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Muriel Spark and Africa

By Willy Maley

In the wake of Black History Month and in the light of an ongoing examination of Scotland's colonial past, Willy Maley reflects on Muriel Spark's formative experiences in Africa and the importance of her time there for her life and work.

Spark's centenary year has offered opportunities to explore elements of her writing that deserve wider attention. Her time in Africa is vital in this respect. An exhibition at the National Library of Scotland reveals aspects of Spark's sojourn in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa (<https://www.nls.uk/exhibitions/muriel-spark/Africa>); critic Eleanor Byrne has begun to map out the impact of time there on her work (<https://www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2017/11/go-away-bird-muriel-spark-southern-rhodesia/?print=print>); and one of the fruits of the Muriel Spark 100 celebrations is a new book by writer Shane Strachan linking Spark's African experiences with Scotland (<http://www.shanestrachan.com/blog/2018/10/20/nevertheless-muriel-spark-in-bulawayo-murielspark100>). Here, with a view to contributing to the discussion around Scotland's colonial past, I want to look at the afterlife of Africa in Spark's writings beyond the poems and stories that expressly draw on her experience of that continent.

According to her biographer, Martin Stannard, Spark had a love-hate relationship with Africa: "When the imaginative impulse of her work was charged by love or hate, it moved restlessly back to Africa. In love, Africa was light, space, freedom, exotic and mysterious, its savage power offering glimpses of the transcendental. Images of strange energies erupt: the moon, the leopard, muffled drums; above all, the rush of the Zambesi, that 'seraphic river', towards the thundering falls, the epitome of ecstasy, the very thrust of creation. In hate, Africa was figured as the Dark Continent, confronting the farcical attempts of mankind to impose control; it was the dust devil, the wasteland, a reminder of essential corruption and alienation, the meaninglessness of the purely material". The language used here is very black and white, and one of the issues that arises in examining Spark's African writings is the question of language, which I'll return to later.

Unlike some of her classmates at James Gillespie's School, Spark did not go on to University. Instead she went to Africa. She was 19 years old and had already led a very full life, as her memoir, *Curriculum Vitae*, suggests. But she still had a lot to learn, and as she later remarked: "It was in Africa that I learned to cope with life". Her life certainly changed dramatically in 1937. Young Muriel Camberg met schoolteacher Sydney Oswald Spark shortly before he went off to take up a 3-year teaching post in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Sydney sent Muriel a one-way ticket to join him. The thought of adventure and travel appealed to the budding author and she journeyed to Salisbury (now Harare) and from there on to Fort Victoria (now Masvingo), where Sydney's teaching post was based. One of the things that attracted Muriel to a life in Africa was the fact that her husband-to-be assured her she would not have to do any housework and could thus concentrate on her writing. She became one of 55,000 whites ruling over a colony of one and a half million blacks.

Spark's entire married life was spent in Africa, where she gave birth to her only child, Robin, in Bulawayo in 1938. Reflecting on her time there, Spark remarked of her fellow settlers: "They

thought the country was an extension of South Africa. But the spirit of the times in those years between the two world wars was already decidedly against the South African model". In fact the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 had laid the groundwork for a deeply segregated society in Southern Rhodesia by excluding blacks from land ownership in certain areas and preserving the best farmland for white settlers and absentee landlords. It echoed South Africa's Natives Land Act of 1913.

In Southern Rhodesia, Spark's encounters with racists took many forms, including the anti-Semitic Mother Superior at an Anglican convent school to which Spark applied for a job as a junior teacher, a woman who blamed the war on the Jews. Spark, having learned that this woman liked her "complexion and [...] golden hair" took great pleasure in telling her that she was Jewish: "I took my fair skin and my golden locks right out of there".

Muriel planned to stay no more than three years in her new home but with the outbreak of war and the birth of her son three years became seven and in the end she felt lucky to get out of Africa and her marriage alive. As she recalls in her memoir, "By the time I had been in Africa two years, I thought of leaving my husband. He became a borderline case, and I didn't like what I found either side of the border." When she finally left him it was to her great relief: "I escaped for dear life", she said. After her divorce, she chose to keep her married name: "Camberg was a good name, but comparatively flat. Spark seemed to have some ingredient of life and fun".

While she lived in Africa, dealing with her husband's increasingly erratic behaviour and caring for her son, Spark "never stopped writing poetry". She twice entered and won the Rhodesian annual poetry competition and published her work in local magazines. She devoured the writings of Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Yet when she came to write a short piece entitled "The Poet's House" for a radio broadcast in 1960, she observed drily: "Africa was full of astonishing and marvellous things, but I had felt very strongly the lack of communication with the world to which I belonged. There was no advanced cultural life in Africa by which to measure all I experienced there – because I had even then a satirical cast of mind. So I'd longed throughout the early years of the war to get back to a place of books and ideas even though the bombs were falling".

Several of Spark's early poems have an African theme. In London in the late 1940s she fell in love with poet and editor Howard Sergeant and wooed him in verses laced with the language of her time in Southern Rhodesia, including "He Is Like Africa" where, as the name suggests, she likens her lover to the continent itself as a character driven by nature to be wild. Spark presents Sergeant in bright colours: "His light, his stars, his hemisphere/ Blaze like a tropic, and immense/ The moon and leopard stride in his blood/ And mark in him their opulence".

In "Anniversary" (1948), heralding the end of the affair, she offers a bleaker vision: "Our love approaches the last episode/ of pitiless flight;/ the young albino animal reaching/ his soft neck/ to the friendly year/ fears no more the hot herd-breath/ behind him". Sergeant joked about Muriel's use of her adventures abroad as a chat-up line, all mystery and romance and danger: "Oh, the years in Africa take away the innocence of us all". Sergeant had literary links with Africa himself, as a poetry editor, and later published a collection entitled *African Voices* (1973).

Spark's short stories, the strongest and longest of them, also tend to have an African theme. They contain a sprinkling of racist epithets used by the colonial characters whom she ridicules in her own subtle but stringent way. These derogatory terms were also part of the linguistic landscape that she inhabited. Her first major publication, the tale that won her the *Observer* short story prize in 1951, "The Seraph and the Zambesi", arose from her vision of the Victoria Falls. In her memoir, Spark tells her readers how this inspired her to write the story that launched her literary career: "I felt a compulsion to describe the Zambesi River and the approach to the falls through the mysterious Rain Forest as a mystical experience. I expressed, symbolically, how the aridity of the white people there had affected me".

The aridity of the white people had affected Spark perhaps more than she knew, and it drove her to embrace the natural wonders of Africa. Victoria Falls, for Spark, was a revelation: "I think everyone should try once to visit this true wonder of the world; it should become a sort of Mecca and place of pilgrimage for the human race. I don't see why peace conferences are not held in the vicinity of the Victoria Falls. I can think of no other experience that makes for the reasonable contemplation of our humanity, and a sense of the proportions in which we should think".

Spark was inspired to write about the falls on more than one occasion. "Victoria Falls" (1948), a poem that prefigures Spark's prizewinning short story, features "the broad Zambesi" on whose "weedy isles/ Swing antic monkeys swarm malignant flies", while "seemingly-lazy lurk long crocodiles". There are no people here. The closing couplet – "Wrapped in this liquid turmoil who can say/ Which is the mighty echo, which the spray?" – appears to echo Yeats's "Among School Children" – "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?" – but Spark's lines lack the human presence of Yeats's verse.

"The Seraph and the Zambezi" is a surreal tale. It concerns the female narrator's encounter with a man called Samuel Cramer who turns out to be a refugee from a story by Charles Baudelaire entitled "La Fanfarlo" (1848). The narrator, visiting Victoria Falls for Christmas, has been sent to the gas station where Cramer rents rooms to tourists. Cramer has penned a Nativity play. This piece of amateur dramatics is interrupted by the appearance of a real Seraph, a celestial being who takes over the show. Cramer's native helpers throw petrol at it and the makeshift theatre burns down. They then chase the Seraph till it disappears down the Zambesi, "among the rocks that look like crocodiles and the crocodiles that look like rocks". The story sees a confrontation between two typical Sparkean figures, creatures – or creations – deliberately designed to be unnatural or supernatural, the reincarnated literary character and the angel who threatens to mar his planned performance.

"The Seraph and the Zambesi" is beautifully written, but in parts it is quite in keeping with old colonial attitudes. For example, we are told: "Some mission natives had been sent over to give a hand with laying the stage, and these, with their standard-three school English, washed faces and white drill shorts, had innocently provoked Cramer's raw rag-dressed boys. Cramer's method, which ended with the word 'police,' succeeded in sending them back to work, still uttering drum-like gutturals at each other". After Spark's death in 2006, *The Observer* posted a digital version of the story – still online (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/apr/16/arts.books1>). Spark was no longer in a position to correct their typo, "gutterals", but the newspaper's mistake is perhaps appropriate because there is a problem with literary representations of native speech.

Nigerian author Chinua Achebe famously denounced the depiction of native Africans in *Heart of Darkness* and Joseph Conrad's tendency to represent their speech as "incomprehensible grunts". Is Spark similarly at fault?

In a late piece entitled "My Madeleine", published in *The New Yorker* in 2000, Spark again ruminated on her African experience as she recalled the idea for "The Seraph and the Zambesi" in a way that revealed how the setting came about: "I started writing a story on my favourite subjects, which at that time were angelology (the fascinating study of the order of angels) and the French poet Baudelaire. To make the story unusual, I placed it in Africa, on the River Zambesi, where I had lived for some years".

At the end of her stay in Africa, in 1943-44, Spark spent six months in Cape Town before she could get a ship back to England. Her encounter with apartheid left a deep impression: "There had been an atmosphere of unreality about Cape Town. The Community was divided into three: coloured, black and white. The coloured comprised Malays, Indians and people of mixed blood. There were three entrances to the cinemas, and other public places, labelled 'Coloured', 'Black' and 'White'. I thought this quite amusing when I didn't think it tragic".

This period of her life was later captured in a story entitled "The Pawnbroker's Wife" (1953), set in Cape Town. The proprietor explains her philosophy of life: "'You see [...] we're quiet people. We keep ourselves to ourselves [...] we live in quite a world of our own'". The point is that it's not a world of their own, nor do they keep themselves to themselves: "Like most establishments in those parts, Mrs Jan Cloote's pawnshop was partitioned off into sections, rather like a public house with its saloon, public and private bars. These compartments separated white customers from black, and black from those known as coloured – the Indians, Malays and half-castes". Mrs Cloote, "a native of Somerset" whose husband has apparently left her for "a native woman" complains about the "coloured" customers using the "white" entrance: "'Did you see that coloured girl that went out?' she would say. 'Came in the white way. Oh, coloured, of course she was coloured but you daren't say anything. We'd be up for slander'". Like most of the bigots and bullies in Spark's work Mrs Cloote is shown to be completely delusional and lacking any moral compass.

Another short story, "The Go-Away Bird" (1958), captures Spark's sense of exile: "All over the Colony it was possible to hear the subtle voice of the grey-crested lourie, commonly known as the go-away bird by its call, 'go'way, go'way'". Spark herself was a go-away bird who never resettled in her homeland. That sense of exile remained a haunting presence in her work. Another short story, "The Black Madonna" (1958), reprinted in Carl MacDougall's brilliant anthology *The Devil and the Giro* (1989), is an attack on smug suburban racism. Some early reviewers found the story spiteful, but it exemplifies Spark's characteristically ruthless treatment of hypocrisy and snobbery.

"The Portobello Road", published the same year as "The Go-Away Bird", is another story part-set in Rhodesia. The main male protagonist, George, is representative of a certain settler type. Having gone out to Africa to work on his uncle's tobacco farm, he marries Matilda, whom the narrative, ventriloquising the colonists, refers to as "the half-caste woman". The marriage creates problems when he wishes to remarry back in England. Matilda is a Catholic and refuses to agree

to a divorce. George's uncle, "a prejudiced hardened old colonial", supplies the money to buy Matilda's silence, but not everyone has a price, and the narrator threatens to reveal George's bigamous intentions, to her cost.

Africa also features in "Bang-Bang You're Dead" (1961), a story whose origins demonstrate Spark's facility for turning traumatic memory into fiction. As she explains in *Curriculum Vitae*: "Just round the corner in Viewforth lived Nita McEwen, who resembled me very much. She was already in her first year at James Gillespie's School when I saw her with her parents. [...] Years later, when I was twenty-one, I was to meet Nita McEwen in a boarding house in the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. There, our likeness to each other was greatly remarked on. One night, Nita was shot dead by her husband, who then shot himself. I heard two girl's screams followed by a shot, then another shot. That was the factual origin of my story 'Bang-Bang You're Dead'". It was a factual origin that was very close to home for Spark: "My husband had a small revolver, a 'baby Browning', which he liked to fire off in corridors and courtyards".

How did two girls from the same school in Edinburgh end up in the same part of Africa under threat from their gun-toting husbands? To answer that question one would need to know more about Scotland's colonial past, about the activities of Scottish colonists, missionaries and schoolteachers and about the Scots who went out to settle in racist states like South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (<http://www.scottishdiasporatapestry.org/Zimbabwe>). Men like Leander Starr Jameson, the Meikle brothers (Jack, Tom and Stewart), and Robert Moffat are less familiar than Cecil Rhodes, and should be far better known as key players in Scottish colonial history.

Spark's African experiences also found their way into her dramatic writings. A radio play entitled "The Dry River Bed" (1959) is a satire on settler life – "Lucia – fish those ants out of the sugar, will you?" – but it is also a sequel of sorts to "The Portobello Road", because here another "mixed marriage" is at issue. Borden Reeves is a settler with a secret – he is "half black" – and this proves an obstacle to marriage, at least in his own mind. There are echoes too of "The Seraph and the Zambesi", because Borden is bound up with three other figures that appear to be part of his identity – a dust devil, "the black fellow and the pale one". Spark repeatedly draws on satire and surrealism, as well as scandal and secrecy, to approach the issue of racism side-on.

Spark's novels also touch on her sense of being stranded in a very masculine frontier society. Her second novel, *Robinson* (1958), a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's famous castaway narrative, tells the tale of a woman in the wild, budding writer and plane-wreck survivor January Marlow, trapped on a remote island run by its manipulative owner, Robinson, who tries to control January. Like much of her fiction it draws directly on experience. Her longest novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), the book she called her *Passage to India*, could likewise be seen to capitalize on her passage to Africa and her female protagonist's sense of being both intrepid and entrapped.

Dougal Douglas, at the end of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), "was away off to Africa with the intention of selling tape-recorders to all the witch doctors". In *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) Sister Gertrude is out in the Congo in an Africa more in line with Boy's Own adventure stories than serious literary fiction: "'She's in a very wild area just now, reconciling the witch doctors' rituals with a specially adapted rite of the Mass,' Mildred says, 'and moving the old missionaries

out of that zone into another zone where they are sure to be opposed, probably massacred. However, this will be an appropriate reason for reinstating the orthodox Mass in the first zone, thus modifying the witch doctors' bone-throwing practices. At least, that's how I see it". Bear in mind this is how Sister Mildred sees it, and not the author, Muriel Spark, who sets up Gertrude to expose rather than merely reproduce the colonial mentality.

Spark had no illusions about the colonists, who could be mean and murderous, but was much more sympathetic towards the missionaries. In contrast to her fictional nun up against the witch doctors, or the real-life racist Mother Superior that she faced down, Spark paints a more positive picture of those whose faith took them to Africa: "The much-maligned missionaries were in fact the finest people in the colony. Africans flourished and were well educated in their care. Zimbabwe owes its independence in part to the influence of the Christian missions. One of the most saintly men in the colony was an Anglican missionary and poet, Arthur Shearley Cripps, who frequently went cold or hungry because he had given the coat off his back or his dinner to an African". Cripps, whom one biographer describes as "a sort of Francis of Assisi of the African countryside", was a champion of native land rights, and author of *An Africa for Africans: A Plea on Behalf of Territorial Segregation Areas and Their Freedom in a South African Colony* (1927). He was also a poet whose *Africa: Verses* (1939) included an attack on Cecil Rhodes that would resonate with the recent "Rhodes Must Fall" debate: "Like a fecund vine to sprawl/ On the width of Sion's wall/ In penitence imperial". Indeed, one of Cripps's poems, "The Black Christ", may have influenced Spark's "The Black Madonna", and yet he doesn't feature in studies of Spark.

Africa appears in other Spark novels, usually as an epiphany, as in *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), one of her most autobiographical novels, when Nancy Hawkins reflects on her early life: "My job was the noisiest I have ever known and in due time I will describe it. I say now that the silence that I woke to recalled to my mind another silence of my childhood while visiting relatives in Africa: I had been taken by car from Bulawayo to the Victoria Falls. Nature was still in the heat of the day. At a certain point, nearing the luxuriant forest of the Zambesi river, a deeper silence fell that made me realize that the previous silence had been illusory".

Spark's African experiences clearly had a profound effect on her artistic vision. They made her a keen observer, taught her the value of silence, and gave her an insight into a world of casual cruelty. Two anecdotes in *Curriculum Vitae* – part of which was published separately as "Venture into Africa" in *The New Yorker* in March 1992 – skewer the prejudice of her fellow settlers: "In my day, no black African stepped off the pavements to make way for a passing white, as had been required previously by law. Young, homeless blacks who did not want to work on the land were not beaten into submission but were left alone, thanks to a public outcry in England. But sometimes I was horrified by the stories I was told, mainly by Afrikaners, or people of South African Dutch origin – who would proudly narrate this or that story of how an impertinent black had been 'fixed'. My story 'The Curtain Blown by the Breeze' contains such an incident: a farmer, I was told, on returning home found a piccanin (as we called a small black boy) standing outside the window of his wife's room, peeping at her through the curtains while she breast-fed the baby. For this crime, he shot the piccanin dead. This story was told me by a smug, self-satisfied South African Dutch woman of about forty-five, whom I met in one of the many boarding-houses I lived in during my married life. (My husband was quarrelsome; we were always being posted elsewhere.) The woman seemed to think the farmer was quite right and to

regret that things were changing or had changed. I was unable to speak. I simply stared at the woman. She didn't notice this, but went on talking in her self-righteous way. The farmer, she lamented, went to prison for three years”.

Spark's phrase – “as we called a small black boy” – reveals the extent to which she was locked into the language of the settler society in which she found herself, no matter how resistant she was to its racist attitudes. Spark recalls another tale of white colonial brutality, equally callous: “I remember a similar woman (and she was typical of many men) sitting at our table one mealtime, describing how a man of her acquaintance, driving along one of the Rhodesian highways (which were tarmac only in strips), deliberately knocked dead a black cyclist who refused to get off one of the strips to accommodate the car coming behind him. ‘That fixed him, that fixed him,’ said the woman, heaving her prominent bosom with the utmost satisfaction. Again, I was struck silent, as was my husband. Our friends of British origin were much more reasonable and civilized in their attitude, but the rough, frontier-type atmosphere was often unpleasant; it entered one's soul. I knew I could never make my home in such conditions”.

Silence gave way to satire and to subtle criticism of the racism ingrained in the segregated society that Spark found herself in: “Some women of my acquaintance wore a key on a cord around their necks. This key was to lock up the sugar against the black servants. ‘They steal as much as a pound at a time’, said one of the women to me. I ventured that maybe the servants needed the sugar. This observation was regarded as blasphemy. Indeed, there was no way in which one could really befriend a native African, for dire penalty wrought by Heaven and earth for such a course of action fell not in the least on the white befriender but on the black befriended. I think if I had sat down in the kitchen to have my morning coffee with my cook, Moses, nobody would have said a word to me. But Moses would have been made to feel ‘his place’ in a hundred different, petty ways”.

In an interview published in 2005 Spark was asked why she hadn't set any of her novels in Africa. Her answer says a lot about her attitude to writing and politics: “I didn't feel that I lived enough there. I was in Africa enough actual years to write a novel, but I wasn't really taken much by the place. There is a great deal to be written about colonial life in Africa, but it is inevitably much too political for me. I don't work on those lines. The minute you mention Rhodesia, you're into politics, or Africa, or black and white. It's a political situation. The better novels of Doris Lessing can achieve that; I think she's very good at it. It's not my thing”.

Although she said “I have no regrets about leaving Africa”, Spark evidently gained a great deal from her time there, and it enriched her writing. Martin Stannard is surely taking it too far when he says Spark “may have been raised in Edinburgh but she grew up in Africa”, but it was clearly a crucial shaping experience, and one shared by other Scots, such as the fictional but plausible expatriate community in her short story “The Portobello Road”. It could also be a fatal experience, as witness Spark's real-life encounter with doomed former classmate, Nita McEwen, the basis for “Bang-Bang You're Dead”.

Spark's use of the word “desegregation” in her landmark essay, “The Desegregation of Art”, delivered as an address to the American Academy of Letters on 26 May 1970, is unusual enough to be deserving of comment. “Desegregation” emerged in the early 1950s as a word bound up

with the policy of ending racial segregation in the American South, but was also applied to the situation in contemporary Rhodesia. In “The Desegregation of Art”, Spark is speaking against overly-politicised art: “We have [...] a marvellous tradition of socially-conscious art [...]. We have representations of the victim-oppressor complex [...] in the dramatic portrayal of the gross racial injustices of our world, or in the exposure of the tyrannies of family life on the individual. As art this can be badly done, it can be brilliantly done. [...] I only say that the art and literature of sentiment and emotion [...] cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule”.

As Martin Stannard remarks in his biography, it was a controversial title and talk in the context: “To use loaded terms like ‘segregation’ and ‘desegregation’, to speak with apparent levity of ‘gross racial injustices’ and to place them in the same category as ‘the tyrannies of family life on the individual’, to say that ‘socially conscious art’ cheated the reader [...] was perhaps a trifle reckless of local sensitivities”.

When it comes to the art of satire, Africa has struck back. In 2006, the year of Spark’s death, Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina published a short satirical essay in *Granta* magazine entitled “How to Write About Africa” (<https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>). His purpose was to show how writing about Africa had become riddled with clichés and stereotypes that served to mask its complex realities: “Always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title. Subtitles may include the words ‘Zanzibar’, ‘Masai’, ‘Zulu’, ‘Zambezi’, ‘Congo’, ‘Nile’, ‘Big’, ‘Sky’, ‘Shadow’, ‘Drum’, ‘Sun’ or ‘Bygone’. Also useful are words such as ‘Guerrillas’, ‘Timeless’, ‘Primordial’ and ‘Tribal’. Note that ‘People’ means Africans who are not black, while ‘The People’ means black Africans”.

Wainaina did not settle for soft targets, the usual suspects, or obvious racists. He cast his net wide enough to include the well-meaning as well as the accidental racists: “Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can’t live without her. Africa is the only continent you can love – take advantage of this. If you are a man, thrust yourself into her warm virgin forests. If you are a woman, treat Africa as a man who wears a bush jacket and disappears off into the sunset. Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed”. Was Spark immune to such stereotypes? Or was she unconsciously caught up in the colonial discourse that she consciously decried?

Scottish-African cultural connections run deep. Spark is just one of several modern Scottish writers with African links – others include William Boyd, David Greig, Jackie Kay, and Alexander McCall Smith, who was born in Bulawayo a few years after Spark left. Bulawayo has been twinned with Aberdeen since 1986 so there is a continuing connection in other respects. There are also several African writers who have chosen to live and write in Scotland, including Leila Aboulela, Tendai Huchu, Tawona Sithole and Zoë Wicomb. Aboulela and Wicomb have written eloquently about Scotland’s colonial past. Huchu and Sithole are both Zimbabwean, and would no doubt have interesting things to say about Spark’s writings and recollections. Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010) is a terrific novel that engages with class and gender in ways that will delight any Sparkean.

Another writer whose work is relevant here is Bulawayo-born Tsitsi Dangarembga. Her novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is a great place to begin for readers looking for a deeper understanding of Zimbabwe. And Dangarembga is interesting too for the fact that she helps put in context Spark's reluctance to address race explicitly in her novels. In an interview, Dangarembga was asked about *Nervous Conditions*, "Why did you avoid a direct critique of Rhodesia's brand of apartheid?" Her answer is revealing: "I find it difficult to write about race. Perhaps because I feel so strongly about it, having gone through so much as a result of it. I use the past tense, but racist supremacist practices still abound in Zimbabwe, and are perpetrated not only by white people. Everything I have tried to write about it so far has sounded fantastic, absurd and unreal. I think this is the catch with racism – looked at objectively, it sounds too absurd to be true". Perhaps Spark's refusal to be drawn into direct confrontation makes more sense in this light.

As Scotland struggles, or, more hopefully, strives to come to terms with its own problematic colonial history – which is of course intimately entangled with British imperialism – Spark's African writings assume greater significance as an example of one Scottish writer's complex encounter with colonialism and the racism and violence that inevitably accompany it. For too long that history of slavery and segregation has been overlooked or ignored. An awareness of the ways in which empire has shaped the modern landscape is the key to justice, reparation and a richer understanding of the past and its persistence in the present.

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