

ABSTRACT

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ALTERNATIVE GENEALOGIES AND SELF-
REFERENTIALISM

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Since the 1989 publication of *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, discourse on seminal African literary texts has focused on their ability to “write back” to the European canon. Using this common trope, a seminal African text is understood as a response to demeaning representations of Africans in the European literary canon. However, writing back privileges European literature by treating it as the source, or “parent texts,” of African literature. Within the last five years, critics like Evan Mwangi and Ode Ogede have begun to question whether African literature needs to be defined largely in reference to Western works. They have argued that the writing back paradigm forces African literature into an inequitable and asymmetrical relation to European texts. My dissertation, “African Literature as World Literature: Alternative Genealogies and Self-Referentialism,” extends this project to offer theoretical and methodological alternatives by bridging African literary studies with postcolonial theory and the current world literature debate to create previously obscured cultural, political and

literary genealogies of African novels. I argue that complex intertextual genealogies generated from specific knowledge provide African source material for more complete readings of African novels. This project critiques the temporally and geographically myopic approaches of Mwangi and Ogede to reposition African literature in a globalized context by not only dismantling the theoretical assumptions of a center/margin paradigm but also positioning African literature as a sovereign entity in world literature.

AFRICAN LITERATURE AS WORLD LITERATURE: ALTERNATIVE
GENEALOGIES AND SELF-REFERENTIALISM

By

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Introduction

The impetus for this project comes from two critical blind spots that I perceive in the study of African literature: the overreliance on writing back as a method for reading African literature and the lack of African-specific readings for individual seminal African novels. Since the 1989 publication of *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, discourse on seminal African literary texts has focused on their ability to “write back” to the European canon. Using this common trope, a seminal African text is understood as a response to demeaning representations of Africans in the European literary canon. However, writing back privileges European literature by treating it as the source, or “parent texts,” of African literature. Within the last few years a few critics have begun to question whether African literature needs to be defined largely in reference to Western works. They have argued that the writing back paradigm forces African literature into an inequitable and asymmetrical relation to European texts. “African Literature as World Literature: Alternative Genealogies and Self-Referentialism,” extends this project to offer theoretical and methodological alternatives by bridging African literary studies with postcolonial theory and current debates about world literature to provide a more extended genealogy for previously obscured cultural, political and literary genealogies of African novels. I argue that complex intertextual genealogies generated from

specific knowledge provide African source material for more complete readings of African novels. This project dismantles the theoretical assumption of center/margin inherent in writing back while positioning African literature as a sovereign entity in world literature.

In rethinking writing back I turn to indigenous African texts to uncover alternative, fittingly African, literary genealogies. My intervention does not preclude the influence of European texts but proposes an alternative conceptual framework that shifts the dominant paradigm of these fields away from Eurocentric readings. Several scholars have questioned the usefulness of writing back as an approach to African literature. The two most important to discuss here are Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Evan Mwangi. Caminero-Santangelo's 2005 *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality* also seeks to wrest the meaning of books assigned to writing back away from the trope. However, his project seeks to rescue them not to interrogate them for insight into their Africanness but how they interact with the works of Conrad beyond simply writing back. Additionally, Caminero-Santangelo refers to intertextuality only in passing and never comes to terms with the slippery nature of its definition and usage whereas I engage intertextuality beginning with its Kristevan theoretical origins though to its usage today.¹ Evan Mwangi provides a much more theoretically

¹ Quite strangely, Kristeva and Bakhtin are only mentioned twice in the entire book and a working definition is never established.

sound engagement in his 2009 *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*. Mwangi writes on specific African literatures for his work, focusing mostly on literature from east Africa written in local languages and more broadly on African literature from the mid-1980's onward. To simplify a complex book, he argues that these literatures are interested in local issues and other African literature, and thus write "back to self" rather than seeking identity via a discursive relationship with the West. Mwangi's insights are impressive but I find the limits of his study somewhat narrow. His argument that East African writing in African languages as well as African literature of the 1980's are primarily concerned with local issues is an important contribution but does not address the most seminal works quickly forming an African literary canon. Mwangi completes his task strikingly well but broadening the scope of his study would make it much more widely applicable. My project, then, attacks the problem of writing back at ~~its core~~ by interrogating works that stand as examples *par excellence* of the writing back tradition. Unlike Caminero-Santangelo and Mwangi, I do not replace one Eurocentric (or Conrad-centric) model with another Eurocentric one and I do not rely on works that operate in temporal or geographical locations that predispose them to gesture towards early African works. Anglophone African novels from the 1960's are assumed to default to intertextual relationships with the Western canon because of a lack of African literary precursors. I dispute this assumption by

venturing that those novels valued primarily as paragons of the writing back form are more fully understood as participating in a complex intertextuality with specific African texts, literary forms, histories and specific societal movements.

Far from a level-headed critique of the West (and even further from an examination of Africa for its own sake) African novels are often read via writing back by positioning postcolonial Africa in an adversarial relationship with the West. The highly antagonistic relationship established by writing back perhaps is understandable given that it takes its name from a Salman Rushdie piece in *The Times* entitled “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance.” This is not to say that Africa does not or should not demonstrate animosity towards the West but that locking African texts in a writing back paradigm leaves room for little else besides nativist views such as *Négritude*. Byron Caminero-Santangelo takes on this very point by crafting his study to “resist representations of the Western and the Post-colonial as opponents forever engaged in the same battle” (2). Unlike my project, however, Caminero-Santangelo is not interested in relegating the West in the patchwork of intertextualities that constitute the networks at play in works said to write back. Instead he wants the West/non-West relationship to move beyond a simple animosity so that the relationships between African texts and the works of Conrad form a relationship more complex than simple correction or resistance. His study represents an important moment of African literary

scholarship because it undermines the assumed correctness in the field of writing back methodology. However, he unnecessarily unravels writing back only to the point of realizing various alternative Western intertextualities rather than moving the intertextual conversation back to Africa. One poignant example comes when he decries the connection between *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Heart of Darkness* as “yet another instance of postcolonial writing back, in which fairly straightforward cultural binaries are preserved” only to extend his focus to how Aidoo’s novel also uses similar narrative structures to those found in *Heart of Darkness* (72).² For Caminero-Santangelo, the problem is not then that too much emphasis has been placed on the West in reading Conrad (in fact he produces more in his book) but that the wrong kind of discourse linking African literature to Western literature has developed.

When reading African literary criticism that compares a text to the Western canon or positions it as a response to a larger discursive tradition of representing Africa I recognize a troubling tautology. Africa was formed as a subject because of a colonizing mission that understood it as a single entity, even when those actually living there did not. Therefore, Africa itself began as a Western idea. When African writers first asserted Africanness as a positive trait it came as reclamation, a correction to a long Western tradition of representing Africa and Africans

² My second chapter is in fact in large part an argument that the narrative structure most at play in *Our Sister Killjoy* is the *fefewo* form of the Akan of West Africa. Caminero-Santangelo does not address this form, sticking instead to Conrad’s influence.

as inferior and savage. As an initial gesture this is a reasonable and necessary strategy for correcting a dehumanizing Western mission. However, the subject of such a discussion becomes not the way Africa articulates itself for itself but the way the West sees Africa articulating itself. How the West interpolates Africa should not be the primary concern of African literature or African literary criticism. How African literature articulates Africanness for its own sake seems to me a more fitting subject. Englishness or Russianness is not created in their respective literatures as a means for explaining themselves to Africa, or anyone else for the large part, and therefore once the initial moment of correction is acknowledged, African literary criticism must be interested primarily in the self-referentialism of African literature and secondarily with its relationship to the West. However, the focus on how Africa projects itself for the world to see has carried on in the continued use of writing back because Africa's availability for the West continues to be its main value, even inside the field of African literary studies.

Writing back as a postcolonial phenomenon is generally understood to be a method by which a non-Western text responds to previous Western texts to address, problematize and challenge them. Usually this entails corrections of misrepresentation.³ In this project though I also consider writing back as a way of reading that can be applied by a sympathetic critic. Writing back is a method by which

³ A full explanation is provided in the following chapter.

critics *choose* to read African literature rather than simply a kind of self-apparent writing done by authors. African writers do reference or respond to the Western canon but as a methodology it has so overwhelmed readings of salient African texts that few readings do not use it as a central mechanism of analysis. As I demonstrate with lengthy literature reviews in the following chapters, writing back has overridden African literary criticism to the point of being ever-present. This ever-present nature has meant that writing back is not explicitly announced when utilized. The conundrum is that as postcolonial theory writing back is rather out of fashion but in practice it is prevalent. Writing back is the theory that dare not speak its name but will not depart. And while I do not deny its previous usefulness or the influence of Western texts on African ones, at this point in the development of African literary study it is an outmoded approach.

Why though does writing back, despite its unfashionable status, persist in dominating criticism of individual novels? Writing back is so attractive because it represents a site of resistance within a conversation the non-West had no choice in joining. Africa was forced into a comparative relationship with the West via colonialism so it is only right that it respond to the inequality of that relationship directly. This new representation trap laid out by writing back does not degrade Africa directly but makes it relevant only in conversation with the West and of little importance on its own accord as a subject. *Thing Fall Apart* for

example only gains critical traction as a repudiation of colonialism, Conrad, explorers' accounts, missionary expeditions and Western ethnographies, not as part of an already self-constituting African literature. The tautology of writing back means that a question aimed at a novel which ponders *Things Fall Apart's* African literary sources goes unasked. This project asks that and many other such questions to contend that not only is writing back ill equipped to analyze African literature but that a rich self-referential mode of reading African literature that outstrips it is possible. Rather than merely an initial move in the immediate post-independence era, writing back has stagnated as the primary means by which Africa's literature is assessed. In a recent issue of PMLA Nirvana Tanoukhi summarizes this kind of stagnation in regards to African narrative strategies by writing that each approach "begins as a robust contextual strategy" but "transform[s] into an automatically enacted contextual scheme" (670). Tanoukhi is writing about a lack of development in character types and motifs but her insight can be applied fittingly to writing back because rather than the regular cycle of one model innovating on the last, writing back represents stalled innovation. To put it simply, no other model has emerged to challenge and transform, despite its limited usefulness. Tanouhki also asks a relevant question for writing back: "In place of old questions of why forms are born, a new question emerges: how do certain formal strategies ...fade while others appear made to last?" (671).We know why

and how writing back was formed but what is less clear is why it is understood as “made to last.” This project explores that phenomenon but also ultimately offers new strategies that may or may not be made to last but whose necessity to be born is certain.

In this way the second blind spot of African literary studies, the lack of specific African readings of seminal African texts, is a product of the first. The end product of African literary study using writing back has been a rich conversation concerning its relationship to the West. While an initially necessary conversation it has resulted often in a dearth of scholarship that looks to local African literature, history and social texts as part of an African-specific genealogy that operates largely outside of a relationship to the West. Instead the world must always be present but the focus remain on Africa. Rather than an essentializing impulse this represents a move towards the specific. African novels do not simply come from Africa. They come from specific nations, regions, tribes and linguistic groups all imbued with specificity that does not come to the forefront when considered African in a response to the West. A reading of African literature as self-referential and self-constituting has been delayed by the compulsion to make African texts write back to Western ones. This project articulates specificity for the most seminal African texts as a larger methodology for the field. Beyond this essential move, this project also considers how non-Western texts can productively speak with one another without the use of a common Western center at

all. In this way, African literature begins to enter the emerging field of world literature not as a convenient other for the West to better understand itself against but as an independent field with complications, accessible and inaccessible, for the Western reader.

Intertextuality

One of the primary tools that I will use to develop alternatives to writing back will be intertextuality and its interlocutor the palimpsest. To help open up these more complex intertextual readings of novels read primarily as writing back to an imagined Euro-American center, Michel Foucault's genealogy proves a useful starting point. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault crystallizes his sense of genealogy as "gray, meticulous and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (76). Beyond clearly describing the process of palimpsest creation, Foucault refigures the ways in which history is constructed.⁴ He rejects a linear, somewhat passive, mode of retracing history as an evolution of rationally inevitable trends (ala acultural modernity) and instead presses for an understanding of history that posits it as the result of contingent turns. History does not follow a

⁴ Because I am interested in the temporal dimensions of knowledge, I apply Foucault's genealogy rather than archeology here. However, Foucault's archeology is also applicable as an unearthing of artifacts to characterize a singular paradigm. Therefore, the individual examples of texts and historical imperatives can be termed archeology but their weaving into a previously unexamined manner rely heavily on genealogy. How this latter move constitutes a network is much more central to my concerns than the individual moments, which while not entirely agreed upon provide much more stable reference points.

logical progression, for Foucault, but plays out in a series of semi-related but not totally causal forces. Similarly, cultural models of modernity disavow an inevitable temporal model that borrows evolutionary terms to conflate modernity with progress and improvement, or Darwinian “fitness.” For Foucault, the progression in this haphazard manner makes tracking history more difficult than connecting phenomenon in causal chains or placing them on a static scale. Causal chains are the hallmark of acultural models of modernity and often stand as prerequisites for continuation on the modernization track. Foucault’s genealogy forgoes the search for origins in history, and any claim on a disinterested stance, to explore the myriad of connections and networks that overlap and sometimes contradict in an effort to expose the power systems behind “truth” in history.

Although my project here is not the tracking of history or the full scope of Foucault’s genealogy, I am interested in the ways that texts confined mainly to the writing back paradigm create meaning outside of a relation to an “original” Western “parent text” through a larger system and how those texts operate within it and forge alternative modernities, just as cultural models exposes the pretension to single truth in modernity. In genealogy, Foucault posits history as non-linear and dependent on a series of transitions that do not evolve or progress but that form a difficultly tracked network of sometimes conflicting and contradictory forces acting on history. Similarly, over determining

meaning in certain postcolonial texts by tying them tightly to European texts, reenacts this problematic creation of meaning because writing back proposes a single, or primary, origin or cause of a text's production of meaning, when a more complex network of texts stand behind textual utterances. That is, rather than a preprogrammed response that by its very nature as response must adhere to the limitations of an original enunciation, I contend that these texts are created by a multifarious intersection of other texts that diverge sharply from Europe as a center for meaning. Not only is the original European enunciation misidentified (both as a primary influence and as original) but a Eurocentric critical paradigm has unnecessarily limited the scope of criticism of African novels.

In terms of mapping genealogy for literature, Julia Kristeva's intertextuality extends Foucault's argumentation by positing that literary texts create meaning as the result of a play of the history, society, and other literary texts outside of strictly casual models or evolutions. This play, for Kristeva, is a dialogue between texts through a continual inscription and erasure process that refigures the borders and relationships between and within texts to continually shift meaning. In a sense, then, texts are erased and rewritten in relation to other texts to the point that no text can ever be said to be stable; texts are not the result of production but always being produced. A text, for Kristeva, is an intersection of other texts in which each absorbs the other. However,

texts work via a system of signs within a textual system (i.e. the novel) and strictly speaking influences and sources from other books are irrelevant within this system, based as it is on structural linguistics. Thus, intertextuality as first conceived by Kristeva occurs when one system of signs transposes another. For example, Kristeva in “The Bounded Text” seeks to establish a typology concerning the intertextuality of extra-novelistic textual sets and novelistic sets. Kristeva’s work is heavily influenced by Bakhtin’s dialogism, but rather than two voices, many voices create a plurality of textual connections in a given text. The difference between Kristeva and Bakhtin are paramount though and often missed in the many misuses of intertextuality as a catch-all for any relationship between texts and even as a substitute for allegory. Literary studies involving intertextuality are plagued with references to the term without a clear working definition. Kristeva is not primarily concerned with what one novel borrows from another or how one influences another. Her primary concern is much more theoretical in trying to consider the way anything that might be termed a text, the smallest unit being a single word, interacts with any other text. She leans heavily on linguistics to explain how texts are imbued with other texts such as history and society. However, this has been largely lost in literary deployments of the terms that substitute it for influence and allusion between whole literary works. This is not to infer that Kristeva or poststructuralists do not pause the chain of endless

signifiers to contemplate intertextual meaning. However, the practice of Kristeva's intertextuality has led less to insightful readings of texts and toward the application and reification of the theory through an endless and often arbitrary poststructural play that privileges proving the instability of all interpretation while often failing to offer its own. This is due in large part to the poststructural fixation with linguistics. Kristeva embraces the abstraction of linguistics, while Bakhtin is concerned with semantic content and societal specificity. This tendency towards abstraction and unfixed signifiers has invited the bulk of criticism of intertextuality. Critics wonder whether a system in which any text can seemingly be tied to any other regardless of semantic content really offers anything other than the broad notion that all texts are linked and therefore "in play" and "in-process" at all times.

Bakhtin sees the relationship between various texts, be they historical or social, as functioning on a semantic field that produces meaning and leads to interpretation whereas Kristeva gestures to an ever-delayed series of signs that adheres to a linguistic model that sees little use in determining meaning (in the worst tradition of post-structuralism) beyond the ability to destabilize any stable signifier and signified relationship. Therefore it is to Bakhtin that critics often turn to rescue intertextuality from a poststructural nightmare of endless empty

signs.⁵ In keeping with Bakhtin, Spivak aptly puts it in “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching” that the critic must “restore reference in order that intertextuality may function,” clearly referencing the haphazard ways in which intertextuality has come to mean any interaction between texts *and* Kristeva’s rigid focus on linguistics. Spivak does not necessarily strictly practice this restoration of reference but her remark is aimed squarely at Kristevan intertextuality as not grounded in the ethical, aesthetic or semantic. Whereas Spivak and other postcolonial scholars (Achille Mbembe in particular) express the ethical implications of black African subjects trying to write themselves into a critical colonial and postcolonial discourse that does not recognize non-whites as subjects, Kristevan intertextuality largely ignores this lack of equity and the requisite political and aesthetic imperatives derived from them.⁶

Each act of reading, for Kristeva, figures anew the textual references contained in a single text. Therefore, the text remains constantly in flux as a “subject in process”. As a critic concerned with

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⁶ Kristeva addresses marginalization later in her career when handling abjection, though in a strictly Western feminist mode that rarely intersects with a postcolonial one.

psychoanalytical approaches, Kristeva continues in this vein to unpack the ways that this kind of reading impacts a central process in the individual mind by arguing that readers strip meaning to “zero” to begin a “reconstitution” process in which a multitude of connotations populate the text as “subject in process” (134). This “zero” process and the subsequent reconstitution reflects the way that I approach texts tied to writing back because a text’s connections are ever evolving rather than fixed in a single other text. I also propose a zero process not unlike Kristeva’s in that I want to question the fundamental story about African literature and its criticism that we have inherited. Assumptions about origins, boundaries, authority and relationships between African texts themselves and between non-African texts need to be fundamentally reestablished via a new intertextuality. Unfortunately, intertextuality has been corrupted in criticism and is often used to mean texts that intentionally allude to and reference other texts as a way for critics to reach back for direct influence. This simplified version of intertextuality that searches out allusion does not align with Kristeva’s intertextuality and over the last forty years has emptied the term for critical purposes.⁷

⁷ Although completely unpacking Kristeva’s intertextuality is not my project here, I would note that this interplay of texts happens on what Kristeva terms the geno-textual level – a textual level that engenders or causes the actual linguistic text, or phono-text, to emerge.

The Palimpsest

Foucault and Kristeva's visual markers of "parchments ...scratched over" and "subject in process" respectively evoke the image of a constantly rewritten and multilayered palimpsest. Traditionally, palimpsests were parchments that were written on, scraped clean and then written on again. However, even to the naked eye, occasionally, the original texts over time became visible again through oxidization and the aging processes. In other texts, only modern x-ray technology has allowed for the underlying texts to become visible. The most famous case of these is the Archimedes palimpsest on which was uncovered a previously lost mathematical text. The texts embedded on these historical palimpsests are unrelated to each other and their inclusion in the same space is coincidental. For example, the Archimedes's palimpsest contained a 10th century mathematical text and an unrelated 12th central liturgical text on top of it. Therefore, physical palimpsests are useful in explicating the writing/erasure act and the non-causal layering of texts, but in relation to palimpsest theory the similarities end there because palimpsest theory concerns itself with the interplay between texts. Thus, a text is not a palimpsest only because it is erased and overwritten but because of the relationship between what is erased and what is overwritten, a process that opens up a multitude of influences and relations.

The inability to erase completely on a palimpsest has been recognized in postcolonial studies by Jose Rabasa and Gayatri Spivak. However, my use here should be differentiated from their use because for Spivak and Rabasa the concept of the palimpsest is useful to highlight the process by which colonialism attempts to silence unauthorized narratives and how, despite colonialism's best efforts, authorized and dominant discourses cannot keep colonized narratives completely in check. Spivak has noted that she uses a palimpsest model "not to describe 'things as they really were,'" but rather to "offer an account of how an explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one" ("Can" 281). Thus, colonized narratives continuously seep through authorized colonial texts to undermine the colonial project and problematize the silencing project of colonialism, without undoing it. Although for my purpose this formulation is not the payoff, it is not at odds with what I propose. Spivak and Rabasa approach the palimpsest as a way to uncover lost explanations for normative colonial narratives, while I am interested in this partial recovery process *and* other factors that influence the production of meaning in postcolonial texts. That is, the normalization of colonial narratives is one of many fields on which meaning is produced in palimpsest-based reading, as they overlap with each other and other societal, historical, and literary texts. For Spivak and Rabasa, colonialism acts as a layer that must be scratched through to reveal hidden voice; for my purposes the palimpsest makes possible

and opens up a more complex dialogue with various codes, not only the colonial project of silencing the colonized.

To concretely distinguish between the various uses of the palimpsest, I use Sarah Dillon's "palimpsestuousness." For Dillon, palimpsestuousness implies the recognition that texts are written on top of one another and that the intertextual interplay at work is Foucauldian, demonstrating that "at the heart of things are the dissension of other things" (Dillon 8). This dissension, for me, problematizes postcolonial writing back criticism because rather than focusing on the oscillation between two texts it allows varied texts to dissent the stable signifying system established by writing back. Far more useful than writing back for my understanding here, is Dillon's "reciprocal elucidation" which "enables a reinscription of the palimpsest" in that palimpsestuousness is not an attempt to linearly develop a mode of reading, but exactly to avoid in reading a reliance on essence, identity and "truth." This is not arbitrary contrariness, but a practice that dismantles evolutionary epistemological schemes, like writing back, in favor of loose involution. Such an involution may not form a tidy codified dialogue between texts but does bring under consideration elements previously disparate to writing back without the absolute arbitrariness of actual palimpsests. Therefore, even palimpsestuousness itself is not finalized but undertaken with the full knowledge that "writing about the palimpsest is writing on the palimpsest" in a constant reimagining of

each text (Dillon 85). The readings herein then are not ossified finalities but themselves layers on a critical palimpsest. The influence of Kristeva's subject in process and Foucault's genealogy creates a palimpsestuous field that can accommodate the influences of the been-to, modernity, and various temporal and spatial shifts required to reimagine a different space for so-called writing back novels. My "palimpsestuous" approach resists a surface reading by tracking specific local African textual influences to demonstrate how considering them in an African context produces readings that complicate and surpass those informed by writing back theory.

The above sense of intertextuality, the palimpsest and palimpsestuousness is deployed throughout this project in a number of ways to initially challenge writing back and to later suggest viable alternatives. In the first chapter, "Writing a Crowd into Being: Self-Referentialism in Early African Fiction as Alternative to Conrad in *Things Fall Apart*" it is at work in the way that dissent against the reliance on *Heart of Darkness* in reading *Things Fall Apart* and the loose configuration (rather than a replacement hierarchy) of alternative genealogies (like Foucault's sense of genealogy) is entangled in multiple texts, geographies and histories rather than in the decidedly disentangled reliance on a single parent text. Chapter one challenges the foundation of writing back by addressing the overwhelming Conrad-centric reading of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) that permeates criticism of the

most seminal African novel to date. As the most widely read African novel inside and outside Africa, Achebe's novel is a natural starting point. As Gaurav Desai points out, for many, the history of African literature begins with *Things Fall Apart* and most seminal criticism of this novel relies on comparisons to earlier European texts while eliding any sense of the novel as a manifestation of an already extant African literary tradition. While texts like *Mister Johnson*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *How I Found Livingstone* are sometimes deployed the critical focus has centered on Conrad. I argue that earlier African texts such as Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1931), Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) and J.E. Casey-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) create an intra-African network of meaning largely closed off from Western reference. This chapter takes the provocative hypothetical question "What if we abandoned a reliance on European literature when reading *Things Fall Apart*?" and proposes concrete genealogies that rival those of the European canon. By demonstrating the impact of these works' narrative strategies and anti-colonial ideology, this chapter challenges the dominant criticism on Achebe's novel to incorporate African literary source material. Moreover, this chapter is an opening challenge to the field of African literary studies in that it takes the most important novel in African literature as a test case and argues that if *Things Fall Apart* as the standard bearer for the African novel participates in a previously unacknowledged African literary genealogy then the works that come after it can also be read

similarly. The product of this chapter is not to expunge Europe as an influence but to remove it as a crutch on which African literary study must constantly lean.

Moving on to how often-overlooked formal African structures contribute to a palimpsestuous reading, the second chapter, “Writing Back to Themselves: ‘Been-to’ Modernity in the Literature of Africans in Europe,” demonstrates how specific African literary forms manifest themselves in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). Both novels feature protagonists who journey to Europe and back in the tradition of what has been termed the “been-to” in Africa. However, literary criticism treats both novels almost exclusively as reversals of *Heart of Darkness*. I complicate this reading by demonstrating how Aidoo’s use of the Akan narrative structure of the *fefewo* and Salih’s deployment of the *hakawati* storytelling traditions complicate the teleological structure emphasized in the critical focus on the category of the “been-to.” Not only does this chapter demonstrate that another generation of African literature is better read via African source texts but it brings formal African narrative structures into play. *Our Sister Killjoy* is clearly not a novel though it is usually read as such to rationalize a comparison with *Heart of Darkness* while *Season of Migration to the North* has a direct address style reminiscent of particular Arabic storytelling structures that is often overlooked for its novelistic form. This chapter challenges the forms of

two renowned African texts to demonstrate the much elided presence of African literary forms present in texts mischaracterized as novels. As the first chapter is an opening salvo in a larger project to reconsider African genealogies for works beyond *Things Fall Apart*, this chapter proposes that these works are only two in a larger field that can be reconsidered for their underlying forms. Form as a local concept has been largely overlooked, except in relation to folklore and parable in West African literature, and I argue that form needs to be reasserted in the field as a critical category.

My third chapter, “Reconciling Journeys to the Interior: Intertextualities, Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacock* and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise*,” seeks new texts that do not need to be revealed via a scrapping away. This chapter investigates the parameters of a local and yet global African literature. I demonstrate that rather than taking up a typical European journey to the interior of Africa, *Paradise* (1994) embeds late nineteenth-century Swahili language prose narratives to create a previously unrecognized Swahili literary genealogy. While focusing on this local tradition, my argument takes on a global perspective by reallocating the imagined resolution of ethnic conflict in Guyana in Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) as a model for elucidating the tenuous cultural milieu of East Africa in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Tanzanian novel *Paradise*. Ultimately I develop an argument for the specificity of African contexts while acknowledging African literature

as part of a larger postcolonial and world literature movement that often circumvents the European canon for meaning production. This chapter is an attempt to offer alternative methods of reading African novels. The previous two chapters create alternative genealogies and bring elided forms into view in a kind of recovery project. This chapter moves beyond such re-Africanizing of African texts to create new global networks of meaning. I ask what we gain when we forgo a European center altogether and read works from various locales whose situations merit comparison. When an African text is read against a Caribbean one rather than a European one different networks of meaning emerge. The nature of these networks and their insight for African literature do not eschew the local for a base universalism but articulate a localness compatible with worldliness.

My final chapter, “Does the World Include Africa? The Place of African Literature in World Literature,” asks how we can imagine the place of African literature within the current debates about world literature. By mining foundational texts by Casanova, Damrosch and Moretti of the new world literature movement I argue that the world literature debate has largely ignored African literature and the specific contexts from which it emerges. Still inherently problematic in its Eurocentrism, world literature has yet to come to a pragmatic understanding of how the local and the global function together yet differently in Africa. I suggest the “theory of everything” conundrum

currently under consideration in astrophysics for world literature to highlight texts that circulate in both a worldly and local way. These worldly yet local texts, such as *Allah in not Obliged* and *Sozaboy*, do not shed their localness for a worldliness that makes them “ready-mades,” or texts that reinforce preconceived Western notions about Africa. They artfully operate in two spheres with different modes of operation. Actual “ready-mades” though such as *Beast of No Nation* and *Long Way Gone* continue the 19th-century Western focus on ethnography when considering the non-Western while ultimately only reinforcing prescribed stereotypes. This “ready-made” phenomenon is particularly evident in fiction and literature by and about child soldiers in Africa. As an alternative to this circulation I look back at the highly successful Heinemann African Writer’s Series and the manner in which texts with specific local contexts were circulated around Africa and the globe. I cast this method of circulation though as inherently political, a charge avoided at all cost in current world literature to argue that world literature ultimately requires a postcolonial approach to appropriately incorporate the unique situation of African literature. This chapter is meant to consider how once writing back is overcome how does African literature interact productively with the world (including the West).

Overall this project contests the tendency towards sedimentation that has occurred in Africa literary studies with its continued usage of writing back by delineating this sedimentation and then experimenting

with different transnational and global approaches as alternatives. I deliberately attempt to open up African literary studies to keep the field of inquiry diverse, mobile and open to new configurations and reroutings. In the not-too-distant-past it would have been hard to imagine African literary studies ossifying around a series of texts and de facto methodologies but this is precisely what has taken place. To some degree this is inevitable and even necessary, but it must also express itself as elastic and open to new and exciting areas of inquiry. In due course “African Literature as World Literature: Alternative Genealogies and Self-Referentialism” expands the projects of African literary studies, postcolonial studies and world literature by expanding their kens to new methodologies, geographies and genealogies to ultimately preserve the characteristic dynamism of each.

Writing a Crowd into Being: Self-Referentialism in Early African Fiction as Alternative to Conrad in Things Fall Apart

There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like. Just as in corrupt, totalitarian regimes, those who exercise power over others can do anything. They can bring out crowds of demonstrators whenever they need them. In Nigeria it is called renting a crowd. Has Joyce Cary rented Joseph Conrad's crowd?

-Chinua Achebe, "The Empire Fights Back"

For better or worse the most read and discussed African novel ever written, *Things Fall Apart*, remains largely defined in terms of its relationship with the Western canon. Because postcolonial theory denies the possibility of essential collective identities and often celebrates the hybrid and exiled author and text to dismantle any clear sense of "us" and "them," one cannot maintain a simple solidified Africanness in reading a book like Achebe's. At the same time, postcolonial theory has not completely moved beyond recognizing the importance of the colonizer/colonized, and reifies an oppositional relationship between Western and non-Western by embracing the trope of the colonized "writing back" to colonizer as a way to empower the former. For these reasons many non-Western colonial and postcolonial novels have been read as an attempt by subaltern groups to make their voices heard by problematizing the normative literary representations of them in Western literature. In this way, *Things Fall Apart* stands in good company as part of a postcolonial tradition of redress. However, where this novel departs

from most, besides being perhaps the most read non-Western Anglophone novel, is the specificity of its tie to the West.

Things Fall Apart is consistently analyzed in reaction to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. This is not to say that serious scholarship outside of this mode of reading has not occurred but one cannot deny the persistent presence of Conrad and Cary when approaching this novel. I will discuss the various reasons behind this phenomenon, some of Achebe's own making, but foremost among these is the question of influence. Where did Achebe, an "English subject" in Nigeria, draw from to compose this compelling and seminal novel? The simple, and too easy, answer is the Western literary tradition and the English canon in particular. This approach assigns *Things Fall Apart* to "minor" literature status. This linking has been imagined in a typical minor/major or center/margins way in which an underrepresented group makes its representation felt by the major/center. That is, the standard, and somewhat beleaguered, postcolonial Manichean trope of colonizer/colonized and former colonizer/former colonized has been applied to demonstrate that Achebe on the margins resists, or "writes back" to, the demeaning representations of Africans. Although Cary cannot be dismissed, Achebe has been critically linked so adamantly with Joseph Conrad that the two form a central axis for the field; Conrad as the author of the most critically acclaimed English fiction on Africa of the 19th and 20th century

and Achebe as the chief architect of undermining and redressing those representations while building a founding African literature.

This chapter refigures *Things Fall Apart* to rely less on the English canon and Conrad in particular towards an engagement with early African literature. While I am not interested in an essential African/Nigerian/Ibo reading of the novel, I do suggest that a set of relations hitherto understudied demonstrate that Achebe's novel may best be considered as one integral step in the midst of the development of African literature rather than its genesis, as he is commonly cast. Grounding Achebe as part of a larger tradition undermines the common argument that Achebe is largely reliant on Conrad for meaning production and exigency. Achebe does draw on Conrad but engages the tradition of African literature in more profound and specific ways. Roland Barthes argues that the text "practices the infinite deferral of the signified" [le recul infini de signifié] to open up "serial movements of dislocations" while a work "comes to a halt." I am interested in this "halt" because I do not intend to deny that *Things Fall Apart* responds to *Heart of Darkness* but that given the development of African literary studies our ossified understanding of this relationship need to be "dislocated." The field of African literary studies and postcolonial studies has codified the 1980's trope of writing back to bring discourse on Achebe's novel to Barthes' "halt" rather than continuing a chain of "infinite deferral." My goal here then is to catechize this process in pointing out how more

useful alternative intertextualities can be deployed in reading *Things Fall Apart* to produce new readings that do not seek to simply avert our attention away from the question of influence but rather to put pressure on the oft reached conclusion that *Heart of Darkness* is in fact the most useful place to look for this influence.

I will contend that *Things Fall Apart* practices a more complex intertextual play with early African literature than writing back affords. Furthermore, I will contend that rather than conceptualizing Achebe as an African writer on the margins seeking to join the club of the English literary canon that *Things Fall Apart* expressly participates in a constellation of minor literatures that need not pass the through the center, or heart, of Western culture to garner meaning.⁸ Early African literature such as Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, J.E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*, Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* all explicitly inform *Things Fall Apart* in manifold ways that have been almost entirely overlooked. Ultimately, using these works this chapter will create a self-referential African genealogy for the novel that supplements the popular writing back paradigm.

Conrad and *Things Fall Apart*

⁸ Minor literature here then being transformed from a minor/major bind to a series of interplaying non-Western literatures that while in conversation with each other and Western literature do not define themselves by being read against a conceived major literature.

In “The Empire Fights Back,” Achebe asks whether Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* “rents the crowd of Conrad” when contemplating the ways in which Western authors exercise power over narratives (cite). For Achebe, Conrad (and by extension Cary) both have “absolute power over narrative” and abuse that power by creating defamatory representations of Africans. Achebe contends that Joyce Cary’s racially reductionist protagonist in *Mister Johnson* and Conrad’s various animalistic Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are not outliers of the ways in which Africans have been represented by English writers but actually stand as consistent parts of a centuries-old discursive tradition. Each new, flattening representation of Africans as primitive by Europeans is “renting the crowd” of its literary forerunners. Through this Nigerian colloquialism Achebe establishes an intertextual approach in which each new text incorporates previous representations of Africa by leaning on and implicitly sanctioning that tradition. In creating these variations, each new text “borrows the crowd” of several others by signifying a linguistic and semantic dependence to create what Kristeva terms an “intersection of textual surfaces.” These reoccurring and intersecting misrepresentations of Africa allow for an othering of Africa and a reassertion of the supremacy of Western culture.

Concerning these Western misrepresentations of Africa, V.Y. Mudimbe argues in *The Invention of Africa* “[t]he African [who] has become not only the Other who is everyone except me, but rather the key

which, in its abnormal difference, specifies the identity of the Same” (Mudimbe 12). Mudimbe terms this process "epistemological ethnocentrism" and suggests that it "fundamentally escape[s] the task of making sense of other worlds." It is this epistemological ethnocentrism in which Africa is othered by means of exoticism or excluded as a non-subject that initiated “writing back” as a way to redress misrepresentation. We can see here then that when Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffith’s 1989 *The Empire Writes Back* codifies this reaction in arguing as one of its key premises that Achebe and other non-Western novelists had “rewritten particular works from the English ‘canon’ with a view to restructuring European realities” that critically this move is indeed necessary (Ashcroft et al. 33).

For Achebe and Mudimbe, novels such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson* reify a tradition of misrepresenting Africa that requires correction. In this vein, many critics of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* have cast it as writing back to spurious images of the continent with accurate and complex representations of Africa. However, by focusing on an intertextual relationship that relies almost wholly on correction, these critics also “rent the crowd” of Cary and Conrad to produce meaning in *Things Fall Apart* by allowing the terms of the discourse on this African, Nigerian, and Ibo novel to be dictated by the very literary sources it seeks

to escape.⁹ As an initial foray to begin to unravel discourse on Africa, writing back was an effective tool to expose absurd assumptions about African subjectivity, but as African literature moves 50 years beyond *Things Fall Apart* and well over 100 past the first African novel,¹⁰ African literature's main contribution and the contribution of its most important work cannot stand as overwhelmingly reactionary in light of a rich literary tradition that has reached a level of self-referentialism that should at least loosen it from reliance on the West for meaning. Therefore, this essay problematizes the above scholarship of writing back on *Things Fall Apart* that we have inherited by positing an early African literature genealogy as a viable, alternative lens through which to read the novel. For African literary studies, we might be tempted to believe that representations of Africa have progressed to a more egalitarian and accurate mode but when books like *Things Fall Apart* are understood via Conrad as a central lens we also fail to make sense of other worlds, in this case the world of influence behind Achebe's novel. Ultimately, this essay engineers a way around writing back without ignoring its useful

⁹ The writing back approach in African literary studies also propagates the fundamental untruth that Africa learned how to write through its engagement with the West. The acceptance of this by many lay and professional readers in the West today reifies central elements of colonization's "civilizing mission." As Albert Gerard unambiguously and accurately argues in his seminal "1500 Year of Writing in Black Africa," "In historical fact, important segments of subsaharan Africa had been introduced to writing and written literature long before the first white man—whether exploiter or explore—reached her shores. In fact, one part of the continent [Ethiopia] had produced written works in its own languages even before the earliest literatures appeared in Western Europe in the Celtic and Germanic languages" (Gerard 147).

¹⁰ Although debate amongst critics continues, the earliest African novel is often thought to be *Marita: Or the Folly of Love* (1885) by an anonymous Gold Coast author using the pseudonym A. Native.

aspects as a way of imagining how to approach the larger issue of Western influence in African literature as a whole.

In several essays Achebe has recalled his initial reaction to recognizing distorted images of Africa and of himself. In “African Literature as a Celebration of Restoration,” he writes of the experience: “I did not see myself as an African in those [English] books. I took sides with the white men against the savages” (Achebe 7). Later though he writes that as he got older he realized “in *Heart of Darkness*; rather, I was one of those unattractive beings jumping up and down on the riverbank, making horrid faces” (Achebe 7). Achebe is clearly concerned with two major issues here: first, that images of Africans are dehumanizing, and second, and perhaps more troubling, that he as an African accepted these representations so much so that he vilified his own representation and glorified that of brutal colonizers. This realization proves crucial for Achebe because he identifies the power of literary representation, realizing that if an educated Ibo Nigerian living in Africa could be convinced of these inaccuracies, then readers in the rest of the world would surely succumb. We can understand then why Achebe often casts his initial writings as responses to misrepresentations of Africans in English literature. Although Cary and Conrad are the authors to which Achebe most often points, there are numerous other examples, whether in the enormously popular Tarzan series, the Allan Quartermain novels, or in the writings of and about Henry Morton Stanley and David

Livingstone. To counteract this tendency of Western literature to misrepresent Africa, Achebe casts his novels as corrective gestures aimed at representing the humanity and complexities of African culture and people.

In keeping with Achebe's analysis of his own work, critics of *Things Fall Apart*, since the 1970s, have considered how the novel refutes European images of Africans. Achebe actively invited their comparisons in his groundbreaking 1978¹¹ essay "Image of Africa" in which he posits himself as "a novelist responding to one famous book of European fiction: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (337). In my estimation, the focus on a purely antagonistic relationship between Achebe and Conrad and subsequently their works based on Achebe's "Image of Africa" is an academic red herring. However, one cannot mention the two writers and simply ignore the one salacious tidbit of controversy that those outside (and too often inside) of the field of African Literary studies take as a defining discourse. Achebe calls Conrad a "bloody racist" and systematically dismantles the counterarguments for an unproblematic reading of *Heart of Darkness*. This has not kept many from calling Achebe's take as extreme or exclusionary of white readings of Conrad. One can certainly just leave "Image of Africa" and Conrad as problematic because this chapter is much less about Conrad than about Achebe and African literature, but I find the dismissive tone of many scholars such

¹¹ Originally given as a speech in 1975.

as Peter Cedric Watts who label Achebe's reaction as "extremist" highly problematic yet ubiquitous. Essentially this view takes the stance that of course *Heart of Darkness* does not accurately represent Africans but that that is acceptable because 1) it is a single flaw in an otherwise masterful work, 2) the book is a product of its time when such views were acceptable and 3) the book is not actually about Africa but madness and stands as a well credentialed criticism of colonialism in general. To answer these claims in full would require more attention than I am willing to afford Conrad here but I would simply interject with a few points because this intersection cannot be ignored, though it needs to be relegated in the overall discourse on African literature.

A common defense of race and representation in *Heart of Darkness* argues that the novel is not "about Africa." Considering that it is almost entirely set in Africa this reading attempts another erasure of African presence. If Africa is not the part of the point of the book it need not be set there (Conrad often used unnamed locales in his other works). As a condemnation of colonialism, the book is clear in its abhorrence of Belgian colonization in the Congo but not nearly as critical of British colonization elsewhere. In fact, there are complimentary lines about the British colonial project in the novel. Conrad does indicate at several points how messy colonization in general is but at no point does he call for a reversal of the "civilizing mission." Africa, for Conrad, needs civilizing but it may not be civilizable. As much as critics want to point to

Kurtz as being the “horror” of the *Heart of Darkness*, clearly the influence of Africa on Kurtz causes his downfall. Kurtz is an average company man who comes to Africa and uses his skills to become a legendary ivory rustler. He sinks into madness not simply because he is involved in the colonial mission (we don’t imagine him a madman roaming England) but because Africa has the power to corrupt him and turn what should be the heart of whiteness into the heart of darkness. Furthermore, this inability for the British to condemn Belgian imperialism while understanding their own as benevolent is well documented as we see with Arthur Conan Doyle and other writers who strongly opposed the Belgians while supporting the British.

Frequently defenders of a straight reading of *Heart of Darkness* claim that Conrad merely reflects the times in which in he lived, inferring he had no literary, social or historical models on which to conceive of blacks or Africans as anything other than animalistic and subhuman. As Patrick Brantlinger outlines in “Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent” Conrad had literary precedents from the abolitionist movement in England on which he certainly could have based his understanding of race. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and many others advocated not just abolitionist policies but for the common humanity of Africans and Europeans. I find it unlikely that Conrad’s “horror” is not informed by English poet laureate (1813-1843) Robert Southey’s “dark horror” in his abolitionist poem “To Horror.”

Furthermore, Brantlinger in his article in *Critical Inquiry* contends that abolitionist sentiments advocating for the humanity of Africans continued well after the abolition of slavery and points to Conrad's contemporaries who condemn the dehumanizing of Africans. Conrad not only had a rich literary tradition on which to fall back on when understanding Africa and Africans but contemporaries who protested the treatment of Africans at the hands of Europeans. Certainly, I could go on in this vein but hopefully the above engagement with the headline grabbing question of Achebe's accusation of racism against Conrad in "Image of Africa" can be bracketed to get to the more compelling, nuanced and seminal understanding of intertextuality in *Things Fall Apart*.

Later postcolonial and African literary studies theoretically formalized Achebe's "bloody racist" accusation as the trope "writing back" to position African literature as resistant to the Western colonial discursive project. This idea was further consolidated by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, and numerous other postcolonial staples. Thus postcolonial scholars and African literary scholars could begin to codify the ways in which a resistant intertextuality was used to answer the representations of colonized peoples. *Things Fall Apart* became the iconic novel that initiated the project of an anti-colonial and anti-neocolonial African literature. The paramount critical concern became the novel's relationship to the English canon and often its comment on English

politics and Englishness itself. Critics wondered if the book was a reaction against the racist hegemony of the English canon, as “Image of Africa” suggests, and if it deserved inclusion in that canon. Due to this fixation with the English canon, critics established various genealogies to bind the novel to *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson*. However, this urge to endorse writing back still relies on an acceptance of the tradition that produced Conrad’s and Cary’s works as the origins of the novel and Western texts as parent texts. Rather than the old formulation of authorial address from the metropole to the colony, the colony could now address the metropole. However, this reworking constitutes a simple reversal that operates on the same confining axis as the previous unsatisfactory formulations. Writing back confines *Things Fall Apart* to a literary genealogy with the works of Conrad and Cary in a limited conversation concerning the faults of European representations of Africa and the merits of Africans correcting those faults rather than acknowledging the novel as the culmination of an African literary tradition. Just as Achebe accuses Cary of renting Conrad’s crowd, this focus on African literature as a corrective forces Achebe to also rent the crowd of Cary and Conrad. Re-presenting the largely erased early African texts as clear forerunners to Achebe, then, begins to establish the text’s rightful place not as origin but as notable development.

As Gaurav Desai points in “Gendered Self-Fashioning: Adelaide Casey Hayford’s *Black Atlantic*” the origins of African literature and

Achebe's place in them are still highly contested and often misunderstood:

The lay version of the story of African literary production would continue to see the beginnings of a written literary tradition in Africa with the publication of *Things Fall Apart* or, at best, in the earlier writings of Amos Tutola and his *Palm Wine Drinkard*. Everything before this, so the story assumes, was 'oral tradition.' To be sure, this version of the story has never been the official story of the discipline, but it continues not only to be part of the popular consciousness but also often of the professional unconsciousness."

We see here that African literary scholars understand that Achebe's novel was not the first African novel, or even the first Nigerian one. Therefore, this renting of the Conrad and Cary crowd is certainly not the only possible genealogy to construct for *Things Fall Apart*. However, much of the criticism on the book has either obsessively tied it to English novels and colonialism, or positioned it as the first African novel by suggesting that Achebe had no models on which to base his work. I would like to consider the position of *Things Fall Apart* in reference to earlier African novels in order to sketch an alternative literary genealogy and new readings that result from them. This is not to contradict Achebe or the many critics who have construed the book as a text writing back to the

English canon, but rather to diversify and make visible alternate genealogies for readings of the novel.

Because of the wide range of critical and academic responses to *Things Fall Apart* and Achebe's own analysis of it, a brief outline of the most influential readings that conform to the prevalent writing back paradigm can help clarify the nature of the responses this chapter is trying to open up.¹² In his study, *Chinua Achebe*, Nahem Yousaf embraces the writing back approach by expressing that Achebe's novel is part of "a long literary tradition" of Anglophone novels including *Mansfield Park*, *Dombey and Sons*, and *Prester John*, as well as *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness* that commodify Africans and treat them as interchangeable (18). C. L. Innes's *Chinua Achebe* takes a similar approach in demonstrating that while Cary constructs a binary of English/Correctness and African/Emotion, Achebe goes to great lengths to break down this othering of Africans by exhibiting in *Things Fall Apart* a complex Ibo culture that rivals, and at times surpasses, the intelligence and humanity of the English system. Innes goes so far as to term the Nigerian character of Mister Johnson as "essentially a European creation" because "no Southern Nigerian (as Johnson is supposed to be) in the early part of the twentieth century could be without a family or relatives to care for him and come to his assistance when he is in

¹² Although the overwhelming number of critical approaches to *Things Fall Apart* number too many to account for here, roughly speaking the main methodologies have focused on writing back, feminism, masculinity, nationalism, realism and anthropology.

trouble” (25). For Innes, Okonkwo is a realistic African response to the wandering poets and tramps of the literary tradition of J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Florence Stratton argues in the writing back mode that “Achebe attempts to undermine the authority of such canonical Western texts as *Heart of Darkness*” and that “the novel must be examined in juxtaposition to other colonial fiction, in particular Rider Haggard’s novels” (37). Noted African literary critic Simon Gikandi has also noted that *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates an “awareness of the colonial narratives that preceded it, narratives that it seeks to revise or negate” in another variation on the writing back approach (29). Hunt Hawkins tells us, “One needs to study the two novels [*Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*] as complementary to each other,” (82) while Ousseynou Traore calls *Things Fall Apart* Achebe’s “response to specific works by Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad as well as the Eurocentric scholarship he [Achebe] calls ‘colonialist criticism’” (67). Biodun Jeyifo writes that “Achebe replaces colonial ‘Africans’ like Joyce Cary’s Mister Johnson or Conrad’s riverboat cannibal in *Heart of Darkness* with realistic, named characters” (114) and Joseph McLaren that “*Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to revise those assumptions, especially regarding notions of primitivism and religious simplicity”(103). Whether we are told that we simply *must* read *Things Fall Apart* via canonical texts as oppositional or supplementary, these critics represent an inescapable critical force in the

study of the novel and represent by now a typical programmed response to much of African literature of the 20th century.

To be clear, Achebe is responding to the history of European representations of Africa. But in focusing excessively on the influence of British texts, critics lose sight of African texts that also influence *Things Fall Apart*. Some critics such as Charles Larson note in passing the influence of Amos Tutola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* as near contemporary influences that Achebe took pains to avoid stylistically, though not necessarily politically. These token attempts to connect Achebe to a literary tradition so chronologically and geographically close to him are few and far between and are absent almost entirely from Innes's and Gikandi's major works on Achebe. While this chapter does not completely redress the absence, it can begin to open up a much needed discussion about the place of early African literature in reference to *Things Fall Apart*.

Although many African literary scholars may know the history of early African literature, an explicit list of works that preceded Achebe must be put into play to make an alternative genealogy possible. Early novels in African languages include *Traveller of the East* (1906), *Pitseng* (1910), and *Chaka* (1925) by the South African Thomas Mofolo who wrote in Sesotho. Serialized in 1885, the English language *Marita: or the Folly of Love* stands as the most likely candidate though for the "first African

novel.” Also, J. E. Casey Hayford wrote the novel *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) in English, as did Sol Plaatje when writing *Mhudi* (1930). Other early English language works include Kobina Sekyi’s *The Anglo-Fante* (1918), Mabel Dove’s *Woman in Jade* (1934) and R. E. Obeng’s *Eighteenpence* (1943). Peter Abrahams also published several well-received novels in South Africa in the 1940s. The first Francophone African novel was *Force, bronté* (1926) by Bakary Dialbo. Given even this quick list above, it is disheartening to continue to see the 1950’s and 60’s being posited as the early years of African literature.¹³ Before the immergence of postcolonial studies and African literary studies such missteps might have been considered part of the growing pains of a new field. Even today though we see leading journals such as *Researches in African Literatures* misrepresenting early African literature. In his 2008 “Language and Time in Postcolonial Experience” Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze writes “In Anglophone Africa, one could think about the earliest works by novelists or poets: Chinua Achebe (e.g., *Things Fall Apart*), Ngugi wa Thiong’o (e.g., *Weep Not Child*), Christopher Okigbo (*Labyrinth*) and Wole Soyinka (*Death and the King’s Horseman*)” when attempting to construct a theory linking the “relations between postcolonial writing, time, memory, and history” (Eze 25). Other examples of these types of statements abound. The point here is not to demonize particular journals or authors but to highlight exactly how pervasively misreadings of early

¹³ This is not even taking into account the obvious influence of oral tradition.

African literature reach. Beyond misidentifying the origins of African literature, these critics insinuate that the few figures who are highlighted, such as Achebe and Tutola, arrived on the African literary stage as if from a vacuum. When a genealogy is posited it is almost always in relation to a European, primarily British, canon. By repeating this genealogy the still extant Anglophone African writing continues to suffer erasure. We see this tendency even in major surveys of the field by well-established scholars. M. Keith Booker's *The African Novel in English* not only forgoes mention of *Ethiopia Unbound*, *Mhudi*, or other early works, but also posits Amos Tutola as the "first African novelist in English" (Booker 8). Similarly, Stephanie Newell only briefly touches on a handful of early authors in the introductory phase of her survey *West African Literature*.¹⁴ These are not minor periphery figures in the study of African literature and these books stand as some of the most read and cited works in the field. Thus, this general silence concerning early African literature is highly problematic.

Early African Literary Influence

One of the many praises heaped on *Things Fall Apart* rightly credits Achebe with establishing a dual register that at once addresses Africans

¹⁴ In her numerous works on Ghana, Newell writes much more specifically than in this survey. However, it is this reserve to bring early African literature to bear on a larger, non-specialist conversation that propagates the spurious "lay reading" of the origins of African literature.

and non-Africans as audiences. The novel can be read as an insider's account of Ibo culture for an Ibo/Nigerian/African audience, or as an attempt to justify African culture to Western readers. Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, though not as popular, similarly creates a dual register and complicates a straightforward concept of audience. Clearly, Achebe intends his novel to be read by Westerners (among others) by writing in English,¹⁵ especially when he writes in the opening chapter: "Okoye said the next half dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (5). Lines like these and the other numerous times during which Achebe describes the uses of kola nut and religious rituals are contextualizing gestures for unfamiliar non-Ibo and largely non-African audiences. This ability to at once write an African story that does not pander to the preconceived images of Africa by the West and yet includes Western readers has been read as one of the novel's great accomplishments and a source of its popularity outside of Africa. Several critics have credited Achebe with developing this technique in the African context and while I am not questioning the effectiveness of Achebe's abilities, it is germane to explore the literary forerunners of this technique in Africa.

¹⁵ He explains his reason for writing in a colonial language with in his article "The African Writer and the English Language."

As delightful as critics have found Achebe's dual registers, *Things Fall Apart* has an African predecessor in this respect in South African Thomas Mofolo's 1925 *Chaka*.¹⁶ Although originally written in Sesotho, which represents a break in ideology with Achebe regarding language aligning Mofolo more with Ngugi and Wali in this respect, the novel was quickly translated into English in 1931. *Chaka* is the story of the rise and fall of the legendary Zulu king, Chaka Zulu. Despite being written in an African language spoken in the country of publication, South Africa, Mofolo gestures to broad non-African audiences as well. The opening of his novel reads, "South Africa is a large headland situated between two oceans, one to the east and one to the West. The nations that inhabit it are numerous and greatly varied in custom and language," which clearly indicates the importance of situating the unfamiliar reader (1). He continues this tactic: "The reader should remember that it is not shameful in Bokone for a mother to see her son naked and bathing, because people hardly wear anything in Bokone" (21). Mofolo directly addresses a reader who does not necessarily know the dress of the Bokone. This is not just because non-Bokone readers would not be privy to this information but also because by the early twentieth century many of the customs would have been foreign even to the Bokone and South Africans. Mofolo, like Achebe after him,¹⁷ evokes his role as author as one of teacher to his own people in an overlapping didactic move that

¹⁶ Although published in 1925, the book was actually written in around 1907.

¹⁷ Most notably in "The Novelist as Teacher"

seeks to preserve traditional culture for the tradition it describes and to move that tradition outwards to a larger international audience.

Achebe's reach in this regard to the Igbo community and the international community is undeniable but even reception of Mofolo's text to rehabilitate Chaka the world over was undeniably effective.

Mofolo also takes pains to include definitions of Zulu terms. Although some of these definitions in the English version are the translator's insertions, Mofolo often explains in Sesotho the Zulu words he is using as a way to provide the reader access to the text.

On the whole, Mofolo more blatantly instructs than Achebe, who often works his instructive moments more seamlessly into the plot of the story. Whereas Achebe usually novelizes ethnographic details into relevant developments, Mofolo often pauses his novel to provide germane background information. A useful example can be seen in Achebe's parable of the tortoise. Achebe does not tell us in this scene that gathering nightly to take turns telling tell stories at night is an ancient Ibo custom; the reader garners the point from the context of stories being passed around and the requests being made by the children for the next story to include a song. The parable is not utilitarian in that one does not need this information to follow the major plot movements of the story. In this sense, Achebe novelizes much of Ibo culture and ethnographic details by departing from Mofolo's direct address for much of *Things Fall Apart*. However, for many major plot points, such as the

extent of Christianity's intrusion, Achebe returns to Mofolo's direct didactic style in strikingly similar ways. When traditions are broken and major cultural mores are broken, Achebe inserts an instructive voice to tell the reader as much. Here Achebe and Mofolo loosely engage what Kristeva terms the "historical text" and the "social text" as "texts" that stand outside of literature that intersect a work to produce meaning. Kristeva, of course, would not draw such a distinct line of interaction as she constantly tries to undermine any stable signifiers. Nonetheless, Achebe and Mofolo are triggering intertextual moments when they not only bring in the historical realities of a particular people at a particular time but also the ideology that was used to subdue those people and the ideology that both see as a partial escape. A semantic connection between the social and historical texts and these novels cannot be completely disavowed, as Kristeva's intertextuality strict formulated prescribes, because these intersections are not simply an attempt to nail down a fixed comfortable meaning but rather to dislocate a position that has become fixed in writing back.¹⁸ This movement then not only occurs between the historical and social texts as initially understood by Kristeva but between works (which become texts).

This dual register represents an essential part of the importance of these two texts. Using Bhabha's hybridity as a jumping off point we see

¹⁸ On their own each text can also be seen as dislocating the racist discourse on their topics.

that both authors are proffering a hybrid, or fragmented, subjectivity, in Mofolo one that even decades before *Things Fall Apart* could not maintain a singularity of voice. Bhabha is of course picking up on Bakhtin's dialogism in arguing that multiple voices need not form a cohesive whole but may be antagonistic to create a "difference within."¹⁹ By constantly shifting registers through the intended audience and narrative positioning both Mofolo and Achebe destabilize any sure footing of a monologism by continually othering their own narrative to invite us to constantly reimagining the positionality of the intended reader and speaker rather than harkening to stable a pre-colonial totality. This move is important because both these text at times get read as unproblematically rescuing the pre-colonial past intact. Moreover, by not attempting to close off their texts in the way Lukacs and Bakhtin both term "epic", these texts invite the reader to constantly seek out the intersecting social and historical texts.

J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello articulates this phenomenon of the constantly destabilized registers of readers and author as highly problematic for African literature when she states:

"The English novel is written in the first place for the English. . . .

But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans.

African novelists may write about Africa, about African

¹⁹ Bakhtin does not argue for a necessarily amicable relationship for these voices in dialogue but rather some theories of the novel have worked to reconcile these voices whereas Bhabha is comfortable leaving them at odds.

experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulders all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them. . . . That to me is the root of your problem. Having to perform your Africanness at the same time as you write.”

Although articulating a problematic understanding of English identity as a single entity, Coetzee here demonstrates the shaky footing on which articulating the multiple registers of African literature rests. She raises the provocative question: is this use of dual registers simply a choice by savvy authors to appeal to multiple audiences and to demonstrate the difficult nature of African subjectivity and authorship or is this paradigm forced on African literature as a repetition of colonial violence that does not allow African writers the self-referentialism of “English novel[s] written ...for the English”?

Coetzee’s Costello misses here that this kind of Du Bois “double consciousness” or Bakhtinian “double-voiced” understanding does not preclude novels “by Africans for Africans” and that the doubleness of these narratives is not devoid of African agency. Mofolo clearly rehabilitates the tarnished image of Chaka Zulu not just to reintroduce Chaka to a Western audience as a powerful king but clearly to stake a claim for black Africans, particularly, South Africans who by 1925 had passed through slavery and were steeped in a brutal colonization. The figure of Chaka had already been misrepresented in the West and

Mofolo's *Chaka* is "by Africans for Africans" because it restores a figure of major significance to South African culture who is a minor figure, usually a foil for white heroes, for the West. Moreover, Mofolo writes in an African language which situates a major resistance inside an African system of signification. At the same time, though, Mofolo is undermining those Western narratives that demonize Chaka. Mofolo clearly could have written a "safe" book such as his first *Traveller to the East* which props up Western culture as the pinnacle of civilization. Instead, Mofolo simultaneously engages the black African and the West as audiences not because he lacks agency in his own writing by being condemned to display Africanness to his colonial masters but because he asserts an agency by "double-voicing" his text in a way that Costello cannot imagine for the English or Russian canon.

However, we cannot deny that *Chaka* came to be a seminal work because it was published in English soon after the original publication, and even the original publication was produced by and required the approval of missionary printing press in South Africa. Indeed, I doubt I would be writing about this book if the above were not true. Achebe may fit more neatly into Costello's/Coetzee's understanding of black African authorship and audience because in working for the BBC, sending his book to England for approval and writing in English he seems to imagine his audience as primarily Western and himself as participating in an overtly British discursive tradition. In several speeches though Achebe

points out that even if we take this economic and autobiographical approach to his audience that his books have sold more in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. So even though Achebe stands as an international literary figure he takes himself to be an African, particularly Nigerian, author and the sales of his books support his claim. Textually, Achebe makes a move that mirrors Mofolo's in that he rehabilitates Igbo culture for the Igbo population rather than for Western readers.²⁰ Although much attention and criticism is spent on the ways Achebe writes back to the West, we can just as easily say that Achebe is reasserting pre-colonial Igbo culture into the Nigerian and African consciousness. That is, colonialism attempted to "paper over" inconvenient elements of the various native Nigerian cultures by implementing educational initiatives that minimized the importance of non-Western culture. For this reason Achebe could actually be confident that an English-reading Nigerian readership could read his novel. Achebe often recounts episodes concerning his childhood. As we saw earlier in this chapter, in an essay from the aptly titled *The Education of a British-Protected Child* Achebe explicitly takes on the way that literature and schooling were used under the British colonial system. Many critics have also contended that the novel produces a Nigerian nationalism in

²⁰ A distinction is probably useful in that Igbo culture is particularized in *Things Fall Apart* so it is what is being rehabilitated for Igbo readers. However, a similar rehabilitation process is underway for Africa via the book. This is Achebe's "double-voicedness" because he uses the story of a particularly Ibo tradition as a comment on that tradition and its move into a Western vision of modernity via colonialism but uses that same particularity as a non-particular comment on the legitimacy of African culture on the whole for a Western audience.

the critical years before Nigerian independence in 1960. Like Mofolo, Achebe sutures a disconnect between modern society and those of the past.

Overall though what Coetzee brings to light concerning the dual nature of African authorship and subjectivity need not represent a negative phenomenon.

In keeping with how the term double consciousness was initially employed we can see that Coetzee's "glancing over their shoulders all the time" is a necessary function of the position of Africans in the world. As Du Bois contends "he [the African-American] wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" but "to merge his double self into a better and truer self." Du Bois is referring to African-Americans handling the two sides of their identity but the point remains for Achebe and Mofolo. That is, their "truer selves" cannot deny the role of colonization in shaping the reasons for telling their stories or the reception of them in the time and place they are writing and being read in, nor can they simply abandon their traditional African/Igbo/Zulu/Sesotho selves.

Building on Du Bois, Fanon and Bhabha both take on "being for others" as disrupted by the colonial experience. In outlining the failure of Hegel's Ontology to account for black and colonized subjects Fanon writes that "the negro has been given two frames of reference in which he has had to place himself." Unlike Coetzee's Costello who seems to

imagine a simple way out of double consciousness by somehow emulating English and Russian literary self-referentialism, Fanon argues that the black body in the world creates a split that “does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structure of the self and the world-definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.” Indeed Fanon moves beyond double consciousness to “I existed triply” in “I was responsible for my body my race and for my ancestors.” It is this constantly fragmenting subjectivity that that makes its way to the novels of Mofolo and Achebe when they explicitly engage with the pre-colonial as they are made to bear a burden of the author but also of proving that black Africans have the ability to write novels and to make those novels validate their ancestors. This triple burden is simply not the case for the white European authors that Costello imagines.

Part of the reason for this lateness is the temporality of modernity. As Bhabha states when engaging Fanon’s “Fact of Blackness” the African is seen in the world, and perhaps more so in the literary world, as “the belatedness of the black man” who is told “You come too late, much too late, there will always be a world - a white world between you and us.” Bhabha terms this lateness as a “time-lag” in which postcolonial subjects occupy a unique present that can destroy the sense of time that keeps the African relegated to a past that never catches up with the future that is always Western. For Bhabha and Fanon, the fragmented doubleness and tripleness experience by African subjects can serve an activist’s

agenda in which the African subject creates a new, or third, space in which to articulate subjectivity.

What I am getting at is that not only is the African author not the minor reflection or other of the Western in books like Achebe but that as Bhabha says of Fanon it “suggests another time, another space.” It is this other time and space, not in strict adherence to Bhabha and Fanon per se, that imagines an interaction with the West and the globe that does not fall into the old belatedness but also does not subscribe to the east/West, black/white pre/post dialectic that would constantly tether African literature to understandings that lead to their use as a foil (the common writing back in which books like *Wide Sea Sargasso* “help” us understand *Jane Eyre*, etc.) African subjectivity must then, as Bhabha writes, “refuse...a minor term in a dialectic that will emerge into a more equitable universality” because the belated nature of the African in such a dialectic scheme precludes an equitable relationship. Therefore, unbinding works like *Things Fall Apart* from that time scheme and repositioning it in a “another time, another space” is fundamental in establishing a self-referential African literature that does not simply exist in dialectic opposition to the West.

Snaking Intertextuality

A turn to specific passages from African intertexts can clarify the process by which Bakhtinian dialogism expresses itself in the above manner via Du Bois, Fanon and Bhabha. In particular, the structure of the discourse in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Chaka* concerning snakes is uncanny and illustrates the first foray here into postulating an intertextual relationship between the two that destabilizes the standard takes on *Things Fall Apart*. When Chaka is confronted by a snake that he is told will judge his adequacy to be king, Mofolo writes:

Water serpents are highly regarded in Bokone, and so indeed, are such little crawlers as the cobra and the puff-adder. A person who has seen a snake is considered to have seen something portentous which presages either good fortune or extreme bad luck accompanied by plagues that are coming to him from his ancestral gods. A snake is not to be killed in Bokone, and anyone who kills one is considered to have done a deed that surpasses all others in ugliness. Such a one will carry for the rest of his life the shame of having killed that snake. He who kills a snake is regarded as insulting the gods and showing them disrespect by killing their messenger who conveys the wishes of the dead to their living descendents (2).

The above passage demonstrates the Bakhtinian dialogic “double-voiced” pauses that Mofolo makes when turning to ethnography. Mofolo

effectively brings in a second voice here that stands apart from the narrative voice that tells the story of Chaka. In this case the second voice explains the nature of snakes in Bokone as godly creatures to be feared and revered because of the societal implications of missing this knowledge are severe if one were to mistreat a snake. This is news to Western readers perhaps entrenched in the Biblical understanding of snakes but also for modern Sesotho speakers residing in industrialized areas in South African and Lesotho. Intertextuality, then, Mofolo is rewriting a social and historical text ala Kristeva (not a disposable text that already exists in the reader's imagination) but uncovering a text to fit into an intertextual relationship previously unimagined. Such references do not quickly become mere allusions deployed to create a shorthand to understanding shared notions but rather an unearthing of necessary connections that come into play after having been elided by colonial discourse. We can see that Kristevan intertextuality while useful and unavoidable when engaging the term cannot be applied wholesale for postcolonial and African literature. Delineating this second voice completely from the narrative voice though completely is problematic because the pause does not provide ethnographic details for their own sake but to clarify why Chaka takes the actions in the next scene. An unformed reader might wonder why this paragon of physicality and aggression stands motionless while a snake confronts him instead of killing the snake the way he does every other enemy in the novel. This

marked but incomplete split demonstrates a particular form of postcolonial intertextuality in African texts by taking on Bhabha's hybrid postcolonial subjects as having a "difference within" that is always prefigured. Mofolo represents a split subject because his subjectivity is always aware of a critical difference between itself in relation to the seemingly stable white European identity. For Henry Louis Gates this Signifyin(g) prefigures all utterances by othered groups because they know that their enunciations will be read against a white "Standard." So Mofolo takes practical steps to include white readers but also seeks to walk back difference. The most powerful literary use of snakes in the West is probably in the Bible in which snakes represent only evil as the devil. Chaka befriending and seeking the approval of snake then may easily be construed by Western readers as a satanic ritual that plays directly into a long discourse about the cursed nature of being black (the curse of Ham in the Bible) and the lack of a "civilization." Mofolo then is not simply capitulating by squelching the fears of Western readers by pausing to legitimize African rituals but savvy to enough to open a space previously difficult to imagine in which Western readers could imagine a black African in league with a snake in a misty river at night as a legitimate expression of culture and not an unholy union. Mofolo effectively resists the monologism of colonialism in keeping with the Bakhtinian sense of dialogism as a form in novels that undermines the dominant discourse. However, rather than just the undermining of a

discourse, in this case colonialism, Mofolo offers a new understanding of metaphysical symbols.

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe employs a strikingly similar approach to Mofolo's when a royal python (python regius) is killed by an adherent to the new Christian mission. As Achebe describes it:

The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as "Our Father" and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds. It ate rats in the house and sometimes swallowed hens' eggs. If a clansman killed a royal python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement and performed an expensive burial ceremony such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a man who killed the python knowingly. Nobody thought that such a thing could ever happen (112).

A few minor details aside, the two quotes regarding snakes in South Africa and Nigeria in books written fifty years apart are virtually interchangeable. In terms of verisimilitude the intertextual tie between the two is nearly as direct as an allusion, but because the information in Achebe's novel does not just allude to *Chaka* but is itself also an ethnographic pause that emphasizes the split nature of African subjectivity this intersection of texts represents a salient moment in the development of African literary studies. Such a moment undermines the

“unofficial story” of African literature, perhaps better understood as the “non-Africanist story,” as originating more or less in *Things Fall Apart* and *Palm Wine Drinkard* because if *Things Fall Apart* can be demonstrated to have such clear ties to a text published decades earlier then its place in African literature needs to be rethought as part of a larger already operating literary tradition.

Whether Achebe read *Chaka* and incorporated a similar prohibition against killing snakes, or this is a coincidence, is merely tangential, especially when thinking in terms of Barthes, Kristeva and Bakhtin, because the similarities of the quotes reveal a demonstrable link between the two texts and their self-acknowledged dialogism. Here we can perhaps reintroduce Kristevan intertextuality and Foucault’s genealogy in the sense that a search for origins for these two theorists in particular is not nearly as relevant as pointing out intersections of texts. For one, the search for literary origins is always dubious but more so here because the search for the origins regarding the role of snakes in Africa would take us well beyond *Chaka* into oral tradition and even further away from a Western understanding of snakes. As long as we understand that moments like these are referencing a history of oral and discursive tradition then we have wrested some agency and self-referentialism back to African literature and its most seminal novel. However, as easy as it might be to slip into a celebration of what Bakhtin terms the “liberation” from monologism by such dialogisms, these two moments both smack of

European ethnography and therefore cannot be entirely bracketed from Western influence. However, complete disassociation from Western influence is not my goal. Dislocating the center of discourse on *Things Fall Apart* and the early literature of Africa away from an understanding that keeps it tied to a European understanding is a significant shift.

We should also recall that the snakes are central to the development of the plot in that both Chaka becomes king because he passes muster with the snake and Christianity prevails around Okonkwo with the death of the sacred snake. Beyond explaining the uncannily similar role of snakes in two disparate cultures thousands of miles away from one another, these two excerpts establish an African influence for *Things Fall Apart*. They assure us that we can begin to see *Things Fall Apart* as explicitly part of an intertextual conversation with *Chaka* specifically but with the novel's forerunners in African literature on the whole. The very interchangeable nature of the comment on snakes opens up the possibility of alternative modes of intertextuality beyond reference to *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness*. Instead of an illusory totality defined by a straightforward and strictly bound relationship to Western texts, the origins of Achebe's novel are multifarious. To this end, we begin to see that *Things Fall Apart* is written one layer of the palimpsest of African literature. That is, traces of previous texts, such as *Chaka*, resist being completely erased and overwritten as they seep into Achebe's text. For the postcolonial reader, these previous texts not only create a

genealogy more fitting for the novel, but clear space for new interpretation and complicate previous intertextual links.

This direct borrowing and refashioning of African texts that constitute a new genealogy of intersecting texts underlying *Things Fall Apart* in regards to snakes does not end with Chaka. In fact, more than 150 years before Achebe's first novel appeared Olaudah Equiano writes in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*:

We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest. I remember two of those ominous snakes, each of which was as thick as the calf of a man's leg, and in colour resembling a dolphin in the water, crept at different times into my mother's night-house, where I always lay with her, and coiled themselves into folds, and each time they crowed like a cock. I was desired by some of our wise men to touch these, that I might be interested in the good omens, which I did, for they

were quite harmless, and would tamely suffer themselves to be handled; and then they were put into a large open earthen pan, and set on one side of the highway. Some of our snakes, however, were poisonous: one of them crossed the road one day when I was standing on it, and passed between my feet without offering to touch me, to the great surprise of many who saw it; and these incidents were accounted by the wise men, and therefore by my mother and the rest of the people, as remarkable omens in my favour.

Equiano's narrative is not a novel, although its veracity has been frequently challenged, but this account of snakes in Nigeria published in 1789 sharply resembles Achebe's in 1958 to such a degree that it imbues *Things Fall Apart* with an historicity (Kristeva's "historical text") hitherto untraced. Rather than a free standing author who is "the first African novelist" we see a complex overlapping and layering taking effect that not only keeps Achebe spatially in an African, even Nigerian and Igbo, context but in a temporality that predates and skips *Heart of Darkness*, *Mister Johnson* and the English canon altogether. For Equiano snakes in

Igboland are “good omens.” For Mofolo, they are “good fortune” and for Achebe they are “the most revered” and all three represent a dialogic form of double consciousness that attempts to inhabit a space beyond the prescribed white:civilized/black:uncivilized construct that defines to varying degrees African subjectivity at the times of writing. Clearly, to understand Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* and the trajectory of African literature one cannot rely on the “official story” of African literature. Rather a new story that incorporates the rich traditional of early African literature is needed.

As self-referential as we might want African literature to appear it cannot escape, nor must it seek to, Costello’s “looking over their shoulder” at the West. As I stated earlier, I do not wish to exclude figures like Conrad from a new intertextual configuration of African literature. To do so would be to simply construct yet another false dialogism that seeks to marginalize inconvenient texts. For better or worse, Conrad’s influence and relevance is undeniable and the intersecting texts on snakes demonstrate this point explicitly. Indeed, *Heart of Darkness* includes the use of a snake to initiate a philosophy on Africa early on. Here, Conrad through Marlowe deploys the snake quite differently than Achebe, Mofolo and Equiano:

It [Africa] had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty

big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water—steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one? I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me (8).

Since part of this chapter's purpose is to move beyond African fiction's constant compulsion to look over its shoulder while admitting Western influence's contribution to these text's double-consciousness while not granting it anything near the hegemony, or "crowd," that it previously enjoyed I will not spend long on this quote from Conrad. However, it is worth noting the nature of his snake. It is dangerous, dark, and unknown, yet irresistible. It represents Marlowe's views on Africa: a belief that the party most vulnerable and in danger during colonization was the colonizer rather than those they ruled. This take on Africa as the "dark continent" contradicts Equiano, Mofolo and Achebe as does the nature of the snakes as being singularly menacing. One could certainly argue in this case that this unflattering representation of snakes and Africa is taken on by Mofolo and Achebe in their later texts but if we

connect those texts, however loosely, to Equiano a clear line of influence from Conrad to Achebe and from *Heart of Darkness* to *Things Fall Apart* certainly cannot be easily drawn. Instead, it appears that Achebe and Mofolo are participating in at least two traditions: one a response to Conrad and the other a continuation of a centuries-long discourse by Africans on the role of snakes in Africa.

I bring up Conrad because the mapping of the uses of snakes in these four texts exposes a fundamental principle regarding the kind of alternative intertextual reading I am proffering. A move from Achebe to Conrad that bypasses Mofolo and Equiano by positing Achebe's snake as responding to, or filling in, Conrad's the "darkness" of the snake and Africa misses several crucial points. Perhaps most importantly, the history of African literature here spills out of Desai's "official story." Clearly, an origin story that revolves around Achebe and Tutola not only misrepresents the history of African literature but prompts individual misreadings as well. *Things Fall Apart* is often treated as an "Achebe vs. the West" face-off when just in this short example we can recast the novel's engagement with Conrad as one literary tradition meeting another. I also include Conrad because while the focus should be shifted away from Western figures like Conrad on to ones like Mofolo, we cannot deny that an intertextual relationship exists with Conrad as well. However, even the nature of that intertextuality, which need not be abandoned, is changed by the acknowledgment of another African text

that comments on snakes and the dual register that incorporates the Western reader.

To complicate this intertextuality even further, we can turn briefly to Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* in which a chief describes a woman applying for a divorce as having "eyes like a yellow snake, that it would be a crime to sentence her to spend the rest of her days with a man she does not love" (140). He adds that she might poison her husband. In Mofolo's *Traveller of the East* the protagonist who sympathizes with whites and wants to escape what he deems black heathenism fears snakes at several junctures. In *Palm-Wine Drinkard* a snake actually coils around the protagonist and helps him hide from evil spirits. Beyond bringing more allusions to snakes into play, these references also complicate the Equiano/Achebe/Mofolo/Conrad intertextual thread that may seem to argue that in the African contexts snakes are revered and in the Western context they are feared. Tutola's snakes are terrifying yet useful but in the missionary influenced *Traveller of the East* snakes are only markers of danger and evil, even for Africans. In *Mhudi* the two views seem to come together in that the king calling the woman a yellow eyed snake is not an insult but a sign of respect for her autonomy while the recognition of her "poison" also makes her an object of fear. In concluding on the use of snakes, then, in *Things Fall Apart* we see the complex competing influences of royalty, sacredness, darkness, danger and assistance in a way that simply moving from Achebe to Conrad would not unfold.

Self-determination and Character

Beyond these texts entanglement with snakes, other early African texts unearth potential fields of influence on *Things Fall Apart* that have gone unexamined. Although not as neatly intertextual, the Ghanaian author J. E. Casey Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*,²¹ published in 1911, includes long descriptions of Fanti-land, and its traditional and contemporary culture, for the purpose of informing non-Ghanaian readers. Hayford, as in the case of the other early African writers discussed here constructs a dialogic subjectivity that preconceives of its relation to a European "standard." As with *Things Fall Apart*, *Ethiopia Unbound* was written in English. Describing the Mfantshipim National University, Mofolo tells us, "It had its origins in the national movement which swept over the country [Gold Coast] in 1897," which provides a recent history of the foundation of the university (15). Hayford's novel also contains descriptions of village life in Africa, but in keeping with the dual register that we notice in Achebe's literature, Hayford constantly

²¹ Unfortunately, despite its clear intentions to unfold the life of a fictional Ghanaian man in England, *Ethiopia Unbound* has had to be defended from the charge of being a treatise. Casey-Hayford did the book no favors in this regard by misleadingly subtitled the book "Studies in Race Emancipation" when the plot basically follows a single character, Kwamankra, through his trials and tribulations living in London as an African. While many of the conversations are stilted and take on a didactic form, it is clearly using common literary devices (fictional characters, events, etc.) in its production of meaning.

oscillates between a kind of African essentialism and admiration of Western culture. Indeed, if there is one major complaint that critics have of *Ethiopia Unbound*, it is that the novel is not nativist enough. For example, Hayford describes the “pristine innocence” of the town of Sekondi and Tcradi Bay as “the mother of Gold Coast civilization,” while exclaiming “the eternal verity remains that the natural line of development for aborigines is racial” (67). Yet, Hayford turns to “Tennyson’s simile, the Titan only knows what the Titan wants, or what he means” in order to comment on the relationship between whites and blacks in colonial Africa (69). This oscillation of registers reminds us of *Things Fall Apart* in that there is an appeal to an essential Africanness but also an awareness of a Western reader who may more easily enter the text via a figure like Tennyson rather than one such as Sundiata for example. Thus we see, yet again, how Achebe is deploying techniques that are part and parcel of an African literary history.

Achebe, particularly among the various novelists being discussed, seems more determined to straddle the dual registers of Africa and the West. Unlike Mofolo, he does not rely on translation, and unlike Hayford and fellow South African Sol Plaatje, he appears comfortable and incredibly adept in his use of English. Many critics have noted the stilted overly formal language of Hayford and the missionary language of Plaatje and Mofolo. Achebe incorporates the themes of Christianity so heavily represented in Mofolo with the anti-colonialism of Hayford

without slipping into Mofolo's role of convert or Hayford's tendencies towards pedantic diatribes. He also veers clear of Plaatje's sympathies for white settlers. Instead, Achebe offers a synthesis of these elements which retains essential components. Despite writing a more fully realized novel, Achebe still relies on the narrative techniques of earlier African works. Like Mofolo, Plaatje and Hayford he incorporates local oratory techniques to fuse the Western traditions of the novel with those of vernacular storytelling. Unlike Tutola, whose usage of oratory has led some to challenge whether his major works are novels at all, Achebe clearly intends to write a novel. Thus just as the opening lines "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievement" tempts us to consider Okonkwo as a somehow separate or above the influences and restrictions of his culture, we also understand that Achebe is operating stylistically inside a structure of African literary tradition (1).

Things Fall Apart also creates a unique register for African audiences by engaging pre-colonial Africa. To this end, the first half of the novel is a careful and effective depiction of the daily life and rituals of pre-colonial Ibo society. Critics have also rightly noted that this is not simply an ethnographic move to preserve a way of life that by 1958 was becoming increasingly endangered. Rather, highlighting pre-colonial traditions elucidates the complexities and organization of Ibo life as well an ethical system. After the disastrous effects of colonialism, such a

gesture constitutes a highly political move to reinvigorate African cultures in postcolonial discourse. One of the ways Achebe rehabilitates precolonial culture for the postcolonial context is through a hyper masculine protagonist in Okonkwo to combat colonial discourse that often feminizes Africa as a fertile and virgin land. Once again, though, Achebe's technique is preempted by Mofolo in *Chaka* decades earlier. Mofolo's *Chaka* not only contradicts the feminization of Africa via colonial discourse but also points to the character of Chaka as a literary forefather for Okonkwo. Chaka acts independently by constantly challenging societal norms whether through his weaponry, political advisors or military tactics. In short, he adamantly contradicts the prescriptions of his own culture to initial success only to be undone by that inability to operate cohesively within traditional power structures. He believes in a highly individualized self-sufficing strength of will and character that eventually abandons him. In other words, Chaka foreshadows Okonkwo's shortcomings so much so that by understanding Chaka we create an interesting plane of texts which help us understand Okonkwo better.

Critics have also read *Things Fall Apart* as advocating for the power of a people to write their own stories and histories, in this case to display the merits of pre-colonial Ibo society. Achebe himself as has written "I would be quite satisfied if my novels . . . did no more than teach my readers that their past--with all its imperfections--was not one long night

of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." This gesture is evident through Okonkwo's strong adherence to tradition, even the unpleasant one that demands the murder of Ikemefuna. This re-staking a claim for one's own history and one's own power to tell that history is perhaps even more direct in Mofolo's *Chaka*. Not unlike African cultures in general, Chaka Zulu by the early twentieth century had come to be synonymous with savagery, madness and blood thirst via Western representations. Mofolo's previous novels all centered on purely fiction characters but *Chaka* attempts a reclamation of history via the ability to empower an African to tell the story of an African king.²² Again we see a duality at work in that Mofolo focuses on the a localized figure for South Africa but simultaneously takes on the history representations of Africa on the whole. Although Okonkwo is not a historical figure, Achebe does take for himself a similar project in trying to highlight the complexity and viability of traditional cultures. Both authors are claiming the right to write their own history, Mofolo through a historical figure and Achebe through a fictional one.

Noting a few similarities between the two main characters can be useful further defining the field on which they intersect. Both men use a foundational act of courage and strength to define their youths as successful. Okonkwo defeats the seemingly unbeatable Amalinze the

²² In fact, this assertion of African identity and power proved problematic for Mofolo as he was unable to publish *Chaka* upon first writing it because the missionaries who controlled the press initially refused due to the content of the book.

Cat, while Chaka kills an actual cat, a lion. Despite the empowerment of self-representation, or perhaps because of the responsibility therein, both Achebe and Mofolo resist a simple valorization of their protagonist. Okonkwo is far from an ideal Igbo man and Chaka ultimately is a terrifying and unjust king. Strikingly, both achieve their fame not from instruction from a father but seemingly from the anger and resentment of being disconnected from their fathers. Okonkwo despises his “lazy” father and Chaka is disowned by his. This similarity continues when both are exiled, Chaka by his father the king and Okonkwo by his tribe. The exiles are similar in that they result not from willful disobedience but from an accident. Chaka’s crime is an accident of birth in that he was deemed the heir to his father’s kingdom despite being conceived illegitimately. Only when proper heirs are later born is his claim to the throne deemed dubious and dangerous. Okonkwo’s accident occurs when his gun explodes during a funeral sending a piece of shrapnel into the son of the deceased, killing him. Achebe slightly deviates by more explicitly explicating the machinations of exile and the personal tensions of the father-son relationship, but ultimately these themes prove indispensable to the plot and character of both novels.

Although in different contexts, each man is also forced to kill perhaps his closest friend as dictated by native religion. Chaka must kill Noliwa to become king and Okonkwo must kill Ikemefuna to ward off a swarm of locusts. However, rather than these moments reifying the

supremacy of native religions both complicate the ability to extract straightforward prescriptions from their respective religions. Okonkwo is told to kill Ikemefuna but also told that it would be a bad omen if he ever harmed the boy. Ultimately, Okonkwo is unable to participate from a distance and deals a fatal blow to Ikemefuna despite being told not to. Chaka kills Noliwa and remains haunted by the act for the rest of his life while being rewarded with a kingship for his actions. Similarly, both characters capitulate after committing rash acts of violence. Okonkwo kills a messenger in mid-sentence who dared interrupt an elder only to take his own life later. Although Chaka's death is certainly not suicide, his death is described in terms that invite the reader to believe that Chaka desires his own death. Not having slept for days, he imagines various spirits and saboteurs and when they finally come and stab him Chaka, "instead of fighting back like a man, as he used to, turned around slowly and woke up from his waking sleep, from daytime dreams he dreamed with his eyes wide open," illustrating his unwillingness to continue struggling against his enemies (167). In both novels traditional culture and religion are esteemed but also inadequate for the dilemma at hand. For Okonkwo this explicitly engages the colonial moment and traditional Igbo culture's inability to quickly react to colonialism in an effective manner. For Chaka, the combination of his own lust for power and use of traditional culture help him build an empire but to great cost

to himself and the people of his kingdom.²³ Like Okonkwo, he is left alone and disgraced at the end.

Ultimately while addressing and redressing the image of Africa as feminized, *Things Fall Apart* and *Chaka* reprimand a particular brand of hyper-masculinity.²⁴ Both main characters fail to solve existential problems because of their violent penchants. Okonkwo cannot keep from beating his wife even during the week of peace and kills Ikemefuna with his own hand despite being warned against it. His final act of murder before committing suicide is of course a violent act that clearly should have been substituted for a negotiation. Chaka is brutal beyond belief and kills not only to gain power but for pleasure as well. By the end of the story he becomes a monster who kills even his allies. Chaka in particular is a clear warning against violence as a mean of ruling. Although Okonkwo at times seems a victim of circumstance, things do not seem to fall apart of their own accord but because of the external pressures of colonialism and the inability of men like him in the Ibo power structure to organize themselves and fruitfully resist. Both novels at once privilege a return to traditional tribal ways and a reassertion of

²³ This is also a rather clever critique on the nature of empire by Mofolo as one cannot help but consider the various empires at work in Africa in relation to the Zulu empire. The Zulu empire was continually cast as the most brutal and dangerous to native Africans and Europeans alike but such a comparison in which Chaka's crimes are held against European colonial systems cannot help but reveal uncomfortable similarities for European readers.

²⁴ Achebe is rightly accused of underrepresenting women in his early works but often this lack of substantial female characters is taken as implicit support for African men in confronting the colonial and postcolonial situation. In *Things Fall Apart* and nearly all his other novels, the models of masculinity used by central characters is not only ineffective but detrimental to themselves and their families and people.

masculinity against the problematic feminizing discourse of colonialism while demonstrating each culture's inherent inability to do so via that same masculinity.

The fundamental contribution of my above readings is the realization that there is a literary history on which Achebe is drawing. He did not have to start from scratch in realizing African literary representations of Africans (or even of Nigerians and Igbos) as the mythology around *Things Fall Apart* so often suggests. Nor did he only have Western literary traditions as touchstones for his first novel. Clearly novels like *Chaka*, *Mhudi* and *Ethiopia Unbound*, among others, either directly influenced what Achebe wrote or suggest a broadly functioning African literary genealogy. That is, the similarities and influences between texts contribute to a kind of pan-African sensibility in which these works inform one another, or write back to one another, in a way previously ascribed only to Western works in relation to the novels. Ultimately, these intertextual moments open up meanings for *Things Fall Apart* that would otherwise be glossed over or attributed to an interaction with a Western text. Many others connections can be made, and no doubt will be, but given even this essay's small contribution, *Things Fall Apart* need not simply rent the crowd of a tradition that would deny it its own. Instead, in such a reading the novel compensates for the ways that the possibilities of early African texts under the strictures of missionaries

initially and then colonialism were limited to decidedly anti-African modes of expression.

Writing Back to Themselves: “Been-to” Modernity in the Literature of Africans in Europe

The central preoccupation of African letters can be formulated as that of working through the tension between one cluster of values called ‘tradition,’ and another that is called ‘modernity.’

–Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*

Olakunle George’s chapter “The Logic of Agency in African Literary Criticism” begins with the above general truism. While one need not accept this broad statement wholesale, we cannot ignore the inescapable impact of modernity, primarily via colonialism, on African literature and its chronic appearance in criticism. Modernity tinges the way African literary criticism approaches nearly everything in the field, whether feminism, economics, governance, religion or sexuality and beyond. As hinted at by George, this “working through” usually is understood to mean a conflict, one in which the pressures of the outside world (modernity) come to bear on traditional African cultures. More precisely, in discourses of modernity, traditional cultures are represented as statically entrenched, while modernity wrenches them from complacency to reproduce the successful European model. Failures therefore are caused not by modernity but by not embracing modernity enough. The modern thus overwrites the traditional and the two cannot coexist. Tribal structures concerning rights, individualism, divinity and the like are

simply erased and replaced with modern counterparts. Whether modernity is cast as an improvement (women's rights, clean water, economic prosperity) or a detriment (losses of languages, customs and value systems) the tendency in discussing modernity in the last few decades has focused primarily on its temporal elements. The operative models have postulated that modernity exists on a sliding scale on which the West represents an ever-improving and transient end point that non-Western societies are constantly in a race to catch. George's "preoccupation" with modernity is not unwarranted in African literary studies but recently one sees a welcome shift away from the temporal model's overreliance on a simple binary understanding that defines modernity as center/Western and tradition as periphery/non-Western.

Among the approaches to theorizing shifts in modernity, Charles Taylor's acultural and cultural models of modernity prove useful distinctions in tracking the transition from the temporal to geographically based models. Singularity and linear temporality are the defining characteristics of Taylor's acultural models of modernity, reflected in the assumptions above. These models have dominated discourses of modernity as supposedly "culture-neutral" in that they understand modernity as a set of transformations that any culture could go through and one which all will eventually undertake. These models are strictly temporal in nature and do not take into account location; modernity is simply a maturation process towards predetermined results

such as science, individuality and technological advancement. Modernity stands as an essential potential that is only waiting for proper conditions to begin. Location can hinder or facilitate the speed of modernity but it does not change its transformative functions. The fact that modernity first took hold in Europe is merely a coincidence and not a positive value judgment of that culture. Taylor bases this acultural modernity model on Max Weber's take on rationalization as a steady process that will take place in all cultures.²⁵ Although this acultural model has been the dominant one in the study of modernity, its flaws make it nearly inoperable when considering any postcolonial society, but especially African ones. Most erroneously, this model casts non-Western societies as constantly trying to catch up to the West as the bastion of modern society; in effect the more Western they become, the more modern they become, but they are always-already belated and by definition unable to gain parity (Jusdanis iv). One is either modern/Western or traditional/non-Western, hybridities are merely temporary stages that will inevitably give way to the purely modern. Even more damning are the realities on the ground in the non-Western world simply not mirroring this inflexible theory. Modernization in Africa and other postcolonial sites has not taken place along the same axis or unfurled the same events as in the West. Numerous examples are

²⁵ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar among others also uses the cultural and acultural distinctions. The precedents for the a/cultural groupings are myriad. Although Taylor points most frequently to Weber, he aggregates thinkers from the Enlightenment such as Voltaire and Korais with contemporaries like Habermas for convenience sake.

available from differences in individual rights to the maintaining of pre-colonial matrilineal societal norms.

Conversely, cultural models of modernity posit the existence of many modernities because modernity develops in a particular place as a result of local culture. However, defining “local” remains difficult. In some cases local culture is defined by tribal, national and/or regional influences. For example, we might see distinct strains of certain modernities consistently at play in Fulani peoples but the Fulani are dispersed across up to 18 nations in Africa in which they are almost always a minority. Would distinctly Fulani modernities be local transnational? Others, such as the Igbo, exist (more or less) in a singular area inside a single nation. Thus, African tribes can at times be transnational and/or local depending on the individual circumstance. Add to this the distinct regional modernities of East Africa, North Africa, West Africa and South Africa and we get a more accurate though complex and convoluted sense of the many modernities suggested by the cultural model. The cultural model argues that a culture’s modernity depends on that specific culture’s understanding of important concepts like personhood, civil society and the environment, among many others. In such a model, Africa or smaller entities in Africa (such as Asante or Bunanda) could each have its own modernity. Each would certainly not be entirely autonomous but rather constituted by a complex multilayered network of relations between many cultures. Many of these connections

would proliferate inside a particular culture and many radiate outwards geographically to other parts of the globe.

However, cultural models do not, as some contend, elide temporality. Cultural models understand temporality more complexly than acultural models by gesturing to altered understandings of Raymond William's concepts of dominant, residual and emergent categories of culture to abandon evolutionary cultural development that would coalesce into a single source. Most significantly for Africa, cultural models can account for the return to tradition advocated by negritude and similar projects that stress the importance of renewed attention to pre-colonial African social practices as guides for future development.²⁶ More than the occasional turn of dominant culture to previous manifestation to authorize itself, the residual is not coopted by the dominant (colonial/postcolonial/globalized) culture but an emergent challenge to it. Thus we see the coalescence of the residual and emergent into what might term a "re-emergent" African category because the residual for Africa existed in a temporal limbo during colonialism to assert itself in the postcolonial moment. Therefore, time in the cultural model is still essential but problematizes the acultural politics of historical periodization.

²⁶ The most recognizable of these perhaps being African feminism which often turns to the precolonial in stressing the matrilineal nature of many precolonial societies, particularly in West Africa and which attributes many of the negative attitudes and policies towards women as originating in the colonial mind.

I contend that George's "preoccupation" has become for many in the field a fixation with a critical acultural approach concerning how African literary scholarship approaches modernity. Implicit in many formulations concerning African literature's engagement with the Western canon is the contention that African literature is constantly responding to the West. The West writes and Africa writes back, in the same way that the West defines modernity in acultural models and Africa simply responds with repetition. Indeed, writing back and acultural models of modernity both do not embrace a multilayered and complex network of multi-polar interactions that span the globe, as in the cultural model of modernity. Instead critics who embrace writing back posit the relationship with the West as *the* relationship, often without a gesture towards a broader network, thus keeping other connections tangential. For me, the inability of acultural models of modernity to account for alternative modernities that lie outside of the scope of European modernity is mirrored by the inability of the writing back model to account for the overwhelming production of meaning in many African novels. In short, the relationship these texts have with the West is undeniable but in terms of their overall production of meaning, that relationship is hardly the most significant. Formerly minor African elements produce a multifaceted mosaic that outstrips Eurocentric readings. While there may be times that the West needs to be bracketed momentarily in this discussion (its specter ever-present), refocusing

African literary study's attention to particularly African and global contexts is not paternalistic, patronizing scholarly affirmative action. In fact, it represents a much needed rebalancing of our approaches to African literature that avoids the essentialism of the field's early years while also addressing the overcompensation for that essentializing evident in much recent scholarship. I am also mindful though of not falling victim to Rey Chow's contemporary Orientalists who seek to admonish non-Western cultures for their modernity and mourn the loss of the pre-colonial and ancient (the "loved object," for Chow).²⁷ Historicizing modernity temporally and spatially for Africa need not revert to a prelapsarian approach that seeks the true Africa only in an honorable and static pre-colonial past.

With the above caveats in mind, I will deploy the cultural theories of modernity to problematize the temporal and spatial assumptions that the current field of African literary studies has inherited. I see this inherited mode as overly reliant on a model that rests almost entirely on the West as a source, origin or parent at work within the field in the acultural sense of modernity and in the writing back trope. Moreover, I contend that one is tacitly accepting the acultural model of modernity when relying on writing back as the primary mode through which to read African novels. Writing back privileges acultural modernity and

²⁷ Chow is speaking of China via psychoanalysis but the point remains for this discussion that like Chow our sense of what constitutes modernity is not diametrically opposed to tradition.

presupposes modernity as necessarily a one-way process. This is not a rehearsal of the now beleaguered metropole to colony reversal of 1990's era postcolonial studies, but rather an acknowledgment that colonialism is constitutive of Western modernities and African modernities in drastically different ways. I contend then that Africa and its literature are entering a global modernity, only one of whose poles is the West, and our criticism needs to account for this phenomenon while constituting the African in African literature.²⁸

This chapter examines African texts that explicitly invite us to view them in relation to the West to demonstrate how even these African novels, whose primary modus operandi has been understood as at least a critical response to the West and at most "postcolonial revenge,"²⁹ constitute a more complex Afro-centric intertextuality. In a reversal of the colonial mission into the hostile interior of the colonies, many postcolonial novels imagine a journey by a colonial subject, or former colonial subject, to Europe. African novels in particular reimagine European confrontations with the strange peoples and landscapes of Africa by placing African protagonists in foreign and often frightening European landscapes. As in the case of *Things Fall Apart*, these novels are read almost exclusively for their comments on Europe (perhaps more

²⁸ Although I am not willing to term any of African literature as "minor," the collection *Minor Transnationalisms* also questions the prominence of the West as center in the study of non-Western, or minor, literatures. Modernity and writing back are not its critical approaches but it does contend rightly that the study of the non-Western via the Western does more to confirm the centrality of the latter than it does to confirm the legitimacy of the former.

²⁹ Leela Gandhi coins this term in her preface to *Postcolonial Theory*.

understandably in these cases), by a begrudging and wounded outsider with a bone to pick. What does the African observer see when confronted with the materiality of the metropole? How does he or she reconcile the various incongruities concerning European ideals and their enactment in the colonial and postcolonial world that inevitably surface? Can Africa hold Europe to account? Whether the substance of the comment is a belated anti-colonialism or the place of Western culture in Africa's post-independence identity, the subject of these novels invariably becomes Europe.

Far from a level-headed critique of the West (and even further from an examination of Africa for its own sake) these books are often read via writing back as positioning postcolonial Africa in an adversarial relationship with the West.³⁰ The previous chapter on *Things Fall Apart*

³⁰ The highly antagonistic relationship established by writing back perhaps is understandable given that it takes its name from a Salmon Rushdie piece in *The Times* entitled "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance." Anger is the prevalent emotion in these readings. Though they still entertain the notions Africans have of Europe, insights are also maligned because the protagonists are naïve and unworldly (the defining characteristics of Africa itself for many). This is not to say that Africa does not or should not demonstrate animosity towards the West but that locking African texts in a writing back paradigm leaves room for little else besides nativist views such as Negritude. Byron Caminero-Santangelo takes on this very point by crafting his study to "resist representations of the Western and the Post-colonial as opponents forever engaged in the same battle" (2). Unlike my project, however, Caminero-Santangelo is not interested in relegating the West in the patchwork of intertextualities that constitute the networks at play in works said to write back. Rather he wants that West/post-colonial relationship to move beyond a simple animosity so that the relationships between African texts and the works of Conrad form a relationship more complex than simple correction or resistance. His study represents an important moment of African literary scholarship because it undermines the assumed correctness in the field of writing back methodology. However, he unnecessarily unravels writing back only to the point of realizing various alternative intertextualities only with other Western sources rather than moving to Africa and beyond. One poignant example comes when he decries the connection between *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Heart of Darkness* as "yet another instance of postcolonial writing back, in which fairly straightforward cultural binaries are preserved" only to extend his focus to how Aidoo's novel also uses similar narrative structure to those found in *Heart of Darkness*. For Caminero-Santangelo, the problem is not then that too

demonstrates some of the tensions when a “traditional” culture such as Ibo culture comes in contact with a “modern” one.³¹ As has often been the case, since Columbus’ diary account of first contact, the modern usually visits the traditional (and all hell breaks loose for the indigenous peoples sooner or later). Exceptions to this rule in the colonial era exist with figures such as Equiano but we cannot not deny the normative practice, historically and textually, of the European modern visiting the African traditional. The journey of an African to Europe at length in African literature is an often used trope and perhaps most directly invites reflections on modernity given the inescapable confrontations that ensues in such books. Two exemplary African books synonymous with this kind of reading are *Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black Eyed Squint* by Ama Ata Aidoo and *Seasons of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. These are perhaps the most noted in a series of books that involve Africans living abroad, known as “been-tos.”³²

much emphasis has been placed on the West in reading Conrad (in fact he produces more in his book) but that the wrong kind discourse linking African literature to Western literature has developed.

³¹ I use quotation marks here because in this specific instance the hallmarks of modernity are confused because while British colonial culture proclaims itself modernizing and civilizing in Achebe’s novel, the Ibo culture actually demonstrates many of the traits of a modern society. For example, colonial authority is strictly top-down. Commands are given by a superior to an inferior and those commands must be complied under threat of severe punishment. Offending parties have little recourse to jurisprudence, as Okonkwo foresees. However, representations of Ibo society with its lack of a chief and presence a council that consults with each other and with the involved parties governed by a series of egalitarian rules appears much more modern.

³² Other examples which engage this topic at length include *Ethiopia Unbound*, *The Interpreters*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Fragments*, *L’Efant noir (The Dark Child)*, *L’aventure ambiguë (Ambiguous Adventure)*, *The Edifice* and *Why Are We So Blest?*

Although both novels treated here concern Africans, the fact that one is an East African Arabic Sudanese novel and the other a West African Anglophone Ghanaian one pressurizes attempts to see them as part of a single “wave” of African literature. The larger question becomes: do the cultural specificities of each culture allow us to consider them together as representative of how Africa becomes modern? Given the various constellations of critical centers in postcolonial studies and comparative literature that have gravitated away from white, male and European, how do these books coalesce to define Africa in terms of modernity?³³ I contend that both books construct alternative modernities to the European tale of modernity via the Africa-specific experience of the been-to phenomenon. In short, been-tos were Africans who had travelled to the West, mostly to Europe, for educational purposes as guests of often governmental benefactors. The term is now mostly abandoned except as a description of a particular wave of post-independence Africans granted education abroad with which they were supposed to return to build their new nations. The return did not always occur, hence the “brain drain” that coincides with been-tos. The term has been bandied in ways that indicate any African who has been to Europe but my definition coincides with William Lawson’s: “those person

³³ Of course this speaks to the much larger issue concerning the definition of Africa. In answering “What is Africa?” we cannot escape that the term itself is the product of modernity. That is, Africa did not exist as an epistemological entity until recognized from the outside and was powerfully reified by colonialism. In short, whether the term does an adequate job of characterizing the multiple races, religions, tribes, and social constructs the multifarious peoples of Africa have been epistemologically linked in a continuation of this initial grouping via African studies and African literary studies.

for whom 'been-to' has meant a prolonged stay that has produced genuine changes and hence some serious conflicts upon the return home." The term itself has shifted from a distinction implying privilege to one of derision as many been-to characters in African literature have taken on superficial Western affectation and often derogatory views of the nature of Africa. In the two books in this study that tension is played out instructively because we are presented with one returning African who holds onto her sense of self and shapes an African identity that supplements her Ghanaian ties, another who appears alienated back in his own Sudanese town and one more that finds a solution to the problem of reintegration (after a disastrous experience abroad) by keeping the otherness of his European tastes locked in a secret room which no one besides himself has ever entered. By examining the "been-to" phenomenon in both books, the place of Ghana in Pan-Africanism, the *fefewo* form, the *hakawati* form of *Seasons* and the Sudanese independence struggle I will demonstrate that the entrance into modernity for Africa is represented here not as a simple two-way struggle between colony and metropole a la writing back but via a palimpsestuous interaction of these forces.

Seasons of Migration and *Our Sister Killjoy* are especially useful because they follow their protagonists to Europe and describe the contacts they have with the West rather than the more standard treatment which is either diasporic in nature or describes

disillusionment upon return. I will demonstrate the problems with how writing back imagines these novels as mainly responses and reversals to argue that they are more constitutive of an attempt to construct a self-referential African self in a newly globalized modern world. That is, these novels instigate a complex weaving of multiple influences to craft identity for their characters beyond a simple oscillation between Africa and Europe. Complex networks imbued with tribal, national, colonial, transnational and pre-colonial forces combine to complicate the current popular critical readings of these texts.

Rather than just a chronological next step beyond the initial impact of Achebe in the late 1950's and early 1960's, these later books represent alternative strategies for Africa to write to itself, to constitute itself in the literary imagination. Whereas the previous chapter looked for historical precedence in African fiction to combat the hegemony of writing back that legitimizes an inaccurate and misrepresentative literary history dependent on the English canon, this chapter will handle the specificity of each work for the country and culture (often at odds with one another) of its origin. Beyond combating the standard complaint against postcolonial criticism for embracing overarching theory at the expense of cultural specificity, this approach links these works, and others in their tradition without the West as the central mitigating and determinate factor because despite the standing of postcolonial and

African literary studies, the problem of getting beyond Eurocentric histories is far from satisfactorily settled.

Critical Responses to *Our Sister Killjoy*

As a text that resists easy categorization, *Our Sister Killjoy* is a fitting text for a palimpsestuous reading because the palimpsest model's flexibility allows the reader/critic to engage with the slipperiness of the text. Despite the complexities of the book, critics have taken a largely single-minded approach to Aidoo's book by insisting on writing back as the dominant methodology in its study. *Our Sister Killjoy* tells the story of a young bombastic Ghanaian woman nicknamed Sissie who is awarded the opportunity to live in Germany as part of a youth program. She experiences culture shock in Germany when she is singled out for attention because of her dark skin almost immediately after arriving. She apprehensively befriends a lonely German housewife, Marija, who tries to instigate a sexual relationship, much to Sissie's horror. Moreover, Sissie finds Germany, and later England, to be lonely places where people live in isolation and where Africans are oddities for whites. Later in London she meets Africans living and studying abroad, many who refuse to return home. Sissie feels they, including her boyfriend, are betraying their homelands and participating in the neocolonial

domination of Africa. Ultimately, Sissie returns to Ghana to counteract the brain drain she sees other Africans abroad perpetrating.

Published in 1977 and set in the late 1960s, the bulk of *Our Sister Killjoy* was written ten years before its publication date. Most critics have situated the book within the 1970s; as a result they miss its interventions in the debates of the 1960s. The 1967 date lends itself to the many readings that cast Aidoo's book as supporting négritude as it would have been written in the throes of the mid-60's debate over the usefulness of the movement. The earlier date also centers the text in the debate over the use of African languages in African literatures as stated most notably by Obiajuna Wali's 1963 "The Dead End of African Literature?" and Ngugi's "The Language of African Literature" as the problem of "The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing" (Thiong'O 299). We see this when Sissie writes her "Love Letter" which begins "My Precious Something, First of all there is this language. This language. [...] I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled?" She continues in the letter: "all that I was saying about language is that I wish you and I could share our hopes, our fears and our fantasies, without felling inhibited because we suspect someone is listening." Clearly Aidoo places Sissie in the language debate of Wali, Achebe and Ngugi concerning the inheritance of colonial languages and the appropriateness of their usage.

However, Aidoo though is not simply rehearsing these debates but demonstrating that unlike the language debate's focus on the choice to use colonial or local African languages, for Sissie's generations in certain areas there is no choice. Although the later date of publication would not have completely removed the language question, the late seventies and earlier eighties in African theory moved towards appropriating colonial tools in service to colonized peoples. I am not advocating for the earlier date over the later date but often the 1977 date of publication is cited without mention of the earlier date that changes the conversations into which the book inserts itself. That being said, Sissie's active engagement with the debate over language and the deep disappointment she feels concerning the deposing of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966 marks the earlier date as the temporal setting for the diegesis of the novel, while the entrance of the book into the literary field in 1977 provides an additional built-in temporal layer that destabilizes fixed interpretations based on the earlier date.

Setting aside temporal considerations about publishing momentarily, the aspect of the book that confounds most critics is the use of prose and verse almost interchangeably. Although Aidoo writes much of the book as a prose novel, large portions are in verse. In some instances the verse continues telling the story from a similar critical perspective as the prose, but at other times the two differ in tone, critical distance, content and temporal setting. Despite this marriage of prose

and verse many critics consider the text a “straight” novel while others have posited it as an extension of African oral traditions. Considering the work as a novel makes large verse portions of the book inconvenient outliers. On the other hand, most critics justifying the book as an oral work presume that the insertion of verse into an African text makes it an oral text, despite such a simplistic formulation not conforming with the conditions of orality in African societies as formulated by Pius Zirimu and others.³⁴ Most of the verse is told from the perspective of the refraining and temporally ungrounded “knowledge gained since” figure who has experience beyond the ending of the book in which Sissie returns to Ghana. The third person prose narrative, or immediate narrator, is mostly limited to Sissie’s immediate temporality in the diegesis. Both access Sissie’s interiority, though the immediate narrator accesses the interiority of others. To complicate this interplay even further the two respond to one another as when the immediate narrator chastises “academic-pseudo-intellectual[s]” who rationalize neo-colonial attitudes and act as agents for Western interests in Africa. The experience gained since narrator retorts: “Yes, my brother, / The worst of them/these days supply local / statistics for those population studies, and / toy with / genocidal formulations.” The addressee becomes the reading audience and the other narrator. These two narrators form an

³⁴ Orality and oral tradition will be discussed later here. However, the point remains that conflating the insertion of verse into an African text with the presence of an oral tradition by some critics is highly problematic. Not only does it not account for why verse equals orality but it does not differentiate between the many different styles of oral storytelling on the continent.

explicitly dialogic register in which one cannot be fully separated from the other, but both stand in distinct positions as the most frequent formula in the novel is for the immediate narrator to describe a scene and then for the knowledge gained since to comment. For example:

Marija was warm.

Too warm for

Bavaria, Germany

From knowledge gained since.

The first line is Sissie's own reaction to Marija's extroverted friendliness while the following lines wrench the reader to an unidentified later point to add context to the immediate narrator's description. As in the case with the dates of 1967 and 1977, Aidoo forces the reader into an anxious oscillation between two distinct entities whose borders nonetheless constantly slip and play with one another. Therefore, any attempt to disregard the verse or read it as prose misses the dialogic nature of the main strategy of narration in the book. Similarly, aligning only the verse with the oral interrupts the conversation between the two narrators.

This dialogic pattern holds its form to some degree for most of the book only to be further complicated when Sissie narrates her "Love Letter" in first person. We are left then with a limited third person narrator (the immediate narrator), a free floating third person "knowledge

gained since” narrator who limits are unclear and a first person narrator. Even these distinctions slip and the reader is unclear as to which third person narrator is speaking and even though the first person narrator is strictly confined to “A Love Letter” the ability of the other narrators to provide interiority at times imbues those narratives with a first person sensibility. These distinctions between a written/published temporal oscillation and between the various narrators are salient not only because they are often misunderstood or oversimplified in criticism of *Our Sister Killjoy* but also because they serve as a useful metric for the following discussion on intertextuality.

The stated are just a few of the complexities that have aided critical responses in falling back on the stock critical approach of writing back, con-texts and the like. That is, many critics have revisited the mid-twentieth century formulation of African literature purely as a site of resistance in an Africa v. West, Black v. White and Colonized v. Colonizer paradigm despite the highly fragmented African subjects in *Our Sister Killjoy*.³⁵ In my view this approach has come about not only because of the ease of deploying stock postcolonial tropes like writing back, but because these oppositional attitudes are visible in the character of Sissie. Sissie is outspoken and brash on issues concerning Africa, causing many critics to mistake Sissie as a stand-in for Aidoo. These understandings

³⁵ The specificity of Nkrumah’s Ghana influencing Sissie so strongly itself problematizes any simple African subject. More convincing perhaps are the heated disagreements Sissie and her narrators have with almost every other African she encounters in the text.

erroneously misread Sissie's exuberance, naivety and enthusiasm as a didactic release for Aidoo. Although this formulation creates a convenient paradigm for considering *Our Sister Killjoy* as resisting White, West and Colonizer, the text operates in much more complex ways than the consciousness of the character of Sissie reflects.

These general tones and critical missteps of can help us understand the macro-criticism of *Our Sister Killjoy*, but examining how specific and salient criticism engages the work can lay bare the working and failures of writing back to account for this book. Critical responses to *Our Sister Killjoy* over the last 30 years have varied enormously, but examining the most influential and oft deployed can give us an understanding of the (over)use of the resistant writing back paradigm. In "The Risk of (Re)membering My Name: Reading *Lucy* and *Our Sister Killjoy* as Travel Narratives," Paula Morgan posits that Sissie's trip to Germany replaces "a white eyed (Eurocentric) perspective with a black-eyed (Afrocentric) perspective," arguing that the text is a "corrective to adjust the myopia of a colonial legacy" (189). In a move that also attempts to isolate an essential African perspective, Elizabeth Wiley stresses that *Our Sister Killjoy* reevaluates "the intrusion of Islam and the West in Africa, in terms of an African view of history with the ultimate goal of establishing the African personality" (15). These readings both conceptualize the production of meaning in the text as coming from an oppositional relationship to the West in which *Our Sister Killjoy's* primary

contribution rights the wrong of the colonial view. Meaning here depends almost solely on an error by an “original” or “parent” text from an essentialized white European center. For Morgan, then, “replacing” means substituting Sissie for Marlowe in a reenactment of the latter’s journey to the interior of the Congo. Unfortunately, this view retains the highly problematic essential subjects of African and European, while confining Aidoo’s text to a caricature, or “what if” experiment, in which what happened in a canonical text can be reimagined, African literature becoming little more than an editorial on canonical Western texts.

A more explicit engagement comes from one of the most recognized and oft deployed critics of *Our Sister Killjoy*, C.L. Innes. Innes has engaged *Our Sister Killjoy* in various works, but her insistence in “Mothers or Sisters? Identity, Discourse and Audience in the Writings of Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba” that “Aidoo rewrites and revises Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as the archetypical novel about Africa” most clearly represents her views and the myriad of critics who subscribe to the writing back paradigm (140). Innes contends that Sissie directly confronts Conrad’s male European narrator. For Innes, the “knowledge gained since” represents not narrative distance from the events of Sissie’s trip but the knowledge that Sissie has gained having incorporated Conrad’s text with minimal alterations. Thus, for Innes the main move undertaken in *Our Sister Killjoy* is a simple reversal. Instead of a white colonizer journeying to the black colonized other, the black colonized is

venturing into white colonizer territory. This formulation preserves several problematic features of colonialism itself as it assumes the underlying structure of colony/metropole still holds while imagining that black/African and white/European subjects, as whole essential subjects, also still stand. For critics like Innes the “knowledge gained since” is not a comment of the forces at work on Africans in the post-independence era that keep them abroad while leaders like Nkrumah beseech, “And to those who want to come back home and fight for Africa’s total emancipation, unity and independence I say, come home. We need you!” Neither is it a better understanding of the difficulties for those returning or why such returns have failed to fulfill what Sissie terms “the promise of independence” Rather the loneliness that Sissie sees as the heart of Europe and the persistence of racial prejudice are what she gains, both points that an African who has lived under a white colonial system hardly needs to travel to Europe to understand. We see then that Innes and the numerous readings based on her work preserve the core structure of Conrad’s problematic novella by simply reversing colonial binaries without factoring the stakes for a self-substantiating African literature.

Similarly, Kwaku Larbi Korang poses *Our Sister Killjoy* as “recovering an African mode of knowledge and being” that “reverses those [colonial] structures of meaning” (52). Korang, more than any other critic focuses on mythologizing a lost Africa. He argues that *Our Sister Killjoy*

is a “project to recover the African to and for him/herself” that “recall(s) the African soul to itself” (51). Beyond embracing Innes’ essential African and European subjects and the reversal of the West’s view of Africa, Korang inadvertently and problematically embraces a Conradian view of Africa as a lost and unknowable continent. Only now the West is not searching for a mythical Africa and its essential core, but Africa is searching for its own lost Africaness. Although the search for self after colonialism is a viable enterprise, the fact that the search takes place along the same essentialist lines that retrace and revise the West’s project in Africa stands as problematic. Sissie constantly identifies herself as Ghanaian and urges specific nationalities, like Nigerians, to focus on domestic events, like the Biafran War, not a vaguely understood African identity. Africa remains lost, the blank space on Conrad’s map, in this paradigm and recovery of a pre-colonial essential “African mode,” not unlike E.W. Blyden’s (and subsequently Nkrumah’s) largely dismissed “African personality” that also relied on an idealized and fictional pre-colonial Africa identity. More to the point, Aidoo’s sense of Ghana, let alone Africa, is so fragmented that to think of Ghana even as a singularity is miscalculated. Theoretically we see many critics, such as Anthony Appiah argue that there was no sense of Africa as an entity before colonialism so a search for a pre-colonial African identity is prefigured to misrepresent. This is not to say that after colonialism that such an identity is not needed or that colonialism as a unifier of Africa is

not less than ideal but African identity becomes powerful and substantive only as a new formation instigated by colonialism for the initial task of revisiting it. Beyond the somewhat problematic underlying assumption that Africa does not know itself, any search for knowledge by modern Africans for Africa would seem to operate in strikingly different ways than Conrad's 19th century search.

Finally, in a stunningly bullish inversion of the work above, Hildegard Hoeller in "Ama Ata Aidoo's Heart of Darkness" demonstrates the types of plausible misreadings available to critics who subscribe to essentialist subjects and the reversal of binaries. Hoeller asserts that Aidoo not only reverses Conrad's novella in the ways mentioned above, but that she is so exact in her reversal that she practices a kind of reverse racism in her portrayal of Germans. Hoeller finds offense in "the inaccuracies, even overt racism" of how Aidoo's brand of reverse racism and oversimplification "seem to mirror Conrad's [racist] depiction of Africa" (132). The "project" Hoeller asserts of *Our Sister Killjoy* is "the haunting literary past of Conrad's colonial narrative" reacting too closely in an exact reversal in which instead of white Europeans oversimplifying and dismissing black African culture, Sissie as a black African oversimplifies and dismisses all of Western culture (132). This reading is enabled because Hoeller uses the essential categories proposed by Korang and Innes. Instead of engaging their nuanced commentary, Hoeller perhaps unwittingly demonstrates how these essentialist

structures can be used to cast Sissie as a new version of the racist Marlowe and *Our Sister Killjoy* as an obtusely racist *Heart of Darkness*. Hoeller is not alone in grasping at this view as Brenda Cooper writes that Aidoo's novella takes a "right wing exclusivist position" in also expressing a palatable unease (27). Hoeller's blatant misreading that parallels a former colonized subject lashing out at a former colonizer with a capitalist hegemonic maneuver by a colonizer to exploit the colonized does not require much insight to overcome. However, the fact that it operates in line with the essentialist and binary principle of more nuanced foundational readings demonstrates how these models derail when taken to their logical conclusions.

Cumulatively, these approaches delimit *Our Sister Killjoy* from becoming a fruitful moment of intertextuality. Beyond oversimplifying Aidoo's work, these views unnecessarily limits the fields for creating meaning in *Our Sister Killjoy*. That is, they too forcibly press a singular ground on which to consider *Our Sister Killjoy* without recognizing the multiple networks that nexus in the work. These critics participate in various aspects of a project to acquiesce to essential modes of identity formation which then support binaries between Africa and West, Black and White, colonizer and colonized, without noting the limited usefulness of this overly confining formulation.

Fields for a Palimpsestuous Reading

To escape the overly confining field of meaning created by criticism that has essentialized African and European identities, recast Sissie as Marlowe and preserved unnecessarily the structures of *Heart of Darkness* through deployment of the writing back trope, I would like to explore the usefulness of the palimpsest as a way of offering alternative readings of *Our Sister Killjoy* that do not depend on writing back. Kristeva distinguishes the two levels of geno-text and pheno-text that are useful for understanding the usefulness of the palimpsest model. The phenol-text is the surface phenomenon of a text present before a reader, whereas the geno-text is made up of the texts (social, historical, literary) that cause that text to surface, its causes. In a sense then geno-texts not only can be tracked to the text that sits in front of us but also to the text that could have been. More concretely, though tracking geno-texts cannot change the actual work in front of us, they can continue to change our understanding of the pheno-text. The palimpsest, on which the phenol-text is merely the outer most level, reveals the scars of violence against geno-texts that have been scratched over or unrecognized. At the same time though these scars create a space in which these inscriptions that cannot be completely erased and thus multiple means can proliferate. Thus singular ossified meaning can

never find firm footing but must remain as Barthes contends “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds.”

For this project, I see the writing back paradigm as imposing the rigidity of Barthes’ “structure of signifieds” rather than his “galaxy of signifiers.” However, I am not interested here in simply offering as many intriguing interpretations as possible but rather in bringing forward the palimpsest as a structure of signification for African literature. As asserted by Sarah Dillon, the foremost contemporary theorist of the palimpsest, Barthes’ “galaxy” “evidences the spectrality of any present moment which already contains within it (elements of) ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’” in an unruly and unorganized endless series of signifiers that do not lend themselves to structure, however flexible. Kristeva attempts to define the intertextuality of the palimpsest as operating on a horizontal axis that “belongs to both writing subject and addressee” and a vertical axis as “oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus.” Here I am concerned primarily with the vertical axis as it runs through multiple texts, but even confined to this axis the multitude of signifiers are innumerable. Therefore I believe a roughly ordered vertical palimpsestuous reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* that deliberately confines itself to local history, the been-to phenomenon, narrative structure, and a prolonged engagement with a similar text will begin to bring the multiplicity of meaning required for African texts such as *Our Sister*

Killjoy.³⁶

History: Ghana and Nkrumah

One of the most interesting points missed almost entirely by critics is the specificity of Ghana as Sissie's native country. The fact that she is African is relentlessly addressed but oddly the specificity of her as Ghanaian has only been engaged in passing by most critics. Reading *Our Sister Killjoy* via Ghanaian history, we cannot deny the many specific allusions to Ghana and specifically to Kwame Nkrumah as opening up a specific historical trajectory. The first instance of this occurs early on when the experienced gained narrator interrupts the immediate narrator's point about racism in the airline industry (Sissie is made to sit at the back of a plane coming from South Africa) with "One more Nkrumah hallucination./The man was great." The ambivalence in this comment that for most critics is disposable represents an insertion of a particular vertical geno-textual marker running through various palimpsestuous levels. That is, this moment represents an engagement with a social and historical text, i.e. the world outside the text, to produce a moment of meaning understood only when these texts are

³⁶ Perhaps most significant here is an attempt at order. The palimpsest as a model has often been conceived of as either too strictly ordered –the scratching off to reveal another text- or as completely unstructured space in which any kind of intertextual relationship is valid. Moving beyond a simple revelation while still suggesting some structural frame is the task at hand.

triangulated with one another in a relationship of mutual elucidation. This intertextuality may seem inconsequential but in this moment in *Our Sister Killjoy* we are given significant insight into the text's positionality in the post-independence African world. The narrator demonstrates an ambivalent reaction to Nkrumah that permeates Ghana and Africa to this day in an opening salvo on the importance of Nkrumah for this text.

Nkrumah is called "the man who shattered forever the mould of colonized Africa," because of his key role in securing independence for Ghana and for his role in promoting the independence of all colonized Africans (Young 242). At the midnight pronouncement of Ghanaian independence on March 6th 1957, Nkrumah insisted as he did before and since that "The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked with the total liberation of the African continent." He was instrumental in founding and propagating the Pan-African movement which morally and materially assisted independence movements throughout Africa.

Nkrumah also was instrumental in forming the Organization of African Unity, the predecessor to the African Union. In short, Kwame Nkrumah is the one individual identified the world over for helping African states gain independence. Even Marija in *Our Sister Killjoy* who thinks that Ghana is near Canada and that Sissie is an Indian recognizes Nkrumah: "Ah, ja,ja,ja that is ze country ze have ze president Nukurumah, ja?"

As much credit as Nkrumah received for “breaking the mold of colonial Africa” he is also blamed for creating the mold of the despotic African head of state. After independence in 1957 Nkrumah won the presidency and he soon took over large portions of the government for himself and his party. This culminated in 1964 when Nkrumah declared Ghana a one party state, making his Convention People’s Party (CPP) the only legal political party in Ghana, declaring “The Convention People’s Party is Ghana.” This was made possible in part because in 1963 he removed the chief justice of the country. For these actions Nkrumah has been cast as the first national African “big man,” defined as a political leader who makes promises to their followers which are not fulfilled while enriching themselves and their followers. Whether contemporary heads of state such as Toure, Houphouet-Boigny, Senghor, Keita Nyerere and Kenyatta, who also transformed their governments to single party states, were similarly caught up in the problem of inheriting colonial structures or influenced directly by Nkrumah’s example is still hotly debated. For Nkrumah, a single party state was linked to his conception of the African personality as benevolent and of African societies as not having class systems that would demand built-in mechanisms for dissent in the system. Was this a naïve move by a leader in an impossible position or merely a rationalization for a more complete hold on Ghana’s power and wealth? Nonetheless, a military coup widely supported with fervor by the public overthrew the Nkrumah

government and the former president was exiled, never being allowed to return to Ghana.

There are those to this day that refuse to accept that Nkrumah had anything but the most noble of intentions while others blame his model of governing as legitimizing despotism and cronyism in African for decades. Sissie's comment and subsequent attitudes though betray an ambivalent attitude towards Nkrumah that similarly paints her view of Ghana, been-tos, the diaspora and African as whole. In her first encounter with Nkrumah, he is at one "great" while also hallucinating. Later Sissie's criticism become more poignant about Nkrumah's downfall but at this early point in the narrative the experienced gained narrator is faulting him for his naivety at a moment in the diegesis that Sissie is at her most naïve. At this early stage she believes that she is being sent abroad to "make good again" and she gets her first tastes of European wine and food at a banquet attended by the ambassador and his wife, making her "shiver and fidget" like a nervous child. Soon she is whisked off to the airport and to a plane on which she obliges white passengers by sitting in the back despite her misgivings. Sissie's naivety then is drawn in direct contrast with Nkrumah's optimism surrounding the transformative powers of independence. Aidoo links the two in this short exchange which is furthered by Nkrumah as perhaps the most well know

been-to.³⁷ The overwhelming sense of achievement of being one of only six students chosen to travel abroad and the deliriousness of independence are mingled here to elucidate the headiness of both.

Sissie intermittently picks up this theme throughout the book. Her strongest indictment of the Nkrumah legacy comes when she refers to “the pigs who run our countries” and Nkrumah more directly in participating in a bout of Afro-pessimism by pointing to the failures of African states “since Ghana opened a dance of masquerades called Independence, for Africa.” Sissie’s ambivalence persists as the masquerade clearly indicts Nkrumah again though the previous comments condemn those who came after him. Sissie mocks Nkrumah’s independence movement as a masquerade while affording those who overthrew him no amnesty. Sissie echoes common statements like those from political elite J.B. Danquah in the Ghanaian national press after Nkrumah’s overthrow: “I hate all that the Nkrumah’s and the other C.P.P. leaders stand for in our political history- dangling of false promises before the trusting masses.” Others though such as Simon Kapwepwe, the first vice-president of Zaire, saw Nkrumah’s fall differently: “I saw Africa going back politically where we started. In short this [Nkrumah’s overthrow] means Africa would be ruled by the West

³⁷ He studied in the U.S. and U.K. at several universities for over ten years before returning to Gold Coast in the late 1940’s before returning to take over as general secretary for the United Gold Coast Convention, the predecessor to the CPP.

through the Army” (Honour in Africa 329).³⁸ Although Sissie speaks harshly about African governments we do not get a clear sense of whether she prefers Nkrumah or subsequent leaders. Sissie’s brand of Afro-pessimism insists that it does not matter which of the “pigs” is in power.

In his chapter “Struggling Toward the Postcolonial: The Ghost of Conrad in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*” Byron Caminero-Santangelo contends that the specter of Conrad pervades Aidoo’s text. He finds “echoes” of several of Conrad’s texts, *Heart of Darkness* being the strongest. I contend that it is the specter of Nkrumah and Ghanaian independence that haunts this text. Aidoo and Sissie are less concerned with correcting European views on Africa as they are with trying to figure out a way forward after the rise and fall of Nkrumah, and in a sense the rise and fall of Ghanaian and African independence. When Sissie returns home calling Africa a “crazy old continent” it is not in reference to a Western view of Africa. Indeed she loses herself in thought and realizes that she may have spoken the words aloud. She finishes the book with “The occupant of the next seat probably thought she was crazy. Then she decided she didn’t care anyway” in a move that allows her to criticize Africa without having to worry about whether that representation of “crazy” inhabits the history of dismissive Western views

³⁸ Kapwepwe brings the West into the discussion because at the time many suspected that the CIA had facilitated the coup. We now know this to indeed be the case.

on Africa. In the end she does not care what the West thinks of Africa just as the book rejects an obsession with the West when Sissie reprimands Africans who are more interested in proving to whites they are intelligent than in working for the benefit of those in their homelands. It is not “the horror, the horror” that we hear in the background of this scene, but Nkrumah’s “I say, come home. We need you!”

A reading of a particular passage can perhaps bring this to the foreground. Caminero-Santangelo analyzes a two page selection of verse that condemns the riches African presidents, their wives and their cronies have fleeced from the African public at large whose “water from their shit-bowls/Is better than what villagers/Drink.” For Caminero-Santangelo “The presidents and their cohorts are the contemporary Kurtzes of Africa.” Clearly Kurtz’s ivory trade exists to benefit foreign trade interests but it hardly compares to the “horror” of a native African who has won independence for his people to later betray them with autocratic rule and kleptocracy on a national level. The relevant intertextual possibilities are manifold as Africa has been the scene of modern autocracy as well as earlier figures like Chaka Zulu who in the name of their specific tribe or country have brought great suffering to masses of people. Rather than delve into the specific complications of figures like Nkrumah, Senghor or Chaka we are told that even specific instances of abuse by African leaders, even when the leaders are named

earlier in the text, signify a European text. Kurtz can be seen to represent Western colonialism but it is not Western capitalists at whom Sissie and the narrators direct their anger. It is directed at Ghanaians, Nigerians and Africans whether they be students or leaders. This Conrad-heavy version of intertextuality operates on Kristeva's vertical axis without an ethical order to make African texts about Africa. On this axis one can deploy African intertextuality in any haphazard manner as any referentiality is as good as another in a strictly linguistic based system like Kristeva's intertextuality. Dillon's palimpsest does little more to remedy this oversight as once again all reference is devoid of semantic meaning. If we take it on principle that part of our project for examining African literature is not to repeat the violence of colonial literature on representations of Africans by participating in a neo-colonial reading of African texts, then we must allow those texts intertextual relationships with the rich social, cultural and historical texts that are clearly referenced in them. Simply put, Kurtz is not the touchstone for African leaders betraying their own populism, Nkrumah earns that dubious distinction.

Rather than Conrad we have a genealogical vein that links to Nkrumah, other post independence leaders and Ghana in chain a signifiers embedded in the text. These intertextual signifiers contaminate the simple essential African subject on the Africa/West binary thus eroding its viability in favor of a loosely ordered African "galaxy of

signifiers.” Instead of a generic structure³⁹ that replicates the West/Other with an African label, the multiplicity of referents present a complex layering of influences and allusions that rest just under the pheno-text and that spills when brought to the surface. Indeed, if the project of African literature, as so many writing back critics propose, is to place Africa as an available subject as complicated and rich as any other, then flattening the various groups in Africa to achieve such subjectivity is counterproductive and at this point is the postcolonial discussion at least somewhat antiquated.

The impact of Nkrumah as a leader and more importantly as symbol for independence era Ghana is hard to overestimate. Noted historian Basil Davidson wrote about Nkrumah’s fall: “Probably there was no single moment after which this [independence-era] optimism began to seem naïve, or perhaps shameful, and was replaced by ‘disappointment’ or ‘disillusionment’ in the headline jargon of newspaper currency.” The rhetoric of Nkrumah is also crucial to understanding his importance historically and in relation to *Our Sister Killjoy*. Nkrumah labeled himself Osagyefo, meaning redeemer and man of destiny. Nkrumah appropriated years of political resistance during the colonial period as well as the dignity and power of the Asante kings (307 Honour). As Osagyefo, Nkrumah effectively cast himself as the

³⁹ This is not the decades old argument that postcolonial studies uses overly general paradigms that are simply transposed onto different regions. Those structures are actually useful given that they are married with enough specificity and knowledge on the culture in question.

personification of the peerless ancestors that had led one of the largest empires in Africa. More importantly, the people of Ghana and much of Africa agreed. Promises from Nkrumah, such as his oft repeated “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all else shall be added unto you,” demonstrated the heights to which he would regularly raise the hopes of the people of Ghana and place his political presence in language of religion and faith.⁴⁰ Therefore, when Sissie fulfills Davidson’s disillusionment with Nkrumah and Ghanaian independence she is not just mentioning one leader in a long and rapidly changing series like the nine regimes in Ghana in the fifteen years after the 1966 coup. Rather she is expressing a universal disillusionment that underpinned the hopes for development of an entire nation and arguably an entire continent. Therefore, despite attempts by most critics to gloss over the figure of Nkrumah in favor of Kurtz this historical layer of the palimpsest that is the geno-text of this work refuses erasure and reasserts itself here as a persistent scar.

Narrative Structure: *Fefewo*

Many critics have found the formal structure of *Our Sister Killjoy* unwieldy. Three narrators that are often difficult to separate, constant

⁴⁰ This flamboyance led to a bet with Cote d’Ivoire’s president Houphouet-Boigny in 1957, called the “West African wager,” to see which country would be more developed by 1967. Nkrumah lost the wager.

oscillations between verse and prose and extraordinary amounts of white space on the page have led to many frustrated readings. Caminero-Santangelo sums up the view of many when he writes “This ambiguity of identity extends to the generic classification of the text itself, which crosses between poetry and prose in a manner that makes it *impossible to characterize*” (italics mine). However, Caminero-Santangelo and others have no such reticence when explaining the explicit dialogism of the text. Bakhtin is effectively deployed to demonstrate how the text incorporates his concept of dialogism as the hallmark of novels (as opposed to the epic’s monologic totality), via *Our Sister Killjoy*’s two main narrators. Readings which elide African cultural specificity in favor of a turn to Bakhtin and Conrad to explain African novels do create an intertextual genealogy but an ethical concern about the ability of African texts to speak without “performing their Africanness” for the West must also ask whether the structure of *Our Sister Killjoy* adheres to a particularly localized structure. In other words, is there a geno-text in the genealogy of the text that we can bring to the surface of a palimpsestuous reading? If we can provide such insight instead of yet another example of a dialogic novel, we break new ground in further establishing African literature’s self-referentialism.

Thankfully, Vincent O. Odamtten in his *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and Reading Against Neocolonialism* provides the seed for an

examination of the influence of local Ghanaian⁴¹ literary structure on *Our Sister Killjoy*. In considering the structure of Aidoo's text, Odamtten brings perhaps the most intriguing features to light by looking to Akan, Fante and Ewe story structures rather than Western constructs. His approach represents a refreshingly organic theoretical construct which attempts to turn inward towards the micro-cultural. Instead of looking to the globe, the West, Europe, the nation-state or other such large-scale entities, Odamtten turns to the particulars of Akan, Ewe and Fante dramatic and oral literary traditions. Odamtten refuses a purely Western audience for Aidoo, and African literature as a whole, and seeks to foreground "the erasures or omissions of the dialogue between Aidoo's texts and her [African] audience." Odamtten proposes a polylectic approach that acknowledges the overdependence of African literary criticism on Eurocentric models that do not "account for as many of the complexities of the specific (con)texts of the literary/cultural product as possible." In other words, Odamtten admonishes African literary critics who do not deploy specific knowledge of the cultures producing the literature they analyze.⁴² For Odamtten African literary criticism often says more about the critic and the cultural and literary traditions from which he or she comes than about the work being considered. At issue

⁴¹ I use Ghanaian here to be more specific than "West African" despite the fact that the Akan (Fante and Ashanti in particular) and Ewe people are not strictly confined by the somewhat arbitrary colonial borders of Ghana.

⁴² Interestingly, Odamtten is noted in almost all the studies on *Our Sister Killjoy* following his book's publication but his deployment of West African literary structures is rarely mentioned and never deployed.

for Odamtten is explicating an approach to Aidoo that resists the hegemony of Western criticism's "narrowly formulated ... master narrative" in favor of "an attempt to conjoin that aesthetic [African orality] to the whole critical enterprise." I suggest that separating the structural dimensions of such texts from their specific socio-historical and cultural contexts, as is often done in analyses of African literature, re-inscribes in a neocolonial fashion the "normative Western generic compartmentalization" of genre that Aidoo's work disrupts (Odamtten 5).

Although Odamtten's overall project in his study differs greatly from this one⁴³, he brings to light several Ghanaian oral literary structures. The structure most relevant for this project is the *fefewo*, "an Ewe word that signifies the totality of the story-telling event-performance *and* reception" (italics in original.) These performances do not function as traditional Western written text as a large part of their culture significance resides in their ability to provoke discussion amongst

⁴³ Odamtten is primarily concerned with tracking resistance to neo-colonialism in Aidoo's oeuvre. He approaches via polylectics which he defines being able to "account for as many complexities of the specific (con)texts of the literary/cultural product as possible." However as Maggi Phillips accounts in her review of Odamtten's study, polylectics while providing the requisite opening up of approaches to Aidoo also acts as a critical limitation. Phillips argues adroitly that the move does not pay off as polylectics does not account for further openings and also lacks a focalized definition. For this reason the palimpsest can prove useful in that it prefigures future inscription. More to the point though, Odamtten focuses on the now overly familiar argument that Western feminist critical modes prove ill-fitting paradigms for analysis of African texts by women. In focusing on African feminism and characterizing Aidoo's oeuvre as resistant to neocolonialism above all else, Odamtten unnecessarily focuses on an adversarial intertextual relationship between African and Western text in which he incorporates writing back as a weapon against the West by understanding *Our Sister Killjoy* as a journey into the "blank of whiteness" that acts as "the reversal of Conrad's central metaphor" in a move that makes space for and prefigures Hoeller's "reverse-racism" claims via his use of the "Heart of Whiteness."

audience members. Aidoo has invited such comparisons herself in interviews often citing the oral nature of her writings, as in a 1972 interview in which she stated that “In fact I pride myself on the fact that my stories are written to be heard primarily.” In a later interview she continues this line:

We cannot tell out stories maybe with the same expertise as our forefathers. But to me all the art of the speaking voice could be brought back so easily. We are not that far from our traditions...In fact, I believe that when a writer writes a short story, it should be possible for the writer to sit before an audience and tell the story of a boy and a girl in Accra, or Paris, or London...You'd like to be able to communicate verbally and have the written thing if people can't be there.

Aidoo intends her work to problematize a clear divide between the oral and the literary as well as the divide of modern and traditional. For Aidoo, local African traditions are not lost in need of rediscovery: “we are not far” from them, and the modern in Africa cannot develop without a local specificity on some universal acultural scale. Similarly, African literary criticism cannot develop without a self-awareness of the problematic nature of Eurocentric models of criticism. Structurally, this focus on orality surfaces in the repeating figure of “my brother,”

whom the narrators address directly.⁴⁴ Confusingly, my brother at times seems to refer to the other narrator but also to an inferred audience. The experience gained since narrator also comments on the diegesis as a present audience member passing judgments on Sissie and weighing in on most plot points. Just as an audience comment breaks the flow of a narrative, the comments by the experienced gained figure often abruptly interrupt the immediate narrator only for the latter to pick up where it was interrupted, allowing the narrator to partially inhabit the role of listener Aidoo so desires.

Further complicating the narrative structure, the experienced gained narrator refers to itself as “we” at several points. One such instance gives us one of a few establishing details of the experienced gained since “we”: “When/You are going to/Finish and go back home.../And the letters home,/My God,/THOSE LETTERS FROM HOME!/Letters/From which we died expecting and/Which/Buried us when they came...” The passage continues by quoting parts of letters to been-tos Kofi, Bragou, Dede, Obi and Kunle. This passage proposes a plural identity for the experienced gained since narrator(s) through the use of the plural pronoun. This section is particularly difficult to track because the immediate narrator is relating a conversation Sissie is having with Kunle about a heart transplant from a black man to a white

⁴⁴ Aidoo has consistently repeated these claims about the oral nature of her work as well as her approach concerning audience in relation to this orality in “we don’t always have to write for readers, we can write for listeners.”

man (rather than the Biafran War as she would like). Rather than the distinction of the immediate narrator speaking in prose and the experience gained in poetry the two overlap by complimenting, supplementing and interrupting each other. Eventually they depart from the conversation completely to tell us that Kunle has died. This section continues the *fefewo* with both narrators simultaneously inhabiting Kunle's mother as she tells the reader of the struggles she and the family back home are enduring. We are then pulled out of the mother's perspective to be told by an almost conjoined dual narrator that Kundle's insurance from England refused to cover the car accident that killed him. The story of Kunle ends the third part of the *fefewo* without returning to the conversation or the dilemmas faced by Sissie. Whether she shames the Africans in London to return, how the conversation with Kunle ends, whether she will return home and the status of her relationship with her boyfriend are left unsettled. The white space on the page that follows suggest a chapter break but also an inviting space for Odamtten's "interminable palavers" that define the *fefewo*'s lack of resolution. Thus, this *fefewo* incorporates a sense of a present audience, and the flexible *fefewo* structure makes little distinction between the genres of poetry, prose and drama-the very mixing that leaves *Our Sister Killjoy* "impossible to characterize" for many.

It is also useful here to explain the nature of orality and oral tradition in *fefewos* and *Our Sister Killjoy*. Oral tradition establishes an

“author position” while acknowledging that individual storytellers are in fact building on a long tradition of telling that same story, as some argue that Homer is not an author of the *Illiad* in the modern sense but a literate compiler of one of his tradition’s seminal stories. Aidoo is clearly not simply filling the author position by aggregating tales but clearly she is inviting comparisons with this tradition by evolving a storytelling structure that allows for differently worded enunciations at the site of telling and improvisation based on imagined audience participation. Aidoo’s text falls more neatly into the broadly defined realm of orality, especially residual orality as orality existing concurrently with written culture. However, ultimately her text is written and not spoken. By repeating the traditional *fefewo* structure made different by appearing in writing and minus semblances of an oral tradition turned literate to preserve traditional stories (content) Aidoo is attempting to create a new modern tradition based on the shared African experience of colonialism, independence, neo-colonialism and been-tos.

Importantly, in *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo does not simply put into effect Nkrumah’s African personality that valorizes pre-colonial Africa as honorable beyond reproach but does turn to the pre-colonial for a marker of difference between Western and African fiction. For Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy* the specifically African nature of the book imposes the uneasiness felt by critics who are uncomfortable calling the book a novel but who also lack the tools for a different distinctive genre. Aidoo

removes oral tradition and orality from the static already-finished realm of the anthropological and breathes life into it, not unlike Amos Tutola, for modern circumstances. In this way Aidoo is the consummate modern African author in that she participates in the commodification and elevation of the written word while inviting comparisons to the novel (in keeping with Bakhtin's conception of its flexibility) but infuses that representation with a structure that at the same time undermines any pretense to the novel's hegemonic totality of representation. For Aidoo, only a structure that incorporates uniquely Ghanaian elements could represent Ghanaians. African storytelling slips in and out of genre systems and Aidoo demonstrates this by at once narrating, analyzing and dramatizing in a fluid genre bending combination of prose, poetry and drama. Aidoo overfills the novel form. She makes us wonder whether we might not rather hear *Our Sister Killjoy* performed, thus breaking down the Western orality/literacy binary as theorized by early orality pioneers like Walter Ong.

These Ghanaian modes of writing that go largely unnoticed by Western critics demonstrate then that Aidoo is not only responding or re-presenting the novel once again to the West but addressing her audience, the ever-present "my brother" addressee of most of the text, with a new modern incarnation of various Akan and Ewe storytelling strategies. The particularity of Akan and Ewe structure is important because of the myriad of failed attempts to theorize and codify an essential African oral

tradition. The practices within Africa vary so greatly that one generalization on style would not remain valid for many traditions even within a single culture. In other words, not only does the theoretical position of an essential African identity paired with an also untenable Western one break down, but pragmatically simply grouping Aidoo's Akan inspired stories or Tutola's reworked Yoruba folk tales together as African remains problematic. Specificity of cultural context though maintains direct relevance to these new takes on traditional forms and content which imbed them as an always-present geno-text that refuses erasure.

Been-to antinationalism

Aidoo's impetus to create new forms via intertextual borrowing from local culture and the novel brings us back to questions of modernity. Clearly Aidoo's new/old approach resembles Taylor's cultural model of modernity as she seeks to find a culturally specific mode of representation for the modern phenomenon of the been-to in Africa. While the specific structures of Ghanaian storytelling dictate a localized approach, the role of the colonial and postcolonial in creating the been-to creates a Pan-Africanism based not on amalgamating pre-colonial identities into a single African whole but in recognizing that the been-to phenomenon, while still leaving space for the particular, spanned much of Africa. Any discussion of *Our Sister Killjoy* requires a discussion of the

particularities of the been-to experience as defined as Africans traveling to the US or Europe in 1950's and 60's, as Aidoo herself did, simply because the main character is a been-to. Rather than focusing on the immediate issues facing Sissie and other been-tos much of the work on her movements abroad have focused on the figure of the traveler or exile. These approaches either trivialize been-tos as tourists or treat them as always in conversation with white colonial explorers.

Considering the pleasures and pains of been-tos in the global context of exile certainly enriches both theories of exile and African studies but still generalizes the African experience. Exile is a broad term that can mean one who chooses to inhabit a hybridized middle space or one that has been expelled from a country or a refugee or one who grudgingly accepts the benefits of exile while pining for home. The been-to however is particularly concerned with black Africans in the 60's and 70's who primarily went abroad to study with the explicit agreement that they would return home when finished with their studies to help develop their newly independent countries. While been-tos partially fall under the auspices of exile, a reading of Sissie via her been-to forerunners places her in context while problematizing the book as a con-texts.

Sissie is part of the evolutionary chain of been-tos who develop from an easily tracked genealogy. The preceding chapter uncovered a hidden genealogy previously unrecognized in African literary studies.

This genealogy, however, is not hidden as much as it is unused in contextualizing *Our Sister Killjoy* and Sissie within an African literary framework. Roughly speaking the first been-to representation in African literature is Kwamankra in *Ethiopia Unbound*. As the first been-to representation Kwamankra poses a threat to the white colonial order by introducing the precursor to Pan-Africanism in Ethiopianism.

Kwamankra and *Ethiopia Unbound* are painfully one dimensionally didactic but an important precedent for been-tos as instigating anti-colonialism and Pan-Africanism. In Camara Laye's *Dark Child* (1954) studying abroad is not easy but necessary and few negative effects coincide with the leaving and return of the protagonist. Later incarnations of the been-to are far less flattering. Samba Diallo in *Ambiguous Adventure* is grudgingly sent away to France out of necessity with risks being foremost in the book's considerations. Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* continues this uneasiness with the been-to in demonstrating the impossibility of a seamless or even productive return home when he unwittingly participates in Nigeria's corrupt government. Dele in Kole Omotoso's *Edifice* claims less innocence than Obi, seeming to accept the terms of neocolonial corruption and working comfortably within them to gain power. Ayi Kwei Armah though probably represents the height of criticism of the been-to figure as no longer a contributor to the cause of African freedom and development but a lecherous neo-colonialist. In his *Fragments* we are offered two been-tos. One takes on

pretentious Western affectations and is only concerned with wealth while the other is declared insane and locked away for daring to question the neocolonial social order. Armah takes a similarly harsh attitude towards been-tos and their potentiality in African society in *Why Are We So Blest?* Wole Soykina does complicate this trajectory with the *Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* proposing been-tos as outsiders within a society who though not of the corrupt system can provide some perspective from within it.

Sissie is a clear decedent of this tradition but with crucial differences that demonstrate the mutability of the been-to tradition and Sissie. Sissie is the first major female character in the tradition of the been-to, that by 1977 was fading from view. As has often been the case in African literary movements, the role of women in been-to representation was largely forgotten, outside of wives and girlfriends who influence been-tos and often cajole them. Women have also often been seen as the reward for a been-to who makes good. Implicit in the power and wealth promised to been-tos has been the promise of women. Sissie breaks this by being a woman but more importantly she also decides to exert power over her relationship with her boyfriend. Rather than waiting for him to decide, as the female partners of been-tos who stay home and wait for their men, Sissie determines the nature of the relationship. In short, she makes an ethical decision that she cannot be in a relationship with a man that can acquiesce to the pro-Western

neocolonial views expressed by his friends in London. Rather than staying in the back ground of the been-to story or crafting a victimization story about how poorly women who stay behind are treated Aidoo makes Sissie's intentionality the catalyst for action in the story.

This positivism harkens back to the first been-to in Kwamankra in several important ways. Sissie's feminism combines with her rejection of neocolonialism in a way that reflects Kwamankra's empowered vision. That is, the been-to in these books evolves a strength and pride in being African, and more than simply resisting the West seeks to clear space for an African subjectivity. That subjectivity is clearly divergent in nature as Kwamankra is not concerned with the role of women (he in fact displays a heady optimism at times that Sissie's "black eyed squint" would never allow) but neither buy into Afro-pessimism.⁴⁵ Sissie is literally and figuratively up in the air when the book ends but she approaches Africa with a sense of its duality when unable to contain her joy at being back in "crazy Africa".

However, Sissie's anti-nationalism marks her as a problematic inhibitor of the been-to distinction, unlike Casely Hayford. That is, typically been-tos do not become disillusioned with nationalism until they come back home and face corruption and inefficiency, Achebe's Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* being the archetype. Although the

⁴⁵ Afro-pessimism emerging after independence clearly rules out Casely Hayford, but the point remains that rather than defeatism at the endeavor of decolonizing Africa Ethiopia Unbound imagines Africa as capable of governing itself.

knowledge gained since narrator certainly expresses a harsher critique of African nationalism than Sissie, from her first meeting with the ambassador and the Europe loving been-to Sammy she feels “uneasy” as she “shivered.” She demonstrates her revulsion toward Sammy, a Ghanaian who fauns over all things Western, in “Saliva rose to her mouth every time her eyes fell on her countryman’s face...She did not enjoy the food: and the strangeness of it was not the reason. Time was to bring her many many Sammy. And they always affected her in the same way...” Sissie is not the typical been-to whose story often roughly aligns to a bildungsroman in which a naïve African travels abroad to be filled with idealism and Western affectation only to come home and be disillusioned. Her beginning is one of suspicion of the West already, a suspicion that is only confirmed by her experiences abroad. This is not to say that she does not mature towards the knowledge gained since narrator position but that her amorphous misgivings and unease towards Europe are verified by actually feeling the cold, experiencing otherness and witnessing the loneliness.

This strain of anti-nationalism demonstrated by Sissie and the narrators complicates the writing back paradigm because for Sissie to enact a voyage that answers the racism of *Heart of Darkness*, they must provide a clear counterpoint to disorganized savagery of Africa with at least a minuscule gesture demonstrating that Africa is capable of self-governing. However, they do not trumpet the unique ability of Africa to

self-govern, instead deriding African leaders who “mortgaged the country for a thousand and a year” and independence as “the general illusion of how well an unfree population think they can do for themselves.

Running very fast to remain where they are” (58, 89). In fact, the text flirts with dangerous rhetorical territory by insinuating that the post-independence era is as brutal as the colonial era when the experience gained since narrator tells us that African leaders tell people “There is ecstasy/ in dying from the hands of a/ Brother” rather than a white colonial. Even more damning for the book’s African nationalist credentials are the books remarks regarding pre-colonial Africa.

Negritude and Nkrumah’s African personality were highly influential in garnering an image of pre-colonial Africa as an ideal and equitable period that needed redeployment in the modern era. Our narrators though take aim even at this sacred tenant of Pan-Africanism when they compare pre-colonial Africa to Hitler’s Third Reich: “The blood of their young men was/Needed to mix the concrete for/Building the walls of/The Third Reich. But/Its foundations collapsed before the walls/were completed./Dear Lord,/Dear Lord,/How this reminds me of kingdoms with the Third Reich” runs contrary to the sentiments of the independence era which used the Holocaust and the world wars as evidence that the West had no right to condemn Africa as savage when they were committing the most horrific and large scale crimes against

humanity in the history of the world. Our narrators abandon this approach for one that condemns equally.

Therefore, *Our Sister Killjoy* is clearly not fielding *Heart of Darkness*' inaccuracies by telling us how Africans and Ghanaians are just as capable as Westerners, but rather addressing Africa's shortcomings. Sissie makes this clear when speaking to an African migrant doctor in London who rationalizes staying abroad as "educating them to recognize our worth" (129). Sissie responds that he should not worry about "a flicker of recognition from those cold blue eyes" while wondering "And anyway who are they?" (130). This interaction acts as an example of what is happening in the text as a whole as Sissie does not press her humanity on whites but rather attacks fellow Africans for being overly concerned with the opinions of whites while ignoring Africans back home. This condemnation of Pan-Africanism, African nationalism, African governments and African independence movements combined with a call to return anyway to help demonstrate the conflicted nature of the text once these strains are laid bare. It is this dimension of *Our Sister Killjoy* that most satisfyingly completes Dillon's assertion that at its core the palimpsest is "the dissension of things." This book does not provide a unified argument, against Conrad or anything else, rather it problematizes everything it engages and then problematizes any experience gained since those engagements to leave us with a text that is

always becoming and always doubling back on itself to undermine and sense of a stable text.

Her story also does not end in the traditional manner of a been-to story. In fact we do not see Sissie back in Ghana but rather suspended in the air between Europe and Africa on an airplane home. Aidoo's approach then adapts the been-to convention as defined as "an account of the deepest meanings of social and spiritual metamorphosis." Sissie does become stronger and more militant but certainly does not transform by the end of the book. The Sissie at the end who "didn't care anyway" is not a different species than the Sissie who has an overpowering visceral reaction to Sammy upon first meeting him. Sissie only makes sense in this way if we think about her in comparison to other representations of been-to. That is, the white European explorer/merchant company men of Marlowe and Kurtz are not the touchstones for triangulating the literary genealogy of Sissie. Nkrumah is the prototypical "good been-to" who takes his knowledge back home to free his people of physical and mental colonialism through a self-empowering vision. Never beyond self-aggrandizing, Nkrumah details his days in the West and his return home in his autobiography, whose publication date of March 6, 1957 is also the date of Ghanaian independence, a less than subtle attempt to conflate the history of Nkrumah with the history of Ghanaian independence. Like many been-tos he falters but the main conundrum of the been-to of whether to come home and can positive change be

effected are bested.⁴⁶ He shares these qualities with *Ethiopia Unbound's* Kwamankra who also preaches an optimism. The pessimistic turn by Armah is also incorporated by Sissie. While maintaining enough hope to return home her critical comments demonstrate that she is not wholly the beguiler Nkrumah or the naïve Kwamankra. Rather she demonstrates the realistic approach of a generation that has seen the Nkrumahs of Africa fail without reacting by abandoning Africa or joining in its exploitation.

Obviously, there are far too many fields at play in *Our Sister Killjoy* to touch on them all, but by covering specific instances of previous ignored or understudied Afro-centric geno-texts that run through the book hopefully a multilayered palimpsest that gestures to the many networks at play has begun to develop an alternative to the acultural models of modernity employed in writing back. These inconveniences for the writing back paradigm serve to maintain focus on how it marginalizes

⁴⁶ Rather ironically, C.L.R. James notes that rather than train Ghanaians abroad to then come home as he had, Nkrumah was largely responsible for a Ghanaian “brain drain” during and after his presidency:

“the dual degeneration of the Parliament and the party had one terrible result. The ablest, most qualified, and the intellectuals of finest character turned their backs on Nkrumah. Some of them, an astonishing number, went abroad and took jobs elsewhere (...) This abandonment of their own government and their own people by gifted, trained intellectuals of high character is a feature of modern underdeveloped countries (...) nowhere has a country suffered from the disaffection of its ablest intellectuals as Ghana has suffered. Since the fall of Nkrumah's regime, the problem has been perpetuated as political instability and repression, as well as the economic impoverishment of the country has continued to drive many of the educated elite and others to leave in search of greater opportunity abroad.”

key aspects of this text and many others by myopically retaining essential identities and colonial binaries as primary concerns. I am not pressing for an African literature for Africa exclusivity, but when critical approaches bypass the specific country of the main character and the author, the salient temporal influences of a Ghanaian writing in the late 60's and 70's, native structures clearly present in the text it indicts that critical paradigm. Establishing these networks hopefully balances the criticism of this seminal text while establishing the groundwork for a different theoretical approach to similar texts.

The point is not that writing back is an invalid way or responding to *Our Sister Killjoy*, but that as a means of examining African and non-Western literature, it does not represent a totality. Rather, writing back operates best as one of several textual analyses operating simultaneously. Aidoo's book is in conversation with *Heart of Darkness*, but also with a multitude of other texts. These texts are social, historical and literary in nature and interact in ways more complex than just a reversal. The palimpsest represents a kind of convergence of these texts. Ultimately, then, the function of the palimpsest model I have begun to explain here lies in the overlaying of all of these various texts. This overlaying though should not be mistaken for an easily unraveled network. The palimpsest, as writing that cannot be erased completely, is fitting because the various literary, social and historical texts cannot be separated from one another. Palimpsestuousness is also not a simple

layering process because there are no primary or secondary texts. Every text on the palimpsest is an integral part of the palimpsest, just as writing about the palimpsest is writing on the palimpsest because a palimpsest contains past inscription, present inscription and the possibility of future inscription. To remove one text from the palimpsest, as I would argue writing back attempts, the palimpsest is unraveled because the relation of those texts in dissention and involution, not singular clarity, is what imbues the palimpsest with meaning beyond a paradigm that searches out origin or single causes. Ideally, this dissention is not a random assembly of disparate pieces but recognition of Dillon's "reciprocal elucidation" that lends vitality to a work like *Our Sister Killjoy*, rather than miring it in a static hierarchical relationship.

Seasons of Migration to the North

As a corollary to *Our Sister Killjoy*, the intertextual entanglements of Tayib Salif's *Season of Migration to the North* demonstrates that the ability to fruitfully disengage from writing back is not confined to Aidoo, West African texts, feminist literature or even the Anglophone African world. *Seasons* as an East African Arabic text from Sudan operates as a companion text to *Our Sister Killjoy* as both have been cast as explicit reversals of *Heart of Darkness* and other Conrad novels, but under culturally specific lenses operate within a more complex field of signification. Just as a close reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* opens up the

text so widely that Conrad becomes only one element among many, a close reading of *Season* via the same axes of narrative structure, the been-to phenomenon and local history not only reveals a similar over emphasis on Conrad but the implicit (and ultimately untenable) acultural model of modernity that must be maintained to sustain it. Pairing these two novels creates a hitherto unexamined connection between them but more importantly anticipates a network of African (and later global) intertextuality that largely forgoes gravitating towards the West as a central reference point.

The seminal *Season* has been the topic of heated debate on many sides, even in consideration of its main character. Strictly speaking, the novel is told by a nameless narrator who encounters the enigmatic Mustafa Sa'eed in his home village after studying in England for several years. After the secretive Mustafa betrays himself by reciting English poetry during a night of drinking, the narrator learns that Mustafa had been an academic in England. Mustafa tells him how he would seduce English woman and drive them to suicide, until he met one that he had to kill himself. After a shortened prison term he returns to Sudan to a village where no one knows him. He marries and establishes himself as a respectable member of the community until he mysteriously disappears, thought by the villagers to have drowned in the Nile. The narrator briefly entertains marrying his widow at her request but eventually declines. She is married off against her will. Her new

husband rapes her and she kills him and herself. Even this general summary establishes that there are two main characters in the novel but many analyses have read the novel as being principally about Mustafa. Evelyne Accad assumes Mustafa is the “central male character of the novel” and this reflects the view of many critics. Mustafa is certainly an important character in the book but the denial of the narrator as a principal figure is not merely an oversight but a distinction prefigured for a writing back reading. As Edward Said explains: “Salih’s hero [Mustafa] in *Season of Migration to the North* does (and is) the reverse of what Kurtz does (and is): the Black man journeys north into white territory” In these readings, Mustafa is explicitly cast as Conrad’s Kurtz who succumbs to evil as a result of his journey into a foreign land. The narrator’s similar journey to England, disconnected Mustafa’s journey (not in search of him ala Marlowe) only to return home to assist in the postcolonial development of his home village, becomes inconvenient excess. Thus for the writing back reading to function, the narrator must be extricated to make *Season* Mustafa’s story in the way that *Heart of Darkness* is often read as Kurtz’s.

This violent reshaping of *Season of Migration* engages it with a postcolonial library of works such as *Our Sister Killjoy*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *July’s People* as read in large part via writing back rather than as a self-constitutive and self-referential African literature. The most prominent critical touchstone for the novel in the

English speaking world is “The Empire Renarrated” by Saree S. Makdisi in *Critical Inquiry*. Makdisi terms *Seasons* a “counternarrative” to *Heart of Darkness* and tells us that “it is like *Heart of Darkness* as much as unlike it” in arguing that Salih tries to “deliberately confront these texts [*Heart of Darkness* and *Othello*] from within.” In other words, Salih creates *Season* as a space not only its own, but one it shares with *Heart of Darkness*, a position from which it can undermine Conrad’s novella. This notion of a shared space treats *Season* as an addendum to *Heart of Darkness*, one that completes it by rebuking its misconceptions but lacking self-constitution in itself.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* agrees with Makdisi that the book’s primary value comes as a rejoinder to *Heart of Darkness*. Said is emphatic about the exactness of the reversal: “So deliberate are Salih’s mimetic reversals of Conrad that even Kurtz’s skull topped fence is repeated and distorted in Said’s secret library...what results is not simply a reclamation of the fictive territory but an articulation of some of the discrepancies and their imagined consequences muffled by Conrad’s majestic prose.”⁴⁷ Said’s offhand analysis is taken up by Caminero-

⁴⁷ From Said’s description of “deliberate mimetic reversal” one could be forgiven for imagining that the scenes from the two books match each other precisely. However, Marlowe in his story has not even met Kurtz at this point stating “I was not so shocked as you may think.” The narrator has befriended Mustafa and is shocked writing Good God, the four walls from floor to ceiling were filled, shelf upon shelf, with books and more books and yet more books.” This is not to say there is not some semblance of similarity in an enigmatic figure demonstrating odd behavior but the idea that books are a direct reversal of heads is unwarranted. Kurtz is made out to be “unsound” while Mustafa as his African doppelganger is not insane for having his books. Other factors such that Kurtz is alive inside his gruesomely decorated compound while Mustafa is dead. Although my argument is to avoid spending energy analyzing how these novels are

Santangelo who argues that Said misinterprets key passages and “misrepresents the primary critical target of the novel.” Said sees *Season* as a reaction against misrepresentation whereas Caminero-Santangelo, in keeping with the theme of his study, does not read *Season* as arguing against Conrad but rather advocates that “we need to replace the oppositional model of intertextuality assumed by both Said and Makdisi” with the notion that “Salih used certain Conradian elements to expose and attack the contradictions of late twentieth-century neocolonialism in Sudan.” As with his reading of *Our Sister Killjoy*, Caminero-Santangelo wants to keep Conrad as central to reading the novel but take out the adversarial elements. Recasting Conrad as a benign influence responsible in part for a bulk of the best literature in Africa in the twentieth century not only relieves Conrad of any misrepresentations but makes African literature even more beholden to Conrad and the Western canon. While I would not deny the influence of Conrad or other Western authors, *Season* like *Our Sister Killjoy*, clearly participates in other traditions more substantively.

I agree that Said and Makdisi overstress the oppositional elements regarding Conrad but Caminero-Santangelo, as in the case with Aidoo, overstresses the importance of retaining a focus on Conradian elements. He is right that the novel is more about post-independence Sudan than a

and are not like *Heart of Darkness*, Said’s assumptions demonstrate the how central and pervasive (and easy) this view has become despite the difficulties in making it work without glossing over large inconvenient portions of these texts.

response to colonialism but not that Conrad is the best means of understanding how Salih's comments on Sudan's initial post-independence. Essentially, Caminero-Santangelo changes the form of intertextuality from redress to address. Salih is not redressing Conrad's work for its misrepresentations but addressing as a literary forerunner. Caminero-Santangelo does not see that a clear division between the two is impossible but more importantly does not look beyond Conrad for the obvious alternative intertextualities that one would expect to come into play once writing back and redress are bracketed.

Narrative structure and the been-to phenomenon

As with *Our Sister Killjoy* the influence of local narrative structure has been glossed over in favor of a focus on Conrad as a singular influence. Critics such as John E. Davidson epitomize this in statements like "*Season* opens in truly Conradian style" when the opening line is a clear intertextual gesture to the *hakawati* narrative form from Arabic oral tradition. Just as Aidoo uses and transforms the *fefewo* form, Salih blends the *hakawati* and *mu-arada*. As noted by Benita Parry, a *hakawati* is a public teller of stories in the Arabic world. A *haka*, or story, in this tradition begins with an address to a male audience. Parry translates this opening as "You will recall, gentlemen..." Salih opens *Season* with "It was, gentlemen, after a long absence..." in a move clearly derivative of the *hakawati* opening. This opening stands as an

announcement of intent, not to wrest representation away from or pay homage to Conrad as Davidson and others direct us, but to represent African subjects via a traditional structure situated outside the ken of Conrad's tradition. This neatly parallels Aidoo's use of the *fefewo* as an Akan oral narrative tradition adapted for a modern prose-poem by similarly taking an oral tradition and recrafting it for a modern novel.

Salih participates in a postcolonial tradition in turning to the pre-colonial *hakawati* to assert and affirm the value of traditional oral storytelling structure. He does not though fall into "postcolonial revenge" or into the naïve belief that one can return unproblematically to the pre-colonial. This is evident in his choice of the novel. Although the opening might remind us of a report with claims towards fact and objectivity, the *hakawati* tradition also "permits a storyteller license to combine fact and fable and speak in riddles, to include in his delivery, description, transcription, digression and reflections on life." (*Excess of Empire*). The artistic license inherent in the *hakawati* form and its practice encourages embellishment thus belying the claims of objectivity inherent in the travel literature of Conrad, Livingstone, Stanley and their compatriots when reporting about Africa. A *hakawati's* form of address refuses an authority to speak for the events or any of the figures involved. In other words, it is largely unauthorized and unauthoritative.

Defined incorrectly by Makdisi as a “rigidly defined style” the *hakawati* style is actually flexible as an intertextual site where the storyteller has the freedom to adlib, tell jokes, put on comical regional dialects, induce audience participation and add or omit events from the story being told. A *haka* is usually serialized over several tellings and ultimately the plot of the story (usually already known by the audience) is secondary to the *hakawati*’s improvisations in gauging the quality of a *hakawati*. In other words, the *hakawati* opening of *Season* informs the (Arabic) reader that the report requires not a passive acceptance of fact but an active engagement with the text to discern meaning. It does not ask its reader to believe but rather to question. The reader is brought into the intimate story weaving space of the *hakawati* who usually operates in a coffee shop or similar environment. This lack of finality in the *hakawati*’s storytelling is most apparent in two central plot points: Mustafa’s disappearance and the fate of the narrator in the Nile when the novel ends. Just as Sissie’s role in postcolonial Ghana (and Ghana’s status itself) is literally and figuratively “up in the air” when the book closes via the implied relationship between audience and narrator in the *fefewo* that forces the reader to consider a response (as an implied audience member) concerning the nature of African postcolonial development, these scenes in *Season* reinforce the *hakawati* form by turning to the reader for a reply regarding the fate of Mustafa and the narrator. Just as Sissie is floating up in the air as a means of forcing a

response from the reader, Mustafa and the narrator float in the Nile suspended themselves but also suspending the narrative for an interpretive insertion by the reader. Traditional *hakawati* storytelling, like the *fefewo* form, develops a rapport with an audience and encourages exchanges between the *hakawati* and audience and amongst the audience themselves. *Hakawatis* also depend greatly on a familiar or informed audience. Traditionally *hakawatis* have regulars who attend and who often act as cohorts during the *haka* to engage the audience (for example, encouraging them to support one character over another). The *hakawati* form here then implies an Arabic audience or at least an audience familiar with these particular Arab traditions. If we think of *Season* as a response, the primary audience clearly becomes Western, whereas if we think of the *hakawati* and the implications of the storyteller device, the West as the primary addressee or subject of the novel is undermined from the very first word of the novel.⁴⁸

The other Arabic narrative structure deployed in *Season* is the literary technique of *mu-arada*. Literally *mu-arada* means confrontation or opposition while the *mu-arda* form is defined by Benita Parry and Barbara Harlow as an opposition between two voices in a text. Once the first voice has told a story, the second voice attempts a similar story but “reverses the meaning of the tale.” However, this working definition

⁴⁸ The *hakawati* himself is indicated as audience as he is the teller of received stories and it is his improvisations to the original that make him a storyteller rather than a story reader. In this way then we are also conscious that the narrator is the audience of Mustafa’s story.

hitherto in the study of *Season* has propagated a misreading of the term to highlight reversal. The standard definition in the second volume of the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* clarifies the misstep in stating that the *mu-arada* has “the dual purpose of honouring the model and trying to surpass it.” Rather than simple reversal, the *mu-arada*’s primary purpose is to improve on and honor the original without recrimination. This misidentification of *mu-arada* as reversal leads Parry to write that the narrator “remain [s] in opposition to that of his double and antagonist” rather than the narrator as Mustafa’s double he seeks to surpass. That is, the narrator does not attempt to reverse the been-to legacy of Mustafa but takes on Mustafa’s role as the African been-to who gains what knowledge and experience there is to had abroad and to redeploy it at home for the benefit of his community. The been-to tradition that links Mustafa and the narrator then is not split between a Manichean bad been-to/good been-to binary but rather how the narrator as a generation of been-to that comes after Mustafa is able to use the been-to experience to better effect by practicing a kind of uninterrupted been-to journey that allows him to leave and return with his education to his hometown without the complications of Mustafa. Thus the Conrad/Marlowe/Kurtz comparisons to Salih/Narrator/Mustafa break down even further when the *mu-arada* form is applied to *Season*.

However, unlike in Parry and Harlowe’s understanding, the *mu-arada* is traditionally contested between two works by separate poets and

so we must ask when adopting the *mu-arada* form whether *Season* is one work in a competition with another, as would traditionally be the case, or whether the novel, as a supergenre, represents a *mu-arada* in its pages. The argument for the former is well documented but the latter's impact is largely unexplored. We can make the case for a novelistic *mu-arada* in two ways. First, the narrator's time in England, while uneventful, leads him back to his own village to assist in postcolonial development while Mustafa's time in England leads him to murder and thus unable to return to his homeland as he is forced to return to a foreign village. Thus, the narrator's story is not a reversal as he too goes abroad but an attempt to be the better been-to to Mustafa's problematic been-to. Secondly, whereas Mustafa disappears (perhaps drowned, perhaps not) in 1956, the year of Sudanese independence, the narrator remains in the village and at the end of the novel redoubles his efforts working stating "I choose life" in the book's closing. Perry accurately describes Mustafa's actions, via Jameson's account of Nietzsche, as revenge. The opposite of revenge would be sympathy but the narrator does not take a pro-colonial stance that would reverse Mustafa's anti-colonialism. Rather he adopts a better way of understanding the role of the West and modernity in relation to Sudan than his double. This besting of Mustafa by the narrator while maintaining his role as his double comes in the confrontation in the mirror: "I moved toward it [the mirror] with hate in my heart. It was my adversary Mustafa Sa'eed. The face grew a neck two

shoulders and a chest...and I found myself face to face with myself.” In this moment the narrator undertakes a journey symbolic of his relationship with Mustafa. Initially, he approaches him as an enemy but as time passes he realizes that he is Mustafa’s double. The narrator attempts Parry’s reversal by hating Mustafa but then recognizes that he and Mustafa have lived similar lives. Makadidi rightly susses this point out but returns to the *hakawati* and *mu-arada* as a rigid forms when intertextual and intratextual improvisation characterizes both better than his characterization of them as “rigid absolutes” with “neat resolutions.” In other words, Makadisi wants us to believe that the novel form overpowers the *hakawati* and *mu-arada* form to produce a flexible and hybrid text whereas we can see that *Season*’s unfixeness and ability to exist inside of an African Arab tradition as well as in conversation with a Western one is *because* of these Arabic forms not in spite of them.⁴⁹

History: Sudan, the Nadah and Feminism

⁴⁹ *Heart of Darkness* is told by a third person narrator, not by Marlowe, while *Season* is told by the narrator which then provides a frame for Mustafa to tell his story. Beyond the structural difference that is elided in the writing back reading, this also problematizes the common conceit of reading Mustafa as Kurtz because Mustafa is allowed narrative agency while Kurtz is merely narrated about by Marlowe who is once removed himself by the third person narrator. Ultimately, the semantic contortions needed to align Marlowe with the narrator and Mustafa with Kurtz in an effort to synchronize *Season* with *Heart* is undermined by the simplicity of *Season*’s opening line that clearly gestures to the *hakawati* tradition. For Western critics though this is problematic as they have access to the Western literary tradition while many times being unfamiliar with traditions closer to those of Salih.

For many critics, the Afropessimism inherent in the failures of several characters in *Things Fall Apart* and *Our Sister Killjoy* demonstrates an unflinching desire to move past idealized images of pre-colonial Africa propagated by late colonial and early postcolonial theoretical paradigms, such as Negritude. Once we also reach the conclusion reached in this chapter and the preceding that such self-critical moves are not comparisons to or revenge against the West but articulations of an African self-referentivity we gain richer readings such as Achebe's literary influences and Aidoo's structural, historical and cultural debts to Ghanaian cultural traditions. *Season of Migration to the North* similarly turns an inward eye on Sudanese culture.

Much work has been done on the role of gender in *Season*. Although much of that work has focused on Mustafa in terms of colonial and postcolonial paradigms of masculinity and femininity, the more poignant work on gender has focused on the marriage of Hosna. Rather than deploying the now standard postcolonial critique of the colonized as feminized and Mustafa as embodying resistance to that by "liberating Africa with my penis" this criticism has focused on the highly critical stance that Salih takes on the traditional treatment of women in Sudan.

In keeping with the acultural model of modernity, the temptation has been to read Mustafa's equitable marriage to Hosna as the influence of Western modernity gained by Mustafa in England and the marrying off

of Hosna after his death to Wad Rayyes as traditional culture in Sudan reasserting itself. However, as Wail Hassan points out marrying a widow off against her will is “a flagrant violation of Islamic law that explicitly forbids forced marriage.” Salih further complicates this fact though when the narrator’s mother chastises Hosna for attempting to avoid the marriage with the elderly Wad Rayyes by marrying the narrator, proclaiming: What an impudent hussy! That’s modern women for you.” Thus, Salih’s text seemingly invites a misreading that would have us believe that Islamic law supports forced marriage and that agency in marriage is “modern.” However, the Koran states, “The widow shall not be married until she is consulted, and the virgin shall not be married until her consent is obtained.” They said, O Messenger of Allāh! How shall her consent be obtained? He said. “(It is sufficient) that she remains silent.” Hosna is not consulted and she refuses to remain silent but it is these actions that bring the disparaging wrath of the community on her. In another example of this confusion the narrator states, “By the standards of Europeans industrial world we are poor peasants but when I embrace my grandfather I experience a sense of richness as though I am a note in the heartbeats of the universe” just before he walks in on his grandfather and his friends laughing at the Wad Rayyes recounting his attempted rape of a young girl. In this same conversation Bint Majzoub when speaking about her husband grimly foreshadows Hosna’s death by saying of marriage and sex: “This business never kills anyone.”

We see then that Salih is not simply subscribing to an acultural model that urges Islamic cultures to catch up to the West's gender valuations but that he is problematizing the very nature of the acultural model by demonstrating that the traditional, assumed to antagonize the modern, is far from monolithic. In the formation of the novel Islamic law competes with Western gender standards. Hosna's voice stands out as an advocate for women's rights, rather than the voices of the English women who want little more than to be dominated by an exotic African man.

Perhaps because of its popularity, *Season* has garnered more of these kind of self-referential readings than *Our Sister Killjoy* and its place as an Arabic masterpiece has insulated it more than *Things Fall Apart* from being endlessly tied to Conrad (though just barely). Both *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Season* do push back against an overwhelming critical reading that posits them as reactions to Western texts to create complex constellations of intertextuality unified around narrative structure, African history and the been-to phenomenon. Appropriately, their endings also come together to express the uncertainty of their self-referential topics. They both end then in perhaps the only way an organic story that seeks to sort out the path forward for Africans can end: by engaging the reader to finish the plot. By lacking a clear resolution both novels force the reader out of a passive engagement with the texts. In Barthesian terms, they become writerly texts that ultimately expect a Barthesian "form of work" by the reader who must "write the text

ourselves” rather than being prefigured as closed responses (cite). In the vein of this open-endedness, the subsequent chapter will engage postcolonial African and Caribbean texts to demonstrate how various African and Caribbean writers have done the work of writing the text themselves of other writer’s work by which will form connedness between such literatures that forgo dependence on Western sources for conversations amongst themselves.

Reconciling Journeys to the Interior: Intertextuality and Wilson Harris' Palace of the Peacock and Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise

The previous two chapters have attempted to develop a theory and practice towards articulating the usually unacknowledged self-referentialism in much of African literature. The last chapter looked particularly to texts that move out of (and back to) African locales as instances of local intertextuality. This outwardly orientated, yet ultimately inward Afro-centric, gaze develops a critical perspective that recognizes the undue influence accorded the European canon in the study of African literature. This project could certainly continue to assert the self-referentialism of African literature in response to claims such as Coetzee's that African writers habitually "perform Africanness" for Westerners' readers. Such a move would produce more new readings of other African texts to create a running list of Eurocentric readings of African texts and alternative self-referential readings, but by addressing prominent texts like *Things Fall Apart*, *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Season of Migration to the North* I have proved that the practice of using writing back to produce asymmetrical readings of African texts is not rare or confined to an insider's list of erudite texts. Instead writing back has become so normalized in criticism of African texts that to continue to unpack yet more such readings is to play out a game whose ending is

clear.⁵⁰ Rather than continuing in this way I want to contextualize African literary self-referentialism within the broader framework of world literature and to consider different ways to consider African literature in the world. In the next two chapters I hope to open up a reading of African literature via postcolonialism and global literary studies to demonstrate the position of a self-substantiating African literature participating in a wide range of global intertextualities.

To this end, this chapter examines the significance of two geographically disparate texts, from Tanzania and Guyana, that both use journeys to the interior to argue for the mutability of local knowledge for global contexts. The journey to the interior has been appropriated in postcolonial and African literary studies to confine non-Western texts that employ it as either respondents to or mimics of European texts that probe the interior of non-Western cities. Again, *Heart of Darkness* and its predecessors, such as the fiction and non-fiction of Stanley and Livingston, are disproportionately represented in criticism of this trope. While I am not attempting to expunge European texts from the intertextual and palimpsestuous mapping of these novels, I do want to expose what is silenced, elided and negated by the dominant discursive mode of writing back in cases of postcolonial journeys to the interior. In the case of the two books I am using, Wilson Harris' 1960 *Palace of the*

⁵⁰ I still think that other such readings are valuable. Indeed I wish more African literary criticism would engage specific African source material in analysis of the continent's literatures.

Peacock and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, what is negated is their ability to speak to non-Western texts with origins outside their own region.⁵¹ Such readings are important because I will argue that *Palace of the Peacock* offers to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable in *Paradise* by delivering an overarching methodology for resolving difference and trauma in the wake of colonialism. Specifically, I assert that Wilson Harris' Guyanese novel *Palace of the Peacock* disrupts the supposed nihilism of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* while partially resolving questions of ethnic difference Gurnah raises.

By relying on the theoretical implications of postcolonial Caribbean scholars such as Antonio Benitez-Rojo, Kamau Braithwaite and Harris' own scholarship I explore how Harris' achievement of establishing a shared equitable Guyanese national identity in a speculative literary and geographic space is transferable to Gurnah's Tanzanian novel which shares much of the fragmentation of identity but little of the resolution.⁵² Gurnah's 1994 *Paradise* handles the complex manifold identities of East Africa (in Zanzibar and Tanzania in particular). While admitting that the novel explicates the ethnic landscape insightfully, most critics read the title as the book's ultimate irony and the text itself as surrender to the

⁵¹ *Paradise* in particular has recently inspired a few analyses linking it to the history of East Africa. Unfortunately, even literary scholars have almost solely sought connections with the novel to the history of Arab trade caravans rather than to other literature of the region. See my "Imagining Unmediated Early Swahili Narratives in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*" forthcoming in *Research in African Literatures* for further discussion of this trend and my own literary genealogy to contest it.

⁵² At least critics read it as pessimistic and lacking resolution. Later I will discuss why this reading is problematic.

troubling ethnic tension in the region for hundreds of years. *Paradise*, critics contend, represents East Africa as a fraught, barely livable locale where ethnic tensions and Arab colonialism endanger everyone. (Dekard 110). As *Paradise* features a journey into the interior of Africa, critics have predictably also fallen back on the critical tick of comparisons to *Heart of Darkness* to gain traction in their analyses, despite numerous problems with this reading as well as Gurnah's unambiguous statement to the contrary that "It [*Paradise*] is not an attempt to rewrite *Heart of Darkness*..."(Bace). Similarly, Wilson Harris' *Palace of the Peacock* has been read in large part via *Heart of Darkness* to delve into the fractious history and identity politics of Guyana. The similarities in critical reception and journey motifs make these books ideal companions for a intertextual reading that seeks new globalized networks for comparison and communication that circumvent a reliance on a Western center. The two novels' differing approaches to a similar problem though perhaps account for a more significant contribution. Whereas Gurnah seems to abandon any kind of resolution for the violence and tension in East Africa, Harris conceptualizes a fictitious locale that he calls "inner space" as a pure literary imaginative field in which resolutions for the seemingly irresolvable products of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial tension play out.⁵³

⁵³ Harris' focus on new literary forms for a new Caribbean echoes the calls for new form by modernists. Harris' fractured subjects and unstable narrative vantage point towards literary modernism. However,

This approach is simultaneously unorthodox and conventional. Reading texts against each other and tracking the way that they interact is the core of comparative literature and intertextuality, but East Africa is rarely placed in conversation with the Caribbean. However, the novelty of casting these two regions as conversant is not nearly as important as the fruitfulness of their interaction. Both *Paradise* and *Palace of the Peacock* have been read as writing back to colonial misreadings. Moreover, they both contain long arduous journeys into the interior from the coast to a mythological center that have led critics to concentrate on how the journeys and novels as a whole contrast, supplement and problematize *Heart of Darkness*. In this chapter, rather than arguing how yet more African texts are misread via Conrad and offering largely ignored or undiscovered localized alternatives, I want to consider a large scale alternative mapping. Staying within the literary fields of intertextuality (rather than the historical and social codes explored in the previous chapter on Aidoo and Salih) I will offer new alternative readings of one postcolonial text (*Paradise*) based on a reading of another (*Peacock*) to imagine possible resolutions to localized issues concerning postcolonial identity and power in the former. I argue here that rather than focusing on figures like Conrad as a central conduit through which texts from around the globe run, we can bypass Conrad and the canon to

the modernist obsession with alienation is a point of departure. Harris deals in incompletes and fractured wholes but mainly as a way to achieve a viable wholeness, not to express that the age of wholeness is irrecoverable and that any attempt at wholeness is itself ill-founded.

allow these texts to speak directly to one another, creating an alternative network of meaning beyond the increasingly untenable acultural center/periphery model inherent in writing back and other outmoded models that rely on Europe to articulate Africa.⁵⁴

The Postcolonial Critique and World Literature

Before moving on to the Harris-Gurnah case and their entanglements this is an ideal moment to discuss the tensions currently facing postcolonial studies that precipitate such an approach and specifically question whether such an approach is postcolonial. For most of its history, postcolonial studies has taken considerable criticism from scholars advocating for the local or the global. Postcolonial concepts that became too conspicuous in academic discourse for non-specialists to ignore such as the work of Bhabha, Spivak and Said on Hybridity, Otherness, Orientalism and the Subaltern were criticized for being far too general and vague. Critics such as Aijaz Ahmad, Neil Lazarus, and Benita Parry have proffered materialist Marxist critiques that accuse the move to theory in the field as an explicit and ill founded attempt to position postcolonial studies as apolitical and ahistorical. Parry

⁵⁴ Far from a negative critique of postcolonial studies proper, I critique a certain purposefully unambitious understanding of the field that has been used as a straw man argument against it. Postcolonial studies has not relied on the simple binaries or the an undue focus on the colonial period for some time. This project aligns itself with new postcolonial projects such as Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih's *Minor Transnationalism* which also interrogates so-called minor literatures without reliance on the canon as a center.

articulates this explicitly in *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (2004):

The abandonment of historical and social explanation was soon apparent in the work of those postcolonial critics who disengaged colonialism from historical capitalism and re-presented it for study as a cultural event. Consequently an air-borne will to power was privileged over calculated compulsions, 'discursive violence' took precedence over the practices of a violent system, and intrinsically antagonistic colonial encounter was reconfigured as one of dialogue, complicity and transculturation.

For Parry, one cannot apply these theories, as "air-borne," equally across the postcolonial world because specific (Marxist) mechanisms operated antagonistically outside the scope of complex transculturation, which for her seems to dull any sense of conflict and struggle. What might work conceptually for India and Pakistan might be found wanting in a consideration of mestizaje in Peru, and often texts and discourses are hardly the appropriate material to discuss violence, markets and the compelled movements of millions. Although there may be some validity in this criticism, the problem stems primarily from disenchantment with high theory in general, as we see in Parry's "air-borne" dig, especially as the usual European suspects of Hegel, Heidegger, Kant and Foucault among others were heavily deployed by those depending on this manner of theorization. This disposition along with the occasional accusation that theory itself is a purely Western construct, that by its nature is ill-equipped to totalize the non-Western world (though Marxism often

escapes this criticism) is part of the demarcation in postcolonial studies between politics and theory. What this criticism often overlooks though is that while theories such as hybridity are not bound in their deployment to specific politics and historicities, they are explicitly derived from them, as we see in works like Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders."

Despite postcolonial studies' ethical stance that the use of theory is not totalizing or universal, we have reached a post-high theory moment in postcolonial, transnational, and world literary studies in which postcoloniality is at once faced with the problem of cultural specificity and with a "new" totalizing theory, sometimes articulated as Empire theory or its offshoot World Literature.⁵⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* are the main proponents of a large scale approach that argues for the abandonment of postcolonial studies. While Hardt and Negri accept that the imbalance of power in the world in the twenty first century falls largely along the same divisions of colonial power structures, they see postcolonialism as primarily focused on "a Manichean world, divided by a series of binary oppositions that define Self and Other, white and black, inside and outside, ruler and ruled" (139). Hardt and Negri mischaracterize postcolonial studies as inflexibly dealing solely in outdated binaries and their complications. While this may have been true of the field early on in a limited way, it seems a

⁵⁵ I will largely bracket world literature in the current discussion as it is the centerpiece of the final chapter.

purposeful mischaracterization of the field in its current state. They continue to state that postcolonial studies "fail[s] to recognize adequately the contemporary object of critique, that is, they mistake today's real enemy" (137). For Hardt and Negri difference is a moot point of contention as it has been co-opted by global market forces, while Postcolonial studies often reveals difference as a site of continued resistance. In this proposed post-postcolonial critical moment, Hardt and Negri have found postcolonial studies wanting, especially in regards to its inability to work outside of strict binaries, such as colonizer/colonized, and their hybrids as an outmoded and inflexible critique that cannot respond to a changing world.

Although postcolonialism has always been concerned with movement across borders, oceans or continents the proponents of empire theory chastise postcolonial theory for two major related missteps regarding its apparent fixed purview. Globalization and empire theory imagine vast complex intersecting networks linking the world while accusing postcolonial studies of operating consistently within a center/margin Manichaeism. This manifests itself in postcolonial discourses on metropole/colony, colonizer/colonized and other such “/” constructs that imagine an authorized hegemonic center which controls and pushes aside those it cannot simply incorporate, only to then have the influence reversed as the margin begins to influence the center. This understanding though purposely positions all postcolonial

theory as resting on decades old constructs, such as Albert Memmi's 1957 *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, while willfully overlooking the innumerable updates, expansion and departures from them within the field. As with other fields, postcolonial studies evolves and transforms itself as it moves through its *longue durée* approach. To simply cherry pick tidbits of amusingly antiquated theories from over half a century ago and pass them off as the most salient argument that must be overcome today lacks intellectual integrity and is simply not a pragmatic way to move discourse

Empire theorists, and increasingly scholars of Globalization, also decry the postcolonial focus on the nation as the unit par excellence for study. Central to what Hart and Negri attempt in *Empire* is to undermine the importance of the nation. They point out that localized groups that operate within, between and around national boundaries necessitate subject formations that do not depend so resolutely on the nation as the primary unit of identification. Therefore, postcolonial studies not only does not adopt the right subjects, by focusing on nations, but also does not conceptualize interaction properly by insisting on an antiquated flow of power, influence and migration in our new global world. This dismissal of the nation as a unit though is hasty as it is still a major part of subjectivity (one of the few globally overarching ones) and postcolonial theory has provided the foundations for localized studies such as those by Anthony Appiah, Achille Mbembe and Stephanie Newell which eschew

the nation while relying on postcolonial theories.⁵⁶ Postcolonial studies then has always realized as Daniel Bell writes that “The nation-state is becoming too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life” but that it is still an essential actor.⁵⁷

Rather than an antiquated mode of understanding the complex interactions of the globe today, postcolonialism offers a means of criticism that unifies disparate locales. The case in hand of Guyana and Tanzania stands as an example. The two are not connected via Hardt and Negri’s networks of Empire but rather via their experience of colonialism on the level of the nation as well as the minorities therein whose differences represent continuous sites of resistance and contention. This is to say that upheavals in these places in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the representations of them in the two novels that will be discussed, form unexpected congruencies because both Guyana and Tanzania experienced strangely similar colonialisms. My work then positions itself not as a rationalization for the continuation of postcolonial studies but as a reminder that the now en vogue constructs that attempt to dismiss postcolonial studies as a singular event (perhaps

⁵⁶ Stephanie Newell often works on hyper-local subjects such as mid-twentieth century Ghanaian popular fiction in *Ghanaian Popular Fiction*. Achille Mbembe has a broader focus but tends to write primarily on Africa. The subjects of Appiah’s work spans the globe but his specificity in discussing Africa (such as his well-known analysis of Yoruba statuary in *My Father’s House*), especially in relation to his own Asante heritage is an example how one can write broadly about postcolonial subjects with a focus on the local. The point is that postcolonial studies has always focused on subjects larger and smaller than the nation.

⁵⁷ Ironically those who flippantly dismiss the nation in the latest affectation of global studies cast postcolonial studies as a passing fad rather than a body of work that originates at the latest in mid-twentieth century anti-colonialism.

petrified in the mid-90's) unfortunately miss out on the insights the field still has for globalization studies.

Gurnah and Harris' novels challenge assumptions which cast postcolonial studies as antiquated and inadequate for the global task at hand in contemporary world literary studies. Both novels explore a move into the interior geographically to reconcile the fragmentation of identities created by the colonial encounter and are expressed in ways that sometimes mimic the literature of colonialism as a strategy of moving beyond the blighted legacy of that encounter towards reconciliation. This method puts into play the national, transnational, local, tribal, and diasporas as the novels travel from the pre-colonial through the colonial to the postcolonial and globalized world. Far from the simplified, exclusive and idealized notions of national allegory that Hardt and Negri take as the main feature and weakness of postcolonial studies, the nation in both novels is imagined as an inherently inclusive unit.⁵⁸ However, the wholeness at the core of this project is never naively or uncomplicatedly achieved and is cast as a largely national project to roughly reconcile the nations of Guyana and Tanzania with their composite and fugitive components. Far from a tidy notion of nation, these novels demonstrate the power of national identity while articulating

⁵⁸ Hardt and Negri argue that the nation is an already co-opted form that by its very structure cannot represent minor internal groups.

the formidable obstacles to unity. For Gurnah and Harris, the nation is far from a stable and fixed subject yet is also indispensable.

Discourses of empire assume that a discourse of nationalism does not take into consideration minor or non-national identities. Even early on when considering the 1950's and 60's, postcolonial critics addressed Tutola as functioning within a Yoruba tradition and Achebe as an Igbo writer building on that tradition and the same can be said later about Aidoo as a Akan and Ngugi as a Kikuyu. Those identities are very much a part of the discourse on nationalism and while we can think about those works as working through an Igbo or Akan identity in relation to a Nigerian or Ghanaian one we can also clearly see that they are not only attempts to reconcile those minor identities with the national but also to reconcile them with their pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial manifestations outside of a relation to the nation. In other words, postcolonial critics have created a porous nation-subject which interacts with multiple identities and identifications, not the rigid confines articulated by Hardt and Negri. Achebe, for example, is clearly thought by postcolonial criticism to be interested not just in nationalism but in what it means to be an Igbo *and* what it means to be an Igbo in the context of the emerging Nigerian nation set in the larger framework of Africa inside and outside of relation to former colonies and metropolises and ultimately in relation to the globe. The nation is not at the heart of a

postcolonial understanding of Achebe and other authors, but one of many indispensable units of consideration.

Harris and Gurnah participate in the tradition of articulating minority identities in regards to larger cultural entities (the nation in particular) but with a key difference. Whereas Achebe identifies as an Igbo writing stories representing Igbo traditional and modern culture (as Ngugi does with Kikuyu and Tutuola with Yoruba) Harris and Gurnah's affiliations are unclear in their novels. *Peacock* does not place the affiliation of Harris as a black Guyanese man in stronger focus than any of the other subjects in the story. The Swahili similarly do not dominate *Paradise* even though Gurnah himself identifies as one. Instead of penning books about a singular insulated group and its ability to remain autonomous in the face of encroaching colonialism or modernity, Gurnah and Harris locate their texts temporally and geographically in locations where such distinctions are no longer a constructive way of seeing the world. The various groups in *Peacock* and *Paradise* have no pretensions towards sealing themselves off because they are already intertwined and irrecoverably mixed with the innumerable peoples around them. Rather than reach back into an irretrievable past seeking a common point from which they emanate, they are forced to consider the entirety of an ethnic landscape characterized by *all* identities being minor. The salient identity in these books comes from understanding the various ever-moving cultural pieces as part of a whole. The questions for Gurnah and

Harris are not those of Achebe and Ngugi who wonder how one retains Igbo-ness or Kikuyu-ness.⁵⁹ Gurnah and Harris rather question what is the “-ness” that articulates particular moments when ethnic origins are not stable enough to express identity. Often in reading African literature we get an a Fante book or a Gikuyu or a Xhosa one set against the nation to expose the tensions of a particular group within the national structure but Gurnah and Harris have purposefully avoided such a major/minor opposition. Their purpose is not to eschew the nation but to argue that the nation is neither a singularity, nor a simple minority/majority enterprise in many places. Caribbean writers have obvious reasons for usually avoiding singularity as a turn to ethnic and racial origins is often problematic but in Africa singularity is often largely preserved unless one is writing from a non-African marginalized perspective, such as East Indians in East Africa in a book like *The Gunnysack*. *Paradise*, though set in East Africa, takes a decidedly Caribbean approach to identity by describing a wide range of cultures cohabitating and competing without any one being dominant. Gurnah focuses on fragmented and incomplete identities to problematize the myth of Africa as a pre-colonial Eden and the Arab presence as simply proto-colonialism to explore the ignored possibility of reconciliation we find in Harris’ *Peacock*.

⁵⁹ While I would not say that Achebe, Ngugi and the like are seeking an ethnic purity or arguing against an evolution of culture, one cannot deny that their loyalties to the Igbo and Kikuyu respectively represent their limits and priorities.

Gurnah is at some advantage to Harris in regards to constructing a historicized space in which to play out this reconciliation. Centuries old pre-colonial records of Arabic trading in East Africa abound, while Harris has no such records on which to rely. Harris thus turns to the literary imagination imbued with the specters of the missing histories of Amerindians, African slaves and East Indian among others. Missing histories are nothing to celebrate but Harris projects a sense of freedom in not being tied to the “real,” as one suspects he would not trust well documented histories to accurately represent the groups in his novels anyway. By refusing a straightforward historical reconstruction available via existent Arab texts though Gurnah joins Harris’ project to posit Arab identity as only one of many. He complicates the oft proffered view that the Arab presence in east Africa was an almost purely hegemonic one that acts as a forerunner to the European imperial project in the region. History for Gurnah is not as straightforward as it first seems. Indeed he uses Harris’ “infinite rehearsals” as an approach and creates a mythic interior that is strikingly similar to Harris’ imagined Guyanese interior. Gurnah could clearly piece together a realistic historicized landscape via the writing of Arabic figures like Tibbo Tib as well as European and Asian accounts to create a realistic patchwork. Ultimately this strictly historicized version is not satisfying for Gurnah as it does not offer a space for reconciliation. It is only in the literary imagination of a new representation of an old place that Gurnah, like Harris, is able to find a

loose reconciliation. That is, the literary rather than histories of lived experience imbued with contemporary postcolonial politics (stories that are “messages with a cover” as Coetzee argues) functions here as a means of alienating the assumed one-to-one descriptiveness of historical fiction. Gurnah and Harris do not construct stories that could have happened in reality, aggregated “real” stories or stories that simply execute a critical bent but rather evoke an alienation and estrangement between the reader and an assumed reality. This is not to say they do not ultimately comment on the world they eschew but that a pragmatic paint-by-numbers one-to-one correlation is abandoned in plain sight to express the overwhelming nature of subjectivity in each context

Palace of the Peacock

It has been suggested that Wilson Harris’ first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), is a riddle that the rest of his oeuvre tries to solve and that it is a cipher for decrypting his oeuvre (Maes-Jelinek xvii). These prevalent and paradoxical readings are not lost on those familiar with *Peacock* as the mythical and dense language used to tell a story with multiple simultaneous temporalities and characters, who are both dead and alive, is far from straightforward. The plot of *Peacock* is basic though. A motley crew of men travel up a dangerous river in Guyana to find the native Amerindian inhabitants, referred to as “the folk,” and the

love interest, Mariella, of the ship's captain, Donne. They capture an elderly Amerindian woman and force her to lead them to the folk who have abandoned their village. During the journey accidents and infighting kill several members of the crew. Finally, the crew reaches a waterfall where the boat is wrecked and the remaining members of the crew die. This basic plot though does not begin to tell the whole story.

In the book's opening Donne is shot while riding a horse and pronounced dead by the narrator, Dreamer, who is also Donne's brother. Dreamer then "dreamt I awoke with one dead eye and one living closed eye" and "put my dreaming feet on the ground" (13-14). Soon Donne comes into his room and thus begins the book's uninterrupted mixing of dream and reality. The reader is caught in a constant flux between dreaming and waking, ultimately undermining both categories so much that the distinction becomes meaningless. The Dreamer continues to awake "in full and earnest" (17) and break from dreaming as in "I knew I was dreaming no longer in the way I had been dreaming before" (25) only to again tell us "I awoke now completely and fully" (48).⁶⁰ Harris plays with reader expectations by promising again and again to reveal a comfortable realism only to replace each dream-like scenario with an awakening into another literary somnambulism. Rather than tempting the reader into wondering which sequences are "real" and which ones are

⁶⁰ I won't list all the examples here of dreaming and waking but there are many more than those listed and none ever wake or sleep outside of a dreaming world.

dreams, the constant dreaming and awakening creates a narrative in which all the interconnected versions of this archetypal journey to the interior remain viable. The literary imagination for Harris is not a dreaming imitation of the world but a space in which one can devise scenarios, problems and solutions not possible in the outside world. Harris describes this strategic playfulness as “inner space.”

Time in Inner Space

Harris’ inner space demonstrates three primary features crucial to understanding *Peacock* as a possible cipher or metric for postcolonial novels featuring journeys to the interior that have been read as writing back. The first of these is temporal. Harris, like many Caribbean writers, has not escaped the impetus to consider the problematic, fragmented and incomplete recorded history of the Caribbean and Guyana in particular. Prominently, Kamau Braithwaite has focused on reconstructing the historical record by tracing individual cultural elements (such as East Indian labors and the individual tribal origins of black slaves) back in time until reaching some sense of homogenization. The origins of the Caribbean for Braithwaite can theoretically be constructed if one carefully traces the origins of those presently in the Caribbean. The present then is not a chaotic whirlwind of cultures so thoroughly mixed and transformed that one can only read the new in

them but a manageable, if daunting, mixes of traceable components. (Braithwaite 23). Braithwaite though precludes Western influence as contributing to “authentic” Caribbean culture and identity. For Braithwaite, Western influence must be excised to create a history that circumvents histories that Braithwaite considers unworthy of inclusion. Selecting what is and is not historically necessary for an approach to the identity question has brought Braithwaite into conflict with many Caribbean critics. His disagreements with Derrick Walcott are particularly noteworthy and useful here. Although their differences now stand as a foundational dialectic for Caribbean literary studies concerning history, their differences are somewhat overblown. Walcott emphasizes the unknowability of the Caribbean past (not completely unlike Braithwaite), particularly in regards to native peoples that simply no longer exist, to focus on the Caribbean as ground for a new understanding of race and history set loose from the bonds of strict historicism. Critics like Walcott revel in the fragmented and unstable mixed history and heritages of the region while also recognizing European colonial influence as essential in making the Caribbean. He refuses to excise Europe when he states: “I feel absolutely no shame in having endured the colonial experience. There was no obvious humiliation in it. . . .It was cruel but it created our Literature.” Here Walcott refuses the insinuation of the indignity of being colonized inherent in Braithwaite’s stance that posits colonization as so painful

that it must be wiped clean from any conceptualization of postcolonial Caribbean identity. (Walcott 50).

This disagreement on the place of Europe in the history of the Caribbean aside, the approaches of Walcott, Braitwaite and Harris focus on the Caribbean as uniquely suited to the creation of new and mixed identities. They pick up the mantle of the Cuban writer Jose Marti as put forth in his 1891 "Our America": "Create is this generation's password." Despite the Caribbean being a scene of destruction of culture and identities that has been called the colonial "worst case scenario," Walcott calls for a new Caribbean subject whom he calls "the Adamic man" in his "Muse of History" (Lafaye 25, Walcott 13). Walcott's Adamic man is paradoxically bound to history yet able to transcend it to create new improvised identities. Despite much ado to the contrary, Walcott and Braithewaite refuse a negative formation when considering Caribbean identity while still realizing the trauma, or "sigh," of history, choosing to focus on creation. Harris's inner space shares this temporal emphasis on futurity and the new by acknowledging the past without being obligated to interrogate it fully to speak about Guyanans in *Peacock*. That is, unlike Braitwaite's occasional focus on origins and tracing to compartmentalize each ethnic, racial, linguistic and geographic

component of individual Caribbean sites, Harris feels free to fluidly oscillate between incomplete temporalities in explicating Guyana.⁶¹

Place in Inner Space

Walcott's embrace of colonization as an undeniable part of Caribbean history and culture is important for Harris because central to *Peacock* is the undue influence of Europeans in the plot. Harris' project of recreating a knowable past in inner space incorporates the European presence in the Caribbean with that of other identities, some of which are extinct. This typical Harris paradox of trying to know what one understands is unknowable necessitates a metaphysical journey to travel "back into the very origins of creation" which is "an impossible quest" that nonetheless in the doing produces "a luminous fabric that one is on the threshold of what I would call 'wholeness': a wholeness which one could never hope to structure absolutely but which is there nevertheless and which enriches partial approaches to it" (Nasta 35). Although Harris is speaking of a temporal journey back to an origin, the process is impossible without some grounding in geography. For Harris, the physicality of place is the essential conduit. The land itself contains the components of recreating a lost history in the creative and literary

⁶¹ The Braithwaite/Walcott debate is foundational to discourse on Caribbean identity but the two have largely been placed in a false opposition to each other. Far from the feud their different constructs have fueled in some of their readers, the two takes on the nature of the Caribbean and its people are not mutually exclusive and quite complimentary.

imagination. Harris argues that rather than having to maneuver a complex space clearing gesture to carefully arrange or circumvent the intricacies of history to achieve an origin, and thus wholeness, the space clearing, for better or worse, has already been largely achieved, physically and ontologically by the blank spaces left by extinct tribes. The appearance of non-existent pre-contact histories, slave histories and the miscegenation of identities is betrayed by a landscape that has witnessed what we can no longer access. Unlike the edenic inference in Walcott's *Adamic man*, Harris is not interested in the common argument for an idealized pre-colonial landscape but for a landscape that even as it appears blank is actually scared with the signs of history.

Reading the landscape as inner space for Harris is the only way to access history, even if that history is necessarily bound by the confines of the literary imagination. Still, Harris' approach begs the question: where is an invisible history located geographically? For Guyana, Harris uses the jungles and savannahs as a means of imagining these histories and peoples. To say the least, Harris' conception of time is complex. It is however the intersection of time with the land and character that completes (and complicates further) the conception of inner space as a tool to understanding *Peacock*. A story that Harris has recalled on several occasions helps to illustrate this interplay of time and geographic space, as well to provide a genesis for the author's own understanding of space in this reclamation project.

Before becoming a writer Harris worked as a surveyor. He was often sent into the Guyanese interior jungle on river boats to survey land for weeks and months at a time. The jungle already held a firm grip on Harris' imagination as his stepfather, also a surveyor, disappeared in the jungle in 1929 when Harris was a boy. On one journey into the interior, as Harris tells it, on a surveying expedition into the interior the anchor of Harris' vessel embedded itself onto the bottom of the river. In order to free the boat and keep it from overturning and likely killing the crew on the jagged rocks and swirling rapids surrounding the boat, Harris ordered the crew to cut the rope to the anchor. They left the anchor behind in the riverbed and managed to use the ship's other anchor to complete the survey. Three years later Harris was on the same river on another expedition when yet another anchor became immovably lodged in the river bottom. Once again the boat nearly capsized but this time the crew was able to move the boat to shore and pull the anchor free. When they extricated the anchor they found that in pulling their anchor free they had dislodged the anchor from three years earlier and that it was in fact the anchor from the previous expedition that had snagged their anchor and nearly doomed their crew. In "A Talk on the Subjective Imagination" Harris tells us:

I felt as if a canvas around my head was crowded with phantoms and figures. I had forgotten some of my own antecedents- the Ameridian/Arawak ones-but now their faces were on the canvas. Once

could see them ... march into the twentieth century out of the pre-Columbian mists of time. One could also sense the lost expeditions ...all sorts of faces, all sorts of figures. There was a sudden eruption of consciousness, and what is fantastic is that it all came out of a constellation of two ordinary objects, two anchors.

Harris' anecdote on the river reveals the genesis of *Peacock* as a story of a crew with the exact same names as a previous crew who retrace that first crew's journey with a difference and the influence of firsthand experience on a young author. More importantly, the story demonstrates Harris' use of time and space in *Peacock*. The geography invades Harris' consciousness to imbue him with the ability to bear witness to the past of the place he is at, with a particular focus in this case on the Amerindian/Arawak. Histories for Harris are stored in the landscape in places like the riverbed and in foreign objects that become the landscape, such as the first anchor. Upturning those landscapes does not structure their histories absolutely but does provide unique access to them, in a skewed moment of double vision that produces insight into the place, its history and its people. It is this skewed double vision of the present and past and its "sudden eruption of consciousness" that Harris attempts to (re)produce in *Peacock* as inner space.

Appropriately, double vision develops as a central trope in the novel. Dreamer begins the novel telling us he has "one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye" and that he and Donne look out of his window "together as though through his dead seeing material eye, rather than

through my living closed spiritual eye” (18). The insinuation in these lines is manifold in that one eye, or set of eyes, sees the dead, such as events in the past and the previous crew, and the other sees the living, or present, being described by Dreamer. However, because we know that Donne and Dreamer see the erratic present, the “closed” living eye indicates that seeing the dead is truly *seeing*. This is brought into focus when Donne is climbing the waterfall to/on the Palace of the Peacock at the book's end when “A longing swept over him...to understand ...to see the indestructible nucleus and redemption of creation...in which all things gained their substance and universal meaning...he longed to see, *he longed to see* the atom, the very nail of moment in the universe” (Italics in original) (102). Donne is overwhelmed by a desire for a unifying vision that explains his own journey and history as well as that of the crew as a symbol of Guyana whose history cannot be completely overwritten. He undergoes a catharsis in which “It was his blindness that made him see his own nothingness and imagination constructed beyond his own reach.” Donne then falls off the waterfall to awake at the Palace of the Peacock where he finds the now twice dead crew and they all become “free from the chains of illusion in an inseparable moment within ourselves of all fulfillment and understanding.” In the ultimate attainment of consciousness, not unlike that in which Harris revels after dislodging his second anchor, the book ends with: “Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been for ever seeking and what he had

eternally possessed” (113). In this moment as Donne climbs his el Dorado he finds Harris’ “sudden eruption of consciousness” that will bind all the “phantoms” brought to the surface by Harris’ anchors. What he most wants though is universality with the various members of the diverse crew. His entire mission and multiple lives are corrupted by difference and distance from his crew, the land and the Amerindians. The atom as the “very nail of the universe” represents a resolution for Donne, his crew, the Amerindians and Guyana as a place that contains them all. Harris cannot imagine a realpolitik solution to the missing tribes, slavery, colonization, continued exploitation of native lands and peoples but he does create a fictional space that utilizes a base atomic relationship to the land of which that all the various peoples of Guyana are composed.

Harris’ Guyanese jungle then can be read as a heterotopia. As Foucault defines it, a heterotopia is a real space, unlike a utopia, that acts as a reflection of a society while being situated outside of it (Foucault 1). Foucault uses prisons, cemeteries and gardens in his examples to demonstrate that these spatial breaks from a society offer a useful mirror to represent the values of that society back to itself. A prison, for example, might put into material reality the otherwise ethereal values of human rights or freedom portended by a society in the way the materiality of Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay problematize concepts of *habeas corpus* and refraining from torture. In terms of Foucault’s

formation it is important to note my departure as Foucault focuses exclusively on physical spaces that are cultivated by societies, such as gardens as idealized and ordered versions of the unpredictability of the natural world. My take is not so much a manifestation of a physically manipulated environment but rather the ideological manifestations of a physical site that resists physical manipulation. The jungle is untamable yet undeniable for Harris and it is how one copes with the fear this causes that matters. For Guyana in *Peacock* the jungle is a heterotopic tool that articulates the fragmented nature of the Guyanese self by at once being understood as outside of the realm of history, yet so inside geographically and conceptually that it cannot be ignored. It is a space that at once defines the nation while being overwhelmingly understood as a space in which Amerindians, via extinction and societal marginalization, and non-Amerindians, via the jungle's dangers, disappear. Heterotopia literally means "other space" and the jungle is othered but paradoxically essential to understanding Guyana. Just as European colonies around the world were idealized spaces that reflected the implications of the colonial civilizing mission better than any of European powers' own discourse, the jungle enacts an essential and central component of Guyana while standing outside of its direct understanding. As mentioned above, Harris does not position himself as indigenous and as such a privileged mediator. In fact, he echoes the likes of Sir Walter Riegh, referenced in the figure of Scholburk, who sought

the ultimate reward in Guyana when searching for El Dorado while fearing a ghastly demise by simply vanishing or succumbing to cannibals. For Harris the jungle can capsize one just as easily as it offers insight into the nature of the land, the people, the nation and humanity itself.

Character in Inner Space

Characters contribute a specific political element to *Peacock* by indicating the various identities Harris is working to unify. They suggest the boundaries for his universalism and the evidence for critics to tie his fiction to postcolonial studies. Without the engagement of specific Guyanese identities *Peacock* could be seen to seek a general pre-industrial or pre-colonial identity but Harris is not only reaching back for Arawak and other Amerindian influences on modern Guyana but also reaching out to various others that arrived after them. The crew are a catch all of stand-ins for populations in the Caribbean and Guyana. The da Silva twins are “of Portuguese extract,” old Schomburgh is a clear allusion to Robert Schomburgk the British explorer who reported on the interior of Guyana, Vigilance is an Amerindian, Donne is of European decent, and Carroll is black and Vigilance’s cousin. Other figures like Cameron, Jennings, and Wishrop whose backgrounds are unclear

complete the crew.⁶² Dreamer also tells us: “The odd fact existed of course that their living names matched the names of a famous dead crew that had been sunk in the rapids and been drowned to a man...But this in no way interfered with their lifelike appearance...” (12).

As much as *Peacock* works to reconstruct the various identities at play in Guyana, Harris’ ultimate goal is to break down the limitations of the individual to stress the unity of the crew and the populations they represent.⁶³ Soon after meticulously describing each crewmember we learn “The whole crew was one spiritual family living and dying together in a common grace out of which they had sprung again from the same soul and womb as it were. They were all knotted and bound together in the enormous bruised head of Cameron’s ancestry and nature as in the white unshaven head of Schaumburg’s age and presence.” By not allowing any individual character to disconnect from the history of his previous name sake and with other members of the crew it is little surprise that later the narrator insists that the particularities of familial bonds are of little consequence: “It no longer matter whether Carroll was his nephew or his son or both.” For Harris, the particularities, while

⁶² Peter Hitchcock in *The Long Space* points out that Harris does not include Chinese in his fictional universalist space (63). The absence of the Chinese is somewhat understandable as they make up a less than one percent of the population of Guyana and Harris seems to correct this in the fourth book of the *Guyana Quartet*, *The Secret Ladder* by including Chinese characters (on a boat named *Palace of the Peacock* no less).

⁶³ Despite Harris’ modernist tendencies in terms of literary form, his articulations of cultural wholeness as a priority over the individual (who is a decentered, almost postmodern subject). Along with not sharing the modernist preoccupation with role of technology Harris is difficult to pigeonhole as a modernist writer.

worth initially designating, ultimately are also the bond which keep the individual crew members, as potential representations of populations in Guyana, from connecting to the land. Cameron stands at this moment in the narrative “like a melodramatic rock in mother earth, born from a close fantasy and web of slave and concubine and free...whose memory was bitter and rebellious as death and sweet as life.” Just as the temporal mixing allows the crew to access a hidden past while it can also “remember the future,” Harris with his characters seeks to break down the normal distinction between characters as individual entities. Only when they put these distinctions aside are they able to gain knowledge from the tragedies of their many journeys on the river and united as Guyanese. In *Peacock*’s closing Harris writes:

He (Donne) had stopped a little to wonder whether he was wrong in his knowledge and belief and the force that had divided them from each other—and magled them beyond all earthly hope and recognition—was the wind of rumour and superstition, and the truth was they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk (110).

Ultimately Harris wishes to break down the distinction between colonizer, colonized, master, slave, indigenous and foreign to embrace a unity in which the “loss of all opposition and true adversary within himself” that filled Jennings early in the story. Donne revels in this sense when he learns near *Palace*’s end “to know and to hug himself, his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without

cruelty and confusion” in an expression of a future orientated postcolonial ethic that ties the indigenous to those who came later.

Infinite Rehearsal

The chronotope for inner space is a series of what Harris calls infinite rehearsals. For Harris, the concept of a rehearsal without a final product is a way to experiment with narrative form. *Peacock's* characters are already dead and repeating a journey that has never been told, yet it is familiar to them, and this crew (one rehearsal) is almost but not quite the same as the last crew (another rehearsal) and neither has the effect of finality. Even though Donne and the crew reach the Palace of the Peacock they are all dead and we assume another life-like crew will repeat the journey. In fact, in a later novella in the *Guyana Quartet*, *The Secret Ladder*, Harris uses another crew traveling down a river in a boat called the Palace of the Peacock as the central plot mechanism. Harris explains this concept: “one is involved in this complicated incessant rehearsal in which one sees or senses these events which one approaches from different angles. I began to find myself involved in a fiction which in responding to the past made one aware of the biases of the past which one had to consume in some degree in order to move into another dimension”(Nesta 35). These rehearsals for Harris then are a way to consume the past and to move on and to put into practice claims

to a general universalism that are hard to enact. One cannot ignore the mistreatment of the indigenous folk and the only two female characters during the journey that leads to unity. Certainly another rehearsal of their story must be enacted before any equitable universalist solution can be claimed. However, the past Harris is discussing is not accessible and the “different dimension” does not mean to simply move into the next historical moment or epoch. Instead Harris takes the imprecise impressions gained from a physical presence in the jungle on the river and pairs it with a fragmented knowledge of the past and plays out a rehearsal of what might have been again and again until the weight of the repetition itself creates a history in the literary imagination.

In this way each repetition is not just a reenactment of the rehearsal before it but as Harris explains

various patterns in the novel are consistently broken and with each change the central image appears again but in a different light as if ones sees it from another angle; it appears to pick up new content...the different context is expressive of the break in the pattern and therefore there is a convertibility of images. ...the pattern changes and as the pattern changes the past makes a different impact on the imagination. (Nesta 35).

These infinite rehearsals with no final play allows one to inhabit the irrecoverable past. And while this recovery is not complete and exists only in the fictitious space of the literary imagination, for Harris these rehearsals are the best way to gain access to the past. This past though

is not a simple ossified history but a layered phenomenon that incorporates the biases of subsequent moments in history. Harris refuses an edenic Amerindian because the long term history of the Amerindian in Guyana is genocidal. While Harris imagines many epochs he never allows himself the naïve indulgence of thinking that he can actually represent or inhabit the other. Instead, he “rehearses” a kind of psychoanalytic incorporation; his difference in the rehearsal being that the elements he seeks to incorporate are also manifestly part of himself. That is, ultimately Harris is attempting to formulate a Guyanese subject through the incorporation of multiple others while also accounting for himself as a subject.

Harris’ insistence on the value of incessant rehearsals parallels the theories of arguably the most significant critic of Harris: Antonio Benitez-Rojo. Although Benitez-Rojo approaches the subject of writing in the Caribbean via chaos theory, his thesis in *The Repeating Island* aligns with Harris’. Benitez-Rojo stresses his theory as the “end is not to find the final result, but process, dynamics, rhythms that show themselves within the marginal” (7). Just as Harris’ “infinite rehearsals” stress what is gained in each subsequent rehearsal, Benitez-Rojo’s repeating island formulates that “every repetition is a practice that necessarily entails a difference and a step toward nothingness.” Benitez-Rojo is channeling chaos theory here and its reliance on thermodynamics. The entropy that he proposes is part of thermodynamics’ obsession with order, chaos

theory essentially being a way to order or understand patterns in disorder. Thus thermodynamics is a theory of wholeness or unity that seeks to account for, or order, even those elements so lacking order that they cannot be accounted. Harris' relationship to history in Guyana, defined as knowing the unknowable, is comparable to Benitez-Rojo's ordering the unorderable. Using a Deleuzian concept of the machine that he calls "the Plantation" Benitez-Rojo unfolds a sense of a non-violent Caribbean identity. The Plantation machine enacts terrible violence but the result is a wobbly non-violent stasis. Harris also does not deny violence in making the Caribbean but seeks a postcolonial unity that leaves behind the violence of slavery, genocide and colonialism. However, it must be noted that as much as Benitez-Rojo relies on chaos theory he ultimately is not seeking to strictly codify the Caribbean, though it does sustain and repeat recognizable patterns or "certain ways." A fully structured thermodynamic view of the Caribbean would by its nature produce a singular Hawking-esque "theory of everything." On the contrary, Benitez-Rojo, and Harris for that matter, embrace the unknowable while still holding onto a sense of wholeness. That is, whereas whole means ordered for thermodynamics, wholeness for Benitez-Rojo and Harris need not be ordered and indeed the preservation of difference and disorder are central to both. Predictably then Benitez-Rojo's reading of *Palace* echoes with the concept of wholeness and unity with difference retained. Benitez-Rojo calls the journeys of the crew "the

historic search for Guyanese society” that reveals a “collective psychic state which would allow for a feeling of [shared]cultural identity.” In their own terms, Harris and Benitez-Rojo agree on *Peacock* as building a loosely structured, yet unified, postcolonial Guyanese identity in the literary imagination. By its nature such an identity is impossible to pin down but through the confinement of the crew in the space of the jungle traveling through a unique repeating chronotope with representative men living and dying repeatedly to gain momentum in rehearsal Benitez-Rojo and Harris construct an impossible reconciliation.⁶⁴

Paradise

Set in early 20th century Tanzania, Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* is the story of a Waswahili boy named Yusuf. From the beginning the reader is invited to compare him to his Koranic Yusuf.⁶⁵ As a young boy of twelve with exceptional looks, Yusuf is given to his “Uncle Aziz,” a

⁶⁴ Although not the focus of my chapter, one cannot help but be struck how in *Peacock* and *Paradise* how men are the primary agents of identity formation and reconciliation. *Peacock* deploys Maria and the old Arawak women as motivations and guides but the grand reconciliation excludes them for the most part. *Paradise* similarly has female characters but their transcendence does not register and they are sealed off in Aziz’s house with their “minor” concerns. It strikes me that one could argue that women are the one minor in these novels (and many others) who are not urged into an equitable landscape with other minors in attempting to make the minor/major distinction moot.

⁶⁵ Biblical Joseph is also a reference as the Koran and the Bible have their own versions of Yusuf/Joseph’s life. Gurnah clearly focuses on the Koran though by choosing to use the Koranic name Yusuf.

merchant from the coast.⁶⁶ Once at Aziz's house on the coast of Tanganyika, then part of German East Africa and now Tanzania, Yusuf works in his new *seyyid's* (master) store. He is mentored by Khalil, an older Arab boy, who disavows Yusuf of any notion of familial relation with the *seyyid*. Khalil repeats "He ain't your uncle" until Yusuf understands that he is actually *rehani*, human collateral for debts that his father owes Aziz. Soon Yusuf endears himself to both Khalil and Aziz and the master takes Yusuf on one of his caravans journeys to the interior. On this first journey Yusuf stays with another merchant who owns a stake in Aziz's treks while the caravan proceeds to the interior. A year or so later the caravan returns. During the interval Yusuf proves himself trustworthy to accompany the next caravan into the interior. This next trip is of huge importance to Aziz as it is larger than any of his previous efforts and he is venturing into remote territories with which he is not familiar. The men are besieged by hardships on the journey. While fearing mythical creatures, they are set upon by wild animals, disease carrying mosquitoes, ransoms from local leaders and attacks from natives. Finally, they reach Chatu. Although initially welcoming, the king of Chatu imprisons the members of the caravan and seizes their goods. Aziz and the king begin a process of negotiating a settlement when a German colonial official arrives. He releases the men and their goods and sends them on their way. Although they continue to trade

⁶⁶ The selling of Yusuf to a man named Aziz is the same in the Koran, as is Yusuf's extraordinary good looks.

along the way, the endeavor is a failure due to the losses on the journey and in Chatu. Aziz is worried about his ability to pay his Indian creditors and his men for their service. Not long after their return home, Aziz leaves to collect on his own debts. Yusuf, now seventeen, takes an interest in the lush Islamic garden at the center of the home. He works in its confines with an old gardener and is soon noticed by the mistress of the house. She believes that Yusuf can cure her of a mark that has scarred her face and implores him to touch it and pray. He visits her for weeks because he is in love with Khalil's sister who also lives in the house. Yusuf discovers that the girl, Amina, has recently been married as Aziz's second wife and he pleads with her to run away with him. She refuses and soon afterward the mistress attempts to force herself on Aziz. Aziz returns that night and overlooks the incident, blaming his wife. The next day a German infantry unit comes through the town and Aziz tells Khalil and Yusuf to hide or they will be captured and made soldiers. They hide out until the army leaves but Yusuf emerges and runs after them to become a German colonial soldier.

Critical Reception

The summary above bears little resemblance to *Heart of Darkness*, or a refutation or reversal of it. Western colonizers appear only briefly and European influence is not yet felt by most in the novel. Rather, the novel focuses on the asymmetrical relationships between the Waswahili, Wasomali and Wanyamwezi in relation to Arabs and Indians. These interactions are complicated even further by the presence of Islam. Some of the local Waswahili, Wasomali and Wanyamwezi are Muslims while others are non-Muslim, or “savages” according to their own tribesman who have embraced Islam. This complex set of relations would seem to preclude simple colonizer/colonized, white/black, African/European construct. Rather, *Paradise* clearly does draw upon the story of Yusuf in the Koran as a young man of beauty who interprets dreams and is sold by his family to a man named Aziz, later to be sexually assaulted by his wife.⁶⁷ However, this obvious reading and the complications in imagining a complex ethnic landscape it evokes are largely passed over in favor of a Eurocentric reading in which “*Paradise*...writes back to [European] Empire” (Bardolph 65). On the whole, three types of criticism on *Paradise* have emerged. Each is insightful in its particular way but each also relies on the flawed premise that the European canon and colonial history are the main intertexts at play in the novel.

⁶⁷ This episode alludes to the well-known Koranic story of Yusuf and Zuleika. The Koranic Yusuf, unlike in *Paradise*, is imprisoned because his master sides with his wife's tale.

One prevalent criticism on *Paradise* views it through the lens of the traditional postcolonial European-colonizer/native-colonized binary. Critics such as Diane Schwerdt and Charles Sarvan relate the events in *Paradise* to European colonization, even though Europeans are notably absent in the text. Of course, German colonial presence pervades the background of the novel, especially as it ends and begins with sightings of Germans by Yusuf. However, there are no substantive European characters and only one of the central plot points, the freeing of the caravan in Chatu, involves a European. Schwerdt and Sarvan's reading continually uses the Europeans and the colonizer/colonized paradigm as a touch stone for meaning, thus foregrounding what is merely the backgrounded German colonial presence in the novel. In particular, Schwert's reading is ripe with views on "the African response to colonization" in purporting that *Paradise* "produces a reading of European colonization" to demonstrate how colonization contributes to "the distortion of cultural identity in colonized people" (92). Consequently, meaning is created in the text by an examination of European colonization, even though it stands as only one of many distinct features in the text. Furthermore, the authors of this view do not explain why we should bypass the *presence* of Africans as potential subjects of criticism for the *absence* of Europeans as subjects in crafting an "African response" (Schwert 94). The text is not taken for what it might offer for specific knowledge of Zanzibarian, Tanzanian, East

African or African subjectivity, but is mined for insights into European colonization in Africa. Indeed, even the problematic issue of the presence of the Arabs as possible pre-European colonizers becomes a comment on European colonization rather than an articulation on the nature of Arab trade and slavery.

Another reading, championed by David Callahan, displaces European colonization as the main theme of *Paradise*. As Callahan writes “Gurnah’s novel operates thus as a corrective to some of the critical pieties that postcolonial studies have inherited from their early history as a discourse of opposition and local witness” (57). In this formulation, Callahan challenges the hubris of using a purely European lens to examine a novel almost exclusively about Africans written by a diasporic African writer. Just as Callahan contends that *Paradise* acts as a “corrective” against overly simplified colonial narratives, Callahan’s reading corrects much of Schwerdt’s reading. Indeed, Callahan writes directly to the Eurocentric reading in “This [*Paradise*] is not primarily an account of European colonization or its effects” (55). Callahan quite rightly notes that in fact, the only substantive European encounter in *Paradise* involves a colonial officer as a “positive presence” who undoes the crimes of Chatu (64). Callahan does not just try to cast the colonial presence in the novel as positive, rather he complicates the oversimplified and poorly realized bad colonizer/good colonized binary set up by Schwerdt and Sarvan by demonstrating that Europeans are not

the primary subject of the novel and that a formulation that positions them as the center is poorly suited for an analysis of this particular work. Overall, this reading goes some way towards undoing the problematic Eurocentric critique of Schwerdt and Sarvan. However, Callahan problematically asserts that Arab/African relations take place on the “same axis” as European/African relations (Callahan 64). Several obvious problems come to light here. Arab disappears as a subject with the introduction of European. That is, when Arab/Wiswahili becomes European/Wiswahili, Callahan collapses Arab into African. This of course does not account for the East Indians or non-Waswahili peoples in the text who are considered savages by the Waswahili. Islam in fact provides another axis that complicates any “/” formation. Perhaps a Euro/Arab/Indian/Waswahili (Muslim)/Waswahili(non-Muslim)/Non-wiswahili African could be constructed but its awkwardness outweighs its usefulness. My absurd “/” formation above reveals that the answer to the oversimplification of the European/African binary is not simply an Arab/African construct that overlooks the role of Islam and Indians, as well as the the distinct split between those from Bombay and those from Punjab in the novel. Rather, Gurnah puts into play a complex system of identities in which almost every character is nativized and otherized at some point in the novel beyond a static axis. Ultimately, a project which seeks to rescue this “axis” does little more than attempt to reanimate an

unworkable construct that continually forces colonizer and colonized into an ill-fitting form.

Beyond simply reshuffling the colonizer from Arab to European, this shift to Arab Muslims as colonizers marks them as non-Africans in a way that the novel complicates and history refutes. African as a subject position, especially in North and East Africa, cannot be divorced from Islam to treat it as a foreign non-African entity if only because Islam had been in the region for 500 years by 1900.⁶⁸ Africa in this reading, then, becomes an essential and static subject because African subjectivity is only African in a non-colonial relationship. Africa stays then as a purified subject reified only when adhering to “pre-contact” narratives that characterize Islam as a contaminant. This makes it an easier subject to handle and deploy (for non-Africans especially) in contrast to the historical reality of Africa always existing in the world with dynamic agency. In the novel, no such situation exists and Gurnah goes to great lengths to demystify pre-colonial East Africa as pure and untouched by the outside world. Thus, Callahan’s reading paralyzes the African subject because it cannot change or improvise with the times and remain still African. This image of an eternal Africa in the West persists even today in many of the associations clearly inherited from the colonial period: disease, poverty, violence and untouched natural beauty. As

⁶⁸ Such a claim is analogous to claiming that Christianity was foreign to South America at the turn of the 20th-century.

Achille Mbembe writes, this conceptualization of Africa as a place “resistant to change” that is “supposedly stationary” reifies a kind of nativism that fixes African subjectivity in an eternal past (Mbembe 9). This Africa cannot evolve and is constantly inhibiting development, causing a false choice between change and tradition. This Africa remains tied to an unreachable past that reinforces Hegel’s proclamation that Africa “has no history” (Hegel 186). In short, this kind of criticism is a central problem in African literary study because in the name of asserting Africaness and preserving Africa, it delimits Africa’s flexibility and viability as a subject.

The last type of criticism on *Paradise* attempts to take the specific context of a Koranic reading of the novel into account. This reading draws parallels between the Koranic Yusuf and *Paradise’s* Yusuf. Amin Malak and Simon Lewis are instructive in this sense because they point to specific Koranic ties that are missed by most Western critics. Lewis points out the problematic fixation of Western critics with Eden as a lost paradise when he demonstrates that in Islam garden/paradise is not just the gardens that humankind was expelled from, but gardens that devout Muslim expect to inherit in the afterlife. Furthermore, Lewis points out how the incident in *Paradise* when Yusuf’s shirt is torn by Aziz’s wife has specific parallels to the Koran in which the wife of the man who bought Yusuf tries to seduce Yusuf. He escapes and uses the evidence of the torn back of his shirt to prove his innocence. Additionally, Malak tells us

that Aziz is also one of the prophet's 99 names, tying him to power, and also the name of the man who bought Yusuf in the Koran. More interestingly, perhaps, Malak outlines a line of reasoning by which we may be able to consider Aziz as impotent. ⁶⁹

The insights of these Koranic readings serve as a laundry list of unaccounted for Koranic references in *Paradise* which the authors recognize but have problems deploying for any larger argument. Ironically, the two critics who shed the most light on the role of Arabs and Islam in the text, Malak and Lewis, also quickly attempt to undo the insight they provide. Lewis, for his part, quickly tells us that because Arabs and Islam are not "indigenous" or "local African" that his method of using Islam does not "have much to do" with African subjectivity – a claim remarkably similar to Callahan's despite the difference in its initial orientation (Lewis 228). Similarly, Malak abandons a pragmatic attempt to use his Koranic insights to comment on African subjectivity leaving us with "only Kurtzian horror reigns in the Euro-colonized paradise of Africa" (Malak 225). Malak's unwillingness to consider what his Koranic insights can say about Africa or Islam in *Paradise* is baffling. He provocatively produces a non-Western reading outside the ken of many critics, only to diminish its effect himself. The payoff of this approach for

⁶⁹ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a prominent Koranic scholar argues convincingly that Koranic Aziz was a eunuch who had no children because the Egyptian use of "high court official," Koranic Aziz's position, was synonymous and interchangeable with eunuch (Malak 212). Thus, the unrest of the women in the house may have more to do with the sexual implications of Koranic Aziz than mistreatment by their husband.

Malak is the simple identification of the Koran's influence and the British/German power struggles in the region. The German/British fixation is especially strange as few signs of the European conflict over East Africa surface in the novel (Malak 219). Overall, Malak uncovers the kind of specific knowledge that leads to more nuanced and insightful readings than uninformed strictly colonial readings, but he does not deploy the reading for much more than a typical comparison to the Western canon via Conrad's Kurtz. Therefore, these potentially explosive readings capable of competing against Eurocentric readings of *Paradise* treat their own insights as extraneous footnotes rather than pursuing them to intriguing ends.⁷⁰

Making the Connections

Paradise ends with Yusuf's realization that he is a "shit-eater" before chasing German soldiers to apparently become a conscript. This ending along with Amina's claim that the garden at the center of Aziz's compound, which is laid out in the traditional Islamic style to represent paradise, is actually hell would seem to contradict the hopeful unity of *Peacock's* ending. The lack of a resolution or even any gesture towards a positive outcome for any character has led most critics to interpret the

⁷⁰ Although I am moving towards another way of using them, these insights by Malak and Lewis are ripe for redeployment in a paradigm that treats them as insightful for African subjectivity rather than extraneous. The small sample they allow themselves is fascinating and as a non-expert on the Koran I wish they had followed through on their initial promise.

title as ironic: a simple reversal in which Gurnah undermines Edenic myths of pre-colonial Africa to demonstrate how it was actually a hellish place. Although not a justification for the civilizing mission of colonialism, *Paradise* seemingly describes East Africa as a permanently damaged locale with an uninterrupted history of violence and exploitation. Gurnah focuses on the pre-colonial and early colonial in this work but his other books have focused on the colonial and post-independence to create a temporally situated argument that East Africa is and always has been troubled by horrific violence as a result of ethnic tension.

However, if we follow through with the Koranic implications of Gurnah's novel this purely negative interpretation of the story is incomplete. The Koran's Yusuf becomes a powerful man who Islamic scholars credit with playing a crucial role in liberating his people, the Israelites, from Egypt.⁷¹ Far from a shit-eater, Koranic Yusuf is one of twenty five prophets charged to deliver humanity to paradise. We could interpret Gurnah's invitation to read Yusuf in *Paradise* as similar in innumerable ways only to end the stories so strikingly dissimilarly as a ham fisted metaphor for telling us that the situation in East Africa is so beyond repair that not even the superhuman traits of Koranic leaders could possibly overcome them. In this reading we should ultimately abandon any sense of hope for resolution of conflict in the region but I

⁷¹ Essentially, he is an important forerunner to Musa (Moses) as the liberator of the Israelites.

believe that such a simple reading of this novel belies the complexities of the conflict Gurnah takes such pains to define. Is Gurnah pointing to the complexities of East Africa in *Paradise* with all of its head spinning affiliations regarding ethnicity, religion, gender, and language only to then undermine the entire project by telling us that knowledge of all of these forces at work is pointless because this region's history is hopeless and its inhabitants in the final analysis are "shit-eaters"? I argue that *Paradise* challenges readers to imagine possible resolutions through moments in the book that *do* resolve ethnic and religious conflict on a micro scale by creating difference between the multiple tellings of the Yusuf story. Harris and Benitez-Rojo stress that the slippages between tellings in a series of infinite rehearsals offer insight and ultimately resolution, if only in the literary imagination. Seemingly unsolvable postcolonial problems can be at least conceptualized and *Paradise* as one such rehearsal contains the potential for future resolutions.

Unlike many other African novels and East African novels, Gurnah does not deal in whole cultural entities. Rather than situating communities and characters as hermeneutically sealed whole units, each identity in the novel bleeds over into every other. Islam impacts everyone whether Islamic or not and the power of Indian merchants manifests itself all the way from the coast to the interior. In the novel one is in constant contact with cultural, linguistic and religious others. Unlike many African novels that can be clearly identified as Yoruba, Akan, Zulu,

Gikuyu and so forth, Gurnah creates an African landscape in which one is always on tenuous ground, not simply trying to protect one's culture from outsiders or wondering how to incorporate modern incursions into a traditional society. In Gurnah's East Africa such a moment of existential crisis for clearly demarked ethnicities in the face of cultural mixing is passé. By the time *Paradise* begins, around 1900, Islam and Arabs have been in the region for over 500 years. Islamic and Arab culture are not foreign, or forerunners of European colonization, they are an ingrained fact of everyday life, whose extraction is only imaginable if one enforces the colonizer/colonized binary. Similarly, Gurnah does not choose to depict Indians in *Paradise* as cloistered from the rest of society. They are maligned as money lenders and merchants who control disproportionate amounts of wealth but they are also key characters in the novel in their interactions with Arabs and Swahilis. For Gurnah, like Harris, one cannot simply trace any of the identities back to an origin or seal them off because they are polluted by each other. Instead, easily tracked ethnicities are replaced with difficult fluid characters resulting from centuries of contact.

These new, yet still African, identities such as Waswahili Muslim or Arab Tanzanian remind one of the focus on the new identity formation in the Caribbean. Just as Walcott, Harris and Braithwaite have theorized various versions of a new or Adamic subject, Gurnah stresses the mutability of East African identities. As in the Caribbean, Gurnah does

not position these into a binary but rather a whirlwind, not unlike Braithwaite's use of hurricanes, whose origins can be roughly tracked but never fully accounted for. The primary difference between the Caribbean and East African formations though come into play with the idea of positive versus negative identity formation. While Walcott may express "no shame in having endured the colonial experience," *Paradise* expresses profound regret at the way these cultures have come to interact with one another. Slavery, fear, violence, exploitation, and poverty characterize cultural contact zones and the negative identity formation that Marti argues against for the Caribbean and that Harris, Walcott and Braithwaite all refuse seems unavoidable for Gurnah. *Paradise* doesn't express a desire for pre-contact purity though. Rather, Gurnah laments the violence produced by the interaction of these cultures without explicitly positing a time in which this was not the case. In what initially seems like an overly pessimistic outlook, Gurnah appears to tell us that exploitative relations have always been the norm in East Africa by placing much of the narrative in a pre-colonial setting. Gurnah complicates redemption even further as all the major actors in the book are African and unable to be considered victims of anyone other than other Africans. In the Caribbean, European colonization and the wedges it creates amongst non-Western identities can be scapegoated as the source of cultural tensions. Europe's undue influence can be what must be fixed and we see that Donne in *Peacock* is often that which must

be ultimately incorporated for Harris' unity to function. For Gurnah though indigeneity does not inoculate one from blame and European descent does not mean villainy. In *Paradise*, the most ruthless character is the indigenous Chatu while in *Peacock* the indigenous population holds the key to unity amongst disparate identities. In *Paradise* the Waswahili are not a repository of a peaceful way of life that the others around them need to come to terms with before unity can be achieved. They may be victims but they do not hold any inherent insight in the novel. In short, they are part of the problem along with every other cultural representative. It's not hard to see then why critics universally read *Paradise* as pessimistic.

Revising the Interior

Gurnah could have stuck rather closely to the various accounts of Arabic trading missions to the interior of East Africa by the likes of Tibbo Tib, Mzee Ali and Selemani bin Mwenye Chande and further supplemented them with the writings of Livingstone, Stanley, and other Europeans. As Sharae Deckard notes though

Gurnah's implementation of the mystical language of Muslim narratives of fantastic voyages and refusal to include clear-cut temporal signifiers dislocates the narrative from the traditional bonds of historical fiction and creates a frequently surreal atmosphere in which the reader struggles to distinguish between historical event and fantasy (109).

Deckard is suggesting that perhaps *Paradise* is not the strict historical fiction it is largely understood to be. I agree and furthermore contend that the fantastic elements in *Paradise* function similarly to those in *Peacock* as a means of defusing the tensions built up over the course of colonialism. Gurnah's reliance on mystical language and imagery cracks the veneer of a novel that is firmly rooted in a specific moment in East Africa just before German and English colonial power came into its own in the region. Magic and mysticisms become more common as the characters move into the interior. Hussien tells Yusuf and Hamid at an outpost on the first journey that "the world is ringed with mountains which give the green tint to the sky. Those mountains on the other side of the lake are the edge of the world..." in an iteration of a common Muslim geographic trope (83). Hussien goes on to tell them that beyond the mountains "the air has the colour of plague and pestilence and the creatures who live in it are known only to God." It is also in this moment when Yusuf is compared by characters to the Koranic Yusuf.

This view of the world based on Muslim mythology continues throughout the novel but the ultimate mystery is an El Dorado in the African interior. Hussien culminates his description of Islamic mapping of the interior by telling his friends that "The Fountain of Life is in that wilderness, guarded by ghouls and snakes as huge as islands" (84). Essentially, Hussien locates Islamic paradise in the interior while also insinuating that hell coexist with it in the same locale when he jokingly

replies to Kalinga's question as to whether hell is there to by answering "You should know...That's where you're going" (90). *Peacock's* dangerous yet enticing El Dorado that can unite disparate peoples in the depths of the Guyanese jungle is articulated in *Paradise* as a perilously reached heaven on earth. Both locations offer the ultimate rewards of unity and eternal life while also offering the ultimate punishment (repeated deaths in *Peacock* and hell in *Paradise*).⁷² More importantly for this project it legitimizes comparisons to Harris' even more fantastic setting. When Deckard remarks that "Fantasy becomes the medium through which the characters attempt to assimilate the unknown," she could just as easily be unpacking *Palace* as *Paradise* (112). The fantastic and magical in both texts do not diffuse or obfuscate meaning but provide sites to imagine resolution in locales where such resolutions have been evasive.

Paradise contains many instances of the fantastic despite it being characterized most often as historical fiction. Khalil tells Yusuf of wolf men constantly and the men comment on mythical animals and the ferocity of animals such as lions and crocodiles. Early in the novel

⁷² To a degree this mirrors the European understanding in Conrad and Stanley of the interior as a dangerous place but also one where one could get rich and famous. The difference comes in the rewards as they proportionately more significant for the postcolonial texts. The reward for Europeans is money and notoriety gained from extracting riches whereas for Guyanese or East Africans the rewards transcend time and space. These distinctions are important because in the writing back tradition we have plenty of examples of the use of horror as a way to characterize the interior but the equally prevalent, and in my argument, more powerful element of transcendent identity capability is under appreciated.

“Khalil told Yusuf stories of wolves that and jackals who stole human babies and raised them as beasts, feeding them dog-breast and regurgitated meat. They taught them how to speak their language and how to hunt. When they were grown, they made them couple with them, to produce wolf-people and ate nothing but putrid meat. Ghouls also eat dead meat...the wolf people sometimes came among real people” (28).

Such creatures are also feared by the men in the caravan and even when Yusuf returns from the interior and tells Khalil that he did not see any wolf-people they agree that they must have been hiding, their faith unshaken. Europeans are also mythologized. In a puzzling entry that is not a report by a character but addressed by the narrator to the reader, we are told that a European “rich beyond counting” lives in the shadows of the mountains. We are told he “learned the language of the animals and could converse with them” and that he lives in an iron palace on a cliff that is also “a powerful magnet, so that whenever enemies approached its fortifications, their weapons were snatched from their scabbards.” Lastly, he “possessed a ring with which he could summon the spirits of the land to his service.” Another running reference in the novel is that Europeans can eat metal and that their spit is poisonous. Thus, despite the temptation to read *Paradise* as a strict reconstruction of the existent narratives of East African Arab caravans, Gurnah complicates this by engaging with mysticism, sometimes Islamic, not just as a report on the superstitions as in the ethnographic style of the biographers of Mzee Ali, Carl Velten and Tibbo Tib but as a reality that

competes with detailed descriptions of financing and cultural norms of the time.

Paradise also constantly refers to the presence of *jinn*s, or genies, as actual forces acting on events in the novel as well as the Koranic Gog and Magog. Khalil first tells Yusuf this Koranic tale in which two evil cities and their people are walled off from the rest of the world because of their wickedness and that the wall represents the edge of the world. Yusuf wonders aloud whether the wall still exists but no one can tell him. Chatu as a treacherous leader isolated from others is analogous to Mog and Magog and Yusuf wonders whether the presence of slavery, domestic abuse and rampant violence indicates that indeed the wall has been breached. His abandonment of the world of Mog and Magog for the German army indicates that he is in fact making a strategic decision against that world.

When we take into account Gurnah's gestures to magic, superstition and Islamic mysticism *Paradise* still does not equal the almost entirely magical realm of Harris' *Peacock* but they do problematize the prevalent reading of the book as historical fiction enough to allow us to consider *Palace* and *Paradise* on these magical terms.⁷³ In reading *Paradise* as almost entirely unhelpful in reconciling the cultures often at odds in East Africa, critics overlook this important feature as well as an

⁷³ *Peacock* has been termed magical realism but *Paradise* eschews the aesthetics of magical realism.

important section of the book that uses this mysticism and the geography of the interior to gesture towards possible solutions. While much of the criticism on *Paradise* addresses the second journey to the interior to Chatu, few examine the initial journey to the interior in which Yusuf is left at an outpost under the care of Hamid, a Waswahili Muslim trader from the coast. On a journey to deliver goods they employ Kalasinga a Sikh originally from the Punjab region of Indian to their destinations, a shop run by the Arab Hussien from Zanzibar. This combination of characters represents the major actors in the regions conflicts before widespread European colonization in Waswahili Muslims (Hamid), East Indians (Kalasinga), Arabs (Hussien) and non-Muslim Waswahilis (Yusuf).⁷⁴

The men commune for several days at Hussien's in the mountains under a mystical green light that Hussien attributes to the mountains they are on. Initially this group seems ill equipped to offer any sense of unity. On the road, Hamid accuses Kalasinga of cheating non-Indians by constructing an us/them Manichean construct: "What do you do with all the money you steal from us? Send it back to Bombay?" Kalasinga complicates this tired trope by telling Hamid that he knows that he's not from Bombay, "the country of these goat-shit banyans. This Gujarati

⁷⁴ Although Aziz assumes Yusuf is a Muslim we find out during his interactions with Hamid and Khalil that he does not know the central tenants of Islam. He also does not know how to pray and has never read the Koran.

scum...” but Hamid continues to antagonize him by saying that all Indians are the same as “all Indians, all banyans and cheats and liars” (74). This back and forth of half-joking ethnic prods continues and nearly comes to blows but pragmatism wins out and the men stop trying to antagonize each other. After being approached by a representative of a European who wants them to leave his land they come to the conclusion that a shared sense of identity in opposition is at least practical because “They [Europeans] are our enemies. That’s also what makes us the same.” This gesture is not the grand all inclusive unity that at work in Harris’ inner space but is a pragmatic initial move in the direction of unity that critics complain is entirely absent from the novel.

In the green light of the mountains alliances are made, frayed, and broken but ultimately the characters unite. This sense of Harris’ inner space as moment in time and space somehow deep inside geographically, yet ideologically an escape from the fractured tension of the political landscape, is initiated at a waterfall the men visit. Yusuf enters the falls and calls them a haven and believes that there must be a river god in them that gives them their beauty and magical qualities in a move that further undermines his Islamic pretenses. Gurnah describes it “There was an air of secrecy and magic in the place, but its spirit was benign and reconciled” (76). Gurnah’s “reconciled” landscape represents a moment of unity and hope that is often overlooked in favor of the terrors of the second journey but when Yusuf returns home he is reticent to tell

the story of those terrors yet speaks uncharacteristically at length about this brief moment at the falls. He tells Khalil: "It was beautiful. As if everything was complete...You could hear God breathing." This moment in *Paradise* is precisely the "sudden eruption of consciousness" that Harris feels after his second incident with the anchor and the unity felt by the crew at the Palace of the Peacock. Just as Harris feels "a canvas around my head was crowded with phantoms and figures" that reminds him of "some of my own antecedents-the Amerindian/Arawak ones" Yusuf almost hears "the sound of the river God breathing" in a gesture to a pre-Islamic deity residing in the river (41). Yusuf, like the men in *Peacock*, uses the land as an anchor around which chronotopes and ethnic tension swirl but cannot penetrate. In the land resides permanency that neither the violence of history, or Islam, can erase.⁷⁵ In referencing the encounter of the men at the falls as reconciled and complete, Gurnah is entering Harris' inner space via interior aquatic geographical wonders just as the crew enters via the river and their own waterfall. Although Gurnah does not end his novel with this moment, the unfulfilled promise of Yusuf as the double of his Koranic other who will free and unify his people and these captured moments of inner space demand further interrogation.

When Harris calls for a move in literary imagination "back into the very origins of creation" he is expressing a desire for a transcendent

⁷⁵ Interestingly, Yusuf revises this to the Islamic God when retelling it aloud to Khalil.

moment so far inside the interior that it works itself outside of the political and historical. Yusuf in the falls is just such a moment. What Harris describes as the “wholeness” of such a moment, Gurnah calls “complete” and “reconciled.” That is, that just as Harris creates “inner space” as a way in the literary imagination to structure the threshold of a “wholeness which one could never structure completely,” Gurnah, despite his purported desire to create an inescapable hell represents Harris’ inner space as similarly inside and outside of paradise. Like Harris, Gurnah is aware of the problem of a practical grafting of such an inner space onto the socio-political reality of his landscape. Harris calls this “incompletely structured” and both authors are unwilling to embrace an idyllic sense of the pre-colonial. Gurnah gives us some insight into this process in an interview: “I didn’t want to simply say ‘Look, it worked before the European colonial encounter’ but instead, ‘Look how hard it had to try to work and look at the kind of things it had to do to make itself work” (Nasta 37). Gurnah’s analysis here is useful in comparing *Paradise to Palace* because while the two share a central motif of how to configure singular identity in highly fractured settings, Gurnah is not as much interested in incorporating the Europeans into that identity. Clearly, Harris believes Europe to be integral. Gurnah though is not so much aligned with Braithwaite when he extricates the undeniable and overwhelming influence of Europe on the Caribbean because Gurnah, as many Africanists have argued, believes that the impact of the European

colonization has been overstated. *Paradise* is about the legacy of hundreds of years of interaction between Indian, Arabic, and indigenous tribes like the Waswahili with Islam as a mitigating factor in all those relationships. For Gurnah this complex field of identities, rather than the more simple explanation regarding direct European influence via colonialism for less than one hundred years, needs exploring. This does not so much represent a parting of ways between Harris and Gurnah as each is reacting organically to a local situation. Despite critics who equate European colonization with Arab slave trading in East Africa, Gurnah avoids the European as central to East African identity by setting his novel before large scale colonial contact, a mere 80 to 90 years before the publication of the novel, in a time with minimal European presence in the region. The European experience in the region, while treated by Western scholars as seminal, is merely a kind of imperial tourism that briefly rose to prominence and then largely faded, leaving today a similar set of actors to vie for resources before European colonization.⁷⁶

The encounter at the falls, though centered on Yusuf, is experienced by all the men and the extension of Yusuf's eruption of consciousness onto the other culturally disparate members of his own small crew manifests itself when Kalsinga's sums up their shared identity soon after visiting the falls: "Maybe we are not rich people but we

⁷⁶ Similar actor persist but the dynamics at play are altered.

live by the law and respect one another.” This may not live up to lofty language of Harris’ crew as “free from the chains of illusion in an inseparable moment within ourselves of all fulfillment and understanding” but in Gurnah’s more realistic and straightforward novel this still stands as a similarly profound expression of unity. Just as Donne longs to find universality via his “very nail of the universe,” Kalasinga’s more understated pronouncement expresses a desire of a shared identity that transcends the obvious barriers to it. Harris’ work is celebrated for maneuvering in a minefield of paradoxes that double back on each other to destabilize plot, characters and readers while Gurnah is read as straightforwardly realist historical fiction. However, Gurnah in this line is paradoxically inferring that the potential for universalism amongst these men exists and indeed even functions, despite nearly coming to blows several times in a manner of a few days. In fact, these signs of tension may even indicate a universalism aware of the dangers of a naïve “universal” value system that in fact favors certain traits over others. Universal values such as Kalasinga’s rule of law validate certain actors. In this case he seems to be referencing Islamic law or a vague law of man but it is not difficult to imagine that Yusuf as *rehani* and the women in the novel may not share in celebrating this so-called universal ethic of the law. Clearly though, fatalism is not the only strategy that Gurnah imagines because these moments during the first journey to the interior offer an enduring model of practical coexistence that is not

simply wiped away because the book does not end with a grand gesture of hope ala *Peacock*. Although Gurnah has said of *Paradise* “My novel is full of these moments when people don’t understand each other,” a moment in which people understand each other. Soon after the men agree on this makeshift motto to “respect one another,” Aziz returns and the mystical communion of diverse identities dissolves and the status quo of seemingly immutable ethnic tension resumes. However, a sincere gesture that does not play to a sarcastic or ironic sense of this place as a so-called paradise as hell does infer that practical coexistence is not as alien and unthinkable as many have argued in the novel.

The ending of *Palace of the Peacock* and *Paradise* appear to differ so greatly because one ends with the unity of disparate ethnic identities while the other ends with “shit-eating.” I posit that read through the lens of the postcolonially situated theories of Benitez-Rojo and Harris’ ideas of rehearsal, cross-referenced with Koranic Yusuf, the ending, while not the same as *Peacock*, does operate similarly as the previous rehearsals of the central narratives. As I noted earlier, one of the quandaries of Gurnah’s ending is that he infuses his Yusuf with many of the characteristics of Koranic Yusuf. Koranic Yusuf’s story ends with a triumphant reunion with his estranged family while *Paradise*’s Yusuf ends troublingly. In most of the novel we are invited to see the parallels as both are sold into slavery by a family member, have a master named Aziz, are extraordinarily handsome, are accused and acquitted of attempted rape

and had prophetic dreams. This rough parallel is broken though when Koranic Yusuf becomes a prophet who initiates the actions that will eventually lead to exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. If we view this via infinite rehearsal as Harris does to establish unity via Amerindians, Gurnah points us towards the Koran. Harris' rehearsal does not simply materialize out of pure imagination but from a sense of the Amerindian relationship with the land. The crew's rehearsals then are at once rehearsals in the sense of incomplete copies of an original as they are of the conventional sense of rehearsal as preparation for a final performance. In *Peacock* the performance occurs in "Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had for ever been seeking and what he had eternally possessed." The final line of *Peacock* does proclaim achievement but it also proclaims the doubleness of the rehearsal because the men have always possessed within themselves, as has the land, their El Dorado, i.e. the performance that is at once source and end goal. *Peacock* gets misread because of its unified ending as arguing for an end of these rehearsals in the interior but there is no indication that this crew differently embodied will not continue such journeys to the interior, as *The Secret Ladder* attests. The crew will continue their rehearsals and Yusuf will continue his as neither novel's ending is the final performance of the interior journey. Yusuf has a semi-accessible origin as he is somewhat aware of the other Yusuf but he must paradoxically rehearse his way back to a Koranic self "he had eternally

possessed.” The rehearsals in both works produce and reproduce “antagonism that separate Self from Other” that are reworked because they “must be reconciled”. Harris though maintains this rehearsal and performance paradigm though as an “impossible quest for wholeness” whereas Gurnah alternatively embraces it and abandons it. In this way, Yusuf is not an end in himself who represents, ala Fredric Jameson, a stand-in for the nation of Tanzania or his Waswahili people but rather as one particular view from a different angle in a long series of rehearsals, each contributing to a growing consciousness. Therefore, the question that one must ask of Yusuf in light of his coming of age as a rehearsal is what is gained in this particular rehearsal. Benitez-Rojo stresses that “end is not the final result” in rehearsal, instead focusing on a sense of transcendence. That is, does the rehearsal contain Harris’ “explosion of consciousness”? Although the forces around him are certainly in opposition to any such consciousness Yusuf does gain important knowledge at the falls and if we accept the notion of rehearsal this can be deployed in the next rehearsal to better effect. Yusuf seems to be participating in a rehearsal of the postcolonial move to unity that is not as developed or realized as it is in *Peacock*.

Benitez-Rojo’s principal of infinite rehearsal can also be usefully applied to the climatic second journey that ends at Chatu. In several places, Harris relies on a type of consumption or incorporation of history that is then approached “from different angles”. The episode at Chatu is

a different angle on an encounter told in the late 19th century by Selemani Bin Mwenye Chande to William Karl Velten, the official interpreter for the German governor of East Africa from 1893 to 1896. Sharae Deckard alone, to my knowledge, has referenced Velten's text alongside the autobiography of Tibbo Tib as general influences on *Paradise*. More than general source material, Gurnah borrows an episode from the Chande/Velten tale for the climax of the journey to the interior. Chande, a Swahili trader who took frequent trips to the interior, tells Velten that near Lake Tanganyika at Kafisa a Chief named Chata stole the goods from their caravan. After consulting with the leader of their caravan they decide to sneak out of their encampment at night for fear of Chata's soldiers tracking them to find a German district officer at Karema. When they arrive at the outpost, the German is asleep and his servant makes them wait for him to get up and eat his breakfast. They tell him that "we have been attacked at Kafisa by this Chief Chata, it is he who attacked us and he has robbed us of all our property, and he has killed our brethren." The German officer chastises them for not coming to him first before Chata as he told all traders to do. The officer sends his soldiers to Kafisa where Chata is told that he needs to respect the German rule of law. Chata responds that he only attacked the men because he had been attacked by another group, lead by Matumla who they did not know. Chata reluctantly gives the traders their goods back

but much of it has been destroyed, to which the German responds “Never mind, take this which is left” and the caravan leaves.

In *Paradise*, a ruler named Chatu initially invites Aziz’s caravan into his town but then attacks them while they sleep. Several of Aziz’s men are killed, the goods are taken and the men are held captive. Chatu tells Aziz “we have suffered from others like you,” detailing slave raids on the town.⁷⁷ However, Aziz simply smiles at Chatu’s recriminations and thanks him for sparing their lives. He tells Yusuf several times “Trust in God.” Chatu tells Aziz to leave and be thankful they are still alive but Aziz retorts that their lives are worthless; it is the goods they must have. After several days of impasse, Chatu and Aziz begin to negotiate over “the amount of goods the merchant would be allowed to take, about the value of what had been taken and what was owed Chatu” to signify that the two men were on their way to reaching a compromise. Soon a column enters the town and a “European” emerges. Aziz rises to tell him what has happened concerning his goods. The European simply yawns and decides to take a nap, after which he wants Chatu brought to him. “The merchant and Chatu waited in the clearing for the European to wake.” When he awakes the European chastises Chatu: “How is it you have robbed their possessions? Aren’t you afraid of the law of the government?” The European demands the return of the goods despite

⁷⁷ It is important to note that Arab caravans did often invade entire towns to imprison the inhabitants (see Tib’s *Maisha* for such accounts) so Chatu’s story is not farfetched but historically accurate and indeed a defensible position.

Chatu's insistence that another trader attacked him and that his own thievery is compensation. The European then tells Aziz to go home and to leave his guns, even though Aziz is still missing a large amount of his goods after Chatu returns them. Once outside the city Aziz makes an intriguing comment: "The merchant lamented that they had been unable to settle matters between themselves and the sultan [Chatu]. 'Now that the European has arrived here, he will take the whole land, he said.'" The fact that Gurnah derived his story of Chatu directly from the Chande/Velten is of itself interesting because this has never been examined but more importantly for our sense of rehearsal and the larger project here of imagining reconciliation are the differences between the two texts and what Gurnah is adding to this rehearsal of the previous text.⁷⁸

The first is that in the Chande/Velten version of the story, the European is invited into the dispute. His role as an arbitrator is requested as a third party with the power of enforcement. In the Gurnah version he inserts himself as an interloper into an affair that he does not fully understand. That is, he does not understand that he is interrupting a complex series of negotiations operating in a style he does not recognize. The journey becomes a huge loss for Aziz as a result, rather than a victory as in the Chata story. This leads to the second difference

⁷⁸ Gurnah also uses the early Swahili prose of Salim bin Abakari which was also transcribed by Velten. Interestingly though Abakari is allowed to voice his opinion in his text and much less censored than Chande, Tib and most other early Swahili informants.

which is the anti-European sentiment of Aziz that is absent in the Chata case. The Chande/Velten case ends triumphantly with the merchant getting his goods back, however incomplete. The Chatu story though ends with a condemnation of European involvement and a bleak forecast concerning the role of Europeans in the region. The Chande/Velten text is ultimately the German version of a story told by a Swahili trader whereas Gurnah as an ethnic East African Swahili is not interested in glorifying the European colonial mission.

More to the point though Gurnah's rehearsal of this story demonstrates that the differences he inserts attempt Harris' "gain of consciousness" with each ensuing rehearsal. Just as the Yusuf story is not simply solved by a rehearsal, this story is not either, but the difference in the Chatu/a stories do demonstrate a necessary development of ideology concerning these interactions that express the weight of experience gained. As stated earlier Gurnah is trying to figure a sense of unity that corrects the undue importance given to Europeans in the region's history and this rehearsal is one in which a non-European sense of compromise and negotiation is interrupted. The previous Velten/Chande deploys a European rather differently to break up the squabbles of petty natives. Gurnah's rehearsal then adds Harris' "different angle" by positioning the colonial Chata version of the story against a knowledge-gained postcolonial Chatu version in which fractured identities still rule but where instances of closure, alliance and

unity can be imagined. Gurnah's gesture towards Aziz and Chatu possibly being able to negotiate a settlement is not an idealistic prescription to imagine a utopic pre-European ideal in which ethnic antagonism is a purely post-first contact problem but a subtle recognition that given the postcolonial situation in the aftermath of European colonization a retelling of the story that accents the current need for a history of the possibility of reconciliation is more valuable than the fatalistic view of paradise as a simple ironic trope. Like in mountains on the first journey to the interior where Yusuf imagines a space of reconciliation between ethnic identities, Chande's Chata predicament is not simply solved by Gurnah's rehearsal. Instead, Gurnah's rehearsals lays bare the seminal issues in Chata's colonial story via slight postcolonial variations on the original without needing to turn to European texts as mediators.

The potential of *Palace of the Peacock* with its heady rehearsals and inner space is partially realized in the tenuous articulations of unity in *Paradise*. Both novels rehearse previous tales with a difference to make headway in realizing a distinctly national identity. The disparate identities at play in Guyana and Tanzania are understood to be challenges but ultimately the material with which any futurity will take form. These novels understand themselves as particular articulations, or performances, in an ever unfolding series aimed at a postcolonial ethic of cultural equality in the face of a history that has provided anything but.

By understanding the relationship we can build between these novels we also understand that while the West as an influential entity in the world will always have a role, that role need not be as a central conduit through which meaning and identity must flow. Ultimately, by deploying a postcolonial reading of these novels that uses the nation, as well as other units in a new network of direct comparison, we get a wildly upended and counterintuitive, yet illuminating, reading of one (*Paradise*) and an extended field of influence for another (*Peacock*). The implication is clear: reconfiguring the way we read African texts that have been limited by their geography and their relationship to the canon offers African literary studies a mode of comparison that not only widens their connectedness to the literary world but adheres to the principles of self-referentialism by uniting them with similarly placed subjects around the globe tacking similar concerns. I am concerned of course with implications for African literature by in the end, this process is mutually elucidating for African literature and the literatures it engages in such ventures.

Does the World Include Africa? : “Ready-Made” African Literature in the World Literature Debate

The preceding chapters argue for specificity when reading, criticizing and theorizing African texts rather than advocating that they be read against the European canon. As we have seen, local African literary, cultural, historical and social texts are often bypassed when seeking reference points and constructing genealogies for African novels. I have demonstrated alternative readings that depend on localized African knowledge that often undermine Eurocentric readings. The causes and consequences of this phenomenon are vital for African literary studies' future. Reliance on European references and geologies seems to come from the ease of access of European texts by Western scholars. As a Western scholar myself, I am not immune from this inclination and localized African readings do not come easily. My criticism of the readings of these texts has focused on how in general they are not Africa-specific enough and one can see a small group of scholars, including Evan Mwangi and Ode Ogede, attempting to supplement the traditional influences of Europe on African literature by pointing to local influence. However, encouraging these few attempts are, larger contexts than African literary studies, namely World Literature, are currently being enthusiastically contested and Africa once again appears to be at best on the margins of a discussion that will shape if and/or how it is

read throughout the world. Read against a larger global context, the consequences of underrepresenting or misrepresenting localized and Africa-specific readings is not lessened but only multiplied. When African literature is read via theories of globalization and World Literature the consequences of misrepresentation increase.

Although I have spent much of this project arguing against reading African texts via European ones, there is a straightforwardness in reading via the canon because much of the readings of African literature are self-professed readings of Africa for Western purposes. There is a strain of African literary criticism that unapologetically reads African texts for what they say about Europe and the United States. While I am not compelled by this approach, there is transparency in work that seeks to read Shakespeare via Africa, Greek classics for the added dimensions African epics bring to them or to Ngũgĩ and Soyinka for insight into the hypocrisy of local British colonial administrators. The turn to the global via globalization and World Literature though often lacks this note of obvious self-interest. The debate surrounding World Literature does not profess self-interest to repackage African literature for the global West but to empower African literature and other literatures to represent themselves globally. What was a glossing over of important details in the reading of singular texts inside the cloistered field of African literary studies becomes a hermeneutic unit inside the newly (re)emerging field of World Literature. While some mindful world literature scholars have

pushed back against the overwhelming tide of African literature as a response, we cannot ignore that World Literature is ossifying around conceptions of various regional literatures and that misrepresentation and exclusion of unpalatable African-specific elements of African literature is a palatable risk. Given the current focus in literary studies on World Literature as a distinct field, related to but ultimately separate from Comparative Literature and Postcolonialism, intervening in this hotly debated conversation is only prudent. African literature is about to be reimagined once again via world literature and assuring that its place in the field represents African literature well is imperative for the field.

At the heart of this matter is a deceptively simple question: What happens when we consider African literature as World Literature? This question matters because the emerging field of World Literature has reconsidered the boundaries of the literary canon to supposedly offer an unbiased level playing field for the consideration of literatures from around the world. However, the dominant theories of World Literature retain a Eurocentric disposition by considering the canon a conduit for disparate literatures to communicate with each other and as a central touchstone for evaluating non-Western literature. My question here considers what we can achieve if we dismantle the Eurocentrism inherent in these systems of the World Literature movement in relation to African literature, as the literature most often misunderstood and marginalized. More pointedly, it argues that not only is World Literature

a way of reading extant African literature but increasingly a force in authorizing certain texts and influencing their global circulation. My follow up question then is: are African texts that pander to Western predispositions concerning Africa as a space for ethnographic interest authorized and thus circulated more widely than novels that challenge ethnography's dominance as an African genre? By tracking the surprisingly vast circulation of the most prominent distributor of African literature in 1960's, 70's and 80's, the Heinemann African Writers Series (AWS), I contest the claim that the field of World Literature is improving the representational status of Africans and their literature. The triumphalism of globalization, while still full of potential, has replaced the 19th and 20th century image of Africans as savages who need saving with the popular image of the child soldier as a new metonymic figure who, like Africa, is a problem that needs to be solved by the West.

World Literature Debate

With some noteworthy addendums, the field of World Literature as a distinct field not encompassed by Comparative Literature, is a relatively

recent phenomenon and has been dominated by three major theorists: Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch and Franco Moretti.⁷⁹ Without diminishing either Comparative Literature or Postcolonial Studies we can say that the contemporary conception of World Literature comes out of the perceived shortcomings of these fields. I will investigate the specifics of this debate later but it is fair to say that the motivation for this turn to World Literature came about because of the perceived overreliance of Comparative Literature on the nation as a unit, and by extension distinct national literatures, and Postcolonial criticism's reliance on colonial relations, and their theoretical underpinnings, to address the whole of world literary history, even that which stands outside of the colonial experience.⁸⁰ Simply put, World Literature as a field asserts that the paradigms of Comparative Literature and Postcolonial Studies are outdated and ill suited for our new globalized world and fields of study. By extension, this disparagement of these fields extends to the ways that World Literature is taught and reaches its most materialist critique in fiery debates over World Literature anthologies. This chapter seeks to review and intervene in the World Literature debate ultimately with a mind towards its relevance for African literature and African literature's

⁷⁹ I am focusing on the most influential ideas in the current World Literature debate but from its initial foray with Goethe's *Weltliteratur* there have been many contributors to the field, especially recently, such as Peter Hitchcock, Wai Chee Dimock, Gayatri Spivak, David Porter, Aamir Mufti and Emily Apter among others.

⁸⁰ As we have seen at other moments in this project with other fields, World Literature has at times purposefully misrepresented the current work of postcolonial studies by gesturing to its initial focus on resistance to colonialism via foundational binaries. Rather than track the development of postcolonial studies it focuses at times on easily dismantled paradigms from decades earlier as convenient straw men.

relevance to World Literature. I argue that the current debate largely ignores the unique situation of literature in Africa and thus produces ill fitting models for its incorporation. I see an opportunity to forgo the problematic handling of African literature within World Literature, present earlier by writing back, to begin to craft an idea of World Literature that accounts for the African situation and asserts that African literature is World Literature.

Before a serious discussion on World Literature can begin, we must account for the state of the field. However, even a definition of World Literature is elusive. Does the term mean all literature in all languages in all locations in all time periods? Although such a broad definition may seem purposefully hyperbolic and unrealistic, some theorists, such as Franco Moretti, are bent on such a definition.⁸¹ A more manageable definition selects literary masterpieces to create a kind of world canon of significant texts. To complicate matters further, World Literature is understood by some as a characteristic of postnationalist literature. Such a view limits the temporality of the field and treats as unique the decolonized period of world history. In this view modern communication, technology and commerce have created a hitherto unparalleled global connectedness and this new kind of connectedness is the proper study of World Literature. In stark contrast to all literature in

⁸¹ Franco Moretti views this not as a realistic current goal but as a distant possibility when we can harness the capabilities of digital technology to effectively put all literature in searchable online databases.

all places and times, this view delimits the field to texts circulating internationally which represent more than a singular tradition. Salman Rushdie is the paragon of this understanding as he attempts to seamlessly float between South Asian and English literary and cultural traditions. The Rushdie model though begs the question that if World Literature is only concerned with this kind of postnationalist multivalent unfettered literature, are there enough Rushdies to justify an entire field? These questions of scale persist in this newly manifesting field and no single approach has consolidated itself and in fact it is this lack of a standard definition that at once makes the study of World Literature vibrant and malleable yet slippery and frustratingly intangible.

Comparative Literature as a formalized means of analyzing disparate texts from around the world initiated the study of global literature. In brief, the field developed in the 19th and 20th-centuries as a means for articulating national characters and traits as well as differences. National characters produced the concept of national literatures that could be studied as unified wholes. Such easy categorization allowed for the creation of genealogies that crisscrossed nations, serving in large part to explain the development of particular traits that could be used to define Englishness or Germaneness, for example. This process was also almost entirely European until the last twenty or thirty years when Postcolonial Studies gained traction. While the preceding is far from a comprehensive account of Comparative

Literature, especially as it has expanded beyond Western literature and the strictly national, it is this understanding of Comparative Literature's approach to the "problem" of thinking of the disparate literatures from around the globe that initiated the backlash against Comparative Literature present in World Literature.

Although the profusion of conventions regarding World Literature can be perplexing, three books on the field serve as common theoretical ground. First in 2003, David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* sought to reconsider the field in terms of circulation and "trajectory." In 2004, Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* focused on literary hierarchies from the perspective of sociological formalism. Lastly, Franco Moretti's 2007 *Graphs, Maps, Trees* consolidated his previous attempts to quantify literature using methodology borrowed from evolutionary biology.

CASANOVA

Pascale Casanova prefaces her *World Republic of Letters* with a direct condemnation of Comparative Literature as dictating that "Our instruments of analysis and evaluation are national. Indeed the study of literature almost everywhere in the world is organized along national lines" (12). Rather than turning to postcolonial approaches which have problematized myopic focus on the nation, Casanova seeks "to rediscover

a lost transnational dimension of literature that for two hundred years has been reduced to the political and linguistic boundaries of nations” (13). In strong contrast to “flat world” views of globalization, Casanova uses sociological formalism to argue that World Literature, or “the world republic of letters,” rather than operating in democratic marketplaces in which ideas vie for attention on a level playfield of equitability, operate in strict hierarchies. These hierarchies function like rigid stratified social structures in which an ideology of equitability plays out a liberal myth while in reality access to, and influence on, literary markets are controlled by a ruling elite of critics, editors and publishers in metropolitan centers like New York and Paris. Casanova argues that our focus on the national has reinforced international power structures while eliding the inherent privileging of certain histories, languages, and cultures. She calls for a reevaluation of the ways texts enter the world and become reified or marginalized. For Casanova, World Literature is a battlefield on which nations and texts compete for prominence to strengthen their claims for relevance in global culture and economics.

Casanova argues that World Literature depends on a claim of universality in distinguishing literary works from various places. Despite her reservations concerning universalism, she depends upon a formalism that sees her unproblematically judge certain areas of the world as “unendowed” because they lack a sense of formal playfulness which Casanova praises when it mimics the Eurocentric (primarily French)

sense of the *avant garde* movement. This reliance on aesthetic development as a universal marker of cultures, especially one which constantly degrades realism, as literarily endowed or unendowed, contradicts her own statements that such Eurocentric rubrics must be abandoned if any sense of a truly World Literature field can be reasonably developed. Furthermore, given that much of African literature has relied on the conventions of realism, her criteria serve as a simple dismissal of it. African realism was born out of a political necessity to represent a continent that had been dismissed and maligned. To make the case that African literature should have been playful while engaged in an anti-colonial struggle is woefully ahistorical. *The World Republic of Letters* reveals difficulty tracked biases concerning the production of literature, the prominence of the nation and the Eurocentrism of World Literature yet is blind to its own Eurocentric biases based on aesthetic development and the centrality of Paris to any sense of worldliness.

Continuing in this manner Casanova depends on the concept of the “Greenwich meridian” by which the development, or modernization, of literature can be judged. This guide post of course is centered in a European sense of modernity and literary development as she lumps the decolonization of Asia, Africa and Latin America together as addendums to Herder’s philosophy on the French Revolution. The French Revolution is *the* revolution while others are belated imitators. While bemoaning

Eurocentric chauvinism, Casanova argues that philosophy born out of the French Revolution is the central metric by which to read the literature of decolonization in all places in the 20th-century. Just as with her focus on the Parisian *avant garde* in relation to literary development, the French Casanova uses a Francophone example to prop up her Greenwich meridian to problematic effect. Casanova condescends to non-Western literatures by placing them on a singularly axised program of modernity which is stunted or accelerated depending on their interactions with Paris. Certainly any consideration of a larger program of World Literature is going to stumble at times and double back on itself as it juggles the nuances, intricacies and paradoxes inherent in taking the globe as a scale for consideration, but Casanova seems largely unaware of her evocation of Eurocentrism. When problems of Eurocentrism do arise for Casanova, she peculiarly mimics a position articulated by Postcolonial Studies; namely that literature is far from an autonomous regime devoid of political machination and economic self-interest that often plays to the hegemonic beat of global capital. Unwilling or unaware of her postcolonial borrowings, Casanova casts her work as a savior. She writes: “My hope is that the present work may become a sort of critical weapon in the service of all deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world” (354-355). Ironically, she argues for a francophone-centric World Literature by

offering it as “service,” uncomfortably echoing colonial discourses of modernity.

DAMROSCH

David Damrosch distances himself from Casanova’s focus on the means of production and anti-national stance. For Damrosch, the key component in discussing World Literature is trajectory. In many ways he overlaps with Casanova in that he disregards origins (the nation) for how works maneuver through the world. His definition of World Literature reflects this focus on movement: “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (9). Although Damrosch spends considerable time concerned with World Literature anthologies, it is not the composition of a world canon he is concerned with as much as the circulation enabled by works emerging from their culture of origin and entering the world. For Damrosch how a book enters the world is not a matter of historical footnote but essential for creating meaning. Meaning is created by a text’s movement in the world rather than by its place or origin; for Damrosch it does not emanate from any singular point but changes for the times and places in which it is read, especially if translated. Damrosch naturally begins with Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur* as an initial move to get beyond the

national, if only to compare, borrow and learn from other nations.

Damrosch describes his understanding:

My claim is that World Literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of materials, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike (17).

Damrosch is quick though to offer several caveats about the “variability” of World Literature, making any single theoretical model for World Literature or even singular reading of a text impossible. This oscillating dialectic continues throughout but Damrosch does make several important (and not completely self-defeating) points about how texts in World Literature circulate.

Above all, a work must be understood as literature in the place it is published and then that literature must be understood as literature by a different culture, and works can fall out of World Literature as well as into it. While Damrosch is interested in how texts lose, gain or change meaning through circulating to other cultures, it is the process of translation that he focuses on as the central pivot for the process of circulation. Damrosch writes of translations, transformations and manifestations when describing how a literary work changes as it circulates outside of its culture of origin. He is particularly interested in how translation mediates this process to become the intersection at which local texts become global. In *What is World Literature?* he focuses

on the work of Chinese Bei Dao and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the manner in which their translations have impacted their ability to be global.

For African literature, Damrosch's central tenant of linguistic translation is not necessarily as pressing as the elided process of cultural translation.⁸² African literature is produced primarily in contemporary global literatures like English and French. This fact, for Damrosch, makes them less foreign and not in need of translation as already global and thus already translated. By locating the transition from local to global in the translation process and in the hands of a translator whose job it is to reconcile linguistic and cultural foreignness for global readers (much of Damrosch's work is on what makes for good translations), Damrosch glosses over the foreignness of some English language texts for English language readers. This elision of foreignness in English language literature subsequently obstructs the processes by which certain texts circulate widely as "ready-mades" for Western readers while others remain "local" or "minor."

MORETTI

⁸² This is evident most readily in the notorious language debate between Ngũgĩ and Achebe in which the central linguistic debate is not how well African literatures translate to European languages but rather which language an author who is fluent in both should use. Achebe argues that colonial languages though unseemly reach larger audiences while Ngũgĩ takes an ethical stance on the refusal of African languages to marginalize themselves.

Franco Moretti in his 2007 *Graphs, Maps, Tree* disavows the close reading, specificity and meaning production on which Damrosch and Casanova base their understandings. Moretti agrees with Damrosch that World Literature is not “an infinite, ungraspable canon” but not because we should limit the scope of World Literature to texts that circulate outside their cultures, but because the history of literature, however large, is indeed finite. Moretti argues that we can in fact use computerized analysis to track all literature. Moretti calls this large scale approach “distance reading.” For Moretti, the practice of close reading is problematic for determining literary histories because only a small subset of texts (classics) ever undergo the rigors of numerous close readings in a given field (and one suspects the incongruities of those readings grate on him as well). Rather than sharpen our tools of analysis and interpretation by engaging individual texts, Moretti conceives of distance as “not an obstacle but a specific form of knowledge: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of overall interconnection” (23). He continues with a mantra reproduced throughout: “from texts to models.” Moretti bases this system of reading on quantitative history, cartography, geography and evolutionary theory. He is not interested he tells us in the extraordinary literary work, but in accounting for as many texts as possible. *Jane Eyre*, for example, would not stand out as more important than any other British novel of the 19th-century in a large-scale discussion about genre or location. Quantifying literature via distant

reading allows Moretti to observe larger patterns that are not visible via close reading. Moretti is easily and often mocked for wanting to essentially feed books into computers to chart them on graphs while ignoring specificity but ultimately Moretti's goals are different from Casanova's and Damrosch's. Moretti is sure that close readings will continue and that they compliment his own work. Distance reading is not a replacement for close reading but another tool for the World Literature scholar that centers on the issue of scale, providing one of the few concrete ways of managing it. He takes pains to tell us that distance reading often "provides data, not interpretation" (40). Rather than attempt a complete World Literature theory, Moretti argues for the inclusion of data into world literary studies as an aide for understanding the complex machinations of world literary production and circulation. This is not to say that Moretti does not interject into specific cases (specific meaning periods and genres) but he does not make the large unifying argument that Casanova and Damrosch do and he avoids analyzing individual texts at length to make his case. His argument raises the possibility for including quantitative data in the study of literature, specifically in literatures that encompass large temporal and spatial dimensions. The primary drawback of Moretti's take on World Literature is that he offers data as potential without fulfilling that potential himself. Moretti does not use his model for interesting insights that could not be argued before data collection but rather collects trivial

data (numbers of books published in particular years for example) that one can imagine as useful evidence for someone else's argument. Could the first chapter of this project have benefited from a digital collection that would have allowed me to search all African literature before 1958 for mentions of snakes and pythons in particular? Indeed, but it is purely speculative whether or not any of the conclusions would have been altered and it is this speculation that holds Moretti's greatest contribution to this debate as well as his largest blind spot.⁸³

Is There an Africa in World Literature?

In the above debates on World Literature only Casanova handles African literature specifically and her engagement of African literature with World Literature can serve as a jumping off point for the specifics of how these two fields have been understood to interact, when African literature has been considered at all in the conversation.⁸⁴ Casanova writes about African literature from a stilted perspective that betrays her lack of familiarity. For Casanova, Chinua Achebe is only a Nigerian nationalist writing *Things Fall Apart* "to provide Nigeria with a national history" (129). Thus his pains to unfurl a specific Igbo world, rather than

⁸³ I must admit that I did in fact use Google Books to search for mentions of snakes in the few early African books that are searchable via the service when researching chapter one of this project. Therefore, I am sympathetic to Moretti's convictions regarding the transformative power of digital technologies in the humanities but he has yet to demonstrate concretely this power.

⁸⁴ Moretti predictably has graphs and statistics on the number of Nigerian novels published but does not move beyond this (even to define what is a Nigerian novel given the highly diasporic nature of Nigerian literature and that fact that ethnic groups found primarily in Nigeria spill out in great numbers to neighboring nations).

a Yoruba or Hausa one, in which only understanding traditional Igbo culture can explain main plot points such as Okonkwo's exile somehow stand in for the nation. One cannot help but doubt whether Hausas and Yorubas would accept that Achebe's Igbo folk tales in *Things Fall Apart* serve "to teach this [Nigerian] history to the people" as Casanova claims of the novel (130). Casanova's deafness to even the most fundamental complications of a seminal text like *Things Fall Apart* not only highlights her unwillingness to incorporate African literary studies or Postcolonial Studies into her world republic of letters but points to deeper problems regarding her approach to World Literature for African literature. Her need to understand all revolutions via the French revolution is instructive here because just as she views all non-Western stories of decolonization as one movement juxtaposed against the French revolution in the 19th-century, she views all World Literature as participating in the kind of national literatures that harkens to Europe's focus on national literatures in the 19th-century. A cursory glance at one seminal moment, the publication of the Igboland tale of *Things Fall Apart*, demonstrates that while the nation is an important unit for African literary and Postcolonial Studies (as well as for Achebe) Casanova's obsession with her republic of letters as pushing back against national literatures proves a straw man when contextualized for Africa. In other words, for Casanova African literature's coming into being is an argument for the former supremacy of the nation when it clearly was

constituted by much smaller and fragmented units and now African literature must be read via a methodology that resists the nation as the most salient unit even though that resistance is again not paramount in the field. The nation was only one of several impetuses for African literature's development and therefore positioning World Literature's primary purpose in regards to African literature as dismantling the nation is ill founded. Nationhood itself in the African context contains a foundational fracture because the nation was grafted from afar by European powers with little consideration for the fault lines of cultural affiliation. Casanova mistakes calls for independence for support of the nation-state structure when in reality the nation-state was the meager inheritance passed on to Africa from the colonial period.

To this effect, the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has said on several occasions that when she is in Nigeria she is considered Igbo, when she is in other parts of Africa she is considered Nigerian and when she is outside of Africa she is just considered African. A fruitful engagement of African literature with World Literature would recognize and reconcile these multiple identities but Casanova's republic of letters does not attempt this difficult process. In fact, she points to figures like Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri as having a "need to display national wealth" despite their heavy reliance on Yoruba folktales and cosmology to present a distinctly Yoruba literature. Casanova though insists that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* are "collection[s] of Nigerian

folktales” in a clear conflation of Yorubaland and Nigeria (not unlike Igboland and Nigeria in *Things Fall Apart*) (134). Casanova’s dilemma here is that in trying to think about African literature in a global context she clings to the nation, as a unit to be overcome, and loses the specific and distinctly non-national contexts that provide knowledgeable readings of these texts. With Casanova, we are left then with African literature lingering in the airport bookstore, flattening itself to compete for a wholly decontextualized audience that cannot or will not appreciate the diminished role the nation had in African literature from its inception.

To be fair, Casanova is not alone in failing to reconcile the various large and small scale units at stake in World Literature. In “Literature for the Planet” Wai Chee Dimock provocatively formulates the tension between the local and the global in which Casanova and others find themselves. Like Damrosch, Dimock is interested in the trajectory, or circulation, as geographic production location hardly defines a text because it can land or impact any number of places. She uses the example of reading Dante in the Soviet Union. She argues that we need to stop assuming a one-to-one correspondence between geographic origins and a book’s evolving literary radius. Literature outmaneuvers the nation in terms of scope (I would add that specificity and minuteness also outmaneuvers the nation as well) so much so that it presses us to think of larger scopes of reading. This inability to contain literature – the inability of Tolstoy’s works to remain meaningful only in Russia or

Shakespeare in England - means that a larger understanding of the ways texts move in the world is needed. She uses Einstein to discuss these large movements as demonstrating literature's elasticity, which is the term physics uses to explain the way matter moves in the universe. Dimock elegantly explains how the movement of literature creates elasticity in literary time and space ala Einstein's relativity. Texts bend, expand and reshape themselves for different contexts so that Dante's dissent into hell can be as salient to a 20th-century Soviet gulag prisoner as a 14-century Italian aristocrat.

While embracing the way literature can expand via musing on Einstein, Dimock overlooks the particular ways that traditionally underrepresented literatures move differently than works like Dante's. In trying to achieve a theory or methodology of handling World Literature we are looking for a theory of all literature, a kind of bonding singularity that at once explains the large scale movements of texts while hanging onto the specificity of the various cultural and historical contexts from which they emerge, and to those with whom they resonate. As Dimock points out, literature does not hold itself to strict synchronicities that wish to bind texts to certain periods or nations as it moves but in her example of Dante she takes for granted that the specificity of the culture producing the text does not undergo similar distortions. That is, she is assured that Dante's Florence of the 14th-century is well studied and understood in and out of academia as part of a liberal arts education.

The Divine Comedy can be elastic because as a canonical text, its ties to a well understood time, place, culture and literature will not be unmoored by its elastic journey to 20th-century Russia, or anywhere else at any time for that matter. By contrast, my project has demonstrated that many of the most seminal works of African literature are not only not understood in terms of the various genealogies from which they emerge and hark back to, but that even specialized literary critics in the field of African literary studies often deploy ill-suited Eurocentric readings of African texts. In Dimock's terms, African literature is in danger of being too elastic and too rigid. For works like *Things Fall Apart*, unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy*, we cannot assume that the micro level of the text's culture is situated adequately enough that it can sustain Dimock's elasticity. To be blunt, if seminal works like *Things Fall Apart* and *Our Sister Killjoy* are read without due attention to their cultural specifics by Africanists in the 20th and 21st-centuries, they will not travel well travel, or bend, once geographically dislocated around the globe and temporally displaced by 700 years ala Dante. They will be bent out of shape, such as when Aidoo is accused of reverse racism, or they will be broken and unmoored from their cultural contexts, such as when *Things Fall Apart* is cut off from its Igbo site of production.

This double bind of an overarching World Literature model attempting to track the hefty movements through large periods of time and space while maintaining vigilance for African literary specificity has

an interesting corollary in the very astrophysics that Dimock drafts into her argument. For decades, physicists like Steven Hawking and Brian Greene have been working towards formulating a “Theory of Everything” which would explain the immense movements of celestial objects such as the creation of stars, galaxies, and the like. For Hawking and others, Einstein provided a key understanding. As he does for Dimock, Einstein gave Hawking and Greene the tools they needed to understand the elasticity of the universe and the way that bodies move in time and space. However, Hawking’s research on black holes revealed that if one wants to understand how the universe was created one must understand black holes. At the core of a black hole is an object with so much dark matter and gravity that nothing can pass through it, not even light. This dense space is called a singularity because it seems to compact all of space, and presumably time, into a finite space (the earth for example if reduced to a black hole would fit handily in a coat pocket). To understand how this singularity reduced matter, time and space Hawking realized that Einstein’s theories of the large scale movement of objects though time and space (relativity) would not work for this singularity. Rather he needed to apply the theories of quantum mechanics, the study of the microscopic, because in a singularity, and even on its edges, the rules of time and space as theorized by Einstein cease to work. The heart of the problem is that the large scale rules of movement in psychics are incompatible with the small scale rules of

movement in quantum mechanics and yet both have been proven to be correct. The theory of everything is an attempt to bridge these differences to establish a comprehensive theory of the universe-what is true for the movement of planets should be true for the movement of atoms.

I am not proposing a direct corollary and I do not profess to be an expert on astrophysics but Dimock's use of Einstein can be extended here to help us think about the circulation of texts, specifically African ones. Despite the desire for a theory of everything, in the example of Dante as opposed to Achebe, it seems that all literature does not move equally through the world. The lesson in the theory of everything is not that because all matter should move equally through the universe that we must pretend it does regardless of the realities but that seemingly incompatible systems of circulation coexist despite our almost primordial desire for consistency. This is to say that African literature moves differently through the world than other literatures, particularly Western ones. Trying to explain the circulation of African texts via Casanova and Damrosch's Eurocentric attempts that either do not account for African literature or account for it only in passing is forcing one set of European rules of circulation onto an African situation that has always had a different set of rules. What I am interested in then is using a specific African book series from several decades ago and current African literature to think about the way African literature's circulation differs

from other literatures. African literature is not simply trapped in one set of rules-the micro or the macro- but oscillates from a local circulation, or its quantum mechanics, to another circulation, its elasticity via relativity, as part of World Literature. I will take up two African examples to demonstrate these complimentary phenomenon by examining the relatively local African circulation of the Heinemann African Writer's Series in contrast to the truly World Literature circulation of contemporary child soldier narratives.

Heinemann African Writer's Series

For most of the history of African literature, the Heinemann African Writer's Series (AWS) has been the foremost means of circulating African literature inside Africa and around the world.⁸⁵ Beginning in 1962, the series dominated the publishing of African literature and published over two hundred and seventy titles. It circulated millions of copies of African literature around the world, dwarfing all other publishers' efforts. This unique situation allows us a focal point in considering how local African literature can be considered in terms of world literature. That is, the elemental problem of constructing a singular subject for an area, Africa, in the study of world literature is

⁸⁵ This began to change when the series started collapsing in the 1990's but in the 1960's, 70's, 80's and 90's the AWS dominated Anglophone African publishing. Today many of the African texts widely read around the world from the 20th century were part of the AWS.

substantially, though not completely, eased because rather than an unmappable miscellaneous constellation of actors ceaselessly crisscrossing global networks, the AWS is a containable entity whose structure partially answers seminal questions currently facing the field of world literature.

How *does* one remain local when circulating to a global audience? The AWS established regional centers in East, West and Southern Africa run by local literary experts such as Achebe and Ngũgĩ who had the ultimate word on what was published.⁸⁶ **(foot: Anecdote about of how if Achebe said it was good enough then it got published no questions asked).** The series was imagined as operating in concentric circles working their way outward. Achebe and Ngũgĩ believed that the literature they chose needed to be relevant for the local context from which it emerged, such as Fulani or Kikuyu, first and then it needed to relate to larger entities such as the nation. Beyond that they considered how it would travel to other places in Africa and lastly how it would be read abroad. Achebe in particular was enthusiastic about this because he had to publish his first work abroad. This ideology of putting the local African context first is admirable but we must consider the economic realities of the drive for profits in competitive global markets and their impact on the content of these African works. The series

⁸⁶ Apparently Achebe wielded particular influence and there are numerous cases of him intervening to singularly ensure the publication of certain texts, including Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child*.

avoided this potentially thorny issue by selling most of its books (at times nearly ninety percent) in Africa, demonstrating that Africans writing for African readers was not another post-independence intellectual ideal doomed to never materialize but an obtainable reality.⁸⁷ Crucially, the AWS was a paperback only series which kept the retail price down and most of their sales inside Africa came from schools and education ministries as newly independent African nations wanted their curriculum, in particular exams, to feature African literature alongside Western literature.

How are these particular and local texts made culturally available for non-African readers, or to borrow from Damrosch, what are the conditions by which a text's "trajectory" is made global? Because such a small percentage of the AWS's sales came from abroad the series simply used a didacticism that worked both to explain one African culture to another and to explain an African culture to a non-African culture. All the books in the AWS contained a photo of the author on the back cover as well as biographical details including information on the nationality of the author and the culture from which the author and text emerged. More explicitly, many of the texts contain glossaries for non-English words and introductory essays explaining the cultures explored in the

⁸⁷ The educational market eventually contributed to AWS becoming a reprinting service because after a few decades of the series' publication it became clear that there were certain African classics that should be on curriculums. This beginning of an African canon though damaged series' ability to publish new authors.

text, the most well-known being an essay on Igbo culture and history in the AWS version of *Things Fall Apart*. We will examine these traits of AWS further, but just through the brief rundown above we can see that the AWS provides a unique field on which to examine African literature as world literature because it contained literature often grounded in subjects smaller than the national yet circulated globally. Perhaps most importantly, it was African literature written for African readers. Moreover, AWS had had such a controlling stake in the circulation of African literature around the world that to fruitfully examine it is to uncover the manner by which African literature first became world literature in a wholesale manner as opposed to the occasional extraordinary text overcoming indifference, prejudice and the economic demands of the market.

Reflecting on the seminal role of AWS in developing African literature, Chinua Achebe comments in *Home and Exile*:

The launching of Heinemann's African Writers Series was like the umpire's signal for which African writers had been waiting on the starting line. In one short generation an immense library of new writing had sprung into being from all over the continent and, for the first time in history, Africa's future generations of readers and writers — youngsters in schools and colleges — began to read not only *David Copperfield* and other English classics that I and my generation had read but also works by their own writers about their own people. The excitement generated by this [...] was very great indeed and continues to delight many people to this day, in Africa and beyond. The British poet

and broadcaster Edward Blishen said of the African Writers Series, 'I saw a whole new potentially great world literature come into being.'

Achebe's claim that the AWS essentially initiated an entire field with its first publication in 1962, a reprint of *Things Fall Apart*, is backed by the history of print culture in Africa to that point as well as Heinemann's later success. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries there were two modes of production and circulation for books written by Africans. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, missions contained the only printing presses on the continent and they were able to tightly control what was printed. Although most of the literature these presses produced was religious, some other texts were permitted. Even these texts though had to pass a religious litmus test and were heavily censored. Early authors such as Thomas Mofolo, most notably in *Moeti oa bochabela (Traveller to the East)* published in 1907, had to include pro-Christian messages in their texts and when they did not faced censorship.⁸⁸ Mofolo himself attempted to publish *Chaka* in 1910 but could not because missionary authorities felt it gave too favorable a view on indigenous cultures. The disillusionment shook Mofolo so hard that he never wrote fiction again. Thankfully, *Chaka* was finally published in 1925, though it desperately needed a reprint by AWS just decades later

⁸⁸ Debates revolve around exactly how much Mofolo subversively undermined this requirement by using traditional forms, languages and myths. One must, however, be bent on reading against the grain to read his early work as critical of Christianity as African characters constantly malign traditional cultures and are saved from African influences by missionaries. *Traveller* ends with the protagonist being saved from a journey into the desert to escape his evil village by French missionaries. When they take him to church he literally see God and is taken up into heaven.

to keep it in circulation, and is now an African classic. Unfortunately, the missionary system destroyed one of its finest products in Mofolo. Beyond strict missionary control, during the late colonial period printing presses not in service to the colonial government were still rare and remained so after independence for most newly created African nations.

The second mode of producing African texts was foreign publishers and their local subsidiaries. Early authors like Achebe and Tutuola only found publishers with great difficulty and had to look abroad to get their books published. In fact, the only copy Achebe had of *Things Fall Apart* was lost for many months by a London agency to whom Achebe had sent it to be typed from his handwritten manuscript. It was only when Achebe was able to find someone willing to physically walk into the office of the typing agency in London, as he was in Nigeria, to demand the manuscript that its eventual publishers ever saw it. Amos Tutuola needed similar good fortune for his *The Palm Wine Drinkard* to be published because his use of non-standard English frightened publishers. More importantly though, most scholars doubt that even after publication by Faber in London the book would have made any impact in Africa or Europe had the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas not been effervescent in his 1952 review in *The Observer* (Larson 4). Still Tutuola struggled for years to receive royalties from his popular book.⁸⁹ Even

⁸⁹ Tutuola had incredible difficulties in ever receiving royalties from his books and lived in poverty despite being one of the most recognized African authors of the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, he was

Ngũgĩ's enduring literary legacy is owed in some part to him luckily tracking down Achebe at the landmark 1962 Makerere African Writer's Conference. Ngũgĩ approached Achebe with his manuscript for *Weep Not, Child* and before the conference ended Achebe had recommended it for publication, a gesture that ensured its publication as #4 in the AWS.

Anecdotes about early African publishing are fitting because no system for considering African literature existed. In 1958 Heinemann did not even have anyone they felt qualified to internally review *Things Fall Apart* for possible publication. The publishers gave the manuscript to an economics professor who had recently traveled to Africa. His review famously consisted of seven words: "The best first novel since the war."⁹⁰ Even publishing *Things Fall Apart*, an almost universally praised novel and the flagship for African literature required good fortune, coincidence and happenstance to get published. While these telling anecdotes amusingly testify to the idiosyncrasies of the English publishing world in the mid-twentieth-century, one can imagine the numbers of writers who did not have the money, connections and good fortune to be able to send a manuscript from Africa to Europe, have it typed abroad and to ensure someone actually typed it and delivered it.

brutally criticized by African intellectuals for fostering a view of Africans as simple minded and superstitious instead of worldly and articulate in colonial languages. He would have benefited greatly if the AWS had existed when he was regularly publishing though he was included in a 1964 AWS collection of African prose.

⁹⁰ There is reason to believe that this is a dramatic retelling of the review but nonetheless the novel was highly praised and recommended for publication.

How many Achebes were lost in the mire of this inexact process of publishing African fiction? From Achebe's accounts it is clear that he understood how fortunate he was to ever get published and his intimate, and unpaid, involvement as the AWS series editor for its first ten years was largely to establish at least one secure institutional structure that would responsibly publish African literature around the continent and the globe.⁹¹ He did not want African writers to have to run the same grueling gauntlet that he did and the AWS's mission under his guidance became to find, foster and distribute the best African writing of the time. The AWS created a mode of circulation that previously did not exist and it benefited African writers and readers significantly more than the missionary/colonial publishing system and the foreign publishing system

Heinemann, as a multinational corporation from a former colonial power, monopolizing circulation of African literature in the 60's, 70's and 80's is not without its ideological snags and at the time was not without its detractors. Most prominently, Wole Soyinka termed the series a "ghetto for African literature" and in literary circles in Africa the series was sometimes viewed as "a general imperialistic infrastructure for controlling African possibilities" (Griffith 3). Ironically, Soyinka took advantage of Heinemann's ability to publish widely and compensate their

⁹¹ It must be said that Faber and Longman also published significant African literature but not as much or as regularly as AWS. Francophone African literature came into circulation almost exclusively through Parisian presses in part in service to the French government's policy of assimilation. The AWS did publish several Francophone works in translation, such as Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*, but primarily focused on Anglophone writers.

authors when his wife sold Heinemann the rights to *The Interpreters* when he was in prison. Panther Publishing stopped printing the book after six weeks when many copies were returned from UK bookstores unsold. Soyinka's wife is quoted as saying that while Soyinka received three meals a day in prison his family starved. *The Interpreters* has been in print for over 30 years since then. Beyond another anecdote on early African literature Soyinka's case demonstrates the attraction of the AWS. Despite a healthy skepticism in dealing with Western multinationals, "writers discovered through hard experience that they were able to reach other Africans, the world at large, and sometimes even their own compatriots" by publishing with the AWS(Currey 18).

As groundbreaking as its publication was, *Things Fall Apart* did not create an audience for African literature upon its initial publication. In fact, the book was reportedly difficult to find in Nigeria while virtually impossible to get in other parts of Africa. This is to say that Heinemann did not simply swoop in and overpower African publishers in an already established market but that they created local, national, regional and global markets for African literature where none had existed. It is not difficult to image that *Things Fall Apart* would have faded into obscurity, like the work of earlier authors like Mofolo and Plaatje, had the AWS not come into being when it did. Local publishing did exist in the 60's, the Onitsha market literature being the most notable, but Heinemann could sell books beyond the local markets to entire nations, the continent and

to Europe and the US. Furthermore, unlike other multinationals that published African literature, they sold the majority of their books in Africa. Exact sales numbers are difficult to verify but James Carrey who worked for Heinemann on the AWS estimates for most of the series' life it sold 80 percent of its books in Africa, 10 percent in Europe and 10 percent in the US (Currey and Mpe 111).

Heinemann's ability to foster local African writers was complimented by its ability to use its national and international clout. It managed to overcome national censorship and local politics that individual authors and local publishers could not. The most compelling case for the unique nature of the AWS in this respect is its role in publishing black South African literature during apartheid. A few authors, such as Alex la Guma, were able to publish abroad but many had no way of getting their work published inside or outside South Africa. Even among these authors publication abroad was not easy and their works published abroad rarely were read inside South Africa or in other parts of Africa. Bessie Head, for one, could not find a publisher for her seminal *A Question of Power* until Heinemann picked it up. Head was reportedly ecstatic that other Africans could now read her work. Even more fraught were the cases of writers such as D.M. Zwelonke and Modikwe Dikobe who had to publish under pseudonyms because they were on a list of banned authors. Heinemann was able to publish the work of exiled writers and the work of writers in South Africa who had

been banned. Their distribution meant that other Africans, not just Europeans and Americans, had access to previously unobtainable work. Perhaps most importantly, Heinemann worked clandestinely to get the writing of exiled and banned South African writers either distributed in South Africa or published secretly. Whether Heinemann should have participated in a boycott of South Africa has been debated but the editors contend that if South African writers inside the country could not imagine a means of disseminating their work then that work would stop being written. AWS did not just publish but created much of African literature and it would have been antithetical to destroy black South African writing by participating in the boycott. In short, the existence of Heinemann in South Africa meant that more anti-apartheid literature could reach the South African readership and that previously overlooked texts, like Peter Abraham's 1943 *Mine Boy*, continued to be printed despite the original publishers long abandoning them.

In the course of this project, I have raised the question at the heart of African literary studies: "What is African literature?" For the Anglophone world, by and large the AWS has made up the majority of African literature. Beyond publishing more titles and circulating millions more books than any other entity inside and outside of Africa for 30 years during the establishment of the field, the AWS launched an African style of novelistic discourse grounded primarily in realism. This realism shunned the modernism of Western literature at the time and for better

or worse realism even today is the style most closely associated with African literature. The experimentalism sometimes referred to as magical realism of Tutuola, Okri and Cheney-Cocker serve as exceptions that prove the rule (and none of these authors were published in the AWS.) Why this style became the calling card of Heinemann and African literature is manifold but can be traced to the series refusing to avoid the political to participate in the wave of decolonization sweeping across Africa as well as the attractiveness of this move to the agencies of newly independent nations that chose books for school curriculums. Although Casanova bemoans realism's lack of formal play (assuming one cannot play within realism), the AWS as essentially founding large scale African literature and needing the crutch of the educational markets circulated in different ways than non-African literature. Whereas European literature, for example, had a built in elasticity at the time based on a long successful discursive tradition (built in part on the colonial experience) and financial security as the result of strong markets for literature, African literature operated under different rules as in the case of two rules at work in the theory of everything. Via comparisons of form we can demonstrate though that these two differently orientated systems work together, like thermodynamics and relativity, and we need not force one to operate like the other for the sake of a singularity.

Heinemann's AWS on the whole did not sell its millions of books to the general reading public in Africa (where it sold most of its books) but

to students required by various educational policies to adopt African literature into their syllabi. The AWS was a numbered series printed only in paperback to keep costs down. The numbering, along with the inclusion of the full AWS list in most books, served to contextualize individual books as part of a larger educational program. One was reading a book in a loosely configured series and joining a fraternity of other readers carrying the iconic orange paperbacks. All of the books had a photo of the author on the back with a description of the culture from which he or she came and a brief synopsis of the book. They were also color coded. Orange (an admitted theft from Penguin) was for fiction, blue for non-fiction and green for drama and poetry. The books also often contained numerous illustrations in chapter breaks. Realism became important because the books were not intended as entertainment as much to teach students from around Africa about other places on the continent. This didactic turn led overseas readers also to think of the AWS as not only entertaining but culturally informative. Clive Barnett points out that both the Canadian University Service Overseas (a kind of Canadian Peace Corp) and US State department recommend the books in the series to their employees traveling and living in Africa (84).

As Barnett states the AWS “was understood to bear a representative function in relation to African societies-speaking of them, but also speaking *for* them” (85). Not unlike the questions that Fredric Jameson raises in regards to postcolonial protagonists as stand-ins for

their peoples, the AWS burdened its texts with the task of representing Africa to itself and the world in a collection of over 270 titles that were meant primarily to be read by secondary school students. The dilemma of a Western publisher in charge of producing African literature becomes trickier when it purports to speak for Africa and this speaking is done for a secondary school audience. Beyond the foundational questions of subaltern groups' ability to represent themselves in fiction (particularly in English), we face the question confronting most non-Western literatures in world literature: are these texts authorized by the traditional Western centers of power to reinforce the centrality of the West? Gareth Griffin is the only scholar to address this question in regards to the AWS by writing "we might see Achebe's simplicity of style, his simple vocabulary, his clear-cut narrative lines, produced as much by the demands of the publishing goals of the overseas distributors as by the force of traditional 'simple,' authentic African stylistic features" (135). Griffin admits in the next line that he is playing devil's advocate, or being "deliberately provocative," and that the style Achebe and others adopted was not simply pandering to the publishers needs to sell abroad or in the educational book market. Griffin's comments are telling because they assume that overseas publishers are also keen on selling overseas despite the AWS eschewing a strong focus on foreign distribution. However, Griffin does rightly call into question the motives of a foreign publisher from a former colonial power profiting off of the work of the

formerly colonized and the way that relationship implicitly shapes content and style. We don't know to what degree modernism and other styles were shunned in favor of realism in AWS but clearly "speaking for Africa" is complicated by this relationship. There are many issues with Griffin's analysis as he does not account for the audience of the AWS being overwhelmingly African, but more importantly I suggest that an African publisher wishing to circulate texts throughout the continent would have faced the exact same situation. Heinemann had over 30 titles that shipped over 100,000 copies and there is no reason to believe that an African publisher could have somehow achieved those numbers without the educational market. That is, given that the educational market was the only way to sustain AWS and its catalogue, it seems unlikely that in the decades immediately following independence that styles that did not directly engage African realities would have been adopted by national African curriculum boards. Even if one is inclined to take the difficulty defended position that the hundreds of titles in AWS are dumbed or watered down, despite the presence of incredibly difficult non-realist texts such as *A Question of Power* and the faultiness of the assumption that realism is "simple," there is little evidence to suggest that an African publisher would not have also had to yield to the economic realities that dictated the AWS be aimed at the educational market. Anthony Appiah and others have aligned realism with a support of nationalism even though many works that problematize nationalism

also function in the realist tradition. While realism in Africa may have been tied initially to nationalism, it is clear that African realism quickly grew beyond a straightforward nationalist project. Indeed, many of the circumventions of local censors were only possible *because* Heinemann was not based in an African nation. Therefore, while one must admit that the AWS must have been influenced by its dependence on the educational market and that for Africa to represent itself in a series of books it would be far less problematic if a direct line could be drawn from African writer to African publisher to African reader, the existence of Anglophone African literature may depend on it not having happened that way.

An examination of a series that lasted decades and has been said to represent an entire field points us undeniably towards Moretti's distance reading. That is, the nature of the publishing, the number of books, the readership, and the editorial process serve as crucial to understanding these texts. Approaching *Things Fall Apart* as a reader without these tools at hand limits one's understanding as much as a bad close reading. Moretti's full historical and quantitative approach is only partially realized here and in other work on AWS, but Moretti's reliance on statistics of texts produced, sold and circulated help us consider larger *and* smaller fields. Ideally, distance reading makes us better close readers. With that in mind, I want to consider several individual books from the AWS and the copycat series it spawned in relation to books

published after the series' demise in the early 2000's. The series collapsed for numerous reasons. For one, it depended increasingly on back list texts and stopped producing new titles. This was in large response to educational markets demanding established earlier writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ and Gordimer over new writers. By creating an African canon the series marginalized the rest of its catalogue. Heinemann was also struck by a crisis when the Nigerian distribution port for its books closed, stranding thousands of copies. This on top of the ownership being changed several times in a couple of years and the series being eventually pared down to only those titles that sold over 100,000 copies meant that they simply became a reprinting company with no new titles. With the collapse of the series, avenues for publishing reverted back to a local vs. global scheme similar to that which existed before the AWS was able to fruitfully combine the two.

What I will argue presently is that African publishing reverted in part to the bad old days before Heinemann when the ability for Africans to publish depended on fortuitous circumstances and the luck of the above anecdotes of Tutuola, Achebe and Ngũgĩ rather than on institutional controls like those of the AWS. This is not to say that modern day Achebes cannot get their manuscripts read or that there are no qualified reviewers ala 1958 but that the nature of what is published and circulated widely has changed greatly from the heyday of AWS. Texts during the AWS period were aimed, or even "ready-made," for African

readers largely in educational markets but now much of African literature that circulates outside of its original context is “ready-mades” for largely foreign readerships. Via contemporary narratives of child soldiers I want to explore how this shift in audience from Africa to the globe has impacted African literature and how the presence of an entity like AWS can help control for some of the worrying trends in African literature that circulates globally. This is not meant to glorify AWS and villanize its antecedents as we will see that the AWS in fact prepared a global readership precisely for the kinds of ready-mades that have come since its demise but to demonstrate what is lacking in global African literature and what can improve it.

To understand the phenomenon of how AWS played into a later kind of ready-made African literature that panders to the predisposition of non-African readers it must be understood in the larger context of literature about Africa in non-African contexts. Although a complete genealogy is not necessary here, we can say that much of the literature about the continent and its people was ethnographic.⁹² Putting aside the usual assertions of the inferiority of black Africans and African societies as a whole, this literature peaked in popularity in the 19th century with the popular work of Stanley and Livingstone sought to explore geography and report on cultures. Wholly part of the colonial mission, these works

⁹² V.Y. Mudimbe’s *Invention of Africa* is the most comprehensive analysis of the European discursive tradition of representing Africa.

reinforced the stereotypes of Africa as a savage and untamed dark continent rife with madness, disease, cannibals, magic and hostile natives. The works saw a corollary in fiction in the wildly popular Tarzan books and films as well as in the Allan Quatermain adventure books, among others. Just as Achebe saw his work as a correction (problematically as I have argued in previous chapters) to these misrepresentations, the AWS chose realism as its de facto style as a way to effectively counterbalance the false ethnographic accumulation of impressions of Africa that Achebe admitted to falling victim to as a student. It is of course debatable whether the series could simply have rejected or restrained the realism of most of its catalogue in favor of more modernist styles but if we accept that AWS did not merely publish African literature but created it then it seems possible that it could have pushed modernism at the expense of realism if it had so chosen.⁹³ The rejection of many of the trappings of modernism was political because a “new” African literature could not be seen to simply duplicate the fashionable Western style of modernism. However, in eschewing modernism for realism (another Western style), the series maintained a focus on the ethnographic. The AWS prided itself on the notion that these were texts that taught one about the place from which they came. One could learn about a real place and culture but also enjoy a narrative

⁹³ Complicating this further though is the fact that Achebe as the series editor was a practitioner of realism, as was Ngũgĩ at the time. Their personal tastes though have usually been elided in discussion of the way authors and texts were selected in favor of the politics and quality of writing.

- a National Geographic article with a compelling personal narrative. As previously mentioned content was paired with packaging that stressed these ethnographic qualities and the various foreign entities mentioned above that adopted the series not for its literary value but for its ability to inform foreigners on specific African cultures attest to ethnographic efficacy of the AWS for readers outside of Africa. What was didactic for an African student audience played as ethnographic for foreigners and perpetuated an affiliation between African literature and ethnography that began centuries earlier. The AWS obviously resisted the specific misinformed and often racist ethnographic “information” of those earlier texts in favor of work that represented Africans as equals but one knew that when reading an AWS title published in the era of post-independence disillusionment that the work would attempt to communicate what was happening in Africa. Ultimately, the AWS acts as an imperfect but highly important and useful model for the way African literature can be seen as world literature. It is to date the best integration of African literature with the wider world yet exposes the frailties in the series itself. As an entity that reached a global audience yet put in place localized regional editors who had to approve any work coming out of their region, the AWS tried to avoid the pitfalls of being a European multinational. It did so to a surprising degree but the criticism against it is warranted. The series simplified African literature by authorizing realism as the premiere African style, though the degree to

which it could have influenced that style is debatable, which continued a tradition of African literature as ethnographic and aimed at foreign readers (despite the AWS readership demographics).

Beyond acting as a positive or negative force for African literature, the series provides crucial fault lines in making African literature world literature. While laudable as a series that afforded African authors the ability to publish and to be read inside and outside of Africa, the series also acted as a primer for today's child soldier literature and its reliance on the memoir form as popular ethnography. That is, as the view from the rest of the world of Africa is still mired in stereotypes on disease, war and famine the ethnography in its multiple guises as fact, fiction or memoir has proven itself an ideal "ready-made" vessel. Ready-made as I use it here is a term borrowed from Tim Brennan's *At Home in the World*. Brennan formulates ready-mades as texts that are prefigured by publishers to appear cosmopolitan and metropolitan to readers who demand easily digestible worldliness in fiction and non-fiction. He writes that they are "less about an inauthenticity of vision than the context of reception of such novels-typically grouped together in the display cases of library foyers-unjustly come off as writing by the numbers" (17).

Brennan does not figure authors into this plastic genre as they

tend to exist not as individuals but elements in an intertextual coterie that chooses them as much as they choose it. They are unable to enter the scene of letters as innovators in the way, for

example, that a talented North American novelist without ethnic baggage might be packaged as “the rude boy or girl of a new generation.” The author is a victim to a particular kind of reading that not only affects the reception of foreign texts but also constructs a discourse that conditions the novels they set out to write (24).

Non-Western authors are rewarded for playing to their Western critics and become that which readers and critics desire. To put it bluntly, non-Western writers are rewarded for pigeonholing themselves in pre-fabbed subject positions and it is only natural that authors respond to the demands of readers and markets. Damrosch points to the consumable nature of ready-mades as “junk food” and “globally directed works” that “may be *too* easy to understand.” Damrosch is contrasting the perceived difficulty of foreign texts, especially pre-modern ones, with works that manage to be about the foreign yet do not destabilize or disorientate readers. He worries that “a little local ethnic color” is splashed onto texts that ultimately deliver reinforcements for well worn and well known stories. He invokes the airport bookstore as the home of such books as a place “unaffected by any specific context whatever.” For Damrosch these books appease a reader who understands that the world is interconnected but does not wish to be baffled, disassociated or marginalized by the difficulties of understanding the specificity of individual cultures. Although not my focus here, the airport as a non-context is problematic as it seems to be a site of specific national and

global capital exchange based largely on Western precepts of identity. For me, the traveler might be able to fool him or herself into understanding the airport as a free floating subject but actually the model of the American Chinese restaurant seem more appropriate. While the airport maintains a faulty sense of no-context, the American Chinese restaurant actually sells Anglo-America back their own food in the guise of authentic Chinese food. This ready-made “junk food” as Damrosch call its literary equivalent can pass off deep fried boneless chicken pieces paired with pineapple chunks in a gooey bright red sweet and sour sauce as Chinese, thus allowing the consumer to participate in multiculturalism without the discomfort of gnawing on chewy chicken feet or plucking the cheeks out of fish heads. There is no misconception of being in China but rather that China has come to them so much so that they need to do little more than eat differently orientated chicken nuggets. Damrosch’s airport bookstore holds tenuously as a site of supposed diversity where numerous cultures meet but the Anglophied “ethnic” restaurant is a site where the West is sold an individual culture that is actually their own repackaged, and thus acts as a micro metaphor that compliment’s Damrosch’s airport bookstore.

Historically, African literature seems to have been plagued by a series of ready-mades. The aforementioned ethnographic forerunners of the Stanley and Livingstone only reinforced the preconceived notions of Western readers. The adventure stories of *Tarzan*, Allan Quatermain and

Heart of Darkness updated the story but still non-Africans reading about Africa were told what they already thought: Africa was dangerous and savage. The AWS confronted this problem head on but in doing so left the argument on the same ethnographic axis in order to refute such claims so that when it ceased to exist the ethnographic predisposition continued. Recently this has manifested itself in the African memoir and specifically in the child soldier memoir. Whether fictitious as in the case of Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* or non-fiction as in the case of Beah's *Long Way Gone* and Jal's *War Child* (a memoir, film and Hip-Hop album) these books reinforce stereotypes of Africa as being dangerous and savage. The precise mechanisms are different than in the 19th century as none simply announce African inferiority but the implications are strikingly similar, especially as most tales of child soldiers in Africa are authored, or often coauthored, by Africans. The "ready-made" implication is that these are not projections of the West's Africa because Africans are telling the stories, just as one finds Chinese employees at the Anglo-Chinese restaurant.

Alexander Schultheis has crystallized exactly what is so appealing about African child soldier stories in the West. Schultheis makes the case that "the figure of the child soldier as a metonymic substitution for a wayward, irrational state appears suspiciously in need of assistance from a sensible adult with international humanitarian institutions and mechanisms performing functions of parent, lawyer and therapist" (72).

In other words, non-Africans reading about African child soldiers do not have their notions of Africa complicated but instead are reassured of their own superiority. Africa is infantilized as a place that like a child soldier is dangerous, naïvely childish and in need of rehabilitation at the hands of the more civilized West. Difference is brought to bear but in child soldier memoirs this difference is almost totally negative. What the good child soldier (the one who was a victim, is now sorry and wants help) ascribes to most is to leave Africa (and write a book). Becoming more Western is the goal and immigration to the West is the crowning achievement. In essence, readers understand that the African protagonist of child soldier memoirs want to be more like them.

Replicating scenes from many been-to novels, many child soldier books place the former child soldier inside a big box store at some point in the narrative. In *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky: The Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* the boys proclaim of Wal-mart: "This is like a king's palace." Many such scenes are replicated in African child soldier memoirs and the implication is unmistakable: Africans want to be Americans. When the choice is between roving death squads and row upon row of sugary cereal, who wouldn't take Wal-mart? Therefore, the been-to child soldier is not a comparison between the realities of African and the realities of America but a fraught cherry-picking of the worst of Africa and the most appealing of America.

Individual works can help to clarify this complex situation as many books on African child soldiers do reproduce ethnocentric views to sell back to those who knowingly or unknowingly hold them. Yet some works in this quickly expanding genre purposefully challenge such notions begging the question how one acknowledges the reality of African child soldiers without placing them as representative of the continent (with an eye to what sells). Perhaps the most important book in the child soldier genre is Ishmael Beah's 2007 *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. This memoir is also exemplary of the genre of African child soldier narratives as ready-made. It tells the story of Beah who was a child soldier in Sierra Leone in the 1990's. As per the usual way these stories go, he is a reluctant participant in violence but only does so under the extreme conditions of civil war. Fueled by drugs, the need to survive and the hope that he can help his family, Beah becomes a child soldier only to later escape to New York.⁹⁴ The book itself has a similarly unlikely journey. Picked up by a major publisher, Farrar & Straus, it received positive reviews in many news outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*.⁹⁵ Beah went on to many talk shows to publicize the book but the biggest break came

⁹⁴ The forcing of drugs on child soldiers is almost always a key factor in the retelling of these stories. While I don't doubt the veracity of this drug use, the focalization of violence as originating outside the child is facilitated by repeated graphic references to drug use, especially before horrific killings and rapes. Drug use becomes particularly important in the rehabilitation stage of these narratives because they allow for the users to refuse complete responsibility for their actions. Such a refusal paired with the innocence of a misled child enables the reintegration of the former child soldier.

⁹⁵ The opening line of *The Washington Post* review by Carolyn See crystallizes the unbridled enthusiasm with which the book was received: "Everyone in the world should read this book" (See).

when Starbucks chose it to be sold at its 6500 US coffee shops. Under the scheme Starbucks only sold one book at a time and although sales figures are sketchy, estimates put sales of Beah's memoir by Starbucks alone at well over 100,000 copies and 700,000 copies overall by 2008 (Bosman). More than five years after its release it still ranks highly on sales charts and is one of the bestselling books about Africa in the last decade, likely having sold over a million copies.

Long Way Gone follows the programmatic routine identified above concerning the child soldier who is forced into brutality and escapes. The book is replete with stereotypical scenes of innocence, naivety, violence, regret and resolve to rehabilitation. Several graphic scenes show that Beah knows how to use a machine gun to deadly effect. Such aptitude in exercising violence is contrasted later with a scene in which he does not know how to use an elevator when he arrives in the United States. This image of a child who can operate the technology of war but not the basic technology of modernity is metonymic for the book and the genre of African child soldier literature in general. That is to say that the savagery of Africa's relationship with modernity and technology demands hundreds of pages while a utilitarian relationship is deployed for comedic effect and only as a trope to demonstrate how even an African, properly decontextualized, who cannot use an elevator correctly can be integrated by a benevolent West into a productive relationship with modernity. Beyond these problematic takes on Africa lie the assumptions underlying

them that Africans lack agency in their lives and critical thinking skills. Instead of a story of a boy who is a victim constantly at the whims of others and resilient in his victim role, we could reread Beah's book as being about a boy who chose the ethically problematic life of a child soldier over that of being a victim of the violence around him. Rather than naïve and innocent he is savvy in his analysis of the events around him and just as savvy in marketing those experiences in a memoir. This is particularly poignant for *Long Way Gone* because the degree and nature of Beah's *savoir-faire* in telling the story is hotly contested. In short, the veracity of Beah's memoir has been challenged successfully by several journalists who have found evidence that Beah misrepresented his involvement when stating that he had been a soldier for two years when it appears that he could not have done so for more than two months and that he did not actively witness or participate in some of the acts he relates. Beah's own story then is less a story of a witless innocent who is handed the world stage because of the straightforward and transparent events that overtook him but rather the story of an incredibly adept young man who took advantage of a series of unfortunate events in order to sell the world a story he was astute enough to realize it wanted to hear.

Regarding the liberties taken to construct African child soldier memoirs Neil Boothby, an expert on child soldiers at Columbia, argues:

“they [former child soldiers] are encouraged to tell sensational stories. It's not surprising that that could be the case here [*Long Way Gone*]...The system is set up to reward sensational stories. We all need to look at why does something have to be so horrific before we open our eyes and ears and hearts?” (1).

I might add “open our books” and “open our wallets” to Boothby’s question but he pinpoints a race to sensationally capture attention, and subsequently readers and markets. Such a race is an important aspect of the book’s popularity as it does not stand alone. As Hammond argues, *Long Way Gone* does not create the conditions for its popularity nor the need to sensationalize an already fantastic tale. As ready-made world literature, the conditions are already in place for it to fulfill preexisting expectations. Hammond puts the onus squarely on readers and publishers as an amalgamated audience that dictates what will and will not sell. The conditions are set by the decision to privilege texts like the Oprah Book Club selection *Say You’re One of Them* and the Dave Eggers penned lost boy memoir *What is the What* (paradoxically subtitled: *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*). Is it any wonder that Beah might exaggerate his story to be as ready-made as possible? Whether we want to demonize readers, publishers or the market conditions that create such a scenario what is evident is that unlike the AWS titles, Beah’s is not aimed at local African audiences or the politics of

representation. Instead it is aimed directly at world markets. These texts circumvent the conventional sense of world literature having a trajectory that begins in a geographic origin as recognizable literature to be exported as foreign literature. Instead, these ready-made African texts are written abroad for an audience abroad using shared points of entry. Unlike in Brennan's examination of *Season of Migration* the critic cannot retroactively realign the points of entry because texts such as Beah's preemptively elide local and political entry points.

The purpose of looking to how *Long Way Gone* is pre-fabricated for Western readers is not to play into a debate about what is and is not "authentic" African literature but to track the evolution of the way African literature has been ready-made for global markets. This assumes that the AWS and other African literature were ready-made for a particular audience but one significantly different and that that different audience has significantly changed the nature of African literature circulating outside of Africa. A brief but telling comparison stressing this temporality can be seen in a short analysis of two similar child soldier books from different eras: Ken Saro-Wiwa's AWS era *Sozaboy* (published in 1984 by Longman's AWS copycat the Longman African Writers Series) and Iweals's *Beasts of No Nation* published in 2009 by Harper. *Beasts* uses a first person narrator speaking in at best an amalgamated Pidgin English and at worst a caricatured Pidgin English, whereas *Sozaboy* uses

a specific Nigerian Pidgin English. What do these two different uses of Pidgin English say about the audience and subsequently the way the books are made for those audiences? In short, Saro-Wiwa imagines local, national and global audiences. The book is intended to be read locally by those speaking this English in regions smaller than the nation (Nigeria) as a recognizable and accurate representation of a real language. However, the work is also made accessible to larger audiences by maintaining legibility even for a global English audience. Longman includes a six page glossary at the back of the book to ensure this readership as well as using AWS's format of placing a biography, author photo and cultural information on the back cover.

Beasts of No Nation does not imagine a local audience at all but a readership that does not recognize particular local Pidgin Englishes. It does not worry that no one actually speaks the vernacular that the text is written in because an audience that could distinguish between a made up, and ultimately reductive, English and an actual Pidgin language is not anticipated. *Beasts* outmaneuvers *Sozaboy* in didacticism, despite the latter's glossary, by including an interview with the author detailing a privileged background living in the wealthiest neighborhoods of Washington DC (Bethesda) and attending Harvard yet asserting Iweala's authentic Africaness as someone who "never forgets that he is Nigerian"

and does aid work there.⁹⁶ The book details Iwela's inspiration for writing the book and provides a list of works recommended by the author in a "read on" section. In other words, *Beasts* goes to greater didactic and ethnographic lengths than even AWS and similar series titles that were aimed primarily at education markets. This transference of an appropriate didacticism in the AWS meant to supply books for African secondary school exams into a more extreme didacticism for general American readers of *Beasts* posits that literature about Africa must pander to Western preconceptions about Africa even to the detriment of Africa by deploying infantilizing devices like a first person narrator caricaturing Pidgin English. *Beasts* then is a certain kind of ready-made world literature in that from its inception it lacks roots in a local context because such roots are inconvenient both for the writer who does not have access to them and to the publisher who is much more interested in global appeal than the politics of representing Africa or smaller entities therein.

Such a critique begs the large scale and important question of how to talk about child soldiers in African conflicts without falling into the myopic stereotypes often at work in the genre. We do not need to pretend this phenomenon does not exist simply because it says something unflattering about Africa. However, the larger questions for representing

⁹⁶ To emphasize his African credentials even further Iweala is pictured in an understated contemporary dashiki in an "About the author" section.

Africa remain: why are stories of child soldiers or child refugees of violence the most popular genre of African literature in the West today when the reality of child soldiers is no more prominent than it has been in previous decades? It is tempting with the decline of the AWS and similar series to ascribe the ready-made phenomenon in African literature to recent trends and generally speaking the globalizing of literature has produced many ready-made African literary products. We can see though that some works in the genre of African child soldier literature resist and problematize the normalized stories represented by Beah and Iweala. Works like Chris Abani's *Song for Night* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé (Allah Is Not Obligated)* at once capitalize on the readership for such narratives while imbuing characters with a mature language of poetics and politics that eschews the child soldier as a purely naïve and innocent victim.⁹⁷

Rather jarringly Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah* subverts the genre by representing African child soldiers as having the capability to make logical decisions and represent themselves to a Western audience while

⁹⁷ Although I will be focusing on *Allah is not Obligated*, the structure of *Song for Night* fascinatingly problematizes the typical narrative of the genre by utilizing a deceased narrator who has no chance of redemption via incorporation as subject of Western aid. Once the false resolution of escape no longer haunts the text, it is instead haunted by the specter of confronting child soldiers for what they are in moments of violence rather than valued for their potential to be transformed later by aid organizations. The death of My Luck brilliantly hijacks the imposed temporality of the genre to make the reader watch child soldiers without a chance of redemption via escape and forces us to consider other forms of redemption. Redemption for My Luck comes from his ability or inability to reconcile his inhumane rapes and murders with his own humanity, displayed primarily via his love for his mother. *Song for Night* changes the conditions upon which redemption for child soldiers is premised and exposes the problematic representations of them in general.

refusing to kowtow to it. The narrator begins destabilizing the reader immediately in the first line by stating that what they are reading is “my bullshit story” (1). He continues to upend expectations with his introduction: “My name is Birahima and I’m a little nigger” (1). This destabilization of the reader occurs not because she does not expect horrific tales of violence but because the reader expects a supplicating narrator who has repented and embraced his role as a victim ala *Beasts* and *Long Way Gone*. Birahima takes pains to disillusion when he says “Don’t go thinking I’m some cute kid, ‘cos I’m not...I’m not some cute kid on account of how I’m hunted by the gnamas (ghosts) of lots of people” (4). Like *Song for Night, Allah Is Not Obligated* uses the global penchant for child soldier narratives as an opportunity to mock and ultimately redefine the genre.

The question of audience in *Allah* is not brought to bear by the publishers in appendixes or further reading suggestions but by the narrator himself. “I want all sorts of people to read my bullshit: colonial *toubabs*, Black Nigger African natives and anyone that can understand French” (4). He tells us that to serve these audiences he has four dictionaries: *Larousse*, *Petit Robert*, the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* and *Harrap’s*. The *Larousse* and *Petit Robert* “are for looking up and checking and explaining French words so I can explain them to Black Nigger African Natives” (3). The Glossary “is for explaining African words to the French *toubabs* from France” while the

Harrap's "is for explaining pidgin words to the French people who don't know shit about pidgin" (3).⁹⁸ The appeal to dictionaries by a child learning to use them while deploying them empowers Birahima to communicate a story that is meant to express his thoughts and feelings rather than to participate in larger project of rehabilitation facilitated by Western aid organizations. Perhaps the most raucous proclamation of a self that falls outside the program of child soldier rehabilitation comes when Birhama purposely refuse to placate the Western reader and instead insults him in many of the chapter endings. Most of the chapters end in a profession of tiredness and a barrage of profanity. Chapter two ends in a particularly pointed way with: "I'm fed up talking, so I'm going to stop for today. You can all fuck off! *Walahe!* (I Swear by Allah or Goddman it) *Faforo!* (My father's cock!) *Gnamokode!* (Bastard!)" (90). One cannot imagine Beah writing "fuck off, I'm going to be a UN representative and write a book that you fools will all buy" or Dave Eggars' protagonist saying "I'm tired of talking about building schools. My father's cock!" Although this profanity has been criticized for normalizing obscenity in African discourse, it makes a poignant political point that refuses to pander to the ready-made standards of the genre (Adesokan 13). Kourouma confronts readers with uncomfortable

⁹⁸ This latter dictionary as a device to clarify Pidgin French contrasts particularly with *Beasts of No Nation* as Birahima though willing to translate for his audience is unwilling to simply either erase traces of this inconvenience for Western readers (who "don't know shit") or create a flattened universal Pidgin stripped of its localness.

challenges to assumptions of African child soldiers, race, and childhood in general.

The results are troubling because they refuse incorporation into narratives of victimhood and lost agency but also because they do not attempt to hide the dreadfulness of African conflicts. *Allah* squarely confronts the elided politics of representation in the ascending field of world literature by demanding agency for Birahima but rather than being simply liberated and able to leave the continent, he is instead responsible and abrasive. Agency and responsibility within the phenomenon of child soldiers in *Allah* articulates a kind of world literature that resists the loss of the politics of representation, specificity, and responsibility we see erased from *Beasts* and *Long Way Gone*. Although the genre's very existence is a political problem for representations of Africa and the ready-made incarnations of it further diminish its viability as a political vehicle, works such as *Allah* and *Song For Night* demonstrate that within African literature and world literature there exists a counter narrative that operates on the same axis but does not leave the ready-made void of localness, specificity and politics unchallenged. Instead they assert the very characteristics that this largely ready-made genre, as a participant in world literature, seeks to diminish.

In devising rough systems for the ways that different literatures, even different African literatures, circulate it is useful to think about the

theory of everything as a warning against thinking of different literatures as circulating similarly. African literature need not circulate the way English, American, Indian, South American, and other literatures circulate and it seems a strange proposition to argue that they do circulate similarly unless one is actually just discussing how non-Western literatures enter the purview of Western readers. In that case a Nigerian text being read in Kenya is not world literature and the major movements of texts in the AWS are not worldly. Therefore, different circulations seem essential if we wish to avoid repeating the Eurocentrism world literature is trying to challenge in the old model of comparative literature. Unlike the theory of everything we can think about which types of circulation are better and what the criteria for such a judgment are. There is no inherent better system when comparing thermodynamics and relativity but if one is considering what kind of circulation brings African literature into an equitable relationship with the rest of the world, those forms of circulation like the AWS that consider the local first and the asymmetrical politics of colonization and globalization would certainly be preferable to the kind of circulation we see with child soldier memoirs. The AWS focuses first on literature that was locally relevant and that resisted reductive stereotypes of Africa. Its reliance on realism may, for some, be an undesirable effect on the style of works published but the political astuteness at giving credence to the very African literature that it was establishing contrast the circulation of

African child soldiers whose stereotyping and paint-by-numbers predictability of form and content not only perpetrates a one dimensional misrepresentation but undermines the need for the such literature. We don't need more child soldier memoirs because as a type we already know what they have to offer just as the glorified chicken nugget is comfort rather than challenge at the Anglo-Chinese restaurant. Although they partially participate in this system some child soldier literature has been shown to complicate the implications of the genre but they hardly constitute another means of circulation. They exploit the system that contains them but offer little in terms of alternatives.

Unfortunately one cannot undo the demise of the AWS but one can recognize which of its attributes lead to such a healthy mid to late twentieth century African literature. Although the AWS has never married itself to the field of postcolonial studies, it is the application of a postcolonial ethic that made the AWS so valuable and that must be reapplied if a twenty-first century equivalent is to found. Postcolonialism has at its core a commitment to represent the formerly colonized accurately and in their own voices as a means of resisting colonial hegemony. Although a proper colonialism no longer burdens Africa, it is not a stretch to say that there are hegemonic forces working on it to limit its capabilities and representations. The problem with child soldier literature is not that child soldiers don't exist but that on a continent of a billion people a singular focus on the estimated 125,000 child soldiers

that the UN estimates exist there oversimplify the complexity of the continent. Many other experiences exist in Africa and even though conflicts are an important part of modern Africa, constructing such a narrow spotlight is an unbalanced and maligning method for reading and writing Africa. The AWS did not prop up a false sense of Africa as trouble free or even idyllic before colonization. Instead the AWS took pains to show the brutal, beautiful and most importantly the mundane of African life to exhibit a richness and diversity of literature that matched the lives of those on the continent.

Conclusion

Just as I was finishing writing my final chapter concerning world literature the literary magazine *N+1* serendipitously published an article, “World Lite,” on the phenomenon of world literature. Specifically, the editors of the magazine took it upon themselves to vent their frustrations with the ubiquitous use of the term world literature and the porous nature of its definition. My first reaction was “join the club” (belatedly) but what struck me most about their argument was their point that the lack of specificity of some modernist texts, particularly in relation to place, is what has enabled them to truly become world literature while literature that trades on specific locales, try as they may, do not achieve “the purity of world literature.” As an Africanist contemplating how African literature is and becomes world literature, the offering of “placelessness” as a prerequisite for worldliness worries me because it prescribes a ready-made Africa devoid of content that does not appeal to non-Africans. I am less interested in what this means for modernism than the editors of *N+1* and some respondents to the article, than what it means for African literature and how such an analysis figures in relation to the direction I would like African literary study to move in the future and the scholarship my project invites.

To me, the frustration the editors of *N+1* have with world literature is how it refuses easy categorization. A similar frustration still resonates in regards to postcolonial studies as it seems that the unwillingness of

world literature and postcolonial studies to box themselves into easily digestible, and thus dismissible, locations and time periods leaves scholars outside these fields uncomfortable. Why do these fields get to break the rules that others in literary study do not? I find this frustration odd and odder still that the solution for the problem of world literature and postcolonial studies not being able to be anchored by place like traditional literary study must therefore be “placelessness.” What *N+1* and others acknowledge when they tie themselves in knots over the term world literature is the uniqueness of the way literature today circulates, is read and becomes relevant across cultures. *N+1* appears to be aware that this is a unique and difficult system but wants the study of it to adhere to standard academic paradigms like French Medieval Literature that has clear temporal and geographical boundaries. The texts of world literature refuse these boundaries and appropriately the study of them does too.

This troubling idea of placelessness also allows me some space to reconcile important and yet perhaps seemingly disparate portions of my own project. In particular, how does my insistence on a deep focus on the specific and hyper local in the study of African literature, in lieu of a reflexive turn to Europe, factor into African literature functioning as a global entity? Placelessness assumes that rootedness dissolves universalism, or any broader appeal, and so I wonder does a move such as pinpointing the *fefewo* and *hakawati* structures of *Our Sister Killjoy*

and *Season of Migration to the North* respectively as essential in understanding them inherently limit their worldliness?

First, we must address the issue of audience. My arguments in the first three chapters have primarily been about the field of African literary study and I hold that Africanists *should* read via the local African first and that they should possess the expertise in culture, history and literature to recognize entities on the hyper local level, such as narrative structures of the Akan when analyzing a book written by one. My critique then is aimed in large part at a group that I feel should know better than to rely on *Heart of Darkness* and writing back as the primary ways of reading African novels. For the Africanist, considering representations of Africa from the local to the global and from the responsible to the cartoonish should not be an overwhelming task. Holding these disparate images in a loose configuration in constant flux rather than embracing or arguing against an image of Africa refracted through the West is essential to African literary study. In short, for the Africanist, the local African should always resonate with the rest of Africa and beg consideration with other parts of the world. My third chapter is just such an exercise. Late nineteenth century Tanganyika and the multiple ethnic groups at play in *Paradise* are carefully reconstructed from caravan accounts of the time and yet one can argue for a convincing corollary with Guyana and its own particularities of localness. Certain congruities align in the *Paradise* and *Palace of the Peacock* but the

unique local situations, and the universalism they prompt, enhance the global nature of both texts rather than limit it. Localness in this case does not diminish worldliness but enhances it.

Does this mean though that the non-Africanist gets to read African literature differently and does this difference mean less responsibility to specific knowledge? To fill out this non-Africanist audience distinction, I think we must recognize that what the *N+1* editors are heralding as success is not literature at all but markets. Successful texts for them are those that are most widely read; popularity is what is meant as audience. Amma Darko and Amitav Ghosh lose to Stieg Larsson and Dan Brown.⁹⁹ In the *N+1* sense then yes, the non-specialist simply needs to read what is popular or critically acclaimed as that which circulates most is therefore the most worldly. As literary scholars this is not the criteria (or at least not the primary one) we use for selecting what we analyze.

Of course, my third chapter also partially answers these questions for non-Africanists by enumerating a way in which a certain localness (19th century Tanganyika) coalesces with another localness (20th century Guyana) to create a hitherto untracked constellation of interaction.

Restructuring the topography of literary entanglements in such a manner

⁹⁹ I cannot help but note here that Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was originally titled *Män som hatar kvinnor* which translates as *Men Who Hate Women*. What is lost in translation, or perhaps better understood as marketing, is much. For me, this loss highlights the contortions the kind of success the source article argues for as one can hardly imagine *Transformers 3* and *Men Who Hate Women* sharing space at the local American multiplex. Instead of understanding that world literature interrogates these kinds of slippages, the *N+1* article imagines that it celebrates them as successes.

destabilizes the way the local is sealed from other entities. We see this assumed seal at work in “World Lite” when Ngugi’s Kikuyu work is dismissed as not part of world literature.¹⁰⁰ What can a Norwegian really get out of a hyper-local text that articulates Xhosa history and culture? This is where Wilson Harris’ universalism enters the fray. Certainly we are talking about a kind of critical universalism that as it extols the universal understands that the values, idea, and traditions that are said to be universal are themselves constructs. They are not universal in the sense of being ethereal truths. They are part of an epistemological construct that understands a concept like freedom can have many manifestations around the globe that are not necessarily compatible (and that the very concept of freedom is a construct). With an understanding that such universals are indeed constructs we can hopefully still use them to understand some level of sameness without flattening all experience to a set of Enlightenment ideals to which Europe holds the rest of the world accountable.

Part of what bothers some critics about world literature is that it acts at times as a kind of cultural tourism. As I mentioned briefly in a previous chapter, this sensibility manifests itself most often in the metaphor of the airport bookstore. One can globetrot through exotic locals and get a “slice of life” that is palatable to global (read Western)

¹⁰⁰ Moretti would take issues with any literature not being understood as world literature and while I understand that *N+I* is a kind of cultural literary magazine and not an academic journal, it does capture the zeitgeist of reactions to world literature. It cannot be ignored but it also seemingly cannot be put to productive use as compared to postmodernism and poststructuralism.

audiences via the titles at the airport bookstore. In this project I point out this tourism as an ethnographic imperative trend that has a long history in colonial “exploration,” especially in Africa. Vast swathes of geographic territory and various identities are conflated and exotified in both. Postcolonial studies and literature have been combating the hubris of reading a book and thinking one understands a place, a history and a people since its inception with foundational scholarly work such as *Orientalism* and creative work such as Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, just to name two well known examples. A frustration with the disposable and too easily read global literature that embraces the financial global markets as creating a “flat earth” where any slumdog can become a millionaire with cunning and knowhow would seem to point directly towards postcolonial literature as an alternative. Postcolonial literature is directed at the real world. Its *raison d’être* is to make a critical intervention into real life issues facing the formerly colonized. Postcolonial literature is not simply a display case for global culture but a challenge to imbalances of power, representation and justice. Rather than dismissible when considering world literature it seems that it is the antidote for its short comings.

Robert Young poignantly begins his “World Literature and Postcolonialism” in the recent *Routledge Companion to World Literature* with “The relation of world literature to postcolonialism remains virtually unmarked territory” (213). At the ready to prove Young right, *N+1* is

forthcoming with lines like “following *The Satanic Verses*, the association of postcolonial writing with anti-imperialism was dead.” This hasty dismissal made in a grand dramatic gesture is simply wrong about postcolonial literature but more importantly for world literature it articulates a too easy shift away from the postcolonial. Later the *N+1* editors complain that world literature lacks “a project, opposition and most embarrassingly, truth” because it is “toothless ecumenicalism.” Say what you will about postcolonial studies but it has never been toothless or terribly ecumenical. By definition postcolonial literature is that which resists unequal power formations in all its forms. I understand the space clearing gesture that one must make to propose something “new” but not only does world literature owe its existence to postcolonial studies as its predecessor in decentering international literature from a myopic focus on Europe but postcolonial studies makes world literature more than cultural tourism.

Postcolonial literature is also still being written.¹⁰¹ A few years ago this would not be worth stating but in the context of the world literature movement it is a necessary intervention to point out that non-Western literature written today can be, and often is, postcolonial. World literature at its worse, which seems to be what the article that serves as

¹⁰¹ This is a difficult statement to parse because any literature that can be shown to concern itself with postcolonial issues can be called postcolonial literature. What I mean here though is literature that purposefully and straightforwardly focuses on non-Western subjects in asymmetrical power relationships with the West.

the jumping off point for this discussion is solely concerned with, lacks an impetus to engage the political and even less of one to actively intervene in the political. Whereas postcolonial literature seeks out imbalances in power to delve into their injustices, world literature seems largely content to sit out messy political fights, sometimes explicating them but rarely advocating. African literature by the nature of the way it came into the world is political in a postcolonial way. Africa and its constituents are themselves postcolonial because as Young contends of all postcolonial societies it has been “forcibly internationalized...without choice” (221). Whether vague or specific, it is difficult to imagine an African literature today that escapes the political interventions inherent in postcolonial literature. Some of the texts that I discuss in chapter four, such as *A Long Way Gone*, adhere to a shallow sense of world literature in the sense of cultures in display cases for easy consumption. Such a book and its cousins *What is the What* and *Beast of No Nation* are do not represent local Africa or its politics in their pages. Even though two of the three are set in real places, local culture is flattened to coincide with Western notions of children, religion and violence. I would argue that *Allah is Not Obligated* is a kind of postcolonial world literature because it explores a contemporary trend yet intervenes, with a local focus on Sierra Leone, in the child soldier debate and seeks to problematize a genre that too easily reads Africans as helpless victims. Other recent novels such as *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, even

though set in the United States, strikes me as postcolonial in the manner that it approaches the issue of gentrification and its ramifications for non-whites, particularly an Ethiopian immigrant. The distinctions above though place world literature as a kind of breezy uninterested beach reading and that is certainly not what Casanova, Damrosch, Moretti or even the editors of *N+1* ultimately want to think of it as. They want to realize a potential beyond the so-called flat world of the airport bookstore for texts but are so set on discarding the substantial contribution of the postcolonial to the study of literature around the world that they miss out on the useful components of aesthetics, ethics, otherness and complex forms of subjectivity simply because they originate in the somehow tainted, or “dead,” field of postcolonial studies.

The above is not by any means a full analysis of the forces at work in world literature, postcolonial studies or African literature but a quick take on the landscape into which I see my project fitting. Such an analysis of the state of these fields begs certain questions such as: If one accepts that world literature gains localness from an entanglement with postcolonial studies, is postcolonial literature inherently local? This is a question I would like to pursue further in regards to African literature because it seems to me that postcolonial literature, unlike a world literature devoid of its influences, can speak simultaneously at a local, national, regional and global level. A novel like *Mine Boy* strikes me as incredibly local to black mining communities in Johannesburg but also

indicative of early 20th century South Africa and Africa as a whole during colonialism. Each level operates in the novel in different stratospheres of the same storm of European colonialism in Africa. It is at once challenging in its localness, getting down to vivid descriptions of how the “Joburg” police profile blacks and the methods for making and secretly selling moonshine. By comparison *Beast of No Nation* lacks specificity and exists in a kind of unsure airy footing that mimics American readers’ unsure sense of Africa. It does not intervene in the issue or challenge the reader (unlike *Allah is Not Obligated* does in the same child soldier genre) but enunciates a comfortable narrative in which African boys are victims who have been turned savage by a terrible non-descript Africa. I am not fond of comparisons to *Heart of Darkness* but the parallels concerning the continent’s ability to drive sane men insane is self-evident. Going forward then I do not imagine a set of frivolous African texts that we can call world literature and more substantive works we can as postcolonial but rather that in applying a postcolonial world literature approach, African literary studies imagines a hybrid way of being that does not reward the vacuous and stereotyping because they are easy reads and diminish those that exert the political and local because they are difficult.

In a more practical take on this problem, my fourth chapter’s take on the Heinemann African Writer’s Series as a circulator of texts in the real world offers a pragmatic way of approaching the question of the local

African as delimiting worldliness. The texts that circulated around Africa during the series' heyday exposed many parts of Africa to many other parts of Africa. At the time this seemed entirely appropriate because an entity understood as Africa had become an "imagined community." In many ways the Ugandans reading the Ghanaian Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path: An African Childhood* and the Ghanaians reading Ugandan Okot p'Bitek's *Horn of My Love* had little in common. They had completely separate histories, cultures and languages. They even had quite different colonialisms but because of colonial interpolation of distinct places like Uganda and Ghana as roughly the same place that could be called Africa, schoolchildren around Africa were reading selections from around the continent. Despite its unseemly origins, today we have few qualms about identifying Africa as a single entity.¹⁰² The point here is that the local African in the AWS series for people in other parts of Africa who were unfamiliar with the source culture were not alienated by it because they imagined themselves as implicated as African. While we cannot readily imagine a world in which everyone imagines him or herself to be African (though that would be great) I do wonder whether expanding the limits of Africa's image in the world would

¹⁰² If anything we have reduced it too much as we see in a vice-presidential candidate believing Africa is a country, a blunder that led to the blog africaisacountry.com that is dedicated to representing Africa as more than "famine, Bono or Barack Obama."

produce something akin to the acceptableness of the foreign we saw in the AWS readership.

Such a worlding of African texts has been happening for some time but as Djelal Kadir points out “what matters is who carries out its worlding and why” because “the inevitable issue is the locus where the fixed foot of the compass that describes the globalizing circumscription is placed” (2). For most of its existence, literature about Africa and by Africans has been worlded by the West, meaning that it has been deployed in service to degrading Africa or directly reacting against such degradation. I have argued in this project that using writing back continues this trajectory when African literature stands as a rich field that does not need to be forced into looking over its shoulder at the West for meaning. The West is a geographically and epistemological distinction. With the prevalence of social media like twitter and facebook geography does not need to be strictly confining and the ability of anyone with a computer and an internet connection to “publish” online certainly has the potential to disrupt images of Africa around the world. This potential has not been realized and perhaps will not for some time as Africa has the lowest internet usage on the planet and more than half of all internet traffic in Africa originates in two countries, Egypt and South Africa. Overall, about 15% of Africans use the internet compared to 80% in the United States, 65% in Europe, 30% in Asia and 45% in South America. How exactly these numbers impact the way Africa is

understood throughout the world is hard to say exactly but it does not look promising to be the most subaltern group of internet users when technology influences the ability to speak on the new digital global stage. When one views a map of global internet traffic, Africa is represented by a large black, or blank, space that cannot help but remind one of the colonial maps of Africa that simply left large sections of Africa as blank, and thus savage and untamed. The cultures on those maps eventually filled in Western maps and African literature has done much of that filling, but the challenge for Africa now is to draw its own maps and fill them in as it sees fit, whether with traditionally analogue or the new digital.

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