# Back from the USSR
## Envisioning the Global Through Journey Narratives

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### Making worlds and their horizons

This chapter traces the worldmaking practices of four journey narratives by travellers from the global South in the Soviet Union. Animated by postcolonial theory and decolonial aims, it contributes to envisioning the global by understanding literature as practising a 'species of world making' (Bell 2013: 257) and seeks to identify the narratives of the global that latently structure the normative horizons of these writings. It articulates the worldmaking practices of British imperialism's 'civilizing mission', and looks at writers from Britain's former colonial dominions who displace and contest them. Rabindranath Tagore and Bisham Sahni from the Indian subcontinent and Pauline Podbrey and Alex La Guma from South Africa each had the opportunity to travel in Soviet Russia and its socialist satellites and penned nonfictional accounts of their experiences. The chapter argues that these formerly marginalized texts furnish resources for productively contesting colonially determined narratives of the global and hone a capacity for pluralizing aspirational horizons. This serves the decolonial aim of dismantling the legacies of imperial ways of producing (knowledge of) the world.[1]

British imperialism's so-called civilizing mission entailed a narrative that did a great deal of work for the colonial project. It told a story in which the Western European colonial metropolis was located as the centre of both the imperium and the world: this was the node whence all that was laudable in European civilization and needed to be exported to the colonies originated. It served as the moral pretext that sought to disguise and legitimate the exploitation that was in fact constitutive of the empire: it was the ethical imperative that bade the more 'advanced' European civilization to come to the aid of its junior siblings in the colonies, to be caretaker of their resources.

Dismantling this faulty structure and its various articulations has been the work of much postcolonial scholarship, not least Edward Said's enormously influential *Orientalism* (1978). Yet I want to propose the value of considering the ramifications of the civilizing mission anew by turning a critical eye on the spatio-temporal mappings underwriting its discursive production of the world. Moving from a clearer delineation of these, I trace how the writings of a number of travellers to the Soviet Union from the global South not only multiply thwarted the colonial arch-narrative's violently ascribed cartographies and temporalities, but furnished the resources and honed the capacity to envision a plurality of alternative aspirational worlds.

My intervention here takes the form of a number of juxtaposed and interrelated readings of accounts of journeys in the Soviet Union and its satellites. These journeys were broadly situated within the geopolitical time of the Cold War, though one account – Rabindranath Tagore's *Letters from Russia* (1930) – significantly predated it. Tagore's epistles are read alongside Bhisham Sahni's *Today's Pasts* (2004) in order to demonstrate how their worldmaking practices constructively repudiate the civilizing mission. Pauline Podbrey's *White Girl in Search of the Party* (1993), in turn, complicates their 'corrective'. Finally, reading Alex La Guma's *A Soviet Journey* (1978) against the grain, I argue for the value of insisting on plurality when envisioning narratives of world. The writer-travellers should not be taken as representative or as giving exhaustive accounts, but as instantiations of viewpoints that produce alternative spatio-temporal mappings of both *colonial* narratives and much-studied *postcolonial* trajectories of 'writing back' to the imperial centre (Ashcroft et al. 1989).

The civilizing mission's projection of the global constitutively informed and shaped its discourses and narratives. Its particular practices of worldmaking entailed positioning the European capital as the centre whence the kind of civilization deemed desirable was to radiate outward to the colonial peripheries. Spatial marginality was thus ascribed to the colonial 'outposts'. A neat expression of this is offered by the cartographic forays that culminated in the Mercator projection that in many (Western) contexts became the most frequently occurring world map, and thus most commonly held envisioning of the world. This projection places Western Europe top and centre, dramatically understates the size of the African continent, and glibly divides the Pacific. The interplay between what is construed as literal and metaphorical centrality is evident, as is the marginalization – again, both literal and figurative – that comes with being located on the periphery.

Germane to the approach of drawing out these alternative mappings is Pheng Cheah's proposal, in *What is a World? Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, that world literature be thought of as 'literature that is an active power in the *making of worlds*, that is, both a site … and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes' (Cheah 2016: 2; emphasis added). The making of worlds and the discourses that sustain them are determined by the power structures that produce them. As Duncan Bell (2013: 261) observed, worlds can 'be taken by force, made and remade in the image and at the behest of others. Imperialism, according to this account, is a technology for the taking and (re)making of worlds'. Each of the texts discussed here entails practices of worldmaking, and my readings work to configure the horizons that determine these worlds, as well as their normative content: specifically, the contours of their normative horizons. Imperial legacies leave not merely cartographic traces, but also temporal ones, as succinctly communicated by the Greenwich Meridian's positioning in London. Cheah points to how centrality works not only in the ways space is charted, but in the ways time is measured: The subordination of all regions of the globe to Greenwich Mean Time as the point zero for the synchronization of clocks is a synecdoche for European colonial domination of the rest of the world because it enables a mapping that places Europe at the world's centre (Cheah 2016: 1).

This maps time as literally emanating outwards from a temporal centre – a node that determines global punctuality – in the capital city of the British empire. Grafting this on to the civilizing mission elucidates how the mapping of time works in that narrative. In colonial stories, London was to be understood as the determining co-ordinate of temporality: belatedness and backwardness – those oft-reiterated accusations levelled at the colonies – were to be determined in relation to this centre. This fitted the narrative of the civilizing mission, since it was necessary to establish the colonizers' putative superiority over the colonized in order to justify their ruling over the latter. This superiority was, and indeed often still is in a variety of different contexts today, articulated in temporal terms, as an expression of the advanced nature of European civilization and culture.

Both these temporal and spatial dimensions work to determine derivativeness. The peripherality of the colonies is derived from the assigned centrality of the imperial capital; the belatedness of the colonies is derived from the more admirable advancedness of European civilization; the colonized are taught to consider themselves always in a species of alterity derived from Eu-

rope. In addition, the colonized are cast in these arrangements as passive: as the *object* of the civilizing mission, that which needs to be civilized.

The designation of being *before*, *ahead of*, or *more advanced than* is implicitly premised in the civilizing mission on an understanding of progress, and it is on this that my first readings will pivot. It is important to interrogate these ascriptions of progress and progressiveness, as they are reborn in subsequent narratives. The colonial narrative would have it that the imperial centre is the home and origin of progress, and that colonialism brings progress to the colonies to help them along. This co-optation of 'progress' insinuates itself into other narratives as well, particularly those of Europe's global positioning. The European centre was able to model itself as 'owning' progress. This formed an integral component of the 'structure of legitimation around colonialism: Indigenous societies could not have survived without the advent of white education, infrastructure, etc' (Lentin 2019). The seeds sown here germinate in later notions that there is something inherently progressive about Europe, 'underpinned by a wider conception of Europe and the West as the general birthplace of the so-called "rights of man"' (Lentin 2004: 14).

In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 20) enunciates the need to 'release into the space occupied by particular European histories… other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives. For it is only in this way that we can *create plural normative horizons*' (emphasis added). The articulation of 'plural normative horizons' is useful to the task in hand. The 'normative' grasps the directionality, the implied forward thrust of progress at stake. The image of the horizon is apposite for the spatio-cartographic metaphorics at work in my argument, which understands the idea of the horizon in the spirit suggested by Vijay Prashad's (2007: xvii) view of what the Bandung conference of 1955 did for its Afro-Asian participants: 'The horizon produced by the Third World enthused them'. The conference's imaginative power was that it created an alternative framework of the possible, enabled a different configuration of what might be striven towards – and this was full of animating energy.

The horizon then delimits the world that can be imagined, the fringes of the imaginable, and thus marks also the figuration of the aspirational. One might hope to *progress* towards one's aspirations. The horizon of a world, moreover, may be determined by its centre. As such, efforts to destabilize and disarticulate Eurocentric narratives like the colonial civilizing mission can be

well-served by locating not only alternative centres, but by also calibrating the alternative horizons they might bring into existence.

Chakrabarty's injunction to create a plurality of such normative horizons is implicitly a denial of the will to exclusivity embodied in the civilizing mission's agenda: *only* the European colonial power could represent the 'right' way to progress; and there was only one kind of desirable progress. Temporality, construed in the linear terms of these narratives, allows only one route to the future: the one charted by the European frontrunner. Chakrabarty's call is for a multiplicity of horizons to be opened out in the space long occupied exclusively by European historiographies and epistemologies.

Tracing the articulations of imagined worlds as configured by the traveller accounts I come to below, facilitates a mapping of alternative horizons and, concomitantly, alternative understandings of progress and progressiveness than those derived from (Western) Europe. Narratives of progress entail that there is something to be progressed towards. The civilizing mission had a clear sense of what that should be – at least a clear agenda on what it wanted to market it as being: if the colonies tried very hard, they might one day arrive where the colonial centre was *already*. But progress was also actively envisioned by agents in the global South, in ways that neither took their home countries as intrinsically peripheral, nor unquestioningly accepted the horizons ordained by coloniality. Specifically, global South travellers in the Soviet Union offer a rich resource for alternative imaginings of the horizons of desirable progress. Significantly, they orientate these in relation to co-ordinates that do not deem the imperial capital to be central at all, rather bypassing it altogether and triangulating their positions according to alternative compass points. It is these alternative mappings that I seek to excavate in the following readings.

Rabindranath Tagore, Bhisham Sahni, Alex La Guma and Pauline Podbrey all had the opportunity to garner first-hand experience of the Soviet Union. Each provides traces of these experiences in their written accounts: for Tagore, this took the form of the letters he sent home during his travels; for La Guma, it was a travelogue written for and published by the Soviet publishing house aptly dubbed Progress Publishers; Sahni and Podbrey articulated their impressions in autobiographies. Their sojourns in the USSR and surrounding countries span a large temporal framework, and they embarked on their journeys with different agendas and priorities, which inflect their narratives of this space accordingly. I sketch their delineation of alternative normative horizons through readings that juxtapose first Tagore and Sahni to illustrate

how they thwart received colonial narratives and open up an alternative aspirational space in the Soviet Union. I then turn to Podbrey in a reading that highlights a possibly necessary critique of some of the more wilfully utopian impressions generated by the first two. Finally, I integrate some observations of what can be gleaned from the contestation of a will to exclusivity through a reading of La Guma's account.[2]

## Against colonial worldmaking: Rabindranath Tagore and Bhisham Sahni

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was, at the time of writing his correspondence from Russia in 1930, already an established and internationally respected man of letters. He has been dubbed, by Indian literary historian Sisir Kumar Das, 'the most towering Indian of the century next only to Gandhi' (2015: 8). Tagore was born into a relatively privileged household in Calcutta in 1861 and, as a result of inheriting significant property, he did not have to work for a living. To many, he is best known as the winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature for the English translation (some might say adaptation) of *Gitanjali*. Tagore was deeply critical of the British Raj in India, in 1919 renouncing his knighthood in response to the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, where the British Indian Army opened fire at peaceful protestors. He was a strong advocate for Indian independence from British colonial rule, though, unlike many who supported this, he was not a proponent of nationalism as its antidote.

Both a passionate poet and teacher, in *Letters from Russia* Tagore positions education as the most central of his concerns. He had been invited a number of times since 1925, and 'in spite of ill health he was fairly determined to make the visit when the VOKS (All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) again invited him in 1930' (Bhattacharya 2017: 249). Despite plans to travel further afield, his journey lasted only about two weeks, and was limited to Moscow and its surroundings due to his poor health. His experiences were determined by the fact that he was on an official tour, and all his communications were mediated by interpreters. His letters were published more or less as they arrived, in *Prabasi*, a well-regarded centrist Bengali literary journal, and shortly afterwards in 1931 in a collection as *Russiar Chithi*, in the original Bengali. The letters were sent home to an India-in-the-making; the correspondence is personal but intended for a wider audience, as Tagore

expresses a wish for his native land to learn from his observations. Excerpts appeared in English translation, but a full-text English version only became available in 1960 – partially due to the efforts of the British colonial government (see Bhattacharya 2017: 238). I work from the English translation made by Sasadhar Sinha.

Bhisham Sahni was born in 1915 in Rawalpindi, in today's Pakistan, and moved to India after Partition in 1947. Most of his written work, which includes short stories, novels and several plays, is in Hindi, though his mother tongue was Punjabi and he was taught in Urdu. He was a well-respected writer and political activist, as well as being younger brother to Indian film and stage actor Balraj Sahni. Bhisham Sahni was politically engaged for most of his writing career, participating in the Quit India Movement in 1942, serving time in jail, campaigning against communal violence, and working variously with the Indian National Congress Party, the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (1946–50), the Progressive Writers' Association (1976–86), and serving as head of the partly Soviet-sponsored Afro-Asian Writers' Association. He spent seven years in Moscow, working as a translator at the Foreign Languages Publishing House from 1956 to 1963. Though sympathetic to socialism, Sahni never joined the Communist Party of India, partially due to his perceiving in the party a lack of a coherent agenda against communalism.

Sahni's autobiography *Today's Pasts: A Memoir*, originally written in Hindi and published in 2004, was published in English in 2015 in a translation by Snehal Shingavi. This is the translation from which I work. Though not ardently pro-Soviet, in his text, he presents himself as evidently and lingeringly sympathetic to communism. He writes with the benefit of hindsight and delineates a tale of at least some disillusionment, while nonetheless locating in the Soviet Union of his memory lingering potential.

Some 74 years separate the original publication dates of these two texts. Such a lengthy interval serves to make the overlap of some particularly resilient narratives all the more remarkable, though, of course, they neither experienced the same USSR, nor presented a homogenous imagining of it in their writings. Both set out with positive expectations, which surely influenced what they chose to register. Key amongst their agreements are a shared attitude to the question of education and an indictment of Western European greed, both of which run directly counter to the narrative of the colonial civilizing mission.

Both Tagore and Sahni find cause to laud the Soviet Union for its accomplishments in the field of education. Though the civilizing mission de-

pended on a purported ethical imperative to *bring* education (and religion) to the colonies for its legitimating structure, both of these Indian travellers represent the USSR, rather than the colonizers, as being at the forefront of educational 'progress'. Tagore, especially, wished to learn from the achievements made in the sphere of education, and expressed his intention to take the practices he witnessed on his journey back to his school at Santiniketan in Bengal (Tagore 1960: 49, 52). The Soviet world he produced could serve as a model to emulate for Indians due, in his construction, to the two regions' many similarities: 'Only a decade ago they [the Russians] were as illiterate, helpless and hungry as our own masses: equally blindly superstitious, equally stupidly religious' (ibid.: 27). Sahni, too, was profoundly impressed by the USSR's accomplishments in literacy and education; indeed, both his children went on to attend university there.

The understanding of progress presented by the texts also has a cultural dimension; as indeed did the civilizing mission. Rather than locating the most advanced, desirable, and aspirational version of culture, or stage of 'civilization', in the colonial metropolitan 'centre', Tagore and Sahni find evidence not only of the equal standing of the Soviets, but of their being ahead on this spectrum. Certainly, one could take issue with their implicit or explicit definitions of 'culture' and 'civilization', but it is worth noting that, however their texts choose to define the markers, the Soviets are more advanced in the implied developmental trajectory.

Tagore observes that those who participate in cultural events are 'wage-earners, such as masons, blacksmiths, grocers and tailors. And there also come Soviet soldiers, army officers, students and peasants' (ibid.: 56). The Soviet Union, for him, is to be lauded not only for making this possible for its citizens, but for possessing and producing citizens who are able to find such high culture desirable – which again speaks to the question of education. He notes: 'One cannot imagine Anglo-Saxon peasants and workers enjoying it so calmly and peacefully until the small hours of the morning, let alone our people' (ibid. 51). The Soviet Union emerges, in this sense, as culturally superior to the 'Anglo-Saxons'.

The attribution of cultural advancedness is a subset of the attribution of civilizational development, which speaks to the envisioning of the kind of civilization that more closely approximates the one that the authors deem worthwhile. A second major accord, then, between Tagore and Sahni's accounts is in their locating in the Soviet Union an important rebuttal of the greed and

decadence of the colonizers. The colonial centre is indicted for a 'glut', born of its Western European civilization and violently exported to the colonies.

Tagore sees the global problems of capitalism and colonialism – and they are not to be divorced from each other. He notes: 'Not much statistical intricacy is involved to see that during the last hundred and sixty years the all round poverty of India and England's all round prosperity lie parallel to each other' (ibid.: 103) – and finds a 'radical solution' (ibid.: 3) being sought in Russia. Europe and its 'Western civilization', by contrast, are rendered contemptible for belying their barbarism: 'behind the scenes everything is topsy-turvy, filthy and unhealthy, dense with the darkness of sorrow, misery and evil deeds. But to us outsiders, looking through the window of the shelter we obtain, everything appears proper, elegant and everybody well-fed' (ibid.: 7). This Europe wilfully forgets its own history where 'they burnt innocent women as witches, killed scientists as sinners and remorselessly crushed freedom of religious belief and denied political rights to religious communities other than their own' (ibid.: 62), and hypocritically points the finger elsewhere:

> It is proclaimed to the people of the world that Hindus and Mussulmans cut one another's throats … but once upon a time even Europe's different communities were engaged in murderous strifes which have now turned to desolating wars between different European countries… displaying the primitive mind of suicidal stupidity, before which our petty barbarism must bow its head in awe. (ibid.: 16)

In the contrast, this Europe emerges as the home of greed and decadence, which it exports to its colonies: 'The pride arising from the difference in wealth has come to our country from the West' (ibid.: 8). As a welcome antidote to this, the Soviet Union has created an environment for 'the complete disappearance of the vulgar conceit of wealth' (ibid.: 9), where there 'is no barrier of greed' (ibid.: 108). Sahni, too, indicts Europe and the West for the 'glut of consumer goods in the capitalist world' (Sahni 2015). Together, Tagore and Sahni participate in producing a narrative of the decadent wicked West, as well as a faith in the lack of greed and corruption associated with communism. The dissatisfaction of some Soviet citizens with the scarcity of goods available to them is, indeed, for Sahni observing the Union in the 1960s, rather to be blamed on the increasing openness to the outside world under Khrushchev which allowed them access to capitalist frames of comparison.

Implicitly, this indictment on the part of Tagore and Sahni entails an understanding of civilizational progress as moving towards a more equitable

distribution of resources. This too runs overtly counter to colonial narratives of the colonial centre as a beacon guiding less developed peoples to the desired destination, or as a role model for the colonized to emulate. The civilizing mission was premised on its artificial manufacturing of a moral high ground for the colonizers. Tagore and Sahni's accounts completely dispel this myth, locating their guiding lights rather in the Soviet Union, which in their iteration serves in many ways as the antithesis of the colonial power.

The European colonizer's greed is furthermore accompanied by negligence and cowardice, as articulated by Sahni through his development of a historical narrative in which the West comes off poorly. Despite his experience of some disillusionment with its original promise, Sahni (2015) still concludes that the world 'will have much to learn from the Soviet Union'. This conclusion is at least partially accounted for by his narrative of the geopolitical terrain of the Cold War – which, in turn, is knitted to a particularly inflected narrative of the Second World War:

> The British government had turned its entire attention to the war, and was becoming increasingly cruel and cold towards India. So much so that when Bengal was overwhelmed by the famine and more than three million people died, suffering, the British government remained unmoved even as the world watched. (ibid.)

The Bengal famine in 1943 reveals, for Sahni, Britain's indifference to its colony. Let down by the British who are understood as having at least some responsibility to what is at this point still part of the empire, in Sahni's envisioning Indians begin to find a favourable alternative in the Soviet Union:

> During the course of the war, the popularity and the influence of the Soviet Union had grown worldwide. It was the Soviet Union that suffered the worst effects of the Second World War. England and America delayed opening up a second front while Hitler's forces invaded deep inside the Soviet Union. Then the war took a turn, and the Red Army routed Hitler's forces all the way back to Berlin. Such a total reversal had never been seen before. It changed everything. Young people were drawn to left-wing thinking in large numbers. (ibid.)

The British, already condemned for their failure to intervene during the famine in Bengal, are implicitly cast as cowardly for their reluctance to open

a second front, while the Soviet Union 'suffers the worst effects' only to heroically save the day by beating Hitler all the way back to Berlin.

If this is not sufficient reason for the colonial oppressor to cede the moral high ground, the final blow is dealt in the portrayal of the Soviet Union as representing a more advanced position in relation to questions of social justice: specifically, in combatting sexism and racism. The Soviet Union emerges in Tagore's letters as a space that has improved the lot of both women, and racialized peoples: a reputation it held in many parts of the world and for a notably long time (see, for instance, Sandwith 2013).

In Tagore's letters, Soviet Russia has solved, so it is suggested, the problems of multiple co-habiting nations and of racism. He notes, 'that in their State there is no difference whatsoever of race and colour' (Tagore 1960: 39); the Soviet project is one that creates and fosters 'community which includes also the swarthy skinned peoples of Central Asia. There is no fear, no concern that they too should become strong' (ibid.: 48). This is a sentiment that will be echoed by first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru some 16 years later in *The Discovery of India* (1946): 'Russians are almost totally devoid of racialism' (Nehru 1994: 549). In these articulations, it is in the Soviet Union that the 'progressive' politics of anti-racism and anti-sexism are understood as taking place.

The Soviet Union thus emerges as a space that has achieved solutions to problems which Tagore's and Sahni's homeland is still grappling with, and consequently as a site of aspiration and even envy. It is to the Soviet Union that Sahni and Tagore would have their countrywomen and men look for guiding principles and concrete strategies on the road to an aspirational future. Tagore's discursive construction proffers the advancedness of the Union, in terms of education, culture and social justice, linking it and what it represents to the future. The Soviets, for him, are 'determined to raise a new world' (ibid.: 10); 'Russia is engaged in the task of making the road to a new age; of tearing up the roots of ancient beliefs and customs from its ancient soil' (ibid.: 115). Sahni, too, is moved by its bearing a torch to the future: 'Whenever attention was cursorily paid to the Soviet Union's problems, the mind was also drawn to their accomplishments. When Sputnik – the first satellite – was launched by the Soviet Union and mankind was brought closer to the heavens, the entire world rejoiced' (Sahni 2015). Technological progress crystallizes the Soviet Union's general 'aheadness'. Sahni associates the USSR's advances into space with its position at the vanguard of progress and its connection to the future. It is its affiliation with the future that offers the final, and perhaps

most obvious, instantiation of the Soviet Union's representing a vision of desirable 'progress' for these two travellers. It opens up an alternative normative horizon in the worlds cumulatively produced by these two travellers' accounts and the readings offered here. They not only resist and contest the civilizing mission's demarcations of global centrality and civilizational aheadness, but situate an alternative horizon for their aspirational future.

## After displacement of the civilizing mission: Pauline Podbrey

Pauline Podbrey was born into a Jewish family in Lithuania in 1922, and emigrated with her family to Durban in South Africa in 1933. Her father was a committed communist and from a young age she moved into leftist political activism, joining the South African Communist Party and doing a great deal of work with various trade unions. The latter caused her to meet H.A. Naidoo, a well-known South African-Indian trade unionist whom she later married. Due to apartheid legislation that made it technically illegal for Naidoo to move from Durban to Cape Town, where the family settled in 1943, as well as difficulties relating to their interracial marriage, Podbrey and her family escaped to London in 1951, and on to Hungary in 1952, where she and Naidoo worked for Radio Budapest until their return to England in 1955. Consequently, she experienced the Soviet republic in the context of the discontent that led to the uprising of 1956, but left prior to the actual revolt and occupation.

In her memoir *White Girl in Search of the Party*, written in English and published in 1993, Podbrey recounts her experiences of the Soviet Union as viewed with the benefit of hindsight, after the dissolution of the USSR. Her imaginative production of Soviet space is profoundly influenced by her relationship to communism. As a young activist in South Africa, her image of the Soviet Union is an idealized one: she imagines this space as the fulfilment of a grand aspirational dream, at the forefront of progress: 'I was convinced that the Soviet Union was leading the world in all spheres, art, science, industry, the emancipation of nationalities, women, agriculture' (Podbrey 1993: 27). In terms of progress in the various spheres of culture, technology and, importantly, social justice, the Soviet Union is leading the way: it is here that she locates her normative horizon.

When offered the opportunity of working at Radio Budapest, Podbrey expresses her enthusiasm for the opportunity to participate directly in the actualization of such a noble ideal:

> The thought of living and working in a socialist country excited and thrilled us! In our dreams we'd never hoped for such a privilege. To experience at first hand the struggles and achievements of building socialism, to share in the life of a people engaged in this historic task, to be part of their movement to create a workers' paradise; it all seemed to us too good to be true. (ibid.: 157)

From a vantage point shaped by her white South African upbringing, then, the Soviet Union looks like a dream of a better future. This is where the communism that inspired and drove Podbrey and her fellow activists in South Africa is actually being put into practice. Later she opines, '[t]he Soviet Union was a dream of Utopia common to the right-thinking persons all round the world, the Fatherland to which we all owed allegiance for moral, ethical and ideological reasons' (ibid.: 186). Her language – 'paradise', 'Utopia' – articulates this space as an idealization and aspiration.

South Africa, by contrast, is not quite so far ahead in Podbrey's portrayal. Indeed, it is also 'behind' its former colonizer Britain. When Podbrey struggles to find a hospital that will deliver her mixed-race baby, she is pleased to find a British matron at a nursing house willing to take her on: 'Here, we told ourselves, is a woman of principle. It just goes to show, we said, how much more civilized the British are, how much more advanced than we South Africans' (ibid.: 129). It transpires that the matron is primarily financially motivated, and backtracks when the other patients express displeasure. But Podbrey's imagined South Africans, due to their racism, are less 'civilized' and, implicitly, more backward, than the British – though of course the 'civilizedness' of the British matron is directly undercut by her prioritizing money. Podbrey's attributed backwardness is understood in relation to an imagined progressive, socially just society. This envisioning of South Africa as behind both the Soviet Union and the West represented by Britain, undergoes a sharp change as Podbrey comes to experience first-hand the 'paradise-in-the-making' constituted by socialist Hungary.

Her disillusionment becomes inevitable as she describes the dismantling of the precious image of the 'glorious future' that the Soviet Union had represented for her. The utopian vision she had looked to for inspiration in South Africa is shattered by the lived reality of Budapest. At the radio station, she experiences, and indeed participates in, the construction of a false image of the USSR. She witnesses the fabrication of desirable news: 'In the absence of any real news two Yugoslav comrades were set to work next door to us manufacturing items of "news"' (ibid.: 168); and the dogmatic strictures imposed

when it comes to party propaganda: 'a report of a speech by Comrade Stalin, no matter how indigestible the English translation … had to be broadcast verbatim' (ibid.: 168).

With regard to the Soviet Union's advancedness in terms of social justice, Podbrey is forced to question her until then strong belief in the USSR's overcoming of the problem of anti-Semitism. In this regard, her voice serves as a necessary corrective to the utopian envisioning of Tagore and Sahni's attribution of progressiveness in this sense. At first reacting indignantly to claims of anti-Jewish feeling in response to the Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia, she is subject to censoring by her supervisors in a manner that suggests a less than clean slate. Her colleague Istvan, who is also Jewish, disappears mysteriously from the station and though no clear reason ever emerges, it is speculated that 'he had failed to confess to a bourgeois Jewish merchant father' (ibid.: 182).

The vision of the Soviet Union as a space that has overcome the problems of racial discrimination is also belied by her experience. She relates an incident that happens to her husband, H.A., when he encounters some Romani people on the street:

> 'Oh sir,' he [the spokesman of a group of Romani] begged, 'take me back with you to your land. I want to be with my own people, with black people, like you and me'. 'But in South Africa,' H.A. tried to explain, 'the black people have a bad life, they don't have equal rights with the whites, they suffer from discrimination and prejudice'. 'Same as here, same as here…' Our only previous contact with gypsies had been in restaurants, listening to their seductive, soulful melodies or foot-tapping to their wild, abandoned, exciting strings. Were they really an oppressed minority? (ibid.: 189)

While the 'wild, abandoned, exciting strings' strike a rather exoticizing note, Podbrey's appreciation of their position is an important step in her disillusionment with Soviet communism as she recognizes discriminatory treatment and signals the racialization and racism present within Europe and the Soviet Union, revealing that this is in fact not the dream of a race-free society it was purported to be. This serves as a significant contestation of what – in Tagore's and Sahni's cumulatively produced worlds – might have been represented as the Soviet Union's paving of a smooth road to an aspirational future of social justice. Racism, counter to that narrative, is alive and well in the Soviet space of Podbrey's account.

The narrative of the USSR's having overcome sexism is also shown up as false. It is, arguably, Podbrey's experience of communist control over women's reproductive rights that pushes her disillusionment to its culmination. Unintentionally falling pregnant during her time in Budapest, she expresses her expectations as a woman and a communist: 'I'd have thought that in a Socialist country women had the right to decide what to do with their own bodies' (ibid.: 171). This, she learns, is lamentably not the case. Indeed, it is her experiences in insisting on her right to an abortion and her final but difficult success in this endeavour, that signals for her the disintegration of everything she had believed communism to mean: 'I felt ashamed to be benefiting from such a hypocritical system, one in which abortions, like other prizes, were at the disposal of the privileged, like me. The class differences of other countries seemed trivial by comparison' (ibid.: 172). Podbrey is disillusioned not merely by the system's failing her as woman, but by its betrayal of the principles of equal treatment. This is chillingly revealed by the juxtaposition of the story of the typist Lydia, who is forced to seek out an illegal abortion and ends in prison. Interestingly, this becomes a turning point in the text's evaluation of South Africa. Podbrey says, 'I'd had two abortions [in South Africa] but nothing prepared me for the indignity to which I was now subjected by this doctor and his nurse' (ibid.: 171). In apartheid South Africa, it seems, she was able to access abortions, and was treated with less indignity.

She also signals the exceptionalism of the South African Communist Party amongst the communist parties of the world, noting 'just how special they [the communist party leaders] were in the international Communist arena we were not to discover until later' (ibid.: 142). The South African communists were warm and welcoming of all fellow travellers; British communists, for instance, were less congenial. Finally, after the colossal disappointment and disillusionment Podbrey experiences as a result of her time in the Soviet bloc, she concludes very much in favour of the South African brand of communism she had initially fallen in love with: 'That was a part of my life I could be proud of – the South African Communist Party was the only organization which stood for total equality… But life under a Communist regime had opened my eyes to the evils inherent in such a system' (Podbrey 1993: 201). Consequently, in the world of Podbrey's text, socialist Europe emerges as the home of a failed dream: a false vision of desirable progress. This causes her to shift her normative horizon away from that once-utopian image back to South Africa, which – however diseased on a governmental level – emerges as having more

closely approximated that horizon and thus as the locus of a true, or ideal, vision of communism yet to be achieved.

## In conclusion: Beyond a will to exclusivity with Alex La Guma

Tagore and Sahni's repudiation and displacement of the civilizing mission, and Podbrey's contestation of its Cold War inverse are valuable in dismantling the legacies of colonial worldmaking. It does not, however, enact structural change when different placeholders merely rehearse the same trajectories: as when the Soviet road to socialism replaces the colonial road to capitalism. And while Podbrey's locating an aspirational ideal in South Africa is productively resistant to dominant norms, the structure underlying this serves to replace one horizon with another. In conclusion, then, I offer a reading against the grain of what is at face value a profoundly clear-cut ideological text: Alex La Guma's vehemently pro-Soviet *A Soviet Journey* (1978). In its particularly stringent reproduction of binary politics and prescriptive socialist trajectories, this travelogue is explicitly mapping a single alternative normative horizon. Nonetheless, contrary to the travelogue's more obvious agenda, I want to end by arguing that this text signals the possibilities inherent in resisting a will to exclusivity, and thus latently reveals a capacity for configuring horizons in the plural.

Alex La Guma (1925–1985), born in District Six in Cape Town, was a South African writer and anti-apartheid activist. He was a defendant in the notorious Treason Trials, and was forced into exile in London in 1966. A life-long communist, he was also an active member of the Soviet-sponsored Afro-Asian Writers' Association, publishing in their quarterly journal *Lotus*, and winning the Lotus Prize in 1969. La Guma was chief representative of the African National Congress in the Caribbean when he died in Havana in 1985. He went to the Soviet Union in 1975 as a guest of the Union of Soviet Writers, and this journey, along with experiences gathered on trips in 1970 and 1973, furnished the material that would result in his travelogue (see Field 2010: 210), a text whose aim is overtly to present a positive image of the communist project being pursued there. Originally published by Progress Publishers in Moscow, the book belongs to the 'Impressions of the USSR' series and forms a part of the image of itself the Soviet Union was interested in presenting abroad.

La Guma positions himself as a staunch communist, enamoured of the Soviet project and convinced that his home country has much to learn from it.

Not only does he wish to disseminate knowledge about the USSR in a positive light, but he explicitly presents it as practising a viable alternative to the global capitalism of the West, which is yoked to the ongoing colonial oppression he sees his and other countries suffering under. In a typically pro-Soviet sketching of 'progress', the USSR facilitates the 'catching up' of its 'non-European' (La Guma 1978: 34f.) brethren, allowing them to bypass capitalism and enjoy, by association with the rest of the Union and as also suggested by Tagore and Sahni, closer proximity to the future.

While overtly promoting this trajectory, the text nonetheless dissolves the exclusivity on which it is theoretically premised. Throughout his journeys in the Soviet Union, La Guma makes and fosters connections with Soviet citizens, enlivened by the mutual sympathies that he presents in the text as existing in simple interactions and conversations and in the interest and empathy displayed by those he encounters. This produces an imagined something shared that binds them, cultivating connections, affinities, sympathies and grounds for alliances. These are fed by a capacity to allow different stories to co-exist without cancelling each other out, allowing them, rather, to supplement each other. Significant in this world's imagining of pasts and origin stories, then, is its lack of a will to exclusivity. While Europe's imperial civilizing mission required the quashing of other stories than those of Western European reason and religion, and Soviet propaganda foresaw only the Soviet route to a desirable future to the exclusion of other ways, La Guma's meetings with the peoples of Soviet Eurasia suggested varied stories that were happy to live alongside one another. In Kazakhstan, his guide Amangeldeh relates how the local mountains came to be: 'There is a legend which says that when the world was born, God looked down on Kazakhstan and saw the flat empty steppes. He felt sorry for those living in such desolate emptiness, so he took a handful of rocks and tossed it down as a sort of compensation and so we got the Blue Mountains.' (ibid.: 114f.).

In response, La Guma offers a different narrative of the origin of mountains:

> There is an African folk-tale, from Tanzania, I think, which gives another explanation for how mountains came to be. It says that long ago the earth was smooth and flat and even all over, but one day she arose to talk to the sky. When the two of them had finished their chat the earth took leave of the sky and started to return. But she did not reach home all over. Some parts of her became tired on the way and stopped where they were. (ibid.: 115)

La Guma's 'another explanation' claims no exclusive universality and no supremacy for itself. On another occasion, he relates the story of how stars came to be:

> 'Stars were first made in South Africa, you know'. I told him that South African tale of the young African girl who sat warming herself by a wood fire one night and played with the ashes, taking them in her hands and flinging them up to see how pretty they were when they floated in the air. As they floated away she put more wood on the fire and stirred it with a stick and the bright sparks flew everywhere and wafted high into the night. They hung in the air and made a bright road across the sky, a road of silver and diamonds.
> 'It's still there,' I said. 'They call it the Stars Road or the Milky Way.' (ibid.: 131f.)

La Guma ends his anecdote: 'if we invented the stars, it must have been your people who invented the sun' (ibid.: 132). The account of his journey imagines and produces a world that is shared and inclusive, in which different (hi)stories can accommodate each other and need not strive to win out over each other. By allowing these different stories to co-exist, La Guma's travelogue works to contest a will to exclusivity and so unleash the potential of a plurality of normative horizons. This is, finally, structurally different in a way that mere displacement cannot be.

In conclusion, the juxtaposition of these readings serves to unfold how these travel accounts can serve as resources not only for contesting violently ascribed colonial narratives, but as sites of productively imagined alternatives. The centres of their worldmaking practices are not located in the former colonial centre, which itself is moved to the periphery of their envisioning of the global. As such, the aspirational horizons animated by the worldmaking activities of these travel writings lie, for Tagore and Sahni, not in Britain's imperial capital, but in the potentialities opened up by the Soviet Union. The alternative horizons opened up by them are complicated and undercut by Podbrey's account. Her contestation of too utopian a representation of the Union's achievements in social justice is valuable to guard against one exclusive route to prescriptive progress merely being replaced by another. La Guma, finally, signals the capacity of his worldmaking not only to forego the will to exclusivity on which colonial narratives such as the civilizing mission are premised, but to display its utter expendability in the world he chooses to imagine. Implicit in this is also the value of plurality indicated by Chakrabarty's call to create *plural* normative horizons in place of Eurocentric prescriptions whose structuring principle is exclusivity. An insistence on plurality and structural

change in thinking about exclusive narratives of the global works in the service of dismantling the legacies of colonial epistemologies.

## Notes

1 I am grateful to the members of the RTG 'World Politics' for their insights and comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2 I build here on previous work, parts of which have appeared elsewhere, though in pursuit of different arguments to the one I make here (see Gasser 2019a, 2019b).