central Committee of Polish Jews (CCPJ), in existence during the years in 1944–50, was an organization providing support to survivors and offering political representation to Jews with the Polish authorities and Jewish organizations abroad. For more on the CCPJ, see https://sztetl.org.pl/en/glossary/central-committee-jews-poland.

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murder of Jews at the hands of 'Home Army bands' and called for greater 'action against the Home Army'.[35] In reality, the picture of anti-Semitism among Polish partisans was even more complicated – it applied to the formations under the command of the Home Army (such as the 'Wybranieckich' division) as well as those under the People's Army (such as the 'Świt' division), which perpetrated ruthless, racially motivated executions of Jews hiding in the woods.[36] Jews were summarily sentenced to death by anti-communist death squads such as the Holy Cross Mountain Brigade of the Armed Forces, under the command of the Polish Organization, whose objective was to create an authoritarian state of ethnic Poles.[37]

In Raszewski's disapproval, what comes to the fore is the martyrological model of Polish culture, one that was deeply internalized during the era of the partitions, when Poland was robbed of its statehood and its social, cultural and economic continuity. It was this nineteenth-century model, in which Poles are identified as the victims and never the violators, that stood in the way of any postwar internalization of the blame and acceptance of Poles' moral co-responsibility for the Holocaust. Tomasz Żukowski correctly argues that '[d]isplays of Polish society's demoralization during the war – denunciation and depredation – and after the war – pogroms, the raids on the Jews on the trains and the murder of Jews by underground military units – to this day fail to find a place in Polish historiography and historical consciousness'.[38]

Thus, postwar nationalism was not a product of a new and hitherto-unknown force but a continuation of the anti-Semitism already existing in Polish society, which had generated a wave of pogroms beginning in the nineteenth century (the Warsaw Pogrom of 1881 and the Galicia Pogrom of 1897),[39] running through the interwar years (the Lwów Pogrom of 1918 and the Wysokie Mazowieckie Pogrom of 1937) and intensifying during the war and immediately afterwards via Polish citizens' actions mimetic of

[35] Cited in Krystyna Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm: Anatomia półprawd 1939–68* (Warsaw: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1992), p. 86.

[36] See Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Okrzyki pogromowe: Szkice z antropologii historycznej Polski lat 1939–1945* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2012).

[37] Grzegorz Motyka, *Lekcja historii dla premiera Morawieckiego, czyli jak Brygada Świętokrzyska NSZ trzech Żydów spotkała*, http://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,23104117,jak-brygada-nsz-trzech-zydow-spotkala.html.

[38] Tomasz Żukowski, 'Świadkowie Zagłady', *Teksty Drugie*, 5 (2001), 143.

[39] See Alina Cała, *Asymilacja Żydów w Królestwie Polskim (1864–1897): Postawy, konflikty, stereotypy* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1989).

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Nazi violence, irrespective of class and social background. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's scrupulous contemporary ethnographic study, in particular when it comes to the Kielce Pogrom of 1946,[40] indicates that it would be false to claim class particularity or unequivocal political affiliation among those perpetrating the crimes against the Jews. It is precisely the inability of all Poles to accept the knowledge of the crimes committed by us that Grotowski later identified as the reason behind the shock experienced by the spectators of *Hamlet Study* when confronted with its scenes of violence: 'We also brought about a confrontation with elements of the Polish resistance movement – attitudes both heroic and nationalistic – all of it has been confronted in a way that, for us ourselves, the Poles, is extremely painful.'[41]

Hamlet Study may thus be acknowledged as a performance deeply penetrating the Polish nation's condition as an imagined community. In his analysis of the national community's aggression towards the Other, Flaszen approaches the anthropological concept of a nation being an imagined community, as Benedict Anderson defines it.[42] This, however, does not mean that an imagined community ought to be exclusively equated with an artifice or a fantasy. In fact, all of its power stems from the realism and not the illusoriness of the nation – from the real-life manifestation of nationalistic behaviour, which produces for itself the Other in its moments of panic or cruelty. By conjuring up the Other, 'this culture creates an internal enemy for itself and, by way of social neurosis, undermines itself and destroys from within the values that it otherwise claims to hold'.[43] Only from this perspective can we begin to understand the paradox of postwar Poland as a society in the grip of fear and aggression towards the Other, and simultaneously as a collective attempting to create a utopian vision of a new society.

It is difficult to agree with the viewpoint that the new Polish state arising after the Second World War, with its new borders, was in any way culturally homogeneous, or autonomous, unique, peculiar or distinct from other cultures. Surely, one significant homogenizing factor in postwar Poland was the Catholic Church, which was able to unite the populace

[40] Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą: Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2018).

[41] Grotowski cited in Kolankiewicz, 'Świntuch, bluźnierca, pantokrator, guru, heretyk, Grotowski', 23.

[42] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 1983).

[43] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitcs*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 131.

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to a much greater degree than the abstract notion of 'Polish culture'. What proved crucial in the creation of the nation was, in my view, a bond not so much with Polish art and literature but rather with a standardized national language and a monoreligiosity radically opposed to monopartisanism. Here, the Catholic Church took a stand against the Polish United Workers' Party as a defender of Polish identity. Though nationalism leads to a society's homogenization, and societal homogenization is fuelled by nationalistic attitudes, this feedback-loop process does not have to determine all of the manifestations and products of a culture. Every society, even the most uniform ones, contains subversive elements, be they individuals or groups, capable of radical criticism of the dominant cultural patterns and able to open up possibilities for other historical, political and ultimately existential narratives.

As Karol Modzelewski states, conducive to this was the peculiar 'liberalism of the communist state'[44] after 1956 towards culture creators and intellectuals, who were able to continue pursuing their professional goals, revolutionary work and avant-garde artistic and social projects on the sidelines. This behavioural paradox came to the fore in the political activity engaged in by Grotowski, who, believing in the experiment of a socialist state being a means to unify people across all divisions, also warned against 'clerical invigoration' and 'the growth of bureaucratic despotism tendencies'.[45] He countered the bureaucratization of the socialist country with a new general system 'in which civilization, governance and social justice would all have a common denominator'.[46] It was just such a vision of community that takes shape in Grotowski's performance, in whose final scene of a battlefield strewn with soldiers' corpses 'Hamlet expresses his yearning for solidarity and community, finally, in this extreme situation, fraternised with these.'[47] In that postwar Polish landscape, I detect not only the brutality of civil war but also a yearning for possible alternative worlds which cannot be reduced to being only symptoms of the repression of the Holocaust experience.

A fascinating document analysing the complex relationship between the Holocaust and decolonization through the context of postwar Polish culture is an essay from 1952 appearing in *Jewish Life* magazine titled 'The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto' by the African-American author

[44] Karol Modzelewski, *Zajeździmy kobyłę historii: Wyznania poobijanego jeźdźca* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2013), p. 92.

[45] Jerzy Grotowski, 'Cywilizacja i wolność – nie ma innego socjalizmu', in *Teksty zebrane* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), p. 74.

[46] Ibid. [47] Flaszen, 'Hamlet Study', p. 100.

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and social activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois's visit to Warsaw was cited by the Holocaust scholar Michael Rothberg as evidence supporting his concept on the multidirectionality of collective memory based on the relationship between the Holocaust and the discourses of race and resistance.[48] Though the connections between spatial organization and race-related violence are central to Rothberg's line of thinking, the city of Warsaw itself as a possible meeting site for black culture and Jewish culture remains irrelevant to the scholar. The perspective adopted by Rothberg so strongly determines his outlook that his analysis omits those fragments of Du Bois's essay in which the American activist himself examines the relationships between locality and globality as an important factor in reformulating one's own theoretical or ideological prejudices and food for thought on the transfer of ideas, beliefs and viewpoints. Du Bois's revision of his views on racism spurred by his visit to the Warsaw ghetto and supported by his acquaintance with the history of anti-Semitism in Europe helped him 'to emerge from a certain social provincialism'[49] and to discover that racial biases can be something different from prejudices as to skin colour. At the same time, Du Bois does not conceal the fact that the intellectual breakthrough at which he arrived thanks to three visits to Poland (during the first of which, in the late nineteenth century, he discovered that the situation of Poles in the Prussian partition resembled that of black peoples in the colonies) meant 'not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem'.[50] Thus, racism appeared to be something that 'cut across lines of colour and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men'.[51]

In the context of decolonization, interest in forms of racism other than anti-Semitism should not, in my opinion, be tied in with the mechanisms behind the suppression of the Holocaust in Polish society. This phenomenon also cannot be reduced to being a product of Freudian screened memory. Contemporary historiography stresses that, like the Holocaust, Communism, as a model of an alternative supranational and secular community, has been repressed from Polish post-1989 cultural memory as a hostile Other. Such a dual point of view makes it possible to

[48] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 111–34.

[49] W. E. B Du Bois, 'The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto', in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 472.

[50] Ibid. [51] Ibid.

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retrospectively examine the significance of the relations between the Jewish community and the communist authorities that developed after the war. This relationship was associated with the promise of an alternative community free of racial prejudice, chauvinism and xenophobia. Thus, there existed something along the lines of an existential need to build a new style of communal life according to the international communist country formula.

In postwar Poland, the topic of the Holocaust – though believed to be an effect of German Nazism and not Polish involvement in acts of violence – was tied into decolonization processes in an open and obvious manner, of which the most prominent example in the artistic world was the work of Ryszard Kapuściński. Though in the Poland of the 1950s and 1960s the linking of Nazi crimes with colonial violence was an element of coping with the trauma of the war, the memory of this postcolonial association was overshadowed in Polish culture by the anti-communist discourse gripping Polish historiography after 1989.

A similar fate befell Zygmunt Hübner's adaptation of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* at Teatr Ateneum in Warsaw in 1961, which attempted to undertake a discussion on the issue of decolonization that has been marginalized in Polish theatre history. It was no coincidence that the drama appeared on the Polish stage at a moment that was historically very significant in terms of the changes taking place in Africa, when many countries there were declaring their independence. In the period between 1960 and 1964, Poland's contact with nascent African states intensified, resulting in closer diplomatic ties which soon led to economic and trade agreements.[52] Although these relations with African countries may be treated as a product of anti-imperialist communist propaganda, quite noteworthy is the confluence of Hübner's adaptation of Genet's *The Blacks* with the intensification of political backlash towards Belgian interference in the Congo in December 1960 and then towards the colonizers' murder of Patrice Lumumba in February 1961. Hübner's performance thus came to life in the context of geopolitical changes that were being hotly debated in the press and literature alike. Jean Genet's play struck a chord with the Warsaw theatre – the Polish capital experienced the 'highest intensity of gatherings and rallies related to the events in Africa'. Nevertheless, before the premiere of *The Blacks*, the performance's creators received a letter

[52] See Paulina Codogni, 'Afrykańczycy w Warszawie w latach 1945–1975', in *Afryka w Warszawie: Dzieje afrykańskiej diaspory nad Wisłą*, eds. Paweł Średziński and Mamadou Diouf (Warsaw: Fundacja Afryka Inaczej, 2010), p. 116.

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from Genet in which the playwright categorically forbade the staging of the play in a country where, as he wrote, 'the only black faces are those of coal miners. But this is not a play about miners.'[53] Genet justified his disapproval not only with the absence of black citizens in Poland but, above all, with the fact that the play's message would be skewed given that, while written by a white man, the text was meant to be performed by black actors.

In the play, a troupe of black actors enacts a court trial connected with a ritual murder and the rape of a white woman allegedly committed by a black man. The Blacks appear before a tribunal composed of members of the White Court who – as black actors in white masks – watch this spectacle as a representation of centuries-long colonial oppression. Genet's revolutionary gesture in imperial France was to offer the victims of racism the exclusive right to pass judgement on racist prejudices on a European stage in front of white audiences.[54] The play as performed by black actors thus critiqued a racist notion of blackness as the embodiment of irrationality and subservience. At the same time, for Genet, black actors performing white characters performed an act of claiming or appropriating the traits of colonizers by putting on the white masks. In this manner, Genet not only subverts the Western European tradition of blackface but also aims to reveal the racist constructions of 'race' and the privileging of (staged) white bodies. The materiality of this gesture leads to an on-stage reversal of the ontological status of black and white centred on a historicity of the racial schema of the body.[55]

What impact could this play have in a country ostensibly devoid of a colonial past and located on the periphery of Europe? What could have been the main theme for the spectators in Warsaw's Powiśle district theatre, for whom contact with people of colour was highly limited or non-existent? That which in imperial France was meant to appeal to the conscience of its people as co-perpetrators of colonial crimes became a very abstract concept in Poland. Genet himself wrote that 'there would be no drama if the stage was occupied by white actors painted black instead of real negroes talking about their real misery'.[56] In Hübner's performance, the stage logic was reversed: white actors with faces painted black put on gigantic ornamental masks when it was time for them to play the imaginary

[53] Jean Genet, 'List Jean Genet'a do polskich tłumaczy "Murzynów"', in *Murzyni*, play programme (Warsaw: Teatr Ateneum, 1961), p. 6.
[54] The French premiere of Genet's *Les Nègres* took place at the Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris in 1959.
[55] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1951).
[56] Genet, 'List Jean Genet'a', p. 5.

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whites, which critics claimed made the ubiquitous, all-determining whiteness of the Polish actors all the more evident. Critics also noted that, while the anticolonial struggle in Africa 'admittedly grips the whole world,' these struggles 'impact life differently in Western versus East-Central Europe'.[57] Andrzej Wirth alone deemed *The Blacks* at Teatr Ateneum 'one of the more interesting performances of the current season', while stressing that 'this time, the theatre outpaces its audience by a distance that cannot be filled in by the critics' interpretations'.[58]

The intentions of the adaptation's creators were clearly defined from the outset. In response to Genet's objections, one of the translators, Jerzy Lisowski, wrote:

> This is a play about Negroes but also a play against all forms of racism. In our country, only from newspapers bringing news from distant Alabama or the Congo do we know about what racism is in reference to black people. But we do know, and very well at that, another racism which, at the hands of the Nazi occupants, built its monstrous altars on our soil in which to burn millions of Jews. [. . .] Sadly, in our world, there are more people whom racism condemns to death. They don't only reside in Africa. Such were the Jews in the Nazi empire and such are the Algerians on the streets of Paris today, who are shot like sparrows only because they have curly hair and their complexion is darker. This play is about all of them because there is only one racism regardless of the circumstances in which it may take Negroes, Jews, the Chinese or Arabs as its targets.[59]

That argument was sufficient for Genet to permit the Polish artists to use his play. The interpretation of Nazism as an atrocity analogous to centuries of colonial violence – and having repercussions in the form of colonial methods being used against contemporary postcolonial nation builders – was not only a correct diagnosis of racism's roots lying in the Western European modernity project, but also brought Polish circumstances closer to the perspectives proposed by thinkers from colonial regions.

Such a perspective was proposed by, among others, Aimé Césaire, who in 1948, before the 1950 Polish publication of his *Discourse on Colonialism*, argued that Nazi Germany employed only on a small scale what Western Europe had employed for centuries against colonial subjects.[60] Behind the

[57] Jerzy Zagórski, 'Labirynt przenośni', *Kurier Polski*, 300, 15 December 1961.
[58] Andrzej Wirth, 'Tragizm dziś będzie w czarnym kolorze', *Nowa Kultura*, 1 (January 1962), 7.
[59] Jerzy Lisowski, 'Komentarz do Listu Jean Genet'a do polskich tłumaczy "Murzynów"', in *Murzyni*, play programme (Warsaw: Teatr Ateneum, 1961), p. 8.
[60] See Aimé Césaire, *Victor Schoelcher et l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Lectoure: Bibliothèque du Capucin, 2004).

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link between colonialism and Nazism was the vision of an international and pacifist *communitas*, which in the social reality transformed from a spontaneous and temporal community formed during theatre performances into an existential or even ideological communitas. This kind of utopian togetherness project made it possible to feel a sense of community with colonized nations. This type of communal understanding clearly resounded in the programme text of the Congress of Intellectuals in Wrocław in 1948, authored by writer and Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski. In his proclamation, titled *Pisarz i pacyfizm* (*The Writer and Pacifism*), Borowski stressed that true pacifism ought to be built on 'prohibiting all forms of propaganda [. . .] containing theories of racial inequality and on the fight against the enslavement' of people of colour and those who are 'economically weak'. He used his vivid memories of his experience with 'fascism, which was an attempt to impose a colonial system on Europe' to motivate the Polish population towards supporting 'the granting of complete freedom to colonized peoples'.[61] This analogy, so crucial in interpreting the history of modernity, was more than 'a simple rhetorical manoeuvre, appealing to a delicate streak, animating traumatic experiences and making it possible to empathize with the situation faced by colonized peoples'.[62] This communitas vision, though backed by the socialist state's ideology, transcended the notion of community based on ideas of race and nation, which in the communist perspective were responsible for halting change in the capitalist and colonial world.

Like *Hamlet Study*, *The Blacks* is a performance that may be treated as a stage manifestation of the dilemmas faced by Polish culture in the age of modernity. Both of these traces of theatre history form a metacommentary on postwar Poland, revealing this era to be a dialectic of death and rebirth. They processed the violence resulting from racism as the chief ideology of modernity and undertook reflection on the period's attempts to build new social utopias. Certainly, the nature of the future visions arising at that time was affected by Poland's specific geopolitical position as a peripheral discursive space, a place of ideological transmission processes, social–cultural intersections and a unique form of colonization, perpetrated first by the Nazis during the Second World War, of which an extreme example was the placement of concentration camps in Poland itself, and later, during the Cold War, in the form of territorial expansion by the USSR

[61] Tadeusz Borowski, 'Pisarz i pacyfizm', cited in Adam F. Kola, *Socjalistyczny postkolonializm* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2018), pp. 114–15.
[62] Kola, *Socjalistyczny postkolonializm*, p. 87.

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and USA, as a result of which Poland once again became a liminal zone, culturally, economically and politically.

My primary argument in this chapter has been that Stanisław Wyspiański's work allowed Polish artists to bring out the specificity of Polish culture and reveal in the fragmentary history of Polish theatre (Grotowski, Hübner) the new dynamics of Polish culture on the map of global politics and in the global cultural archive. In answering the questions 'Where is Poland?' and 'What is Poland?,' historiography, including theatre historiography, still devotes little attention to comparisons of the various geopolitical circumstances of acts of violence, in which the past, present and future are focused as if through a lens. In this, I observe the legacy of Eurocentrism as the dominant model for political conduct, the writing of history and the interpretation of culture resulting from an unwillingness to acknowledge the links between European cultural history and colonialism. Assuming a peripheral perspective in studying cultural history makes it possible to embrace not only local experiences of violence but also local stories, other means of creating and transmitting sense, and different epistemological traditions in Western historiography. That said, the concept of theatre history – and, going further, cultural history – that I propose is not about attempting to escape the Western colonization of language for the sake of local discourses exclusively. Instead, maintaining an awareness of locality, one must move beyond it, break the boundaries of local specificity and see culture in a broader context. As Wyspiański proposed, it is a peripheral perspective that opens the door to just such an approach to the study of theatre and cultural history. Consequently, this pertains to broadening the historical and communal imagination in the context of the specifics of local experience. With the recognition that the archive is not the domain of the West exclusively, and that it is not a cultural monolith but a complex blueprint for creating as well as deconstructing existing means of cognition, the project of decolonizing knowledge itself that has been initiated in the global peripheries may well become a reality.

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