Hemingway and the Black Renaissance

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Best known for his novels, short stories, political journalism, and comic strips, the South African writer Alex La Guma (1925–85) was a staunch pro-Soviet communist and leading member of the African National Congress (ANC). La Guma was born in District Six, a vibrant slum, on the edge of Cape Town’s central business district, that the National Party destroyed as part of its “grand apartheid” scheme. Detained without trial several times in the 1950s and 1960s, his works banned and he confined to his house by law in 1962, La Guma and his family went into exile in mid-1966, living first in London and then in Havana, where he died. At the time, he was the ANC’s Chief Representative for Central America and the Caribbean.

La Guma read widely but directly admitted few literary influences, and Hemingway was not among them. Whatever the latter’s impact on black South African writers—there is insufficient research at this stage to determine whether it has the quality of an iceberg, mostly submerged—when we consider the relationships between style, content, aesthetics, politics, and representations of gender and sexuality in several La Guma texts, Hemingway’s hand is evident. Analysis of that presence offers us insights into the shifts in La Guma’s work between allusion and influence, and glimpses into that domain which Ian Craib describes as “the area of play, of creation out of external materials and internal fantasy.” Craib also suggests that this is “the area which in adult life becomes art and religion, but
also, pathologically, theft and fetishism” (162). South African viewers of the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition during April and May 2006 could test this argument (Madeline and Martin). Though helpful in understanding the often hazy lines between creativity, inspiration, allusion, borrowing, and plagiarism we may profitably supplement Craib’s insights with some of Derrida’s observations about Freud, memory, and writing to show how La Guma hid and disclosed some of his influences and concerns, particularly those associated with Hemingway.

La Guma grew up in an intensely political family. His father was a member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) who visited the Soviet Union twice in 1927 and supported it unquestioningly, as did his son. In the short term—roughly a decade later—during the Spanish Civil War Cape Town newspapers with a predominantly black readership referred to Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes in Spain.2 Given his father’s interest in Robeson, and the publication of articles on and work by Robeson, Hughes, and Georgia Douglas Johnson in the *Liberator*, a journal on which both father and son worked, and which took its name from the *Harlem Liberator*, we can assume that the young La Guma would have connected this conflict and these figures with a broader, international struggle against class oppression and racial prejudice in the form of fascism. We can also assume that he knew of Hemingway and his support for popular front politics (Mellow 498–99). In 1938, at the age of thirteen, La Guma tried to volunteer for the International Brigade (Abrahams 1985, 5), and describing the cultural and political milieu of young political activists in District Six at that time, one of La Guma’s surviving contemporaries told me that “we thought you were uneducated if you hadn’t read *The Grapes of Wrath* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the Spanish Civil War was of course politically interesting in our circles, and these novels gave it a more romantic dimension.” Two years later, before Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, his father rejected the CPSA’s pro-Soviet neutralist position on what it initially regarded as an “imperialist” war and enlisted in the South African army. Later La Guma wrote approvingly of his father’s view that World War II was “a continuation of the Spanish Civil War” (1979, 72).

The earliest concrete indication of Hemingway’s impact on La Guma, though at this point we can only regard it as an allusion, dates from 1956 when he and 155 other South Africans, including figures such as Nelson Mandela, went on trial for high treason. By 1961 all defendants had been acquitted. The majority of defendants were members of the Congress Alliance, a movement led by the ANC that sought to unite all South Africans
in a broad multiracial front against apartheid. In one of his many articles on the five-year trial, La Guma thanked an anonymous donor for “a book with a quotation from John Donne on the flyleaf, which says: ‘No man is an island entire of himself; he is part of the continent, a piece of the main . . . .’ I like these sentiments” (1993: 35–36). By October 1959, when La Guma repeated the quotation in his funeral oration at the grave of one of his comrades, it had become more significant. About four years after the treason trial, we find evidence that La Guma reworked and copied Hemingway, presumably to understand and master what he thought were important stylistic features. Among La Guma’s papers is an unpublished prose reworking of Hemingway’s crucifixion play “Today is Friday,” which he retitled “The Spear.” Set in a jail, one of the subplots of La Guma’s third novel, The Stone Country (first published 1967), recounts three prisoners’ failed attempt to escape. Here La Guma uses a technique found in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” of shifting between plain and italic fonts to signal a transition to interiority that enables him to explore how one of his protagonists, a cat burglar, remembers a related event, though in this case his previous successes do not fortify him against the immobilizing terror he experiences that night, and which leads to his recapture (119–20).

Viewed politically, the plots of two early La Guma short stories, “The Lemon Orchard” and “Coffee for the Road,” are similar. In both cases a single individual—a “coloured” schoolteacher in the former and an “Indian” mother in the latter—are placed in an unfamiliar, hostile rural setting. They challenge the norms and laws of apartheid, and suffer retribution from reactionary whites. In both cases the main character remains unnamed. Initially in “The Lemon Orchard” La Guma refers to “The men,” establishing collectivity and anonymity; then he divides them but retains their anonymity by referring to “[a]ll of the men but one” and “[o]ne of the men” (131–32). Dialogue establishes opinion and attitude, and this enables La Guma to distinguish the “one” man as coloured and to show why “the men” dragged him from his bed and brought him to the orchard, and how little they value the lives of black South Africans (135). Much the same happens in “Coffee for the Road” where we find Hemingway’s influence in La Guma’s depiction of women. For Devost, “the references to the women in much of Hemingway’s work are common nouns that, along with their modifiers, pinpoint a woman’s place in a relationship, with these references remaining static or changing depending upon how a given conflict unfolds during the course of a story.” However, if in Hemingway these references become “mirrors of the conflicts
in which the women find themselves” (Devost 46), La Guma’s determination to make a political point made it difficult for him to avoid qualifiers that put the matter beyond doubt. Throughout this story La Guma uses common nouns—“the mother” and “the woman”—to name his two main protagonists. He uses both to refer to one, and the latter to refer to the other. As she approaches the café in order to fill her thermos flask with coffee for her children, the “Indian” woman is “the mother” (La Guma 1964, 89). La Guma renders the café virtually empty, and this heightens the contrast between her and the “broad, heavy woman in a green smock who thumbed through a little stack of accounts.” They are both “women” until the latter registers “the colour of the other woman.” When the “broad heavy woman” orders “the brown, tired, handsome Indian face with its smart sunglasses, and the city cut of the tan suit” to the “foot-square hole where non-Whites were served,” she becomes “the mother” again while the “broad, heavy” figure remains “the woman” (90, 89, 91). Thus, as both stories unfold, features of Hemingway’s style such as the controlled anonymity of the characters, the repetition of phrases, and the short sentences drop away, and a directly stated political message—the type of abstraction that Hemingway sought to avoid—takes center stage (Summerhayes; Lodge 159).

Several critics have pointed to Hemingway’s desire to combine different and sometimes opposing modes of representation: realism and modernism for Lodge (155); naturalism and a “more romantic” point of view for Beegl (82); for Vaughn a desire to participate in “the realist tradition” and to challenge the “assumptions about reality on which realism is based” (3). If for these critics Hemingway displays such features simultaneously, in La Guma they appear consecutively, suggesting that like other politically committed African writers of his generation, such as Ngugi wa T’hiong’o or Sembene Ousmane, whatever approaches he may have consciously or unconsciously incorporated he would never have gone beyond a “populist modernism” or “realist modernism” that was closer to Hemingway, than to the “high modernism” of Eliot and Pound with its dubious political associations (Gugelberger 14–17). In South Africa, La Guma wrote very little on cultural or aesthetic matters, but in exile, where he was a high-profile ANC spokesperson on cultural matters and represented the national liberation movement at conferences and cultural events, he had a good deal more to say. Given his support for the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that in public he advocated socialist realism and condemned modernism, which he felt valorized fractured individual consciousness and displayed little if any social concern. At the 1967 Soviet Writers Congress,
for instance, he praised the “humanist features” of pre-Soviet writers such as Dostoyevsky and Gogol, and applauded Soviet writers such as Gorki, Sholokov, and Ostrovski who, he said, have “always offered a challenge to the supporters of the individualistic ‘every man for himself’ school. It is in Soviet writing that we have seen great examples of literature placed at the service of the people.” This suggests a preference for works set in what David Craig calls Soviet literature’s “Homeric” period (211). It was at such times—when like Robert Jordan, La Guma “was under Communist discipline” because “the Communists offered the best discipline and the soundest and sanest for the prosecution of the war” (Hemingway 1955: 158), the war against the fascists, that is (and here the parallel with South Africa is inescapable)—that we find Hemingway’s political and aesthetic appeal to La Guma.

Hemingway is not the only writer whose style, content, and political concerns we can detect in La Guma—other notable influences include Sir Walter Scott, Jack London, and John Steinbeck—but from the mid-1970s there is an increase in the frequency and variety of his Hemingway references, and a change in their underlying significance. La Guma’s last two published works, *A Soviet Journey* and *Time of the Butcherbird*, draw on *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and to a lesser extent *Death in the Afternoon* (1958) and *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1987). As its title suggests, *A Soviet Journey* (*ASJ*) documents La Guma’s travels around the Soviet Union in 1975 as a guest of the Soviet Writers Union (15). Given his political affiliations, it is safe to assume that on the whole La Guma was a “political pilgrim” (Hollander) for whom the Soviet Union was the bearer of political, economic, and ideological truth. For La Guma’s part, however, his truthful rendering of these experiences relied at times on fiction—often Hemingway’s—with the result that in *ASJ* the representation of authenticity spans a continuum that ranges from the empirical to the intertextual, with several intriguing intermediate positions.

Hemingway’s reception in the Soviet Union went through several phases. Between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s, Russian translations of Hemingway’s works were “best sellers” (Parker 1964, 498; Prizel 1972, 454). The response to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was mixed, but by the mid-1960s—La Guma first visited the Soviet Union in 1966—it had found greater acceptance: Soviet critics saw in it aspects of socialist realism; in the aftermath of World War II Soviet citizens could empathize with characters such as Robert Jordan; and in the more relaxed post-Stalin era there was some space for consideration of the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of Hemingway’s work (Prizel 1972, 453, 454, 456). Among La Guma’s per-
sonal papers are two articles from the journal *Soviet Literature*. Their value lies in the ways that they accommodate Hemingway, Picasso, and modernism, and claim them, with some reservations, for a Soviet view of aesthetics and history to which La Guma publicly subscribed. Savva Dangulov’s piece on the illustrations accompanying Russian translations of Hemingway’s novels and short stories places him on the side of the oppressed, because he “drew a sharp distinction . . . between just and unjust wars, unconditionally bestowing his sympathy on people struggling for the truth, on people . . . with calloused [sic] hands” (163), and in part this enabled Hemingway to achieve his famous goal—“to write as truly as I could all my life” (164). If Dangulov presents Hemingway as a politically progressive realist noted for his economy, the essay by Vladimir Dneprov, “The Lessons of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ (The function of new forms)” explores the implications of Picasso’s modernist representation of a moment in the Spanish Civil War that his painting had defined. Through an analogy with natural science that marks the boundaries of acceptable artistic expression at that time and reserves Picasso for possible later and more extensive inclusion, Dneprov, who also wrote on Hemingway (Prizel 1972, 448–50, 452–53), claims that “just as Newton’s theory [had] become part of a more complex and comprehensive theory of present-day physics,” so Picasso could become “one of the possible components of a more complex and comprehensive aesthetics of modern realism” (Dneprov 1975, 152). Retaining a commitment to realism that begs the question of just how many modifications the latter could sustain without becoming its opposite, the piece acknowledges that Picasso shared modernism’s “tendency to break the world up into separate parts,” but simultaneously credits him with a desire to “combine and synthesise” (150)—essential features of the realist project whether bourgeois, critical, or socialist—and credits him with a worldview similar to canonical figures such as Gorky and Dostoyevsky (150, 152). They depict the “essential . . . everything else is rejected” (151–52), in their imagery “a part [stands] for the whole” (155), and in their writings “subject and composition . . . are based not on the treatment of a scene from life corresponding to the field of view of a possible observer, but on the associative links between the images” so that “rhythm and structure . . . correspond to the movement of its deep meaning” (152). For La Guma, if modernism had any place in art and literature, it would have to be like this Hemingway or Picasso—“true to life”—and travel writing provided La Guma with that opportunity. It is based on verifiable experiences of the shared world, in effect Dneprov’s “treatment of a scene from life corresponding to the field of view of a possible observer.”
Simultaneously the movement on which travel writing is based fragments the world so that its “rhythm and structure”—and La Guma’s travel work is episodic and fragmentary—“correspond to the movement of its deep meaning” (152), though not necessarily in ways that Dneprov or La Guma intended.

The other rhythm and structure evident in ASJ which shows a debt to Hemingway appears in La Guma’s encounter with gypsies, who are many of the bullfighters in Death in the Afternoon and comprise the majority of the guerrilla band in For Whom the Bell Tolls. For La Guma the Soviet Union’s gypsies were a symbol of its ability to accommodate an eternal, Oriental Other. Despite being “the only community which defeated Marxism-Leninism,” and here La Guma displays rather heavy Soviet irony, they had prospered under it. “I never saw a Gypsy with gold teeth outside the USSR” (La Guma 1978, 30, 88), he notes. This view receives its first confirmation in the gardens of the Summer Palace outside the former Leningrad. There he encounters three women dressed in shawls and long skirts who insist on reading his palm after he has crossed one of their palms with silver “in the timeless tradition” (30). Even if they are not, strictly speaking, a national group according to Stalin’s definition—“a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory and economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin 1936, 8)—in ASJ La Guma sees their continued existence as one of many signs that the Soviet Union had resolved “problems of national conflict.” This was something of concern to opponents of apartheid South Africa like La Guma who looked to the Soviet Union for a viable alternative (La Guma 1978, 11, 229–30) that acknowledged ethnic and cultural differences and ensured political and economic equality.

For La Guma the background to this belief was the recognition that after the October 1917 proletarian revolution the developed capitalist states would fail, that the Soviet Union contained various “nations” and “national groups” at various stages of development, and that the greatest difference at that stage was between its own western and eastern spheres. The latter were perceived as primitive and patriarchal societies that could, with the support of the Party and its allies, bypass capitalism and move directly to socialism (Boersner 1957, 263). Speaking at the First Congress of the Soviets of the USSR in 1922, Stalin noted that the new federation had “smashed the chains of national oppression . . . awakened the peoples of the East, inspired the workers of the West . . . in order to unite them into a single state, the USSR” (Stalin 1936, 130). His description of East and West portrays the former as passive and therefore subject to
little or no change without the intervention of those who are already in history, and therefore defined by class struggle, namely the party of the working class of the most politically and economically advanced parts of the most politically advanced state. In effect La Guma’s notion of success in this area depended heavily upon a textbook case of Saidian Orientalism, namely, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1985, 2), and within La Guma’s travel writing and late fiction Hemingway’s work would mediate the relationship between the Orient and socialism.

From Leningrad the faint associations with bull fighting intensify and extend east to Moscow. In the gardens next to the Kremlin near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier where he watches courting couples, La Guma’s Hemingway references mark the beginning of a series of associations with writing, sexuality, and death as public spectacles that simultaneously constitute La Guma as active subject and passive object. In terms drawn from Death in the Afternoon which legitimate his masculine gaze, and his sense of himself as a famous writer on tour who is also the object of the gaze of others, he describes the couples’ rituals as “a sort of paseo, a promenade” (La Guma 1978, 25). In Death and the Afternoon, Hemingway associates the term “paseo” with spectacle, and masculine desire and death, for it is the time when men “can sit in a chair at a café or on the street and have all the girls of the town . . . passing not once but many times as they walk up the block” (44), and the picturesque and colorful “entry of the bullfighters into the ring and their passage across it” (310). Through these associations La Guma articulates the contradictions of his own position on this journey. He is the active and conquering male and writer who can and must “capture with a look” (Porter 1991, 158), while as a famous visitor in the public eye he moves through ritualized and staged encounters that subject him to the gaze of others.

La Guma’s description of his trip to the construction site of a hydro-electric power station near Nurek demonstrates how his own eyes relied on Hemingway. After visiting the dam, the mayor of Nurek, whose chief recreation is hunting, takes him on a tour of the area, and this precipitates ironic allusions to Across the River and into the Trees that make way for reflections on his own mortality. “Up there, there’s lots of game,” says the mayor. And La Guma muses, as the mayor gestures to the riverbanks, “Across the river and into the trees, I thought” (La Guma 1978, 55), but it is he and Hemingway’s character Cantwell, not the mayor, who are “half a hundred years old” (Hemingway 1987, 26). Neither Cantwell nor La Guma can fully accept their mortality without assistance. The former must
revisit an old battle site, while the latter relies on his interpreter Larissa, whose brown eyes and “Gypsy face” (La Guma 1978, 55) silently criticize his excessive eating and drinking and express the fortune-teller’s concern, for La Guma had already suffered at least two heart attacks, and ten years later in Havana, like Cantwell, he would die of another one on the back seat of his car. La Guma was buried in the Colon (Christopher Columbus) Cemetery in the family acre of the parents of José Martí.

The setting for one of La Guma’s two published stories with a non–South African setting, and the scene for one of his most frequently quoted statements on the relationship between literature and life, Tashkent was more than a familiar city, and his metaphorical description of it as an “Eastern beauty clad in the swirl of traditional skirts of stone” (La Guma 1978, 126) binds signifiers of Oriental femininity and unyielding material, and anticipates what Hemingway will enable him to see and “capture.” On this part of the journey, his first excursion takes him to a tyubeteika (embroidered skullcap) factory in Ferghana and then into the open countryside, before arriving at the Karl Marx Collective Farm. Introduced to its chair, La Guma cannot dispel a sense of her familiarity. “I had a feeling I had seen or read of somebody like her somewhere before,” he writes, but “could not have met her before” (138). She could be a character from a film or book, but not a real person, and La Guma is determined to name her and to specify her origins. Eventually he “recognizes” her as Pilar from For Whom the Bell Tolls. In the process, fiction in For Whom the Bell Tolls (Pilar) that imitated life (Pasionaria), changes in the narrated present to life that imitates fiction: “At last. Pilar. She was the guerrilla woman Pilar in Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls. The man’s coat, the heavy shoes, the booming voice” (138). Hemingway describes Pilar as “wearing a . . . black peasant skirt . . . with heavy wool socks on heavy legs, black rope-soled shoes and a brown face like a model for a granite monument . . . big but nice looking hands and her thick curly black hair was twisted into a knot on her neck” (Hemingway 1955, 30). In ASJ, wisps of Inakhon Akhmadalieva’s “black hair escaped from her headscarf, falling about her big, craggily handsome face.” There are “wool stockings on [her] thick legs,” and she wears “man’s shoes. Her voice boomed cheerfully, her teeth flashed in her dark face as she took each of our hands in one of her own big ones” (137).

The similarities continue as the visit proceeds: just as the men defer to Pilar, so the men on the collective farm defer to Akhmadalieva. Akhmadalieva’s husband, like Pablo in For Whom the Bell Tolls, moved away from her but is now back under her control. And she too is associated
and contrasted with another more conventionally feminine woman who, like Hemingway’s Maria, is concerned with women’s fashions in other countries. In La Guma’s travel piece the effects of this appropriation of conventional masculinity are most clearly expressed in his description of mulberry trees and silkworms after his encounter with Akhmadalieva/Pilar. On the outward journey to the silkworm sheds the mulberry trees are “stunted,” but with good reason, for they have been “especially cut down to encourage the greenery” (137). On the way back they are “grotesque, amputated” (141). In between, La Guma enters the silkworm sheds. He does not revisit the terror of battle and explore the impossibility of meaningful relationships in its aftermath, which Hemingway writes about in “Now I Lay Me.” Instead La Guma’s responses suggest two other related fears—being engulfed by a shapeless form and being castrated. “In the gloom . . . the piles of green were heaving and writhing as if they were alive.” His first association is with an “eerie and horrid living mass of unearthly life . . . one of those fantasy movies featuring ‘blobs’ from outer space.” On closer examination he sees that “the masses of leaves were infested with thousands of white worms, bloated and somehow repulsive” (141). With its narratives of doubling and castration anxiety, and its dissolution of distinctions between “imagination and reality” in a setting that is “real” and “imaginary,” and all undermined by irony (Freud 1981, 231, 244, 252), La Guma’s debt to Hemingway simultaneously evokes and negates aspects of Freud’s “uncanny.” La Guma’s references of Hemingway question the notion that representation in travel writing or socialist realism requires an original “real” referent, and challenges aspects of his address to the Afro-Asian Writers Congress held in Tashkent earlier in that year. Then he had argued that “life is the criterion through which the artists’ imagery and literary observations are evaluated” and that “life is the stimulation of artistic endeavor” (La Guma 1991, 51), whereas through Hemingway ASJ suggests that on some occasions at least La Guma’s travel reportage and his fiction relied and commented upon fiction. Thus we may also read La Guma’s use of Hemingway as evidence of an intertextual sensibility at odds with his public adherence to socialist realism.

Irrespective of Hemingway’s sources for For Whom the Bell Tolls, in La Guma’s travel writing what starts out as ironic allusion to fiction becomes the representation of “life” in the same work, and in modified form becomes fiction in his last published novel. Several aspects of Time of the Butcherbird draw on For Whom the Bell Tolls, particularly the description of Mma-Tau. She is the sister of Pablo’s equivalent Hlangeni, the passive and fatalistic chief who has resigned himself and his people to
further subjugation. Physically, politically, and emotionally, Mma-Tau is a Pilar-like figure. If Pilar is “almost as wide as . . . tall” (Hemingway 1955, 32), Mma-Tau is a “heavy square woman,” and as the latter’s power grows so Hlangeni diminishes and he recedes into obscurity (La Guma 1979, 45, 85–89). Pilar has a “deep voice” (Hemingway 1955, 12), while Mma-Tau’s laugh has a “deep sound” (La Guma 1979, 79). Pilar’s oratory and forceful personality command respect, fear, and obedience; Rafael is unwilling to disturb her, and recalling Maria’s rescue he shakes his head and remarks: “But what the old woman had to say to us to make us do it!” (Hemingway 1955, 31). In *Time of the Butcherbird*, the shepherd Madonele describes Mma-Tau as a “terrifying woman . . . I keep out of her way at all times. . . . And there is no doubt that she will have her way here” (La Guma 1979, 45–46), referring to her mobilization of the community against forced removals.

Mma-Tau’s political philosophy confirms the Donne epigraph, “No man is an island.” She embodies the principle that individual acts of revenge such as Shilling Murile’s killing of the suave, ambitious Afrikaner politician Meulen have limited value. Toward the end of the novel, after the community has successfully resisted the first attempt by the police at forced relocation, and after Murile has rejoined the community and the value of united opposition to apartheid has been established, Murile tells Madonele as he brings out the still warm shotgun, “And I will be bullied by that woman’ (La Guma, 1979, 118). The ambiguity of that “will”—a prediction or an intention (or both)—suggests that for La Guma challenges to conventional sexualities are necessary but not always desirable, and that like Hemingway he may have been gesturing toward “the solace of surrender inherent in masochism and passive sexuality while reinscribing traditional canons of masculinity” (Fantina 2003, 95).

After traveling east to Siberia, the last record of La Guma’s journey deals with Lithuania. His narrative returns him to the journey’s thematic point of departure (and arrival), for he re-embraces the *paseo* as sexually charged public prelude to death. He begins the last part, “The Bull’s Death,” by contrasting the Soviet Union’s political and economic achievements with life in capitalist states and many former colonies. The latter’s superficial freedom can hide neither “national oppression,” “racial antagonism,” the “exploitation of man by man,” nor intriguingly the “t togas worn by the declining nobility at gladiatorial combats” (La Guma 1978, 220, 223–24, 231). That La Guma’s conclusion crosses the threshold that conventionally separates political analysis from rhetorical devices such as synecdoche and metonymy demonstrates that he ultimately failed to find a
In his second novel And a Threefold Cord La Guma was reluctant to acknowledge the contribution of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* to his depiction of community life and political consciousness among shack dwellers in the Cape Town region (Field 2005). This contrasts sharply with his openness about his sources for *A Soviet Journey* and his articles in the South African Communist Party journal the *African Communist* which depends upon a scrupulously referenced trinity of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. Political factors made a debt to Steinbeck more problematic. Like Tolstoy (La Guma spoke of the two writers in the same breath), Steinbeck advocated small-scale farming in contrast to the Soviet Union’s collectivization policy (Field 2005). La Guma may also have experienced less Bloomian “anxiety of influence” toward the end of his life. In any event, Hemingway’s Soviet reception from the mid-1960s would have made it harder for La Guma not to acknowledge him. Whether or not the narrator of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was critical of the Communists and the Comintern (Nelson 1994), the novel’s support for a noble cause doomed in the short term but ultimately victorious offered hope to the South African Left, which saw direct parallels between European fascism and apartheid at a time when the apartheid regime was growing in power and the world was largely indifferent to its horrors. This encouraged La Guma to draw on some of Hemingway’s graphic and stylistic features before he visited the Soviet Union in the 1960s. That La Guma incorporated these aspects into his work before his first trip to the Soviet Union suggests that if Hemingway’s attraction was initially political, as a writer La Guma was sensitive to the benefits that a stylistic understanding of Hemingway’s work could
offer him. By the mid-1970s, the appeal for La Guma of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Death in the Afternoon*, and *Across the River and into the Trees* had shifted to more individual and personal concerns. Even if there are elements of irony and self-parody, more serious references to sexuality, spectacle, autobiography and death are never far away. La Guma’s visits to the Soviet Union coincided with an openness to the modernist aspects of Hemingway’s work, but without discarding the view that he was heir to the great Russian pre-revolutionary writers, and therefore “true to life.” Unlike Picasso, Hemingway was sufficiently a realist to be unconditionally accommodated within the Soviet aesthetic of the 1970s. Hemingway also offered La Guma a double Faustian pact. By drawing on Hemingway, he could write “truly” provided that he incorporated a “description of his own writing, of his way of writing what he writes” (Derrida 1987, 303) and died as a writer who drew from “life.” Underlying this exchange were La Guma’s fears of castration and being consumed by a masculine woman, and the ambivalence of surrendering to her. Hemingway and the gypsy women La Guma encounters remind him of his own fears, ambivalences, and moments close to death. Like Pilar, Larissa, the Gypsy interpreter/fortune-teller, saw the signs of La Guma’s physical, creative, and sexual mortality which he, unlike Hemingway’s Jordan, could read but with the greatest reluctance.

Notes

1. Parts of this chapter first appeared in Field 1994.

2. In South Africa and elsewhere, racial designations have a problematic history and confine us to ontologies we reject. La Guma was committed to a democratic, nonracial, socialist South Africa. Like many other South Africans, he used terms that continue to remind us of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past. He saw himself as “coloured,” a term he defined as “mixed-race,” almost all of his fictional characters were “coloured,” and he saw no problem with being “coloured” and participating in a struggle to end racial inequality.

3. At the time that he wrote “Coffee for the Road” those designated as “Indian”—the descendants of indentured laborers from the Indian subcontinent—were forbidden to spend more than twenty-four hours in the Orange Free State, one of South Africa’s provinces.

4. Alex La Guma Papers, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape.

5. There is no definite indication of La Guma’s attitude to Hemingway during the former’s Cuban years. Ulli Beier, one of La Guma’s long-time literary associates, recalls that the two of them visited the “Hemingway Bar.” If the film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) is any indication, then the official attitude toward Hemingway was at best ambivalent. According to Michael Chanan, the film acknowledges Hemingway’s support
for the Cuban Revolution, but sarcastically describes him as “the great lord . . . [t]he colonialist,” and indicates that a new society would need a different type of writer (243–44).

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