

*Frontier Fiction:  
Reading Books in M. G. Vassanji's  
"The Book of Secrets"*

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History drifts about in the sands, and only the fanatically dedicated see it and recreate it, however incomplete their visions and fragile their constructs.

M. G. VASSANJI, *The Book of Secrets*

The violence of the body reaches the written page only through absence, through the intermediary of documents that the historian has been able to see on the sands from which a presence has since been washed away, and through a murmur that lets us hear—but from afar—the unknown immensity that seduces and menaces our knowledge.

MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *The Writing of History*

PERHAPS MORE THAN most novels of the growing genre of "historiographic metafiction"<sup>1</sup> (where the writing or construction of the novel is included in the novel's narration), *The Book of Secrets* depicts colonial habitation as a movement synonymous with the writing of history itself. Both processes—the one of colonizing and governing a "savage" land and the other of making comprehensible the "savage" past of East African colonial rule—operate as functions of "frontier." Frontier, as it will be used in this essay, should be understood as both the metaphorical border imposed between that-which-is-known and that-which-is-not-known and the actual, physical, and ever-moving border of colonial expansion. The word "frontier" implies a firm and recognizable distinction on either side of a dividing line; yet this distinction remains more metaphorical than actual. Every frontier is under constant permeation and ideological osmosis (one side into the other) so that the conceptual differences which "frontier" attempts to illustrate are just that, conceptual.

In other words, the ideal purity of a “frontier” and the impermeability of “border” are constantly dirtied-up by cultural exchange and interaction.

*The Book of Secrets* details the constant construction and diffusion of frontier differences. Vassanji’s novel builds through implication an allegorical layering where the new frontier work of historiography—where a “past” is engaged by a “present”—mirrors the colonial frontier separating the colonizer from the colonized (the white from the black or brown). In this construction, we see border skirmishes between the parallel binaries of colonizer/colonized and present/past. However tentative this allegorical connection might be (and a certain amount of caution is surely in order so as not to “figure away” the brutal effects of British colonization in East Africa), *The Book of Secrets* has us understand that historiography, regardless of its claims to objectivity, is always a fictional process of mastery over a silent and mute body of knowledge, a body that must be simultaneously invaded and conquered.<sup>2</sup>

Alfred Corbin’s diary, the narrator tells us, will be tracked like a wild animal through a foreign and mysterious land, with the narrator on “a trail that if followed would reveal much about the lives and times it witnessed, and tell us why the diary finally surfaced where it did” (8); the narrator goes on to state that he entered into a warlike “engagement with the book” (8), a parry between the past and the present in which the present vies for occupation of the past, a battle to understand the “dark, passionate secret of a simple man” (8). The narrator’s movement to decipher Corbin’s “dark” secret and to revive “the spirits of the book itself” (8) is made strangely similar to Corbin’s inability only pages later to “conjure up England out of a night in Africa. The darkest, blackest night” (22). The diary and the African continent—both “dark” and full of spirits and conjurings—become one and the same: the diary becomes that “dark” continent—with an equally “dark” content—invaded by the historian Pius Fernandes, while the diary itself narrates Corbin’s “invasion” of the “darkest, blackest night of Africa.” However, this vacillation between historiographical and colonial frontiers and the plural connotations of “engagement”—whether it be

Corbin's engagement with the Shamsi village or Pius's engagement with the past—are both figures firmly established by historiography itself.

In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau states that

*intelligibility is established through a relation with the other; it moves (or "progresses") by changing what it makes of its "other"—the Indian, the past, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World. Through these variants . . . unfolds a problematic form basing its mastery of expression upon what the other keeps silent, and guaranteeing the interpretive work of a science . . . by the frontier that separates it from an area awaiting this work in order to be known. (3)*

De Certeau describes the very "frontiers" on which Vassanji's novel operates: the frontier of historiographical discourse (or "intelligibility") where a past is chained and made to speak ventriloquistically by the "mastery" of the present, where a mute or incomprehensible "Third World" is brought into European discourse through acts of invasion, interpretation, and translation by the First, and where a firmly entrenched frontier is established between the "present" and the "past" as between the "civilized" and the "uncivilized." Through this historical process, the "raw material" of facts and documents becomes a variant of a colonized "savage land." Indeed, the historicist Hayden White echoes de Certeau when he states that in both fiction and historiography, which he sees as becoming more and more identical, "we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and *colonizes* the world it seeks to inhabit" (*Tropics* 99; emphasis added). Both de Certeau and White figure the making-of-sense of a body of knowledge—which is both the making of history and the making of fiction—as a colonial movement synonymous with the subjection of one alien race by another. And just as in colonization—de Certeau's figures seem to argue—so in historiography the enforced silence of the "other," of the "Past," remains vital; only through this silence can historiography attempt, as Vassanji's narrator Pius Fernandes states, to "recreate the world of that book" as if giving life to the dead (8). The past, in a sense, becomes the inert blank page on which the present writes and on which the ink of the present etches its own narratives: "the past," de Certeau argues later, "is the fiction of the present" (10). And just as "those *wazees*—the ancients" (1) per-

ceive Corbin's diary as the empirical colonial discourse attempting to capture and study them—Corbin is the jailer who “steals our souls and locks them away” (1)—so Fernandes's narrative recreation of Corbin can be perceived as another, though more benevolent, empirical discourse attempting as another, to dissect the past and find out the “secret” of a man. *The Book of Secrets* brings both of these systems (historiography and colonialism) into an interesting coalescence where one figures and refigures the other.

The initial inspecificity of “it” on the novel's first page amalgamates the writing of Corbin's diary to the historian's own writing. The very book that becomes metonymically representative of colonization itself—Corbin's diary is, after all, the Assistant District Commissioner's diary—becomes also the starting frame of an endless *mise en abîme* of book within book, within book.<sup>3</sup> Yet we must make important qualifications in examining these parallel structures. Corbin's diary relates his term in British East Africa as an Assistant District Commissioner, “saddled,” as he puts it, “with overseeing Indians” (22); from the start this sets up some interesting paradoxes emblematic of the society of East Africa itself where there exists no simple binary of “slave and master” but rather a three-part structure (and even this simplifies a much more heterogenous society) of relations between the British whites, “immigrant” Indians, and the indigenous blacks. In addition, Pius Fernandes himself has the unique position as a Goanese Indian (237) writing about a Shamsi Indian village so that distinctions in geography and religion<sup>4</sup> create a number of differences that problematize any simplification. We cannot say for instance that Fernandes's narrative is simply a reverse discourse, in the Foucauldian sense,<sup>5</sup> and an inversion of some slave/master hierarchy. This would necessarily ignore not only Fernandes's particular appropriation but the special relationship that Indians in East Africa have had with the British colonizers as being both ruled subjects but also an important part of the colonizing structure itself. One critic refers to this unique position as Vassanji's “hard place,” the place that “does not position itself as the voice of ‘the colonized’” (Mukherjee 172); another refers to it as Vassanji's “Ambivalent Affiliations”

(Malak). The position of Indians in East Africa does not fit easily with much Western critical thought, which seems stuck in the binaries of oppressor and oppressed, slave and master. Vassanji's narrative is only a reverse discourse in that it attempts to particularize and problematize (and indeed attempts the very basic project of telling) an area of African history which seems, according to Mukherjee, all too often forgotten (172-73). In this sense, *The Book of Secrets* sets itself up on a third frontier in addition to the colonial and historiographical frontiers I have tried to describe. Vassanji's novel is a "ground-breaking" narrative on the frontier of a "new" "Tanzan-Asian" (Ball 3), or "Afro-Asian" (Kanaganayakam 21) history, an area, according to Vassanji, very little explored (Ball 3).

Perhaps the most evident similarity *The Book of Secrets* tacitly constructs between the processes of historiography and colonization can be seen in the excerpts Fernandes includes from the *Governor's Memoranda for PCs and DCs* (31, 32, 40).<sup>6</sup> These excerpts describe the very real processes by which novice Provincial and District Commissioners were to establish the British mandate of indirect rule.<sup>7</sup> Indirect rule was designed to establish, though the figure-heads of native Chiefs who would represent and enforce British authority, a process whereby "the colonial administration totally transformed the foundations of authority and loyalty" of East-African settlements (Meister 35). These excerpts from the *Governor's Memoranda* reveal, perhaps most explicitly, the constructedness of the narrative by taking the reader out of the fictional world of Corbin's diary; they are the most disjunctive of the novel's "shifters," in the sense that Roland Barthes uses them, transporting us from the "utterance" (Corbin's diary) to the actions of the "utterer" (the historian, Fernandes) thereby revealing the temporal "friction" between these two different times (7-18).<sup>8</sup> Through these excerpts, the narrator reminds the reader that no matter how friendly and appealing Corbin may seem, he still represents a larger colonial project totally given-over to the sacrosanctness of its own superiority over those "peoples who have not reached a high stage of civilization" (31). Yet the inclusion of the excerpts is not, obviously, the only indication Vassanji gives of Fernandes ac-

tively shaping the narrative for, as is made clear from the start, Fernandes gives the reader both excerpts from Corbin's diary and his own narrative expansions of what the diary leaves out. Fernandes does not try to pass off his narratives as part of the diary but seems to keep a very firm border between what Corbin writes and what he, the historian, creates. Yet the length of some of the diary excerpts—October 27 (45), February 14 (56), or May 8 (67), for example—seems exceedingly long for a five-by-eight-inch diary that only “allowed for three days a page” (6). This contradiction at least partially undermines the border between Fernandes's and Corbin's writing. The reader must either assume that Corbin's handwriting was exceedingly small or that he ran one day's entry over another's (both very plausible assumptions) or that Fernandes himself augmented the entries without admitting such. However, regardless of this speculation, the excerpts from the *Governor's Memoranda* indicate most distinctly that Fernandes has actively shaped the narrative to highlight certain informational paradoxes.

The condescending diction of the excerpts (which assumes its own civility unimpeachable) seems conveniently blind to its own acts of savagery. Fernandes lists some of the great acts of British civility: “A lord of the realm who shot a servant for serving bad cream with dumplings. . . . A farmer who had a servant flogged fifty times, until senseless, for eating the kitchen rice denying it afterwards” (64). Or Fernandes narrates Frank Maynard's story of how he, as a captain of the King's African Rifles, avenged a murdered European: “We set fire to the huts, waited outside for the niggers to emerge. I myself bayoneted them, men and women as they came running out” (21). Through this collage-like technique, Fernandes lays out the blatant paradoxes and blindnesses of colonial rule where the so-called civilized demonstrate no lack of their own savagery. Through this juxtaposition of diary entries with factual excerpts from colonial directives, the nar-

rator reveals himself actively shaping the reader's reading of Corbin's diary. The past may be brought to life but it is also made to serve the narrator's ideological drive (regardless of how “sympathetic” this drive may be) bent on revealing hypocrisies latent

in British rule in East Africa. This is doubly compounded when the very excerpts which reveal the trick of historiography themselves describe the subversive workings of colonial bureaucracy. Just as the narrator tacitly shapes and changes our reading of Corbin, so indirect rule attempted to "lift the natives to a higher plane of civilization" (31) almost unnoticeable by having its law spoken through the mouths of aboriginal Chiefs.<sup>9</sup> Just as indirect rule mixed British and traditional tribal law, so the narrator, as is evidenced by these very excerpts, mixes the sometimes benign diary entries with artifacts of a very different and less romantic past; both techniques attempt a certain subterfuge. In effect, Fernandes appropriates a procedure of colonial rule and mixes his own very personal desires with his historical narration in an attempt to "dirty-up" the somewhat sparkling character of Corbin.

This abstract construction whereby the process of colonial rule finds its mirror in the very processes of its own recording is refigured in another of the novel's many "diaries." Similar to the way that Corbin's diary serves as an artifact of colonial rule yet at the same time the focus of a neocolonial recuperation and critique, Livingstone's diary becomes the literal battleground of these same forces.

After his residence in Dar es Salaam, Pipa enlists as a porter for a European missionary expedition into the African interior led by "Livingstone" and "Bwana Turner"—an expedition which would arrive, after twenty-nine days of travel through a sometimes hostile jungle, in Moshi, the city of Pipa's birth. However, after the arrival in Moshi and after receiving his pay, Pipa makes the near fatal mistake of stealing Bwana Turner's unattended valise:

The tent at which he had been paid was open, now only a folding chair stood outside it. Pipa took a quick peep inside, saw no one, passed by the chair and noticed a valise on it. Swiftly he looked around him, then swooped up the valise. But two steps on his way, a voice, a very English voice, said loudly:

"Weh mwivi—you thief! Simama! Halt!"

He was pinned to the ground by Livingstone's lieutenants. . . . In the rush of hands, somehow the book—a diary—had come out of the valise. . . . The wondrous object, the book, lingered a while among

the crowd until the last person had fingered it and taken a peep at the writing inside before delivering it respectfully with both hands to the missionary. (137)

What is of interest in this scene, even more than Pipa's temptation of fate, are the reverberations Vassanji constructs between this diary and the many other diaries and books with which the novel concerns itself. The narrator's "stealing" of Corbin's diary (it is, after all, still "stolen goods" after Mariamu originally steals it) long enough to rewrite Corbin's story (a story which the *wazees* believed Corbin had already stolen from them) mirrors the passing of Turner's diary from hand to hand. Each book is handled, consumed, and, in a sense, partially reclaimed and taken back. The crowd returns the book and Livingstone releases Pipa, not realizing that the book's most precious attribute has been irrecoverably lost: the book has been "fingered" and "peeped at." Even though it remains doubtful that the diary could be read by its handlers—just as Pipa himself cannot read the book to which he has built a shrine—the very physical opening and handling of it, the realization that the book did not contain spirits but only inked words, demystifies and satirizes some of the importance that the "wondrous object, the book" had held. In the same way, we are led to realize that Corbin's diary contains very little of the mysticism and power the *wazees* attributed to it. It is *only* the narrative of a lonely, white colonial authority in a mainly Indian village in Africa. Yet Pipa builds a shrine to Corbin's diary while Turner's diary becomes a mere curiosity without much value. Why these two different evaluations? Vassanji seems reluctant to suggest a total defetishization of the book; *The Book of Secrets* reveals diaries simultaneously as empty symbols devoid of any "real" significance and as the actual containers of a spirit—the ghost of Mariamu. Books contain the unimportant jottings of everyday colonial life yet they, in part, also contain some of the Indian-African people's "spirit" because these books are the only records left of this time. Books written by whites must ironically substantiate what has been unrecorded by a largely oral African-Indian culture and so become simultaneously both targets of satire and important mediums of history.

Books in *The Book of Secrets* serve as the allegorical focal point of the novel's engagement with frontiers and ownership. The



reader is forced to decide, as Fernandes must decide, who exactly owns these colonial relics. If the diaries themselves appropriate African culture, then surely there can be no wrong in re-appropriating them—stealing the stories back. Yet, as Corbin's diary evidences, though the books may contain some reference to Africa, we are forced to realize that the reading of the diary itself is an invasion on another level—an invasion of the public reader into the private life of the author. As such, this reading and rewriting of the diary does not reconstitute lost property but rather is an almost criminal reading of what was not meant to be read. Through these contradictory notions, the book becomes the site of a dialectical vacillation between the mutual recuperation of a history and the invasion of one; the book becomes, in a sense, a frontier of alternating excursions and penetrations of the public-present into the private-past of an individual and the native reclamation of a stolen discourse. This dialectic is further problematized, however, by our own reading of *The Book of Secrets* as if it too were a diary or manuscript that somehow found its way into our hands.

After each "part" of the novel, Vassanji has appended additional sub-chapters, "Miscellany" (91-99, 173-84, 227-33, 293-301, 329-30)—which include the private correspondences between Pius Fernandes and Sona—appendices, and the sub-headings "*From the personal notebook of Pius Fernandes.*" In effect, the reader reads a personal notebook belonging to Fernandes that itself reads a personal notebook belonging to Corbin that itself reads an African-Indian village. Both the author and the reader are implicated as unauthorized purveyors of a private life, as holders of possibly "stolen goods." This relationship of the present-reading of a written-past (which is itself a past-reading of a past-writing) constructs an almost labyrinthine allegory with frontier stacked upon frontier.

Given these convenient pluralities, it should be no surprise that books—with all of their inconclusive questions of ownership—become the very simulacra of larger national and colonial scuffles. Books—Corbin's diary or Bwana Turner's diary or Frank Maynard's notebook (169)—place *The Book of Secrets* well in the middle of what Fredric Jameson calls "national allegory"

where “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (69). Without taking issue with Jameson’s over emphatic stipulation that “*All third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical*” (69; emphasis added) or his problematic three-world scheme, I find his category to be a helpful one.<sup>10</sup> Jameson’s “national allegory” attaches a real politics to a rhetorical figure that, despite all its deconstructionist trappings, is often seen as politically benign. Although surely not all Third World texts operate allegorically, it remains important that we realize the place that literature can have in documenting and figuring national and international struggles not just in the Third World but the Second and the First. Vassanji seems to be arguing along very similar lines. For in *The Book of Secrets*, books are always already political (whether they be allegorical or not) and involved in the politics of the real world by the particular situations—ideological and geographical—of the authors and readers. Corbin’s diary may be just the jottings of a lonely man, but his position as colonial representative imbues his book with a certain importance as relic of a larger political past.

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In the same way that many of the questions surrounding Corbin’s diary parallel the similar questions that plague Fernandes’s narrative, so too does each half of the novel—if I can figuratively split it into the narratives belonging to its two major characters, Corbin and Fernandes—mirror the other in its construction of “secrets.” And these two “secrets” point out the shady difference between “secret” and “private” where each of these words signifies radically differing degrees of intelligibility. It is in regard to this withheld information that the reader’s position most emulates Fernandes’s own; he recognizes, as we do, the essential mystery—the secret—which each narrative seems to hold.

The private, as we have seen, comprises the world of the individual easily penetrated by the public gaze, that gaze which would not only study it but regulate it and use its private narratives for its own public purposes. Corbin’s diary and Fernandes’s manuscript both function as the grounds of this public/private

frontier; however, in each of these narratives there exists that which evades the intelligence of the reader, that indissoluble kernel of "the secret." The secret in Corbin's diary is that which is not there yet tantalizingly close to being there: the degree of Corbin's sexual involvement with Mariamu. The overriding question left for Pipa, the reader, and Fernandes to contemplate is the "great riddle" of who fathered Ali: Corbin or Pipa? The narrator tells us that the boy is "fair and had grey eyes" but that, reassures the *mukhi*, "didn't prove anything." Mariamu stays mute on the subject and Pipa can conclude neither way. Corbin seems to take a particular interest in Ali (they meet several times in England), yet Corbin seems to have just as much concern for his lost diary and pen as he does for his possible son. The diary and Ali are all just relics, reminders, of a past in which Corbin was becoming increasingly, with the writing of his memoirs, more interested. Yet this interest seems democratic in its focuses and "proves" nothing of Corbin's relationship with Ali. Or, rather, it *could* prove something. Ali forever remains with the possibility of two fathers and the word "could" becomes an important justification in any hypothetical solving of Ali's lineage. In almost a mirror image of this mystery, the novel presents us with the secret of Fernandes's involvement with the English schoolteacher Gregory.

During a meeting with Fernandes, an old pupil at the Shamsi Girls' School, Rita, tells him that "your friendship with [Gregory] was rather peculiar to us girls. Gregory was a homosexual, as you know. Gay, he would be called today." She goes on to state: "what was between you and Gregory only you know that. If you do" (297). The question of "what was between you and Gregory?" becomes, like the unspoken question of "what was between Corbin and Mariamu," strangely unsolvable. In thinking over the feelings he had for Gregory, Fernandes even states that "there are questions that have no answer; we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart"—even, apparently, our own. In a sense, the unanswerability of Fernandes's question becomes projected onto Corbin's narrative; the present, as de Certeau would say, writes its concerns, its problems, on the blank page of the past (11) and the repressed unconsciously resurfaces in every conscious move we make. But this parallel secret, or this act

of projection, creates some interesting paradoxes. First, in the movement from the past to the present, a possible interracial heterosexual relationship becomes transmuted into a possible interracial homosexual relationship. Racial concerns exist between Corbin and Mariamu but seem to be almost forgotten between Fernandes and Gregory or perhaps translated into the equally taboo area of homosexuality. However, the inconclusiveness of these two relationships and the inability of the historian to “solve” them point to the failure of history as a totalizing discourse which would lay out causes and effects in narrative simplicity.

*The Book of Secrets* reveals, and revels in, the failure of history, the failure of an historical endeavour that would attempt to root out and solve all the mysteries of the past, not realizing that some privacies are impenetrable and that some secrets will always remain. As de Certeau suggests, there will always be, in historiographical endeavour, that “unknown immensity,”—the body, the actual, the Real—that “seduces and menaces our knowledge” (3). *The Book of Secrets* attempts to write back into history a sense of mystery, of incomprehension, of a narrative stunned by its own inability to produce answers; the novel tries to include what-is-not-said as part of what-is-said, not as a necessary binary but rather as an integral part of knowledge: blindness and insight become component parts of each other. As Vassanji himself states, the mystery of the novel mimics “the mystery of everyday life” (Interview 112). Or, as Michel Foucault echoes,

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things. . . . There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse. (27)

Foucault stresses the importance of what-we-don't-know in what-we-do-know and that there exist no either/or divisions, no firm frontiers, between them; rather they are both signifying parts of the same singular discourse. The secret becomes the many silences between words, the silences that make speech decipherable. White reiterates that “the real reason we must remain silent about some things is that in any given effort to capture the order

of things in language, we condemn a certain aspect of that order to obscurity" (*Tropics* 239). Something that is dug-up entails a necessary burying of something else; our will to know condemns a certain amount of "possible" knowledge to that dark continent of the unknown.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the one important question *The Book of Secrets* leaves us with is that posed by Feroz at the beginning of the book, the unanswerability of which haunts the rest of the novel: "What is history, sir?" (4). Indeed, who owns history? Who needs it? How do history and colonialism correspond? What is fact? What is fiction? At the same time that Vassanji's frontier narrative has us question some of our assumptions about history and fiction it is also a "ground breaking" novel and, simultaneously, "frontier breaking." The novel reveals a correspondence latent between historiography and colonialism (that they are both an imposition of one order over another) yet breaks down some of the binaries (present/past, civilized/uncivilized) that operate between these mutual categories. In addition, the novel communicates mystery as an important element of not only historical fiction but also of knowledge itself and attempts to break that frontier between the unknown and the known. In the end, M. G. Vassanji's novel enmeshes itself in larger political and social concerns not only by the scope of the questions it asks but also by the all-inclusive frames it constructs through which, by the final page, the "book of secrets" signifies not only Corbin's diary but the novel itself (331).

## NOTES

- 1 The phrase is Linda Hutcheon's; she states that "Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present" (97). For more on this, see Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* or *The Content of the Form* (26-57).
- 2 Aijaz Ahmad reminds us that description, despite its claims of political neutrality, "has been central, for example, in the colonizing discourses" (99). And so, just as we cannot dismiss the politics that inform and enable the writing of Corbin's diary so too we must examine the motivations behind Fernandes's narrative recreation.
- 3 For a more thorough discussion of *mise en abîme*, and all the difficulties its structure creates, see Paul de Man (86).

- <sup>4</sup> Goa only became part of India in 1961 and is largely Roman Catholic (Bharati 19). And it should also be noted that Vassanji's Shamsi sect is a fictionalization of the Muslim Ismailis.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on Foucault's conceptualization of discourse, see *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (100-01).
- <sup>6</sup> Vassanji tells us in his "Acknowledgments" that these excerpts "have been taken from 'Confidential Memoranda for Provincial Commissioners and District Commissioners,' dated 1910, signed by Governor E. P. C. Girouard" (339).
- <sup>7</sup> Meister describes the role that indirect rule had in changing traditional East-African societies: "By making the reserve a reservoir of subsistence-level labor and adopting the system of indirect rule the colonial power did not of course intend to transform traditional structures. But at the same time it was forced to distort their original functions (for example, by superimposing a system of chiefs on the very egalitarian system of councils of elders) in order to insure a regular supply of workers for its settlers, and later to prevent social and political agitation. The population remaining on the reserves soon represented only a pale reflection of traditional society" (44).
- <sup>8</sup> Barthes goes on to state "that the entry of the act of uttering into the historical utterance, through these organizing shifters, is directed less towards offering the historian a chance of expressing his 'subjectivity,' as is commonly held, than towards 'complicating' the chronological time of history by bringing it up against another time" (10). Vassanji's organized intrusions into the time of the "utterance" complicate the idea of a smooth linearity between two different times by showing how one is involved in the making and shaping of the other, but at the same time they also reveal the subjectivity that is part of this temporal reshaping and whose significance Barthes seems too hasty in dismissing.
- <sup>9</sup> It is no surprise that this "unnoticed" strategy was far from unobserved. The chiefs set up by indirect rule, also called by some the "black-Europeans," were among the first casualties of the Mau Mau War (Meister 55).
- <sup>10</sup> For a useful critique of Jameson's essay see further Ahmad's "Jameson's Rhetoric of otherness and the 'National Allegory'" (95-122).
- <sup>11</sup> Vassanji, talking about his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, could well be describing *The Book of Secrets* when he states that "Not all of the mysteries of the past are resolved in the book. . . . It's the only way" ("Broadening" 22). In another interview, he states that "I was a little nervous about making the uncertainty an integral part of the novel, but there was really no choice" (*Configurations* 134). Vassanji's reluctance to remystify the past entails his constant struggle to "remystify historical discourse."

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