

Spaces of Order: An African Poetics of Space

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“Spaces of Order” argues that the African novel should be studied as a revolutionary form characterized by aesthetic innovations that are not comprehensible in terms of the novel’s European archive of forms. It does this by mapping an African spatial order that undermines the spatial problematic at the formal and ideological core of the novel—the split between a private, subjective interior, and an abstract, impersonal outside. The project opens with an examination of spatial fragmentation as figured in the “endless forest” of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1952). The second chapter studies Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a fictional world built around a peculiar category of space, the “evil forest,” which, I argue, constitutes an African principle of order and modality of power. Chapter three returns to Tutuola via Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) and shows how the dispersal of fragmentary spaces of exclusion and terror within the colonial African city helps us conceive of political imaginaries outside the nation and other forms of liberal political communities. The fourth chapter shows Nnedi Okorafor—in her 2014 science-fiction novel *Lagoon*—rewriting *Things Fall Apart* as an alien-encounter narrative in which Africa is center-stage of a planetary, multi-species drama. *Spaces of Order* is a study of the African novel as a new logic of world making altogether.

Dedication

For Enaholo

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Introduction

“As it happens,” says Achebe, “the novel, even in its home of origin, has not behaved very well; it has always resisted the straitjacket. What is more, being a robust art form, it has travelled indefatigably and picked up all kinds of strange habits!” (54). The idea of the novel in a straitjacket conjures images of madness even as it turns Europe—the novel’s home of origin—into a mad house. Achebe suggests not only that the novel is a mad form but also that this madness is what grounds its global movement. In so doing, Achebe redefines what it means to think of the novel as a global form. He provincializes the history of the form as it emerges in Europe and, thus, clears an intellectual space from which the study of the novel can be decoupled from the European ownership of the form. Second, he opens the possibility of a more nomad approach to the history of the novel. Instead of tracing a linear history of the form centered around Europe as its inviolable origin, Achebe is asking that we map the movement of the novel across multiple centers. What moves through the globe is not the European novel backed by the forces of imperialism but a radically open, heterogeneous, and unstable form—hence the principle of madness. Achebe makes the case that the novel ceased to be European a long time ago so that it could become global. The novel originated in Europe, but its global expansion is the result of formal innovations generated by literary traditions other than that of the west. In other words, it is the refusal to be owned, straitjacketed,

and disciplined that accounts for the form's global spread and not its expression of something intrinsically European.

This definition of the novel as a global form informs *Spaces of Order*, in which the African novel is studied as a singular trajectory of the novel with its own set of ideological concerns, aesthetic paradigms, and formal innovations. To that end, the project follows an aesthetic line of inquiry that takes up the African novel, first and foremost, as a fundamentally experimental project, which in its inception sought to upend the conventional formal attributes of the novel. The African novel has not always been read in this way. In African literary scholarship, for example, because the history of the African novel is often read alongside the history of anti-colonialism, the African novel has conventionally been positioned as an auxiliary of the European novel. The question typically is: how did African novelists, who are almost always imagined as nationalists, grapple with literary "forms that had been codified in Europe" — realism, modernism, and romance — forms which were understood as complicit with colonialism (Gikandi 311)? Simon Gikandi's and Susan Andrade's essays in the 2012 issue of the *Modern Language Quarterly* on "peripheral realisms" are some of the most recent of such studies. The African novel becomes inextricably bound with "the dialectical interplay of realism, modernism, and romance" (313), by virtue of which it is consigned to the labor of always writing against, writing with, or re-imagining these conceptual categories but never producing its own formal problematic. This also accounts for why the history of

the African novel is constructed as a replica of the European instantiation of the form. A good example of this is Emmanuel Obiechina's *Culture, Traditions, and Society in the West African Novel*. Modeled after Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*, the book simply retraces the rise of the novel in Africa along the same trajectories of capital, the individual, and realism, as laid out by Watt. This creates the absurd situation whereby even though the African novel emerges after Kafka, Joyce, and the long period of modernist innovations, it is still expected to reflect the perceived simplicity of Victorian-style realism. This assumption of a formal regression, whereby African novels comes late but hacks back to archaic European forms, informs studies such as Frederic Jameson's essay on the allegorical form of third-world fiction. "Spaces of Order" is an attempt to move away from this practice of approaching the African novel from the standpoint of an aesthetics of mimicry.

My enquiry into the formal innovations of the African novel takes the form of an investigation into the logic of space that governs the construction of fictional worlds in the African novel. The project began with the observation that there is a sizable cluster of African novels in which the space of collective life is built in relation to an external space that resists abstraction. In Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* written in 1910, Chaka is exiled from the village into the wild barren plains where he almost meets his death but also where he meets the bloodthirsty black-magic artist responsible for the greatness of the Zulu empire. In D. O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Deemons* (1938), a forest of monstrous

creatures is simultaneously conterminous with the village as well as the hunter's bedroom. Stories about an "endless forest" and "bush of ghosts" teeming with grotesque life forms established Amos Tutuola's prominence as a fantasist. In Mongo Beti's *Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956), a syphilis outbreak in a women's labor camp is the result of the Catholic Mission's failure to transform the surrounding forest communities into models of colonial domesticity. In *Dusklands* (1974), the bare, wild, and expansive world of the Bushman is setting for J. M. Coetzee's strange cautionary tale about an overconfident explorer. In Nuruddin Farah's *Links* (2005), Mogadishu is a dante-esque underworld of terror dotted with sanctuaries where life can barely persist in the form of the everyday. Lauren Beuke's *Zoo City* (2008) takes place in a divided world where "animalled" people—mutated beast-human amalgams—live in a terrestrial enclave of poverty and disorder, distinct from a suburban community of wealth and legal status. In his attempt to recast Las Vegas as an African city, Chris Abani, in *Secret History of Last Vegas* (2012), explores ghost towns as liminal worlds tangential to the city and the desert. "Spaces of Order" analyzes the singularity of this recurring spatial form, which it sees as an aesthetic paradigm that reconfigures the novelistic rules for assembling the social, that reinvests narrative subjectivity with new ideological burdens, and exposes the novel to be a far more open and unstable narrative apparatus. These spaces collectively fall under the category of what I call the forest—named after its most iconic representation in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

In *Theory of the Novel*, Lukacs argues that there is a way to track the evolution of narrative in the European tradition according to the kind of exteriority in relation to which the fictional world is imagined. Lukacs reserves for the novel that form of exteriority that can be abstracted because it lacks the immanence of meaning. Lukacs contributed immensely to establishing the notion that the novel's deepest formal and ideological structures take the form of a split between an inside world of subjective, libidinal interiority and an outside world of abstract social issues and collective life. This assumption is so entrenched in the study of the novel that when Jameson attempts to identify what is different about a "western" versus a "third-world" novel, he is careful not to get rid of this split but instead argues for a reversal. What changes when we move from a first-world to a third-world novel is, as Jameson puts it, "a different ratio of the political and the personal" manifested in a "radical reversal" (69, 71). At some point in his argument, Jameson points out that every time we attempt to wish away this "radical split," we end up re-inscribing it. Jameson is, perhaps, right in the sense that as long as narrative is about order, it has to cut up the world in some shape or form. What he doesn't take into account is the fact that the splitting up of the narrative world can't possibly be the most fundamental principle of narrative order. The practice of constructing fictional worlds around two spatial imaginaries where one is the dialectical opposite of the other such that an interior world is posited in relation to an outside requires a prior operation—which I argue takes the form of the forest.

Let me illustrate by showing how a fictional world structured as a dialectical split versus one structured in relation to the forest requires fictional characters to do different things. In "Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Bennett," Virginia Woolf observes that every novelist is involved in a peculiar kind of labor. Every novelist is trying to catch a Mrs. Brown, she explains. Mrs. Brown is elusive. "In the most seductive and charming way in the world," she keeps saying to the novelist, "Come and catch me if you can" (1). Most novelists get heady from the chase, squandering "volume after volume, spending the best years of their lives in the pursuit" (1). But it is hardly ever a happy ending. "Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair" (1). But despite the fruitlessness of this chase, Woolf ends the essay with the exhortation that novelists should remain "determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown" (12). Who is Mrs. Brown? Why is she so desirable? What makes her so elusive?

Woolf uses Mrs. Brown as a paradigm for articulating the function of the character in fiction. Mrs. Brown is a model that helps us understand "what we mean when we talk about 'character' in fiction" (1). The value of a well-wrought character lies not in its being "lifelike" but in its "power to make [us] think not merely of itself but of all sorts of things *through its eyes*—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family, of life, of balls in towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul" (5 italics mine). "Great novelists" convey "whatever they wish us to see through some character" (5). Mrs. Brown, Woolf explains, has these eyes that lets us into the truth of the world. "The

things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself" (12). Mrs. Brown is life, but she also reflects the outer reality called life in the sense that we see life through her eyes. Mrs. Brown is "life itself," when we look through her eyes, all we see is her. Mrs. Brown is, thus, an optical apparatus that allows the reader to see an outside world reflected through her. But the nature of this outside world is precisely what makes it refractable through Mrs. Brown. She is the outside world. She is "life itself" (12). Mrs. Brown, therefore, is a device integral to a narrative form anchored on the notion of an outside world that amounts to little more than an abstracted version of Mrs. Brown. When what we call external reality amounts to religion, love, war, peace, family, life, balls in towns, sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul—in essence life as it already exists in language, in meaning, and so on—then Mrs. Brown is our woman. Only she can sustain the circularity at the heart of such a construction. She reflects back to us a world that is essentially herself.

In the African novel, the spatial division represented in the figure of Mrs. Brown appears as a secondary problem. If the question the novel is invested in the question of the political—what it is, how it is constitute—then Mrs. Brown can't possibly be what is at stake for the novel. Mrs. Brown is the figure of a world that has already been made intelligible thanks to the binary principle of order, which distinguishes an interior world from an outside world which it reflects. What lies beyond this split? What makes the

spatial binary of the novel intelligible, in the first place? Against what other kind of outside is the public/private binary thinkable? So Jameson is, in a sense, wrong. We may not be able to do away with the split, but we can make it superfluous by seeking out whatever “fringe and heterogeneous” exteriority guarantees its intelligibility. Placing this other category of space at the heart of the novel reassembles fictional worlds and the forms of subjectivities they presuppose (Agamben 84).

In *Things Fall Apart*, this exterior world takes the form of an evil forest, a geopolitical residue of sorts that survives the constitution of the clan as a space of political life. It is impenetrable and excludes human life. It is coterminous with the spaces of clan life—villages, farms, shrines, and markets—but is not homogenous with it. The evil forest is a space of terror where bodies and objects that threaten the life of the community are abandoned and, as Tutuola suggests, possibly recombined and reintroduced within the community in unrecognizable forms. The forest guarantees the political and historical process through which clan order is made intelligible. The forest manifests itself not in its visibility—as is the case with Mrs. Brown’s outside world—but in its function as an operative force within the political. In Woolf’s sense of the novel’s form, what is at stake for the novel and why it has to hold on to Mrs. Brown for dear life is the capacity to make things visible, where “things” mean an external world of balls in town, sunset, capital, social relations, and so on. In other words, the novel consists in an optical play between what is outside and what is inside. At the end of the day, we are

either dealing with Mrs. Brown or sunsets—recognizable things. Because the forest is heterogeneous to the clan and because this heterogeneity is irreducible, the forest is not something that can be reflected in the clan/the individual or vice versa. The forest manifests itself during those moments when the clan betrays the heterogeneity constitutive to its order, moments when the clan is forced to confront aspects of itself that though threatening and unrecognizable are internal to its functioning. Assembling a fictional world around the forest means telling that very difficult story about the dark underbelly of the political and its emergence. To tell the story of the forest is to essentially call up everything that the novel in its European form is designed to conceal—the disposability of the individual, the illusion of the sovereign enclosure, the monstrosity of the body, the discontinuity of time, and so on.

The forest, Achebe suggests, is a principle of order that is manifest in the ultimate expression of order, the distinction between life and death—a fact that accounts for the link between the protagonist of the forest and violence. Achebe makes this suggestion in his attempt to differentiate the individual in the European novel and what he sees as the peculiar narrative subject of the African novel.

Of course a Westerner would be most reluctant to destroy "in a page or two" the very angel and paragon of creation- the individual hero. If indeed he has to be destroyed, it must be done expansively with detailed explanations and justifications, not to talk of lamentations. And he must be given as final tribute the limelight in which to speak a grand, valedictory soliloquy! The non-Westerner does not as a rule have those obligations because in his traditional scheme and hierarchy the human hero does not loom so large...But even more important, he is subject to the sway of non-human forces in the universe, call them God, Fate, Chance or what you will. I call them sometimes the Powers of

Event, the repositories of causes and wisdoms that are as yet, and perhaps will always be, inaccessible to us. To powers inhabiting that order of reality the human hero counts for little. If they should desire his fall they will not be obliged to make a long-winded case or present explanations. (57)

The protagonist of the forest makes manifest those “inaccessible” “repositories of causes” that give shape to everyday reality. It does so by exposing itself to the violence of “the powers inhabiting that order of reality.” The fact that Woolf can only talk about Mrs. Brown in terms of what she lets us see, what she makes visible and the fact that Achebe chooses to talk about the figure of the forest in juridical language of “explanations,” “justification,” making “long-winded case” is very telling. It points to the fact that whereas in Woolf’s tradition the value of the character lies in its optical function, in Achebe’s the value of the character lies in the fact that it can be killed or destroyed or made to fall or exiled. The fictional world relies on them to show “the sway of non-human forces” or to show how order constitutes and preserves itself.

In his 1973 essay, “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka presents the most sustained theorizing of the forest as an element of African narrative. The crux of Soyinka’s argument is that attempting to capture the dark, chthonic terrors of the forest has formal implications. “Spaces of Order” is an attempt to recast Soyinka’s mythic “fourth space” within broader philosophical and aesthetic contexts as a spatial typology that lets us ask questions about life, violence, power and the making of African fictional worlds. The first chapter is titled “**Dismembered Life: Amos Tutuola’s Archeology of the Body.**” It

takes up the “endless forest” in Amos Tutuola’s debut novel (19), *The Palmwine Drinkard* and reads it as a space where we can trace an alternative genealogy of the body and the structures of value through which it acquires form as human life. In Tutuola’s surrealist picaresque, the forest, which is the primary setting of the story, is a collection of discontinuous bushes and towns inhabited by heterogeneous groups of beings and creatures that come in all shapes of the grotesque. Violence in the forest is the endless play of a murderous force in which the human body is tossed, burned, pursued, eaten, captured, mutilated, buried, skinned, baked, and so on and so forth. Tutuola’s forest is not an enchanted realm of fantasy. It is a politico-technological marvel where the (undisciplined) body does not depend for its survival on the protection of law but depends on its capacity to extend, contract, transmute, and graft things on to itself, and, most importantly to be dismembered—literally torn to pieces. The aim of the chapter is to show how the reproducible body of the political—the individual, the gentleman, and so on—relies on the aberrant corporeality of life in the forest.

Tutuola shows us how the forest operates by taking us inside its cavernous, non-human world. Because of that, he keeps life in the political—embodied in the figure of the Town—vague and barely perceptible. Achebe does the opposite in *Things Fall Apart*. He conceals the forest so that he can better reveal its structuring operation within the clan. In the second chapter titled “**Critique on Violence in *Things Fall Apart*,**” I argue that the evil forest, as a space of terror, is the hidden principle of order in the world of

Things Fall Apart. The evil forest marks the threshold between collective existence and this other space where sinister forces roam freely and to which pure violence is allocated. But how exactly does the clan maintain this distinction between village and evil forest to which it owes its existence? It does this by claiming monopoly over the power to distinguish, for instance, between dead bodies that can be buried in the village and those that must be thrown into the evil forest, between the life that can be lived within the village and those such as twin newborns or people afflicted by strange illnesses who would have to be left to die in the evil forest. The evil forest is, therefore, the mechanism through which the clan instrumentalizes violence as a principle of order. If Achebe's objective is to show an African world—contrary to Conrad and Hegel—evolved enough to invent technologies of power for instrumentalizing violence, then the evil forest is the single most important space in the novel. But to make the operation of the evil forest visible, Achebe requires an unusual breed of characters. The essential structure of these characters is not interior subjectivity but exposure to violence; yet, these characters are not, for this reason, entirely abject, bare, disposable lives.

Chapter three, titled “**Interspaces and the Never-Ending Story**,” is a study of Ben Okri's *Famished Road* (1991). Tutuola's creature-ridden “endless forest” reappears as fragmented spaces of fantasy contiguous to the household, the street, the roads, the market, the neighborhood, the city and so on. The chapter explores implications of these dark, crowded, and secret “interspaces” within the architecture of modernity. How do

these spaces of fantasy—but also of folklore and myth—disrupt the spatial economy of the urban environment? What does the contiguity of these spaces to the household and other locations of the everyday do to narrative continuity? How does the nomad subject tethered to these spaces refashion the novelistic character? Instead of positioning the distinctive, and often eccentric, aspects of *The Famished Road* as an instance of magical realism, these kinds of questions allow us to approach the novel as a fictional work deeply rooted in an African aesthetic tradition.

The concluding fourth chapter, **“Aquatic Forests’ and the Making of an African World Power**, is a brief consideration of the forest in a contemporary novel—Nnedi Okorafor’s 2014 science-fiction novel titled *Lagoon*. The chapter develops the idea that Okorafor’s alien-encounter novel is the response to a question that haunts the tragic ending of *Things Fall Apart*: Will Africa ever rule the world again? Okorafor takes us back to the original scene of encounter that generated Achebe’s story about the end of an African world. Against this background, Okorafor situates Africa as center-stage in a planetary, multi-species drama, where Africa saves the entire planet from experiencing the same tragic outcome as Achebe’s story. The novel turns the compass so that the planet is not only saved, but also reoriented in relation to Africa. Rather than marking the end of an era, Okorafor’s science fiction, by fulfilling the utopian dream that haunts *Things Fall Apart*, establishes Achebe’s passing as the beginning of a radically experimental tradition of the African novel.

“Spaces of Order” thus reopens the question of what constitutes the novel as a global form and claims that what we call the global novel is not the world domination of a European aesthetic tradition but a constellation of singular histories and formal trajectories tugging at the limits of the novel and reconfiguring its aesthetic strategies, thus its ideologies. The African novel shows itself to be one of such trajectories of the form by introducing a formal invention that reconfigures the rules of world making.

Chapter 1: Dismembered Life: Amos Tutuola's Archeology of the Body

In his study of Yoruba tragic aesthetics, Wole Soyinka refers to a form of terror tied to dismemberment and fragmentation. The text in question is "The Fourth Stage," which he began writing in early 1970s. It offers the most sustained theorization of the forest as an element of African narrative. From Yoruba folklore, Ifa oracular texts, and Yoruba hunter poetry, Soyinka extracts a cosmology consisting in three different kinds of spaces—the world of the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. But between and around these spaces of existence lies a "fourth space" (32). It is an abyssal territory, a forest of cosmic undergrowth seething with "dread powers" and "blind energies" (35). Soyinka calls it "the gulf of transition" and positions it as the primordial element of the Yoruba cosmos and, thus, its fundamental principle of order (32). Bringing this space under some kind of management either by "forging a bridge" or "clearing a path" is a process without which the cosmos remains a series of fragmented localities (35). Yoruba drama, claims Soyinka, is essentially a re-enactment of the revolutionary moment of this bridging carried out by Ogun. Where other gods in the Yoruba pantheon failed, Ogun extracted iron ore from the depths of the world and used it to clear a path through the forest. Ogun's act of bridging this space creates a spatial economy and founds the cosmic

order under which gods and mortals are able to live and commune across all three zones of existence—the world of the dead, the living, and the unborn.

One of the dominant properties of Soyinka's gulf of transition is an order of violence that takes the form of fragmentation. During Ogun's terrestrial odyssey, exposed to the infernal violence of the forest, Ogun comes close to disintegration. But Ogun's willingness to "surrender his individuation" to the "fragmenting process" of forest travel derives from an even more archaic event of dismemberment, which is "the elemental fragmentation of Orisa-nla" (37). Yoruba tragic aesthetic is, as Soyinka sees it, constituted by a repetition of Ogun's experience of the forest's "fragmenting process"—an experience rooted in "the recurrent consciousness within Ogun" of a "previous rendering"—that of Orisa-nla's body (37). In adulation for this principle of fragmentation, Soyinka writes in the epic poem, "Idanre," "May we celebrate the stray electron, defiant/ Of patterns, celebrate the splitting of the gods" (82). Soyinka sees this recurring trope of dismemberment represented in the ritual-dramatic practice of sacrificing a dog, the carcass of which, in "the mock struggle of the head priest and his acolytes," is "literally torn limb from limb" (37).

The main objective of the chapter is to develop this idea of bodies torn to pieces as the form in which life and bodies inhabit the forest. The text that most precisely describes the structure and function of this principle of fragmentation is Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*. What Soyinka localizes in a particular order of space and

represents in the figure of a splintered god, Tutuola translates into a narrative and subjective principle but also into the problem of political life, its form and origin. The objective here is to inquire into the value of imagining the world and the body in a perpetual state of dismemberment. What is its value as a political imaginary? What kinds of problems does this create for the novel form? More broadly, the chapter explores the implications of the forest and the forms of life it presupposes.

The Palmwine Drinkard is Amos Tutuola's debut fiction. Giving an account of the enigma of the forest as a location of fiction must begin with giving account of the enigma that surrounds Tutuola's peculiar type of fiction. *The Palmwine Drinkard* has always been a problem text—as the story of its publication perfectly illustrates. When Faber and Faber received Tutuola's manuscript, they loved it but could not quite decide on how to market the text. A month after the book had been accepted for publication, Geoffery Faber describes the work, in a letter to a leading anthropologist, as “a highly unusual manuscript...a long rambling ghost, spook, and juju story by a West African native” (Low 22). At the end of the day, the question came down to this: how do you commodify a “long, rambling, ghost, spook, and juju story” for a global literary market? At first, they thought about marketing it as an anthropological document. They contacted a British anthropologist working in Nigeria to ascertain the anthropological value of the book. But when their 1952 spring catalogue came out, a compromise had been reached. The book was categorized under arts and letters, not under fiction and

certainly not under novels. As Gail Low addresses in a study of the book's publication history, it is the text's intractable enigma that Faber and Faber eventually commodifies by mobilizing around it a politics and aesthetics of the primitive.

The Palmwine Drinkard has been as much a problem for the scholarly community as it was for the literary market. If it isn't Gerald Moore forcing Tutuola into the company of Blake, Bunyan, and Dante and then concluding that he certainly was not a "western novelist," it is Ann Tibble claiming his work is everything—fantasy, myth, fable, fairy tale—but the novel, or Harold Collins conceding that even though Tutuola is not quite a novelist proper, he is a "folk novelist" and his work may not be the novel proper but is a "ghost novel" (Lindfors 308). Within the history of the African novel, Tutuola's work has traditionally been consigned to the category of literary texts that precedes the official invention of the African novel. In operating outside "the realism/modernism dyad," argues Simon Gikandi, texts such as Tutuola's "sought to inscribe the space of the nation and its subjects using even older forms of literary representation, most notably romance, or drawing on the allegorical narratives they had mastered at the Christian missions" (313). Designated as romance or fantasy or picaresque or folklore, Tutuola's work, as with those of Thomas Mofolo, Sol Plaatje, and D. O. Fagunwa are consigned to a pre-history of the African novel. Whereas in relation to the long, European history of the novel Tutuola is an exception, within the history of

the African novel, he is prehistory. Criticism of Tutuola's work has, therefore, oscillated between these two forms of outsidership—the exception and the prototype.

This confusion surrounding Tutuola's fiction derives from the unusual nature of the narrative. It tells the story of a man named The Drinkard. His only defining characteristic is his insatiable appetite for palmwine provided by a companion called The Tapster. The novel opens with the Drinkard living in a vague narrative space called "my father's hometown" (9). The Tapster's subsequent death cuts off supply of palmwine. The Drinkard's monstrous consumption of palmwine is interrupted. He is incapable of performing the one act—drinking palmwine—that constitutes his existence. After this experience of loss, the Drinkard is essentially banned from the town. Anxious to reconstitute his life—in his hometown—as the man who drinks 225 kegs of palmwine daily, he embarks on a search for the dead Tapster. This journey covers most of the narrative. It is helpful to divide it into two phases. In the first phase, he travels by himself in a terrain that, for all intents and purposes, is recognizably human. He travels through a network of "towns" and bushes spread across a space that has some kind of geographic and geometric reality. He can measure his progress in terms of days and months in relation to the set objective of finding out information about his tapster's whereabouts. All through this portion of the narrative, there are strong hints that this generally recognizable world is coterminous with some other kind of world, but it is not until the second phase of his travel that we see what this other world looks like. In this

phase, the Drinkard is accompanied by a wife. The forest is “endless” and has “no roads” (41). It is a collection of communities and “bushes” each different in irreducible ways. This difference produces boundaries that are so intractable that they cannot be crossed. “Creatures,” the Drinkard explains, “were bound not to trespass on another’s bush” (43). This means that the Drinkard faces an unusual challenge, whereby he has to traverse a space where mobility is essentially impossible, but it also means that the forest is a confluence of communities, bodies, and objects held together without any unifying principle. Membership in the forest is based on a radical heterogeneity. This spatial heterogeneity is such that it reverberates through various dimensions of the text—the dismembering violence at work in the forest, the form of subjectivity this violence presupposes, and even the episodic structure of the narrative.

In the course of their journey through the forest, the Drinkard and his wife experience various forms of violence, but nothing as extreme as what they experience in this town described by the King as “a town in which only enemies of God is living, only cruel, greedy, and merciless creatures” (60). Like most denizens of the forest, the residents of the Unreturnable Heavens town are not human. The Drinkard simply describes them as “creatures that we had never seen in our life” (58). However, this lack of recognition is not mutual. The human subject or “earthly person,” as the Drinkard puts it, is included in the world of these creatures as something intelligible (59). The “earthly person” is included or belongs to this world, but, as the object of a peculiar

form of violence. "If any earthly person mistakenly entered their town," explains the Drinkard, "they would catch him or her and begin to cut the flesh of his or her body into pieces while still alive. Sometimes they would stab a person's eye with a pointed knife and leave it there until that person will die of much pain" (59). What sort of world is this where the human body is included, recognized, accounted for but as something that can only be torn into pieces?

To elaborate the specific structure of the subject implicit in this form of violence, we must give attention to the crises of value at the heart of life and order in the Unreturnable Heavens town. The Drinkard sets up for the reader a world where labor and the body is defined by an inversion of value. "These unknown creatures," he begins, "were doing everything incorrectly" (58). For example, they would climb a ladder before placing it on the tree. Even though they live right by a vast stretch of flat land, they have built their town on the slopes of a steep hill so that "all the houses bend forward as if they were going to fall and their children were always rolling down from these houses but their parents did not care" (59). They wash the bodies of their animals but leave their own bodies filthy and unwashed. For clothing, "they wrap themselves with a kind of leaf" while they reserve expensive fabric for their domestic animals. Uncut for a hundred years, their nails are long, but the nails of their animals are well-manicured. They build houses only so that they can sleep on the roof while reserving the rooms for their animals. By portraying the town as being incapable of giving the right

value to the right kind of labor, the Drinkard prepares us the extreme and seemingly meaningless violence to which he and his wife are exposed.

Then the king gave them flat stones to use as razor blades... the attendants were clearing the hair with the flat stones... After they had tried all their efforts and failed, then the king gave them pieces of broken bottle to use, when they got that, it cleared some of the hair by force, and blood did not allow them to see the rest of our hair again. But before they started to shave off the hair, they had tied us with strong ropes to one of the pillars of that palace. After they had cleared some of the hair, they left us there unloosened and went to grind pepper, after a while, they brought the pepper and rubbed our heads with it, then they lighted a thick rag with fire and tied it on the centre of our heads so that it nearly touched our heads. By that time, we did not know whether we were still alive or dead, although we could not defend our heads, because both our hands and bodies were tied to that pillar. When it was about half an hour since they had hung the fire near our heads, they took it away and started to scrape our heads again with a big snail's shell, so by that time, every part of the heads was bleeding. 60-61.

The mutilation of their bodies does not end there. They are eventually buried in the ground up to their necks while their heads are flogged, after which the executioners let lose a scavenger bird to pluck out their eyes. The residents and their children are allowed to pass out urine and excreta on the heads of both the Drinkard and his wife.

The detail with which the torture is documented is a bit uncharacteristic for someone like Tutuola who, according to Achebe, writes with brutal precision and brevity. In this instance, Tutuola seems to be caught up in the pleasure of chronicling all the different forms of mutilation the human body can be made to undergo. It is as though Tutuola wants to "exhaust all the nonetheless infinite variety and inventiveness" of the executioner's dream for a human body that can be endlessly mutilated (Barthes

58). The intoxicating inventiveness of violation is articulated through the banal repetitiveness of the act of mutilation—their heads are scrapped three times, first with a stone, then with a piece of broken bottle, and later with a shard of snail shell; their heads are also pummeled with whips, stones, feet, urine, and excreta. An interplay of repetition and inventiveness drives the intensity of sadistic pleasure. The takeaway of this scene is the notion that the Unreturnable Heavens Town is a place where, through a reverse operation, the value of the body grounds itself in its capacity to be mutilated or “torn to pieces.” This form of violence against the human body that takes the specific forms of capture and dismemberment— “they would catch him or her and begin to cut the flesh of his or her body into pieces while still alive” —takes a slightly different form in the idea of a Complete Gentleman’s body created out of assembled human parts (59).

The Complete Gentleman refers to the human disguise of a forest-dwelling creature. He meets a woman in a market. She is taken under his spell and follows him beyond the boundary of the town into the “endless forest” where she watches him strip off his human parts one by one. In West African folktales and myths, the market is a strange, liminal space, but it is also a cosmopolitan space, a meeting point for surrounding and faraway towns and villages. As Ben Okri shows in those spectacularly beautiful market scenes in *The Famished Road*, the market is a place where cosmopolitanism extends beyond ontological difference. Humans come together with non-humans—ghosts, the dead, animals and so on. On that day, political differences, gender

differences, ontological differences are not necessarily suspended but rather harnessed to create some kind of economy of relations. Exchange is carried out across multiple worlds and forms of life. The idea of the market as a community of worlds operates, however, on the basis of an illusion of sameness. Ghosts and beings from other worlds are welcome in the market, but only if they look like humans, hence the motif of transformation that characterizes these folktales—animals, the dead, and strange creatures take on a human form to trade and commune with humans. The Complete Gentleman, who is in actuality a decayed skull, is a case in point. He is one of these otherworldly creatures who appear only on market days to do business with humans and, as is the practice, take on a human form. This “manufactured resemblance” makes the market a field of optical illusion where bodies only appear to be human. But it also places a high premium on the human body. Without it, forest creatures cannot participate in the economic relations of the marketplace. As a direct response to this need, there is a market for human parts in the forest. Body parts can be rented for a fee and then assembled into bodies more beautiful than what exists in the human world. Therein lies the irony of a “Complete Gentleman” who is assembled out of disparate parts.

The kidnapped woman who later becomes the Drinkard’s wife has a rare glimpse into this macabre world of body rental when, enchanted by the “fake” beauty of

the Complete Gentleman, she follows him into the forest. Here is how the Drinkard describes what she sees:

As they were travelling along in this endless forest then the complete gentleman in the market that the lady was following, began to return the hired parts of his body to the owners and he was paying them the rentage money. When he reached where he hired the left foot, he pulled it out, he gave it to the owner and paid him, and they kept going; when they reached the place where he hired the right foot, he pulled it out and gave it to the owner and paid for the rentage. Now both feet had returned to the owners, so he began to crawl along on the ground...When they went furthermore, then they reached where he hired the belly, ribs, chest etc., then he pulled them out and gave them to the owner and paid for the rentage...When they reached where he hired both arms, he pulled them out and gave them to the owner, he paid for them; and they were still going on in this endless forest, they reached the place where he hired the neck, he pulled it out and gave it to the owner and paid for it as well. 20.

What is revealed in the forest is not the ruin or loss of a unified body. There was never such a body in the first place. The creature-as-complete-gentleman was always already a collection of fragmented parts. Each body part, we can assume, comes from a different body. As though this is not fragmentary enough, Tutuola introduces spatial dispersal. The creature walks a distance of 55 miles total to return each isolated piece of body, flesh, organ, down to the skin. Tutuola invites us to imagine a massive rental system of human parts. These parts have to be harvested, stored, distributed, and so on, meaning that each arm, leg, eye, etc. comes from different bodies. These body parts are being circulated as fragments in a way that obfuscates their origin from a human body or, rather, that multiplies origins to such a staggering degree that it becomes meaningless.

In this scene, Tutuola gives us a scandalous account of the gentleman—an iconic figure of political subjectivity in the discourse of modernity. He presents a scathing commentary on the history of the individual as the privileged form of political subjectivity in the commonwealth. We are confronted with the modern political body as something produced entirely by artifice and capital. First, the Drinkard measures the beauty of the creature's body in monetary terms: "if he had been an article or animal for sale, he would be sold at least for £2000 (two thousand pounds)" (18). In the forest, the rented body parts are returned for a fee. The story of the complete gentleman is Tutuola's version of a classic West African folktale motif—the motif of the Disobedient Daughter. But as everyone from Harold Collins to Bernth Lindfors has pointed out, Tutuola's unique addition to the story is the insertion of the return of body parts within a rental economy. In all the other extant versions of this particular folktale, the body parts are simply borrowed and subsequently returned. The fact that the creature rents the body parts and makes payment is no small modification. Tutuola presents the human body—whole or fragmented—as a commodity. He compels us to imagine the human not as something that is born whole or that can make claims to "self-possession, the desire for self-perfection, and self-mastery (self-government) through the development of interiority" (Mbembe 2), but as isolated parts and fragments stitched together to produce a body, which like a commodity, cannot generate or guarantee its value.

Tutuola's *Complete Gentleman* has a long history in the discourse of modernity, a history with which Tutuola is clearly in conversation. We can't help but hear, in the term *Complete Gentleman*, echoes of Daniel Defoe's work *The Complete English Gentleman*. Tutuola enters into conversation with this discourse by conceding that every society needs gentlemen in so far as the gentleman is one form in which the body appears in the political as having been inscribed with value. Tutuola gets all of that. He simply reveals that in the nocturnal underbelly of the beautiful gentleman that has captivated us ever since Locke are scattered bits of body parts. The value of the complete gentleman's body—its capacity to circulate and to be reproducible—derives from the distinction between a body that appears "complete" and "beautiful" and a body that can only exist in alienated fragments. The body that is rendered visible in the political, that circulates and can be replicated is nothing but the network of human fragments circulating in the forest. For Tutuola, the gentleman is not a knowing, speaking subject constituted by the sovereign capacity for self-ownership and mastery but a constellation of rented parts. He is made up of disparate parts, each of which he does not own and has to rent. Even after the body is assembled into something whole and beautiful, its capacity to circulate within the market and lay claim to any kind of value is dependent on market forces. There goes Locke's sovereign individual.

We can now begin to see the ties between the status of the human body in the order of the market and the status of the human body in the Unreturnable Heavens

Town. In both spaces, the human body is valuable. Because, in the marketplace, the human body is a kind of morphological currency, its value is manifested in its replication and circulation. Like money, the form of the body is not intrinsically valuable. Value does not inhere in the material essence of the body but in its function as sign, as what allows the circulation, exchange and translation on which the market is constituted. In Unreturnable Heavens Town, value takes the form not of circulation or replication but of dismemberment. The people of the town value human bodies. We know this because killing the Drinkard and his wife is not the point of the violence as is evident in the inventiveness of the torture. It is not the disposability of their bodies that is at stake for these creatures but the fact that these bodies can be “cut to pieces...while still alive.” In fact, how are we to know that bodies dismembered in Returnable Heavens Town are not the same ones that find their way back into the market? In the market, bodies acquire value when they are assembled. In Unreturnable Heavens Town, they acquire value in their dismemberment. We can, therefore, conclude that, for Tutuola, what stands in relation to political subjectivity is dismembered life. What lies unseen in the beautiful body of the complete gentleman or in the figure of the liberal individual is the scattered bits of fragmented body parts to which it cannot lay claims of ownership. The forest is neither the absence nor the crisis of value, and as such, it is not a zone of the exception or of “bare life” (Agamben 12). That would make the forest into a mere dialectical other of the market. The forest is a reverse operation whereby value grounds

itself in the fetishistic fragmentation of the body. The body appearing in the political in the full light of its beauty and completeness is, therefore, nothing but the transfiguration of a decayed skull and disparate body parts, the origins of which have long been lost in a terrestrial rental economy. Perhaps, Tutuola is inviting us to take the Yoruba proverb—“the world is a market place, heaven is home” —seriously (Soyinka 49). It is not just the value of objects alone that is constituted through an artificial system of signs and meaning but life itself. Bodies encountered in the political are stitched up things, made up of borrowed parts, which depend, for their meaning, on external forces.

This order of power that operates by producing and recombining fragments is illustrated in the figure of the Trash King. Early in their sojourn in the forest, the Drinkard and his wife come across an unusual royal court. Having been arrested for trespassing, they are brought before the king of a forest community called “field creatures” (44). The palace is “an old ruined house” erected entirely out of refuse (45). But the surprise comes when the King arrives: “He himself was refuse,” observes the Drinkard, “he was almost covered with both dried and undried leaves and we could not see his feet and face etc. He entered the palace and at once came and sat down on refuse” (45). It is not that there is a kingly body that is then draped in trash. Trash here is not part of a dialectic of clothing and nudity taking place on the body of the king. It isn’t that the king is wearing trash. “He himself was refuse,” insists the Drinkard—a faceless, limbless tower of refuse (45). The idea of a kingly body constituted by the recombination

of scattered bits of refuse represents power as a play of fragments. The king's body is a fractured body made up of objects that in spite of being refuse have not been vitiated of their use value. Instead of being discarded, they are assembled to form the body of the king, which in being a collection of trash cannot amount to an organic whole. The body of the Trash King, therefore, stands as a metaphor of a power invested in the production and recombination of fragments.

The character named Death helps us further understand this relationship between refuse, ruins, fragments, dismemberment, on the one hand, and power on the other. Death is an usual allegorical figure in the sense that his being called death has little to do with his capacity to kill. Peeved at being intruded upon by a living being, Death attempts to strangle the Drinkard. In the scuffle that ensues, the Drinkard overpowers Death, after which they shake hands and decide to be friends. The Drinkard's capacity to address Death, to be a guest in Death's rather bucolic household is conditioned on Death's failure to kill him. In other words, Tutuola introduces a context in which Death is not defined by its capacity to kill. What horrifies the Drinkard about Death is not his power to kill but something entirely different:

[Death] took me around his house and his yam garden too, he showed me the skeleton bones of human-beings which he had killed since a century ago and showed me many other things also, but there I saw that he was using skeleton bones of human-beings as fuel woods and skull heads of human-beings as his basins, plates and tumblers etc. Nobody was living near or with him there, he was living lonely, even bush animals and birds were very far away from his

house...I met a bed which was made with bones of human-beings; but as this bed was terrible to look at or to sleep on it, I slept under it instead. 13.

Death is interested not so much in taking lives as it is in bodily remains, especially the capacity to put them to profane use. When a person dies, life comes to an end. This disappearance of life is signified in the act of removing the remains of the body from circulation by burying the corpse. But Death needs life in its fragmented remnants. Death embodies a form of destruction that does not vitiate the destroyed thing of its use value. The misconception is that the horror of Death's world resides in the fact that it kills whereas Death only becomes truly interested in the body after it has been killed so that he can repurpose its skeletal remains. Like the Trash King and his pile of refuse, Death's power lies in the mountainous heap of "skeleton bones of human-beings which he had killed since a century ago" (13). The collection of remains, some of which are recycled as utensils and furniture, is the embodiment of Death's power. The power at work in the forest has a necrophilic tendency in the sense that it is drawn to dead things as remains, fragments, ruins that offer themselves up for other kinds of uses.

From the figure of the Complete Gentleman to the figure of Death as figure of power, perhaps we should place Tutuola's work in relation to the long history of ideas about the commonwealth and the form of political subjectivity it presupposes. We also have to consider the fact that as a space in relation to which political life organizes itself around the question of labor and the body, Tutuola's forest falls well within that iconic

spatial configuration of modernity called the common. Reading Tutuola's forest alongside the common as theorized by Locke allows us to explore further the implications of conceptualizing the forest as a figure of nature in relation to which the political can be imagined. In the previous section, we saw how the forest helped illuminate the structures of values that make capital, property, and political identity. The objective here is to look closely into how the forest gives form to and serves as a limit point to the political.

The concept of the common helps throw more light on the problem of the forest as a political imaginary. When Locke speaks of the common as "neglected, and consequently waste land" (335), he is referring to the classic European philosophical move whereby the sovereign and enclosed sphere of the political is constituted by being separated from a space where there are "no limits, no boundaries, no consecrated spaces, no sacred orientations, no law, and no property" (Schmidt 43). Thus the common is constituted by the logic of negation. The initial declaration that an exterior world is open and masterless is the primeval act of appropriation that preconditions all subsequent ownership, whether public or private. This is why Locke first has to secure the common through the logic of the gift before he can then propose the juridical problem of private ownership. In summary, the commonwealth manifests itself in the act of separating and excluding the common, or rather, nature in the form in which it is appropriated, waste, and ready to be transfigured into private property.

In the *Two Treatise of Government*, Locke begins the thesis on property with the creation story in the book of Genesis. He invokes it as a conceit for his definition of a pre-contractual commons. The world, explains Locke, came about as an act of giving. “God gave the world to Adam and his posterity in common,” writes Locke. But if the world is given freely to all, why is there individual property? Is there a constitutive unlawfulness—i.e., thievery—in the logic of property? “Is it a robbery,” asks Locke, “to assume to [oneself] what belonged to all in common?” (330). This question introduces the shocking revelation that there’s a problem with God’s gift. In the form in which He gave it to all men as something to be held in common, the world was waste recalling the watery abyss out of which God created the world. Like Himself in relation to the watery abyss, God positioned man before nature, which he, like God, must transform with “the work of his hand” (Locke 329). The concept of a God who creates the world ex nihilo is replicated in a subject who impregnates the world with meaning by transforming waste into property.

Locke’s logic of property is based on the twin idea of the sovereign subject and the world-as-common, which equates to the world-as-waste. The most basic definition of sovereignty would have us understand it as the power to draw a line between space that is outside the sovereign subject, free and open to all, devoid of meaning or, to use Locke’s own term, “waste land.” Locke draws his idea of a self-owning, sovereign

subject from contemporary juristic and cartographic archives¹. He maps on a spatial configuration of power—the enclosed subject over and above the common as wasteland—onto the political body. But the givens of a cultural mapping based on property changes things lightly. It translates the sovereign who was outside and above the law into the sovereign individual who is outside the common and protected by the law. “Every man,” Locke writes, “has a property in his own person” (328). As one of his contemporaries put it: “Every man is born with a propriety in his own members” (329). It is in relation to the unified totality of the individual body that Locke rethinks nature as the gift common to all men as nature that is not yet private property and therefore fragmentary and wasteful. By participating in the unity of the individual body, the common regains its wholeness as property.

The protagonist of Locke’s political fable of creation—the sovereign subject—takes form in Robinson Crusoe. Indeed, Crusoe’s arrival on the island is one of the most memorable scenes in the history of the concept of the common. Indeed, Crusoe’s arrival on the island is one of the most memorable scenes in the history of the concept of the common. On the second day of his arrival, Crusoe expresses concerns about not being able to orient himself spatially. So he walks up a hill and finds that he is in “an island

¹ In a sense, the spatial logic of property emerges out of a spatial configuration that recalls the amity lines that were already becoming an important part of European international law by the 17th century. “Amity lines ran along the equator or the Tropic of Cancer in the south, along a degree of longitude drawn in the Atlantic Ocean through the Canary Islands or the Azores in the West, or a combination of both...At this ‘line,’ Europe ended and the ‘New World’ began” (Schmitt 93). The concept of Amity lines is also tied to the politics of the Terra Nullius that propelled the Age of discovery from 1400s to 1800s when colonial annexation began (Mudimbe 33).

enviored every way with the sea: no land to be seen except some rocks, which lay a great way off; and two small islands, less than this, which lay about three leagues to the west" (83). The elevation of the hill allows Crusoe to observe and abstract the surrounding environs. He is able to discern that he is on an island as opposed to a continent. Most importantly, this ability to observe, imagine, and abstract space allows him to make a claim without which his entire project would not have been possible: "I found also that the island I was in was barren, and, as I saw good reason to believe, uninhabited except by wild beasts of whom, however, I saw none" (83). This moment constitutes the event of political subjectivity. In the very same breath with which he pronounces the surrounding area barren, Crusoe proclaims his sovereign dominance over space and all the life forms there in. The arrogation of such powers to himself brings the island under the management of his sovereign will. By so doing, Crusoe sets up the opposition between history and nature, the laboring/fertile body and inert/barren space, the self-making self and the created world, the human and the beast, the common and private property, the political and the biological body—that has defined the principle of world-making in the discourse of modernity.

This conception of the world as something over and against which the political subject stands has the added benefit of draining the external world of its dread powers. In the terms of Heidegger, the island abandons itself to Crusoe "in emptiness." He awakens to an outside that withholds nothing of itself. When Crusoe is washed up on

the shore, the first thing he does is walk. "I walked about on the shore lifting up my hands, and my whole being, as I may say, wrapped up in a contemplation of my deliverance" (72). The walk brings Crusoe to a watering hole where he finds fresh water. After quenching his thirst, he eats a little bit of tobacco to stave off hunger. Crusoe is terrified by his lack of provisions and exposure to danger, but as night falls, he snuggles up on a tree branch:

having cut me a short stick, like a truncheon, for my defense, I took up my lodging; and having been excessively fatigued, I fell fast asleep, and slept as comfortably as, I believe, few could have done in my condition, and found myself more refreshed with it than, I think, I ever was on such an occasion. 74.

He will later call this tree lodging "my apartment in the tree." Crusoe finds himself in an utterly unfamiliar world, but he is able to walk, eat, acquire refreshments, find lodging, sleep comfortably—things we would imagine him doing in any European town. He builds a fortress. He goes on long hikes. He plants a garden. He records his thoughts on grains, pottery, and animal husbandry. He even has pets. He has good days and bad days. Crusoe lives the everyday existence of an English farmer. However much Defoe tries to infuse strangeness into Crusoe's experience with the talk of savages and strange beasts, the island preserves its familiarity even to the point of banality. The moment Crusoe sets foot on the remote island off the coast of Venezuela, there was already an English manor waiting for him. It just had to be made manifest. The island is empty, nameless, uncultivated, waste. But what Crusoe sees is not a blank canvass. He sees

apartments in trees. The tree-apartment is a signature—“a sign within the sign”—on the basis of which the island is made legible as nature that has already been saved (Agamben 59). In other words if Crusoe were not able to see the apartment lodged in every tree, he would not have been able to build a castle. The common of inert and formless masses of “stuff” is nature made legible as commonwealth.

Staging the primeval scene of the political as an encounter between a solitary, sovereign subject and an expanse of barren nature is integral to European political philosophy. The problem is not just that the concept of the sovereign subject is a political fable but that it is a bad one. The fact is that for the common to be constitutive of the political it has to bear within its ruins and barrenness a signature of the commonwealth, which the sovereign subject is expected to be able to read—as Crusoe is able to see apartments in trees—and then make manifest through his labor. Thus, when Locke defines the common as “waste land,” he leaves something out. The common is, more accurately, wasteland already made legible as enclosure, as farmland, as household. What Locke does not account for is the ground for this legibility. Against what other form of nature is the common made legible as the scene of property?

In his introduction to Tutuola’s second novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Geoffrey Parrinder says something about the forest that leads us to believe that the forest just might be some kind of archeological principle that makes the divisions essential to the political order visible.

“The ‘Bush’ in which the ghosts live is the heart of the tropical forest, the impenetrable thickets that are left even when the rest of the forest is cleared for cultivation. Here, as every hunter and traveler knows, mortals venture at their peril. Nobody dares enter there by day, let alone go near at night. In another manuscript Tutuola says that, in addition to the Reserved and Unreserved Bush specified by the government, there is Native Reserved Bush. “It is strictly out of bounds to both Whites and Blacks, because it is only for dead Ghosts and bad Juju... If you enter into it you cannot know the way out again, and you cannot travel to the end of it for ever.” 87-91.

Tutuola makes a distinction between two kinds of bushes. On the one hand, there is “Reserved and Unreserved Bush specified by the government.” These land areas appropriated and reserved for the modernizing work of the colonial regime falls within that order of space over and against which Robinson Crusoe stands to declare his sovereign presence. And as Tutuola clarifies, even in cases where these spaces are “Unreserved” — abandoned — they still stand in relation to power as something appropriated, something linked to a government — an economy. Tutuola distinguishes this type of space from what he calls “Native Reserved Bush.” “It is strictly out of bounds,” Tutuola explains, “to both Whites and Blacks, because it is only for dead Ghosts and bad Juju.” Parrinder clarifies the political and philosophical significance of this space when he speaks of it as something “left [over] even when the rest of the forest is cleared for cultivation.” The forest is essentially the space without which the garden (and the home/castle) cannot be “cleared for cultivation.” It is in relation to the forest as a singular order of nature that arable nature is designated as that which can be cleared for cultivation. The forest outlives the transformation of the world into the castle and the

garden because it is coeval with both. The forest is this non-decomposable remainder of the political order and as such is both internal and external to the town. The forest is, therefore, a principle through which the town constitutes itself by simultaneously linking and separating itself from that part of itself that it cannot live. And this is why the forest can only be articulated through figurations of monstrosity and the grotesque and why it is “strictly out of bounds to both Whites and Blacks,” essentially, to humanity. The forest is essentially that order of space in relation to which the distinction between cultivated and uncultivated land takes on meaning. It is simply nature that cannot be transfigured to property, nature that is neither virgin nor waste, and nature already denatured by deep and residual histories.

The idea of the forest as the constitutive heterogeneity that makes the order of everyday life possible is manifest in the strange forms of life that inhabits the forest. We saw how dismembered human bodies helped constitute the illusion of wholeness embodied in the idea of the gentleman. But beyond the notion of the gentleman as a political identity, the forest also anchors the distinction between the human and the non-human so integral to the order of political life. “Strictly out of bounds to both whites and blacks,” the forest distinguishes itself as the sphere of the non-human. The key to understanding Tutuola’s creatures is that they resist any attempt to define them in relation to the human. They are not simply the dialectical opposite of the human. For example, when Tutuola speaks of “dead ghosts,” he is not referring to the immaterial

souls of dead people. Dead humans live in Deads Town, a kind of mirror image of the human world (the dead are bloodless and walk backwards instead of forward). Ghosts are a completely different order of the body. Ghosts have never lived on earth. They never die. Their bodies are misshapen agglomerations of heterogeneous parts consisting of biological tissue and inanimate objects evocative of modernity, e.g., the 200-year old ghostess who has a “television-hand,” the human-headed palm trees smoking long tobacco pipes, the half-burned baby-monster with a “telephone voice,” the ten-foot red-colored woman wearing a ball gown and metallic high heels. As side form ghosts, Tutuola also refers to “terrible” and “curious creatures.” Within the taxonomy of beings in Tutuola’s fictional world, it is safe to say that the ghost and the creature inhabit the same category. The “terrible” and “curious” creatures in *The Palmwine Drinkard* become ghosts in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, but the core characteristics of the species remains the same. If Tutuola’s ghosts are not diaphanous, spectral remainder of a deceased body constituted by the memory of a past human life, his creature is not, as in the Christian tradition, beastly life aspiring for a human future—for example, Caliban. Tutuola sees too much of the human in the conventional definition of the ghost and in the theological conception of the creature—a ghost is a remainder from a human past in the same way that a creature is defined by the aspiration to a human future. Tutuola uses the words “ghost” and “creature” to refer to a new category of life, one within which the human is not operative either as past or as future. “The ghosts in the present book,” explains

Parrinder, "are different from...deceased mortals. They are all types of beings who have never lived on earth and are dangerous and mischievous. They are creatures of God but different from men; they never grow old or die." One thing that distinguishes the common as a figure of nature in Western thought is the absence of the creature. To justify the barrenness of the common, it is often articulated as the sphere of objects and the animal. This is why when Robinson Crusoe walks up a hill to survey his domain, he has to make the point that the island is "uninhabited except by wild beasts." Tutuola introduces into the common the life of the creature. Thus the common is no longer just the scatter and fragmentation of things in nature but also the realm of the creature.

Tutuola seeks to name, in the figure of the forest, something that is simultaneously more archaic and more contemporary with political life in a way that the common is not. Taking on Parrinder's commentary on the forest as something that outlives the town has some unexpected ramification. First of all, the fact that the forest is fundamentally structured as the remainder of the town opens up the rather unsettling possibility that the forest is in fact the town, albeit the town's ruined, un-lived version of itself. In *Black Critic and Kings*, Andrew Apter refers to the collectivities within the forest as "inverted societies" (175), the "other side of social life." In the terms of Agamben, in the essay "Philosophical Archeology," the forest is a "fringe and heterogeneous substratum," lying at the edge of "what remains non-lived in every [political] life" (84). Its structure as a remainder accounts for, among other things, the forest's temporal

heterogeneity. On the one hand, the forest appears to be old and archaic. The Red King of the Red Town speaks of “the olden days” — a deep, perhaps, geological past—during which the human body was shaped differently: “the eyes of all the human-beings were on our knees...[they] were bending down from the sky because of its gravitiness and...were walking backwards and not forwards as nowadays” (75). In this same world where one encounters a monstrous and primordial history of the human body, there are cigarettes, ball gowns, high-heeled shoes, photographs, live orchestra, and disco. The time of the forest is, therefore, temporally non-synchronous in the sense that it is both archaic and contemporary. As such, the forest cannot, like the common, be located in a chronological past or be construed as a chronological beginning. Even though the forest stands as the origin of the town, it cannot be placed diachronically in relation to the time of the town as though it were its past. The forest is what remains after the common has been transfigured into property, after the island has been transformed into the castle and the garden, the village into the city. The forest is, thus, the missing link in Locke’s magical logic of property and individual sovereignty. The forest—where the human and the animal lose distinction in the body of the creature, where the difference between nature and history collapses, where the distance between the household and the market closes and where bodies and things illicitly commingle—is the space of radical heterogeneity that Locke has to elide in order to posit property and the individual at the origin of the political.

It shouldn't seem at all strange to stage an encounter between a 17th century English philosopher and a 20th century African fantasist. Tutuola is no less invested than Locke in the body and how it forms entities inhabiting categories of property such as the self, the household, and the marketplace and circulates objects that acquire value in a political economy. Locke writes at a moment when the spatial logic that informs his concept of a sovereign individual and the common-as-waste is establishing the terms and justifications for colonial annexation. Locke's dream of a unified subject with an unrestrained capacity to appropriate a world it sees as free but in a state of waste finds its fulfillment in the colonial project. Tutuola enters the cultural history of the common at what perhaps may prove to be the end of this project, the common as it took form in Africa². Thus, unlike the European philosophers of the commonwealth, Tutuola is able to see that the meaning of the world does not originate in property—the juridical allocation of the proper, mine and thine—but in sectioning off a space of radical alterity called the forest or what we are calling creaturely common. As far as political theory is concerned, Tutuola's innovation consists in re-introducing the forest—this ever-present

² As Schmitt points out in *The Nomos of The Earth*: “The last common land-appropriation of non-European soil by the European powers, the last great act of a common European international law...occurred during these years of the last bloom of the *jus publicum Europaeum*. It concerned African soil” (215). The Congo Conference of 1885 was the last land-appropriation act that sustained the idea of a nomological (world) order centered around Europe. Africa was literally the last space declared “free” and “open” by the European International Community in its original 17th century form. After Africa, the world ran out of New Worlds. The legend and politics of the *terra nullius* had come to its end and could no longer be repeated. “Only in fantastic parallels,” remarks Schmitt, “can one imagine a modern recurrence, such as men on their way to the moon discovering a new and hitherto unknown planet that could be exploited freely and utilized effectively to relieve their struggles on earth” (39). The acquisition of Africa was both the fulfillment and the end of what Schmitt refers to as “a time of great optimism” (215).

other of the political imaginary — into the discourse of modernity. In some sense, *The Palmwine Drinkard* is asking what happens when the forest as opposed to the common becomes the political unconscious of the novel form.

The forest shows Tutuola working within an archive where the idea of a state of nature as the zero-limit of the political is not considered useful. For someone like Tutuola who is thinking outside of a specifically European political theological tradition, the idea of a sovereign figure emerging out of nothing, creating a world out of nothing and holding in its capture a life denuded of meaning would appear to Tutuola as too fabulous to be conceptually productive. At no point can the world be encountered as something empty or devoid of value. Even when the world is reduced to fragments, the ensuing chaos, scatter, and confusion is not a signature for worthlessness. Like the skull in the Complete Gentleman episode, fragments in the forest are suffused with excess animation and meaning. If anything, we are always working from a world oversaturated with meaning. All through Tutuola's work, we see a sustained refusal to imagine life through the logic of negation. Life begins from the vibrant residues of other lives. The fundamental distinction is never that between life and death or the impossibility of distinguishing between both. As with "Death's house," we have to imagine a death-world that goes beyond the biopolitical or the necropolitical in the sense that what is at stake in ghostly terror is a body that does not exhaust its life in death. The form of the body that stands in opposition to the body — as it exists in Death's domain — is the body

of the Complete Gentleman—a body that exists beyond ruin as a jumping, humming skull.

What stands in relation to political life, therefore, is not disposable life but dismembered life, not the wasteland of the commons but an “endless forest in which only all the terrible creatures were living,” not the sovereign emperor but the Trash King, not the self-possessing individual but the gentleman made of rented human parts. From the Trash King to Death’s skeletal furniture to the dismembered bodies of the Returnable Heavens’ Town, Tutuola presents a mechanism of power whereby life can only be encountered as fragments continually being assembled, dispersed, circulated, recombined, and disassembled. At the center of our terrestrial apparatus is what Edouard Glissant calls “an irreducible singularity,” which we must differentiate from the nothingness, the pure form, or the “impenetrable autarchy” posited by the structure of sovereignty (190).

Chapter 2: Critique on Violence in *Things Fall Apart*

Hegel's Africa is a political nightmare. Kings and despots massacre their own people. Dynastic successions are interrupted by blood baths. Mothers murder their children. Fathers sell children into slavery. Men assault gods who are as numerous and capricious as they are. Such a world, claims Hegel, is the outcome of "contempt for humanity," "want of regard for life," and absence of "Universal...laws" (114). Africa, for Hegel, was a zone of pure violence—violence beyond the pale of means and ends, irrational and arbitrary. Africa had no concept of law or divinity and thus no apparatus for harnessing the force of violence as a means towards legal and political ends; hence Hegel's observation that "the entire nature of this race" is such that one could not apply to it "the category of *political constitution*" (114).

But as nightmarish as Africa seemed, it had its uses. Africa helped Hegel and the politico-philosophical tradition he inaugurated to work out the uses of violence in the constitution of political order. By positing an African form of violence located outside history and symbolic structures, Hegel is able to imagine a European system of law and order constituted on the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence or, as Walter Benjamin puts in his "Critique on Violence," an order that "demands of all violence a proof of its historical origin" (280). I argue that Chinua Achebe intervenes in

this legal-philosophical exploitation of Africa by writing a novel that is primarily about the political uses of violence. The many scenes of violence that characterize *Things Fall Apart* (1958) are manifestations of a political order built on an African logic of violence and world making. Achebe demonstrates the legal-philosophical truism, expounded upon by Walter Benjamin, that “all violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving.” Achebe is not saying that African societies were ever devoid of violence. What he wants to change is the way violence is read when it is encountered in Africa. There are those who, for instance, have attempted to disprove Hegelian assumptions about Africa on the grounds of false information. But the problem is not false information but faulty ideology. Consider Hegel’s claim that, following the king’s death, the Kingdom of Dahomey murders all 3,333 queens at the rate of 500 women per 6 minutes. It is most likely a fabrication lacking in empirical value, but nonetheless a useful prop for Hegel’s assumptions about Africa’s structural value for the philosophy of history. What Africa is to Hegel is a structural necessity—a formless political void that serves as precondition for World History. The truth or falsehood of the details is inconsequential. Achebe knows this. The game-changing story about Africa will not necessarily present the most accurate details about African pre-colonial life. It will uncover structures of power and spatial relations that link violence and order. In fact, one of the greatest mistakes ever made in contemporary literary criticism is the insistence on attributing some kind of anthropological value to *Things Fall Apart*. *Things*

Fall Apart is remarkable not because it shows us what a late 19th century African clan looks like but because it shows us the complex legal machinery by means of which a late 19th century African clan decides who lives and how dies. In what follows, I examine scenes of violence, in which the clan exercises the power over life and death.

The uses of violence in the novel are impossible to grasp without first mapping out the spatial configuration of power. At the center of the novel's spatial order is a large and powerful clan called Umuofia. It is made up of nine villages. There is a broader network of clans who defer to Umuofia as its center. Umuofia "was feared by all its neighbors," "powerful in war and in magic," and "its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country" (11). The landscape of inter-clan politics is, therefore, oriented in relation to Umuofia, which stands as the guarantor of order. But adjacent to the space of clan lives—villages, farmlands, etc.—is a strange category of space called the "evil forest" (32). Achebe's representation of everyday life within the villages the clan is memorable, in fact, so memorable that readers and critics, alike, pay little or no attention to this space, which, as the narrator explains, is

where the clan buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for highly potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An evil forest was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. 148

The novel does not give a lot of information about the specific location of the forest.

What we know is that the evil forest is contiguous to the villages that make up the clan

and that it marks the uttermost limit beyond which the law of the clan does not apply. It can be distinguished by its flora and fauna. In the execution scene, Ikemefuna and his executioners arrive at a place he describes as “the heart of the forest,” which he says marks the point at which “the short trees and sparse undergrowth” surrounding “the men’s village began to give way to giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the axe and the bush-fire” (59). The fact that the evil forest is a stretch of “giant trees” “untouched by the axe and the bus-fire” could only mean that it exists outside a regime of property (59). The evil forest is, thus, not arable wilderness waiting to be transformed into farmlands and households. It is a kind of spatial excess or remainder that escapes the historical process through which the community comes into being.

The opening scene in *Things Fall Apart* introduces the forest as the outcome of the historical process through which the clan constitutes itself as a political community. The scene is a wrestling match. 18-year-old Okonkwo is locked in a deathly grip with Amalinze The Cat. It is Okonkwo’s first time in the wrestling ring, but Amalinze has been an undefeated champion for seven years. Amalinze’s prowess is attributed to a somewhat mythical athletic quality that the narrator seems only to be able to explain in the terms of the animal. “He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth,” he observes. Amalinze’s wily catlike ways are contrasted to Okonkwo who is “slippery as a fish” (3). “In the end,” concludes the narrator “Okonkwo [the Fish] threw

[Amalinze] the Cat" (3). By establishing an affinity between his characters and beasts, Achebe takes us into the world of the fable. In the bodies of men imagined as animals, Achebe adds on a layer of the fabulous to an ostensibly realist canvas. He also shifts the scene of narrative from the market square to the forest. In so doing, the scene of combat between a cat and a fish suspends Achebe's novelistic project, even though momentarily, and clears the space for another story to be told. Okonkwo and Amalinze's fight, it turns out, is a repetition of a primordial scene of combat, which is why it reminds "the old men" of an earlier moment when "the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (3). Presumably, it is after the triumph over this spirit of the forest that the "founder of the town" becomes the "first father" and produces the nine sons who settle in the nine villages that make up the clan called Umuofia (89), the literal meaning of which is "people of the forest" (Irele Forward xii).

In reenacting the clan's origin story, Okonkwo and Amalinze bear witness to the foundational act of violence—killing the spirit of the wild—by virtue of which a space is cleared out for political existence. Within it, life is protected from the violence of the wild. A household of fathers and sons is established to take the place of a wilderness where dangerous spirits run amuck. What, though, can serve as proof of this constitution of order? What guarantees the validity of the new community's claim to power? How does it ensure the stability of its boundary? How does the clan avoid

returning to the chaos of a world overrun by spirits of the wild? It does this by holding on to a remainder of the wild forest as a monument to its victory over the “spirit of the wild” (3). This remainder is the evil forest. When a threatening power emerges from within the clan, it is taken out of the clan into the evil forest where it bears witness to the clan’s monopoly over violence. For the people of Umuofia and their neighbors, therefore, in the beginning, the world was a forest where wild spirits roamed. The constitution of the community, however, does not completely do away with this forest of ancient, dark powers. A small bit of this archaic space of violence is set apart, as Ikemefuna puts it, from “the beginning of things.” The forest is the living proof of the founding act of violence on the basis of which the clan is marked out as a space for collective life. The evil forest is, therefore, what lies between the terrestrial and mythical abyss inhabited by “spirit[s] of the wild” and the space cleared out for clan life.

The evil forest is a legal monument in the same way a constitution is a legal document, which stands as proof of the state’s claim that it has monopoly over violence. But instead of bearing witness to political power as a product of a contract, the forest bears witness to power as a function of violence. It is in this sense that the evil forest can be used as a critique of a liberal political imaginary built on contract and agreement. For Achebe, it is violence—destroying a spirit of the wild—and not contract that puts an “end” to the violence of the forest. It is on the basis of this founding act of violence that the clan can claim a monopoly over violence or, put differently, that the clan guarantees

the legitimacy of any violent act it authorizes. In other words, if the world before this victory over the spirit of the wild is such that it is overrun by violence—red in tooth and claw, pure, and meaningless—victory over the spirit of the wild is the first use of violence as means. Something of that violence has to remain. If this remainder is completely neutralized—which is what happens when the missionaries transform the evil forest into a church—the clan ceases to exist. The evil forest is the proverbial center in Achebe’s Yeatsian epilogue—the center, which when it ceases to hold, things fall apart. This is because the evil forest is, in the terms of Benjamin, “the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in [the clan’s] legal institution.” When it “disappears, the institution falls into decay” (288).

The structural function of the evil forest takes the form of a “dumping ground” for bodies and things that represent, for some reason or the other, a threatening power. Obierika struggles to erase the memory of his twin newborns placed in earthenware pots and left to die in the evil forest. Nwoye recalls the bloodcurdling feeling of passing by an evil forest and overhearing the piercing cry of twins left to die. The sacrificial killing of Ikemefuna is done at the threshold of the evil forest. Individuals afflicted with abominable diseases are carted away from the clan and made to spend the last moments of their lives in the forest. Abandoned gods and their fetishes cannot remain within the body politic neither can they be destroyed. They are thrown into the evil forest where their residual demonic power is allowed to roam free but far away from political life. It

is hard to imagine how terrifying such a place would be. The fictional world of *Things Fall Apart* is dotted with the dumpsites or death zones where each clan channels things that threaten its survival. The clan order keeps these spaces that signify its dissolution close, thanks to a repertoire of devices it uses to restrain their expansion. The world of *Things Fall Apart* is, therefore, defined by the paradoxical operation of keeping terror alive and restraining it. ‘

Take for example, the strange case of Unoka’s exile. In his old age, Unoka is afflicted by a peculiar kind of illness. His stomach and limbs begin to swell. The Earth Goddess, who takes dead bodies into her bowels, prohibits the burying of bodies afflicted by this disease. Ideally, victims of this illness are not even allowed to die anywhere within the clan. While they are still alive, they are taken away from the household and abandoned in the evil forest where they die a slow death and where their bodies decompose above the earth. Unlike some of the other acts of violence in the novel—the murder of Udo’s wife, Ikemefuna’s sacrificial death, the decapitation of the court Marshall, the decapitation of enemies in warfare, the Abame massacre—Unoka’s death does not involve the spilling of blood by anyone in the community. He is simply abandoned in the evil forest. He is left there to rot or to be consumed by wild beast. Ravaged by this disease considered to be abominable, Unoka’s body becomes essentially refuse.

Unoka's death gives us a clear example of how the forest functions in the systemic production of disposability. The narrator accounts for Unoka's disposability as the outcome of fate. "Unoka was an ill-fated man" (18), the narrator remarks right before outlining the circumstances surrounding his death. We know that the fatal logic of violence is tied to guilt. But of what is Unoka guilty?³ How is it that his death comes to be a necessity? Until he falls sick with the swelling disease that makes his body "an abomination to the earth goddess" (18), Unoka is just a poor man, heavily in debt, and lazy.⁴ "He owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts" and is "known in all the clan for the weakness of [his] machete and [his] hoe" (4, 17). In this sense, Unoka is the opposite of his son, Okonkwo who, through a sharecropping arrangement, is able to create considerable amounts of wealth from a small loan taken in his youth. As a man who "could not stand the sight of blood" (10), Unoka is also useless to a community that prides itself in being the most "powerful in war and in magic" (11). He spends his life indulging in pleasurable activities—drinking,

³ The relationship between fate, guilt, and disposability is not always this apparent like when the narrator says of Obierika: "He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed" (125).

⁴ "In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts" (Achebe 4).

eating, singing, and playing the flute. He lives at the expense of the collective instead of contributing to the production and circulation of wealth and power (Gikandi 45-46).

But a person like Unoka poses a far greater threat to the clan. Let us return to the opening scene in which Okonkwo defeats Amalinze the Cat. If that scene is, as I argue, the re-enactment of the clan's origin story, then Okonkwo would be the "founding father" while Amalinze would be the "spirit of the wild" who is defeated to constitute the order of the clan. Achebe sets up Unoka as the opposite of his son Okonkwo. Unoka is lazy and improvident. His son is wealthy and hard working. But there is another difference, a much darker one. Okonkwo, in defeating Amalinze, is a figure of that foundational violence to which the clan owes its origin and its survival. Thus when we see Okonkwo as a figure of legitimate violence, a statement such as this one takes on greater significance:

He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head." 10

If the clan is a space where legitimate violence prevails, the evil forest is the space where the formless violence of the old world persists to serve as proof of what existed before and how the clan put a leash over it. In other words, whereas Okonkwo is the figure of the clan as a space where violence exits as means, his father is the figure of the clan

rendered inoperable by the violence of the forest. Imagine a village made up solely of individuals like Unoka who produce nothing and are weak and incapable of violence. Such a village cannot be imagined because it would not thrive in the face of the sinister power and the “immense and chaotic growth” of the forest (Soyinka 145). It is precisely this possibility of extinction that Unoka’s dissolute life and then his diseased body call up for the political order. It is no coincidence that Unoka’s body is an abomination to the Earth Goddess, as opposed to another deity. She is “the source of all fertility” both in an agricultural and a domestic reproductive sense (Achebe 36). But she also sanctions any act of violence that takes place within the bounds of the village. It is in her name that the killing of a kinsman is prohibited. When Okonkwo inadvertently kills Ezeudu’s son, he is sentenced to a 7-year exile in her name. When Okonkwo commits suicide, he is said to have acted in contravention of her law against suicide. By ensuring agricultural and biological productivity and guaranteeing the distinction between legal and illegal violence, the Goddess acts as the restrainer of the forest and can, therefore, authorize the exclusion of the weak, unproductive, and cowardly Unoka as disposable life.

Just as the evil forest abides within the clan as a persistent reminder of blind terror, Unoka does not disappear with his death. He remains within the system, first, as the precondition for his son’s exceptional success. Having a father such as Unoka meant that “[Okonkwo]’s whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness,” a fear that “was not external but lay deep within himself...the fear of

himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (13). It is in the midst of this fear and the ruins of a father's abominable body that Okonkwo lays "the foundations of a prosperous future" by throwing himself into work and the passion of ambition "like one possessed" (18). Unoka's monumental failure is a necessary precondition for Okonkwo's astronomical success; hence, his exclusion does not translate to his complete disappearance. He continues to inhere within Okonkwo and is, in a sense, programmed to pop up out of the forest in the person of Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, "who was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness" (13). There is no way to tell what Unoka's father was like, whether he was a deadbeat like himself or a great man like Okonkwo. But there is enough reason to suspect, given Nwoye's resemblance to his grandfather, that the Unoka-Okonkwo antithesis has had previous repetitions. The oscillation between the greatness and decrepitude of son and father is a cog in the legal and political machine through which the violence of the forest is simultaneously restrained and kept in force. The domestic space is coopted here as a device for simultaneously reproducing and containing a dark power that resides out there in the forest but that keeps finding its way into the community?

If Unoka represents the involuntary irruption of the evil forest within the domestic space, Ikemefuna is the deliberate inclusion of the forest within the domestic order. His death is, arguably, one of the most unsettling scenes of violence in the recent

history of the novel. The context for this scene is a legal case involving two men from a clan called Mbaino. They murder a woman from Umuofia. Instead of asking that the men be punished for their heinous crime, Umuofia asks for a virgin and a boy. The virgin is handed over to the widowed husband as replacement for his dead wife. The boy, who happens to be the son of one of the murderers, is taken away from his family. He is not immediately executed. He is placed under Okonkwo's foster care. In time, Ikemefuna develops strong familial bonds with Okonkwo's household. At the end of three years, right when he begins to imagine himself as a kinsman and forgets his birth place, in addition to his status as legal ransom, he is taken to the outskirts of the clan—in "the heart of the forest—and hacked, repeatedly, with a machete until he dies.

Ikemefuna's death allows us to assess the status of violence in the broader political community of clans. The fact that two clans can negotiate, come to an agreement, and initiate an exchange that averts war indicates that there is a larger political order across clans and villages that administer matters having to do with violence, law, and life.

Umuofia, because it is "powerful in war and in magic" and is "feared by all its neighbors," is at the center of this wider legal and political order (11). This also explains why Ikemefuna is the one executed even though his father is the murderer. Killing Ikemefuna is not a form of punishment.⁵ His status as hostage and eventual death

⁵It might appear that the clan's decision to declare war or demand reparations for the killing of a kinswoman is somehow irrational, that as a judgment it is incommensurate with the crime committed. This opinion is also tied to the question of punishment. Why are the men who killed Udo's wife's not punished

simply proves Umuofia's monopoly over violence beyond the limits of the clan. A point that critics have repeatedly missed is the correspondence between Ikemefuna and the forest. First of all, during the legal proceedings convened to address the murder of Udo's wife, Ezeudu, the oldest man in the clan, opens the meeting with the statement: "those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia." "Sons of wild animals" recalls the "spirit of the wild," the destruction of which is re-enacted in Okonkwo's defeat of Amalinze the Cat who, it turns out, is Ikemefuna's kinsman. These parallels are not mere coincidence. It tells us that the forest is the name for any threat that undermines Umuofia's survival and its monopoly over violence. When Okonkwo defeats Amalinze the Cat, he re-inscribes Umuofia's power by defeating a body that stands for the violence of the forest. When men from Mbaino murder an Umuofia woman, her death is considered as a threat to Umuofia's power. Ikemefuna is made to bear the curse of this threat such that in killing him, order is restored.

individually? Why is their clan pronounced enemies for a crime that they committed? Why is Ikemefuna made to answer for the sin committed by his father? For starters, judgment is never commensurate with the violation committed. As Benjamin has argued in "Critique of Violence," "no judgment of the deed can be derived from the commandment" prohibiting the deed (298). Secondly, punishment gives a crime a personal dimension that seems at odds with a legal order where life is completely separate from the domain of the individual. Just as Udo's wife is killed, primarily, as "a daughter of Umuofia" so too her killers are thought to have acted as "sons of [Mbaino]" (11). Just as it is impossible to die as an individual, it is impossible to kill as an individual. Life (and the taking of it) is fundamentally political and never private or individual. Punishment can also be subsumed within the logic of property. This is why an individual has to "pay" for his crime as though he had taken something that was not his. In general, violence in the clan is managed through a legal structure erected to take away from the individual the power to use violence for personal ends and the capacity to even be a victim of violence.

Why, though, does the clan not execute Ikemefuna the moment he is given to the clan? This question is particularly important given that the three-year delay causes a crisis of kinship. Okonkwo's family forgets that Ikemefuna "belong[s] to the clan as a whole" as a thing consecrated to the gods and treats him as a foster son (12). Their mistake lies in letting the boy "feel like a member of [the] family" (34). Okonkwo treats him "like a son" and "Ikemefuna call[s] him father" (28). It pleases Okonkwo to see his own son who has always seemed effeminate and unmanly take to hard work and the domestic performance of manliness, all because he finds an older brother in Ikemefuna. However, this experience of domestic intimacy has no legal value whatsoever. In a world where kinship is determined by blood, Ikemefuna who is sacred life marked for death has no chance of ever attaining political identity as a member of the clan. He therefore inhabits the politically awkward position in which he is a member of Okonkwo's household but an outcast to the community. He belongs to a political order from which he is excluded. He is caught between his domestic status as a beloved son and his legal status as a life marked for death.

But if Ikemefuna blurs the line between a son and a sacrificial victim, Okonkwo's status as an instrument of legal violence is compromised. Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village, says as much when he comes to dissuade Okonkwo from taking part in the boy's execution. These are Ezeudu's words:

“That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death.” Okonkwo was surprised, and was about to say something when the old man continued: “Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father.” 57.

In spite of this warning, or, rather, because of it, Okonkwo joins the execution party. When they arrive at the threshold of the evil forest, Okonkwo suspends the power of the father to protect. After the first blow, Ikemefuna “ran towards” Okonkwo, crying, “Father they have killed me.” Instead of offering the protection of a father, “Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down.” How are we to understand the significance of Ezeudu’s admonition and Okonkwo’s refusal to heed it? When Ezeudu tries to dissuade Okonkwo, perhaps, he has in mind the prohibition against killing a kinsman, which would make Okonkwo’s involvement in the boy’s death a grievous violation. Umuofia has a strict law against killing a kinsman. But then the law against killing a kinsman would only apply if Ikemefuna were Okonkwo’s son. The narrator is very precise about maintaining the ambiguity of Okonkwo and Ikemefuna’s relationship. Ikemefuna “calls” Okonkwo father and is “like a son” but is never a son proper, in the legal sense of the term. If the nature of Ikemefuna’s kinship is not altered by his stay in Okonkwo’s household, why should Okonkwo feel obligated to exempt himself from his execution? The boy belongs to the clan irrespective of his status in Okonkwo’s household. If we continued with this line of reasoning, we would come to the conclusion that Ezeudu’s

admonition was pointless. But to take Ezeudu's admonition at face value is to mistake a domestic complication for a legal complication. Okonkwo acts well within the bounds of the law in partaking of Ikemefuna's death. If not, he would have contravened the law that prohibits killing a kinsman. We know that is not the case because when Okonkwo does kill a kinsman a few years later, he is exiled for seven years. My suspicion is that the legal order anticipated the changes that would take place in Ikemefuna's status while living in Okonkwo's household. It anticipated that after the passage of a certain amount of time, Ikemefuna would blur the lines between the kinsman and the non-kinsman, between the son and the sacrificial victim, between political and sacred life. Killing Ikemefuna three years after his stay in the village and his attainment of membership in Okonkwo's house gives his death far more power than if he were killed the moment Okonkwo brought him back from his village as a purely sacrificial victim. The purpose of intervening three years after is to accrue around this figure a certain exceptionality that gives exponentially more legal and political capital to his death.

The most surprising part of this legal maneuver is the possibility that the community anticipated Okonkwo's involvement and set him up to kill the boy. If Ikemefuna blurs the line between the son and the sacrificial victim, his death takes even greater legal significance if he is killed by someone who blurs the line between the father and the executioner. The idea of a father who kills should take us back to the opening scene where Okonkwo mirrors the "founding father" whose killing of the spirit of the

wild constituted the clan in the first place. Okonkwo's refusal to kill the boy would have been a missed opportunity to re-inscribe the violence that lies at the heart of the political order. The little we know of Okonkwo's life should tell us that there could only have been one reaction to Ezeudu's suggestion that Okonkwo's capacity to inflict violence on Ikemefuna has become a matter of public concern. Ezeudu had in essence come to tell Okonkwo that everyone in the community knew that Ikemefuna "called him father" and, therefore, assumed that this would affect his decision on inflicting violence on the boy. But Okonkwo is a man defined by the primal fear of being identical to his father, whose distinctive quality is that he is incapable of violence. This is a man that would do anything to prove that he was not like his father. After he takes his first hit, Ikemefuna "runs towards" Okonkwo crying, "My father, they have killed me" (61)! For the first time Okonkwo is deaf to this "call" or address through which Ikemefuna initially modified the nature of their domestic relationship. Instead, it is the "fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" that kicks in and prevents him from giving Ikemefuna's familial address a significance that had become by then customary (13). "Dazed with fear," explains the narrator, "Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (61). A few days later, Okonkwo shakes off the depression that descends on him—the loss of appetite, the cold shivers, the sleeplessness. He shakes it off by disavowing his status as a father and embodying the official capacity in which he killed the boy. This is how he reasons it out:

“When did you become a shivering old woman,” Okonkwo asked himself, “you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.” 65.

A legal order that, in spite of the complications described above, can reduce Ikemefuna’s death to the status of five nameless human heads brought home from war is one that has tremendous control over the way meaning is assigned to violent acts. Okonkwo was merely its willing instrument. This statement: “How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number?” is what the entire three-year wait is about. The beauty of this moment, from a legal perspective, lies in the fact that it reaffirms the community’s capacity to make a clean distinction between the kinsman and the non-kinsman, to neatly re-inscribe Ikemefuna into the order of legal violence in spite of a momentary complication.

With the advent of imperial power, the legal and political edifice built around the evil forest begins to crumble. Since the evil forest takes the place of the primordial forest of myth and pure violence, the arrival of imperial power and the subsequent dissolution of the evil forest take us back to the original scene of combat between the founding father and the spirit of the wild. The stage is reset. The imperial power, to constitute its own form of order, would have to lay claim to a foundational act of violence. Rumors about the Abame Massacre is the initial form through which imperial power enters into public discourse. Okonkwo is still exiled in his mother’s village when

Obierika who has come to visit tells him the “strange and terrible story” (138). The people of Abame, on the advice of the Oracle, kills a white man who wanders into their village. It takes a few weeks before a punitive attack is made on the village. “Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose chi were wide awake and brought them out of that market” (139-140). With this one gesture, the wiping out of a village, British imperial power constituted itself as a powerful force in the region. Everything that happened from that point on is merely an attempt to build a community around this single act of violence. The Abame massacre done in retaliation to the killing of an imperial “kinsman” is the foundational act that announces the arrival of the British as a new force claiming the exclusivity of its power over violence. It is important to note the parallels between the reaction of the British to the killing of their kin to the clan’s reaction when Udo’s wife is murdered by men from another clan. The perpetrators are not sought out, tried in a court, and punished individually. The entire village is destroyed without warning or dialogue.⁶ What the Abame massacre proves is that the imperial order is not more just despite its claim to justice and protection as its objective. In fact, it is more destructive given that its legal system is backed by a far superior war machine.

⁶ “The European had the guns and the troops; the people had only their blacksmith-made hunting guns to shoot with, and the bush to hide in. Resistance almost invariably resulted in what the colonials called “collective punishment.” (Wren 27).

Another aspect of the imperial usurpation of power is a spatial reconfiguration based on the village-forest antithesis. The small Christian mission has been causing quite an uproar in the village by saving twins left to die in the forest, welcoming outcasts to its fold, and spreading incendiary teachings against the native gods. This is the state of things when the mission approach the elders of the village asking for a piece of land on which to build a church. The elders decide to give the mission a piece of land in the evil forest. The rationale behind the decision is simple and quite intuitive but misguided: “[These Christians] boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory over death” (149). There is no clearer way to articulate the fact that what is at stake in the colonial encounter is the “victory over death.” The Abame Massacre, coupled with the widespread rescue of twins thrown in the forest has clearly undermined the clan’s sense of itself as having the power over death. The missionaries accept the land with gratitude, a church is quickly built, and the waiting game begins. By the villagers’ reckoning, the “impudent missionaries” have only 28 days to live before they are struck down by none other than the ruthless Earth Goddess (150). At the end of the set term of 28 days, none of the church members die; instead their numbers increase. They continue saving twins thrown into the evil forest and raising them in the church that is now located in the evil forest, showing that they have power over not just death but also life. The villagers try to dismiss the unexpected turn of

events by reasoning that “perhaps the evil forest was a fit home for such undesirable people” (154).

Simon Gikandi states the outcome of the face-off rather beautifully as the transformation of the evil forest into a home. This domestication of the evil forest, he then argues, results in “a semantic crisis” (49). Since the evil forest is a “zone of prohibition,” its destruction calls the clan’s “rules of prohibition into question,” resulting in a semantic crisis, whereby the evil forest

Mean[s] different things to different people: to the missionaries, it will be home; to the people of Mbanta, it will be a dangerous dumping ground. However this ambivalence, this dispersal of meanings, will have deprived the site of its powerful ritual authority: only those who believe in the evil forest can be affected by it. 49

But the evil forest is not simply a zone of prohibition, neither is it just a site of “powerful ritual authority” (49). It is the key political structure that defines the orientation of power. There can be only one evil forest around which the political order of the region is organized. The evil forest is precisely that element of the political that cannot mean different things to different people because it is what makes meaning possible in the first place. It is not up to individuals to decide whether to believe in the evil forest or not. The implications of a domesticated evil forest far exceeds “the dispersal of meaning” (49). What is lost in this spatial transformation is a deeper, more structural, perhaps nomological power—the capacity to be the center that holds ones world together, to command the power that restrains it from falling apart, to define the orientation that

gives it order. Allocating the missionaries land in the evil forest was political death.

With the evil forest domesticated—literally transformed to a home—the line that had up till then given collective life its form by separating it from that which is outside is redrawn to create a reversal where by the church (as the space where victory over death (and life) has been attained) becomes the new village while the village itself becomes the forest.

Ultimately, what changes hands between the clan and the imperial representatives is the power over violence. One day the village could rationalize and sanction every act of violence that took place in its territory, the next day it lost that power. Through an established legal structure founded on the power over life and death, the clan validated its claims to hold back the violence of the forest. To disassemble this order, the British would have to undermine this claim with a counterclaim that they are the only ones who can put an end to violence. But how is that possible if there is already an economy of violence in place? The solution is to recast the clan as a space of violence, to transform it into a forest, so to speak. And this can be done by disabling the old system of meanings through which certain acts of violence were distinguished as legal and non-legal. The British empire did not put an end to violence. Instead it multiplied the different forms of violence so that it could better validate its legal intervention. The killing of twins becomes infanticide. Human sacrifice becomes homicide. The caste system becomes political discrimination. Suddenly, the clan is a

place rife with violence, losing its separateness from the forest; thereby, giving the imperial power the grounds of undecidability on which to constitute its sovereign power. We are back in the primordial forest but the imperial power is the entity fighting “the spirit of the wild” now embodied in the non-functioning political order of the clan. The monopoly over violence as the ultimate object of this contest has not changed from when the founder of Umuofia fought the spirit of the wild and triumphed over it. *Things Fall Apart* stages this latter-day contest in the form of two spectacular acts of violence—the Abame Massacre and the domestication of the evil forest. Achebe closes the gap that sets up the world of clan politics and the imperial order as dialectical opposites. “The peculiarly African character,” Hegel observes, “is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas” (110). Claims such as these, of Africa’s otherworldliness, seek to justify Africa’s supersession by the forces of modernity. In the process of correcting the faulty ideology, through which Africa is interpreted as a sign of violence without form, Achebe also exposes the African logic at the heart of the imperialist process. The pre-colonial political complex and the imperial order, Achebe suggests, share the objective of legitimizing and preserving power through a monopoly over violence that is anchored on the evil forest. This analogy between clan power and imperialism is significant. Imperialism is no longer the supersession of the African world by a bigger, better, more civilized order. Imperialism repeats an African modality of power.

Despite these similarities, the violence of imperial power has its peculiarities. For example, both clan and empire hold up a feminine figure as the guarantor of violence. Nonetheless, there are significant differences. It is hard to tell what the earth goddess is from the novel. Is she the ruler or the creator of the earth? Is she simply an allegorical figure of the earth itself? What is certain is that despite the fact that she is called the “earth” goddess, her power is not planetary in the same way that the queen is. In other words, her power does not depend on her being able to lay claim to being “the most powerful ruler in the world” (194). The earth is not, for her, a “dominion” (194). Unlike the queen, she does not seem to own the space over which she rules, neither is her power initiated by an act of appropriation. Her chief task, it seems, is to withhold the power of evil embodied in a forest that was continually seeking to overreach the boundary that set it apart from the village. The difference between her and the queen is the difference between a sovereign and a restrainer. She embodies the power that literally prevents the world of the clan from falling apart. That is why the language of protection and care⁷ that the District Commissioner evokes with regard to the queen might not be applicable to the goddess. It is not that the goddess does not provide

⁷ “We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people's houses and their place of worship. That must not happen in the dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world” (Achebe 194).

security and order. It is just that hers is the protection not of the owner keeping watch over or tending its property but of the guard (or the guardian).

Another point of difference between the clan and imperial order lies in the rhetoric of life and protection characteristic of the biopolitics of imperialism. If the economy of violence within the old order was exercised on the basis of a “victory over death,” imperial power claimed a victory over life, on the basis of which it rescues from death and protects from harm or ill-treatment. “If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue” (194), says the District Commissioner to the village heads, who he is about to incarcerate. We must not, however, forget that this power of protection derives from an earlier act of violence (the Abame Massacre). The juridical and bureaucratic structure of courts and justice is another distinguishing feature of the new order. “We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen....the most powerful ruler in the world” (194), continues the District Commissioner in his little speech to the village heads about the presence of a new power. A juridical system mediating between a sovereign figure of violence and an the individual replaces a system where violence is immediate. In this new order, violence is evoked through the rhetoric of rights and justice. The very idea that power aspires to justice is something that would not have entered the calculus of violence and power in the old order. The clan did not always cover over the fact that violence was a matter of power and order and not of justice. We see this difference

illustrated in the way Dickens⁸ and Achebe handle the disposability of their characters. Admittedly, Magwitch and Unoka are unique to the systems of power within which they reside, meaning that they are figures of different forms of disposability. But what strikes me as interesting is the fact that even though it is quite clear that Dickens has marked Magwitch for death, he still has to dress up the destruction of this character in an (awkwardly) elaborate juridical process. This is a character that appears for the first time in the novel amidst the marshes of a graveyard. Magwitch's death has already been fated. His violation of his ban, the melodramatic court hearing, and his eventual death is Dickens covering over the character's peculiar relationship to violence with the rhetoric of justice. That is why despite the best of efforts, Dickens fails to account for the difference between Magwitch and Pip. If both men are animated by the desire to become gentlemen, why does one succeed and the other fail? Why does it seem as though Magwitch, like Unoka, is plain and simply an "ill-fated man" (Achebe 18)? Why does Dickens try so desperately to hide this aspect of his character with which Achebe is so forthcoming? I am reminded of Achebe's response to John Updike's comments about the ending of *The Arrow of God*. In a letter to Achebe, Updike expresses admiration (and slight unease) that Ezeulu "should be so suddenly vanquished" and that his defeat should take place "in a page or two" (56). What Updike is not saying outright but that he is really asking is why Achebe's characters are killed off, just like that, without due

⁸ Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. New York: Rhinehart P, 1962

process. Achebe picks up on the unsaid in Updike's remark. He senses that what is being put up for questioning is what may appear to some as the extra-judicial quality of violence in his novels. As Achebe sees it, Updike's observation stems from his ties to the European tradition of the novel where, "If...[a character] has to be destroyed, it must be done expansively with detailed explanations and justifications, not to talk of lamentations. And he must be given as final tribute the limelight in which to speak a grand, valedictory soliloquy" (57)! This juridical articulation of violence seems, to Achebe, tacked on and false. When we return to someone like Dickens after having read Achebe we realize that the juridical padding of Dickens' narratives cover over the intimate relationship between law, power and violence.

Things Fall Apart begins and ends with a display of Okonkwo's body. The opening is a wrestling match. Thousands of men, women, and children from various villages are gathered in the market square, their eyes captivated by two bodies tangled up in struggle. "Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point" (3). The body of the athlete pushing the boundaries between the human and the superhuman is held up as a spectacle for all to see. The bodies of both men are even transposed to the realm of the mythical, for, as the narrator explains, in throwing down a man who had previously been undefeated for seven years, Okonkwo called to mind the founder of

their town who “engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights” (3), and presumably destroyed it.

Okonkwo’s body displayed in all its athletic beauty and power and made almost godlike under the luster of myth ends up, in one of the final scenes in the novel, a carcass hanging down and dangling from a tree. A body that initially allows the idealization of a scene of violent contest into myth is transformed into a corpse that has to be “buried like a dog” (208). Okonkwo who decapitated five men in battle, who did not let domestic sentiments get in the way of his legal obligation to kill a foster son, who was a powerful instrument of legal violence—this is the Okonkwo that now dangles from a tree, disavowed by his own people and reduced to one “reasonable paragraph” in the annals of empire (209). This chapter has been an attempt to give an account of the two economies of violence—clan and imperial—that connect these two bodies.

After Okonkwo beheads the court Marshall, a public trial and the spectacle of death by hanging would have provided the perfect means to constitute the imperial order as a lawmaking power. Okonkwo kills himself instead and by so doing renders the colonial juridical machinery through which violence is transformed into law making power inoperative. Instead of using Okonkwo’s death as an opportunity for legal decision, the commissioners and his men end up, on Obierika’s request, with the “undignified” menial task of cutting the body down and burying it. “We cannot bury him,” Obierika pleads, “we shall pay your men to do it” (208). But not even the clan is

able to appropriate the body to further its own ends. His death is not that of the great criminal who is admired by the common people in life and revered in death. Like his father (and Kafka's K⁹), Okonkwo dies a death of shame. In what way does this shame outlive him? As with Unoka, should we expect Okonkwo to reappear? Should we think of Okonkwo's body as something that continues to interrupt African modernity? What form might this interruption take?

As a suicide, Okonkwo's body is an abomination and has to be separated from the clan. If the imperial order cannot secure their lawmaking power on the basis of Okonkwo's death, neither can the clan use his death as a new center around which to gather what is left of the broken order. Okonkwo's corpse, doubly abandoned, exists beyond the two symbolic orders. But there is another dimension to Okonkwo's suicide. A suicide is one form of violence that is neither legal nor illegal, particularly within the new Juridical order. In killing himself, Okonkwo makes his death something on which the order could not decide. In so doing, he hands over his death to the Earth Goddess, creating one last case on which her name could be evoked. When the commissioner asks why Okonkwo's kinsmen refused to bury him, an anonymous bystander responds: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth...His

⁹ Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. New York: Schocken, 1968.

body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (207). In making his body abominable to the earth goddess, Okonkwo gives himself over to her.

As a story of loss, *Things Fall Apart* lends itself to the historicist logic of history as a series of transformations that take place in stages of development made possible by a past in which the things of old disappear. The wreckage of the clan, the destruction of the legal, political, and technological apparatus through which it uses violence in the service of power becomes the necessary precondition of the institution of imperial structures of power. The destruction of African political structures is, thus, seen as necessary for the establishment of empire. However, violence itself as a principle of power escapes this constitutive work of destruction that is inherent to a historicist logic of becoming. Empire did not invent the uses and management of violence as criteria of power and certainly did not put an end to it. It simply recalibrates violence for incorporation into its political order. But this incorporation is not total. Something of the violence—of the forest, the goddess, and the clan—from the old world survives. I would like to think of Okonkwo's corpse as the form this survival takes. As something cast out of the old order as an abomination and as something that does not lend itself to the affirmation of imperial political takeover, Okonkwo's body outlives the destruction of the former and inhabits the latter as something that escapes incorporation. To tell the story of this body, that is to account for the transfiguration of the body of the wrestler (made luminous by myth) into a corpse that can only be buried like a dog is to give a

name to what haunts and continues to interrupt the received history of an (Hegelian)
African modernity.

Chapter 3: Interspaces and the Never-Ending Story

In an essay published last year, Ranciere argues that the triumph of modern fiction, as spearheaded by Virginia Woolf, was decided on the question of how best to make fiction capture the truth of life. “Life consists of an incessant shower of innumerable atoms that come from all sides,” or as Aristotle might formulate it, the “empirical succession of individual facts” (196,197). Therefore, concludes Woolf, to impose a “causal link of necessity or verisimilitude” on the lyrical scatter of life would be tantamount to crippling the truth bearing capacity of fiction (197). Woolf does agree that fiction cannot consist entirely in “the chance succession” of micro-perceptions and moments, but she insists that fiction comes closest to bearing the truth of life’s radical exteriority when it takes the form of a “wandering thread,” —

what Woolf, after Conrad, names the “luminous halo” or the “semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”. The wandering thread thus is something different from the chance succession of the atoms. It is the thread linking the atoms so as to make the light of the halo shine and the spiritual texture of the envelope provide a new sense of the whole. 197.

In the course of the essay, Ranciere will show that “there is no wandering thread” after all, “allowing the luminous halo of life to dismiss the tyranny of the plot.” Woolf’s so-

called “new kind of whole” is dialectically bound to the organic totality of plot, which it purports to replace but which it must always evoke so that it can disavow it.

If the invention of this “new sense of the whole” as an instrument for “dissolve[ing] the lie of plot” marks one of the inaugural moments of modern fiction, then perhaps we can put forth the proposition that Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* marks yet another landmark moment in the modern narrative project of unraveling the “lie of plot” (2014). Okri’s version of the project is quite intriguing because it deactivates the force of causality by rendering it altogether superfluous in the way it displaces the problem of plot—whether as tyrannical, wandering, or absent—as the starting point of form and stylization. For Okri, it is not enough to answer Aristotle and the Edwardian materialists with a “new sense of the whole.” Apart from reintroducing some kind of totalizing structure into narrative, this approach re-inscribes the Aristotelian opposition between life and fiction it claims to dismiss. In other words, like Woolf and her beloved Georgian writers, Okri assumes the “radical exteriority” of the stuff of which life consists (197). He also understands that within this sphere there exists only “the destruction of the usual modes of connection of causal action” (197). The difference is that confronted with this disorder, Okri’s knee-jerk reaction is not to conjure some alternate “living unity” through which a new kind of “immanence of the whole” can be made “manifest” but to produce more scatter by means of a narrative form we are calling the unfinishable story (197). Put simply, the unfinishable story is a new way of

assembling things to form a narrative by means of a force of dispersal. Instead of inventing yet another mode of linkage, another kind of thread, another kind of whole, Okri puts into play a narrative principle through which things are held together in fuzzy clusters where they are constantly being pulled apart and inserted into other forms of assemblies, while staying open to all kinds of changes and transformations.

It is, of course, hard to miss the irony in the claim that a novel officially categorized as fantasy purports to unravel the “lie of plot.” However, to make the starting point of criticism the assumption that Okri’s novel is magical-realist or fantasy is to prematurely domesticate the abundantly productive formal unruliness of the novel. If it is the case that *The Famished Road* is not so much a novel as it is an expansive and unruly archive of things, bodies, and adventitious circumstances, then this chapter offers, in part, a cautious attempt at taking a step in the direction of a non-magical-realist reading of Okri’s masterpiece. The question we should be asking about Okri’s novel is not how it synthesizes the magical and the realist, the miraculous and the everyday, the modern and the pre-capitalist, precolonial and postcolonial condition but by what formal and stylistic machinations it holds together an amalgam of heterogeneous elements without subsuming these elements into an organic whole-story.

The Famished Road begins with a folkloric fragment—the story of how the road, which was once a river, became hungry— and ends with a set of disjointed dream visions and quasi-prophetic utterances. In between is a mass of enigmatic images and

incidents hastily and awkwardly joined together by cheap plot tricks. Towards the end of the novel, as though to placate the reader who has just tumbled through a mass of discontinuous incidents and characters, Azaro, who is the principle character, offers a belated warning in a brief anecdote about meeting a tortoise, who “was a wandering griot” and “who warned [him] at the roadside that no story could ever be finished” (481). With this statement, Azaro hints at one of the novel’s most important formal attributes.

There is the straightforward sense in which a story that can never be finished is a story that stays open on both ends. No one clarifies for us the stakes and properties of such a form as well as Lukacs does in the *Theory of the Novel* where he argues that beginnings and endings of novels are far from being expendable formal attributes. He explains that against the “discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated” things (81), bodies and events in which the problematic world makes itself perceptible, the novel’s only chance at some kind of epic redemption lies in the “biographical form” — not to be confused with natural biological life, which begins at birth and ends at death (77). Biographical form is an abstract conception of life as a completed framework. It is also an organizing principle that allows us to assign a beginning and an end to the content of a novel. While a novel “is by no means bound to the natural beginning and end of life,” observes Lukacs, it necessarily captures “the only essential segment of life” as “determined by the central problem” of the narrative (81). By “touching upon whatever

lies before or after that segment...as it relates to that problem," the biographical form allows the novel to gather into itself both what lies within and outside its marked limits. Biographical form is a synecdochic structure whereby one segment of life can stand for a whole, unified narrative life unfolding itself developmentally. Every story is a segment of life cut out of a thread that is the "development of a man" — a thread which, as Ranciere points out, could be wandering or straight, Woolfian or Aristotelian (Lukacs 82). This notion of form requires the primacy of the individual or the subjective principle at the heart of the novel. "The scope of the [novel's] world," explains Lukacs, is such that it is

limited by the scope of the hero's experiences and its mass is organized by the orientation of his development towards finding the meaning of life in self-recognition...the discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolized by the story of his life. 81.

What we want to take from Lukacs is the idea that every novel is a concrete manifestation of an abstract life existing in a completed form. The way to read for this form, especially, where the narrative is ostensibly devoid of a rigid plot structure is to check for subjective interiority. A stream-of-consciousness narrative, for example, is not necessarily open and free of this inner form since the movement inward not only upholds the principle of subjectivity but, in so doing, re-inscribes this abstract, unified biographical framework that haunts every novel. By contrast, a seemingly conventional

story like Kafka's "Great Wall of China" is configured differently. Space is fractured in the meaningless cycles of the wall's "piecemeal construction." Time disperses in the discontinuous histories of the empire. Caught between the discontinuities of a nomad history and the fragmentary order of space, the emperor turns out to be too multiple to wield the unifying force of subjective interiority. Kafka's story exemplifies a narrative leaving itself open to external forces. The unfinishable story is a force that commits narrative to dissipation and flux. It means that things don't get represented and that gestures and images are often unreadable, but it frees the narrative labor from the endless duplication of "a completed framework of the world" and of the individual anchored in the absolute idea of a subjective principle.

With *The Famished Road*, things are a bit more peculiar. Azaro's father's remark—"many lives reside in us...many past lives, many future lives"—is enlightening in this regard. If we read it literally, it means that individual life is a crowded affair (499). Every subjective life form is the bristling constellation of lives from different temporal orders. With the Lukacsian novel, there is only ever one ideal character. Each novel tells the story of one segment of life cut out of one abstract life form, which, in its most recent incarnation, is the liberal individual. Okri has a different predicament. Where the Lukacsian novelist tells the story of a segment of one life form, Okri's narrative subject is a cluster of countless fragmented lives. Modeled after a strange mythological figure of Yoruba cosmology, Azaro has lived far too many lives than he can remember. Azaro

also admits early on in the novel that, apart from the fact that he lives these lives simultaneously, he can't tell one from another. Azaro has no privilege point of access into his own life. As we will see, he has very little control over how he moves and what he encounters. Life is always, for him, a confusing feed of images and assault of sensations from these other lives.

So, it turns out, the contents of *Famished Road* cannot be reduced to an "essential segment" of an abstract, completed life. Instead, in an attempt to narrate these many unfinished lives, both past and future being lived in "frantic simultaneity," the novel sprawls out. Azaro is an archive of uncountable lives that make themselves perceptible in the expansive collection of images and narrative fragments of which the novel consists (147). This boy who simultaneously inhabits non-synchronous spaces and temporalities is an impersonal narrative machine designed to produce an unbounded constellations of images, incidents, things, and bodies. Since the objective of the novel is to propagate as opposed to contain narrative, to keep it open and reversible, there is no need for a narrative life equipped with stable, intrinsic properties through which a central, unifying narrative problem is put into play. As this chapter will show, the "I" that tells the story and that calls itself Azaro is really only an "anonymous, collective, or third-person function" that allows the story to propel itself by a movement towards extrinsic relations. The *Famished Road* or Azaro's life is a story that can never be finished

in the sense that it is based on a narrative life form uncoupled from any abstract organizing structure.

This expansive, open, and dispersing attribute is evident in the unruly abundance of themes in the novel. Indeed, there are particular moments when the novel takes on the feel of a magician's den cluttered with random items. The reader is assaulted by a volley of themes ranging from boxing, rodent infestation, modern architecture, cavalry, beggar colonies, photography, prostitution, fertility cults, Chinese medicine, haunted houses, gambling, Hitler, party politics, madness, urban development, reincarnation, bibliomania, and much more. This schizophrenic ensemble of themes is rather strikingly captured in the bibliomania scene. Azaro's father has been comatose for days from a boxing match that left his body battered and made him a target of the spirits living in the "Land of the Fighting Ghosts." When he eventually awakens, he is bristling with manic energy. "A new idealism had eaten into his brain with the freshness of his recuperation," remarks Azaro. At some point, the mania induces an attraction to books that Azaro describes thus:

Dad began to spend a lot of the money he had won in buying books. He couldn't read but he bought them. I had to read them to him. He bought books on philosophy, politics, anatomy, science, astrology, Chinese medicine. He bought the Greek and Roman classics. He became fascinated by the Bible. Books on the cabbala intrigued him. He fell in love with the stories of the *Arabian Nights*. He listened with eyes shut to the strange words of classical Spanish love poetry and retellings of the lives of Shaka the Zulu and Sundiata the Great...His passion began to drive us slightly mad. The room became cluttered with books of all sizes, ugly books with pictureless covers and tiny letters as if intended only for

the ants to read, large books that broke your back to carry them, books with such sloped lettering that they strained the neck, books which smelt like cobwebs and barks of medicinal trees and old sawdust after rain. Mum complained and sometimes made piles of the books and balanced her basins and cooking pots on them. Dad got furious at her disrespect and they argued bitterly. 409.

Azaro begins listing the books by their subjects, books that can be assembled around a set of thematic clusters— anatomy, Chinese medicine, politics, and so on. If we imagine this sequence visually, it is like looking at a collection of books in a bookstore arranged according to themes. We can't see the individual titles, just the subject headings under which they are arranged. At this point, there is some kind of order to his interest in books. Anatomy, philosophy, the bible, Spanish poetry, Arabian Nights, and the Shaka epic all amount to a certain kind of liberal sense of what constitutes the dominant sites of knowledge, a kind of world literature "best of" list. It is where you might begin if you wanted to become a "knowledgeable" person. We are not yet in the realm of bibliomania proper. Azaro's father looks more like an avid book collector. But as the lens zooms out, the topical logic of the collection disappears. Books begin to appear before us in the form of their material attributes—"ugly books," "books of all sizes," "pictureless covers," "tiny letters." Books begin to lose their intrinsic value in terms of how they allow access to knowledge and become purely material objects arbitrarily lumped together on the basis of observations about their physical condition. The collectedness of the ensemble of books disperses even further when these books are grafted onto bodies such that what

we are able to observe about them is no longer their material condition but the form in which they interact with the body. Azaro speaks of “large books that broke your back,” “sloped lettering that...strained the neck,” and books that exist only in the form in which they can be smelled. The breaking point is when the constellation ceases altogether to be of books and becomes furniture with the mother piling up the books and “balanc[ing] her basins and cooking pots on them.”

This moment illustrates a key element in the novel—the fact that objects and bodies register their presence not through a set of stable characteristics but through their participation in an ever-changing amalgam of relations. Books take new and increasingly singular forms as they move through the different cycles of “dispersal and collectedness” (Benjamin 188). The more variables put into play, the more fuzzier the aggregate of things become, the more the cluster disperses while also re-collecting in new ways, and the more the nature of the principal element changes—so that what started out as books eventually becomes furniture. The movement from books to furniture also follows a gradual erosion of subjectivity. As the books become incorporated in the series of configurations and reconfigurations, Azaro’s father disappears as the driving force. What starts as an individual’s quest for knowledge becomes a manic attraction for books in general, books that are read but not understood or books that are smelled but not read. By the end of the sequence, the books take on a

life of their own and shift their primary relationship from that with the father to the mother who repurposes them as kitchen furniture.

This enquiry seeks to investigate this force of dispersal and collectedness through which things change their natures, partake in strange forms of mobility, and are divested of subjective powers—how a novel escapes chaos without being subsumed under the unifying mask of subjective interiority and other formal abstractions. This study of the novel is anchored on three main formal problems—the schizotypal structure of the novel’s narrative subject modeled after a dark and enigmatic figure of Yoruba cosmology, called Abiku; the implications of this subjective mode for space and forms of mobility; and the status of meaning and representation.

Abiku is a “child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family” (Mobolade 62). It is a name assigned “to people who are believed to cycle rapidly and repeatedly through birth and death” (Ilechukwu 239). An abiku is a figure of death and melancholy. Though an ageless spirit being, the abiku is born into the world as a human child. It subsequently kills itself or wills its own death, leaving the household bereaved. But this bereavement is followed by a return. The “child” is soon reborn into the same family only to die yet again. This cycle of birth and death continues as many times as it takes for the mother’s body to lose its reproductive capacities, at which point the abiku abandons the household in search of its next victim. The word, abiku, when transliterated means, “born to die.” But it is plain to see how birth and death become

indistinguishable in the many comings and goings. It is born so that it may die as much it dies so as to be born again. For an Abiku, birth and death become synonymous.

Okri's principal character is an abiku who, for some unexplained reason, is compelled to interrupt the endless back-and-forth between death and rebirth, between the spirit realm and the world of the living. Refusing to will his death and return to the spirit world, Azaro remains in the terrestrial realm as an exiled spirit being but also as a "gifted" and restless child born into an impoverished household. The novel is essentially an account of his extended excursion in the human world. Critics have made much of Okri's re-imagination of this figure taken from Yoruba cosmology. But they have mostly treated the figure as though it were just another fantastical character in a novel—Tolkien's elves or Gulliver's Lilliputians. In a hurry to allegorize the figure as representative of some abstract iteration of the postcolonial condition, some critics miss the enormous formal possibilities of building a narrative around a life form as fractured and nomadic as the abiku. The central assumption this paper makes is that the abiku is not, for Okri, simply a mythological figure adapted to a modern fantasy novel. He treats the abiku as a subjective apparatus that makes enormous demands on the classic novel form. We will begin by drawing from literary, ethnographic, and mental health archives to cobble together a portrait of Okri's own peculiar appropriation of the abiku figure, which, as Douglas McCabe and Ato Quayson points out, is different from the abiku as it appears in the oral archives of folklore and divinatory commentary.

The abiku is not entirely the stuff of mythology in the sense that it structures real life experiences of individuals and communities. In the second of their two 1990 interviews, Wole Soyinka says to Jane Wilkinson:

“You have to understand that I grew up with abiku, not just as a metaphor but as a very physical expression of the link between the living, the unborn, the ancestral world, and so on. Abiku was real, not just a figment of literary analysis. Some of my siblings were abiku, the anxieties involved in their existence, their survival, their illnesses and so on were abiku. 165.

This view of the abiku as a concrete aspect of daily life informs Soyinka’s deployment of the figure as a metaphor for time as repetition. For Soyinka no myth of progress can stand against the “endless repetition” of violence in history. He calls it the “perennial problem of mutual slaughter, cannibalism, cruelty, the...unconquerable evil of power” that persists “in spite of the phenomenal strides man has made in the improvement of the quality of life, technological means, means of communication, the conquest of nature, the harnessing of the forces of nature” (159). No other figure captures this macabre loop of history than the abiku, which, in its contemporary re-imaginings, claims Soyinka,

became a metaphor...a symbol of cyclic cruelty, cyclic evil, and also an expression for some of the enigma of existence, some of the insoluble aspects of existence. It became a symbol also for unwished cyclic impositions, a symbol for the unwished but recurring. Abiku is something you cannot totally kill off. You mark it, you scar it...It is a theory people swear to (and it is not just a theory) that, if you scar the Abiku, when the next child is born it will have those scars. You’re longing for the new child as a symbol of continuity, a guarantee, a renaissance, a consolation. It’s the same as for instance in politics: there’s an

untenable situation and you're longing for change, you're participating in the process for change, you're looking for a re-born society, but when it eventually emerges, it's got the same ugly scars, the same mark of Cain on it as the last one. (166).

In his study of Soyinka's 1960 poem titled, "Abiku," Niyi Osundare reads the line "ageless though I puke," as a problem of time. The abiku's claim to being an ageless spirit places it beyond time. But in so far as the abiku is nothing without its repeated sojourn to the world of the living, its repeated immersion into human time of death and birth, the abiku is not exempt from time. It is an accursed being trapped within time as repetition. The abiku lives its agelessness through a repetitive act that binds it to time. It lives a short, truncated life span as a child before it dies so as to be born again. An abiku might seem ageless, but its life is broken down into fragments of countless lives lived out in a long series of life cycles.

Beyond this cosmological function of the abiku, Sunday Ilechuckwu's work on the abiku as a mental health issue confirms that in certain communities when "a consecutive familial sequence of births and deaths of infants" occurs, it is "construed as the same child dying and being born over and over again" (Ilechukwu 239). He sees the abiku phenomenon as a psychopathological condition that primarily affects the young. This is, of course, in keeping with customary belief, in which the abiku is thought to die young —more frequently at infancy but certainly before the abiku attains any kind of

socially coded marker of maturity. In an ethnographic essay addressing the mythological belief, Timothy Mobolade explains,

“some abiku may decide to remain alive for as short a period as one day to three months. Some even wait until they have reached the age where they are about to marry before they die; while others choose to die some days after marriage or immediately after the birth of their first child.” 62.

This is why the abiku’s death is considered a “malignant form of reincarnation”

(Ilechukwu 239-240). The return of the abiku is not rebirth of a life lived in full but the abrupt interruption of a life that merely spans the fragment of youth or infancy. The return of the abiku is the return of an unresolved, uncompleted life. It is, therefore, not surprising that the symptomatic profile of the abiku as a mental health condition

includes forms of dissociative behaviors. As Ilechukwu observes,

There appears to be a failure of awareness of thought process, and feelings so that actions are disconnected from psychological process and appear reasonably attributable to a disembodied psyche...DSM-IV diagnoses of bipolar mania, brief psychotic disorder, schizophrenia or the schizophreniform psychoses, or the non-DSM diagnosis of bouffee delirante of French Psychiatry must always be considered. 250-251

The many cases featured in Ilechukwu’s study show that the abiku thrives in a kind of narrative abundance. Patients tell outlandish stories about their other lives, stories which are mostly drawn from urban legends and folklore. One thing we can take away from this is that the abiku is a state in which a person might imagine him or herself immersed in a web of incidents, sensations, and perceptions without any subjective

“awareness” or control. Equally important for our study is the idea that an abiku is defined by a certain kind of narrative excess generated by the need to account for the claims to have lived many lives.

Okri’s literary deployment of the abiku figure brings together these contemporary discourses—the abiku as a figure of repetition and as an accumulation of countless fragments of lives that manifest themselves in some kind of dissociative reality. “How many times,” Azaro laments, “had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea” (5). Again, we have to extract this statement from the sphere of fantasy or mythology and read it literally. Azaro who has lived far too many lives than he can remember is an accretion of fragmented lives. Being both multiple and fragmented, Azaro’s life cannot be localized or segmented in the way Lukacs imagines it. When Azaro explains his trouble with hallucinating and the incessant invasion of his mind by a “host of images,” he alludes to the constitutive discontinuities at the heart of his narrative life:

I had no idea whether these images belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come...When I was very young I had a clear memory of my life stretching to other lives. There were no distinctions. Sometimes I seemed to be living several lives at once. One lifetime flowed into the others and all of them flowed into my childhood. As a child...I felt weighed down by the inscrutability of life. 7.

Going beyond the mere mythological or fantastic notion of an abiku and, instead, refashioning the abiku as a form of schizotypal life allows Okri to fashion a narrative subject, a storytelling principle, a characterological problem, and a spatial configuration that we can actually read for in a novel. Unlike most of what came before—Soyinka’s poem titled “Abiku,” J. P. Clark’s poem also titled “Abiku,” and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*—Okri goes beyond simply incorporating the figure at the level of theme or subject. Okri’s major contribution to contemporary attempts to reimagine this life form consists in extracting from it a set of formal and stylistic properties.

Beginning with the problem of space in a novel as unhinged and problematic as *The Famished Road* is justified by the fact that space is ostensibly a privileged component of the novel’s structure. After all, it’s a novel about a famished road. The term, famished road, also appears in Soyinka’s 1967 poem, “Idanre,” where it stands as a figure of a space-bound violence. Roads—the signs of enclosures, spatial economies, the possibility of mobility as departure, arrival, and return—paradoxically exposes the traveler to certain forms of violence, death, and immobility. The idea of a famished road in Okri’s novel goes beyond the link between space and violence. It conjures up the idea a space made inoperative by the very instrument of mobility. A famished road is a road that is hungry not just for human life—as in Soyinka’s use—but for space itself. These are strange roads that cannot be reduced to the mere imposition of form to the world. Just like an unfinishable story, a famished road eschews the teleology of destinations or the

economy of space. It propagates itself endlessly by opening spaces instead of creating enclosures. In some of his travels, Azaro would encounter roads that “led to a thousand others, which in turn fed into paths, which fed into dirt tracks, which became streets, which ended in cul-de-sacs and avenues” or roads that have “cruel and infinite imagination,” that “multiplied, reproducing themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths, twisting themselves into labyrinths” (113). At the heart of Okri’s novel is the idea of space as something animate and creaturely, but also as something fractured and constituted by extrinsic relationships to bodies and things.

This is why it seems utterly strange that the critical consensus is that space in *The Famished Road* is structured as a dualism. The central conflict in the novel is ostensibly generated by the division of space between a spirit and an earthly realm. Azaro goes on a self-imposed exile in the human realm after refusing to return to the spirit world. This refusal results in his being haunted down and pressured by his spirit companions, who even stage several attempts to steal him back to their non-human realm. In a sense, it does appear that the life of an abiku is constituted by a spatial division. The abiku is a spirit being in the spirit realm, who journeys to the human world to torment unsuspecting household. It would also seem that, beyond generating the conflict and the mythological rationale of the story, this spatial division is the source of the fantastic in the novel. Ato Quayson’s commentaries on space and “liminality” in *The Famished Road* takes as its starting point a spatial dualism (147). What is “liminal” or “esoteric” about

Azaro's experience, he observes, derives from the fact that Azaro "maintains contact with the spirit-world while steadfastly being committed to remain" in the human world" (146).

Azaro's movement between the two realms in spite of their ontological difference becomes the basis on which the empirically real is suspended. Azaro's capacity to blur the distinction between the spirit realm and the everyday world of human existence infuses the narrative with the all too familiar fantastic elements—hallucinations, mystical transports, and metamorphosis. For us to see space in *The Famished Road* as a dual system, we have to assume that the spirit realm and the earthly realm are actually in opposition. After all, a spatial division of this sort forms the deep tectonic feature of most novels. But the truth is that Okri is not at all interested in this kind of narrative spatial economy, a point that is glaring enough for us to see in the abiku as a problem of space. First of all, the opposition we imagine to be an inherent aspect of the relationship between the human and spirit realms is an illusion produced by the abiku figure itself. The distance between the human and the spirit realm is not there for the abiku to traverse back and forth but is generated by the abiku's back and forth movement. As a figure of the threshold, it is by means of its going and coming that the two realms are constituted as distinct spheres of existence. The spirit realm and the human world are essentially the same—formless spaces—without the repeated movement of the abiku. This is precisely what J. P. Clark's abiku poem makes clear. The

abiku child, who “bestrides the threshold,” is the one who keeps the distinction between the household and the outside world of witches and evil spirits operative by its coming and going (Clark 205). The child constitutes both realms as spaces into which one comes from, leaves, and to which one returns.

We ought also to pay attention to the structural similarities between the two spaces. The spirit world posits itself as a homeland in the same way the earthly realm—constituted by the household—does. In being homelands, both spaces are inimical to forces of dispersal. For example, the spirit companions would often attempt to “entice” Azaro with the promise of “a world where [he] would never be lost” in the same way that after Azaro returns from one of his wandering excursions, an “old man made a libation at both posts of the door” and “prayed” that “[Azaro] never be lost again (18). Each world lays claim to being a force against homelessness and, by so doing, posits the other as the realm of exile. Each world posits itself as the spatial anchor, arrival point, destination, fixed point which one leaves but to which one must always return. They suggest spatial economies where boundaries enable back and forth movement, departures and return, exits and reentries. The frustration of Azaro’s spirit companions at his delayed death/return and the anger Azaro’s father expresses any time Azaro goes on his aimless wanderings are similar. His refusal to die and to return to the spirit realm, as well as his inveterate wanderlust, are indications that he is drawn to space as something dispersed. They are gestures of escape—escape from spaces of captivity

(where he “would never be lost”). By choosing to “stay,” Azaro renders the distinction between the two realms inoperative since it is his back and forth movement that constitutes it in the first place. In rejecting the spirit homeland, he also rejects the human household by foreclosing any possibility of being domesticated, reined in, or “brought up” like a child. Letting go of these homelands does not then render Azaro homeless. Letting go means that Azaro extricates himself entirely from the logic of space as a dialectics of home and homelessness. He finds himself entangled in crowded, fractured, layered, and non-synchronous spaces propelled by the unruly mass of images invading his mind from his many unfinished lives—not simply images from the spirit realm, as some critics think.

In *The Famished Road*, space, as a geometric reality, is actually quite small. Azaro never goes beyond his immediate neighborhood. Most of his adventures take place somewhere between his home, the streets, Madame Koto’s bar, the adjacent forest, and the market—an observation that is easy to miss given that the abundance of singular incidents that characterizes Azaro’s adventure gives the impression that space in the novel is epic and expansive when it is, in actuality, small. One way Okri achieves this formal quirk is by keeping spaces that would otherwise be closed open and crowded—a kind of spatial thriftiness that involves breaking down the boundaries between the inside and the outside to allow spaces to be repurposed in such a way that a whole lot can be done or stuffed within a small space. Take for example Madame Koto’s bar.

Azaro recalls a moment when it becomes so “crowded that [he] had to struggle through the tight-jammed bodies, all of them raucous, all of them singing” with “voices that were unearthly, languages that were nasal and alien, laughter that could only have come from dead tree trunks at night or from hollow graves.” But the more the space becomes crowded with Madame Koto’s “mutant customers,” the more it seems as though the small neighborhood hang-out spot has “been transported from its familiar environs...to somewhere under the road, under the sea, to a dimly remembered and unwanted landscape” (133). There is also the comical case of the police man’s house infested with ghosts. This is in spite of a plaque proudly mounted on the wall, which has the inscription: “Jesus is the unseen guest in every home” (19). How fitting that a household that purports to monitor its unseen inhabitants is infested with ghosts. In lampooning the idea of the guest or of a household as an enclosure that allows only authorized forms of inclusion, Okri creates a domestic space that doubles as a burial ground. People murdered by the policeman outside the house, purportedly in the line of duty, find their way back to his house where they live and partake of everyday domestic activities. They mill around the house, eat his food, lie on his bed without his knowing. All through the novel there are numerous examples of ordinary spaces—a bar, a living room, even a photograph—taking on a mythical expansiveness simply by being inundated with bodies and things.

Another way Okri integrates an epic expansiveness into small spaces is through hallucination. What we might think of as hallucinations or magical flights in *The Famished Road* are actually techniques for changing spatial coordinates. Hallucination functions in the novel as a means of creating a relationship of contiguity between disparate spaces across a horizontal trajectory in such a way that the distinction between an enclosed interior space and an ungraspable outside space is rendered superfluous. "One moment," narrates Azaro, "I was in the room and the next moment I found myself wandering the night roads. I had no idea how I had gotten outside" (188). In another instance, he says, "One night I managed to lift myself out through the roof. I went up at breathtaking speed and stars fell from me" (188). In these two instances, the bedroom or the house is made contiguous to interplanetary spaces. This way, the bedroom turns out to be less enclosed and the night skies to be less vast. Hallucination becomes not just a marker of the fantastic but a narrative technique used to present space as heterogeneous. Granted hallucinations is a manifestation of the dissociative perceptions of an abiku—a being consisting of a multiplicity of lives—but it also bears out what Deleuze means by nomad space and nomad forms of mobility. Since nomad subjectivities are multiplicituous entities, movement is not measurable transference from one fixed point to another over the course of time. Thus for the nomad, immobility and speed are indistinguishable (Deleuze 400). Transference can take place without any relative movement. Azaro is nomad in the sense that he lacks a set of stable and intrinsic

properties. He is a constellation of fragmented lives, both past and future, and this has clear implications for mobility. Okri is very well aware that an abiku has to experience space differently. As some kind of multiplicity or amalgam of lives, an abiku is capable of inhabiting disparate spaces simultaneously and is capable of going from one space to another without any relative movement; hence the need for hallucinations and seemingly magical transports.

The essential character of space in *The Famished Road* takes its clearest form in the market sequence in book 2. In a fit of wanderlust, Azaro decides to go in search of his mother who is a trader in the market place. The journey to the market takes him on a long walk through a blazing hot street. But his arrival at the market isn't so unremarkable. He is first assailed by the "many smells" in the market: odors of "rotting vegetables, the fresh fruits, the raw meat, roasted meat, stinking fish, the feathers of wild birds and stuffed parrots, the wafting odors of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow dung and Sahelian perfume, and pepper-bursts which heated the eyeballs and tickled the nostrils." In the midst of this olfactory intensity, there are the "many voices, loud and clashing" — "bickering in the air," "cart-pullers shout[ing] for people to get out of their way, Imams "pray[ing] on white mats, crashing sounds of stalls being "overturned," "dogs barking," "whizzing" sound of sticks flying the air, flies "buzzing" (161). In the midst of such an intensified olfactory and auditory experience of the market, his vision is greatly impaired. Because he is barely the height of the display

tables in the market stalls, he finds himself in too close proximity to things. He “often found [him]self staring into the dead eyes of fishes, into basins where great crabs and giant lobsters were entangled in their mass of claws, in buckets where hammer-headed fishes and eels whipped their tails against the aluminum”(162). He is always being thrust into things and cannot maintain enough distance to get a visual hold on things. When he looks, he is either seeing collectivities of bodies—“women,” “men”—entangled in a strange catalogue of things or finds himself face-to-face with the “dead eyes of fishes” and wriggly bodies of eels (162). In a sense, Azaro takes in the market the way an animal might—by smelling it, hearing it, and seeing it as a fuzzy aggregate made up of a multitude of bodies and things in constant flux.

The market is not one thing and cannot be experienced as such in the same way that Azaro is not one thing and cannot encounter the market as such. Different parts of the market are made present to Azaro in the form of smells, aromas, “loud and clashing” sounds, and an “unholy fecundity of objects.” Azaro is unable to take in the market as a whole since he can only latch on to disparate parts of the market via his senses. Caught in a space such as the market where objects, bodies, and sensations are making themselves present in “frantic simultaneity,” Azaro has no control over his body, how it moves, or what this movement accomplishes (147). Let us recall that he enters the market in search of his mother. But, no matter how much or how far he walks, he keeps going in circles and seems not to be able to penetrate the market. “I walked round and

round the market spaces," he complains, "unable to go any deeper, unable to find my way out, unable to go on because my feet hurt, and unable to stop because of the perpetually moving crowds who pushed me on or shoved me aside or trampled me or shouted at me" (162). That Azaro finds the market impenetrable derives from the fact that he exists in relation to the market as something bound to it. Since he is "pushed," "shoved," "trampled" by market forces, he drifts with the market as opposed to walking through it. He goes wherever the market's "perpetually moving crowd" takes him. He is drifting, but he is also moving in circles, "going round and round the market place" (162). The problem with Azaro and the market is that they are not opposed to each other the way an object might be opposed to a subject—*res extensa* to *res cogitans*. On the one hand, Azaro is not able to claim a self-sufficient interiority that is independent and separate from the market. He is part of this assembly of bodies and things that he can't quite grasp in its entirety or in its abstract wholeness. What he knows about the market is piecemeal and wired through his body and senses. On the other, the market is not the realm of the absolute and so does not dominate all its constituent parts. Instead, the market draws things into itself like a vortex even as it abandons itself to their constant flux and their refusal to give up their singularities.

His mother is in the market, but there is no way he can get to her as long as he interacts with the market as something to be penetrated and as long as he imagines his mother as a destination awaiting his arrival. Not all spaces lend themselves to the act of

discovery, least of all the market. For a space to be searchable, it has to be penetrable, which would require that there is an interior to be penetrated. Spaces such as the market have no fixed points of entry or exit. They are not enclosures with clearly marked boundaries, which is why Azaro finds he is “unable to go any deeper” and “unable to find [his] way out” (162). The market is space “sprawled in fantastic confusion” (161). It is radically exterior and refuses any kind of limits that would give it a stable form or ascribe any kind of interiority to it. It also refuses any kind of relationality that would determine the position of its heterogeneous parts. What this means is simply that neither Azaro nor his mother can remain in one place or remain one thing for too long. At some point, he begins to see his mother’s face everywhere and in everyone. One moment the “jostling universe” of the market place is filled with unfamiliar faces (162). But “in flashes of lightness and dark,” he begins to see his mother dispersed everywhere (162). She’s “writhing in the basin of eels. She’s “amongst the turtles in the plastic buckets,” in “the amulets of the sellers of charms.” She’s “all over the market,” which, of course, means that she is no where to be found (162).

To find his mother, he has to “change the perceptive coordinates of [the] space-time” of the market (Deleuze 248). The story of how Azaro ends up finding his mother is a spectacular illustration of nomadic forms of mobility. The process of finding his mother involves several stages. First, he abandons the task of finding his mother altogether and takes refuge under a “stall of snails” (162). When “time changed” and

“darkness slowly swallowed the day,” he comes “out from under the stall” and makes another attempt at “struggling through the crowd” (162-3). This time his movement brings him to the stall of an old herbalist. The stall is somewhat tangential to the market. In the herbalist’s shop, Azaro finds a space that appears to be a part of the market but also somewhat removed from it. Even though Azaro can still hear the murmurs of the market, he observes that the man’s stall “was the quietest place in the whole market” (163). The crowded market seems not to affect him. “He sat alone on a bench...called no one to buy his wares and no one came” (163). Azaro proceeds to ask for directions, but instead of telling Azaro where to go, he hands Azaro a bowl of beans and a glass of water. Azaro’s description of what follows sounds very much like a drug-induced hallucination. He finds hears disembodied voices and comes face to face with the moon, and arrives at a deserted well. A few yards from the well, he finds his mother quarreling with two market thugs threatening to evict her from her stall. Azaro moves transversely through the market to the moon and then to his mother’s location in the market. These are the kinds of spaces and forms of mobility privileged in the novel and not simply movement between two spaces as fixed and monolithic as spirit and earthly realm.

In his 2002 poem, “Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known, Soyinka conceptualizes the space of the market in strikingly similar terms and also clarifies why Azaro is necessarily a wandering subject. “A market,” Soyinka begins, “is kind haven for the wandering soul or the merely ruminant” (49). What the wanderer and the

ruminant have in common is a form of mobility not tied to an ultimate object. The market can suffer only these kinds of beings because of its peculiar spatial configuration. The market consists of stalls, but each stall is a consecrated enclosure—“shrine,” “temple,” and “magic cave”—filled with “memorabilia” (49). The passages linking these stalls—the lanes, by-ways and paths— are themselves crypts. As crypts linking magic caves, these conduits are unlike paths linking “fixed and identifiable points” (25). It’s cavernous stalls and cryptic passages are more like chambers or portals that “transport us/...from pole to antipodes, annulling/Time, evoking places and lost histories” (49). Zapping from “pole to antipodes” with time interrupted, the subject of the market can hold spaces separated by enormous distance in immediate simultaneity and reawaken histories thought to have been lost to the inexorable flow of time.

In a second attempt to define the market, Soyinka writes in the first line of the second stanza, “A market is where Samarkand invades/Johannesburg, and as the shutters close/ Departs without regret or trace/Until its next reincarnation” (49). The market is a space not of continuity but of repetition, more reason why the wanderer and the merely ruminant are its subjective forms. But the market is also “borrowed spaces” over which people and things contend but can never assert patrimony (50). Even though the market is a place where the terms of property are transacted, somehow the market exists outside a regime of property. This is possibly because the market sustains two different orders of exchange. On the one hand, “hard currency is what changes hands”

(49). On the other, the market “lets you drift in fluid channels where/ Sensations thrive on trade by barter” (29). The market is something other than chaos because it has a bit a system about it—a geographical whole as in “pole to antipodes” but also an order of exchange as in “hard currency” going from hand to hand and back. But within this rational order lies those other “channels” where things and people don’t circulate but “drift” through spaces saturated with sensations. In these spaces of sensations and contingency, exchange takes place among unequal, incommensurable, untranslatable things, things bristling with excess life, embodied things. The market is a space where abstract system of signs have not completely taken over, where the commodity still has to contend with the fetish. Sound, like sensations, thrive in the market place: “the muezzin’s prayer” chants, handbells, “fairy-bells in counterpoint to cosmic ooms,” Ogun’s bells, Sango’s drums, “ancestral voices,” invocations (50). These religious expressions commingle illicitly and lose their sacredness in the profane world of the market. Pulled in every direction by the proliferation of sound, things, and colors, the wandering dervish does not walk along trajectories with fixed point. Entranced by the assault of sounds and things, he “swirls” and “meanders” in “ethereal motion” through transverse or multi-directional trajectories (50).

The first of the poem’s two epigraphs—“the world is a market place”—taken from a Yoruba song gives away the fact that the market serves for Soyinka as a metaphor for the world (49). And if the world is a market place, it offers a political imaginary different

from a sense of the world as a home, a lost home, or a space always in the process of being made a home. This distinction between market and home is important for Soyinka. The main objective of the poem is a critique of contemporary religious and political fundamentalism, published partly as a response to the 9/11 tragedy. He builds the critique around the distinction between the idea of the market as a fluid, borrowed, contingent, and crowded space and the idea of the world as something that can be inherited, as a promise land, a home—all of which is, of course, predicated on the idea of property and the discourse of right.

The idea that narrative is, more or less, propelled by the utopian reconstitution of a lost home is a version of what Soyinka criticizes in the sphere of politics. The market as nomad space in correspondence with the abiku as a schizotypal subject distinguishes Okri's work from the entrenched axiom, popularized by Lukacs, that the novel, at its philosophical core, is constituted on the idea of the world as a home or as a lost home. Okri's novel seems to suggest a different spatial unconscious for narrative—the market where unresolvable difference, randomness, and openness are made productive instead of a lost home where difference is something one resolves by re-introducing immanence into the world by other means.

Azaro's remark about his mind being invaded by a "host of images" and his not knowing "whether these images belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come" hints at the problem of visibility in the novel (7). An abiku is a

constellation of disparate lives that refuses to be unified under one subjective consciousness. These lives make themselves present in the form of fragmentary images, most of which are unintelligible to Azaro himself. Azaro is assailed with visual experiences of lives that are his—lives he has lived before or is yet to live—but that he, nonetheless, cannot fully assume. It also accounts for why in *The Famished Road*, narrative is primarily a visual process, as is evident in the fact that the word “saw” is used over 400 times in the novel. What counts as “recounting” is not a narrative thread unfolding in time but a succession of images or a cluster of images occurring simultaneously. In other words, Azaro is not a storyteller weaving a narrative of his own life. He is a detached spectator conveying to the reader-spectator a disjointed play of images and scenes. The novel’s problem of intelligibility—read as magical realist—derives, in part, from the fact that it is made up of unreadable images that are equally unintelligible to Azaro.

The way to read for this “heightened graphicness” in *The Famished Road* is to observe Azaro’s tendency to give pictorial depictions of dramatic moments (Benjamin 461). One of Azaro’s many excursions into the forest consists of four main scenes, the first of which is a scene of protest and the last a fighting scene between two monsters—all of which are conveyed through different forms of visual techniques. The first scene is a construction site:

Workers stood around the hulks of machinery, abusing those who were working. They waved sticks with words written on them. I gathered that those who cursed had been sacked. They shouted slogans at the white engineers. The sun was remorseless. Shadows were deep. Where the sun was brightest, objects were blackest. Antagonists and protesters twisted in an extraordinary dance and all I could make out were the confusing shapes of glistening bodies moving in and out of visibility. The lights made everything unreal. 241.

There is shouting, cursing, abusing, and so on taking place. And even though it is supposed to be a construction site, in a very Kafkaesque sense, no construction is taking place. It has been interrupted because the workers are engaged in a heated protest against their employer. But notice how Azaro can't help highlighting the scene in terms of lights and shadows. The dramatic potential of the scene is lost in Azaro's hurry to reduce the scene to an image. Against the play of sunlight and deep shadows a scene of protesting workers is transformed into a play of "confusing shapes...moving in and out of visibility." The dramatic scene quickly deteriorates into a surrealist image: an "extraordinary dance" of "twisted," "glistening bodies" and "confusing shapes."

The second scene is also a construction site of sorts. A community is in the process of being built in a disappearing forest. But the difference is that here the construction phase is replaced with a kind of magical instant where houses and roads are springing up in quick success even as they are being populated and lived.

All around, in the future present, a mirage of houses was being built, paths and roads crossed and surrounded the forest in tightening circles, unpainted churches and the whitewashed walls of mosques sprang up where the forest was thickest. The worshippers in the unpainted churches wore white cassocks and prayed to the ringing of bells all afternoon. The world of trees and wild bushes

was being thinned. I heard the ghostly wood-cutters axing down the titanic irokos, the giant baobabs, the rubber trees and obeches. There were birds' nests on the earth and the eggs within them were smashed, had fallen out, had mingled with the leaves and the dust, the little birds within the cracked eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world. 242.

Roads, houses, mosques, churches are springing up even as forest trees are thinning out and as birds emerging from their shells are dying—like a time lapse video. These scenes are more vibrant than the last, but they are also more unstable. The longer he stays with the scene, the more evanescent the images become. One moment the world is springing up from thin air. Another moment it is disappearing. Whereas in the previous phase, the construction scene disintegrates, due to a problem of lighting, into a dark, surrealist version of itself, here images appear only to “vanish before [his] gaze.” The problem with Azaro’s visions is not so much that they are unreal but that they never cohere into something unified before the reader is assailed with another cluster of images. Again and again the reader is confronted with sketches that are too unstable and too piecemeal to be read for any narrative meaning.

Azaro’s visions become more extravagant as he goes deeper into the forest. He encounters an old man and a boy, but the narrative potential of these encounters is cut short as the reader is inundated with fantastic descriptions of bodies and the surrounding world.

I saw a bird with a man’s hairy legs flying clumsily over the branches of the rain-tree. An antelope with the face of a chaste woman stopped and stared at me and

when I moved it disappeared among the luxuriant bushes. An old man emerged from the anthill that had been following me. He had a white beard and green bejewelled eyes and a face that was both a hundred years old and childlike. 243.

One begins to suspect that moments when Azaro becomes lyrical or amplifies the strangeness of the world and the creatures he encounters are moments when the force of the dramatic is being foreclosed. After going through a list of statements like these— “a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull,” “dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws,” “cats with the legs of women, midgets with bright red bumps on their heads,” and “birds with bright yellow and blue feathers, eyes that were like diamonds,” “prehistoric dragon with the body of an elephant and the face of a warthog,” —the reader is so overwhelmed that the thought of asking “so what happened” is lost (245). Azaro assails us with so many extravagant and flamboyant depictions of distorted bodies and spaces that the demand for a narrative—that Azaro stops for one second to tell us what these images mean, how to read them, what he thinks of them—is completely lost.

The simple truth is that the bulk of *The Famished Road* is a jumble of unintelligible images, scenes, and encounters. The conventional critical move has been to reduce these unassimilable bits of elements to the effect of fantasy or magic-realism. However, what is strange about Okri’s world is not the irruption of the magical in a world entirely present as real. The image of “a cat with the leg of a woman” is weird not because it is

less real than a construction site with protesting workers (245). The problem is that Azaro never rises above merely registering a set of disjointed visual feeds. The usual physiognomic power of images and descriptions in conventional narrative is missing here. What is odd about “cats with the legs of women” and “midgets with bright red bumps on their heads” is not the fact that they are fantastic but that they are opaque, unreadable, mute (245). They are simply placed side by side without testifying to anything but their mere presence. In this form, they appear as mute visual fragments. Azaro puts it perfectly when he observes that the forest is a space where “ordinary things [become] riddles” (246). For Azaro, visions never resolve into revelation or an invitation to interpretation. Each of those 400 times that Azaro invites the reader to see what he sees, what appears are unreadable scenes, bodies, objects, and images. Being incomplete, they are not able to bear or reflect the immanence of an articulated structure. Both narrator and reader are spectators of a world that parades itself as a dumb show consisting of an undecipherable “choreography of gestures” (Benjamin).

As has been demonstrated, Azaro moves and acts in ways that are indifferent to his will or individual disposition. Much of what is unintelligible about *The Famished Road*—the myriad creatures, the extravagantly fantastical encounters and images, the discontinuous narrative ensembles—derive from the fact that Azaro’s many lives and their interplay are neither generated nor propelled by himself. They are, in a sense, assigned to him. That is why he never could tell whether the images invading his minds

“belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come.” The impersonal force driving narrative in the novel is also evident in the way the novel is awkwardly tied together by cheap plot tricks primarily because Azaro lacks a strong enough subjective presence to hold together and propel the narrative.

Chapter 4: “Aquatic Forests” and the Making of an African World Power

Nnedi Okorafor’s 2014 novel, *Lagoon*, and *Things Fall Apart* are the last two novels one would think to pair. One is realist. The other is science-fiction/fantasy (SFF). One is read as a historiographical reconstruction of the past. The other is a speculative imagination of the future. One is set in a secluded terrestrial enclave. The other is set in a coastal city that has been linked to the global pathways of power and capital for over three hundred years. One is a largely masculine world. The other is anchored around powerful female characters. The two novels are set in historical moments more than a hundred years apart. In spite of these glaring differences, I argue that both texts are so intimately bound that *Lagoon* could be read as a fan-fiction rewriting of *Things Fall Apart*. As an alien encounter story set in a post-Achebe world, *Lagoon* reopens the apparent inevitability and finality of Achebe’s colonial encounter plot to a speculative rewriting.

The objective of the chapter is to reopen the question of the forest within the context of contemporary African fiction. The juxtaposition of Achebe’s and Okorafor’s novels has the precise advantage of demonstrating different modes of assembling fictional worlds around the idea of the forest. Achebe uses the forest to constitute a life ordered around clan power. It is this order that is dismantled when the colonial order

hijacks the evil forest and transforms it into a church. Okorafor uses the forest, not to make order visible as Achebe does, but to dismantle the spatial and ontological binary at the heart of the global ecological crisis. But Okorafor takes things a bit further. For both Achebe and the colonial order, the forest is nothing but a mere instrument of power. The forest is that space of radical alterity that has to be ceaselessly diminished in order to make the space of political life visible. In contrast, Okorafor imagines the world as forest. She suggests that a post-human world would not only be multi-species—following the wreckage of the human world— but would have to be located within the forest. It is, of course, also important to Okorafor that this planetary, multi-species community which she calls an “aquatic forest” is oriented in relation to Africa.

It is in this sense that *Lagoon* can be read as a continuation of Achebe’s story. In a sense, *Lagoon* is asking the question that every fan-fiction narrative asks: “what if?” What if we pick up Africa’s story about a hundred years after a modern African world has been cobbled together from the wreckage of the colonial event? What if the colonial encounter were to repeat itself but in a more intense form? What if we were taken back to Umuofia but in the future and made to encounter something that is as alien as the white colonial emissaries were to the clan? What if the site of the encounter shifts from a hermetic African world to the African city? What if what is at stake in this encounter is not the loss of Africa’s place as the center of the world but the survival of the globe itself? The idea is to think of *Lagoon* as some kind of sequel to *Things Fall Apart* or as a

narrative built on “what-ifs” generated by Achebe’s novel. The inevitability of Achebe’s realist plot is opened up with the help of science fiction so that an African past that is imagined as loss is now able to “branch out towards multiple futures” (Mbembe 258). *Lagoon* is the future of *Things Fall Apart*, but one that it could not have been able to imagine.

To demonstrate these trajectories of both novels, I organize the chapter around the ways in which Okorafor repurposes the forest as the principle not of order but of the social and political alliance among a radically heterogeneous community of species and objects. The chapter can also be understood as an attempt to throw light on the strange dedication of *Lagoon*: “To the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria— Animals, plant, and Spirit.” The chapter is, thus, essentially asking: how does the idea of “people” that does not include the human fulfill the utopian impulse at the heart of *Things Fall Apart*? And if *Things Fall Apart* marks the inaugural moment of the African novel, how might this new community mark the aesthetic concerns of a post-Achebe literary landscape?

Since my argument about Okorafor’s novel relies on reading *Things Fall Apart* as an unfinished project that requires us to posit a series of “what-ifs,” I want to begin by addressing what it means to think of *Things Fall Apart* as traced through by a utopian impulse. The conventional practice is to read *Things Fall Apart* as a commentary on pre-colonial African life and colonialism. In the first part of the novel, Achebe presents the

everyday life of a clan named Umuofia. It comprises of 9 villages. Life in these villages thrives under the management of a legal order. Umuofia exists within a network of other clans held together by a common legal bond. Umuofia is not only at the center of Achebe's story but also at the center of this inter-clan political community able to exercise its nomological power and defend its claims to a monopoly over violence. By and large, Achebe offers us an African world equipped with all the technologies of power to maintain order, protect life, and manage violence. Against "the legacy of the enlightenment," this much is revolutionary and shows why the novel has been particularly useful to postcolonial discourse (Mbembe 245). In the same breath with which it gives an account of colonial violence it dismantles a discourse of modernity that sets up the pre-colonial African world as lacking political form and order. Achebe replaced the exceptionality of African life with "everyday practices" that showed Africans to be just like everybody else (Mbembe 258). The irony, however, is that all this aesthetic and ideological investment into constructing an African world that is believable and complex serves the purpose of asserting the significance or value of what is fated to be lost. *Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to say that, contrary to what has been said in the discourse of modernity, something was indeed lost. This simplicity of Achebe's claim is also the source of its power. But what this means is that the idea of an African world order becomes visible only in the moment in which it is lost. Achebe is little more than a master domino toppler. Having painstakingly created a world by

assembling a multitude of pieces, the image of what has been assembled remains invisible unless the entire sequence of pieces is toppled. Shouldn't it be a problem that there is no way to tell the African story without telling the story of its loss?

But there is another way to read *Things Fall Apart*. It begins with bracketing the assumption that *Things Fall Apart* is a historical novel—an assumption that has led to the tendency of ascribing all kinds of anthropological and historiographical importance to the novel. Is there a way of shifting the temporal investment of the novel to the future? Is there a way to read *Things Fall Apart* as a colonial eschatology while also identifying the “secret index” by which it refers to a future of redemption (Benjamin 463)? How might we reread *Things Fall Apart* as giving an account not of the past but of an African world that is yet to come? On the basis of what kind of reading can the African past represented in *Things Fall Apart* be reconstituted as an image of the future?

One way to begin would be to interrogate some of the aesthetic choices that Achebe makes in constructing his pre-colonial African community. It has become a cliché that *Things Fall Apart* is a story about the colonial encounter. But what is sometimes not taken into consideration in emphasizing this aspect of Achebe's work is the fact that the colonial encounter does not necessarily refer to a historical datum. It is a historical phenomenon, yes, but one that functions like an example, a figure, a model that we use to make a set of historical patterns or relationships intelligible (Agamben 1, 5). The paradigmatic (as opposed to historical) aspects of The Colonial Encounter are

evident when we place a little bit of critical scrutiny on the way it is staged in *Things Fall Apart*. The particular scene I have in mind takes place half way through the novel. Okonkwo is in exile when he receives visitors from his homeland. His closest friend Obierika comes to see him and brings very strange news. A neighboring clan has been wiped out. Addressing a circle of men, Obierika begins to narrate the story as he heard it from the survivors.

During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan...He was not an albino. He was quite different...And he was riding an iron horse. The first people who saw him ran away, but he stood beckoning to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them. And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends. I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him. 138-139

Here Achebe reverses the colonial trope of the first encounter in which the natives are either mute or are made to speak what the discourse of modernity wants them to say. For the first time, Achebe presents the image of a western subject who is incapable of speaking of his world or speaking at all on his own terms. He is only what the villagers imagine him to be—an alien being perched on an iron horse, an apparition, “a leper” (74). Unable to decode the nature of this difference, the villagers assign the white man to the order of the divine. The oracle is consulted. “It told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them” (139) “Other white men

were on their way. They were locusts, it said. That first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain.” (139). The oracle’s utterance is an example of an old narrative device—retrospective prophecy. From the standpoint of the reader, the oracle’s utterances have come to pass. Retrospective prophecy as we know is useful for many things, but particularly, for according a certain kind of divine quality to historical events. Apart from that, the reference to harbingers, locusts and a future in which collective destruction is imminent locates us within the realm of eschatology.

This scene betrays an underlying assumption integral to the novel. Setting up the colonial encounter as a miraculous instant that then presages an apocalyptic end requires an African world that is hermetically sealed and homogeneous. Up until that moment in the text, we have observed the inner workings of a community that is self-assured. It governs the rules and paradigms that constitute the concept of truth and knowledge. It gives an account of itself—even its imperfections, especially its imperfections— in its own terms. All of this is fine until we realize that it is also a world that is so self-assured, so self-contained that it has never encountered anything outside of itself. All of a sudden, the geographical location of the story seems far less random. The tropics have always been a trope of seclusion. Integral to Achebe’s pre-modern African world is the myth of the savage geography—a space that is impenetrable and exists outside the economy of space that propels the global circulation of bodies, goods, and ideas. Setting his colonial story in a hermetically sealed terrestrial enclave is borne

out of an aesthetic choice not a historical necessity. The idea of Africa in *Things Fall Apart* bears an uncanny resemblance to Robinson Crusoe's island—a thought experiment of sorts: what would the world look like if it contained nothing else but Africa? The Africa in *Things Fall Apart* is, thus, an imaginary Africa that Achebe cobbled together—expertly I should add—by drawing elements from a wide variety of archives—Igbo ancestral archive, European theological archive, the explorer narrative archive, and so on. The idea of an African community that is so isolated that it knows nothing but itself is the stuff of fantasy that one would expect from someone like Hegel. *Things Fall Apart* is a pseudo-historical novel that is corrupted by a utopian dream. *Things Fall Apart* is about an imaginary past, a past that might have been but never was. The Africa of *Things Fall Apart* is, thus, a dream masqueraded as a memory. Notwithstanding, in *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida explains just why such an idea of the past is both valid and useful:

The question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. This is not the question of a concept dealing with the past, which might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility to tomorrow. 36.

What this means is that to think of Achebe's project as historiographical and anthropologically dubious is not to devalue it in any way but to open it up in interesting ways—to make the claim that if Achebe's Africa is imaginary, it is because it tends towards the future.

In the world before the fall, things— life, power, and history— were oriented in relation to Africa as the center. When Africa is dislodged from its place as the guarantor of form and order, things fall apart. Achebe’s novel tells the story of this fall— how the global cartography of power is restructured in such away that spaces such as Africa are relocated to the peripheries of a world anchored on Europe. Because of this, *Things Fall Apart* has been particularly helpful for addressing the apocalyptic and melancholic aspects of the colonial encounter— how the advent of colonialism led to the collective destruction of a world, a loss that the discourse of an African modernity has not been able to come to terms with. What is often missed is that the apocalyptic trope of *Things Fall Apart* carries with it the possibility of redemption. In other words, there is a way to read *Things Fall Apart* as embodying a utopian dream of a world order reassembled around Africa. Even though Achebe went on to write two novels that critics have retroactively forced into a trilogy, the true sequel to *Things Fall Apart* is yet to be written. The fact that *No Longer At Ease* and *The Arrow of God* are essentially repetitions of the trope of loss should alert us to the incompleteness at the heart of the project. A true sequel would be one that touches on the utopian vein buried deep in the project and, as a result, digs its way out of the novel’s postcolonial melancholia. After 60 years, this sequel, I argue, appears but in the form of a science fiction novel set in Africa’s most populous city. In *Lagoon*, a world centered on humanity is dismantled so that a multi-species community located in Africa-turned-forest becomes the zone of life. Africa is the

name around which is assembled a global and heterogeneous assortment of life forms, temporalities and geographically distinct spaces. What form does this dismantling of the human world take? Of what does the African reforestation of the world consist?

Lagoon tells the story of three residents of Lagos. Adaora is a marine biologist. Agu is a soldier. Anthony is a Ghanaian rapper. In what appears to be a chance encounter, all three strangers run into each other quite literally at Bar Beach. "Bar Beach," we are told, "attracted drug dealers, squatters, various accents and languages, seagulls, garbage, biting flies, tourists, all kinds of religious zealots, hawkers, prostitutes, johns, water-loving children and their careless parents." Crowded and bustling, Bar Beach is that kind of place where there shouldn't be anything extraordinary about three strangers running right into each other. But something strange happens the very moment Agu, Adaora, and Anthony collide. A sonic blast rends the air followed by a 4-foot wave that engulfs the three strangers. All that commotion is caused by the aliens landing their ship in the Atlantic right off the shores of Bar Beach. When the three strangers are washed up ashore, they have a vague recollection of an encounter with the alien leadership. They also realize that they have in their company an alien emissary who has taken on the body of a woman. As they extract bits and pieces of information from the emissary, they realize that their meeting and its timing with the aliens' arrival are not coincidental. They were all fated to meet on that day and to help the emissary get her message about the New People to Lagosians and the world. The rest of the novel is a

dizzying account of Lagos devolving into chaos—as told from the standpoint of a Pentecostal pastor, a tarantula, an underground LGBT community, a prostitute, a mentally disabled boy, an email con artist, the Nigerian president, a bat, and so on. Thanks to a deft use of the Rashomon effect coupled with the narrative reliance on the viral principle of social media technology, the novel is a fragmented, multi-dimensional, and diffuse clutter of a story.

After the initial release of the novel, much of the conversations around it centered on the question: why set an alien encounter novel in an African city? The only reason such a question is justified has everything to do with the bias at the heart of the science fiction tradition—the fact that aliens are mostly drawn to first-world cities. The logic behind this bias is that first-world cities represent the pinnacle of human civilization. Aliens seeking to wipe out humanity in order to establish a new world order would rather target New York City or Tokyo than some third-world city on the far side of the global corridors of power. What then is different about Okorafor’s aliens? Why would they possibly be interested in Lagos? The key to understanding this unconventional extraterrestrial interest in Lagos lies in the similarities between Lagos and alien life.

Lagos is Africa’s most populous metropolis. African cities, as scholars of urban planning have made quite clear, are strange spaces, but Lagos is particularly so. Lagos is a city of close to 18 million people huddled together in a space half the size of New York

City. With a “near-complete absence of those infrastructures, systems, organizations, and amenities that define the word ‘cities,” Lagos exists as a living conundrum (Belanger et al 652). Porous boundaries allow all kinds of informal enclaves to develop both in the heart of the city and its peripheries. Perennial hold-ups on limited high ways and crumbling roads force nomad forms of mobility that sustain a vast network of informal economies—mobile markets, night markets, roadside markets, black markets, so on. Inclusion in the life of the city does not require strict documentation, making Lagos the meeting point of difference that cuts across ethnic, racial, and national lines. Cities like Lagos break all the rules on what constitutes a city and how it should function. They function on the basis of principles that exist outside the canon of urban planning (652). Rapid expansion and shifting boundaries give cities like Lagos a somewhat magical nature. They are in a perpetual state of transformation even as they are sustained on informal economies that are in a constant state of flux.

Because of its shifting boundaries and rhizomatic properties, Lagos, as the narrator explains, is “a place of mixing. The ocean mixed with the land and the wealthy mixed with the poor.” Lagos is a place where the seemingly fixed geographical boundary between land and water is unstable enough to allow strange amphibious communities like the famous Makoko water slum located a few miles from Bar Beach where the aliens land their ship. In *Lagoon*, Okorafor’s preoccupation is clear. She wants to reconceptualize the social as a radical form of mixing.

What draws these aliens to African spaces and communities structured as open and amorphous entities? Like Lagos, the alien is a shape-shifting organism. When Adaora examines Ayodele's skin cells under the microscope, she is shocked to find out that Ayodele "is made of tiny, tiny, tiny, metal-like balls. It's got to be metal. Certain types of metal powders look like that at two hundred times. I think that's why she can . . . change shape like that...The balls aren't fixed together as our cells are... (25). When Ayodele emerges out of the water the first time, she is a woman—a black woman with long braided hair. But in the course of the narrative, she changes into a frog and takes on the body other characters, their relatives, and, at one point, takes on the body of a bearded and aging Karl Marx. Thanks to some kind of strange alien metallurgy, the alien is a life form lacking precise subjective and bodily boundaries. What the marine biologist describes as unfixed cells points to a technology of the body through which the self becomes the meeting point of an expansive multi-species and multi-temporal archive of bodies, lives, and identities. The alien body is the figure of a community that holds together a dazzling array of heterogeneous life forms without ridding these life forms of their singularities. It also represents an order of power that specializes in producing and intensifying difference. We now see why the aliens need Lagos as opposed to a first-world city. What draws these aliens to Lagos is precisely what they have in common with the city—shape-shifting and porous boundaries and the absence of a unifying characteristic. Adaora was beginning to see," explains the narrator, "why Ayodele's

people had chosen the city of Lagos. If they'd landed in New York, Tokyo, or London, the governments of these places would have quickly swooped in to hide, isolate, and study the aliens. Here in Lagos, there was no such order" (64). First-world cities are spaces where order manifests itself in the act of capturing, classifying, and "transmuting" every thing into a science (Mudimbe 179). Lagos operates on a different principle. Lagos functions by maximizing and intensifying difference. The openness and heterogeneity of Lagos, in terms of its geographical form and its social life, is the signature that allows Lagos to be readable as a site traced through by the utopian impulse signified by alien life. This utopian impulse takes the form of a conceptual practice that allows the illicit mixing of different orders of knowledge and that synchronizes different forms of time. At the heart of the alien apparatus is an "immensely complex technology of gathering, meeting, cohabiting, enlarging, reducing and focusing" (Latour 6). One of the most fascinating moments in the novel illustrates what this means for knowledge production. How do you produce knowledge in a place such as Lagos where life is in constant flux? How do you produce knowledge about an alien, shape-shifting life form lacking in stable characteristics?

Adaora is the first human to interact with the alien emissary. She is also the one who names the emissary Ayodele, a Yoruba name meaning "Joy has come home." When she first meets the alien, she is struck by the familiarity of her appearance. Ayodele is so recognizable that she reminds Adaora of a distant relative. In spite of this familiarity,

Adaora can't shake off the feeling that there is something weird about Ayodele's resemblance. Ayodele's hair is natural black hair, meaning "bushy" or, rather, textured as they say in cosmetological parlance (16). Adaora is struck by how "long" and "perfect" her braids are (17). She observes that in spite of being so "perfect" and "shiny," the woman's braids are "clearly her own hair" (17). This detail about the alien's hair refers to the practice among black women to braid their hair with synthetic hair extensions. Usually, the finished hair looks perfect and has a plastic sheen to it. What stands out as strange to Adaora is the fact that the woman's synthetic-looking hair is "clearly her own" in the sense that it is not an extension but her actual hair. She has a biologically recognizable body but a head of hair that looks synthetic. That is how Adaora first registers what is off about Ayodele, and why she refers to her as "it" (16). It is important to note how in this particular moment knowledge about the alien body is being produced at the intersection of race and the feminine body.

Adaora's observation that Ayodele's body is marked by some kind of excess derives from the contemporary discourse around the politics of black hair, a conversation spearheaded by Chimamanda Adichie and the so-called global natural hair movement. The discourse oscillates between a call to repudiate the use of straight synthetic hair—because it simulates white hair textures— and the call to embrace the fact that black women can wear just about any kind of hair. The latter strain of this discourse grounds itself on the idea that black femininity is defined by changeability.

The widespread culture of hairstyling and the use of synthetic extensions are part of the significance of hair as a form of feminine cultural expression of blackness. Hair becomes a question in relation to which the black feminine body can be imagined as mutable.

Adaora's second attempt at naming the excess that makes the alien figure both "repellent and attractive" shifts from the discourse of race and cosmetology to the discourse of demonology (17). With "piercing brown eyes," the unnaturally perfect hair, and overly "calm and fluid" mannerisms, Adaora immediately locates Ayodele within the category of the witch (17). In the Nigerian taxonomy of witches, Ayodele would fall under the category of "marine witch," powerful because "she could harness water" (17). But the marine biologist in Adaora kicks in even as she makes these observations about Ayodele being a witch, so Adaora decides to take the woman to her laboratory where she learns about her cell structure, as noted above. As she analyzes Ayodele's cell structure, Adaora interrupts the flow of her thought to document her observations. This would ordinarily be the moment when the alien as an object of knowledge is transmuted into scientific knowledge and made legible under the signature of the written word. But as Adaora writes, she makes these oral commentaries that run against the currents of the scientific discourse.

"They can be anything and are nothing," she said as she wrote. "Basically, she's a shape-shifter." She smiled. "I wish my grandmother were alive to see this." "Why's that?" "She was always sure the markets were full of them, witches, shape-shifters, warlocks, things like that. This would blow her mind." She

suddenly snapped her fingers, making Agu jump. “Ah-ah, what kind of technology must they have?” 28-29.

The process of speaking in the discourse of demonology while jotting down empirical observations beautifully illustrates the heterogeneity at the heart of the novel. The novel seems to insist that there ought to be a way of bringing science and magic, cellular biology and demonology into some kind of synchronic relationship that makes one a dimension of the other. “And why must magic be anti-science,” Okorafor asks in an interview with Matthew Omelsky, “and not just another facet of it? Why can’t I say that gasoline-powered vehicles run on burning ghosts? Crude oil comes from dead diatoms and zooplankton, doesn’t it?” Bruno Latour calls this process of reassembling fields of knowledge by pulling discourses together into a relationship of simultaneity a “teratology” – a kind of monstrous process that involves prying apart and splicing irreducibly different categories of knowledge (30, 16). The alien is the sign of such an archive where bodies, spaces, discourses commingle illicitly before they are subjected to the operation of the binary process that reduces all knowledge to history versus myth, magic versus technology, the witch versus the scientist, the sacred versus the profane, the animal versus the human. The outcome is a schizophrenic discursive ensemble. From the moment Adaora encounters the alien, she tumbles through the discourse of cosmetology, demonology, cellular biology, astronomy, and back to demonology in her attempt to name what constitutes the alien excess. In the end, Adaora is not able to

ascribe a set of stable attributes to the alien, aside from the fact that the alien is a shape-shifter. This is precisely because “They can be anything and are nothing.” To “know” the alien is to set in motion a “plurality of operations” through which a heterogeneous body of elements and discourses are assembled without “ruining the dynamics of their alterity” (Mudimbe 179.) We can, thus, define the alien as the power to level hierarchical relationships by bringing things, bodies, communities, temporalities with a range of different characteristics together—holding them in a loose, diffusive, and unstable amalgam such that their difference is never subsumed. This definition will guide us as we develop and analyze the unique structure of the alien as a form of time and a modality of power.

Alien time exists in a continuum that links the deep history of the world as a material object and the dark, obscure history of the human as embodied in the figure of the ancestor. What these two orders of time have in common is that they exclude the primacy of the human as the only legitimate subject of history. Okorafor first hints at the possibility that the alien is not a singular event in the history of the world when she has Adaora link the alien cellular structure to meteorites: “The balls aren’t fixed together as our cells are...I always wondered...Much of the world’s most famous extraterrestrial material, mainly meteorites, has fallen right here” (25). The passage is choppy. Whatever correspondence between meteorites and the round metallic structure of alien cells that Adaora wants the reader to see appears nonsensuous. Alternatively, we could

read Adaora's statement as an attempt to locate alien history at the scale of geological time. If as the passage suggests, alien bodies consist in elements linked to meteorites, then we can trace their presence in the human world to the history of the globe as a material object. This would implicate the alien in the geological life of the world. As one of the folkloric characters in the novel puts it: to tell the story about the alien is to "go deeper" into "the dirt, the mud, the earth...the fond memory of the soily cosmos" (194). Situating the history of the alien at the intersection between geology and astronomy pulls together multiple temporalities. This discontinuous temporal order takes the form of an "always-mingling past, present, and future" (194). But it also replaces time, as a constitutively human principle of order, with space, as the site of a deep, non-human history. Ultimately, the alien becomes a dimension from which one can reduce the history of humanity to an episode in the longer history of the globe and the universe. This is why from the standpoint of the alien, the end of humanity is not the end of the world. Privy to the history imprinted on the geological structures of the earth—"the dirt, the mud...the soily cosmos"—aliens are witnesses to the contingency of the human world, to the fact that the world is not coeval with humanity and that the survival of the world is not tethered to human existence.

The deep history of the "soily cosmos" intersects with human history at the point where the ancestor, masked and obscure, emerges as the figure of a past that exists both outside and inside human history. The first reference to the ancestor occurs in the

opening scene of the novel. An animal protagonist—a swordfish—encounters the aliens and is subsequently transformed into a monster. Unable to name her new body, she attempts to describe it:

Her swordlike spear is longer and so sharp at the tip that it sings. They made her eyes like the blackest stone, and she can see deep into the ocean and high into the sky. And when she wants to, she can make spikes of cartilage jut out along her spine *as if she is some ancestral creature from the deepest ocean caves of old*. The last thing she requests is to be three times her size and twice her weight. They make it so. Now she is no longer a great swordfish. She is a monster (italics mine). 6.

Ancestral masks, an iconic subject in the discourse on African artistic production, imply a conception of history made evident in an aesthetic of the grotesque. These masks often take the form of full-body masquerades and are elaborately designed to be frightful and awe-inspiring. In this passage, the ancestor is figured as a peculiar order of monstrosity constituted by time and space—“ancestral creatures from the deepest ocean caves of old.” It points to a past so remote and so ancient that it becomes monstrous or unrecognizable. However, this remoteness in space, distance in time, and singularity of form does not prevent the ancestor from emerging in the present or from vying for the right to address the future. Okorafor is here dipping into the same literary archive that produced Amos Tutuola’s “terrible creatures” (19), Ben Okri’s “four-headed masquerades” (374), and Achebe’s masked ancestral spirits (89). In all these instances, the ancestor represents the irruption of the past—within the present—albeit in an unrecognizable form. Whether it is Tutuola’s monstrous creatures or Achebe’s masked

spirits, we are confronted by images of the past that are not reproductions of anything. As visual art objects, they are non-referential. Since the ancestor is a conception of the past that relies on the operation of the mask, the ancestor has no identity that can be located within a linear, continuous history. The ancestor emerges in the present as a temporal heterogeneity that implicates the past in the concerns of the future or that could make the future appear in the imaginaries of the past. By comparing her monstrous body to an ancestral mask, the swordfish suggests that the grotesque and fetishistic aesthetics of the ancestral mask is the sign of the alien. What it means to become alien, as we see in the case of the swordfish, is to take on a form so heterogeneous to oneself that one is as unrecognizable and as visually grotesque as an ancestral mask.

Linking the ancestor as an archival operation that marks the moments in which the alien leaves traces of its presence in human history throws light on one of the most unusual scenes in the novel. The arrival of the alien spaceship in the water surrounding Lagos Island produces a sonic blast. The explosive force of the blast rocks the foundations of a building where a cyber café is housed and within which are huddled a group of email scammers. Everyone in the café flees the crumbling building except a young man who goes by the online username, Legba, and who looks on as an alien and an ancestral masquerade enters into the building and stands before a computer monitor:

It stood over thirty feet high. Bamboo sticks and canes stuck out of the top half, and it was covered in ceremonial cloth decorated with colorful geometric shapes and magical designs . . . and the designs were spinning and moving. Alive...Holy shit, this was Ijele. The Chief of all Masquerades, Igbo royalty. 199.

Decked in “tiers of wooden platforms” that are “twelve or fifteen feet in diameter,” the masquerade walks up to the alien, who is now standing in front of a computer monitor. When the alien addresses the masquerade by its name, “Ijele,” there is recognition. “Ijele bounced, and as it came down, a drumbeat deep like the bottom of the ocean sounded, shaking the husk of the building. GBOOM! It was like the sonic booms we’d heard twice within the last twenty-four hours, except much louder, much closer” (200-201). The sequence ends with the alien and the masquerade leaping into the computer monitor and leaving behind a mist of smoke and gas. As this scene dramatizes, the alien and the ancestor are linked even though they are not homogeneous. While the alien is the figure of the deep past of the cosmos, the ancestor signifies the deep past of the human, both of which represent the irreducible exteriority—called the forest—that makes intelligible those binaries constitutive of human order.

What we cannot afford to miss, in all of this, is the fact in both instances when the ancestor is mentioned—the swordfish and the cyber café—the ancestor is located within the watery depths of the ocean: “ancestral creatures from the deepest ocean caves of old” and the comparison of the masquerade’s footfalls to a “drum beat deep like the bottom of the ocean.” This relocation of the ancestral habitat to the ocean is key to

understanding a crucial point at which Okorafor's text departs from Achebe's novel. In *Things Fall Apart*, the ancestors inhabit the sacred or evil forest for obvious reasons. The temporal heterogeneity of the ancestor coupled with the fact that the ancestor is essentially a non-decomposable bit from the past makes the ancestor potentially threatening. The ancestor, in the sense in which it is being used here and in which it is formulated within the African archive, must not be confused with a biological father who marks the chronological beginning of the community and who is, by necessity, recognizable in the features of the descendants. The ancestor represents an excess produced by the constitution of the clan as a space of political life. In the opening scene in *Things Fall Apart*, the "founding father" is spoken of in terms that are very suggestive of the animal. The ancestor marks the point where the human life of the clan owes its existence to a founding father—embodied in Okonkwo who is "slippery as a fish"—who conquers a "spirit of the wild" (figured in Amalinze the Cat) (Achebe 3). The ancestor calls up the beastly, chthonic residue of the political order. This is why the ancestor has to be kept outside the political—in the evil forest—or allowed in under circumstances controlled by ritual.

In *Lagoon*, the ancestor is still a denizen of the forest. It is just that the forest shifts location. It goes from land to the watery depths of the Atlantic. During their meeting with the Nigerian president, the alien leadership—also known as the "Elders from the Stars"—refer to "aquatic forests" hidden right off the coast of the Atlantic (160, 273). The

term aquatic forest appears only once in the novel in reference to the model society already in place to substitute human communities. Not much else is said about the constitution of this space except that through some kind of alien technology it does not operate on fossil fuel. The little we can glean from the novel about this place comes early on. The swordfish speaks of a “shifting bar of glimmering sand...It is not deep but it is wide. About two hundred feet below the surface” (5). The swordfish compares the “aquatic forest” to a coral reef—a fitting comparison given that coral reefs are fondly called “rainforests of the sea.” The difference, however, is that the “aquatic forest” is “wilder and more alive” than a coral reef. It is also the site a “unique gathering” of sea life—unique because of the sheer diversity: “sharks, sea cows, shrimps, octopus, tilapia, codfish, mackerel, flying fish, even seaweed” and because, like the swordfish, some of these creatures are transformed into monstrous versions of themselves (5). To put it simply the aquatic forest is an underwater ecosystem of aliens, and ancestral life, and sea life transformed into monsters. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the fate of humanity will be decided on the question of gaining membership into this community of “the New People.” This is because the aquatic forest arises from the urgency to unthink the human as a conception of order, a way of dwelling in the world, and a principle of assembling the social. How, though, do you make humans disappear without an act of collective destruction?

This takes us right into the territory of alien power and allows us to ask what its structure is, how it operates and makes itself manifest. In *Things Fall Apart*, colonial power announces its presence through an act of violence. Until Obierika visits Okonkwo and tells him about the Abame massacre, there is hardly any hint of colonial activity. The narrator does a good job of keeping the world of clan politics completely sealed off. The first time the world of clan politics is opened up to something outside of itself is in Obierika's account of the Abame massacre. "Have you heard," asks Obierika, "that Abame is no more?" "How is that?" asks Uchendu and Okonkwo in unison. "Abame has been wiped out," says Obierika (137). Obierika goes on to narrate the "strange and terrible story" of Abame's destruction. That single act of violence—the scale of it, the spectacle of it, the repeatability of it—constitutes the colonial power and its claim to the monopoly over violence.

The fact that the inaugural act of colonial violence takes the form of a massacre is particularly important. A massacre has enormous strategic value for any form of power structured according to the logic of sovereignty. Because of its representational value, mass killing is an economical way of asserting one's monopoly over violence. First, it announces the presence of the colonial order. Second, it is the act on the basis of which the colonial order claims a monopoly over violence and authority over life or death. Third, it is the means through which the colonial order enters into narrative. The sheer scale of the violence ensures the telling and retelling of the moment, which guarantees

the dissemination and representation of power. It is important to realize that for the people in Achebe's clans, the idea of a clan being wiped out is actually quite inconceivable, primarily because killing that many people would require a technology of violence that they just did not have. We know this because Okonkwo who is said to be a renowned man of war has killed only five people. Between machetes and crude hunting guns, it is physically impossible to wipe out an entire clan—which is made up of anywhere between a few to ten thousand people.

The Abame massacre illustrates a key aspect of the structure of sovereign power. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben explains this property of sovereign power as the capacity to mark out "a zone that is excluded from law and that takes the shape of a 'free and juridically empty space' in which the sovereign power no longer knows the limits fixed by the *nomos* as the territorial order" (28). The massacre testifies to the status of the clan as a space where the law—in this case the law of the European International Community—does not apply. Even though it is carried out in retaliation to the murder of a British man, it is clear that the massacre is far from being punitive. We can only conclude that the massacre is a calculated attempt to establish that the clan is a space where life has no legal value, and, therefore, counts for nothing. This claim, as Agamben explains, is the content of sovereign power. A massacre—the wiping out of a community, the laying bare of a collectivity—becomes the perfect symbol for a "juridically empty space" (27).

Alien power bypasses and counteracts this tendency of sovereign power to produce spaces of abjection. In *Lagoon*, this aspect of sovereign power takes the form of pollution, the laying waste of bodies of water due to crude oil extraction. The world before the aliens arrive is divided into two—the city of Lagos and the Atlantic, which also includes the Niger Deltas where oil and gas multinational are housed. Human life in the city of Lagos has always been dependent on transforming the Atlantic into a space of terror—during the slave trade and now with the extraction of fossil fuel. Historically, Lagos’ inclusion within global routes of power and capital has always depended on its link to the Atlantic. Its relationship to the Atlantic is such that life—which is essentially life on land—depends on death in the water. On the mandate of global capital, Lagos—the economic nerve center of the 5th largest oil producing country—carries out the mass killing of sea life and the destruction of whole ecosystems. Okorafor adapts the form of violence particular to sovereignty to a discourse on ecology located at the intersection of multi-species debates, animal studies, and eco-criticism. She links the current ecological crises to the ontological sovereignty of humans. Within the logic of sovereignty that has defined political theory—from Hobbes to Lock to Carl Schmidt—political value, political life, and subjectivity are things one acquires by attributing to oneself the value that one refuse the other. In Locke, this thinking takes the form of a world that one encounters as waste. The principle of property requires that we imagine the world in a state of scatter and waste so that we can transform it into property. Our care, guardianship, and

ownership of the world is constituted on the notion of the world as being in a state of perpetual scatter or waste.

This points to the problem at the heart of contemporary discourses on climate change and ecological crises. How can you save a world that is constitutively waste? Pollution, deforestation, and all the other ways in which the world is being used up are solidly grounded on the structures and procedures through which we ascribe value to life and the world. These structures of values run so deeply that the end of the ecological crisis must invariably coincide with the end of a world anchored on the idea of human primacy. *Lagoon*, thus, opens the possibility that any politics around the ecological crisis has to be multi-species. The question of the planet's future has to be asked within discourses of alternative ontologies. Ecological crisis is the sign that the human center of the world can no longer hold. The world as a set of political and spatial relations constituted around humanity has to fall apart so that a new community can be imagined. *Lagoon* is an attempt to show – within the latitude afforded by science fiction/fantasy – how such a world would come about and what it would look like.

But *Lagoon* is also a response to the question: how do you get rid of humans without a massacre? If this question allows us to differentiate alien power from sovereign power, what, then, is alien power? If it is not structured along the lines of the sovereign apparatus, how does it function? What sustains it? What maximizes it? The structure of alien power is linked to Ayodele's insistence that the aliens are not invaders

even though the evidence says otherwise. In her address to Lagosians, the alien emissary refers to their status as “citizens:”

We landed here in the night from beyond Earth from space. You all will call us aliens. We are guests who wish to become citizens . . . here. We chose here. I am the first to come and I greet you. I apologize for the noise of our arrival and your rising waters from our landing. Nobody is attacking you. And nobody will dare now. The winds of change are blowing. We are change. You will see. In less than twenty-four hours, I have seen love, hate, greed, ambition, and obsession among you. I have seen compassion, hope, sadness, insecurity, art, intelligence, ingenuity, corruption, curiosity, and violence. This is life. We love life. Please, listen to me. Consider me, consider us. As you have much to offer, so do we. We come to bring you together and refuel your future. Your land is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart. We do not seek your oil or your other resources. We are here to nurture your world. So, what will you do? 111-113.

The address is, to put it mildly, politically naïve. It fails to acknowledge the violence at the heart of their project. She is apologizing for “the noise” caused by the landing of their ship. To call it “noise” is to put it mildly. It is a sonic blast. It shakes Lagos to its very foundation. The so-called noise not only rocked Lagos’ tectonic foundations, it also awakened “non-carbon creatures” buried in the memory of the city. The sonic blast unleashed chaos on an already chaotic city. What she terms “rise in water level” is actually a mini-tsunami followed by a 7-foot rise in water level, burying homes and roads under water. You can’t apologize for creating natural disasters and displacing thousands of people. Bear in mind that by the time they make contact with humans or ask for “help,” as the alien emissary puts it, they’ve assembled an army consisting of sea-going monsters. In the process of assembling this army, they transform the eco-

system by essentially metamorphosing these creatures into monsters. This expansive community of sea life becomes the core of the New People. Everything points to the fact that this is a hostile takeover. So why are they, in spite of all this, insisting that they are not invaders?

The idea of invasion suggests a binary logic of encounter that positions the aliens as outsiders forcefully breaching the walls of a metropolitan enclosure. But recall that Lagos is a city that already has trouble stabilizing its boundaries. Lagos is already a city that has trouble maintaining its claims to sovereign interiority. What attracts the aliens to Lagos, in the first place, is the fact that Lagos has no boundaries to invade. To think of the aliens as invading misses the point of alien power. They are not invading Lagos but making Lagos—as a space of human life—superfluous. They assemble new forms of sociality around the animal, transubstantiated ancestral spirits, and even plants. They are reassembling the social in such a way that what constitutes the political is expanded to include other life forms. The objective of an invasion, especially the colonial kind, is to impose form on something that has previously been constituted as formless, disorderly, or empty. What the aliens are doing is crowding out the human residents by proliferating the space with other species. The introduction of ontological diversity into Lagos reduces the hallowed chain of being to heterogeneous collectivities so that what used to be human because it was located on the top of the chain ceases to be human because it now exists in a horizontal relationship to other species. They initiate alliances

across life forms that have been suppressed by the ontological hierarchy of the human and its predilection for homogeneity. The human loses its place as that specie that reserves for itself what it refuses everyone else. It becomes one among an expansive network of species with equal stakes on the fate of the globe. The category of the human becomes obsolete because it is far too primitive and too simple to capture the complexities of the new form of life and body. There is this beautiful moment in the novel when Adaora explores the alien space ship in the form of “a giant, metallic blue fish” (251). Breathing under water and communicating telepathically with her alien guide, she gets a glimpse of life as one of the New People. Losing her stable, unified identity as a human allows her to adapt to a different terrain and reality. Adaora’s amphibious body is the new human body built to adapt to a world fated to become an aquatic forest. The new world breaks down the binary between land and water—where land or “the dry places,” as one animal protagonist puts it, is privileged as the dwelling of humans (5). When Adaora attributes the rise in sea level to the landing of the spaceship, the alien emissary corrects her: “It’s not just the size...the ship is communicating with the water and the creatures in the water” (43). We should read this as the alien suggesting that the rise in sea levels is part of the process of assembling the new communities and not an isolated event. The novel’s cover image, designed by the celebrated South African illustrator Zoey Hifi, shows a city of Lagos in the process of being engulfed by the Atlantic. At some point in the story Adaora observes that the

world is 70 percent water while the adult human body is 75 percent water. She ends the short reflection with the Somali proverb “water is life.” In all this, the novel suggests that the aquatic forest is that place where the difference between land and water becomes superfluous given that the body is adapted to exist in both worlds.

We can now see what is at stake in the discourse of the forest. Achebe posits that in the beginning, the world was a forest where violence ruled red in tooth and claw. The founding father, by wrestling with and defeating “a spirit of the wild,” interrupted the violence of the forest and cleared a space for clan life. This act of beastly violence, by virtue of which the clan is brought into existence, is an excess that has to be kept out of the clan. Where does this excess go? It is diverted to the evil forest where it is close enough to animate and validate the political life of the clan but remote enough to be kept at bay. From reading “The Fourth Stage,” Wole Soyinka’s essay on a similar terrestrial chasm, we know that the forest is “an immense chaotic growth” that resists usurpation and that the labor of the political, therefore, consists in ceaselessly keeping the forest at bay and monitoring its irruption within the space of the political. In general, the evil forest testifies not only to the legal validity of the clan’s claim to power and monopoly over violence, but it is also a site of history. Objects and bodies that prove indigestible to the political order accumulate in the forest. In other words, the order and relative homogeneity of clan life and the clan’s claim to a linear, everyday history are all grounded on the idea of the forest as a multi-temporary space defined by a radical

heterogeneity. We also see how in *Things Fall Apart*, the colonial drama is decided on the question of the forest. Clan power fails the moment the dread, chthonic powers of the forest is neutralized. This happens when a church/orphanage is built in the forest. We can, therefore, argue that the center which, in ceasing to hold, leads to the fall of all things African is the forest. This argument has far-reaching implication for Okorafor's project, especially, within the context of the correspondence we are trying to draw between *Lagoon* and *Things Fall Apart*. If the evil forest is the center, the loss of which leads to the fall of the African world, the *Lagoon's* utopian restoration of Africa to the center of the world would, thus, take the form of reassembling the terrestrial center at the heart of Achebe's African world.

From this perspective, we can agree that the "aquatic forest" is the reincarnation of Achebe's evil forest and that this lost center is reconfigured so that Africa can once again anchor a world order. But there are differences between the evil and the aquatic forest that are worth drawing out. First, the evil forest is a terrestrial space. It is landlocked, impenetrable, and feeds into Achebe's imaginary Africa that is completely secluded from the global currents of events. Placing the forest in the Atlantic—one of the dominant highways of global capital—immediately positions the forest as a global space. We can also see how Achebe and Okorafor are making different aesthetic choices in terms of setting for their stories. While Achebe chooses to set his account of the colonial encounter in a secluded forest community, Okorafor sets her story in a coastal city with

a 300-year old history of global interaction. One of the key structural properties of the evil forest is its impenetrability. The reason for this is obvious. The evil forest essentially embodies everything the clan refuses to attribute to itself. Since the clan marks itself as the site of life and the domestic, the evil forest cannot function as a habitat. Life simply cannot take place there. In contrast, the aquatic forest is the space of life. It is the habitat of the New People. The fact that Achebe refuses to imagine life in the forest betrays the binary principle that informs his logic of space and power. Granted, the binary principle in *Things Fall Apart* is a bit more interesting than the principle of sovereignty in the sense that Achebe's clan-forest binary is much more unstable and porous. Still, it is binary all the same, whereas the principle of power that informs life in *Lagoon* is rhizomatic. Power is maximized by the proliferation of difference and the intensification of heterogeneity. *Things Fall Apart* tells us the story of the evil forest, how it emerges with the constitution of the clan, and how it is lost, leading to the debacle of clan power. *Lagoon* would be uninteresting if it simply restored the forest to its place as a technology of power, as the hidden center of a world. It would be little more than the mirror opposite of Achebe's novel. Okorafor does not just restore the forest. She transforms it into a habitat. It is infinitely important to clarify that the forest as habitat in *Lagoon* is different from the forest-turned-habitat with the arrival of colonial power. This is what is utopian about her work. She imagines a world in which life can exist within the forest as forest and not the forest as it functions in the management of power. In other words, whereas Achebe

excludes the forest to make his world intelligible, Okorafor makes the forest the space of life.

Okorafor, it turns out, is not the first to imagine the forest as a kind of utopian community. Tutuola's novels can be read as an attempt to imagine life within the forest. *Things Fall Apart* is the novel that constitutes an African literary order by excluding the forest and, thus, putting an end to a literary space within which Tutuola builds his strange and singular story, *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Perhaps we could read Okorafor's restoration of the forest as Tutuola taking a long overdue revenge on Achebe. We also have to consider that interrupting the process whereby the forest is ceaselessly excluded to constituted order relegates the centrality of the colonial factor in Africa's history. This is because to tell the story of the forest is to tell the story of its loss, which is marked on the site of the colonial event. By restoring the forest as the political imaginary of a global, multi-species world, Okorafor actually displaces colonialism as the structuring concern around which a global discourse on Africa is mobilized. This line of thinking is important for speculating—within the context of Achebe's passing— about the future of the African novel. Perhaps the new African novel is the novel that authorizes the distinction between the history of an African modernity and the history of colonialism. This would make the new African novel the novel of the forest.

Conclusion: The Achebean Signature: African Literary Archive and the Ancestral Principle

This set of concluding remarks expands the principle of the forest as a problem of the archive by interrogating Achebe's place within the African literary tradition in relation to the idea of the ancestor, which, as we have seen, is linked to the forest. The Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiongo was first mistaken for Achebe in 1964. He had just published his first novel *Weep Not Child* and had become something of a national celebrity. On this particular night, he walks into a bar frequented by the Nairobi literary African elite and was greeted as the Kenyan author of *Things Fall Apart*. In 2010 at Jomo Kenyatta Airport, as he walks towards immigration, a Zambian professor approached him and said: "Excuse me Mr. Achebe somebody pointed you out to me. I have long wanted to meet you" (41). Curious to know how far he could push the mistaken identity, Ngugi turns to his son, Mukoma, who is also a novelist, and says to the man, "here is Mr. Achebe" (41). The obvious youth of son did not change anything. The Professor promptly turns to Mukoma happy that he'd at last met his literary idol. In his final remarks, Ngugi says: "There is hardly any African writer of my generation who has not been mistaken for Achebe. I have had a few such encounters. Every African novel became *Things Fall Apart* and every writer some sort of Chinua Achebe" (41). Ngugi tells recounts these moments during a dinner held to celebrate Achebe's 70th birthday.

To be an African novelist, it would seem, is to be doomed to a mistaken identity and to carry on the forced labor of continually citing *Things Fall Apart*. Ngugi's statement brings up the problem either of an archive that endlessly replicates Achebe or a literary genealogy that can be collapsed into one book. Either way, it draws attention to an absurd dimension of an archive built on Achebe's legacy but, more importantly, it points to a kind of radical citation, a form of reading, and an intellectual practice that lies at the heart of African literary production. Achebe has left a lasting impression on the way we read and produce stories about Africa. What is the nature of this impression, the concept of the archive it presupposes, and by extension the kind of literary historiography it proposes?

A good place to begin would be to address the perception of Achebe's place within African literary discourse. In 1991, Simon Gikandi published his now seminal work on Achebe's writing. It was in that book that he named Achebe the inventor of African literature. Designating the origin of form or retracing our steps back to the beginning of things is always a messy process. In African literature, things are a lot messier. To start with, the idea of the first African novel seems contrived, partly because the novel as a form has been in existence for centuries and because the novel has long lived a surprisingly robust life in Africa. Hailu Gebreyesus wrote *The Conscript* in 1927. It is a heartbreakingly beautiful account in which an Eritrean soldier narrates the tragic occupation of Libya by a battalion of Eritrean and Italian soldiers. Thomas Mofolo

published his Lesotho novels as early as 1907. Novels in Amharic, Arabic, Yoruba, Geez, and Zulu were being published in the '20s and '30s. There is also the vast body of mining novels written by white South African settlers as early as the 1870s. The point is that there is a rather long and largely uncharted history of the novel in Africa long before *Things Fall Apart* came on the scene. The strategy for making all these narratives disappear in order for *Things Fall Apart* to be the first has been to replicate the Ian Watt model of the novel's rise in an African context. You situate the rise of the African novel at the intersection of the individual, capital, and realism. To place Achebe as a first, literary historians have simply categorized everything that came before as fantasy or proto-realist. *Things Fall Apart*, thus, marks the true moment of arising because it is perceived as the moment in which African narratives take a recognizably novelistic form.

No one has articulated the absurdity of Achebe's first-ness better than Wole Soyinka. In the weeks following Achebe's death, the media was awash with statements about Achebe being the father of African literature. Soyinka was clearly rankled by the term and said as much in an interview he gave in the weeks leading up to Achebe's funeral.

Chinua himself repudiated such a tag—he did study literature after all, bagged a degree in the subject. It is a tag of either literary ignorance or “momentary exuberance” – ala [Nadine] to which we are all sometimes prone. Those who seriously believe or promote this must be asked: have you the sheerest acquaintance with the literatures of other African nations, in both indigenous

and adopted colonial languages? What must the francophone, lusophone, Zulu, Xhosa, Ewe literary scholars and consumers think of those who persist in such a historic absurdity? It's as ridiculous as calling WS father of contemporary African drama! (saharareporters.com)

Even when we narrow our scope from African literature to the novel, Soyinka's concerns still resonate. Achebe's first-ness, he suggests, undermines the multiple ancestries of the African novel. Nonetheless, Soyinka is wrong. Soyinka imagines Achebe's inaugural role in the traditional sense of an origin as something inviolable, unified and identical with itself. But Achebe is the first, not because he marks the chronological origin of the African novel but because he cleared the space for assembling a network of signs that initiated a new kind of African literary hermeneutics. That is what the Achebean Signature means—a new way of making Africa intelligible as subject of history and narrative.

Achebe's signature is first and foremost a counterpoint to the colonial archive, which has for ages defined what counted as knowledge about Africa. In *The Idea of Africa*—the sequel to *The Invention of Africa*—V. Y. Mudimbe reprises his Foucauldian critique of the colonial library. The colonial library is “the body of knowledge,” “generalized conceptual rules,” historical paradigms, and political imaginaries in which the African world is made to “unveil itself as an object for conversion and standardization” (173,176). Mudimbe argues that this archive is a repository of fantasies the compilation of which dates as far back as Greek antiquity. Africa goes from

being merely a sign of difference in Herodotus to an embodiment of savagery in the 15th century all the way up to the 18th and 19th century when Africa is used to constitute an anthropological discourse and the colonial project. Any inquiry into Africa's past must stop at the moment of the split between a life that can no longer be called up in memory and what has been recorded in the colonial library.

In *Seasons of Migration to the North*, the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih allegorizes the problem with the idea of an Africa that is made intelligible solely by the conceptual parameters set by the discourse of modernity. What happens, Salih asks, when the fantasy of Africa shaped by the colonial archive comes to life? It takes the form of a subject so racked with resentment that it embarks on a perverted course of vengeance. Before his life as a farmer in a Sudanese village, Mustafa was an economics professor in London. But in his free time, he was a serial killer of sorts. He killed white British women as some kind of payback to the empire. He seduced these women by playing the part of the orientalist figure constituted by the colonial archive—fantasy assembled around sandalwood incense, a room draped in Persian rugs, endless recitation of classical Arab poetry, and wild erotic encounters. By thus portraying himself as an incarnation of that imaginary figure shaped by the archive, Said beguiled these women and then killed them in an elaborately ritualistic orgy. After serving his time in jail, he returns to his native Sudan to live out his days as a farmer and takes with him the very archive that produced him. Lodged in his rural household—like the picture of Dorian

Gray — is a secret room, a “life-size replica” of his apartment in London where he killed those women (Makdisi 812). The room is “complete with fireplace, antique chairs, Persian rugs, and a vast library of books” (813). The library is discovered late in the story. There is this moment when the narrator lists the titles in the library. It is laborious to read, but if you don’t skim it but instead read every item in the long list, you realize that the list is divided into two. The first and longer of the two begins with the Encyclopedia Britannica and ends with Plato, in between is everything from Thomas Carlyle to Virginia Woolf to Thomas Mann. There is no African text in the library. No Arabic text either. The only copy of the Koran is translated in English. Right after Plato comes as short list of six texts written by Mustafa himself as an economics professor. The titles sounds like what you might find in the post-colonial section of a university library: *The Economics of Colonialism, Colonialism and Monopoly, The Cross and the Gun Powder, The Rape of Africa, Prospero and Caliban, Totem and Taboo* (Salih 137). One the one hand, we have the archive of European thought, which has been instituted as the only legitimate field of knowledge that can render Africa intelligible. On the other is the kind of writings about Africa that emerges from it—an order of knowledge that locates the commencement of an African archive at the site where colonialism discloses and inscribes its monopoly over what Africa is. These two archives are dialectically bound. They constitute a dead-end that reproduces nothing that has not already been said. The monument of this history, as the narrator remarks is “a graveyard, a mausoleum, a

prison” trying to pass itself off as a site of knowledge (Salih 137), or as Achille Mbembe puts it, “an imprisoning model of a history that is already shaped and that one can only undergo or repeat” (258). This mode of thought often ends up locating Africa’s present somewhere between “a neurosis of victimization” and “lamentation over the loss of a *nom pro-pre*” (258).

The impact of this archival operation on the history of the novel in Africa is significant. The problem with early African novels has to do with the way stories coming out of the continent were read and with the institutional forces and value systems that controlled not just how these texts were being defined but also how they circulated in the global landscape. First of all, African novels were not seen as novels. They inhabited this strange institutional and disciplinary crossroads that barred them from gaining access to the literary market as fiction. There is the example of Mofolo’s Lesotho novels—published by a missionary magazine and translated into English by an anthropological institute. But the most compelling example is Amos Tutuola’s *The Palmwine Drinkard*. When Faber and Faber received Amos Tutuola’s manuscript they loved it (Low 22). The problem was that they did not know what to do with it. But how could Faber and Faber who published Eliot, Auden, and Joyce not know how to handle unconventional writing? At first, they thought about marketing it as an anthropological document. They contacted a British anthropologist working in Nigeria to ascertain the anthropological value of the book. When *The Palmwine Drinkard* is initially advertised in

The Bookseller, it is listed under “Essays and Belle Lettres,” not under fiction (Low 28).

We are talking about a world where there was a very specific, institutionally policed practice of ascribing value to African narratives. Achebe changed all that. He cleared an intellectual field where African literature could become literature. To put it very simply, he freed up Africa as a subject of narrative. Now you can write a story about Africa, and it will be called a novel and circulated in the literary market as a novel and read by scholars as novels. And this novel can be situated within the longer history of the form and can enrich the discourse on the novel as a global form.

How do you interrupt this archival machine that ceaselessly subjects Africa to the norms and rules of colonial thought? This is where the ancestor comes in as an order of time and archival principle that brings the colonial archival machine to a standstill. We always think of the past as surviving into the present in the form of an artifact or document that is readable. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida allegorizes the procedures for rendering these objects readable in spatial terms. The archive as hermeneutic apparatus derives from a spatial order that delimits a carefully guarded interior where things are collected, sheltered, interpreted. The past survives in the form of durable but also inert objects exposed to the sovereign principle of the archive and used in the constitution of law. Derrida calls it the “topo-nomological” principle of the archive (3). Now let’s imagine an idea of the past that survives in the form of bodies. There is no sovereign—or insurmountable limit as Derrida calls it—that can protect these bodies from the

accidents and contingencies of time or that can stabilize their capacity to produce meaning. There is a moment in *Things Fall Apart* that illustrates this very conception of the past. It comes up towards the end of the novel. Earlier in the day, he hears that his son has been converted to Christianity. He is depressed by the news. The narrator remarks that "he cried in his heart." It is now nighttime. He is in his hut, sitting down perhaps. Everywhere is dark except for the light coming from the fireplace.

"Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth." 152-153.

A very touching picture—a crowd of abandoned fathers, waiting for sacrifice but surrounded by ash. There is a whole set of assumptions that Okonkwo is making about how the past survives. Okonkwo looks into the future and sees not just his descendants for whom that future will be a present. He also sees himself and a community of fathers drawn from various moments in the past. In the future Okonkwo sees, this community of fathers inhabits the present of their descendants and their future. How is that possible? How is it possible that Okonkwo who is, by that time, dead is waiting for a future time when his children will bring him sacrifice? The answer is quite simple:

Okonkwo is an ancestor. What it means to be an ancestor is to be ceaselessly drawn into the present of ones descendants by simultaneously inhabiting their past and their future. Ancestors or ancestral spirits make up an unearthly community of men. They inhabit the sacred forests that mark the limits of political life. Shrines located at the threshold of the forest serve as portals for their entrance into the political either to judge cases or to partake in the burial rites for newly dead fathers, welcoming them into their company. When they appear, they take the form of masked figures—and this is important. As Robert Wren notes in his study of Igbo culture, these masked men are seen “as transubstantiate beings, living presences of dead fathers?” (47).

The ancestor is, for me, a figure of an unusual order of time. This order of time is illustrated in Okonkwo’s fear of abandonment. At the thought of being abandoned by his children, the passage tells us, “Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation.” What is so terrible about the prospect of being an abandoned ancestor? Ancestral time is a past that opens out into the future. It is an incomplete past that still has to be fulfilled. There are enormous risks involved in such a temporal order. Notice that Okonkwo is not worried about death itself. He is also not worried about being forgotten. Forgetting is not the worst kind of crime a descendant can commit. Good descendants are not the ones who remember their forefathers. Remembrance is a relationship to the past that presupposes the loss of some essential connection. Remembering is necessary where death is understood as an event

of irredeemable loss. As Leopold Senghor points out in the poem "In Memoriam," ancestors are "forefathers who...refuse to die" (54). In refusing death, an ancestor gives himself over to the living, and, in so doing, asserts himself as a contemporary of the living. What an ancestor fears most—this is why Okonkwo "shudders"—is being trapped in a future that has no content and having to wait perpetually, being caught between "the ashes of by gone days" and sacrifices that are yet to come— the no more and the not yet. To abandon an ancestor is to cast him off to some temporal limbo where he is trapped in a state of perpetual longing.

There are several things to keep in mind. The ancestral archive requires the operation of the mask, meaning that inclusion is not based on the stable characteristics of things. These masks are elaborately designed by putting together a wide variety of objects that do not always seem to fit together. The ancestor, therefore, is the form in which the past survives in the form in which it is unrecognizable. Whereas in the colonial library, things are identified and classified in order to be "transmuted into a science," in the ancestral archive things retain their opacity (Mudimbe 179). The ancestral archive consists of a heterogeneous collection of things that bring together multiple temporalities. The ancestral archive would therefore be an apparatus that assembles things on the basis of their mutable characteristics. In the colonial library the aim was to organize and subject the idea of Africa to a set of normalizing operations that situates Africa within the linearity of the time of modernity. The ancestral archive gives

an account of Africa by assembling, as Mbembe sees it, “those temporalities that are always simultaneously branching out toward several different futures and, in so doing, open the way for the possibility of multiple ancestries” (258). *Things Fall Apart* creates a space where Africa can testify to its mutability and heterogeneity. A host of forms, narratives, ideologies, and histories can now be mobilized around the question of Africa.

We can therefore identify the nature of Achebe’s inscription on the African literary archive thus: *Things Fall Apart* marks the moment when Africa becomes an idea around which could be assembled narratives, images, concepts, problematics with an expansive range of characteristics. Achebe cleared out the intellectual space where the notion of Africa could live in perpetual mutability to the point of not being recognizable. What distinguishes our historical moment is, for me, the ways in which African novelists are aggressively reinventing Achebe’s Africa to the point of unrecognizability by moving away from colonialism itself as a generative paradigm of globalization. Lauren Beukes’s recent novels are set in Chicago and Detroit, respectively. In these novels, she uses African literary techniques to tell an American story. Helen Oyeyemi’s novels map black diaspora networks that dismantle the idea of Africa coincides with race and geography. There are writers who have taken up the project of rewriting the European cannon from an African perspective. Igoni Barret’s rewrite of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is brilliant. Teju Cole’s *Open City* is a philosophical novel that situates itself at the intersection of Rilke’s *Malte Laurid Brigge* and W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*.

Somalia's Diriye Osman and Nigeria's Chinelou Okparanta in recent years have reopened the question of same sex love as a mode of Africa life. Ivan Vladislavic, in *Double Negative*, uses Walter Benjamin's ideas about history to comment on post-Apartheid South Africa. These texts carry the mark of the Achebean signature in the sense that they testify to the mutability, heterogeneity, and fluidity of what Africa is. But that signature opens them up to being marked by a different archive, which I would mark as the global Anglophone novel.

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Biography

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