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**“Making is Half, but Ruin is Everything”:  
Gender, Apocalypse, and the Performance of the Other in *The  
Melancholy of Resistance***

Senior Paper

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## Introduction

Laszlo Krasznahorkai is an increasingly popular, if cultishly followed, contemporary Hungarian novelist. Especially since 2013, when his debut novel, *Satantango*, was translated into English, he's experienced a skyrocketing of popularity among a certain Western, English-speaking literary set, as evinced by several-page articles in the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* Magazine, two consecutive Best Translated Book Awards in 2013 and 2014 for his work, a month-long teaching residency at Columbia University, and a recent nomination for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize. It's easy, in many ways, to understand the draw.

Krasznahorkai's works depict, with dark humor, apocalyptic worlds of hopelessness and fear, looking at the infusion of capitalist ideology into day-to-day life—clearly themes that speak to our current American post-recession moment of anxieties surrounding potential collapse.

However, despite these points of analogue, Krasznahorkai's oeuvre has been received by a wide range of critics as apolitical.<sup>1</sup> This is especially noticeable when looking at his first novel translated into English, *Melancholy of Resistance*. The 1989 work depicts characters trying and failing to respond to the encroaching collapse of their society and identities, attempting, as the author writes, to “retreat to a point of inner security...because the world outside had become a place of agonizing decay” (187). While this collapse is very much apocalyptic and decentered,

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of depoliticized reception, look at Robert Boyers' review of *Melancholy of Resistance*, “Stiflings: László Krasznahorkai,” in *The Dictator's Dictation*, New York: Columbia, 2005, 169-78; John Wilkinson's review of *The Melancholy of Resistance* in *World Literature Today* (76.1), 2002, 168-9; David Auerbach's survey of Krasznahorkai's career, “The Mythology of László Krasznahorkai” in *The Quarterly Conversation*, 7 Jun. 2015; and Jacob Silverman's profile of Krasznahorkai in the *New York Times*, “The Devil They Know: Satantango,” 16. Mar 2012.

it's been received as such to the exclusion of other meanings.<sup>2</sup> Certainly townsfolk central to the work experience overwhelming, biblical premonitions of ruin, inescapable visions (and realities) of collapse dominating their lives. Yet the ruin coursing through the text also has essential sociopolitical and historical meanings attached to it, meanings that I attempt to tease out in the following pages.

*The Melancholy of Resistance* is about a decrepit, Communist town on the verge of economic collapse, inviting comparisons with the recession state of Soviet-controlled Hungary at the time of the novel's publication. More significantly, the town is segregated by visible gendered and bodily divisions, placing priority on (white) able-bodied male forms and casting shade on any abjectly-formed (or even *-performed*) bodies. The resistance in the title becomes especially interesting within this context. *Melancholy* is a phallogentric, ability-oriented text, and its antagonists—arguably the only resistant figures in the work—exist and are ostracized outside this dominant order. Mrs. Eszter, a fascistic leader who eventually takes control over the town, occupies an androgynous body and displays intense gendered assertiveness; moving against the societally determined idea of “woman-ness,” she is socially isolated and tormented because of her body. The Prince, the mutated and foreign centerpiece at a roving carnival that comes through the town, occupies a similarly contested, freakish form. Never seen, The Prince exists as a body both unclassifiable as human and hence ungendered (he's rumored to be shrunken and three-eyed at various times throughout the text, dehumanized attributes) and one decidedly foreign, not Hungarian.<sup>3</sup> Yet just as Mrs. Eszter is able to command military rank following the

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<sup>2</sup> Silverman's article in the *New York Times*, for example, describes *Melancholy* as a text that “constructs allegories only to demolish them,” ignoring wider patterns of politicality (BR20).

<sup>3</sup> Linguistically, too, the Prince speaks in an unknowable language or dialect—again, certainly “not Hungarian,” at the least.

collapse of the village, *The Prince* is able to create that collapse in the first place, urging his followers to destroy for the sake of destruction. In this way, both *Eszter* and *The Prince* simultaneously gain power and are marginalized through their contested presence in the visual field. As scannable, easily classifiable objects, both fall apart, revealing essential cracks in the hierarchy present in the text and Hungary at the time: the bodies themselves serving (perhaps unwillingly) as signifiers of destruction.

Considering this network of power relations and destruction, my approach to Krasznahorkai's text will be essentially two pronged. The first prong, subtly grounded in the text, examines historicity in Krasznahorkai's novel and finds layered relations between the presentation of norms within the village and historical realities in 1980s Hungary, repoliticizing a text that has been presented as apolitical since its introduction to English-language audiences. The second prong, more immediately textually based, examines the way bodies, particularly those of the text's villains, are mapped and colonized in Krasznahorkai's work, focusing primarily on politics of identity and ownership throughout the novel. Through both of these prongs, looking closely at the gendered and ethnic performance at stake in *Melancholy*, a potentially problematic text can be writ into an emblem of productive destruction. By recontextualizing *Eszter* and *The Prince* within their frameworks of political oppression, *Melancholy* becomes relevant and essential for a historical reading of '80s Hungary and even our own contemporary contested political climate. To paraphrase scholar and political scientist Susan Buck-Morss, viewed within a gender- and postcolony-influenced frame, the text itself charts how, and how quickly, "dreamworld [becomes] catastrophe" (Buck-Morss xi).

### **History and the Freak: Hungarian, Historical Relations within *Melancholy***

In a recent interview László Krasznahorkai stated that “what I describe [can] happen anywhere... Time and space aren’t very important. Only the situation counts” (qtd. in Thirlwell). While Krasznahorkai expresses skepticism regarding the historicization of his work, *Melancholy of Resistance* nonetheless engages with themes drawing heavily from Hungarian history: resistance, economic slowdown, and increasingly conservative gender and body segregation. As Krasznahorkai notes, under inequalities determined by encroaching global capitalism, these realities can indeed “happen anywhere.” However, by looking specifically at the national grounding of Krasznahorkai’s narrative, the political reality of the text becomes easier to parse out. In many ways, historically contextualizing Krasznahorkai’s novel itself creates the possibility of more decentered, radicalized readings of the work applying it to a global context. Hungary in the 1980s can serve metonymically for the resistance within *Melancholy*, and looking at the two of them linked in a historicized and postcolonial context helps make these political decenterings possible—making the text more immediately politicized and more contemporaneous with current culture, as well.

Throughout the 1980s, Hungary was in a state of (partial) economic and social collapse. An increasingly segregated economy and the reification of gender and class hierarchies all contributed to high levels of resentment and instability in the area, making Hungary especially prone to anti-Soviet organizing (although this never happened on the violent scale of Krasznahorkai’s novel). Scholar and political scientist Steven Saxonberg attempts to triangulate many of these different forms of collapse present in Hungary in his 2001 book *The Fall*. Placing most intense focus at the economic crises Hungary struggled with in the 1980s, Saxonberg argues that Hungary’s spiraling inflation, juxtaposed against the previous strength of its “second

economy”—the proliferating small-business income present alongside official state incomes—led to increased resentment and government pliability (72). Furthermore, he notes high levels of “unhappiness” (if not “crisis” per se) about the economic situation in Hungary on the general population level (72). Arguably, this same cluster of economic inequalities (“mounting debt crisis, declining investment, and lowered real wages”) was responsible for greater social marginalization, as both societal outcasts and the lower class in Hungary are affected by these forces (8).

This economic situation can be easily mapped onto Krasznahorkai’s text; intimations of economic ruin frequently pop up throughout the novel, especially in Eszter’s interactions with a more socially advantaged woman, Plauf. Through looking specifically at how Plauf’s thoughts and actions run counter to the narratives Eszter is forced into, the intense economic inequality Saxonberg writes about can be read onto *Melancholy*, immediately politicizing the text. On her way to a manipulative interaction with Eszter, Plauf reflects on her luxuriant apartment, an acquisition Eszter is prevented from having because of the scarcity affecting lower classes. During this walk, through focusing specifically on the things she owns, Plauf is able to react against the ongoing economic collapse in Hungary at the time by creating order:

The pantry, which served as the hub of the whole flat, contained a surprisingly rich store of food: joints of ham with strings of paprika hung like necklaces about them, spicy sausages and smoked bacon suspended from high hooks and, in their shadow on the floor, a *low barricade* comprised of bags of sugar, flour, salt and rice; neatly ranged on either side of the cupboard were further bags, of coffee beans, poppy seeds and walnuts, not to mention spices, potatoes and onions, a complete bastion of provisions whose copiousness bore ample witness...to its *creator’s foresight*, the whole crowned by ranks of

benevolent-looking jars of preserves arranged with *military precision* along the shelves lining the middle wall. (31, italics mine)

There are multiple references throughout the text to Plauf's disregard for her surrounding, lower-class neighbors, and the implicitly militarized pantry fleshes out undercurrents of the violent resistance Plauf finds herself drawn to, again linked to contemporaneous Hungarian anxiety. Most essentially, as Plauf never addresses the greater economic situation in her reflections, focusing on ownership instead, she creates a narrative of empowerment that places her outside the "decay" in the rest of her town (38). The fact that many of the goods described are imported (coffee beans, poppy seeds, spices, etc.) is also important in establishing a separation between Plauf and her native country (and said country's economic malaise). Her pantry inventory creates a cosmology centering around Plauf, where she is the "benevolent creator" and the products are her subjects—another way of moving against personal and economic scopophilia to establish a textual authority for herself.<sup>4</sup> Eszter, on the other hand, describes herself an advocate of "the simple life"; living in an apartment without a carpet, curtains, or any substantial furnishings, she is far more exposed to the difficulties of day-to-day life than Plauf (49).

However, looking at the Hungarian context purely in terms of economics is overly reductive. The abjectly-bodied Prince, in his one monologue addressing the reasons for annihilatory action, helps present a more intersectional view of the book's setting: one decidedly negative, granted, but nonetheless incorporating a more complex view of disintegration and revolt. It's also important to emphasize that The Prince speaks everything through his factotum, an accomplice responsible for translating, carrying and protecting The Prince, creating a level of

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<sup>4</sup> The militarization in the kitchen in many ways reflects a sort of fascism as well, moving away from an economic interpretation. The uniform diversity of Plauf's supplies essentially negates the possibility of any lower-class signifiers entering and disrupting the primarily acquisition-based world Plauf has built for herself.

disconnect (or disembodiedness, perhaps) to his words. Regardless, he and his factotum synthesize economic constraints and personal rage, specifically targeting the corrupt circus director with their words. Translating for *The Prince*, the factotum notes that “to the director *The Prince* means money... [but regarding negotiations], there will be no conditions. The director gets the money, *The Prince* gets his followers. Everything has a price” (159). While the factotum deliberately simplifies the capitalist, money-dependent reactions of the circus director, these initial comments still represent a reification of the schemas of economic motivation within Krasznahorkai’s text. At the same time, however, *The Prince*, as noted, is an outsider body; viewed in this light, his/the factotum’s pronouncements can be read as arch, subverting people’s fixation on “price” and production in the fracturing Hungarian state.

Further adding to this intersectionality, the factotum continues identifying *The Prince*’s plan of destruction, connecting it further to different, discriminatory practices between bodies and power. “Unlike the director,” the factotum continues, “he [*The Prince*] believes that everything has its own individual significance. The significance is in the elements not in the whole... a town built on lies will continue to be a town built on lies” (159-60). While the factotum and *Prince* articulate an intentionally vague, foreboding rhetoric—a verbal tactic discussed further later in this paper—they nonetheless engage in a problematization of the village that hints at wider spheres and frames of oppression. By positioning the village as a “town built on lies” (echoing, in many ways, the popular opinion surrounding Hungary’s statehood at the time) the two navigate from a simple economic reading to one more complex, tied to a heuristics of lying specifically. Saxonberg notes the widespread distrust of Hungarian administration, reading the ultimate support for democratic transition in early 1990s as representative of this fear; according to party insiders, the administrative fear of uprising at

“failed policy” was itself responsible for the relatively early transition (Saxonberg 161). This inability to take speakers on their word serves as a fuel for much of The Prince’s anger and ultimately his power. Distrust serves as a motivator, however volitional, for the praxis of destruction in Krasznahorkai’s text.

One of the most essential remaining historical frameworks, then, to considering the deception present both in the text and Hungary proper is that of gender relations, looking at the construction of men/women in both locations. It’s essential to reemphasize that Krasznahorkai himself is not a feminist, and in his treatment of female characters he in many ways echoes the dominant cultural biases of his native country, treating the women as potentially irrational, threatening, scapegoated creatures. Hence, it becomes necessary to read his text against itself, reemphasizing its universalizing and revolutionary force by contextualizing the female characters within the larger critical context of gender in Hungary in the 1980s. Through this frame, the characters in the work exhibit autonomy, not menace; by moving against the author’s sexism a metatextual revolutionary, destructive power can be articulated.

But again, historical contextualizing becomes essential for this interpretation. Hungarian sociologist Olga Tóth provides a useful corrective for Western assumptions regarding 1980s Hungary in her short paper, “No Envy, No Pity.” Tóth’s paper, written (partially) in response to the ways “Western feminists...distorted the situation of women [in Hungary],” mainly addresses the way woman as a totemic unit was constructed in Hungary at the time (212). Indeed, by looking most extensively at what Tóth terms “the ‘private’ sphere,” the interrelation between women and families in the popular Central European imagination, a greater understanding of Eszter’s contested identity becomes possible—in addition to laying out the schemas of development throughout the 1980s in Hungary. Tóth notes that despite the purported sexual

equality under Soviet rule, “children continued to be socialized into extremely conservative sex roles...sons were, and still are, seen as future breadwinners, and daughters—reflecting reality—as only secondary earners” (214). Additionally, Tóth claims that early marriages were emphasized in Hungarian societies, and while divorce was seen as a solution by many embittered women, it still frequently resulted in complete social isolation and delegitimization for both spouses. Furthermore, according to a 1988 survey Tóth cites, children were seen as the end-product of marriage, a consensus opinion being that a childless marriage was not “fully complete” (216). Eszter, then, who in many ways operates within an incomplete marriage, perhaps by extension even has an “incomplete” identity as a married woman.

In fact, the intense discrimination Eszter faces—living separated from her husband, having no children, displaying degrees of ambition far surpassing most of the men surrounding her—position her as ideologically alien, following Tóth’s overview. Yet by these same standards, Plauf, who married twice and ultimately disowned her son, is also more of an outsider than her self-assured dialogue would suggest. In this way, both characters rewrite their scripts to downplay potential societal othering they might experience. It’s also essential to emphasize, however, that this is an othering potentially writ by the author as well; as a man who lives within this highly stratified society, Krasznahorkai plays with these marks of societal othering to make his female characters more unpleasant, delegitimizing their own power and personal narratives.

Another scholar, Joanna Goven, provides a perhaps less polarized lens through which to view the Hungarian society creating *Melancholy*, incorporating and integrating class more fully into her discussion of the status of “woman” in these ideological frameworks.<sup>5</sup> In her article

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<sup>5</sup> Goven, it’s important to note, is American, and as such risks applying Western definitions of feminism and femininity to Hungary; nonetheless, put into conversation with Tóth, there is still a universality to their gender rights discussions that transcends location.

“Gender Politics in Hungary,” Goven focuses on antifeminism and internalized misogyny in Hungarian women, looking at the way the sexist frames of experiencing lived reality influence both the dominant subjects and objects of a society. “Down with matriarchy!” an anonymous woman cited in Goven’s essay surprisingly declares, going on to enforce the “bedrock...of sexual essentialism” within the state of Hungary (224, 226). Goven cites countless examples of women holding women responsible for Hungarian ills, all centering around internalized patriarchy (230, 231). Of course, this fearful bedrock itself implies another binary, that between the disorderly and sainted woman; each of Goven’s informants claim the latter status, in many ways legitimizing power despite occupying a subordinated space. In this way, social accomplishments are linked to the economic crumbling of Hungary; the opposite of what Eszter and The Prince advocate, the majority of women surveyed present an economic solution based on returning to a more rigidified, conservative, oppressive structure that they can be contained within. This marks Eszter, with her ambition and fascistic goals, an outsider; even The Prince in this context, ethnically and bodily ambiguous, if not sexually so, is a danger to the conservatizing homogenous order presented in Hungary at the time.

Positioned further within a colonial and postcolonial context, Hungary and the novel both enact a historicized subjugation of bodies. Through processing contested bodies as aberrant—especially in the case of The Prince, who is additionally presented as a foreigner—figures in the text both colonize bodies in space and provide tools for creating new, subversive authorities. The next section examines more specifically the ways that bodies are processed, the frequently colonial and postcolonial mechanisms of control and reclamation present surrounding Eszter and The Prince’s form. Read as liminal, potentially apocalyptic figures, they can be re-mapped onto global traditions of oppression and decolonization.

### **Becoming Other Bodied: Aberrancy and the Colonial Imagination in Mrs. Eszter**

In many ways, *Eszter* and *The Prince* both occupy what scholar Judith Butler terms the “domain of abjected bodies” in her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter* (16). Butler writes specifically on the ways bodies occupy colonial and post-colonial space, the primary identities and the social marginalization constructed through visual and gendered deviancy. While *The Prince*’s form seems more immediately aberrant, his seclusion within the caravan isolates him from the more critical gaze of his surrounding community. *Eszter*, on the other hand, by interacting with the townsfolk on a much larger, more public scale, reveals more prominently the Butlerian entrenchment of prejudiced responses to othered bodies present in the cosmos of the text. By looking at Krasznahorkai’s work within this framework of oppression, understanding the linguistic and cultural violence(s) acted on *Eszter* and *The Prince* because of their contested bodies, a reappraisal of the work becomes possible, repoliticizing and vitalizing the text as itself a work of collapsed, catastrophic dreamworld.

Butler herself focuses specifically on heterosexual discourses in *Matter*, a label that *Eszter*, being writ by a heterosexual man and herself expressing heterosexual desires in the last portion of the novel, fits within. According to Butler this one-dimensional approach to female identity is itself dependent upon the establishment of dominant, imperialistic structures of control. Throughout her introduction Butler repeatedly attempts to show “that the uncontested status of ‘sex’ within the heterosexual dyad secures the workings of certain symbolic orders... its contestation calls into question where and how the limits of symbolic intelligibility are set” (17). *Eszter*, in Krasznahorkai’s text, occupies this zone of contestation; being androgynously shaped, she is trapped with the label of “not woman,” stuck in a contained binary of

attractive/unattractive presence. In other words, Eszter's symbolically (un)intelligible body frame is itself a form of resistance; in her interactions with the more societally successful Plauf, we can see this symbolic resistance—and the reclamation of terms Eszter eventually relies on to establish her autonomy—present itself as an alternative path of navigation through the text.

The interplay between Eszter and Plauf's treatment of Eszter's body then becomes especially interesting, specifically Eszter's intrusion into Plauf's private chambers. Plauf, being a part of the same structurally exclusive norm Butler critiques, holds Eszter in a general revulsion.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Plauf bases much of her hatred in how Eszter "refused to acknowledge that... her rude, bumptious and pushy manner and 'gaudy clothes, so befitting her tub-of-lard figure' offended the more respectable families in the neighborhood": a form of distaste both tied to economics and the way Eszter's body occupies space (35). However, the very forms of bodily atypicality Plauf acknowledges are what Eszter herself takes pride in; Eszter's size and shape are markers of her otherness. The later political takeover Eszter stages itself is tied to this; by being societally excluded for her body, she has the power to claim this exclusion, use it as justification for revolutionary action.

Responding to this "heterosexual dyad" imposed by Plauf, Eszter reclaims and recodes insults surrounding her into a source of political authority. Noticing Plauf's resistance to her entering the house, Eszter reflects and empowers herself with the very terms Plauf uses to attack her. Eszter reflects that she was, "in terms of height and body weight, positively gigantic... not to mention the other things," that should together "flatten the resistance of stubborn Mrs Plauf" (35). By claiming body size as a positive attribute ("positively gigantic"), Eszter is able to refute the way her body is objectified and othered in the community. In fact, Eszter asserts power by

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<sup>6</sup> Echoing the sentiments of the town proper, Plauf positions Eszter as someone to be held "at arm's length," referring to her multiple times as a social outcast (35).

positioning herself as a specifically androgynous (or masculinized) force. Eszter's voice, throughout her whole series of interactions with Plauf, is described as variously "ringing," "manly" and "booming"—all attributes she plays up as a way of commanding attention in conversations (35, 37). Even her body, with its "round belly very much like an elderly man's beer gut," is easily writ as a masculine force; together, these traits, both naturally occurring and deliberately performed (e.g., the many instances of Eszter dropping her voice lower to convey solemnity) are a way of counteracting the linguistic violence committed against her (55). Likewise, the intense desire to own that drives her, the other attribute Plauf loathes about Eszter, can be viewed as a response to her existing marginalization, the way her body becomes objectified, depersonalized, and stripped of ownership.<sup>7</sup>

Through these linguistic and bodily differences—despite their shared positions as women in a repressive political climate—Eszter is fundamentally othered from Plauf. Eszter, by occupying an ambiguously-gendered form in a village that processes heterosexual female bodies as disempowered, presents a disruption in the heteronormative world of Krasznahorkai's text, not unlike *The Prince* does. As scholar Jack Halberstam writes in "An Introduction to Female Masculinity," there is something fundamentally threatening and disruptive about othered bodies: when societally enmeshed actors suspect a gender-ambiguous subject of being designated female, one of the first impulses is to "want to punish her for her inappropriate self-preservation" in assuming a less disenfranchised body (Halberstam 23). Hence: Plauf's spite, and Eszter's social marginalization, both forms of depersonalization. Of course, contrarian readings of Eszter's gender performance can also be made, muddying the waters; following the argument

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<sup>7</sup> At the same time, it's important to emphasize that Eszter is not necessarily a fully liberatory figure. Writ by Krasznahorkai as a bodily-othered object, Eszter's portrayal can also tie into fears surrounding the lower class, positioning her as aberrant in a way that condones the economic instability conferred onto her by a broken system.

laid out in Judith Butler's earlier book *Gender Trouble*, the emancipatory struggle of Eszter is one towards the greater enforcement of patriarchal colonialist norms, as well. Noting that "the female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law," Butler brings up the way othered female bodies pose as subversive while still enacting dominant gender roles, something that Eszter does by assuming a more masculine performativity (Butler 126). Regardless, these bodies still fulfill colonized interpretations of identity, enacted upon by depersonalizing forces.

However, despite potentially essentialist frameworks, the text still subverts and decolonizes dominant narratives throughout; Eszter's and *The Prince's* abject forms resist not only gendered readings, but also the categorization of bodies under colonialist frames of understanding. In Ryan Michael Kehoe's article "Necropolitics and Contemporary Hungarian Literature and Cinema," Kehoe, a PhD candidate at Rice University, maps frames of postcolonial discourse onto Hungary and Krasznahorkai's work specifically. The Soviet and post-Soviet Hungary, Kehoe argues, is governed by what Africanist scholar Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics." Writing about the way Hungarian economic and social practices facilitate oppressive technologies and claustrophobic social arrangements, Kehoe draws most specifically on Mbembe's idea that necropolitics consists of a stratified social inequality, the way that "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (qtd. in Kehoe 2). This living dead status, as cited in Kehoe, describes the economic and social confinement of subjects, but also can convey more alien forms, as well. In this context of the living dead, *The Prince's* explicitly non-human body, just as the Hungarian economy, functions essentially within necropower and necropolitical spheres.

Kehoe further identifies this liminal, undead state as a central theme in Krasznahorkai's oeuvre, looking specifically at the later novel *War and War* but acknowledging thematic consistency in this body of work in general. Focusing on how Soviet policy "served as a basis or justification for repressive, sometimes violent interventions into the domestic affairs of the East Central European satellite countries," Kehoe positions Hungary as first a colony and then a postcolony, tying its cultural identity into ideas of necropolitics (3). Krasznahorkai's works, Kehoe argues, in fact serve as "political statements, allegories of national rebirth and renewal, and critiques of global structures of repression" (9). While Kehoe perhaps places too much emphasis on Krasznahorkai as a subversive figure (ignoring the ways his works also bow to traditional orders, norms, and colonized behaviors), his politicization of Krasznahorkai's work is an essential one that can tie much of the author's output, especially *The Melancholy of Resistance*, to a colonial, normative reality. This becomes further evident in looking at how *The Prince* is processed throughout the text, the complex racial and ethnic scapegoating going on subconsciously in the work.

### **Already Other Bodied: The Prince and Necropolitical Sway**

While Eszter is both the colonizer (taking over the town in the explosive finale of the book) and the colonized (remaining essentially subjugated to the dominant social norms of bodies), *The Prince* occupies a less ambiguous territory. Defined in many ways by the racial processing of his body, *The Prince* adopts a more immediately colonized status, drawing his textual power primarily from a subjugated status beyond that which Eszter struggles with. In contrast to the rest of the characters in *Melancholy*, *The Prince* is an *existing* outsider to the village, never a part of the society; because of this othered status, he has fears of colonized,

racialized invaders mapped onto his body by the surrounding villagers in ways Eszter et. al. do not. Indeed, both shielded from public view and positioned as something to be gawked at—bodily marked as other—The Prince becomes reducible to a symbol rather than a human, acted upon by necropower and reduced to a wrathful force.

While The Prince is referenced ambiguously throughout the first few sections of the text, he only appears directly during his portentous, factotum-facilitated interaction with the circus manager.<sup>8</sup> During this conversation, The Prince's visual otherness is repeatedly referenced (ironic, given his body's hiddenness throughout the whole text); this referencing sets up a visual processing and interpretation of his body in ways both complexly entangled and racially charged, putting The Prince in opposition to Eszter and her more ethnically parsable body. Even language separates The Prince; he speaks in "a kind of sharp and sudden chirrup," necessitating the presence of a factotum who translates The Prince's discourse in low and "broken" Hungarian (155). Of course, this brokenness, mirroring much of the disrupted textual environment Krasznahorkai's work is set in, is also a verbal sign of outsider-ness; moreover, it implies a hierarchy of native-ness to the text. While the factotum, unseen but speaking in Hungarian, is registered as a non-native speaker but still engagingly human, The Prince, with his chirruping voice almost unrecognizable as language, is such an alien that he appears illiterate or non-linguistic entirely. In this way, The Prince's outsider status, conveyed not only through body shape but linguistic and vocal differences, essentially denies him the same shared humanity engaged in by the factotum, circus director, and village proper. In many ways, occupying a body

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, even this interaction is potentially colonized; translated by his factotum and then overheard and narrated by another interpolator, Janós, The Prince is separated from his own textual realities through multiple levels. Instead, occupying multiple entangled frames, divorced from his own body or voice, he becomes even more of a scapegoat and ultimately dependent on others interpretations of him proper.

that was inserted into the town for profit and unable to express himself proper, The Prince—despite the power he wields—is a fully colonized subject, victim to necropolitical pressure and reducible to a purely hated, feared symbol.

The Prince's status as a colonized symbol becomes more evident during the moderated conversation between The Prince/Factotum and circus director. While, as mentioned above, their dialogue engages in rhetorics of capital and profitability, there is also a deep-set negotiation of bodily othering and identities within The Prince's narration. From the start of the conversation, The Prince establishes himself as someone much smaller and weaker than the circus director. To wit, the factotum justifies his presence in the crowded caravan bedroom by stating that The Prince "says he's wants me with him because he's afraid the director might drop him" (156).<sup>9</sup> The director also acknowledges this difference in bodies, positioning The Prince as something so othered and atypical as to be held in complete disgust. Referencing the fascination crowds seem to have with his circus attraction, the director discloses his prejudice towards The Prince, explicitly positioning The Prince's economic draw as a contested entity within the colonized, exploitative display of bodies under capitalism:

'His [The Prince's] magnetic power,' the voice rumbled mockingly, 'is a disfigurement! He is an aberration, I'll say it slowly so you can understand it, an ab-ber-ray-shun, who—and he knows this as well as I do—has no knowledge or power. The title of prince,' the voice rang with contempt, 'was one I bestowed on him as a business decision! Tell him that I invented him!' (157)

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<sup>9</sup> While all of The Prince's responses are translated and interpreted by the factotum, for the sake of simplicity this paper assumes that the factotum's interpretations are accurate and can act substitutively for The Prince's comments themselves.

Even The Prince's title—which mockingly echoes overthrown royalties but also positions itself as a form of identity-creation through labeling—is overturned by the director, positioned as a symptomatic part of a “business decision.” As with Plauf's interactions with Eszter, the director attempts to delegitimize any power the Prince may actually yield, establishing him instead as an aberrant form without any real autonomy. Thus, the “inventing” the director claims as his prerogative over The Prince is not only a form of capitalistic identity creation but related to the politics of speaking itself, the director voicing over The Prince as a contested subject. Reducible to a body, The Prince's alien form positions him, to his scopophilic fans and employer, as a necropolitical and postcolonial creature.<sup>10</sup> An outsider, then, The Prince is placed in opposition to the larger village, a fact he seizes on later in his speech.

This outsider status has been interrogated by several Krasznahorkai scholars. John Hodgkins, a professor of English at the University of Rhode Island, reads The Prince as an allegorical figure who *channels* xenophobia to alienate other groups, distancing him from the occupied body he lives within. In his essay “Not Fade Away,” Hodgkins looks specifically at the historical occupation of Hungary by Nazi Germany during World War II as an origin for Krasznahorkai's text, reading The Prince's power as deriving from an “irresistible oracular style” overpowering any physical constrictions, tied only to the “burden of history” (53, 52). Of course, this reading—focusing on The Prince as a symbol of foreign power, not merely foreignness—overlooks the fact that each conversation with The Prince needs to be translated, the complete inability to speak for himself or move of his own autonomy present in the work. Indeed, even in the rest of The Prince's argument, as he articulates his revolutionary anti-capitalist plan—the

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<sup>10</sup> And indeed, much of the circus director's rage seems to be directed at the paired characters' foreignness itself; as when he hollers later that The Prince need to be taught “to speak Hungarian properly,” many if not all of his insults derive from noticing an outsider status (160).

idea that the any form of progress, expansion, or capital is fleeting and illusory—he disputes the superiority of the host country, the factotum noting with finality that:

A town built on lies will continue to be a town built on lies...What they do and what they will do [riot at The Prince's command] are based on lies and false pride. What they think and what they will think are equally ridiculous. They think because they are frightened. Fear is ignorance. He says he likes it when things fall to pieces. Ruin comprises every form of making: lies and false pride are like oxygen in the ice. Making is half: ruin is everything. (Krasznahorkai 160)

While The Prince calls for a destruction of his host country—echoing, certainly, past occupations of Hungary and the country's complicity with international tragedies—it is still difficult to place The Prince himself as an owning force within this destructive praxis. Being again, by mark of his foreignness, unable to talk to the town without translator means that all of The Prince's comments necessitate interpretation; despite encouraging an ostensible reactionary rage, he's too separated (both visually and linguistically) from his audience to undo the colonization of his body, the signifiers of foreignness coded into his own identity.

A more explicitly postcolonial framework is necessary for understanding The Prince and his followers, the power they wield despite a contested identity.<sup>11</sup> Mbembe in "Necropolitics" emphasizes the importance and revolutionary nature of death-drive responses in marginalized populations engaging in and battling against necropower, something The Prince notably demonstrates. Writing about global resistances, Mbembe notes that:

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<sup>11</sup> Occupying postcolonial consciousnesses, The Prince's associates are also linked to a marginalized status. His factotum, and even The Prince's followers (described repeatedly as "dark-skinned hooligans" alongside other embedded ethnic and otherizing signifiers) all exist in segregated populations separate from the wider, colonially-empowered Hungarian village (207).

To a large extent, *resistance and self destruction are synonymous. To deal out death is therefore to reduce the other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flesh*, scattered everywhere and assembled with difficulty before the burial... The body as such is not only an object to protect against danger and death. The body in itself has neither power nor value. (Mbembe 36-7, italics mine)

As such, The Prince, who lives in a body so powerless it's never even shown, argues for a complete destruction that also could contain himself, a form of engaging in resistance against a system prejudiced against him and all foreign-demarcated or body-atypical people. While postcolonial or racial concerns are never voiced explicitly throughout The Prince's speech, they certainly play a part in his isolation and othering in the first place. As such, occupying and resisting with his contested flesh becomes a transgressive, revolutionary act.

Both The Prince and Mrs. Eszter live off of and create aftermaths of violence, drawing on marginalized, demonized statuses to destroy the structures oppressing them. While Eszter is privileged in some ways that The Prince is not, able to casually term him a "monster" in conversation while he remains incapable of speech, both characters are moderated and interpreted on multiple levels (152). Indeed, the characters are even linked in their praxes of violence: the way that through projected villainy their reactions become forms of resistance to the economic, political, and geopolitical realities of the text. While the destruction enacted by The Prince and Eszter may derive from fears of Hungary's general ruination, they nonetheless still articulate processes and aftermaths of resistance; however melancholic, both characters still form ways of escaping containing systems. The fact that these resistances only end in destruction only reemphasizes the malaise the text is trapped within, the necrotic and necropolitical forces—

both feared and actual—acting ultimately upon the community. Because of the stratified inequality within the text, destruction overtakes all.

### **Marginality and the Performance of Destruction**

It's important to re-emphasize that Eszter and The Prince are operating within the larger schema of disruptive political change, acting in many ways as projections of the anxieties surrounding late-80s collapse. As such, while their actions are subversive and revolutionary, they also constitute a destruction of the current order of things. Notably, the endpoint of each of the character's actions is positioned as something violently transgressive against the status quo: The Prince commanding his followers to “tear down everything” and build anew and Eszter's military “*coup de grâce*” following this destruction both are ways of changing a society alienating to them (263, 304). But this revolutionary destruction derives in many ways from a real fear of the infusion of capital and crumbling social relations within Hungary at the time. It's certainly no coincidence that Eszter, for example, fulfills hardly any of Tóth's standards for a traditionally acceptable woman. In fact, both Eszter's and The Prince's performances of identity are so linked to this apocalyptic shift that the destruction itself is partially performative. Just as Eszter performs her gender in both masculine and feminine contexts, and as The Prince capitalizes on his othered body to provoke rioting and a cult of personality, so too do they also perform destruction as an identity.

By relating The Prince and Eszter's rage to their marginalized identity throughout the text, the two becoming allegorical forces of destruction. Certainly, insecurities abound in both characters; the self-constructing rhetoric they engage in throughout the work is shot through with realizations of their own inadequacies. While The Prince understands his identity in theoretical

terms (stating that “all pride is false pride,” and that “the whole does not exist,” beliefs that reduce his individual importance), Eszter performs a more obvious, although still sublimated, identity (160). Underlying her constant self-defense is a fundamental dislike for and uncomfortability with her body; assuming a more male identity, Eszter potentially rejects the ambiguous bodily realm she occupies in favor of a less ambiguous and not as torturous status.

This underlying insecurity is most immediate in Eszter’s mid-evening reflection that “her self-confidence...had been sadly lacking” lately, an acknowledgement that challenges her relationship to her body (40). Eszter’s reclamation of masculine and size-based terminology is still a form of gathering power, of course. However, the frequent reflections she makes on her strength, in this light of self-doubt, becomes as much a way of convincing herself of her worth as others. The praxis and of rage militarized takeover she enforces then becomes a performance; as she is penalized for occupying a contested body (like *The Prince*), the destructive response she forms is a performative, colonized response. As an “other” to society, Eszter’s response of remodeling society is very much a sort of self-legitimization.

It’s worth nothing, considering the masculine identity Eszter potentially occupies, that she is an abandoned woman. Her husband, György, left several years prior to the start of the novel, telling her he “no longer required her household services”— another way of reducing Eszter to a body rather than a human, specifically in this case a provider (39). In one of the novel’s more mordant bits of humor, Eszter reflects on her past history with her husband, his elevated status in town, and her current woes, coming abruptly to the conclusion: “could he [György] be the true enemy?” (39). While she never explicitly dwells on the melancholy or anger resulting from this separation, Eszter still feels some malaise surrounding his departure, another key motivator of her behavior.

In this way, both characters' decisions to *destroy* specifically are linked to their marginal identities and potentially to anxieties about the solidity of the Hungarian state in the first place. By rebelling in the way they do, they destroy much of the extant state culture already there. But also in their rebellion, Eszter and The Prince become scapegoats for fears of ensuing destruction. Of course, because of their differing backgrounds, The Prince's and Eszter's rebellions achieve different results. The Prince, both more ostensibly confident and more bodily excluded from ever fitting in to the dominant culture, has established a practice based on "laying [the town] to waste," as one of his followers puts it after being imprisoned (264). Eszter, however, while also left out of the dominant order of things, is slightly more empowered by the culture and hints more at personal insecurities surrounding her body and outsider status; as such, her resistance—with its militarized "liberation" of the town proper and emphasis on eliminating the "general lack of discipline" in her community—in many ways reinscribes Soviet order, a circular resistance barely altering the status quo (288-9). Both characters' actions, however, are rooted in rebellion and destroying that which came before, as much performed and influenced by their exclusion from society as their own marginalized bodies are.

### **Coda: Destruction in the West and *Melancholy's* Relevance**

Perhaps *Melancholy* can best be understood as a politically ambivalent work, aware of sociopolitical trends but sending a decidedly mixed message when it comes to their implementation. As the text seems to betray a fear of the destruction of dominant Hungarian culture, yet at the same time gives its villainized, socially contested figures a platform to engage in resistance against the culture, multiple mixed signals are sent throughout the work. A political subtext certainly courses through *Melancholy*, with its focus on bodies, commodification, and

economically and socially marginalized forms. But why then has it been received as a primarily apolitical work, especially in the United States? Skidmore professor Robert Boyers, in his book *The Dictator's Dictation*, positions Krasznahorkai's work as being "too often lavished upon a bleak dogmatism, too often harnessed to irreversible patterns of orchestrated chaos or decline" to make any political statement, a sentiment less cynical reviewers have also taken up (177). Indeed, the majority of the critiques *Melancholy* has received, positive and negative, follow similar patterns of depoliticization.

Historicizing the United States and current Western situation may prove a solution to the puzzle of this reception of Krasznahorkai's book. After all, the West is also currently in a situation where an ostensibly oppressive economic and political system seems to be showing signs of distress—manifested especially in widespread economic crises, re-traditionalized gender roles, and increased fear of collapse.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, the United States is itself in a state of unacknowledged crash. Examining the specific forms of oppression and cultural anxiety Krasznahorkai writes about perhaps necessitates examining contemporary Western crises as well; the depoliticization of the work then is a way of avoiding these conversations.

Political philosopher and historian Susan Buck-Morss touches on these avoidance techniques in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, a good frame for understanding the contemporary situation and the historical false binary constructed between the West and East. Examining systems of interrelation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1980s, Buck-Morss posits the importance of distinctly defined enemies in establishing contained political

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<sup>12</sup> Even apocalypse film and art, especially notable in such works as *This is The End* and *Spring Breakers*, seems to be following similarly prophetic patterns in contemporary America as we see in collapse-era Central and Soviet-occupied Europe. While these films concern capital and the end of Western civilization, they have had a contested reception in the United States, either read as apolitical, escapist texts in the case of *This is the End* or overly confusing, morally compromised works in the case of *Spring Breakers*.

systems, avoiding acknowledging similar problems between the two political powers. Drawing especially on the work of Russian literary theorist and philosopher Valerii Podoroga, Buck-Morss lines up one of the chief binaries of Soviet-era Western thought, the national identity:

This [national identity] must be understood in the double sense described by Podoroga, who distinguishes the “enemy” both as a term within the political imaginary and, on a metalevel, as a threat *to* the political imaginary. The first could be termed the normal enemy, which has already been positioned in the imaginary terrain. In contrast, the absolute enemy threatens the coherence of the imaginary system as a whole. So long as the enemy really acts like the enemy, it poses no threat on this second level.

Paradoxically, the threat on the metalevel is that the enemy might disappear. But a threat to what or whom? Clearly to the legitimacy of the sovereign agent... The logic of the argument can be applied to both capitalist and socialist models of mass sovereignty. (13)

Buck-Morss highlights the fundamental fiction inherent in distinctions of “enemy” to the functioning of both the West and the Soviet Union. Just as characters throughout *Melancholy* project their fears onto Eszter and especially The Prince, so too does the West, according to Buck-Morss, create an enemy in the Soviet Union to “act like an enemy,” engaging in the political imaginary to support current, oppressive systems of governance. Within the work itself, we even see this false opposition in Eszter’s reaction to The Prince, terming him a “monster” despite their similarly isolated bodies (and likewise marginalized statuses within the dominant society).

But also what Buck-Morss describes is the process of isolating fears about one’s own country, a sort of mutual projection explicitly avoiding acknowledging similarity to one’s enemy. In this light, the disappearance of an enemy becomes especially dangerous, depriving dominant

countries of a place to project anxieties about their current state. The greater fear that Buck-Morss talks about, that post-political disappearance of the enemy, in many ways mirrors the contemporary situation in the United States, giving us a model finally for reading the work's reception. Perhaps *Melancholy* has been read so apolitically in the United States because "the enemy," namely the Soviet Union, has disappeared. Unable to project the critiques the work makes or is influenced by—racial and gender segregation, the influx of capital, and the dehumanization of life under necropolitical force—onto any real enemy, the novel becomes potentially more subversive and contested as a work. Krasznahorkai's current popularity within literary subculture is testimony to the relatability of these themes; the lack of focus on his novels' political content is testimony to their political importance.

Regardless of reception, *Melancholy of Resistance*, with its focus again on intensely stratified gender roles, racially and ethnically motivated separatism, and economic destruction, is a text speaking strongly to the current Western moment. The avoidance to treat it as such can be linked to that same process of enemy creation, realizing that if we read it politically the construct of the benevolent "West" becomes destabilized. Of course, *Melancholy* is itself also a compromised text; Krasznahorkai, by pointing out structural inequalities in Hungarian and global society, in many ways enacts them. Internalized realities of racism, sexism, and unequal dynamics of ownership course through the novel, often appearing to mixed or ambiguous aim. Yet at the same time, these themes of politicality—Eszter's and The Prince's occupied bodies, their processing under capitalistic systems and the dominant Hungarian social orders at the time—are essential to an understanding of Krasznahorkai's work. In depicting a world where injustice is perpetuated cyclically, even as he pins a scapegoated reality onto marginal figures in

his text, Krasznahorkai creates a novel that speaks to the current moment, in the West as much as the occupied former Soviet Union.

The apocalyptic subtexts of the work are perhaps *more* powerful, in fact, because they refuse a traditionalized, linear reading. As Krasznahorkai writes, focusing on the cyclic nature of these injustices and resistances:

People are talking about apocalypse and the last judgement, because they do not know that there will be neither apocalypse nor last judgement...such things would serve no purpose since the world will quite happily fall apart by itself and go to wrack and ruin so that everything may begin again, and so proceed *ad infinitum*, and this is perfectly clear (103).

By advancing a worldview where these cycles of ruin are inescapable, *Melancholy of Resistance* posits a type of ruin more germane to our contemporary climate. In many ways, throughout the West and Hungary, oppressions of the type Krasznahorkai writes about seem inescapable, unalterable, and ruinous. There could be hope, however: Eszter and The Prince, even operating within schemas of oppression, are able to articulate revolutionary action. Perhaps too so can we, in the heterogeneous, crisis-ridden West; even in ruin and destruction perhaps there exist some sproutings of hope and resistance. Ruin might be all, but that doesn't mean it's all that is next.

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