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Sacred Things, Sacred Bodies: The Ethics of Materiality  
and Female Spirituality in *Purple Hibiscus*

Kylie McQuarrie

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Sacred Things, Sacred Bodies: The Ethics of Materiality and Female Spirituality in *Purple Hibiscus*

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Thing theorist Bill Brown writes that “the thing names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.” This article examines the subject-object relation between African things and African bodies in Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. While the main character, Kambili, eventually learns to assimilate Western Catholicism into her Nigerian reality, her Christian fundamentalist father, Eugene, uses Catholicism to justify his self-hating destruction of African things and bodies. This article argues that both reactions are rooted in the characters’ ability or inability to see African material things, including both objects and bodies, as autonomous subjects. Adichie’s novel demonstrates that religious syncretism centered in an ethics of things is a viable, fruitful reaction to the colonizers’ religion, and that religious practice can be healthily enacted through the medium of things and bodies.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, Thing Theory, New Materialism, Postcolonial Literature

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Sacred Things, Sacred Bodies: The Ethics of Materiality  
and Female Spirituality in *Purple Hibiscus*

Nearly every critic<sup>1</sup> of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2003 novel *Purple Hibiscus* has commented on the first line, narrated by the protagonist, Kambili, and its overt connection to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (3). Adichie's opening sentence serves both to situate her work in the context of Nigerian fiction and set apart her third-generation post-colonial novel as a tale of domestic, not purely national or colonial, destruction. The line also presents the readers with a crucial opening word: things.

Susan Strehle notes that for both Achebe and Adichie, whose *Purple Hibiscus* focuses more on the Christian aspect of colonization than any other aspect, the reference to Yeats' poem reflects their belief that Christian imperialism "unleashed 'mere anarchy'—not divine purpose or justified sacrifice, but a scattering that reduces [Nigerian sacred objects and belief structures] to mere 'things'" (117). As the Christian colonizers reduced sacred objects to objects with no further significance, so, too, did the colonized people who relied on objects as key cultural signifiers. While Christianity divorced the signifier from the signified, making once meaningful objects meaningless, it simultaneously replaced them with the colonizers' own sacred objects. While Achebe's Okonkwo is powerless to stop the loss of meaning that results from the objectification of his culture's sacred objects and their associated meanings, Adichie's Eugene Achike furthers this colonial destruction within his own family, even while actively protesting Nigeria's postcolonial dictatorship.

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrade (92), Basu (67), Bryce (56), Hewett (79), Hron (30), and Kurtz (26).

In her works, Adichie refuses to ignore material life in Nigeria. Speaking about her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), she says that she “was determined to make [her] novel about what [she likes] to think of as the *grittiness* of being human—a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh” (qtd. in Norridge 19). She embraces the fact that “[t]o be human is to live in a material world in which our experience is always grounded in the actions of our bodies in relation to other material entities within our world” (Dant 136). *Purple Hibiscus* is no exception. Through the lens of the narrator Kambili’s first-person descriptions, the characters stay grounded in the physical Nigerian world as they grapple with Eugene’s Western/Catholic-based objectification or dismissal of African cultures, peoples, and objects, and his family abuse rooted in Christian dogma.

*Purple Hibiscus* follows Eugene’s daughter, fifteen-year-old protagonist Kambili Achike, as she expands her worldview beyond her father Eugene’s restrictive household. Kambili, her brother Jaja, and her mother Beatrice all live in fear of Eugene, an abusive, missionary-educated Christian fundamentalist with a prominent position in the community (including the global community—he receives a human rights award from *Amnesty World* for running a free press in the face of state violence). Midway through the novel, Kambili’s liberal, Catholic Aunt Ifeoma persuades Eugene to let Kambili and Jaja visit her and her three children in Nsukka, where she teaches at the local university. At Ifeoma’s house, the children experience a more open form of Catholicism and begin to love their “heathen” grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, whom their father forbids them to see for longer than fifteen minutes every Christmas. Kambili and Jaja journey back and forth between their home in Enugu and their aunt’s home in Nsukka, where they take gradual steps towards replacing their home’s violence and silence with the freedom of thought and expression learned from their aunt and cousins.

The novel starts its examination of material things in the prologue, entitled “Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday.” Chronologically, the events of the prologue take place after most of the novel’s events, such as Kambili and Jaja’s first two visits to Nsukka. “Breaking Gods” describes Jaja’s first explicit rebellion against Eugene’s patriarchal authority, which is the moment when “things,” such as Eugene’s grip on his family, started to “fall apart” for the Achikes. However, it also depicts material objects, or literal “things,” “falling apart” as Eugene’s violence shatters and destroys them. When Jaja doesn’t attend communion on Palm Sunday, Eugene tries to punish him by hitting him with the missal, which typifies his response to anything he perceives as a spiritual infraction committed by one of his family members. However, he misses Jaja with the missal and instead hits his wife’s *étagère*, which houses “beige, finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures” (7). Although she prizes her figurines, Beatrice only polishes them in the days or hours directly after an instance of Eugene’s abuse. The figurines’ destruction is a brutal parallel to how Eugene treats his family members’ bodies, including breaking a table on Beatrice’s stomach, whipping all three of them with his belt, and permanently disfiguring Jaja’s finger. His use of the missal situates Catholicism as the ideological and physical weapon Eugene uses to destroy his family members’ bodies and, in this case, material possessions. The prologue also sets up one of the novel’s central tensions: the conflict between Eugene’s Eurocentric religious worldview, which turns humans’ bodies into objects that can be manipulated and shattered as easily as material objects; and his family’s ethical religious perspectives, which subversively allow for objects like the *étagère* figurines to work their way into their spiritual ideologies.

In this paper, I will explore Eugene’s anti-African, body-hating Christianity in contrast to the syncretized Afro-Catholic spirituality Kambili embodies at the novel’s end. While many of



Adichie's literary critics have focused both Eugene's abuse as rooted in colonial religion and on Kambili's synthesized religion, fewer critics focus on how Kambili manages to break away from her father's worldview in the first place. In contrast, I focus the process of Kambili's transition, not that fact of the transition itself, arguing that both Kambili and Eugene's religious worldviews grow out of their treatment of material things. While Kambili accepts things' autonomy and learns to privilege African things as much as European ones, both through the objects around her and the examples of her mother, aunt, and priest, Eugene objectifies both African things and people in the name of Christianity, which leads to his death.

Ultimately, Kambili's acceptance of both African things and humans as subjects, or autonomous beings with agency, empowers her to break way from Eugene's Christian-inspired violence and objectification. It also pushes her to develop a hybrid spirituality of resistance that blends Catholicism with African spirituality primarily through a female-bodied, Africanized Virgin Mary and is grounded in ethical treatment of things and people. This spirituality enables her to finally see her own African female-sexed body not as an object for others to control but as a subject in its own right.

### Material Culture and the Ethics of Things

This reading of *Purple Hibiscus* relies on strands of three key materialist theories: thing theory, new materialism, and materialist feminism. Early in his article "Thing Theory," Bill Brown, drawing on theorists like Heidegger and Ponge, discusses the difference between objects and things:

We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a

window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us . . . The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (4).

For thing theorists like Brown, the word “object” refers to "objectified" materials,<sup>2</sup> or instruments that human subjects use. As opposed to a thing, which is similar to a Cartesian subject with autonomy and agency, an object is “that to which action or thought or feeling is directed, the thing (or person) to which something is done” (Candlin and Guins 2). For Heidegger, things are endlessly fascinating and difficult for the human imagination to comprehend, while objects are more mundane and easier to control: “things are . . . compliant and modest in number, compared with the countless objects everywhere of equal value, compared with the measureless mass of men as living beings” (122-23).

In spite of Heidegger and Brown’s terminology, English speakers tend to use “object” and “thing” interchangeably. Many new materialists and thing theorists do the same, in part because “thing” is a vague, ambiguous word in English (denoting a “specific unspecificity” [Brown 3]); a person might tell someone they felt like “things are complicated,” meaning emotions or circumstances, and in the next sentence ask them to “hand me that thing,” meaning a specific object like a ball, bag, or book. Although in places I will use them interchangeably, in this paper, I will typically use “things” when describing Kambili’s point of view, and “objects” when describing Eugene’s point of view.

If a thing is a non-objectified entity that is outside the subject’s control, how do things

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<sup>2</sup> For definitions of key terms that new materialists use more than thing theorists and that are less relevant to this paper, such as “material culture,” see the introduction to Tim Dant’s *Material Culture in the Social World* (1999).

represent a “changed relation to the human subject”? For Walter Benjamin, at least, it entails humans perceiving the thing as a subject, instead of solely seeing themselves as subjects: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (qtd. in Ezell and O’Keeffe 9). Barbara Johnson furthers this idea in *Persons and Things* (2009), though she gives the described object more autonomy than Benjamin:

Which of us has not had this dream: an object shaped by our desire and lovingly formed by our fantasy until its inanimate face perfectly reflects our own wishes . . . . Yet also, which of us has not had this nightmare: an object crafted with loving attention to resemble life shudders, awakens, breathes, becomes warm—and suddenly what was an object becomes a subject whose gaze turns *us* into an object and who escapes our control. (1)

For many theorists, the way human subjects should cope with “objects asserting themselves as things” is by treating them ethically, including accepting and learning to live with their otherness. According to Brown, for instance, Theodor Adorno believed in “the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (12). Critic Boris Arvatov enacted this idea by positing that the only way to move society away from capitalism and towards Marxism, and people’s mindsets away from individual gain and towards collective good, was to reconceptualize things and humans as “co-worker[s]” and “equals, comrades” (qtd. in Brown 10). He believed that as humans practiced seeing things as subjects and equals, they would learn to see their fellow humans as subject and equals as well. For all of these theorists, ethically accepting things’ otherness and subjectivity should lead persons to act ethically towards other persons.

As mentioned above, since an object is “the thing (or person) to which something is done,” objects are not limited to material things. Anything can be an object, whether it is “human, animal or vegetable, as well as mineral or synthetic” (Candlin and Guins 2). In fact, in his study of Maori culture that helped found material culture studies, Marcel Mauss emphasizes that “the first human artefact is the human body itself, and . . . action by and upon the body is core to understanding our [material] culture” (qtd. in Graves-Brown 3). Susan Bordo agrees that the body is “a medium of culture,” as well as “a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (745). Some bodies, though, are consistently thought of more as objects than things or subjects—especially women’s bodies. Bordo continues, “our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity” (745). For female bodies, this often means becoming “docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (745). As an object exists for the subject’s use, so to does the female (object’s) body in regards to the male (subject’s) body. For instance, “the idealized, beloved woman is often described as an object, a thing, rather than a subject” (Johnson 95). For theorists from de Beauvoir to Bordo to Johnson, referring to women as objects can cement their status as the eternal other, constantly objectified by the male subject.<sup>3</sup> Black female bodies in particular experience this constant Othering through the dual lens of sexism and racism/colonialism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949): “For if woman is not the only Other, it remains none the less true that she is always defined as the Other” (303).

<sup>4</sup> In particular, Hershini Bhana Young’s *Haunting Capital* (2006) discusses the objectification of the black female slave’s body; Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s *Africa Wo/Man Palava* (1996) discusses several examples of black women’s objectification, including women like Saartjie

Judith Butler addressed this issue and problematized material female embodiment in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), where she explored the ways in which gender is a performative act rather than a material fact. While Butler's argument was important, particularly for queer and/or trans women, and drew crucial attention to the language and performances surrounding gender, it also shifted the conversation away from women's material lives, ultimately privileging cultural practice and linguistics above matter (Graves-Brown 3). In reaction to Butler over the last twenty years, materialist feminists have "expressed concern that the intense preoccupation with social constructivism typical of postmodern and poststructural feminism [such as Butler's] has fuelled a certain wariness, even antipathy, towards matter and materiality as that which exceeds socio-cultural discourse" (Haynes 131). Various feminist works fall under the umbrella of materialist feminism by virtue of focusing on women's lived experiences. Materialist feminists like Donna Haraway blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman subjects,<sup>5</sup> while postcolonial feminists like Chandra Mohanty focus on discussing and improving the material conditions of women's lives.<sup>6</sup> Although she wouldn't refer to herself as a feminist, Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie<sup>7</sup> concerns herself with "[t]he condition of the African woman" as "situated within . . . global socio-economic reality" (25). The return to materialism underscored by theorists like these and more "opens up new ethical and political vistas," particularly since "[r]edefining the human and nonhuman has ethical implications: discourses have material consequences that require ethical responses. Ethics must be centered not only on those discourses but on the material

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Baartman, who was known in the West as the "Hottentot Venus" and whose body was offensively and grotesquely displayed for European amusement after her death.

<sup>5</sup> In particular, see Haraway's "Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms."

<sup>6</sup> See Mohanty's "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity."

<sup>7</sup> Ogun-dipe-Leslie coined the term *Stiwanism*, meaning Social Transformation Including Women in Africa, to reframe feminism in a purely African context and emphasize material realities specific to African women's lives.

consequences as well” (Alaimo and Hekman 7).

Within this context, I will discuss the (material and spiritual) consequences of viewing things as objects versus viewing things as subjects. While Eugene’s Christian upbringing prevents him from understanding African things and bodies as subjects rather than objects, Kambili’s ability to see objects as things helps her transcend his restrictive anti-thing, anti-body teachings to create a new, African-centered spirituality.

#### Eugene, Objects, and Anti-African Ideology in Colonial Christianity

Eugene (or “Papa”) is Kambili’s ethical and religious opposite in every way—in large part because of his view of things. Most Adichie critics view Eugene’s familial abuse in part as the result of British colonization’s inherent racism, which cultivates his self-hatred. Cheryl Stobie refers to him as the “emblematic colonised Christian subject” and “mimic man” (424). Madelaine Hron similarly writes that Eugene is a “failed transplant” who “embodies repressive patriarchy, imported Western religion, or colonial mimicry” (31). Within the text itself, Ifeoma refers to Eugene as “too much of a colonial product” (13). In his quest to emulate white colonizers, Eugene drives a Mercedes, plays Monopoly with his children, and hardly ever speaks in Igbo, even at home. Most of the objects in Eugene’s home reflect his Britishisms, from the tea he drinks every day from a “china tea set with pink flowers on the edges” (8) to the TV and satellite dish he owns but rarely allows his family members to use. His factory produces “wafers and cream biscuits and bottled juice and banana chips” (12), all with “the same faded-looking labels” (12). This commodification of local foods into sellable Western-style goods enables him to buy even more Western objects that further signify his high status in the community. Eugene’s attempts at British mimicry and his immense wealth, which he uses to single-handedly finance his local church, endear him to his white parish priest, Father Benedict, who refers to “the pope,

Papa, and Jesus—in that order” (4).

Eugene’s treatment of things as either disposable objects or status symbols is tied not only to British colonization generally, but to colonial Catholicism specifically, which he learned as a child from white missionaries. These missionaries preached of a disembodied God in the sky, emphasizing his lack of physicality over his son’s embodiment (84). Eugene still perceives this disembodied God as Western, assigning him characteristics of the godlike white colonizers. This Eurocentric Catholicism is tied to the colonial Christianity that Christian theologian Mercy Ada Oduyoye describes as “an assault on the African way of life launched by ethnocentric Europeans in collaboration with colonial administration and colonial violence” (28). This “arrogant Christianity that arrived in Africa from Europe saw, in the spirituality of African cultures, nothing but idolatry” (28), even as Catholicism replaced indigenous religious objects with its own European religious objects. By labeling African objects idolatrous and British/Catholic objects sacred, colonial Christianity alienated colonial subjects from each other and their homeland—a process that continues with Eugene, who continues to condemn his father’s “gods of wood and stone” twenty years after the end of British colonial rule (47). In fact, he refuses to let his father, Papa-Nnukwu, enter his compound, along with any other “idol-worshippers” in his father’s age group (98). Father Benedict endorses these actions, supporting Eugene as he rejects his African family members. After Kambili tells Father Benedict she enjoyed seeing the *mmuo*, or a masquerade of spirits, he tells her that “it is wrong to take joy in pagan rituals, because it breaks the first commandment. Pagan rituals are misinformed superstition, and they are the gateway to Hell” (106).

Eugene’s Eurocentric religious practice hinges on punishment, self-denial, and exact obedience. He frequently punishes his family for putting their physical needs before their

religious observance. He doles out two of his most brutal beatings because Beatrice, who has morning sickness, would rather stay in the car than visit Father Benedict; and because Kambili, who has menstrual cramps, takes painkillers with food instead of waiting to break her fast at mass. Eugene's belief in punishing the body to save the soul stems from his own childhood, especially an incident when a white priest caught him masturbating. Papa tells Kambili, "[The priest] asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it" (196). Eugene punishes his children similarly after learning they spent several nights in Papa-Nnukwu's presence without telling him, scalding their feet to demonstrate that "[t]his is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (194). Eugene sees himself as his family's spiritual guardian, punishing their bodies "for [their] own good" (197). With every punishment, he imposes his belief that the African body must be constantly denied and punished to lead the spirit to a Western god.

Eugene's familial abuse learned from white priests, insistence on speaking English, and deference to white authority figures like Father Benedict and the nuns who teach Kambili indicate that he privileges white bodies above black bodies, and British objects above African objects. The only pictures in the home showcase whiteness, like a photograph of Beatrice's father, who was "light-skinned, almost albino," which "was said to be one of the reasons the missionaries had liked him" (67). All the pictures of deities or saints in the home are white too, including the portrait of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus in Eugene's room (118). The only African "things" in the house are Eugene's family members' bodies, which he punishes on an almost daily basis.

Some critics, like Cynthia Wallace, suggest that Eugene's body-hatred is that of the interpolated colonial subject; his "self-hating version of colonial Christianity" connects



“Christian fundamentalism with a fear of the body and sexuality related to the colonial association of Africanness with the bodily and the sexual” (471). Eugene certainly teaches Kambili to fear and dislike the human body, or at least black bodies like hers. She repeats multiple times that it is “sinful to look upon another person’s nakedness” (117, 168), and she frequently feels separate from her own body, saying things like “my legs did not belong to me, did not do what I wanted them to” (165). Kambili never clarifies why, precisely, the human body is sinful, but her references to modesty (she doesn’t own a pair of jeans or shorts, wearing only dresses and skirts) and discomfort with her own sexuality (when Father Amadi, a priest Kambili falls in love with, approaches and she can’t look away from his “loping, comfortable gait” [163], she flees inside) indicate that in the Achike household, the white body should be idolized and imitated while the black body should be covered, repressed, ignored, or abused. This attitude allows Eugene to distance himself from other Nigerians, including his own family members, by perceiving himself as successfully Westernized and them as degenerate Africans.

Eugene further attempts to disassociate himself from other Nigerians through his religious mimicry. Sunday Mass in particular is a place for him to demonstrate his exact obedience to Father Benedict’s instructions: he always “sat in the front pew” and was “the first to receive communion” (4). Unlike others at church, Eugene kneels to receive communion, “[holding] his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace,” then “[sticking] his tongue out as far as it could go” (4). Meanwhile, Father Benedict eliminates almost all references to Igbo culture and language from Mass:

Father Benedict had changed things in the parish, such as insisting that the Credo and kyrie be recited only in Latin; Igbo was not acceptable. Also, hand clapping was to be kept at a minimum, lest the solemnity of Mass be compromised. But he

allowed offertory songs in Igbo; he called them native songs, and when he said ‘native’ his straight-line lips turned down at the corners to form an inverted U. (4)

In keeping with Father Benedict’s rules, Papa criticizes the visiting priest Father Amadi for singing in Igbo, calling him a “Godless” man who will “bring trouble to the church” (29). Refusing to speak Igbo doesn’t distance Eugene enough from other Nigerian bodies, though. He also needs to conform to British speech patterns by “sounding British” instead of Nigerian (46) when he speaks to Father Benedict. In these aspects, then, Eugene seeks to distance his Christian practice from Nigerian experience. He follows Father Benedict’s example and eliminates Igbo influence to privilege foreign customs and punishes black bodies in rebellion to push them towards a white god who is completely removed from African bodies, language, and culture.

In contrast to his son, Papa-Nnukwu’s religion is deeply Nigerian. It is tied to “Ani, god of the land” (65) and physical realities like food, which he asks Ani to share with him. His spirituality is thus centered in both the Nigerian landscape and his own undeniably Nigerian body—which, instead of wishing to whitewash, he celebrates. In the morning, he prays unclothed and unashamed in Igbo, facing the sun. He prays for material things that fit the lived realities of his children’s lives, asking that Ifeoma have “enough for her family” (168). Even his abstractions and metaphors are tethered to the land, as when he asks that “the sun not set on [Eugene’s] prosperity” (168). Papa-Nnukwu’s prayer privileges the lived reality of life in Nigeria, while Eugene’s prayers only focus on the material when he’s emphasizing Christian dogma, as when he prays for twenty minutes “for the conversion of our Papa-Nnukwu, so that Papa-Nnukwu would be saved from hell. Papa spent some time describing hell, as if God did not know that the flames were eternal and raging and fierce” (61).

While Adichie emphasizes that Eugene’s imported religious practice is deeply sexist, she

does not gloss over Papa-Nnukwu's sexism as rooted in Igbo tradition and culture. When Jaja says something naïve about Igbo religious customs, Papa-Nnukwu tells him, "Don't speak like a woman!" (87). He holds to sexist customs about the *mmuo*, telling his grandchildren, "This is a woman spirit, and the women *mmuo* are harmless" (85). Similarly, he tells them to, "Look away! Women cannot look at this one!" (86) when a certain powerful *mmuo* passes by. Auntie Ifeoma "looked amused, but she turned her head away. 'Don't look, girls. Let's humor your grandfather,' she said in English" (86). At the same time, she gently rejects and corrects his sexism. When he jokes that Ifeoma that she is "a woman," so she "[doesn't]" count, she tells him, "Eh? So I don't count? Has Eugene ever asked about your aching leg? If I do not count, then I will stop asking if you rose well in the morning" (83). When he says his spirit will intercede and send her a husband after his death, she tells him, "Let your spirit ask *Chukwu* to hasten my promotion to senior lecturer, that is all I ask" (83). Overall, Papa-Nnukwu is willing to accept and love his independent daughter without attempting to silence her, telling her, "I joke with you, *nwa m*. Where would I be today if my *chi* had not given me a daughter?" (83). In spite of some of his sexist traditions, which the text does not excuse, he never exhibits behavior as egregious as Eugene's Christian-rooted abuse towards women. The text—or at least Kambili—still romanticizes both him and his traditions, perhaps to a fault, but tempers Papa-Nnukwu's own dogmatic beliefs with his love for both his children and grandchildren.

Although his father's African traditions don't save him from problems like sexism, it is Eugene's body-hatred and British mimicry lead him to believe that African material realities, including African objects and African bodies, are worthless. As a result, unlike Papa-Nnukwu, he views the people and things around him simply as objects with no capacity for becoming subjects. He treats objects the same way he treats his family—controlling them and disposing of

them as he sees fit. The language Kambili uses to describe Eugene's violence emphasizes that she knows that in her father's eyes, she, Jaja, and Beatrice are as disposable as his mass-produced foods. When Kambili anticipates punishment after she and Jaja visit Papa-Nnukwu, she thinks that Eugene "would pull at Jaja's ears, that he would tug and yank at the same pace as he spoke, that he would slap Jaja's face and his palm would make that sound, like a heavy book falling from a library shelf in school. And then he would reach across and slap me on the face with the casualness of reaching for the pepper shaker" (69). Similarly, after he beats Beatrice into unconsciousness and causes her first miscarriage, Eugene takes her to the hospital: "Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border" (33). Kambili conflates Mama's body with Eugene's factory products, knowing that to Eugene, both materials are at his command and have no agency of their own.

Apart from abusing them, Eugene exhibits his control over his objectified family by regulating how they interact with other material objects in his home. His television, radios, luxurious couches, and lacy white tablecloths mark his status as a rich, British-educated businessman, but he rarely allows his family to use them. The first time Aunty Ifeoma's family visits, Kambili's cousin Amaka asks her if they can watch TV. When Kambili tells her they cannot use the television, Amaka assumes this has to do with the family's wealth and status. She says, "Because you're bored with it? If only we all had satellite so everybody could be bored with it" (79). Kambili thinks, "I wanted to tell her that although huge satellite dishes lounged on top of the houses in Enugu and [Abba], we did not watch TV. Papa did not pencil in TV time on our schedules" (79). His schedules let Papa control both the literal objects in his home and the people he thinks of as objects: "Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta,

siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep” (24). As he controls the ways his family interacts with his possessions and delineates each of their days into activities he approves of, Eugene further establishes himself as the controlling subject at the head of his objectified, silenced African family.

It is ironic, then, that both Jaja and Beatrice use consumable, mass-produced, colonial objects to turn the tables on Eugene. Right after Eugene breaks the *étagère*, Jaja continues his rebellion by declining to participate in the family’s lunchtime ritual of sampling and complimenting Eugene’s factory’s product of the week. Instead, Jaja refuses to speak, then meets his father’s gaze across the table. Kambili notices “a shadow clouding Papa’s eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja’s eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja’s eyes and entered Papa’s” (13). As he refuses to consume Papa’s goods and intentionally refers to the host as a “wafer,” which makes it as mundane and material as one of Eugene’s products, Jaja challenges Papa’s control by controlling objects himself. In effect, he becomes the “object whose gaze turns back on the subject” that Johnson describes. In the same vein, Beatrice chooses Eugene’s tea, the ultimate “[symbol] of [his] colonial mimicry,” to poison him (Hron 33). Beatrice procures the poison from her maid Sisi’s witch doctor uncle, choosing a Nigerian poison delivered through a colonial product to remind both Eugene and the book’s readers that Eugene’s body is ultimately no different from the African bodies he abuses.

Through Jaja and Beatrice, what Eugene consumes greedily turns back on him and consumes him in turn. Of course, both Jaja and Mama have to manipulate other bodies and objects to feel like subjects who can control Eugene. This is perhaps why their empowerment is so short-lived. Only Kambili becomes a subject in her own right without objectifying other bodies or things to do so.

Overall, Eugene's self-hatred, physical abuse, and violent opposition to all things Nigerian mean he has no room in his religious worldview for the ethical treatment of African things. His learned colonial Christianity prevents him from thinking of things as subjects—including, to his ultimate destruction, himself and his family members.

#### “Accepting the Otherness of Things”: Kambili's View of Things

At the start of the novel, most of Kambili's relationships are with objects, not people. Her life is so circumscribed by her father's suffocating control that she has next to no human contact outside of her immediate family. She attends a private Catholic girls' school, but the other girls think she is a snob because she runs to her father's car at the end of the day instead of walking to the gate with them. Of course, the other girls don't know that Kambili only runs because the only time she was late, Papa “slapped [her] left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on [her] face and ringing in [her] ears for days” (51).

The shared experience of enduring Eugene's violence unites Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice, but their fear of Eugene frequently prevents them from saying what they really mean. In Elaine Scarry's words, physical pain is “language-destroying” (19); for Kambili and her family members, Eugene's torture doesn't just remove their ability to speak during the violence itself, but continues to destroy language after the fact. The closest they ever come to acknowledging Eugene's abuse is towards the start of the novel, right after Kambili tells Jaja that Mama is pregnant. In response, Jaja says, “We will take care of the baby; we will protect him” (23). Although Kambili “knew that Jaja meant from Papa,” she “did not say anything about protecting the baby. Instead, [she] asked, ‘How do you know it will be a he?’” (23). Similarly, when Eugene breaks Mama's figurines, Kambili “meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, ‘I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama’” (10). This coping

strategy allows her, Jaja, and Beatrice to proceed with their lives as though everything is normal, but it also limits their relationships by ignoring one of the defining aspects of their lives' material realities.

As a result of her limited human relationships, Kambili's narration focuses on her relationships with material things. As the story progresses, Kambili grows to value certain African human subjects as much as she values material things. However, earlier in her development, she attributes both subject- and object-like qualities to (primarily British) material things. Unlike Eugene, Kambili rarely perceives things simply as objects; she usually attributes some amount of agency to them and sees them as outside of her control. For instance, right after Papa throws the missal at Jaja, her immediate thought is, "Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated. The off-white walls with the framed photos of Grandfather were narrowing, bearing down on me. Even the glass dining table was moving toward me" (7). She assigns the walls, photos, and dining table characteristics of both objects and things: while she is still the center of their action, indicating her place as the human subject and theirs as objects, they also seem to act of their own accord, "[possessing] agency and productive forces of [their] own" (Haynes 132)—two traits that define both the Cartesian subject and Heidegger's "thing." Since Kambili can't react to the situation without incurring Papa's wrath, she imagines the things acting outside his control as a way to express her distress. While this problematically anthropomorphizes the things in the room, it also situates them as outside of Papa's control, even though he purchased them. Even at this point in the novel, on Palm Sunday, Kambili can't picture herself beyond Papa's power. But since she perceives herself as an object manipulated and fashioned by Papa for his use, viewing Eugene's other objects as free to move and react to stress indicates that one day, she might be able to do the same.

In contrast to the furniture, Kambili cannot see or imagine any of her family members reacting to the catastrophe. She wonders, “Why were they acting so normal, Jaja and Mama, as if they did not know what had just happened? And why was Papa drinking his tea quietly, as if Jaja had not just talked back to him?” (8). The family continues to not talk about what has happened, maintaining their tradition of silence in the face of Eugene’s violence. While Kambili has started to perceive objects as possible subjects, she hasn’t yet made the transition towards freeing herself and her family from those same constraints. It is less transgressive to picture the British objects and “off-white walls” becoming agents than her own body or her family members’ bodies, which are not European but black and African, requiring constant control.

However, with things as the mediators, Kambili begins to have compassion for black bodies as well, as long as they are not hers or her families’. Associating people with things gives Kambili a way to identify with other Africans, defying her father’s pervasive anti-African ideology. For instance, when the government murders her father’s investigative journalist Ade Coker via letter bomb, her initial reaction is to picture his glasses, “the thick, bluish lenses shattering, the white frames melting into sticky goo” rather than his body or his bereaved wife and children (207). When she does think about his body, she thinks about it primarily in relation to things, like his “charred remains spattered on his dining table, on his daughter’s school uniform, on his baby’s cereal bowl, on his plate of eggs” (207). Kambili is only used to coping with trauma obliquely, since she, Jaja, and Beatrice never address their abuse directly. Visualizing the things lets her displace her trauma (and the trauma she imagines Coker’s family members feel) onto them, acknowledging it but containing it. As potential subjects, the things can experience trauma; as objects, they can serve as symbols of Kambili’s own trauma.

The ability to see things as potential subjects has far-reaching consequences for



Kambili's spiritual development. For most of the novel, Kambili seems to accept her father's African-hating Christianity. She rejects African "traditionalists" to privilege a sexist, racist version of white Christianity. Over time, though, the way she sees both African and European things helps her learn to treat "*persons as persons*" as a central part of her own religious beliefs (Johnson 2, emphasis in original). At the start of the novel, she still believes her "heathen" grandfather's non-Catholicism damns him and can contaminate her. For Kambili, her grandfather is the ultimate Other. When she sees him, she "[examines] him" for "signs of difference, of Godlessness. I didn't see any, but I was sure they were there somewhere. They had to be" (63). When Auntie Ifeoma tries to humanize Papa-Nnukwu, referring to him as a "traditionalist," not a pagan, Kambili "stared at her. Pagan, traditionalist, what did it matter? He was not Catholic, that was all; he was not of the faith. He was one of the people whose conversion we prayed for so that they did not end in the everlasting torment of hellfire" (81). However, Kambili's religious condemnation—parroted from her father—contrasts sharply with her more inclusive worldview, which accepts religious difference through the mediation of things. Earlier in the novel when Kambili's family visits Father Benedict, she notices that the "alcove with the cream telephone looked ready to receive the Blessed Sacrament" (30). In Kambili's world, then, even things might be worthy to receive the Sacrament—an extreme affront to her father's religious philosophy, which views things only as objects and never as autonomous agents. At this point in the novel, Kambili would never say or do anything that would contradict her father's religious worldview, but her thoughts reveal an ethical spiritual perspective that offers even things the possibility of redemption. And if things can be redeemed in Kambili's perspective, other humans might be redeemable as well, no matter the extent of their religious difference. The telephone and alcove are both distinctly British; Kambili doesn't yet treat African objects as things or

accept non-Christian African bodies as redeemable. However, this inclusive thinking sets the stage for her eventual acceptance and love for Africans like Papa-Nnukwu later in the novel, and even for her incorporation of African materiality into her religious ideology.

#### Transitional Objects: How Kambili Transforms (Material) Objects into (Human) Subjects

Eventually, Kambili expands her view of material objects as potential subjects to include both African things and African people. But Eugene's dominating worldview is so pernicious in Kambili's life that she requires a catalyst that acts as both person and thing to clarify the connection between African material things and bodies. It is not until she accepts a painting of Papa-Nnukwu after his death and defends it from her father that she begins to reject his objectification of both her body and other bodies. I refer to the painting as a "transitional object," which is a term coined by psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. Winnicott describes a transitional object as a child's first experience with "other-than-me objects" (66). These objects fit into the "intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (66), and as such, "the transitional object is never under magical control like the internal object, nor is it outside control as the real mother is" (71). The child still sees the object as a part of him or herself, meaning he or she can exercise some degree of control over the object and correlate his or her emotions and actions with those of the object. At the same time, the child is distant enough from the object that he or she can recognize it as a separate entity with its own agency. In other words, the transitional object has characteristics of both a thing and an object.

In Barbara Johnson's view, the transitional object is crucial to the child's development of a prototypical ethics. She writes that it "[opens] a space for experience" (98), which allows the child to "learn to tolerate frustration, loss of omnipotence, separation" (98). Learning to see the transitional object as Other, but not separate enough to be frightening, allows the child to

acknowledge the existence and agency of both other people and things. Johnson argues that as the child learns to “use” the object, he or she also learns to “use” people, which for her is synonymous with “‘trusting people,’ creating a space of play and risk that does not depend on maintaining intactness and separation” (105).

To this point in the novel, Kambili has envisioned certain European things as outside her father’s control, but she hasn’t acted on any of her impulses. She still devalues her own body and privileges Papa’s thoughts above her own. However, she begins to care about Papa-Nnukwu and envies his relationship with his other grandchildren. When Papa-Nnukwu dies, “Jaja bent down and covered Papa-Nnukwu’s body with the wrapper,” but even though Kambili “wanted to go over and touch Papa-Nnukwu, touch the white tufts of hair that Amaka oiled, smooth the wrinkled skin of his chest,” she “would not,” because “Papa would be outraged” (184). Instead, she says, “I closed my eyes so that if Papa asked if I had seen Jaja touch the body of a heathen . . . I could truthfully say no, because I had not seen everything that Jaja did.” It takes the portrait, which is a depiction of a body without being an actual body, to propel Kambili from passivity to action in defense of another African material subject.

At least in part, the portrait can act as Kambili’s transitional object because she has conflated her grandfather’s body with Nigerian things since the novel’s start. She consistently feels a heightened sense of things’ independence when she is around him. For instance, at the end of the yearly visit, Kambili is reluctant to leave Papa-Nnukwu’s house. Instead of articulating this, which would voice transgressive opinions that would earn her punishment from Eugene, she thinks, “The bench held me back, sucked me in” (66). She makes the bench the rebellious agent instead of herself, which lets her continue to mask her true feelings. She imagines that Papa-Nnukwu will respond with similar language by asking, “Does my house

chase you away?" after Jaja tells him they must leave (67). This imagined response indicates that Kambili envisions Papa-Nnukwu as the kind of person who personifies things to give them pseudo-autonomy, just like herself. The imagined exchange doesn't parallel reality, though, as Papa-Nnukwu's actual response is, "All right, my son," because "[h]e was used to our leaving moments after we arrived" (67). However, it reveals that in Kambili's mind, in spite of the mental restraints caused by her father's punishment, she and Papa-Nnukwu are connected through their treatment of objects as things/subjects. This initial connection helps her start to break down the barrier caused by racial and religious Othering between herself and her grandfather.

Later, when the children are staying at Nsukka, Kambili continues to connect Papa-Nnukwu to material objects, especially Nigerian objects. This strengthens the unspeakable connection she wants to have with him. When she watches Papa-Nnukwu pray at Ifeoma's house, Kambili immediately begins to compare his body to both Nigerian things and the Nigerian land. His legs have "loose, soil-colored skin" (167) that "captured the gold shadows from the lamp flame in its many furrows and ridges" (168). This imagery almost turns Papa-Nnukwu's body into the Nigerian landscape itself, which is populated with African material things: his entire body is "like the bark of the gnarled gmelina tree in our yard" (168), his navel is like "a wrinkled eggplant" (168), his nipples are like raisins (169), his teeth are like "fresh corn kernels" (168), and the skin on his arm hangs "low like a brown leather pouch" (167). His body, apart from being a material Nigerian thing itself, exemplifies material life in Nigeria, as does his prayer. One of the first things he says while praying is, "I have taken no one's land," unlike the British missionaries who taught his son (168). Since Kambili sees so many objects as autonomous, associating them with Papa-Nnukwu is her own way of acknowledging that he, too,

could be a subject, in spite of his Africanness and traditional religious beliefs.

If Papa-Nnukwu had lived, Kambili might have continued to make these connections between his body and things until she finally allowed herself to love him as a real human being. However, her grandfather's death forces her to try to connect with him through the medium of things instead of bodies—though in the painting's case, the two almost become one. When she returns to Enugu after Papa-Nnukwu's death, Kambili conceals the painting from Eugene, knowing it would enrage him. She's almost too afraid to touch it, just as she was Papa-Nnukwu's corpse: "I was too scared to unwrap it. Papa would know, somehow. He would smell the painting in his house" (196). The painting isn't only seeable, which is an inherent quality of a painting, but smellable, which is more body-like than object-like. Kambili sees the painting's presence in the home as just as transgressive as Papa-Nnukwu's actual body would be. When Kambili finally gets up the courage to touch the painting, she "ran [her] finger along the plastic wrapping, over the slight ridges of paint that melded into the lean form of Papa-Nnukwu, the relaxed fold of arms, the long legs stretched out in front of him" (196). In spite of his death, the painting might as well be Papa-Nnukwu himself. According to Brenda Cooper, the painting "may be the spirit of Papa-Nnukwu, but it is also his body, his physical presence into which [the painting] melds" (120). The painting is thus both a material African object and a material African body. As with any transitional object, it is neither entirely internally controlled nor entirely externally controlled. Kambili can control the painting's movements, but she can also use it to blur the boundaries between herself and her Othered grandfather.

When Eugene discovers the painting, he immediately tears it up and nearly beats Kambili to death. In ripping up the painting, Eugene "destroys the painting as if it is Papa Nnukwu himself" (Okuyade "Changing Borders" 253). Kambili certainly thinks so; she notes that the

pieces of the painting “were very small, very precise. I suddenly and maniacally imagined Papa-Nnukwu’s body being cut in pieces that small and stored in a fridge. ‘No!’ I shrieked. I dashed to the pieces on the floor as if to save them, as if saving them would mean saving Papa-Nnukwu” (210). Instead of trying to defend herself when Eugene starts to kick her, Kambili “curled around [herself] tighter, around the pieces of the painting” (211). Kambili’s defense of the portrait almost costs her life, but it also represent the turning point in her mentality: as she conflates another person’s body, not her own, with a material object, she feels compelled to protect them both—even though the painting is of a black African who is also a “heathen.” It is this ethical act that enrages Eugene the most, since he knows that “[t]he honour with which Kambili handles the pieces of the painting symbolizes the collapse of [his] system”—and the simultaneous realization of her own spiritual ethical system (Okuyade “Weaving Memories” 155).

#### Kambili’s Afro-Catholic Spirituality: Figurines, Bodies, and Mary

Defending Papa-Nnukwu’s body/image is Kambili’s first defensive action of an Othered subject, and it is a rebirth of sorts: while protecting the painting’s pieces, Kambili “lay on the floor, curled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus in [her] *Integrated Science for Junior Secondary Schools*” (210). But this action alone isn’t enough to change her entire outlook on life or, especially in the aftermath of Eugene’s vicious beating, encourage her to act out further against him. It also is not entirely tied to a revision of her father’s anti-African Catholicism. As she draws from the examples of her mother, her aunt, and Father Amadi, she constructs a model for further action centered in accepting blackness, Africanness, and other embodied subjects through a synthesized Afro-Catholic spirituality.

Like her children, Beatrice never directly acknowledges the abuse she receives until the very end of the novel, after Eugene’s beatings cause her second miscarriage and she finally

describes her abuse to Ifeoma. After every other instance of abuse in the novel, though, she silently polishes and rearranges her *étagère* figurines. The chapter when the figurines break is entitled “Breaking Gods,” which signifies that the broken figures symbolized a type of deity for Beatrice, but not Eugene’s punitive, white Christian God. As Western products, the figurines seem to blend seamlessly into Eugene’s home, and he certainly sees them as British enough to fit into his carefully constructed British house. At the same time, as Brenda Cooper notes, “The ceramic figurines hint at other worlds and belief structures” (117). The *étagère* thus acts as a shrine for the female form, displacing Eugene’s Christian-inspired abuse.

Beatrice’s choice of female-bodied figurines underscores both her own femininity and the fact that Eugene’s violence has different consequences for her female-sexed body than it would for a male-sexed body. While Beatrice can’t control what happens to her own body, she can control what happens to these female figurines. She takes care of them, washing and polishing each one in turn, and moves them around to make them look exactly as she wants them to, give them a sense of mobility that she lacks, and reclaim the ability to take care of female bodies. This gives her a “limited mastery over space” and a sense of control lacking in every other part of her life (Cooper 117). Unlike Kambili, who perceives things as autonomous, Beatrice still treats her figurines as objects under her control, much as Eugene acts towards her (though she treasures her figurines instead of harming them). In some ways, though, the figurines still function as Beatrice’s transitional object—she recognizes them as separate from herself since they can move and stay safe when she cannot, but she has enough control over them that their presence reassures her. In fact, “the loving care with which Beatrice washes and dries [the figurines] in a soft towel suggests that she finds solace in them as symbols of power, artistry, and bodily self-control” (Strehle 112). Only when polishing the figurines can Beatrice start to conceive of

herself as a subject—an agent who is empowered to act—in relation to the empowering objects she takes care of.

After the figurines break, Beatrice openly defies Eugene for the first time in her life. Ignoring the family's tradition of silence, she acknowledges Eugene's attempt at abuse by "[asking] Sisi to wipe the floor of the living room, to make sure no dangerous pieces of figurines were left lying somewhere" (258). She refuses to "lower her voice to a whisper" while doing so. And, while she's been poisoning Eugene over the past several weeks, she finally poisons him to death within a few days of the *étagère*'s destruction.

This act of violence would seem to finally make Beatrice a fully empowered subject by removing the person who consistently objectifies her. However, Jaja accepts responsibility for the murder in Beatrice's place and goes to prison, which destroys him both physically and psychically. Beatrice's violence thus takes her children away from her almost as effectively as Eugene's abuse did. Without her shrine of female figurines, Beatrice surrenders the small degree of agency and control she gained by liberating the family from Eugene. She turns her household over to Kambili and their steward. She loses her interest in both objects and her body, becoming a "vision of a painfully bony body" (296) who pays no attention to the material world: "her scarf starts to slip off. She reaches out to knot it again as loosely as before. Her wrapper is just as loose around her waist, and she ties and reties it often, giving her the air of the unkempt women in Ogbete market" (295). The destruction of her figurines is thus not a catalyst for enacting her own spirituality and exercising control of her own body; instead, it leads to her destruction as well.

Thus, while Kambili continues to develop ethically and spiritually after her transitional object's destruction, Beatrice doesn't survive hers. Part of the reason might be that Beatrice can't synthesize positive aspects of Igbo culture. Like Eugene, she eschews anything resembling



fetishism or traditionalism, smiling indulgently when “she talked about people who believed in oracles, or when relatives suggested she consult a witch doctor, or when people recounted tales of digging up hair tufts and animal bones wrapped in cloth that had been buried in their front yard to ward off progress” (20-21). In the absence of her figurines, Beatrice has no other material force or ideology to turn to—Eugene’s violence has alienated her from Christianity, and she feels no connection to traditional religion or Igbo culture beyond its capacity to destroy, as demonstrated by Sisi’s uncle’s poison. The figurines are also Western, which emphasizes Beatrice’s distance from her own culture and body. With nothing to supplement them and no sense of religious synthesis, the figurines can connect Beatrice to her femininity but not to her Africanness, which plays a crucial role in her self-destruction.

While it is in part from her mother that Kambili learns to treat objects as subjects and to centralize femininity, then, she ultimately relies on two other people who successfully navigate Western religion, African tradition, and Nigerian realities. That she turns to Aunty Ifeoma and Father Amadi and their connection to religion and things emphasizes Kambili’s progression from privileging relationships with things to seeking relationships with people. Both characters also point her towards Mary, the religious female figure who ultimately ties Kambili’s synthesized religion together.

Unlike Eugene, when Aunty Ifeoma talks about God, she embodies him: “She asked God to stretch a healing hand over [Papa-Nnukwu] as he had stretched over the apostle Peter’s mother-in-law” (150). Ifeoma’s Christianity thus revolves around a literal God with a physical body to stretch “hands” over his children, even the “heathen” Papa-Nnukwu. The hands Ifeoma pictures are dissimilar from the “wide, white hands” and distant “rumbling, British-accented voice” Kambili associates with God (179). Instead, the images in Ifeoma’s home suggest she

refers to an embodied African man who mirrors African material realities, like Amaka's painting of Mary and Jesus, which is "much like a copy of the Virgin and Child oil painting that hung in Papa's bedroom, except the woman and child in Amaka's painting were dark-skinned" (118). Ifeoma also frequently ties African things to a Christian God, telling Kambili that the "green and pink and yellow" on the croton leaves are like "God playing with paint brushes" (142). Unlike both Eugene and Father Benedict, Ifeoma's family's "[m]orning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs that usually called for hand clapping" (140). Ifeoma's material, Africanized Catholicism is a far cry from Eugene's anti-African Christianity.

Ifeoma also asks "the Blessed Virgin to pray for [Papa-Nnukwu]" (150), referencing both Mary and Peter's mother-in-law in the same prayer. Just as it is rooted in Africa, Ifeoma's Christianity is also centered on embodied women who have the power to effect change in the material world. She draws on their power and example without shaming or abusing their bodies. When Papa-Nnukwu seems better, she says, "Our Lady is faithful," crediting the female-embodied Mary for this "miracle" (166). At the same time, she encourages her father to tell his grandchildren traditional stories without condemning his beliefs (157). Ifeoma's example teaches Kambili to "[accept] the body as part of the natural world" and "[find] a dimension of respect for all life," including for women and "African people and traditions" (Strehle 113). Amaka similarly focuses on Mary's embodied existence. She asks Father Amadi, "Don't you wonder how come [the Virgin Mary] always appears in Europe? She was from the Middle East, after all" (138). In contrast, the only Mary Kambili knows is ahistorically white and blonde (4). This Mary is removed from the realities of her daily life as God, and she is certainly less discussed than God in the Achike home, where women's bodies are constantly devalued and abused.

Even though Mary is still tied to Western Catholicism, by the end of the novel, Kambili is

able to synthesize her into an African sphere, much as Ifeoma and Amaka do. Like other aspects of her spiritual ethical development, her ability to see Mary as a hybrid figure starts with Papa-Nnukwu. When Kambili sees his shrine, with its “mud roof and walls covered with dried palm fronds,” she thinks it “looked like the grotto behind St. Agnes, the one dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes” (67). Although she doesn’t make the connection explicit at the time, this is Kambili’s first recognition that her religion and that of Papa-Nnukwu might have something in common.

However, for Kambili to accept an Africanized, non-white Mary as a religious icon, she must first accept herself—especially her femaleness and her Africanness. As Ifeoma’s priest and Kambili’s first love, Father Amadi ties Catholicism to African things, African spirituality, and African bodies. Seeing these connections in Father Amadi, who loves her and who she loves, allows Kambili to finally accept her spirituality, Africanness, and sexuality as well. Kambili contrasts Father Amadi with the ethereal Father Benedict, who she refers to as “our new priest,” perhaps because he “still looked new. The colors of his face, the colors of condensed milk and a cut-open soursop, had not tanned at all in the fierce heat of seven Nigerian harmattans. And his British nose was still as pinched and as narrow as it always was, the same nose that had had me worried that he did not get enough air when he first came to Enugu” (4). Instead, Father Amadi is distinctly material and African. When Kambili first sees him, she says that he arrived “in a whiff of an earthy cologne,” and “[i]t felt almost sacrilegious addressing this boyish man—in an open-neck T-shirt and jeans faded so much I could not tell if they had been black or dark blue—as Father” (135). He also speaks “English-laced Igbo sentences at dinner” instead of only speaking one or the other as he enjoys Auntie Ifeoma’s yams, a distinctly Nigerian dish (135).

As soon as Father Amadi talks, Kambili transforms the immaterial things about him, like his voice, into physical sensations. She says, “He had a singer’s voice, a voice that had the same

effect on my ears that Mama working Pears baby oil into my hair had on my scalp” (135). This overtly sensual imagery is the first connection to her own sexuality that Kambili expresses. It’s also firmly material, grounded in both her body and comforting physical objects. As with Papa-Nnukwu, her descriptions of him are rooted in the physical realities of life in Nigeria; she describes a day spent with Father Amadi to “the sweetness of an overripe bright yellow cashew fruit” (180). Father Amadi’s church position, acceptance of Kambili’s love, and grounding in the material African world act as a tacit endorsement for Kambili that her Nigerian, female body might be acceptable.

Of course, that Father Amadi enables Kambili to see her own body as acceptable is deeply problematic. Most critics avoid this particular point, instead assigning Father Amadi a variety of semi-positive roles in Kambili’s life. Ehijele Femi Eromosele writes that “[t]here is no doubt that it is Kambili’s never-to-be-consummated attraction to Father Amadi that helps in unlocking her potentials” (101), but at the same time, she is critical of the fact that in her first novel, “Adichie’s attitude towards the depiction of sex is like that of a teenager who is at once fascinated with the idea and innocent about what it entails” (103). Onyemaechi Udumukwu focuses on how Father Amadi is the catalyst for Kambili to “[discover] her innate but repressed ability to express her sexuality” (201), while Jack Kearney writes that although Father Amadi is a “healing” (142) presence for Kambili, she is still “unable ever to displace Eugene as the dominant voice in her consciousness” (143). While I agree with most of these critics that Father Amadi plays a critical role in challenging Kambili’s notions about religion and helping her explore her sexuality, I find it unsettling that a man in a position of authority solidifies Kambili’s comfort with her own body. Kambili herself notes a strange connection between Father Amadi and Eugene, which points out that they seem to occupy a similar patriarchal, religious sphere in

her life: she dreams that “a man chased [her] down a rocky path littered with bruised allamanda leaves. First the man was Father Amadi, his soutane flying behind him, then it was Papa, in the floor-length gray sack he wore when he distributed ash on Ash Wednesday” (282). That both men chase her implies violence, and that they do so in religious garb indicates that both men represent religious authority. At the same time, and in contrast to other critics, I also believe it is less Father Amadi’s authority and more his own confidence in both his body and lived religious experiences that allow Kambili to accept her own sexuality and through it, her own sense of self-love. His emphasis on materiality and things acts as the mechanism that aids in Kambili’s own transformation.

Father Amadi doesn’t just impose religion on Kambili either. While Kambili’s interactions with Father Amadi allow her to overcome her internalized objectification and start to think of herself as a subject, their relationship also allows her to do the same thing for him. Kambili willingly identified herself with things that are subjects, not objects, around Father Amadi, and he does the same thing around her. Together, the two enact Johnson’s idea that “the capacity to become a subject . . . could best be *learned* from an object” (96, emphasis in original). For instance, when Kambili plays soccer with Father Amadi, she thinks, “He picked up the water bottle, drank deeply from it. I watched the ripples in his throat as the water went down. I wished I were the water, going into him, to be with him, one with him. I had never envied water so much before” (226-27). Father Amadi does the same thing when he slaps a mosquito on Kambili’s leg, then tells her, “It looked so happy feeding on you” (267). Similarly, he pulls a flower off a tree and asks Kambili, “Is this the flower you can suck?” (269). When Kambili tells him that no, it is not, she “laughed imagining how bitter their white juices would taste if Father Amadi had really sucked them. I laughed because Father Amadi’s eyes were so brown I could

see my reflection in them” (269). As the two conflate their bodies with natural or African objects, they create Johnson’s “space of play and risk” that, for the objects, “does not depend on maintaining intactness and separation” (105). By willingly associating themselves with things in lieu of initiating a forbidden sexual relationship, neither of them compromises their vows or integrity, and both learn to identify with autonomous subjects. In particular, Kambili, who has long been silenced by patriarchal religion, learns that she “can be female and also a subject” within a religious context (Udumukwu 192). In contrast to her father’s home, where he is the only subject, with Father Amadi, she willingly correlates herself with things and understands that “[s]ubjectivity does not exist only for the advantage of the male” (192).

Kambili also privileges different parts of her body after Father Amadi touches or compliments them, like her “left hand, the hand that Father Amadi had held gently to slide the flower off [her] finger” (269). Valuing her female, African body lets her break free of previous constraints and act autonomously, running up a hill and immodestly revealing her legs as she remembers “the way [Father Amadi’s] eyes had lingered on [her] bare legs” (284). Kambili feels in control of her body and allows herself to act on her impulses instead of repressing them. Finally, when Father Amadi suggests Kambili play Mary at their church play, Kambili agrees, then sings “Igbo choruses” with him, blending her voice with his (239). Envisioning herself as an envied thing, a beautiful and desired body, and finally as a Mary figure who sings religious songs in Igbo further propels Kambili towards subjectivity grounded in religion and her own materiality.

When Kambili finally visits Aokpe, the site of a Marian apparition and the reason Kambili and Jaja visited Nsukka in the first place, she fully embraces her new form of ethical spirituality rooted in the material African world and in African bodies like her own. The religious

scene is firmly situated in the material realm: “People were packed so close that the smell of other people became as familiar as their own. Women crashed to their knees. Men shouted prayers. Rosaries rustled. People pointed and shouted, ‘See, there, on the tree, that’s Our Lady!’ Others pointed at the glowing sun. ‘There she is!’” (274). When the young girl who saw the Virgin Mary walks past them, Kambili says,

She had hardly passed us when other trees nearby started to quiver with a frightening vigor, as if someone were shaking them. The ribbons that cordoned off the apparition area shook, too. Yet there was no wind. The sun turned white, the color and shape of the host. And then I saw her, the Blessed Virgin: an image in the pale sun, a red glow on the back of my hand, a smile on the face of the rosary-bedecked man whose arm rubbed against mine. She was everywhere” (274-75).

Earlier, Father Amadi had asserted that Mary is omnipresent and “within us,” meaning “we don’t have to go to Aokpe to find her” (138). But for Kambili, the opposite is true—Kambili *does* need to visit Aokpe and see Mary in a “natural setting, rather than a church,” and as “part of the Nigerian landscape” (Stobie 429). Only this setting lets her envision a fully Africanized Mary. She rejects Father Amadi’s immaterialism and instead sees Mary in the African sun, in the Nigerian people around her, on her own hand, and in her own body. The apparition also gives Kambili the confidence to finally speak up in opposition to a religious male authority figure. On the drive home, she blurts out, “I felt the Blessed Virgin there. I felt her” (275). Instead of contradicting her, Father Amadi agrees with her: “Kambili is right . . . Something from God was happening there” (275).

Most critics mark this as the passage that best demonstrates Kambili’s synthesized

religion. In particular, Cheryl Stobie emphasizes that the figure of Mary in the girl reveals to Kambili that “the feminine spiritual principle” can control “manifestations of nature and [act] as a bridge between heaven and earth, and between artificial boundaries dividing humans” (430). Similarly, Cynthia Wallace writes that this experience finally allows Kambili to solidify her own “re-appropriated Igbo-Catholicism, one that values that body, the feminine, the African” (475). Rather than reject Catholicism, she “affirms another version of Christianity, one that values the body and Igbo language and culture” (474). I would add that Kambili’s descriptions of the leaves, ribbons, and human bodies privilege Nigeria above the West, flipping the troubling binary imposed on her by her father. The scene also shows that Kambili perceives Mary, in the form of an embodied African girl, is a powerful agent and female subject who interacts with and affects the material Nigerian world. Kambili even sees Mary in her own body, making herself an empowered subject who acts without surrendering her own sovereignty. More than just acting as the hallmark of Kambili’s synthesized spirituality, then, I believe this particular scene typifies the journey she took through objects to reach this point. Like Father Amadi, who leaves for Europe at the end of the novel to “reconvert the West” (279), Kambili has appropriated Catholicism, making it her own—African and female.

#### Conclusion: Towards a Postcolonial Ethics of Things

In the novel’s short concluding section, Kambili’s life seems to be in shambles. In the three years since her father’s death, her beloved aunt and cousins have immigrated to America, her mother remains incapacitated, and her brother is still imprisoned. However, the conclusion also shows a Kambili who has self-awareness, control, and confidence in her own body. She finds a sense of “grace” (303) and is able to instill some hope in Mama and Jaja, even getting Mama to care about the material world and her own body for the first time since Jaja’s arrest



(306). The novel ends with Kambili interacting with the physical Nigerian world as a subject who acts, not an object deprived of agency: “Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon” (307). She understands how different aspects of the Nigerian material world affect her life (e.g., that the clouds signal the approach of a new season) and confidently asserts her place in it.

Overall, Adichie’s novel demonstrates the vital importance of material culture and material studies to postcolonial theory. As the novel ends with Father Amadi leaving Africa to preach to the Europeans (“From darkest Africa now come missionaries who will reconvert the West” [279], Kambili’s cousin jokes), it indicates that those who were once treated solely as objects can see themselves subjects, and can return the favor to their former oppressors—not by objectifying them in turn, but preaching a synthesized gospel that refuses to allow for colonial self-hatred. *Purple Hibiscus* provides readers with the vital hope that they, like Kambili, can synthesize seemingly disparate cultures by re-centering materiality and learning to treat others, no matter how dissimilar from us, as subjects and things.

At the same time, I wish to avoid turning the novel into a national postcolonial allegory. This approach can be problematic, even though a number of critics have provided interesting, thought-provoking readings of *Purple Hibiscus* as national allegory.<sup>8</sup> However, rather than allegorize the text, I would end by emphasizing how it acts as a sort of transitional object for postcolonial readers. Like a transitional object, the physical book and its interpretation remain largely within the reader’s control, but the characters and situations in the text force the reader to understand the possibility of others’ subjectivity. Hopefully, as Johnson writes, books like

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<sup>8</sup> For particularly relevant and successful allegorical and nationalist readings of *Purple Hibiscus*, see Susan Z. Andrade’s “Adichie’s Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels” and Ogaga Okuyade’s “Weaving Memories of Childhood: The New Nigerian Novel and the Genre of the *Bildungsroman*.”

Adichie's can further our ability to "treat persons as persons," and not as objects to control.

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