

EXPENSIVE SHIT:

AESTHETIC ECONOMIES OF WASTE IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

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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

This dissertation proposes a reading of postcolonial African literature in light of the continent's continued status as a "remnant" of globalization—a waste product, trash heap, disposable raw material, and degraded offcut of the processes that have so greatly enriched, dignified and beautified their beneficiaries. The "excremental" vision of African authors, poets and filmmakers reflects their critical consciousness of the imbalances and injustices that characterize African societies and polities under pressure from monetized capitalism and domestic corruption. The figure of superfluity, excess, destruction or extravagance—concepts gathered together under the sign of "waste"—is a central thematic, symbolic, and formal feature of many postcolonial African works, and I suggest that literature functions in this context to document, critique, and offer alternatives to the culture of waste that predominates in political and social life on the continent.

The argument covers a range of geographical and historical ground, from the "excremental" preoccupations and stylistics of early postcolonial African fiction, to contemporary South Africa, where political anxieties about the relative superfluity of entire populations to the project of neoliberal development are articulated through the aesthetic challenges of representing the past while remaining open to productive futurity. Through chapters on excremental literature and the politics of allegory; corruption, debt and economy in Senegalese film; magical realism and inflation in Nigeria; and recycling and aesthetics in transitional South Africa, I argue for a reading of postcolonial African fiction as a mode of political ecology, an aesthetics that draws its energies directly from the problem of waste management figured in the works.

Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Walter Benjamin and postcolonial marxism to poststructuralist literary philosophy, the "new economic criticism," and psychoanalysis, I investigate how African artists themselves make sense of the continent's increasing superfluity to

the global economy, its role only as “la poubelle”—the world’s trash heap—where toxic waste and excess capital alike are sent to die.

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Introduction. Africa la Pou/belle

[T]he archaeological refers to ruin and responses to it, to the mundane and quotidian articulated with grand historical scenarios, to materializations of the experience of history, material aura, senses of place and history, choices of what to keep and what to let go (remember/forget), the material artifact as allegorical, collections and their systems, the city and its material cultural capitalizations (investments in pasts and futures), the intimate connection between all this and a Utopian frame of mind (archaeology is not just about the past, but about desired futures too). And the stuff of it all is garbage.¹

On the morning of August 19, 2006, residents of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, awoke to the overwhelming stench of petroleum, garlic and rotten eggs. The noxious smell, which burned noses and eyes and caused open sores on the skin of babies, was traced to pools of slick black sludge, which had appeared overnight in fields and backyards across the city's suburbs. As hundreds streamed into clinics and hospitals complaining of headaches, nausea, nosebleeds, stomach pain and skin irritation, the sludge was identified as a potent cocktail of industrial wastes and byproducts of petroleum refining, dumped illegally in leaking drums on open-air sites by a local subsidiary of a Dutch waste-management firm. At least 10 people died from exposure to the toxic waste, while dozens more were hospitalized and over 100,000 sought medical attention. Subsistence farmers lost a whole year's worth of manioc and corn, and many others were forced to

¹ Michael Shanks, David Platt, William L. Rathje. "The perfume of garbage: modernity and the archaeological." *Modernism/Modernity* 11(1) (Jan 2004), p.61-83, 85-87 (p. 64).

leave their homes; contamination even kept the city's garbage pickers from their customary work in the "stinking mud" of the Abidjan landfill.²

The task of identifying the source of the waste proved difficult indeed, as its restless circulation across the world's oceans helped obscure its origins. The sludge was eventually traced to a Panamanian-registered ship, the *Probo Koala*, chartered by a Swiss oil- and metals trading outfit. If, in Paul Gilroy's account, the slave ship traces the contours of a Black Atlantic modernity, then we might say that this floating waste barrel similarly sketched the geographic outlines of global postmodernity, plotting a course along the slopes of its uneven economies of profit and waste. The waste, a "toxic brew of cleaning chemicals and gasoline and crude oil slop," was originally scheduled to be unloaded in Amsterdam, but officials there refused to admit the pungent mixture without payment of a \$250,000 disposal fee.³ The crew was similarly unable to dispose of the waste at its next port of call, in Estonia; after delivering a shipment of petroleum to Nigeria (from where, we might imagine, the original oil likely originated), they managed to find a local Ivoirean company, Tommy, to take the slop off their hands for a fee of only \$18,500.

The ship's journey from (occluded third-world origin to) first-world port through former second-world (back) to the unregulated, impotent third world makes the *Probo Koala* a compelling mobile metonym for the global processes that relegate Africa to

² Lydia Polgreen and Marlise Simons, "Global Sludge Ends in Tragedy for Ivory Coast." *The New York Times* (October 2, 2006), A1

³ Sebastian Knauer, Thilo Thielke and Gerald Traufetter, "Toxic-Waste Ship "Probo Koala": Profits for Europe, Industrial Slop for Africa." *Spiegel Magazine* (Sept 18, 2006). Available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,druck-437842,00.html> (June 2, 2008)

the role of waste receptacle for the so-called developed countries. As *The New York Times* observed in its front-page story about the crisis, “Africa has long been a dumping ground for all sorts of things the developed world has no use for.”⁴ Two days later, in an editorial entitled “An African Dumping Ground,” the paper decried the global economies that geographically allocated profit and waste based on the relative “cheap”ness of human life.⁵

What makes this a particularly interesting case among literally dozens of such incidents is the fact that Cote d’Ivoire was once one of Africa’s most promising countries, featuring a rare combination of political stability, peace and prosperity. By the time of the waste dumping, however, the optimism of the post-Independence decades had given way to bitter pessimism, as economic crisis, corruption, ballooning national debt and years of civil war had eroded any hopes for the country’s successful entry into the ranks of global modernity. As shrinking state support for infrastructure was reflected in gaping potholes, shabby buildings and piles of stinking garbage, the city once celebrated as the Paris of Africa, “Abidjan la Belle” — Abidjan the Beautiful — became ironically regarded by locals, even before the toxic waste scandal, as “Abidjan la Poubelle”: Abidjan the Trash Can.⁶ The stench of gasoline and rotten eggs that announced the arrival of the European sludge only confirmed this diagnosis of the radical failure of the country’s dreams of integration into global networks of production

⁴ Polgreen and Simons, “Global Sludge Ends in Tragedy,” A1.

⁵ “An African Dumping Ground.” *The New York Times* (Oct 4, 2006): A30

⁶ Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, “The Lost Glory of Ivory Coast.” *All Things Considered*, NPR News, October 20, 2006. Available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6354149>

and exchange; instead of production, or even productive consumption, Cote D'Ivoire had joined the rest of Africa in its business of consuming, willingly or unwillingly, the toxic remainders of those processes. The gap between postcolonial expectation and postmodern disillusionment, was thus, we might say, symbolically and materially expressed in the pools of stinking toxic waste scattered across the suburbs of the country's commercial capital—and in the burning skin and eyes of the poisoned Abidjanais.

This dissertation proposes a reading of postcolonial African literature in light of the continent's continued status as a "remnant" of globalization—a waste product, trash heap, disposable raw material, and degraded offcut of the processes that have so greatly enriched, dignified and beautified their beneficiaries. The "excremental" vision of African authors, poets and filmmakers reflects their critical consciousness of the imbalances and injustices that characterize African societies and polities under pressure from monetized capitalism and domestic corruption. The figure of superfluity, excess, destruction or extravagance—concepts gathered together under the sign of "waste"—is a central thematic, symbolic, and formal feature of many postcolonial African works, and I suggest that literature functions in this context to document, critique, and offer alternatives to the culture of waste that predominates in political and social life on the continent. Literature is thus, in its own way, a "trash heap": a site at which waste accumulates, but also (as in many real-world African landfills) a rich source of value,

creativity, nutrition, and even surprising beauty, for those who have the skill to recognize them.

For many contemporary writers and artists, superfluity lies at the center of concerns about the possibility of political autonomy, cultural authenticity and personal dignity—the conceptual cluster that makes up the very notion of “postcolonialism” as a project. In the classic works of the early postcolonial period, when utopian dreams were being rudely interrupted by the sordid realities of corruption and dependency, Fanon’s warning that cultural or “national” autonomy could not survive without economic independence returned as a bitterly ironic specter. Whether manifesting as domestic corruption or foreign neocolonialism, monetary modernity or national debt, it was the demands and constraints imposed by the economy that effectively put an end to the promise of postcolonialism, and it is therefore no surprise that so many postcolonial works are so thoroughly preoccupied with economic issues.

Furthermore, in the African works I consider, the question of “economics” is intensively articulated against the more specific problem of “*economy*,” an idea that more precisely expresses the moral and indeed practical threat posed to independence by, specifically, excessive, unproductive expenditure and consumption in a context of scarcity. Literary and artistic explorations of consumption and waste express what we might call the “politics of economy” in the postcolony. The concept of *economy*—as distinct from “economics” or “the economy”—is central to the political and aesthetic vision of the works I address, and forms a philosophical and practical foundation for the

kind of ideal economic subject that I suggest the works collectively envision. As Jacques Derrida shows in *Given Time*, this is a term whose etymological ambivalence tells us a great deal.⁷ As an articulation of *oikos* and *nomos*, the household and the law, “economy” describes the social process of division, distribution, circulation and conservation by which resources are allocated, particularly (as its more specific sense of “frugality” or thrift denotes) in view of assuring future security.⁸ Aristotle’s positioning of *oikonomia* as the basis of political life identifies the ideal work of politics as being fundamentally *managerial*, concerned with the “proper” dispensation of resources rather than with power or sovereignty per se; this view is shared, though with certain necessary updates, by the writers and filmmakers I treat here.⁹ Thinking “economically” signifies not only a preoccupation with, say, the effects of monetary exchange or commodity fetishism on social life (though such concerns are certainly present in, and often central features of, these texts), but also reflects a deep concern with the political and personal necessity of *thrift*. It is, in their view, not extravagance but rather *economy* that underwrites sovereign self-possession, whether individual or national.

The novels, films, plays and poems I discuss here variously address the question of sovereignty in relation to the problem of waste, examining the implications for

⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. 1. Counterfeit Money*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6.

⁸ From “ancient Greek *οἰκονομία* management of a household or family, husbandry, thrift, arrangement, in Hellenistic Greek also administration, principles of government, arrangement of a literary work, stewardship (Septuagint, New Testament), plan, dispensation (New Testament), prudent handling or explanation of doctrine.” “economy, n.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Available at <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50071995> (Accessed June 4, 2008)

⁹ See Giorgio Agamben, “From Political Theology to Economic Theology: an interview with Gianluca Sacco.” Tr. in “Life During Wartime” blog, available at <http://aldiqua.blogspot.com/2005/06/agamben-from-political-theology-to.html> (accessed June 6, 2008)

political and personal self-possession of exposure to (or determination by) the economies of waste and superfluity that organize postcolonial life. They present a grim picture of the dependency, indignity, moral corruption and material degradation that result from the culture of extravagance through which African rulers (and their elite hangers-on) display and perform their sovereign authority. Georges Bataille's insistence that sovereignty is defined by a radical "indifference to utility" and displayed through the spectacular performance of destructive, wasteful consumption,¹⁰ seems a dismayingly accurate description of Africa's political and economic elites, as critics like Achille Mbembe and Jean-François Bayart have shown. But while literary descriptions of the sordid appetites on display in Africa (and this is certainly a popular trope) seem to serve on one level as evidence for Bataille's theories, the very different moral and ideological frameworks through which they view these realities call into question the normative conclusions he draws, pointing out the ultimate instability of polities based on waste. They achieve this, in part, by situating the "general economy" of extravagance that Bataille describes in specific, historically- and materially grounded contexts where the contradictions of such wastefulness are thrown into immediate relief.

The abstract "consumption" that is so central to Bataille's philosophy is critically engaged in these works by being literalized in the figure of food, which is then itself re-metaphorized as an index for appetite and the dialectic of necessity and pleasure through which it operates. Food comes to stand not only for itself, but for all the resources that are necessary for both biological and social survival, and whose

¹⁰ See *The Accursed Share, Vol. 1: Consumption*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

politicization has had (and continues to have) such devastatingly real consequences for ordinary Africans. This is of course an issue with immediate relevance that extends beyond the confines of literary criticism. As I write this, a global food crisis, intensified by profound imbalances and monopolistic blockages in the global economy, threatens the very lives of tens of millions of people, particularly in Africa.¹¹ While the West struggles with epidemic obesity and other diseases of overconsumption, in Africa, where one in three suffers from malnutrition, millions wonder where they will find their next meal. Reading Bataille in such a context, and in combination with the literary works I treat here, makes it difficult to accept his ahistorical and amoral enthusiasm for sovereign extravagance. The symbolic and thematic centrality in postcolonial African literature of food and digestion points a bitterly critical finger at the political valence of consumption and the distinctly material danger posed by its excesses in societies where many do not have enough to eat, let alone destroy in sumptuary display.

While I argue that the cluster of texts I have identified as preoccupied with “economy” in fact contest Bataille’s theory of sovereignty and his enthusiastic admiration for the extravagances of potlatch rituals and even human sacrifice, they nevertheless accept his positioning of “surplus” at the heart of life in general. The work of reading I undertake here attempts to articulate the various, often contradictory levels at which Africans confront the problem of waste and its correlate, economy. These are

¹¹ For a useful overview of the “food emergencies” facing contemporary Africa, see Oxfam International, “Causing Hunger: An overview of the food crisis in Africa.” Available at http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingpapers/bp91_africa_food_crisis.pdf (accessed June 6, 2008). Though there is a large and growing literature on the politics of food, a useful introduction is provided by Jean Dreze and Amartya Kumar Sen, *The Political Economy of Hunger* (3 vol.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

concepts and concerns that infuse the symbolic, libidinal, aesthetic and social fields, as well as the mundane level of material exchange, and must therefore be examined from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Even as, I suggest, these African writers and filmmakers contest Bataille's vision of sovereignty, their works therefore share his interest in identifying and investigating a "general economy" of waste: the extension across the social, psychological and even biological landscape of the relations of consumption, expenditure, waste and calculation that are more typically treated within the narrower confines of what he calls the "restricted" economy (that is, the economic per se). Bataille's "general economy" expresses his insistence that *all* organic behavior—not just the "rational," human sphere of exchange—is driven by the principle of superabundance, staging an ecological as well as an economic drama of literally cosmic proportions. Though strategies for dealing with surplus vary among organisms and across historical time, the problem of superfluity represents the organizing principle, for Bataille, of life in general. By "relating the problem that is posed in economics to the general problem of nature," he brings together economy and ecology in a theory that identifies waste as a concept that mediates the biological, environmental, social and political spheres of human existence.¹²

What is determinedly absent from Bataille's analysis, but in fact quite central to the vision of the African works I consider, is the question of *morality*. What the excremental texture of postcolonial African literature signals is, as I show, the fundamental immorality of luxury and extravagance in a context of scarcity, and its

¹² Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 13.

consequent incompatibility with the ideals of postcolonialism and democracy, whose rhetorical deployment serves to legitimate the political and social hegemony enjoyed by national elites. Moreover, the spectacular “indifference to necessity” displayed in the conspicuous consumption of African rulers presents a serious obstacle to the economic development of postcolonial nations, preventing the productive investment of national resources and stranding these countries in crippling debt and humiliating dependency on the West. Treating the problem of economy through the perspective of aesthetics therefore highlights the coincidence, in this case, of ethical and political ideals.

The values (and this is a complicated term for a project about waste) that are endorsed by this cluster of texts, and thus the ideal *subject* they ultimately predicate, turn out to be surprisingly “bourgeois,” resting on a foundation of restraint, sobriety, frugality and foresight that greatly resembles the Calvinist ethic promoted by colonial education, religion, and biopolitical discipline during the pre-Independence era. I do not spend much time on the ideological challenges of reconciling this ethic with the ideals of postcolonial liberation with which it is associated in the literature; suffice to say that contemporary capitalism, with its emphasis on consumption and expenditure, looks very different from the production-oriented industrial capitalism of the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. As Jean-Joseph Goux wryly observes, in his discussion of Bataille’s relevance for our “capitalism of consumption,” “no society has ‘wasted’ as much as contemporary capitalism.”¹³ Anticapitalist “resistance,” as well as more

¹³ Jean-Joseph Goux, “General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism.” In *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford & Malden, MA. : Blackwell, 1998), 199.

restrained attempts to articulate “ethical” economic behavior, must and does therefore assume very different forms. The challenges posed by these developments, and by the new contradictions that emerge from them, find expression in the tensions and ambivalences that profoundly complicate our readings of the “political” work of literature in such a context.

While this is a project deeply concerned with the “real world” implications of philosophical experiments like Bataille’s, and with the materialist purchase of literary responses, it is, I want to stress, fundamentally a dissertation about *literature*. It not only invites readers to take seriously the political stakes of African literary works, but also works to highlight and intensively engage their distinctly *aesthetic* concerns and achievements. All too often, readings of African literature privilege one aspect at the expense of the other, treating novels and films as “documentary” accounts of African societies, as primarily “political” interventions, without adequate consideration of their status as aesthetic objects; or, less frequently, discussing their stylistic or figural features in isolation from the historical or political contexts of their production.

The mode of reading I deploy here attempts to do both—not alongside but *simultaneously*, arguing for a political-aesthetic understanding of African literature in which the political is not simply understood to be thematized, but might also be found at work on the deep-structural level of aesthetic form. Beauty itself, along with representation, organization, sensory pleasure and the other functions of aesthetics, are

all revealed in the literature as not supplementary to the material or political, but in fact as deeply political concepts and practices in themselves.

This approach is evidently inspired by the work of Fredric Jameson, whose insistence on the “semantic richness” of Marxist interpretation has led to what I see as a uniquely productive approach to political readings of literature. Like Jameson, I am intrigued by the tensions that characterize the relationship between literary “form” and “content,” and with the utopian prospects that arise from this tension in even the bleakest narrative circumstances. Close reading is thus itself revealed as a strategy for excavating the “political unconscious” that makes its way into works of literature. This unconscious, like Freud’s, is constituted of desires and the various effects of their impossible fulfillment; close reading, therefore, represents an engagement that sets into motion the ethical and indeed political force of such desire, in all its contradictions.

While Jameson’s forays into “postcolonial” areas have been limited, not to mention controversial, his method has much to offer scholars of postcolonial literature, like myself, who are concerned with both the “political” and the literary-aesthetic substance of that literature. The attention I pay to questions of genre is particularly influenced by his example, while my interest in the ways in which literature articulates and interrogates—that is to say, mediates—the multivalent effects of economies and the economic, benefits from his careful elucidations of the relationship between the material and the aesthetic.

While Jameson's Marxism provides the central organizing method for this project, I see it as addressing gaps in two other paradigms that engage these questions and which have deeply influenced my work. First, while it draws on a "postcolonial" archive, treating texts from African countries written in the aftermath of European colonialism and considering issues that were central to the nationalist projects of the early anti- and postcolonial era, it undertakes a rather different kind of analysis from those typically classified as "postcolonialist." Critics like Arif Dirlik, E. San Juan, Jr., and Aijaz Ahmad have angrily pointed out the centrality, in institutionalized postcolonial theory, of what San Juan calls the "metaphysics of textualism," a concern with hybridity, language, and other cultural processes often at the expense of materialist and especially broadly economic considerations.¹⁴

Reading even a few recent novels from the continent quickly reveals that the field's emphasis on discursivity, subjectivity and representation is glaringly out of touch with the issues that preoccupy ordinary Africans and intellectuals in the postcolony today—issues that may in fact be summarized as broadly "economic." Though the lingering cultural and psychological effects of European colonialism certainly feature in African literature after 1960, it is equally true that most contemporary works struggle much more agonistically with the problems arising from a rapidly expanding monetary economy, from poverty, foreign debt, structural adjustment, food scarcity and the challenges of everyday survival on the periphery of the global system. Though these

¹⁴ E. San Juan, Jr, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), 22. See also Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third-World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literature* (New York: Verso, 1994).

concerns are explored in many fine anthropological or other social-studies approaches to Africa, they have not been fully integrated into literary-critical approaches to African postcolonialism, which tend to focus instead on issues of language, cultural resistance, and so forth.

My project, which is as concerned with aesthetics, genre, and figuration—literary economy—as with the more material economies that shape Africans’ everyday life, attempts to articulate these approaches by reading literature as one, particularly rich nexus within a general economy of superfluity. Literary approaches facilitate an analysis not only of narrowly “economic” concerns, but also the ways in which the encounter with waste informs the political, psychological, social, aesthetic and cultural fields, Africans’ sense of themselves as subjects and historical actors, and their understanding of the function of cultural products like literature in the face of these painful realities.

Here I have found inspiration in the second field of study to which this project responds—though, again, my work attempts to redress what I see as a striking omission in its otherwise helpful approach. Over the past two decades, the growing field known as “new economic criticism” has attempted to think about the relationship between economics and aesthetics from non- (or not exclusively) Marxist perspectives. Marc Shell’s 1978 work *The Economy of Literature* (followed in 1981 by *Money, Language, and Thought*) brilliantly discussed the homologous kinship between language and money as mediums of “exchange” and as semiotic economies that create and circulate forms of

value.¹⁵ Though drawing on Marx and some Marxist theories of value, Shell's work nevertheless cannot be called Marxist; rather, he uses linguistics, semiotics, literary theory and psychoanalysis to examine the ways in which language and money, aesthetics and economics, mutually inform and structure one another. More recently, "new economic" critics like Sandra Sherman, Deidre Lynch and Catherine Ingrassia have focused on early eighteenth-century British fiction to trace the ways in which literature helped produce, reproduce, and contest the new values, attitudes, behaviors and representational forms demanded by the nascent capitalist economy.¹⁶ By showing how fiction variously participates in the disciplinary creation of bourgeois subjects, based on principles like "credit," trust, individualism, autonomy and semiotic stability, these writers propose a more nuanced understanding of the processes by which economic, social, and representational or aesthetic processes intersect than the cruder frameworks of "ideology" and "mediation" can provide.

Though this is an influential and provocative approach to the study of literature and economy, it is surprising to note how limited its geographical and historical scope has been. Given postcolonial literature's preoccupation with economic concerns, with money, debt, exchange, and value, it seems an ideal field in which to undertake the sort of work that new economic critics have so brilliantly achieved with Western (frequently,

¹⁵ See Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and *Money, Language, and Power: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Sandra Sherman, *Finance and Fictionality in Eighteenth-Century Literature: Accounting for Defoe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Catherine Ingrassia, *Authorship, Commerce, and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Culture of Paper Credit* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

early-modern British) texts. Bringing the methods of new economic criticism to bear on postcolonial texts, and complicating its interest in the relationship between economic and linguistic, aesthetic, or semiotic fields with the insights of postcolonial theory and the experiences of revolutionary postcolonialism, produces many useful results, as I hope to have demonstrated here. This dissertation attempts such an intervention, standing as a preliminary example of the rich possibilities offered by a “new *postcolonial economic*” approach to literature.

What all these perspectives share, and what I try to honor in my own work, is their insistence on grounding their claims in close readings of literary texts. The arguments of each of my chapters emerge from careful encounters with “literary” works (including novels, plays, films and short stories) from a range of African countries. It is through *reading* that the political and ethical claims of the texts emerge, a process that (as I show in the first chapter) is explicitly thematized in these works themselves. While the readings I present each identify in the various works the deep-structural significance of *economy* and waste, they do not seek to be reductive, by seeking and finding the same story in the richly diverse texts that I read. Instead, our encounters with the texts, through the mediating labor of reading, function as “thresholds,” self-conscious openings to works in which the dialectic of particularity and generality are perpetually at play. Here I draw on Ato Quayson’s provocative theory of “reading for the social” that he presents in his *Calibrations*. For me, as for Quayson,

close reading involves not just reading for specific details as a means of identifying interacting heterogeneities that, taken as a configuration, illustrate

the parameters of a literary structure in the first place. But this reading for heterogeneity in the literary field is at once correlated to a reading of the social itself, my argument being that what allows literature to represent the social is not any straightforward mimetic relationship between the two but the degree to which literature encapsulates an image of the social via a configuration of heterogeneities.¹⁷

My similar interest in reading for the “heterogeneities” and tensions that characterize literary responses to the culture of waste, the ways in which their formal or generic structure frequently complicates or dislocates their narrative unity, helps uncover their highly ambivalent ethical, political and aesthetic responses to superfluity and other excesses. Even the most profoundly excremental realities are charged with the promise of historical difference, while the thrifty bourgeois values promoted so strenuously in the works are mediated through the self-conscious inutility of the artwork itself.

Even while decrying the destructive effects of wasteful consumption, many of these texts are charged with powerful *desires*, whether of the trivial, shiny-commodity variety, or on the more profound scale of utopian longing for radical historical change. Either way, the appetites and pleasures of the body serve as material referents for the other forms of pleasurable excess—beauty, eroticism, revolutionary politics—they closely consider. Bataille himself suggested that “the term poetry...can be considered

¹⁷ Ato Quayson, “Incessant Particularities: *Calibrations* as Close Reading.” *Research in African Literatures* 36:2 (Summer 2005), 122-131 (p.126).

synonymous with expenditure,"¹⁸ a view that accords with Kant's famous definition of the beautiful as "purposive purposelessness," or absolute superfluity.

Though in some ways I find that African literature argues for a surprisingly "bourgeois" ideal of the economic subject, the texts' "literariness" simultaneously directs their energies beyond the narrow calculations of marketplace exchange into an ideal realm of absolute superfluity — aesthetics itself — that in fact achieves, if only symbolically, the profoundly utopian ambition of wresting "a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity."¹⁹

The following chapters present a series of essays on the problem of waste and superfluity in postcolonial African literature. Though drawn from a wide range of historical and national contexts, and offering a diversity of ideological and aesthetic perspectives, the texts I treat share an interest in the status and function of beauty in light of these economies of waste, as well as a deep concern with their implications for the ideals of dignity, autonomy, and revolutionary change associated with the postcolonial itself. While situated in their specific contexts, these texts are at the same time exemplary of a broader, continental problem, the "general economy" of extravagance that characterizes political life in the postcolony. This question of

¹⁸ Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, tr. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 120.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 19.

exemplarity—of singularity, representation, and abjection—is itself quite central to the texts I consider and thus to the arguments I advance in the following chapters as well.

The very diversity of these works of “national” literature challenges the stability of the forms and relations on which those communities have been built. If these are “national allegories” at all, they are so only as allegories of the deconstruction of national integrity that is effected, in their view, by monetary economy and its extravagant logics. Treating them as “cases” of a more general phenomenon helps us understand how the dynamic between singularity and generality is, in fact, the basis of the very process by which ordinary Africans are made into garbage.

The first chapter considers the prevalence of figures of excrement and garbage in African literature, looking at works from Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and other sites to identify the allegorical valences of abjection in transitional contexts. In the films of Ousmane Sembène, which I examine in Chapter 2, unproductive consumption is starkly contrasted with the aesthetic and political ideal of hunger to show the dire effects on personal and political subjectivity in Senegal, specifically, and in Africa more generally. Chapter 3 discusses a case when hyperabundance, not scarcity, becomes a problem—in a reading of Ben Okri’s short-story collection *Stars of the New Curfew*, I argue that the inflationary culture of petroboom Nigeria demanded new ways of representing the contradictions between the degraded material conditions on the ground and the dazzling wealth and possibility on display during the 1970s and 1980s. Magic realism serves, in this context, as a melancholic expression of the failure of modernity and

modernization, as promised by the newly monetized economy and culture, to adequately arrive. The final chapter, on South African novelist Zakes Mda, identifies in that author's "aesthetics of recycling" a paradoxically optimistic response to the death, destruction, degradation and abjection that characterized the transition from apartheid during the early 1990s. Once again, as in the preceding chapters, generic disjuncture here expresses the novel's contradictory impulses: its desire to archaeologically uncover and preserve a disappearing history, and its utopian orientation toward a future freed from the agonies of the past.

While the mode of reading I propose generates *general* claims about African postcolonialism, and African postcolonial literature, as a whole, my argument is here necessarily limited to a few exemplary works. What they share, apart from a thematic interest in superfluity, is what we might call a certain level of formal complexity and self-consciousness. These are works for which the conventions of classical or socialist realism no longer suffice; instead, their modernist or indeed postmodernist approach to representation—their variously fragmented, disjointed, deconstructive form—can be seen as key elements in their exploration of the crises of modernity or modernization that precipitated postcolonial disillusionment and its excremental signs.

At the same time, like objects in any collection, they have been selected for the ways in which they uniquely illuminate and complicate one another in juxtaposition—that is, in their singular difference. Though they share a preoccupation with money,

commodity fetishism and its cultural, psychological and political effects, their critical responses look and feel very different. While the early postcolonial texts with which I begin largely respond to their excremental circumstances only with bitterness and despair, the more recent South African novel discussed in the final chapter is charged, despite its similarly bleak milieu, with materialist productivity and even political optimism. The culture of waste depicted in the films of Sembène, treated in chapter two, is interrogated through the lens of hunger and scarcity; in Ben Okri's Nigeria, by contrast, waste and extravagance result from abundance, not scarcity, with inflation as a consequence. Okri's critique takes the form of hyperbolic magic realism, in striking contrast to Sembène's insistence on technical and formal restraint. In short, the texts are representative, not of a unity of vision, but of the very disjunctures and contradictions that characterize the economy of excess through which political and social life is organized in Africa.

The dialectical play of generality and singularity that provides an organizing principle for the dissertation is itself a central thematic and formal consideration for the literary works that it studies. As an assemblage, the texts I discuss, and the readings I undertake, therefore sketch the outlines of a general economy of surplus, a continental and perhaps even global vision of a system seen from its periphery—or most abject underside.

Chapter One. Marvelous rottenness: excremental allegory and postcolonial African literature

The history of postcolonial African literature is an excremental one. In Lusaka, street children bottle raw sewage to get high off the methane gas.¹ In Nairobi's largest slum, Kibera, where latrines overflow and sewage contaminates drinking water, children play on heaps of "flying toilets," plastic bags filled with excrement and tossed into the street.² In Kano, the commercial capital of northern Nigeria, entrepreneurs grow rich off a trade in human excrement salvaged from open-air dumps and sold to farmers as fertilizer.³ Heifer International Uganda, an NGO focused on technological solutions to hunger and poverty, promotes the production of biogas from "human urine and excreta" mixed in with "banana peels, algae, water hyacinth and poultry droppings" as a way to stave off the growing threat of deforestation.⁴ A diplomatic tiff over the illegal dumping of human waste from a luxury game lodge causes tension between South Africa and Botswana and prompts a debate over the definition, in Botswanan legislation,

¹ Ishbel Matheson, "Children high on sewage." BBC News July 30, 1999. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/406067.stm> (May 14, 2008)

² Ashley Seager, "Africa's largest slum: where youngsters play among bags full of raw sewage." *The Guardian* (London) November 10, 2006. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2006/nov/10/kenya.water> (May 14, 2008)

³ Sam Olukoya, "Nigeria's Dirty Business." BBC News January 4, 2001. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1100624.stm> (May 14, 2008)

⁴ John Kasozi, "Uganda: The Fuel in Human Excreta." *New Vision* (Kampala) January 2, 2008. Available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200801030059.html> (May 14, 2008)

of “waste.”⁵ And academic activists for South Africa’s squatter populations are barred from the February, 2008 Africa Sanitation conference in Durban by the R2000 (USD333) entrance fee; noting the irony, they remind the experts that the greatest problem for public sanitation in Africa is “under-funding” (“Without subsidies, if you can’t pay, then you can’t pee or poo in comfort”).⁶

As these recent news stories suggest, contemporary Africa is frequently associated, both at home and abroad, with human and other wastes. This is nothing new: as in the rest of the world, African colonialism drew the lines of civilization and savagery at the bathroom door. According to the Manichean division of the colonial world into “clean” and “dirty,” and the public health, commercial and medical industries that capitalized on and helped reproduce this ideology, Africans and their bodies were relegated to the moral and material trash heap, an appropriate fate for those that racist doctrine identified as “filth.”⁷ African bodies were constituted, both discursively and practically, as dirty, diseased, and incontinent, characteristics that were in turn held to justify and even to demand the salutary disciplinary effects of colonial governance, Christian education and capitalist industry.

⁵ “The Eye airs waste laundry in the open.” *DailyNews online (Gaborone)* November 22, 2004. Available at http://www.gov.bw/cgi-bin/news.cgi?d=20041122&i=The_Eye_airs_waste_laundry_in_the_open (May 14, 2008)

⁶ Baruti Amisi, Patrick Bond, Dudu Khumalo and Simphiwe Nojiyeza, “South Africa: The Neo-liberal Loo.” *Green Left Weekly* 742 (March 5, 2008). Available at <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2008/742/38369> (May 14, 2008)

⁷ See Warwick Anderson, “Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution.” *Critical Inquiry* 21:3 (Spring 1995), 640-669; Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Anne McClintock, “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising.” *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995).

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon famously extended these logics into his description of the symbolic economy of colonialism and its spatial arrangements, pointing out that the “mire” in which Africans are seen to be wallowing has in fact been recirculated from the clean streets of the colonists’ towns:

[In the settler’s town,] the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. ... The settler’s town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. [... By contrast, t]he native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs.⁸

In Fanon’s Algiers, as throughout colonial Africa, “natives” and their quarters function as trash heaps and sewers for society’s wastes, the end point of the economies of circulation that generate profit (financial as well as symbolic) for more mobile subjects. If Fanon is here describing the colonial body politic, complete with mouth, “belly,” feet, skin, eyes and knees, then the “native town” is surely its anus—or, more accurately still, its toilet.

What is especially striking about the recent news, however, is how frequently we find excrement in close contact with, on the one hand, pleasure or beauty (as in the Zambian methane-sniffers or the Kenyan children at play on piles of excrement), and, on the other, money. Shit is a problem for government, the environment, and public health, to be sure, but it is also good business. The ubiquity of human waste in the streets of postcolonial cities presents a profitable opportunity: a way for ingenious or simply desperate Africans to make a living—and even, it seems, to find perverse kinds of

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 39.

pleasure. All of these stories, which tend to fall into the “news of the weird” category even though they appear in the “Africa” section of newspapers or news websites, show Africans as, in every respect, excrementalists, paying attention to (and indeed being paid for) filthy things that Western readers ordinarily ignore or actively repress.

The excremental trope that recurs in news stories and in regulatory discourse about Africa is not restricted to the non-fictional realm. As critics have begun to recognize, postcolonial African literature is relentlessly preoccupied with shit. In an influential essay, Joshua Esty notes the “remarkable currency and symbolic versatility of excrement in the postcolony,” observing “shit's function not just as a naturalistic detail but as a governing trope in postcolonial literature.”⁹ Even a superficial catalog of excremental literature from the continent demonstrates that the popularity of the trope spans many countries, literary genres and historical periods from colonialism through independence, postcolonialism and on into the contemporary neoliberal moment. Preceding even the two novels of the 1960s that Esty identifies as “landmark[s]” of the genre, Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Ghana, 1968) and Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (Nigeria, 1965), we could include Amos Tutuola’s novels, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (Nigeria, 1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (Nigeria, 1954), which feature a number of excremental characters and settings. Perhaps the most literally excremental African novel is *Devil on the Cross*, which Ngugi wa Thiong’o famously wrote on toilet paper while in prison; as we shall see, its excremental language and figures make full thematic use of the scatological context of its production. At the start of Ngugi’s most

⁹ Joshua D. Esty, “Excremental Postcolonialism.” *Contemporary Literature* 40:1 (Spring 1999), 22-59. p.23.

recent satire, *Wizard of the Crow* (Kenya, 2005), the protagonist awakens from the dead atop a rubbish heap, in a slum that greatly resembles Nairobi's Kibera.

Tutuola's compatriot, the flamboyant musician and political critic, Fela Kuti-Anikupalo, was similarly fond of excremental themes and figures: apart from his "Expensive Shit" (1974), which recounts his arrest and imprisonment on drug charges by corrupt police officers who waited expectantly for him to eliminate the marijuana joint he had hastily swallowed, his "African Message" (1977) satirically condemns Africans' cultural alienation by describing the advantages of traditional water ablutions over the increasingly popular toilet paper, while "Perambulator" (1983), which interrogates the politics of medicine, does so through the provocative example of hemorrhoids.

Also from Nigeria, Ben Okri deploys excremental imagery and themes in many of his works, including *The Famished Road*, where Azaro is appalled to find his father working as a night-soil porter, and the *kunstlerroman* *Dangerous Love* (a rewriting of the 1981 novel *The Landscapes Within*), with its protagonist's controversial insistence on painting the stinking scumpool that lies outside his ghetto window. South African letters has its own excremental tradition, with the refuse- and feces-strewn landscapes of antiapartheid protest literature (we think of works like Alex LaGuma's *A Walk in the Night* or Oswald Mtshali's "An Abandoned Bundle," among many others) being continued (like their real-world counterparts) into the postapartheid era by writers like Zakes Mda, Chris van Wyk, Marlene van Niekerk and Lesego Rampolokeng.

There are of course many others, including countless excremental works in other languages than English (the largely untranslated novels of Sony Labou Tansi come to mind). This is a prevalent trope in postcolonial African literature; the question is, *why*, and to what *effect*? Esty's dazzling comparative analysis of works by Armah, Soyinka, Joyce and Beckett identifies their use of scatological imagery with the experience of postcolonial political disillusionment in the face of which each of these authors was writing. Drawing on historical studies by Warwick Anderson, Esty suggests that the satirical deployment of excremental language in a postcolonial context works "counterdiscursively," troubling the constitution of native bodies as unclean and excremental and the identification of "progress" with sanitization: "In postcolonial writing, shit can redress a history of debasement by displaying the failures of development and the contradictions of colonial discourse and, moreover, by disrupting inherited associations of excrement with colonized or non-Western populations" (25-26). The omnipresent filth in these works functions in Esty's analysis as a "trace of uneven development" (28), and a marker of the ethical dilemmas to which individuals are subject in the context of underdevelopment.

The literary versatility of these tropes mirrors, we might say, the many creative uses to which Africans put human and other wastes. The question, though, is why excrement is so incredibly profitable—why, in these contexts, an abject waste product can so readily be made to seem and be and do so much more than we would expect? It is at once part of the landscape, just one of the many hazards confronting characters and

writers on their wanderings through the continent's cities, and a powerful symbolic nexus that mediates between the sordid reality in which these works are embedded and the allegorical superstructures toward which they extend.

The mode by which excrement signifies is simultaneously metaphor and metonymy, representing the "sign of a system that has gone afoul" as well as the trace element of that befoulment itself. Like other abject forms, it not only serves in literary works as an index or metaphor for a "generalized state of degradation," but has also a documentary function, a literal detail that denotes the sordid reality of the lifeworld being described.¹⁰ This ambivalence, or semiotic tension (between the signifying object and the non-signifying substance that, as Julia Kristeva describes, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses"), is one that pervades many of the excremental texts of African postcolonialism. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, in particular, the Man's sense that "something more" pulsates almost visibly beneath the "disgusting" decay of everyday life—his ability to appreciate the beauty of even the most abject objects—infuses the excremental vision with a paradoxically utopian energy.

Above all, however, what African literary excrementalism demands is that we take shit literally. In this case, the excess of ordure that defines the landscapes of postcolonial literature is a result—both symbolically and materially—of overconsumption, a concept that is literalized in these works' abiding fascination with eating, digestion, and the consuming body. An excess of excrement comes from too

¹⁰ Guillermina DeFerrari, "Aesthetics Under Siege: Dirty Realism and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Trilogía sucia de la Habana*." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 7 (2003), 23-38 (p.33).

much food (and perhaps a scarcity of available toilets, as the example of Kenya's "flying toilets" suggests), and forms a stark though telling contrast to the hunger and deprivation that characterize everyday life for a majority of Africans. The "politics of the belly" described by Jean-Francois Bayart, in which domination proceeds through the monopolistic control of food and other resources, has its literary correlative in the aesthetics of shit deployed by writers like Armah, Soyinka, Ngugi and Van Wyk; their excremental vision satirizes and allegorically contests the social, political and indeed aesthetic effects of African elites' addiction to bodily pleasure

As flip sides of the same coin, or end points of the same process of consumption, food and excrement are key figures in postcolonial literary considerations of the political significance of *economy*. In highlighting the excremental consequences of overconsumption and its monopoly by the privileged few, scatological artists radically contest the excessive model of sovereignty proposed by Georges Bataille and his theoretical heirs. Jean-Francois Bayart and Achille Mbembe have described the ways in which postcolonial African sovereignty proceeds via the "politics of the belly," a mode that sees power as, first and foremost, "the privileged loc[us] of pleasure where one eats and consumes to one's heart's content."¹¹ Bayart's influential analysis of popular euphemisms and other figures through which power and corruption are articulated by ordinary Africans demonstrates the close interrelationship between consumption and domination in the postcolony. (Famously, he examines the "big men" syndrome, in which physical heft both symbolizes and expresses political power, along with a range

¹¹ Monga, 230.

of other examples in which food and eating mediate political relations: the Cameroonian party, dedicated to nepotistic graft, that called itself “I chop you chop” – “I eat you eat”; the cynical maxim explaining the inevitability of corruption because “the goat grazes where he is tethered”; and so on.)

Not only control over the circulation of food, but the theatrical demonstration of such control through feasting, munificence and ornamental display (through commodities like imported cars, foods and drinks, Western clothing, splendid houses, and beautiful women) form the basis of political authority in the African cases that Bayart and Mbembe study. This performance of wealth not only displays the fortunate individual's power and his “indifference to utility,” but also serves a legitimizing function by “sharing” his wealth with his wider social network. This obligation to share, imposed by the steady stream of supplicants and kinsmen who present themselves at his door, is ignored at his peril: “a man who manages ‘to make good’ without ensuring that his network shares in his prosperity brings ‘shame’ upon himself and acquires the reputation of ‘eating’ others in the invisible world: social disapproval and ostracism and, in extreme cases, a death sentence may in time be his reward” (233).¹²

Building on Bayart's work, Achille Mbembe shows how this spectacle of enjoyment, the luxury of extravagant pleasure, is absolutely essential to the exercise of authority. In an especially striking passage from *On the Postcolony*, he writes: “To exercise authority is, furthermore, for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain

¹² For fictional investigations of this problem, in which “corruption” is articulated as a contradiction between politics and ethics, see (among others) Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984) and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, discussed in the Introduction.

delight in eating and drinking well, and, again in [Congolese novelist Sony] Labou Tansi's words, to pass most of his time in 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls.'" ¹³ To be sovereign or self-possessed is to be wasteful, to luxuriate ostentatiously in grotesque physical pleasure. And yet, again, this commanded enjoyment is more than simple (personal) corruption; it forms the aesthetic substance of sovereign power itself. "[T]he *commandement* must be extravagant," Mbembe indicates, "since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele; it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in dress and lifestyle, turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theater" (109). In short, "the postcolony is a world of anxious virility, a world hostile to continence, frugality, sobriety" (110).

"In this sense," as Bayart points out, "the 'politics of the belly' is truly a matter of life and death. Life—if one succeeds in taking one's part of the 'national cake' without being taken oneself. Death—if one is forced to make do with a hypothetical salary that will only feed the family for the first three days of the month..." (238). Postcolonial sovereignty is, in this analysis, a biopolitics in its most basic form: to participate in politics, to become a political subject, is to enter a struggle for survival based on a social landscape divided between those who simply *consume*, if they are fortunate, and those who *enjoy*. The attainment of personal and social dignity, in this context, is a fundamentally wasteful endeavor: it is only by setting aside or transcending the bounds

¹³ Achille Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarities." *On the Postcolony*, tr. A.M. Berrett, et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 110.

of economy (frugality, careful valuation, and thinking of the future) that one shows oneself to be fully human.

The power of excrement to express the contradiction between desire and necessity, between “an all-encompassing desire for material possessions and a pervasive condition of psychological and physical impoverishment,”¹⁴ lies in its status as, at once, literal substance and figurative concept. As its overdetermined status within psychoanalysis indicates, shit is a powerful semiotic node, capable of signifying many disparate, even contradictory ideas. It is, in other words, profoundly *excessive*, simultaneously more and less than itself, an abject waste product capable of signifying the most excessive forms of value. Here, and in each of the excremental texts we have identified, the allegorical valence of shit is profoundly multiple and often therefore impossible to pin down: corrupt elites are a source of shit, but so are their victims. Abject populations are designated as excremental and disposable by genocidal political economies, but in true Bakhtinian fashion they revel in their ordure, “throw[ing] turds and urine” in order comically to bring low those who dominate them. Excrement is symbolic and satirical, but also dismally documentary and realist.

This ambivalence arises, as Guillerma DeFerrari notes, from shit’s status as a “formless object”: “at once overdetermined and meaningless, the allegorical structure it appears to sustain is imprecise” (30). This imprecision or ambivalence challenges the

¹⁴ John Lutz, “Pessimism, Autonomy, and Commodity Fetishism in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.” *Research in African Literatures* 34:2 (Summer 2003), 91-111 (p.95)

very allegorical interpretations that the excremental works seem to invite. The primary mode with which scatology is identified in Esty's essay is satire, a connection that makes sense given the genre's traditional association (as Esty notes) with filth, and popular descriptions of the satirist "as throwing turds and urine on those whom he ridicules."¹⁵ Works like Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, Van Wyk's *Year of the Tapeworm* and Van Niekerk's *Triomf* certainly use scatology to bring low those who regard themselves as hubristically "high," revealing for instance (in Achille Mbembe's description) that "the president's anus is not of something out of this world—although, to everyone's amusement, the official line may treat it as such; instead, people see it as it really is, capable of defecating like any commoner's."¹⁶ As Bakhtin insisted, after all, shit is "the most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted."

And yet, as we have seen, many excremental works exceed the category of satire by problematizing the presumed distance from which the satirist hurls his critical ordure. In novels like *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the disgusting appeal of the very commodity culture being condemned makes it impossible to sustain the critical distance necessary for satirical judgment, while satire's etymological association with satiety (from *lanx satura*, a full dish) imbricates it indirectly in the very economies of consumption responsible, in the author's view, for the excremental conditions afflicting postcolonial Africa. I would like to suggest that the interpretive mode invoked by

¹⁵ Irvin Ehrenpries, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age*. Vol. 3. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 691. Cited in Esty, 31.

¹⁶ Achille Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly." *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 108.

excrementalism is in fact allegory, a “kind of surplus value of signification” whose very excesses reflect, at the level of form, the problematic economies of excess being documented and critiqued in the works’ narrative content.¹⁷

At the center of Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross*, we have a parade of the “big men” who dominate African politics and whose corpulent figures are central to Bayart’s and Achille Mbembe’s political analysis. Each has a larger belly and more grotesque appetites than the next, culminating in the Devil himself, who is described as having two mouths, a sagging belly, and skin like a pig’s.¹⁸ The “Devil’s Feast” around which the novel’s plot is structured, a competition among “thieves and robbers” to determine the greatest among them, is a ritualistic performance of conspicuous consumption and “verbal diarrhoea” (196)—an extravagant ceremony whose wasteful logics provide an ironic counterpart to the parasitical exploitation and overaccumulation through which these thieves have filled their bellies (95).

The novel’s argumentative thrust is summarized in the excremental observation that these men, whose appetites are sucking the lifeblood from the country’s moral and material economies, have “shat and farted beyond the limits of tolerance” (158). The questions it poses, attendant on this recognition, are addressed to the intellectuals who bear witness (like the novel’s protagonists, Wariinga and Gatuiria) to the grotesque parasitism of the elite and the abject suffering of the poor. First, comparing intellectuals to the proverbial “hyenas which tried to walk along two different roads at the same

¹⁷ Roberto González-Echevarría, *Isla a su vuelo fugitiva* (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1983), 61. Cited in Alan West, *Tropics of History: Cuba Imagined* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1997), 48.

¹⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Devil on the Cross* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 13.

time" (205), Ngugi insists that they decide, in the face of such abjection, on their class loyalties and affirm their commitment to the struggle for national dignity and social justice. The comparison to hyenas captures African writers' dependence on the cultural and linguistic leftovers of the West, their role as scavengers—and thus, ironically, their structural similarity to the economic elites, whom Armah describes disgustedly as "eating what was left in the teeth of the white men with their companies" (81). Writers, like the nation itself, need to become self-sufficient and *productive*, creating new resources and new, authentic forms of beauty for the national culture rather than simply consuming the material left to them by the imperial center.

Secondly, and by way of complication of the first, the novel questions the very possibility of a genuine national culture in such a context of corruption and universal abjection. Gatuiria, the teacher and ethnomusicologist who is also a composer, has long suffered from a creative blockage that derives from his inability to conceive of an appropriately patriotic work in these circumstances. "An artistic composition," he insists, "should be inspired by love...love of your country... a love that inspires the composer to sing hymns of praise to the beauty, the unity, the courage, the maturity, the bravery of his country" (132): how then, his dilemma suggests, to conceive of a "national literature" in the absence of such virtues?

The answer, I suggest, is again twofold: Ngugi, like Armah and others, identifies the excremental vision with the position of the artist and intellectual: situated between the hunger of the masses, on the one hand, and the full bellies of the elite, on the other,

the intellectual sees the shit that occupies and symbolically articulates the gap between them. In *Devil on the Cross*, as in Fanon's account, this impacted economy, in which enjoyment flows one way and accumulates there, while wastes flow in the opposite direction, is rendered in spatial terms: the town of Ilmorog, like the other former colonial cities in which many excremental works are staged, is divided between the "Golden Heights" residential area, with its "homes of sheer magnificence" and omnipresent polished wood, and the area called "*New Jerusalem*," where "the wretched" live amongst "fleas, bedbugs...sickening, undrained ditches, full of brackish water, shit and urine...the carcasses of dead dogs and cats ... [and] the rubbish and waste from the factories" (130-131). It is the task of the intellectual Gaturia to sublimate the literal substance of abjection—the shit and urine in which the wretched are wallowing—to the level of metaphor, to recognize the broader social and political economies at play in the production of such excremental conditions. "Flies, jiggers, bedbugs...are there more of those in Ilmorog's slums than the human parasites we have left behind in that cave?" he muses (131). Naturalistic description is thus raised through allegorical interpretation to the level of political critique.

The allegorization of excremental matter signals the political turn, when the novel's excremental vision shifts from the descriptive to the analytical. As Gaturia's bitter quip indicates, the spatial organization of Ilmorog, whose boundaries are marked by human and industrial wastes, reflects a broader divide in postcolonial Kenyan society. The gap that his analogy highlights is one between excess and scarcity, pleasure

and despair: the trash-filled gulf that separates the dreams of nationalism from the waking reality of venality, impoverishment and humiliation. The excremental vision—epitomized in Gatuiria’s joke—is, most fundamentally, a *mode of seeing*, one that works to defetishize the gleaming exterior of commodities, consumer culture and the politics of the belly to reveal the rottenness on which these forces are predicated.

It is also one that operates, like Gatuiria’s *magnum opus*, through the mode of national allegory. The dialectical play of literal and symbolic, particular and general, through which allegory operates is ideally suited to represent the ambivalences of societies determined by commodity fetishism and its cultural forms, and in which the desires stimulated by such forms run painfully up against the cold reality of necessity. This chapter works through the relationship between African literary excrementalism and the allegorical mode in which it most often features, suggesting that both are concerned with bearing witness to the effects of unrestrained enjoyment—uneconomical extravagance—on the nationalist project of postcolonialism.

In 1986, Fredric Jameson (in)famous claimed that “all third-world texts are necessarily... allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*.”¹⁹ This line instantly provoked a chorus of protest by critics who decried the overgeneralization entailed in the term “third-world” (and indeed in “necessarily”), and the Eurocentrism of his focus on the “national.” Yet little serious critical attention was devoted to the question of allegory and its particular valence for

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism.” *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986), 65-88 (p.69).

what we now call “postcolonial” literature. In her response to the controversy, Imre Szeman recuperates Jameson’s argument from the “willful misreading” to which (in her view) it has been subjected, and attempts to take seriously the notion of “national allegory” as it unfolds in his analysis. Drawing on Jameson’s other work on allegory, in books like *Fables of Aggression* and *The Political Unconscious*, Szeman suggests that his intervention into third-world or postcolonial literary studies turns on his understanding of allegory as a mode uniquely suited to “bridge the increasing gap between the existential data of everyday life within a given nation-state and the structural tendency of monopoly capital to develop on a world-wide, essentially transnational scale.”²⁰ In other words, far from fetishizing the “nation” as an uncritically given political form (a utopia), Jameson’s “national allegory” in fact names the “representational crisis”²¹ that is precipitated by the pressures of global capitalism on the postcolonial national form. In an earlier work, Jameson speaks of the “specific and uniquely allegorical space between signifier and signified”²²; in the case of “third-world” literature, then, “national allegory” identifies the psychic and material divide that separates the ideal of national autonomy from the reality of neocolonial dependence.

The connection between allegory and excrementalism thus proceeds through desire and its impossible object—in this case, the failed expectations of postcolonial nationalism itself. We have already seen how scatology critically indicts the postcolonial

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 94. Cited in Imre Szeman, “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:3 (Summer 2001), 803-827 (p.815).

²¹ Szeman, “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory?”, 816

²² Jameson, *Fables*, 90-1

elite's monopolization of consumption and its pleasures by taking literally the metaphor of "belly politics" and presenting Africa's "big men" with their own fecal remainders. At the same time, the hermeneutical impulse that characterizes many excremental texts—the pressing need evinced by many characters to read and make sense of their fragmented and contaminated circumstances—indicates that excrement serves a broader function, one that might be understood as both allegory and allegorics. Feces are to be read allegorically, that is, but they also express or symbolize the contradictions inherent in the allegorical mode itself, its supplementarity, its semiotic "extravagan[ce]," and the final impossibility of "the principle of equivalence" on which its comparative structure is predicated.²³ The allegorical turn, in which "one text is doubled by another"²⁴ and the banal everyday is infused with surplus significance, formally expresses the survival of the utopian spirit in the excremental contemporary, the refusal to give up on the hopes and dreams of anticolonialism despite the degradations of corrupt postcoloniality.

In an early scene of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which must surely stand as the very exemplar of the excremental African novel, Ayi Kwei Armah establishes the symbolic and thematic significance of the shit-money nexus. Discovering a precious cedi bill among the worthless coins in his tray, a bus conductor becomes fascinated by the banknote's phenomenal qualities.

Among the coins it looked strange, and for a moment the conductor thought it was ridiculous that the paper should be more important than the shiny metal. In the weak light inside the bus he peered closely at the markings on the note. Then

²³ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." *October* 12 (Spring 1980), 67-86 (p.84; 52)

²⁴ Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 68

a vague but persistent odor forced itself on him and he rolled the cedi up and deliberately, deeply smelled it.... It was a most unexpected smell for something so new to have: it was a very old smell, very strong, and so very rotten that the stench of it came with a curious, satisfying pleasure. (3)

The “marvelous rottenness” (3) emitted by the banknote invokes Freud’s identification of the “intimate relationship” that obtains between money and feces, and therefore establishes Armah’s interest in the connection between the material world of getting and spending and the psychic-subjective structures that arise in such contexts. The early-morning dusk in which this scene unfolds, along with the sleeping figure of the protagonist who unwittingly plays witness to the conductor’s perverse enjoyment, suggests that this is a dream scene, an overdetermined symbolic representation of the unfulfilled desires and libidinal contradictions of waking life. The complex of money and excrement, pleasure and rottenness, that is revealed in this scene is an expression of the national unconscious of a country whose ambitions of autonomy and self-possession have been eroded by the effects of unrestrained desire.

As Roy Porter notes in his introduction to Alain Corbin’s *The Foul and the Fragrant*, “smell [is] the meeting point of desire and shame within the paradox of civilization”²⁵; the furtive pleasure that the conductor takes in the excremental odor of his profits, and the shame that follows, when he becomes aware of being watched, gestures allegorically to the ambivalent affect of corruption, as well as to the other desires and dreams—the Man’s and the Teacher’s, for the realization of the utopian nationalist vision—that persist into the shamefully sordid postcolonial contemporary.

²⁵ Cited in Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “A New Emetics of Interpretation: Swift, His Critics, and the Alimentary Canal.” *Mosaic* 24:3/4 (Summer/Fall 1991), 1-31 (p.15)

The rotten stench of the cedi bill seems indexically to refer to the surplus value that the conductor has extracted from his passengers through deception and outright theft, and which he was in the process of counting when he spotted the cedi bill. On a small scale, this theft of a few cents from poor passengers is emblematic of the rampant and unfettered corruption that is the order of business in Nkrumah's Ghana, and the money's association with decay suggests the corrupting effects of this venality on the body politic—a theme that Armah develops throughout the novel. The conductor finds himself particularly drawn to the cedi banknote and its sensuous pleasures, more than the coins whose smell he finds "not so satisfying" (3). This invocation of the increasingly abstract monetary value according to which Ghana's economic and social values are being oriented points to the thematic centrality of fetishism, as both an "objective economic" process and a social or psychological one.²⁶ The gap between the banknote's flimsy material substance and its economic (and socially symbolic) "value," between its putative function as a social mediator and its status as hoarded object, a repository of value—in short, its fetishism—is marked by the vague stench of excrement that the conductor surreptitiously enjoys.

As both Marx and Freud describe in their accounts of fetishism, this is moreover a form that depends on the repression or erasure of historicism—for Marx, the history of human labor that has produced the commodity; for Freud, the encounter with desire and lack. It is this amnesiac structure that the protagonist deconstructs with his restless wandering and wondering, his attentiveness to the various, singular forms of

²⁶ See Lutz, "Pessimism, Autonomy and Commodity Fetishism," 96.

excrementalism he plays witness to, and his attendant reflections on the ironic disjuncture between the “greatly beautiful things that could be and the starkly ugly things that are” (79).

The logics of superficial appearance, historical erasure, and homogenization that characterize the fetish extend, as John Lutz notes, to Ghanaian society more generally, where the desires provoked by the “gleam”ing commodities available to the fortunate few contrast vividly with the squalid conditions of life for the majority. The novel’s most powerful insight is that this contrast is in fact to be understood dialectically: the clean and beautiful, fetishistic existence of people like Koomson and Estella—their zealously defended dignity—depends upon, and indeed is responsible for, the abjection of other Ghanaians. As the Man himself bitterly notes, after shaking Estella’s perfume-drenched hand, “some of that kind of cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of the garbage dump” (44). Excrement, then, makes visible the contradictions of this society and its fetishistic logics, its imprisonment in “a hopeless and repetitive dialectic between an all-encompassing desire for material possessions and a pervasive condition of psychological and physical impoverishment.”²⁷

This dialectic is captured synchronically in the “disgustingly confused feeling” that arises when the man finds himself confronting the “gleam”: the radiant appeal of “beautiful,” “clean” commodities emblemized in the towering figure of the Atlantic-Caprice hotel (10). This “disgust” is the dominant affective trope of Armah’s novel, which is famously replete with thick descriptions of the slimy, noxious, obscene and

²⁷ Lutz, “Autonomy, Pessimism, and Commodity Fetishism,” 95.

grotesque features of postcolonial Accra and its social formations. While recoiling from the decaying environment that is the result of the state's fiscal inadequacy and the collapse of society's moral fiber under pressure from pervasive commodity fetishism, the novel's protagonist is equally nauseated by the grotesquely inflated bodies and egos of the corrupt postcolonial elites who are responsible for the hollowing-out of the national treasury, and who conspicuously consume their expensive liquors, perfumes, cars and women while the majority of people skip meals and struggle to survive the perennial "Passion Week."

At the same time, he acknowledges and himself struggles against the seductive appeal of the "shiny things" available to those willing to sacrifice their ethical and political ideals, his desire mediated only by his rational understanding of the "rotten ways" (144) necessary to achieve them (what he calls, using an appropriately digestive metaphor, "cutting corners, eating the fruits of fraud" [95]). It is this ambivalence, rather than his critical distance, that is expressed by the feeling of "disgust" he describes, and which underpins his excremental vision. In this novel, excrementalism signifies the intersection of beauty and corruption, whether something once considered beautiful (something mundane, like the office Block where the man works, or something profound, like the ideals of anticolonial nationalism) has now been degraded and ruined; or whether that former aesthetic judgment (as, for instance, about the beauty of commodities and the other trappings of bourgeois existence) is now recognized as a

mistake; or even, occasionally, when something ugly and abject, like the face of an old woman or the insurgent people themselves, is appreciated for its underlying beauty.

It is what Elaine Scarry calls a “radical alteration” in perception that is signaled by Armah’s invocations of disgust,²⁸ a sensation that, as Pierre Bourdieu points out, alerts us to the proximity of the ethical (and, for Armah, the political) boundaries that distinguish the genuinely “human” from “the less human”:

disgust is the ambivalent experience of the horrible seduction of the disgusting and of enjoyment, which performs a sort of reduction to animality, corporeality, the belly and sex, that is, to what is common and therefore vulgar, removing any difference between those who resist with all their might and those who wallow in pleasure.²⁹

As a lingering trace of the body as a potential site of both luxurious pleasure (Koomson’s imported drinks) and of animal necessity (the “concrete” that the man eats for lunch), excrement and its disgusting effects denote precisely the ways in which such luxurious consumption, far from signifying the dignity of the human subject, in fact ultimately leads to the dissolution of bodily integrity, its obscene porosity and grotesquely open orifices (“The nostrils, incredibly, are joined in a way that is most horrifying direct to the throat itself and to the entrails, right through to their end” [40]).

Koomson’s escape through the “shithole” of a stinking public latrine induces (and indeed is only enabled by) an episode of vomiting, and his abjection is completed only once he has walked “along the latrine man’s circuit through life” (170) and

²⁸ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 13. Scarry argues that such alteration in one’s judgment of beauty — whether from recognition of “overcrediting” or “undercrediting” — is signaled by a “striking sensory event, a loud sound, an awful smell” (13).

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 489.

abandoned all his prized possessions for flight into exile. It is only, that is, once he has begun to give out more than he takes in—to reenter the economies of circulation that, in the novel’s view, are necessary for social and material development (“it seems everybody is making things now except us,” notes a taxi driver. “We Africans only buy expensive things” [140])—that Koomson can attain a genuine humanity and history itself can be prodded into action. The stinking, voidant body of the Minister serves as an allegorical vehicle for the postcolonial body politic, whose dignity and sovereign self-possession can only be attained, the novel contends, through the release of libidinal energies and the equitable circulation of both food and excrement through its component parts.

For Walter Benjamin, the work of allegory involves precisely this sort of melancholic or “weak messianic” attachment to lost or forgotten objects and affects—the stubborn “optimism of the will” that persists, in Neil Lazarus’s seminal reading of Armah’s novel, alongside the “pessimism of the intellect.”³⁰ “Mourning,” Benjamin notes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, “is at once the mother of the allegories and their content,”³¹ and his abiding interest in ruins and fragments as emblematic allegorical images helps establish a relationship between Baroque drama and excremental fiction, forms similarly concerned, I am suggesting, with the problem of political imagination in a transitional context in which nothing much makes sense any

³⁰ See Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990).

³¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tr. John Osbourne (London & New York: Verso, 2003), 205.

more, and in which history appears to have come to a grinding, suffocating halt under the weight of objects and relations that have assumed the appearance of a “second nature.” What allegory mourns, and thereby keeps alive, is in other words what excrement denotes: the grotesque contradiction between the “starkly ugly things that are” and the “greatly beautiful things that could be”: which is to say, the lingering *desire* that occupies the gap between reality and difference. In his essay on “The Structure of Allegorical Desire,” Joel Fineman links allegory to psychoanalysis, suggesting that “the movement of allegory, like the dreamwork, enacts a wish that determines its progress.”³²

Benjamin describes how baroque literature works primarily “to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal ... in the unremitting expectation of a miracle... (178). The very decay and ruin that are documented in baroque allegory, he contends, expresses the messianic impulse by infusing nature itself with the “eternal transience” that signifies history: seeing not only the inevitability of destruction, but also the promise of change, “an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent.”³³ As Bainard Cowen puts it, “the obscurity, fragmentariness and arbitrariness of allegory all signify the absence of a fulfilling event; this absence, in turn, serves to invoke that event with a greater urgency and a desperate faith.”³⁴ The Benjaminian quality of Armah’s writing, and of his political philosophy, is exemplified in the Teacher’s surprisingly optimistic, excremental vision of historical change:

³² Fineman, 46

³³ Bainard Cowen, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory.” *New German Critique* 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter 1981), 109-122 (p.110)

³⁴ Cowen, 119

This was the way with all of life, that there was nothing anywhere that could keep the promise and the fragrance of its youth forever, that everything grows old, that the teeth that were once white would certainly grow to be encrusted with green and yellow muck, and then drop off leaving a mouth wholly impotent, strong only with rot, decay, putrescence, with the smell of approaching death. Yet out of the decay and the dung there is always a new flowering.... The promise was so beautiful. (85)

While the “new flowering” foreshadows the motif that the man spots on the bus at the novel’s end, the morning after the coup that signals at least the possibility of political change, the metaphor of rotting teeth that the Teacher uses to describe the impermanence of phenomenal reality is later given similarly literal substance in the stinking body and foul mouth of Koomson, whose comfortably extravagant ministerial lifestyle and overweening sense of his own dignity are abruptly interrupted by the same coup. The stinking body of the fugitive Minister, who has served as the very representative of corruption and the bodily pleasures it facilitates, underscores the connection between obscene enjoyment and the corrupt body, while simultaneously allegorizing, in the very literality of his physical decay, the transience of even the bleakest socio-political conditions. It is its allegorical valence that saves *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* from the fatalism or pessimism that its excremental vision would otherwise seem to promote, and which many early critics condemned; instead, like the baroque dramas that Benjamin studies, the novel manages, through allegory, to keep alive the seeds of hope precisely in those scenes or spaces that seem most fully mired in excrement.

It is only appropriate, given the novel's interest in food and its excremental remainders, that the Teacher turns to a digestive metaphor for his philosophical musings. Teeth themselves are an overdetermined image in excremental novels like these, signifying (both metonymically and metaphorically) the greed and consumptive unproductivity that characterizes Africa's pseudo-bourgeoisie (whose role is described by Armah as "eating what was left in the teeth of the white men with their companies" [81]). Koomson's "rotten" breath, the result of his corrupt scavenging for Western leftovers, recurs in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, which similarly describes the breath of the blood-sucking "modern thieves": it "smelled worse than the fart of a badger or of someone who has gorged himself on rotten beans or over-ripe bananas" (182), a feature that metonymically recalls the grotesque appetites of these elites and contrasts vividly with the cynical maxim that "the fart of a rich man never smells" (65-6).

Rotting teeth and farting anuses defetishize the dignified integrity of bourgeois bodies by bringing to sensory attention the suppressed modes of abjection on which such dignity is constructed. Shit, farts, rotten breath and vomiting not only satirically highlight, in general, the all-too human bodies of the elites, complete with animal needs like the rest of the population, but more importantly also serve specifically as metonymic traces of the overconsumption, excessive appetites, and "poor taste" that quite literally take food out of the mouths of other postcolonial subjects.

If what is “most proper” to allegory is “its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear,”³⁵ then we see its significance to the work of bringing to light the “hidden,” corporeal reality of the “gleam”: what John Lutz summarizes as Armah’s vision of Ghanaian society’s “squalor and universal abjection before the alien power of money.”³⁶ Excrementalism therefore manages—as in Armah’s novel, and Ngugi’s, and in many of the other texts we are identifying as excremental—not only to document the destructive effects of corruption on the postcolonial body politic (to “ceaselessly pile up fragments”), but also to reinject this dismal reality with the historical energy of desire, the very possibility that is contained in the people’s “hunger” for change. Excremental allegory sustains the expectation that history, and the desires that generate historical action, have not been foreclosed but merely deferred, becoming, in Joel Fineman’s powerful description, at once “a vivifying archaeology of occulted origins and a promissory eschatology of postponed ends.”³⁷

The Janus-faced gesture of allegory—recuperating an “occulted” history while also opening history out to an unredeemed future—is reflected in excrement’s oscillation between abjection and sublimation. As in other excremental works, these African texts are characterized by what Kelly Anspaugh calls “verbal alchemy”: the distillation of beauty and political optimism—positive value—from vulgar or sordid descriptions of material waste. This identification draws on the work of Julia Kristeva,

³⁵ Owens, 68

³⁶ John Lutz, “Pessimism, Autonomy, and Commodity Fetishism in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.” *Research in African Literatures* 34:2 (Summer 2003), 94-111 (p.104)

³⁷ Joel Fineman, “The Structure of Allegorical Desire.” *October* 12 (Spring 1980), 46-66 (p.49)

who also saw abjection as “an alchemy that transforms death drive into the start of new life, of new significance.”³⁸

The alchemical work of sublimation is undertaken by a figure that Kristeva calls a “stray,” one who she describes as a “tireless builder,” a “deviser of territories, languages, works” (8); the stray is above all a flâneur, a wanderer “on excluded ground” whose encounters with abjection lead to a constant remaking of the self through its “separation” from the abject (8). The improvisational and, we could say, economical (*nomos* as partition or separation) process through which the self is constituted through its ambivalent encounter with, and differentiation from, radical otherness is one that avoids reifying either the subject or its environment: rather, the encounter locates the subject somewhere between the given and the possible, in a “time of abjection [that] is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (9).

This “deject” or stray is a figure that appears in African excremental works as an artist or intellectual. Armah’s “Man,” Ngugi’s Gaturia, Van Wyk’s Scara, while very different personalities in themselves, each function within the novels’ excremental milieus to read, clarify, and ultimately sublimate by metaphorizing the abject figures they encounter. The tropic play in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* of light and dark, clarity and obscurity, for instance serves to figuratively thematize the political and subjective importance of reading and interpretation—of making sense and significance

³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 15.

out of the homogeneous “rubbish heap” of postcolonial Ghana, where the collapse of all individuality into undifferentiated “rot” makes judgment or meaning-production—let alone the political imagination that depends of these—almost impossible.³⁹ As in the other scatological works, *The Beautiful Ones* presents capitalism’s reduction of singularity (a concept it figures in terms of “beauty”) to sordid homogeneity as the fundamental cause of Accra’s material and moral degradation. Jean Baudrillard uses strikingly excremental language to describe how in consumer society, with its generalization of the fetishistic commodity form, everything is “finally digested and reduced to the same homogeneous fecal matter...a controlled, lubricated, and consumed excretion (fecalite) is henceforth transferred into things, everywhere diffused in the indistinguishability of things and of social relations.”⁴⁰

In the opening scene, as an early-morning bus approaches the downtown depot, descriptors like “uncertainly,” “vague,” “indistinct,” and “confused” immediately establish the thematic centrality of visuality; the conductor’s curious “peer”ing at his cedi note, which “looked strange” in the “weak light” and has a “vague” odor (3), takes us closer to associating obscurity specifically with the fetishism that is increasingly dominating the city’s social and subjective relations as well as its economy. The man’s fascination with the ambivalent play of the fetishistic “gleam” of commodities—and his

³⁹ As Mary Douglas describes, “a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the common mass of common rubbish. It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse, to try to recover anything, for this revives identity. So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous.... Where there is no differentiation, there is no defilement.” Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 197-8.

⁴⁰ Jean Baudrillard, “Consumer Society,” 34-35. Cited in Anspaugh, 73.

understanding that this brightness and superficiality is as obfuscating as the dim light through which he makes his way to the office each morning—signals his ambivalent desire to have things signify only themselves, to be experienced in their singularity, and to mean something more than they are. The Man's wanderings around Accra, and his unique ability to appreciate the beauty of banal objects like his railway charts, prostitutes, the face of a homeless woman, as well as natural landscapes, mark him as one of these strays, an outcast figure who nevertheless is uniquely positioned to deconstruct the fetishistic logics of beauty/ugliness, light/dark, clean/dirty, according to which postcolonial society and polity are organized.

In *Devil on the Cross*, the question of reading and interpretation is similarly thematized alongside, and as a crucial component of, the novel's satirical critique of corruption and overconsumption. The proverbs that are sprinkled throughout the narrative not only help vividly illustrate its political themes but also themselves enact the dialectic of singularity and abstraction that the text is at pains to establish as itself a political issue. Just as the proverbs use specific figures, objects and practices to describe more generally applicable truths, generalities that in turn are used rhetorically to make sense of specific situations, *Devil on the Cross* depicts carefully developed "round" characters who nevertheless are meant to be read as types or representative figures. It is simultaneously, and quite self-consciously, individual bildungsroman and political allegory. Wariinga, for example, tells her tragic story twice, the first time as an exemplary tale, featuring a protagonist named Kareendi, of what could happen to "any

other girl in Nairobi" (17); the second, as her own particular tragedy. By recognizing her own experience in the lives of all other young women in the city, and theirs in hers, Wariinga identifies the damaging effects of capitalist economy's and corrupt society's transformation of singular individuals—particularly, though not exclusively, young women—into exchangeable commodities to be exploited, enjoyed, and/or disposed of.

This process is exemplified, satirically, in the thieves' proposals for new business ventures: their plans to squeeze even more profit from Kenya's people by selling jars of soil or air (107), opening a "supermarket for human hearts" (50), or farming human bodies to extract and sell their blood, sweat and brains (187), achieve their critical purchase by literalizing the metaphors or abstractions of economic theory. The story of the evil spirits who help a penniless man become a wealthy magnate by turning him into a soulless vampire and cannibal obsessed with property similarly allegorizes-by-literalizing the effects of capitalist logics on social and psychological relations. The parable's ambivalent status somewhere between literal description and allegory is comically highlighted by Gaturia's stubborn insistence on taking the story at face value and refusing to believe that it is "real" since, as a rationalist academic, he cannot accept the existence of ogres and vampires.

The allegorization of the physical body and its component substances (blood, shit, and food) to invite critical readings of the political "body" ("Life is the circulation of the blood; death is the blood clogged in the veins" [80]), not only captures the political importance in Africa of food, sexual appetite, and indeed excrement, but also manages

to express the ways in which corruption's fetishistic forms radically devalue the individual bodies and lives of the nation's people. Exploited, degraded, and buried "in a hole full of fleas, lice, bedbugs" (131), ordinary Kenyans are reduced to commodities and raw materials for the obscene consumption of the comprador elites. (Making a similar point, Armah's *Man* reflects bitterly on "the endless round [of "debt and borrowing, borrowing and debt"] that shrinks a man to something less than the size and the meaning of little short-lived flying ants on rainy nights" [22].)

The comparative mode on which allegory depends could be seen as itself complicit, in Ngugi's and Armah's critical account, in the homogenizing logics of corrupt capitalism and fetishistic culture—and thus in the excremental devaluation of human life the novels depict. But allegory's comparative gesture, which draws its semiotic energy from the ultimate *incommensurability* of its vehicle and tenor, their non-identity, offers a very different vision of relations among objects, ideas and people than the mechanisms of exchange through which capitalism operates. Recalling Benjamin's interest in linking allegory to fragmentation and ruin, in contrast to the stable unity of the Romantic symbol, we begin to see how excremental allegory works to express, at the level of form, the crisis of representation and political imagination brought on by postcolonial disillusionment. If corruption and greed bring about the instrumentalization of human life and energy by reducing all singularity to degraded homogeneity, allegory expresses the impossibility of comparing such singularity and

thereby works to mourn and contest such instrumentalization. Fredric Jameson proposes that,

if the allegorical is attractive for the present day and age it is because it models a relationship of breaks, gaps, discontinuities, and inner distances and incommensurabilities of all kinds. It can therefore better serve as a figure for the incommensurabilities of the world today than the ideal of the symbol, which seems to designate some impossible unity.⁴¹

What marks excrementalism as allegory rather than, say, symbol, is therefore precisely the discontinuity and fragmentation that underlies and destabilizes the comparisons it draws. Serving therefore to deconstruct the comparative mode on which fetishism and commodity exchange depend, it works to sublimate and melancholically preserve the excessive value of individual lives and experiences in the face of their excremental degradation. Excremental allegory works to release the constipated energies of societies, like postcolonial Africa's, that are based on consumption at the expense of production, returning to circulation those energies—libidinal, material, and semiotic—that have been monopolized by greedy elites. Allegory is “extravagant, an expenditure of surplus value; it is always in excess.”⁴²

This supplementarity aligns allegory, as Craig Owens points out, with writing, “insofar as writing is conceived as supplementary to speech. ... For allegory, whether visual or verbal, is essentially a form of script.”⁴³ By way of conclusion, let me take seriously the double meaning embedded in Owens' use of the word “script,” and turn to

⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, “From Metaphor to Allegory.” In *Anything*, ed. Cynthia Davidson (Cambridge, MA & London: The MIT Press, 2001), 25.

⁴² Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 84

⁴³ Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 83.

a text that stages (or re-stages) the question of allegory as a performative gesture. Where the novels we have studied so far have largely been restricted to documenting and critically indicting the excremental effects of elites' monopoly of wealth and pleasure in the postcolony, this text directly addresses the possibility, and the profound complexities, of achieving something different—the unredeemed future that Benjamin saw in the ruined landscapes of Baroque drama. The play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, developed by Jane Taylor and artist William Kentridge in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company, is a satirical yet deadly serious examination of the ethical and political issues raised by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in postapartheid South Africa. Inspired by and explicitly invoking the scatological works of Alfred Jarry, whose obscene play *Ubu Roi* caused riots at its Paris debut in 1896, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is a representation of sovereignty at the point of its breakdown, replete with images of excrement, abjection, and bodily decay that contrast vividly with the ruler's sense of his own dignified self-importance. If Jarry's play showed a power-hungry tyrant on the rise, this play is about the long-term consequences of political rapacity, for the tyrant and for those he consumes along the way.

Its protagonist, Pa Ubu, is an operative of the apartheid state who has committed many crimes in the course of his employment; he now confronts the decision of whether to make a full confession and request amnesty from the TRC, or whether to remain silent and risk discovery and prosecution. He is an individual figure, a fictionalized version of

any high-level operative (Eugene de Kock, former commander of the “Vlakplaas” counterinsurgency hit squad, comes to mind), but he is also, together with his three-headed dog Brutus, an allegorical representative of apartheid sovereignty more generally. The dog’s three heads are said to represent the triple components of the National Party’s rule, standing for “foot soldier, general and politician,”⁴⁴ while Ubu himself is at once their boss and an ordinary, “honest citizen” (67) who was “only doing our job” (55). Pa’s frequent switches between first-person singular and plural, as in this line, indicates the ambivalence of subjectivity under apartheid, when individuals could never escape their determination by, and responsibility to, a broader (racial) collective; it also signals the difficulty of locating culpability in such a context, particularly when the performativity of testimony is added to the mix.

The director, William Kentridge, situates the play somewhere between two other contemporaneous dramatic responses to the TRC: a fictional play, *The Dead Wait*, which recounts a soldier’s return from the war in Angola, and another play, put together by a support group for survivors, in which “real” people rehearse their own TRC testimony over and over again each night. As an attempt to “do justice” to the stories of apartheid’s victims (xiv), *Ubu and the Truth Commission* lies between these two approaches, incorporating elements of both fiction and documentary, allegorical generalization and singular specificity. But it also, even more interestingly, explicitly thematizes and attempts to represent formally this tension, which it identifies as lying at the heart of the

⁴⁴ Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, “Puppeteers’ Note.” In Jane Taylor, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), xvi.

amnesty tribunal's own attempt to parse "politically motivated" acts from ordinary crimes, and in the TRC's claim to be achieving "*national*" reconciliation and healing through its hearings of *individual* testimonies. I suggest that the play invites us to read this problematic in terms of allegory, which it identifies as the experiential mode of postapartheid society.

Once again, allegory and excrementalism come together in the play. Pa Ubu is an unabashedly scatological figure, whose grotesque appetites and sordid activities are reflected in his verbal obscenity and predilection for word-play. As in Jarry's original, Ubu "inhabits a domain of greedy self-gratification," exhibiting a notoriously "infantile engagement with the world."⁴⁵ His inescapably physical presence, with its extravagant gestures and bawdy humor, provides a bold contrast on stage with the puppets and animations through which the victims of his repressive rule are represented. He is thus, in his relentlessly material, porous (eating, weeping, defecating) body, a satirical and allegorical figure for apartheid rule itself, one whose daytime fantasies and rhetoric of orderly government and Calvinist restraint are brutally and ironically undercut by his nighttime activities of torture, murder and deception. His vulgar body, strutting the stage in vest and underpants, similarly expresses the ambivalence of apartheid's tyrannical sovereignty, staging a visual contrast between "the impotence and depravity of his person" and the omnipotent impunity of his rule.⁴⁶ The play's excrementalism thus illuminates and deconstructs the sharply drawn borders between order and violent

⁴⁵ Jane Taylor, "Writer's Note." *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), iii.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 72.

disorder, dignity and degradation, reason and irrationality, that underpinned apartheid's internal logics.

The duality of colonial sovereignty, with its discourse of order and discipline set against the violent excesses through which it is imposed, is represented formally in the play's generic and narrative disjuncture. Traditional theater is combined with reenactments of documentary scenes, testimony from victims and amnesty-applicants at the TRC, and puppetry, while the live-action, burlesque antics of Pa and Ma Ubu on the main stage are critically deconstructed by animations, still photographs of apartheid-era conflicts and other images that appear on a projection screen. The play is also generically ambivalent, including elements of burlesque and political and familial farce alongside documentary realism. Whereas, however, Jarry's burlesque mode enables Ubu's political and personal rapacity to proceed without measurable consequences for those who inhabit his "farcical world," *Ubu and the Truth Commission* explicitly probes these boundaries between burlesque satire and the material world, revealing a protagonist who is comically puffed-up by day, but haunted at night by the indelible, material traces of his crimes.

This hauntological effect is not only thematized in the play's action, in which Pa Ubu confronts his victims at the TRC, but is also expressed structurally and stylistically through generic discordance and its multimedia form. The burlesque antics of the vulgar Pa and his shrewish wife Ma, played by live actors, are interspersed with and implicitly critiqued by re-enactments, performed by puppets, of actual testimony before the TRC

by victims of police brutality like Pa's, and by animated drawings and photographs depicting the acts of torture, assassinations and other atrocities described in the testimonials. By setting Pa's flamboyant stage presence and his self-conscious attention to performance and appearance (we see him rehearsing his statement of "remorse," complete with emotional import, in a toilet-brush mirror), against the restrained, almost immobile puppet-witnesses with their devastatingly "real" narratives, the play highlights the highly ambivalent functions of theatricality and narrative within the process of justice embodied in the TRC.

Its use of drawings, photographs and animations, particularly to comment critically on or highlight the gap between Pa's euphemistic language and the brutally material events to which they refer, further problematizes the relationship between language and "truth" that the TRC's testimonial structure presumes. By pointing out the ways in which this presumed identity between language, performance and the speaking subject is vulnerable to cynical manipulation and thus to deconstruction, the play reflects seriously on the very possibility of social justice and of political representation in a context of universal degradation like apartheid South Africa.

While responding, like the other excremental novels we have examined, to the illusions and disillusionments of the immediate postcolonial context, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* addresses more directly the question of transitional justice that is present in the earlier works only in its profound absence. In South Africa, the TRC provided a stage on which to examine the injustices of the past and their contemporary effects; as a

highly public and quite self-conscious spectacle of testimony, it was explicitly understood as a performative process intended to stimulate specific effects in those who bore witness to it. Rather than attempting to order and organize by assigning meanings to the events of the past—that is, to historicize them—or to render justice by punishing the guilty, the TRC’s approach to justice is “restorative”, seeking to provoke a national “catharsis” through, precisely, the power of its affective effect. As Pa Ubu cynically puts it in the play, “gallons of blood and then gallons of tears to wash the walls clean” (21).

Once again, excremental and digestive imagery combines to highlight the ways in which colonial sovereignty rested on a disavowed process of abjection. As in the earlier works, we find sovereign excess figured through exploitative consumption—Pa and Ma Ubu’s meal at which they feast (“gradually and cavalierly, as if all things are available for their own consumption” [35]) on items plundered from the sidewalk spaza shop that one of his victim-puppets sets up on their table. Their “corpulent” bodies are sustained quite literally through theft from those whose dehumanized degradation (one of the ways we could read the mechanical puppets who represent apartheid’s victims) their exploits help assure. Their banal table-talk is punningly loaded with allegorical significance by Pa’s guilty conscience, tainting the food they eat with reminders of his “dirty tricks”:

MA UBU: I see that prices are still rising.

PA UBU: What uprising?

MA UBU: Today, everything costs an arm and a leg.

PA UBU: I had nothing to do with it!

MA UBU: Pass me the salt.

PA UBU: Who said it was assault? (29)

Asked if his hands are clean, he soliloquizes “By no means. My carrion acts cling to my digits like gloves. But the feeding of our appetites helps us forget” (35). The shift in this line from first-person singular to the royal plural indicates the allegorization and politicization—in the play and under apartheid more generally—of his individual hands and body, while the very performative disjuncture created by the shift simultaneously calls this seamless identification into question—a move that rehearses the amnesty tribunal’s attempt to discern “politically motivated” from merely criminal acts of brutality.

Filled with terror at the prospect of discovery by the new regime, Pa disposes of the evidence of his crimes by feeding incriminating papers, film reels and photographs into his crocodile’s jaws. Some of these tasty tidbits have been hidden in Pa’s bathroom cupboard (“Buggerashit!” he exclaims when the crocodile reminds him of this secret stash [35]), and it is these “unsavoury” pieces that give the shredder “heart-burn” (35). These undigested, repressed residues of colonial brutality are, in the play’s symbolic economy, the “dirt” that the TRC is designed to excavate and wash away, and which haunts Pa throughout. Niles reminds Pa that the amnesty tribunal demands “full disclosure” in exchange for absolution: “If they should find any dirt under your fingernails after you have had a complete manicure,” he warns, “they will chop off your hands” (17).

As a site where dirt is both concealed (and retained) and flushed away, the bathroom symbolically facilitates similar functions as the TRC itself—a surprising but

potent comparison. While the Commission was envisioned as a public archive of information about apartheid, a process through which evidence could be unearthed and preserved for posterity, its public rhetoric of ablution and absolution simultaneously promoted the idea that its work would “cleanse” the damaged national psyche, the dirty hands and consciences of perpetrators, and the degraded souls and bodies of the victims, living and dead, by freeing South Africans from the unhealthy burden of its past. As TRC chair Desmond Tutu repeatedly insisted, “the act of telling one's story has a cathartic, healing effect.”⁴⁷

Like allegory, in Joel Fineman's description, the TRC functions as both “archaeology” and “promissory eschatology”—an attempt to gather together and make sense of the fragments of the (traumatic) past, while opening a space through interpretation for an apprehension of future difference. In theory, at any rate. The play is far more skeptical about the ultimate ability of the TRC to render justice. Pa's use of a toilet brush as a mirror in which to rehearse his amnesty application not only suggests his scatological disrespect for the proceedings, but also points to the excremental traces of injustice that will surely persist—in his conscience and in society—once his testimony before the TRC mirror has “set him free.”

The connection between dirt and language, or justice and representation, is established in the play through the figure of the glass booth, which serves alternately as a shower, where Pa Ubu attempts to efface the “smell of blood and dynamite” after a night of mayhem, and a translator's booth during TRC hearings into an apartheid-era

⁴⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 279.

“bloodbath” (12). The cleansing force of the shower is thus symbolically aligned with the putative cathartic benefit of the psychoanalytic talking-cure or the Christian confession, both of which were invoked to justify the TRC’s privileging of storytelling over punishment or reparation as a response to injustice. This association returns later in the play, to ironic effect, in Pa’s pious chorus of

O the blood, O the blood,
O the blood of the lamb that sets me free
Send a flood, send a flood
Send your blood like a flood over me. (69)

The Christian iconology that frames the TRC is radically destabilized in this scene by the materiality of the experiences being described. The metaphorical or symbolic “blood” invoked to cleanse the sinner’s soul cannot, by this point in the play, be separated from the literal blood that Pa has spilled (and whose “disgust”ing smell taints his hands). His cynical performance of a remorse he clearly does not fully experience casts critical light on the inadequacies of the Commission’s aestheticization of justice.

Pa Ubu’s theatrical repetition—his performance—of the language of remorse without any affective referent serves as an ironic reflection of the problems of translation that attended the TRC, and which are explicitly considered in the play. Here, we might say, allegory (*allos*, other + *agoria*, speaking) takes itself literally: the translator speaks “in the voice of the other,” repeating, with a difference, the testimony of apartheid’s victims. Once again, however, this process of “speaking otherwise” simultaneously expresses language’s ability to serve as a universal mediator, *and* the radical incommensurability that prevents the perfect translation of singular experience into general truth. The gap

between the witness's "original" and the translation is marked, in this case, by a relative surplus or dearth of *affect*. Director William Kentridge describes in his prefatory notes how

there was a divergence [at the TRC] between the emotions expressed by the witnesses telling their stories and the version given by the translators. It was felt that so much of the heart of the testimony was lost when it came back through the translators. So for a short while the Commission had the disastrous idea of encouraging the translators to copy the emotions of the witnesses and to perform the emotions in their translations. This was soon stopped.⁴⁸

In the play, testimony is given in the original and then again, as an English translation; it is also clear, moreover, that this "original" is itself a copy: a creative repetition of the live testimony given by victims and perpetrators before the TRC. The use of puppets to represent the victim-witnesses foregrounds the artifice of performance and what is lost in the course of translation.

As Julia Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard explain, this disparity between the referential and affective qualities of language was what Walter Benjamin identified as the very condition of allegory. As a mourning play, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* does more than simply lament the losses of apartheid; it testifies, formally and thematically, to the impossibility of mourning itself and to language's failure to give full account of the affective traces of such loss.⁴⁹

Its philosophical foundation thereby expresses precisely what the play's dramatic plot reveals: in the final scene, we find Pa and Ma Ubu, along with their

⁴⁸ William Kentridge, "Director's Note." In Jane Taylor, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, xiv.

⁴⁹ Julia Reinhard Lupton & Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 67.

crocodile-shredder Niles, sailing into the sunset toward a “clean slate... A new beginning.... A bright future” (73). Despite his appalling record of “blood and dynamite,” and despite its cynical performance of remorse and mourning without any genuine content, Pa’s amnesty application has evidently been accepted. The play’s ultimately pessimistic view of the TRC’s model of justice, and its ability to effect substantial social and political transformation, is summarized in the text that appears in the final slide: “My slice of old cheese and your loaf of fresh bread will make a tolerable meal” (73). The effect of this meal—that is, of the failure to bring about meaningful change or redress the imbalance between those, like the Ubus, who eat and those, like the puppets, who only watch—is of course more excrement. The cleansing implications of the water-image that dominates the closing scene is ironically undone by the fact of the boat’s entanglement in the “Sargasso” (71): rather than the promised “new beginning,” what we have is stasis, repetition, and superficiality.

The uneasy note on which the play concludes can thus be attributed to its irresolution—the absence, we could say, of the very *catharsis* that would, in a traditional tragedy, provide moral and emotional closure and assure the audience that justice has indeed been done. Pa Ubu’s successful avoidance of punishment by staging a virtuoso performance before the amnesty tribunal has averted the encounter with “truth”ful sentiment that the TRC was designed to effect, and the play concludes, despite its ironic façade of a “happy ending,” on a distinctly pessimistic note. Pa has offered a semblance

of tragic catharsis without really “letting go” of his emotional self-possession, and thus refuses the socially mediating function that Aristotle identified in tragedy.

The tragedy, here, lies in fact in the failure of tragedy—the play, like the “traveling theater” of the TRC for which it stands, has been unable to purge the social body of its polluting elements or repressed emotions, stranding its audience in a Baroque landscape of ruin and fragmentation without any prospect for the redemptive transformation promised by Benjamin. If we recall the medical metaphor underlying Aristotle’s dramatic term (the OED’s first explanation of “catharsis” involves “purgation of the excrements of the body; *esp.* evacuation of the bowels”), we begin to see that tragedy’s emetic function stands opposed to the archaeological role that Benjamin associated with allegory. Tragedy helps us “let go” of our social and emotional wastes, whereas allegory works to melancholically preserve those elements at risk for erasure or disposal. Where *Ubu and the Truth Commission* leaves us, therefore, is with the uncertainties of allegory, refusing its audience the easy consolation of purgative tragedy. As such, it raises subtle questions about the TRC’s tragic structure and its cathartic—that is to say, problematically amnesiac—intent. By pointing to the inadequacies of representation that the TRC testimony reveals, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* insists that the remainders of South Africa’s excremental history be properly mourned—not simply flushed away.

Chapter Two. Consumption and dependency in Ousmane Sembène

*Government and politics seemed to have been placed at the mercy of passion, fantasy and appetite, and these forces were known to feed on themselves and to be without moral limit.*¹

2.1 Introduction

On March 5, 1975, speaking at Indiana University, where he had been invited to deliver the Sixth Annual Hans Wolff Memorial lecture, Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène proposed a surprising account of African survival during the bleak centuries of slavery, deportation, colonization and postcolonial oppression. In the face of the starvation and undernourishment he identifies as Africa's harvest from "three centuries of the slave trade" and the colonial underdevelopment that followed, it was above all "culture," in his view, that kept African communities alive, providing a sustaining continuity against the disruptive and destructive effects of foreign depredation. Despite the efforts of colonizing powers to destroy and discredit African culture, he contends, "it became a bulwark when faced with the devastating effects of imported civilizations. Having remained a passive expression for some time, it continued to maintain, to feed, to regenerate the communities."²

¹ J.G.A. Pocock, "The mobility of property and the rise of eighteenth-century sociology." *Virtue, Commerce, History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 112.

² Ousmane Sembène, *Man is Culture* (Bloomington : African Studies Program, Indiana University, 1979), 6-7.

This “passive expression” was turned into an active political “weapon,” he continues, during the anticolonial struggle, when a form of cultural recycling injected new energy and significance into the old practices, turning them into a newly rich source of ‘nourishment’ for the revolutionary movements. In strikingly poetic language that indirectly invokes Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*,³ Sembène describes the cultural work undertaken by these revolutionary subjects: “The people gathered up the debris, the waste, the relics of the expression of the deported generations, the vanquished, the disappeared. These scraps of culture were used to nourish and sustain those who refused subjugation” (7).

He is careful to insist on the *productive* aspect of anticolonial culturalism: while celebrating the ways in which the “ancient” culture served as “leaven” for the struggle, keeping the “ember” of resistance and autonomy alive during the long years of conquest (8), Sembène warns against a “servile imitation” or uncritical appropriation and repetition of the old forms. Here he is quite obviously, though without mentioning any names, indicting his nemesis Léopold Sedar Senghor, the Senegalese president and patriarch of Negritude, who proclaimed the universal and transhistorical value of Africanity for modern black subjects. “The obligation to do today as the ancestors did is a sign of intellectual deficiency,” Sembène insists, with characteristic truculence. “[I]t reflects a lack of control over daily life” (8) and promotes the “lethargy” he diagnoses in postcolonial African society. This failure of productive energies, which he attributes to

³ See Frantz Fanon, “Concerning Violence.” *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, (1963), pp. 54-58.

the new leaders' simultaneous fetishization of ancient African culture (their "claim to be for Negritude, African authenticity, Africanity, African wisdom" [9]) and their unthinking participation in the "cultural imperialism" that continues to alienate and silence the people, is the main cause of Africa's deplorable condition. Indebtedness and dependency characterize cultural as well as financial life on the continent, according to Sembène's analysis, a condition for which postcolonial leaders are once again held responsible. "These monarchs only speak to their people in borrowed languages," he notes bitterly, once again pointing silently to Senghor, while the national media "are simply thieves' kitchens or relay stations for the former Mother country" (9). He describes the effects of this alienation, once again, in the language of consumption (in this case, a cannibalistic autophagy): "An enormous uneasiness is *gnawing away* at modern Africa, the results of which can be seen in the psychiatric hospitals, in the banditry, in the greased palms of the civil servants, in the coups d'état, in the moral and physical prostitution" (10; emphasis added).

The speech therefore brings together consumption and indebtedness, both as material conditions and practices and as rhetorical tropes, to give an account of Africa's impoverished contemporary condition. Cultural and psychological alienation, the result of reliance on "borrowed" languages and cultures, is at once seen as responsible, in his view, for the corruption, greed and political inertia that he targets in his films and novels, and as a symptomatic effect of Africans' material dependency. In both cases—cultural and economic "alienation"—the anticolonial ideal of autonomy and dignity has

been corrupted by dependency, a condition that, in Sembène's account, results directly from an addiction to the pleasures of foreign goods.

Consumption is a pervasive figure in *Man is Culture* and is identified implicitly throughout with entropic loss and inevitable death—and this at both metaphoric and material levels. Just as the “demographic drain” of 100 million deported Africans (2) was experienced as a loss of the continent's “vital force,” an unequal (and once again cannibalistic) exchange of its precious and productive “flesh” for the foreign “corn, peanuts, manioc and cocoa” that forcibly displaced indigenous crops (3), the contemporary politics of dependency offers up the fetish of cultural autonomy as payment for the “prestige” and economic “aid” that accrues to African heads of state in the world forum. (He describes how these leaders prostitute traditional culture, “exhibiting folklore as a cultural expression” and peddling “hypnotising slogans [“African socialism, the democratic way, non-alignment”] which are based on no economic or cultural reality in their respective countries” [10].) These leaders—and he notes that this is an unfortunate feature of Latin America and other Third World regions, as well as Africa—“extend their tin cups” and help enrich wealthy countries at the expense of their nations' autonomy, even as the national bourgeoisie that they represent “obediently profits from the crumbs of imperialism” (11). The bourgeoisie gets to eat, while their people starve, even if the only available source of nourishment for Africa's elites is imperialism's leftovers (fragments of doubtful nutritional value, Sembène seems to suggest).

Cultural and economic self-sufficiency are therefore closely interconnected, in Sembène's analysis; his political vision proclaims, above all, the "infallibl[e] ... right to absolute control of one's economic and cultural riches ... the right of all people to live off their possessions" (10, 11-12). Setting aside for the moment this surprisingly Lockean formulation of citizenship conceived as proprietary individualism, we can identify Sembène's emphasis on autonomy as the basis for sovereignty in the postcolony. In both cases, productivity is seen as the key to avoiding "borrowing" and achieving self-reliance: the simple revival of ancient cultural practices, for example, is dismissed as sterile repetition, another kind of mimicry that fails to add value or create something that has use value "suited for contemporary realities" (7).

If excessive borrowing presents a problem for African self-possession, then he is equally concerned about the "excessive generosity towards history" that he diagnoses in proponents of Negritude, who invest more value in an idealized African past than is warranted by contemporary conditions. Taking too much is as damaging as giving too much, in this account; genuine autonomy and "self-possession," the substance of popular sovereignty, demand a certain moderation of appetite, whether physical or cultural, along with a commitment to production.

"New forms of expression" are called for, and for Sembène this newness is precisely what makes of culture a specifically *political* intervention, a mode that serves, in his view, as a kind of relay or mediation between the economic and the political. He outlines his structural analysis of Africa's contemporary plight:

Economic dependency is a form of alienation which is expressed by cultural poverty. And the cultural feeds the political. A new African culture is sprouting forth from the political humus. It will bring together the various ethnic groups to make a single people of them. The only sacred aspect it will have will be the respect due to man. For man is culture. (11)

Africa's cultural poverty is at once a symptom and a cipher for the continent's material deprivation, and represents the most serious obstacle to Africans' full realization of the dignity (the "respect due to man") that he sees as the fundamental goal of independence movements. The organic language used in this passage to describe an ideal symbiosis between economy, culture and body politic, a balanced flow of nutrition from one realm to another, also however invokes the possibility of an emergent surplus, as in the figure of new African culture "sprouting" mushroom-like from the ruined fragments of postcolonial political life. Food, death, and creative production here coincide rhetorically around the problem of dependency and indignity, a symbolic cluster that this chapter will identify as substantially central to many of Sembène's other works and to his political philosophy more broadly.

In this chapter, I focus on three of Sembène's feature films—*Mandabi* (1968), *Xala* (1974) and *Guelwaar* (1993)—to trace the development of his thinking about postcolonial politics and its relationship to consumption and other pleasures. The Senegalese writer and filmmaker, often described as the "father of African cinema,"⁴ has been explicit about his commitment to Marxism as both a political project and an analytical framework for diagnosing Africa's postcolonial ills, an ideological position that

⁴ See, for one example among many, David Murphy, *Sembène: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 3.

emphasizes the determining importance of financial and other material relations in shaping social realities. While Sembène is concerned with a wide range of social themes, including the politics of language, gender, history and religion, and although these have attracted most of the critical attention devoted to his work, economic relations trace a persistent subtext through the novels and films he has produced over the past four decades. But even more specifically, I will argue that the filmmaker's political aesthetic turns on a deep and abiding concern with *economy*—the artful and judicious management of limited resources, whether on a domestic or national scale. He views many of postcolonial Africa's material problems, from corruption to indebtedness, as symptoms of a broader failure within monetarized modernity to attend to traditional values of economy and restraint; from *Borom Sarret* (1963) to *Faat Kine* (2000), and in both form and content, his films urge the discipline of appetites at all levels of social and political life as a basis for genuine autonomy and dignity. Three representative feature films will serve here to illustrate the evolution of his thinking on this point.

Sembène's concern with "economy" extends beyond what we might call the "literal" level of the market and financial exchange (which are, nevertheless, frequent subjects in his films) to a more general consideration of household thrift (*oikos*) and the laws of propriety (*nomos*) in an African context.⁵ Virtually all of his films address the wasteful aspects of official power and exchange, and consider the political and aesthetic

⁵ "What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing or partition [*partage*], the law as partition (*moira*), the given or assigned part, participation." Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

challenges associated with the superfluous bodies, commodities, and signs cast off in their wake. He suggests that “economics” and its governing profit-motive have displaced “economy” in the national imaginary, and identifies this usurpation—what we might preliminarily identify as Sembène’s understanding of “corruption”—as the reason for the disappointing failure of nationalist ideals in the postcolonial period. This is closely connected, as we shall see in our reading of his films, with the advent of a money economy and the redefinition of wealth and indeed subjectivity in terms of the universal commodity. The increasing monetarization and financialization of the national economy after independence, particularly in the wake of rising indebtedness and the crises of the 1970s and 80s, have resulted in Sembène’s view in the total subsumption of individual and family life and the steady evacuation of power and meaning from the place of national sovereignty in the country. Rhetorical tropes central to the discourse of postcolonial nationalism, like “autonomy,” “representation” and even “wealth,” are shown to be fetishes, concepts that claim to positively describe reality but which in fact conceal a profound absence, failure and lack—the painful reality of dependency, impotence, and poverty.

As we will see, Sembène extends Freud’s account of fetishism as a symbolic economy to identify the economic and erotic fields as closely interrelated in the postcolonial context, with family finances and economies of (erotic) pleasure serving as thematic allegories for the broader questions of political corruption his films explore. The right to enjoyment is the critical point of contention in Sembène’s political

philosophy; against those like Georges Bataille who argue that pleasure (and indeed a spectacular “indifference to necessity”) is the sign and material condition for sovereignty, these three films propose that excess of enjoyment (and its monopoly by self-interested elites) is ultimately responsible for Africa’s economic and political plight, and insist that the task of reclaiming African dignity depends on the disavowal of individual pleasure—including the visual pleasure associated with conventional cinematic spectatorship.

2.2 *Food and other pleasures: enjoyment as a political factor*

Sembène relies, throughout *Man is Culture* and in many of his films, on the trope of food, which serves as a symbolic and material corollary to the cultural and political issues that constitute his primary subject. His films present a critical view of the culture of dependency that has grown like a sort of superstructural parasite atop the foreign aid, loans and other flows of capital and commodities to Senegal from the West over the past four decades, and for Sembène this is specifically mediated through the figure of food, which serves in this economy both as a literal object of exchange (“food aid” as a kind of gift) and as a metonymic representation of consumption more generally, as a specifically problematic practice, in this context. Analysis of the filmmaker’s use of food as a visual and thematic trope serves as a useful critical entrée to a broader analysis of the way that his films work to produce a model of economic and political subjectivity and practice, an

ideal of autonomy, productivity and self-reliance that counterposes the reality of growing dependency that he identifies in postcolonial Senegal.

In this speech, and in his films, 'food' mediates the levels of literal/material and symbolic/social that generate the dialectical energy of Sembène's aesthetics and politics. The most fundamental product, article of exchange and object of consumption, without which life in any form cannot exist, food is in a certain sense the universal economic object, the very material basis of economic and social (as well as individual) life. The original *oikos* (the domestic economy) is concerned above all with the management of family nutrition, with the effective circulation of nourishment into and within the household and the disposal of the resultant waste products; at the same time, laws of propriety determine the distribution of food and other necessities among family members, thereby establishing hierarchies and determining social positions based on who eats and in what order. Exchanges of food and other consumables were then surely the first economic acts, the first points of contact between households and the broader *socius*, between one community and another.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that food has thus functioned as a central trope in debates on national identity after colonialism. In Frantz Fanon's influential—and representative—formulation of anticolonial struggle, the right to eat constitutes a key demand. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he famously observes that "the people ... take their stand from the start on the broad and inclusive positions of *bread and the land*: how

can we obtain the land, and bread to eat?"⁶ For Fanon the people's claim to their right to feed themselves, which in turn provides the basis of their demand for dignity and recognition as fellow-humans, leads directly to their demand for sovereignty over themselves and their territory—to their claim to political independence: "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (44). Under colonialism, Fanon explains, dignity is impossible for the "natives" who inhabit a zone of radical deprivation, an abject state of scarcity that serves, at the same time, as a repository for the waste products of the settlers' luxurious enjoyment:

[In the settler's town,] the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. ... The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. [... By contrast, t]he native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. (39)

Colonialism is defined, in this passage, according to an unequal economy of consumption and destruction: one group eats (and is "always full") while the other starves; one group sets itself apart from its own wastes, while the other "wallows" in the mire of abjection. This is, for Fanon, simultaneously literal and symbolic—the "town" he describes is both a real place (Algiers, Dakar, Nairobi, Johannesburg...) and a figure (perhaps a metonym or an index) for the structural organization of colonial life more generally. The colonized ("niggers and dirty Arabs") are in fact posited as the

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 51. Emphasis added.

excremental remainders of colonialism as a system of production and consumption: they are the racialized and disavowed waste products of the accumulation, enjoyment and subjective self-possession that the West has secured for itself through colonial enterprise.

This passage powerfully expresses the connection, for Fanon, between the property (control over land, specifically), food, and dignity that he identifies as anticolonialism's chief demands. Struggling to win the right to one's own land means fighting for the ability to feed oneself, to achieve the nutritional independence that is, in turn, a prerequisite for human dignity. "Dignity" for Fanon here represents the colonized's transcendence of their "animal" nature, their attainment of a state in which the basic struggle to survive no longer fills the horizon of social and individual life. As he earlier contended in "The Fact of Blackness," and in the "By way of conclusion" essay that also appeared in *Black Skin White Masks*, dignity expresses for Fanon the individual's freedom from determination, his or her self-possession and self-mastery, a dialectical synthesis of body and rational mind ("O my body, make of me a man always who questions!"⁷).

But as the passage cited above indicates, the concept of dignity invoked by Fanon relies on a suppressed economic trope that leaves it open to deconstruction and which problematizes the political project that is built on the basis of this idea. Fanon's notion of dignity is of course a Kantian ideal, one that lies at the heart of the Western Enlightenment's model of an autonomous individual subject. As Kant explains in his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, "dignity" expresses the ethical imperative to treat

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, tr. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 232.

human beings as ends in themselves, never as means to an end. In this, Kant delineates a space beyond the logic of the marketplace, in which (as Marx and Engels note) “personal worth [is resolved] into exchange value” and everything—and everyone—has its price.⁸ The space of “dignity” is one in which human life is literally priceless, embodying a value that is not determined economically.

In treating the colonies as raw materials for personal and national enrichment, and colonized peoples as a disposable means toward that end, colonialism depended on a radical indifference to the dignity of the racial other. In the Hegelian struggle of anticolonial resistance described by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the native subject forces the colonizer to recognize his “essential-reality” (glossed by Kojève as “his recognized, human reality and dignity”⁹) and thus to acknowledge his essential “human freedom.”¹⁰ Being a full human subject, in this account, means establishing one’s freedom from the bounds of necessity, from “animal” life and from the dog-eat-dog world of the economic market. Like the description of aesthetic value in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant’s theory of “dignity” is one that values excess and inutility, the very opposite of economy as a guiding principle.

⁸ See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 211.

⁹ Alexander Kojève, “In Place of an Introduction.” *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, tr. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 13. For Kojève’s influence, via Jean-Paul Sartre and Lacan, on Fanon (and thus indirectly on Sembène), see Donald R. Wehrs, “Sartre’s Legacy in Postcolonial Theory; or, Who’s Afraid of Non-Western Historiography and Cultural Studies?” *New Literary History* 34:4 (2003), 761-789; and Kleinberg, Ethan. “Kojève and Fanon: The Desire for Recognition and the Fact of Blackness.” *French Civilization and its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race*, eds. Tyler Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003): 115-128.

¹⁰ Kojève, 21.

At the same time, in insisting that the dignity of the colonized depends on their ability to provide for themselves (“land and bread”), that it represents the conceptual opposite of dependency, Fanon invokes a Lockean ideal of the possessive individual, one who “has a Property in his own Person” and whose proprietorship over the fruits of his labor in turn serves as the basis for his social and political subjectivity.¹¹ In Locke’s description, this model of sovereignty—as right—is one that depends strictly on utility: one only has a right to appropriate resources to the extent that they can be made useful. The central text of western individualism puts it this way:

God has given us all things richly [...] But how far has he given it us? To enjoy. As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others. Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy. (290)

This insistence on the rightful proprietorship of those who put property to use—which Fanon identifies with the “native” populations of colonial spaces, in contrast to the wasteful habits of their colonizers—is however precisely the logic that justified colonial conquest of “empty lands” in the first place. Political subjectivity rests on an economic infrastructure, in this model, and therefore presses against the limits of human “dignity” as conceptualized by Kant and, subsequently, Fanon himself. Dignity as self-possession conflicts with the Kantian ideal of dignity as inherent, uneconomic (“unconditional”) “worth”¹²; the excessive character of moral and aesthetic value, in

¹¹ See John Locke, “Of Property.” *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 287 et passim. For a useful (and seminal) theorization of the figure of possessive individualism in Western thought, see also C.P. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

¹² And even Kant himself proposes that “intrinsic worth” does have something to do with what we might call “economy”: “Moderation in emotions and passions, self-control, and calm deliberation are not only

Kant's account, seems incompatible with the utilitarian basis of right proposed by Locke and invoked in Fanon's insistence on the native's right to make use of the land and its products. Sembène's films seem uneasily aware of these philosophical disjunctures, and I suggest that his theory of corruption represents his attempt to make sense of the postcolonial failure to reconcile the political (land), economic (bread) and ethical (dignity) strands of the anticolonial movement.

This paradigmatic account of anticolonial nationalism is rearticulated by Sembène in his films and forms a constitutive foundation for his political philosophy. Taking seriously Fanon's insistence on the centrality of "bread" to genuine human freedom, Sembène treats food as a vital visual and thematic trope for his analysis and indictment of corrupt postcolonial life. As we shall see, eating and other forms of physical pleasure represent political as well as aesthetic concerns for Sembène; an interest that situates the filmmaker in a long tradition of philosophical modernity in which food appears as a variously conscious and unconscious figure.

Food and eating are powerful symbolic forms with ritual, social and political significance in virtually all societies. As Cameroonian critic Célestin Monga puts it in his essay "Let's Eat," a reflection on the aesthetics of eating in postcolonial Africa, eating is "symbolic of having and being," providing an important practical and ideological occasion for inscribing, reproducing and contesting ideologies of identity and

good in many respects, but even seem to constitute part of the intrinsic worth of a person." Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals: On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns*, tr. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 7.

belonging.¹³ At the same time, our continued dependence on food serves as a reminder of the inescapable physical, even biological nature of social actors—the final impossibility of transcending altogether the bounds of necessity. Food is an index of man’s animal nature and yet, as an (aestheticized) object of pleasure, and a powerful social symbol, it simultaneously signifies the subject’s excess over that brute matter. Monga tells the story of Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran, who was startled to discover, on his first visit to France at the age of 27, that food was important for social and cultural ritual, as well as fulfilling a biological need. Cioran wrote: “I therefore learned only at the age of twenty-seven what eating actually meant, what was remarkable and unique about this everyday demeaning activity. And so I ceased to be an animal.”¹⁴ The “demeaning” activity of eating as a concession to the body’s “animal” nature is ultimately invested with a ritual significance that allows the diner to attain dignified subjectivity through the very act of satisfying this necessity. As an 1833 French “Ladies’ Manual” cited by Monga puts it, “what distinguishes civilisation is the ability to impart, to the satisfaction of all our needs, a character of enjoyment and dignity.”¹⁵

The transformation of food from an “everyday” and shameful necessity into the archetypal expression of civilized “dignity”—of “hunger” into “enjoyment”—follows the logic of Kantian aesthetics and its devaluation of utility. Eating ceases to be shameful

¹³ Célestin Monga, “Let’s Eat: Banquet Aesthetics and Social Epicurism.” *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, ed. Sarah Nuttall (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 238.

¹⁴ Emil Cioran, *Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 149. Cited in Monga 229. The Hegelian language here reminds us of Alexandre Kojève’s use of hunger to explain the process of subject-formation through the master-slave dialectic as presented in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. See, once again, Kojève, “In Place of an Introduction.”

¹⁵ Cited in Monga, 229.

as soon as it attains a surplus significance over its utilitarian, sensuous function and becomes, in a sense, purpose-less or excessive: Kant's criterion, in his third critique, for aesthetic judgment. "Civilised" eating is not about consumption but about "taste," not the body and its needs but the pleasurable stimulation of the higher faculties. Of course, Kant himself deploys the language of food in constructing his theory of "taste", in which, precisely, the ability to enjoy without consuming defines the subject's relation to beauty. "Here it is not what gratifies in sensation which constitutes the basis of any disposition for taste, but solely what pleases through its form."¹⁶ What we are tracing, that is, is the aestheticization of consumption through social ritual, and (as Kojève's account suggests) the location of the problem of consumption and pleasure at the foundation of subject-formation itself.

In a context of scarcity, however, this valuation of excessive enjoyment assumes particular ethical and political, as well as economic, significance. One person's attainment of "dignity" and "civilisation" through enjoyment beyond what is necessary to sustain life, might mean in such a context that someone else's life cannot be sustained at all: when there isn't enough to go around, indifference to the utility of food is the ultimate luxury. Recalling Sembène's point that Africa's corrupt politicians enjoy the "crumbs of imperialism" while their subjects starve, we must consider the effects of unequal access to food and other consumables—the *economy* of consumption—on these philosophical concepts.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner Pluhar (New York: Hackett, 1987), 67.

In Sembène's view, this is precisely the problem with postcolonial political life in Africa. While he is unquestionably critical of foreign interference and the West's continued political and economic domination, it is the will to enjoyment on the part of Africa's rulers that he ultimately holds responsible for the failure to achieve the dignity and autonomy that constituted the major goals of the liberation movements. The remainder of this chapter will sketch Sembène's political philosophy (or perhaps, more strictly, his philosophical political economy) as it unfolds in three of his films, separated by six and then 18 years. All are similarly concerned with the problem of sovereignty and its relationship to pleasure in postcolonial Senegal. Although many of his films, including several not discussed here, take up these issues from various angles, these three works form a particularly productive complex in which food, erotic and family life, and monetary economy are thought together in terms of the problem of "dignified autonomy." *Mandabi* presents a deceptively simple parable of a man whose social and economic security are undone by a windfall gift of credit and by his own appetites; *Xala*, an allegory of political impotence and corruption in the postcolony, warns of the excremental consequences of overaccumulation; while *Guelwaar* argues that excessive enjoyment and resultant dependency lead to a kind of death-drive, which Sembène regards as the secret center of political ontology in Africa.

2.3 *Mandabi: credit and consumption*

Sembène's 1968 feature film *Mandabi* (*The Money Order*), a tragi-comic parable about a poor man who receives a money order, brings together food and money to show the consequences for sovereignty of excesses of appetite. In an early scene, we watch protagonist and patriarch Ibrahima Dieng enjoy an extraordinarily generous feast. He devours an enormous bowl of rice and steaming fish stew, stuffs himself with papaya (he has to drink several large cups of water to make room) and finally, when it seems he can surely eat no more, munches on a cola nut, before collapsing groaning onto his bed. "Allah be praised," he marvels. "I haven't had such a big lunch in ages." Because his body is apparently unused to such quantities of food, the scene is punctuated by his visceral groans, pants, throat-clearings, belches, and frequent chest-thumping, and on several occasions he pauses to remove fish bones that have become stuck in his palate. He even intermittently appears to be on the verge of vomiting. The camera lingers on the scene, following Dieng's meal in discomfiting close-up and emphasizing, through shot composition and camera perspectives, both the vast quantity of food being consumed and the grotesqueries of his consuming body. The first shot, angled downward so that Dieng's mouth and nose form its exact center, provides an intimate view of his wide-open mouth and the overstuffed hand that delivers an enormous ball of food onto his tongue. His skin, shiny with sweat and the oil applied by his barber in an earlier scene, provides a striking contrast in such close-up with the light-colored rice and stew that spills out from between his fingers, emphasizing the thematic interplay, established in this scene, between excess, food, and the body that opens wide to consume it.

The scene is, as I hope I have conveyed, almost nauseating to watch; the dominant impression is of superlative *excess*, of taking in way more than is proper, and of giving out (excreting) bodily sounds and sights that surely ought to remain private, hidden from view. Our impulse is to look away, to spare the enthusiastic diner the indignity of catching us looking and listening, and experiencing the shame that psychoanalysis tells us follows the awareness of being under the gaze of an other. Dieng is, however, apparently indifferent to the presence or absence of an audience and seems entirely unashamed by his dietary performance. We are, of course, not the only witnesses to the scene—his wives, Maty and Aram, take turns assisting him during the meal—but their intimate position in the household means that their gaze does not unduly affect Dieng’s behavior. In fact, if anything, their presence serves as a form of encouragement, even compulsion, as he tackles the task of finishing the dishes they present. The wives watch silently as he eats, but their eyes are not envious or hungry, as might be expected in a context where eating (as we learn) is apparently not an everyday occurrence, but rather admiring, respectful: they encourage him to eat more, and seem to derive proud enjoyment from their ability to provide dishes that give him pleasure. Dieng’s capacity to consume everything put in front of him is an important symbolic expression of his potency, given his position as the sovereign patriarch of his polygamous household. The aesthetic of sovereignty, as reflected in this scene—the regime of display associated with demonstrating one’s independence—is shown to be precisely excessive, wasteful, even “grotesque”: Dieng performs his “majesty” by

displaying his enjoyment and his extraordinary power to consume,¹⁷ just as his second wife and five children express his indifference to economy (he is evidently in no position to afford such a large family) and his enthusiastic enjoyment of physical (in this case, erotic) pleasure.

At the same time, the wives' role seems to be to manage and mediate the more grotesque aspects of the scene. They pick out choice morsels of meat, hold out their hands to receive the bones he spits out, provide water for ritual hand-washing and cleansing drinks, offer a towel to dry his hands and face, clean his cola nut and take away the dirty dishes, not to mention of course the fact that they have prepared the meal in the first place. They play their parts silently and respectfully, acknowledging and affirming with every action the fundamental dignity of the patriarch. They are, in short, active participants in Dieng's meal, although we do not see them eat; they are only spectators and assistants in the serious project of delivering food to their husband, and secondarily their children, whom we see gathered around a communal dish at the scene's opening. And yet they seem equally satisfied at the meal's conclusion, and join Dieng in sleeping away the afternoon.

On both sides of the food bowl, the meal involves distinctly physical *work*: simply getting the meal into his body demands an enormous effort on Dieng's part, who sweats and groans with physical exertion, to the extent that it hardly seems pleasurable; Maty and Aram, on the other hand, presumably (since theirs is, in the film, largely invisible labor) spent several hours and considerable trouble preparing and serving the

¹⁷ See, once again, Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly."

meal. Feeding the household's nine mouths is a significant undertaking, involving huge expenditures of labor as well as money (in this non-agricultural community), and presumably posing certain difficulties for the management and disposal of the waste that remains after the work of preparation, consumption and digestion is concluded. Rather than recoiling in distaste from the bodily excesses, the groans and belches, that serve as the physical remainders of this digestive labor, Maty and Aram derive their own enjoyment from them, regarding these bodily "leftovers" as socially valuable signs of their achievement of satisfying their husband, and as illuminating, in turn, his exceptional power to provide more than enough for his family.

What Dieng does not know—his wives', and the audience's, little secret—is that the food he enjoys at this special feast, and which he spends the rest of the afternoon digesting in a comatose siesta, has been bought on credit from the local grocer. While he was out being shaved and polished by his barber (an experience whose graphically bodily details we are again treated to in the film's opening scene, along with a pointed close-up of the exchange of coins that marks this service as a business relationship), the postman delivered to Dieng's wives a money order for 25,000 CFA¹⁸, along with a letter from his nephew Abdou in Paris. Astonished and overjoyed at this unexpected windfall, and unable to read of the details in the accompanying letter, Maty and Aram head

¹⁸ The CFA franc is the common currency of 12 former French colonies in West Africa, along with Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea. It has a fixed exchange rate against the French franc, currently (2007) standing at 100 CFA francs = 1 French (nouveau) franc = 0.1521 euro; or 1 euro = 655.957 CFA francs. This money order for CFA 25,000, regarded by the film's characters as almost unimaginable riches, thus represents around US\$50 in 2007 currency.

immediately for the grocer's, brandishing the money order as evidence of their credit-worthiness: "Today, we will eat." And indeed they do.

These early scenes thus establish a close interconnection between food, the consuming body, and monetary debt, which the film is concerned to explicate. *Mandabi* is Sembène's first color feature, and the first African film in a local language (Wolof), and the themes he addresses here will be in one way or another central to the eight films that follow, although they have received oddly little attention in the scholarly literature on Sembène specifically and African cinema more generally. Though it appears on first viewing as a simple parable about the troubles confronting a traditional naïf alone in the modern city, *Mandabi* reveals itself to be a complex meditation on the process by which individuals become economic—and thus uneconomical—subjects in a system dominated materially and symbolically by immaterial relations organized according to a logic of money.

Its narrative structure is built upon an apparent paradox, drawn from a "true story" that Sembène discovered in a minor news article: a gift of exceptional wealth to a poor man ironically brings increased poverty, suffering and oppression. Whereas its protagonist hitherto lived a poor but "honorable" life as a respected elder in the "native quarter" of Dakar, the arrival of his nephew's money order, and the expectation of windfall riches it summons, destabilizes the organic equilibrium that once organized social life in the ghetto, erodes the property ownership and patriarchal authority that underpinned Dieng's social identity as an honorable man, and finally casts him out, in a

state of disgrace, into the second-order state of nature that characterizes modern monetary life. The promise of riches effectively destroys Ibrahima Dieng long before the promise is fulfilled (an event that remains in potential at the film's final fade to black), but his encounter with these imaginary funds—the gift that is (literally speaking) not one—irrevocably changes him, his sense of self and his place in society.

Throughout this process, it is his ability—or, rather, his inability—to manage his limited resources, to practice the *oikos* on which his survival depends, that underwrites his sovereign autonomy, as both possessive individual and as patriarchal paterfamilias. Here Sembène's critical gaze is raised to the allegorical level of national economic subjectivity, the challenges confronting a new nation emerging into capitalist modernity. *Mandabi* was released in 1968, two years after Senegal accepted its first loan from the World Bank. With the conclusion of this award, a \$9 million grant to support expansion of the national railroad, the country had finally attained the status of a subject on the international scene, a self-possessed entity capable of concluding contracts and “able to make promises”: in terms of one definition, a sovereign power.¹⁹ Most importantly, entering into a loan agreement signaled that the new nation-state could imagine its own future and claim itself responsible for that future, a characteristic that Patrick Brantlinger identifies as fundamental to “public credit,” the credibility and therefore, in modernity,

¹⁹ In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche makes the ability to make promises the basis of sovereign subjectivity, which he sees as the capacity to project oneself into the future through mastery of the body and its immediate desires. He refers to his heroic subject as “this master of the free will, this sovereign.” Friedrich Nietzsche, “‘Guilt,’ ‘bad conscience,’ and related matters.” *On The Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, tr. Carol Diethe (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38, 40.

the material reality of the imaginary community and its institutions.²⁰ In this case, it seemed that a failure of credit—of creditability as an index of national dignity or ‘worth’—would threaten the ground of sovereign autonomy more than an excess of credit or indebtedness. As Brantlinger points out, in a very real historical sense, the “founding moments” of “all modern nation-states [...] are identical to the funding of their debts,”²¹ and in Senegal’s case the extension of credit—the recognition of the nation as credit-worthy in the eyes of the world community—seemed to represent the pinnacle of sovereign worth, even (as we shall see) dignity.

But *Mandabi* expresses its director’s deep anxiety about what this will mean for the new nation-state. For Sembène, indebtedness marks the limit of postcolonialism understood as a project aimed at securing sovereignty, a political condition defined by autonomy, self-possession and self-determination. Recall that he later (in *Man is Culture*) described the ideal of liberation struggles against colonial powers as “the right to absolute control of one’s economic and cultural riches”²² If anticolonial movements sought the restoration of the dignity and plenitude—the subjective and political presence—of African people, through this defense of autonomous singularity, his films satirize the sham dignity he associates with indebtedness, underscoring instead the fetishistic structure of national identity and nationalist ideology in a context of

²⁰ “‘Public credit’ [...] refers to the faith a society or ‘public’ has in itself to prosper or in the future—presumably eternal—power and glory of a given nation-state.” Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, 29.

²¹ Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*. His detailed example treats the founding of the Bank of England in 1694 and the role of the national debt (and its converse, public credit) in the ascendancy of the British nation-state in the eighteenth century and beyond.

²² Sembène, *Man is Culture*, 10.

neocolonial dependency. After 1966, Sembène suggests, the postcolonial Senegalese state becomes itself a fetish, a simulacrum of sovereign autonomy that conceals the hollowness, the dispossession and indignity, at its core. And once again, in *Mandabi* we find that excess of enjoyment and an un-economical indifference to its consequences are what pose the gravest threat to sovereign self-possession.

Mandabi follows Ibrahima Dieng, an unemployed polygamous patriarch with a taste for physical pleasures, on his journeys through the labyrinthine underworld of Senegalese bureaucracy and the city's emerging monetary economy, as he attempts to cash the money order sent to him by his nephew, Abdou, who is working as a street sweeper in Paris. The anticipation of riches that the money order initially precipitates soon gives way to despair, however, as the undocumented Dieng finds it impossible to realize the promised funds without proof of his identity. The pursuit of Abdou's money ironically requires various investments (bus fare to the city, fees for documentation, payments to middle-men who intervene on his behalf, even "good luck" gifts to beggars on the streets of Dakar), and this speculation against the expected return gradually sinks the family deeper and deeper into debt, as the illiquid hero must borrow from the grocer (who serves as a sort of local banker), from his relatives and even from his wives, in order to fund his Quixotic endeavor. After undergoing diverse humiliations, Dieng is ultimately swindled out of the money order and, at film's end, seems likely to lose everything—including, most painfully, his house—to his creditors, who turn out to be colluding with his swindler to ruin him.

According to the film, an economy based on credit is one that is essentially unproductive, promoting consumption (and thus, inevitably, waste) over work. This begins almost as soon as the money order arrives. The postman tells Aram and Maty that Dieng can cash it at the post office later that day, and in anticipation of their new-found wealth, they lavishly order—once again on credit—a delivery of water, sparing themselves the effort of fetching and transporting it from the communal faucet. A key shot of the borrowed water being poured into the homestead’s storage jar, cascading (at some length) from the top of the screen with no apparent source, into the dark mouth of the jar, highlights the punning disjuncture between the family’s fiscal poverty—their illiquidity—and the liquid commodity that flows into their pockets, their thirsty mouths and their dirty bodies, and then, inevitably, into the dust.

All too soon we see Aram and her daughter laboriously fetching more water from the tap. While the commodity-water here momentarily stands in, at least within the symbolic economy of this poor community, for a plenitude of wealth, the satisfaction of desire (as indicated by the flow that fills up the hollow jar, as the borrowed rice and water fill up their hungry bellies), we cannot help feeling uneasy about the ultimate impermanence of wealth, even (or perhaps especially) the “fictional” wealth of credit²³, invested in consumables like food and water. As Kojève reminds us, “this ‘consumption,’ this idle enjoyment [...], which results from the ‘immediate’ satisfaction

²³ See Karl Marx, “Credit and Fictitious Capital.” *Capital*, vol. III, tr. David Fernbach (London & New York: Penguin, 1991).

of desire, can at the most procure some pleasure for man; it can never give him complete and definitive satisfaction" (24).

Not only has this commodity been bought on credit, credit that is moreover underwritten by a text that the illiterate family cannot even understand, and whose value might in fact turn out to be fictitious, but it seems to us (and eventually to the women themselves) a particularly wasteful expenditure—a "luxury" in every sense. Of course, as a luxury the commodity (in this case, their ability to save themselves the labor of fetching their own water) serves social-symbolic as well as material functions: for Marcel Mauss as for Bataille, luxurious expenditure or ostentatious wastefulness paradoxically serves to "display power, wealth and lack of self-interest" and to secure social prestige and "honour."²⁴ And clearly it serves this function for Dieng's wives, particularly Aram, who relishes her new role as consumer (along with the water, she buys, on credit, a wildly inappropriate piece of beautiful but useless underwear from a peddler) despite the nagging demands for payment that inevitably follow in the days ahead.

In this case, however, claiming social "honor" by proving themselves immune to the constraints of personal necessity, backfires unpleasantly when the responsibilities that attend such social status become evident. As news of the windfall spreads through the neighborhood, various scavengers (as we must call them) arrive to claim their share of the not-yet-riches. At this point hospitality itself becomes another luxurious

²⁴ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tr. W.D. Halls (New York: WW Norton, 1990), 16, 37.

expenditure, a way of claiming social value by giving gifts that, quite literally in this case, cannot be repaid—and which, more importantly, exceed what the giver can “afford” to give. While for some this aspect of hospitality is precisely what makes it a quintessentially ethical practice,²⁵ for Sembène such ethical questions can never be abstracted from their material context, from the problem of *oikos*. In any case, through the thinly veiled and often duplicitous motivations of those who enjoy Dieng’s hospitality, Sembène highlights the difficulty of reconciling the abstract ethical imperative with a social context that promotes absolute self-interest.

As anthropologists since Levi-Strauss and Mauss have argued, social expectations of hospitality and charity counteract selfish desires to monopolize material goods by helping to distribute them more generally across the social networks. Wealth can never simply be accumulated or enjoyed, let alone re-invested or saved for a rainy day; it must be distributed. These pressures certainly characterize social life in the “native” quarter of Dakar depicted in the film. Dieng lavishly orders his wife to give the leftovers from the sumptuous lunch, which we know the family cannot really spare, to a passing beggar, “so as to ward off evil.” He later gives 20 francs, which he himself has had to borrow, to a woman begging on the street, invoking Muslim injunctions to give alms (and illuminating the fetishistic misrecognition of money’s material agency) by praying “May this coin shield me and my children from evil.” Friends and family drop

²⁵ For a representative example, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, tr. Rachel Bowlby (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000). See also chapter four in this project.

in to request loans of money and food, and are welcomed hospitably with food and drink (including colonial luxuries like tea, white bread and sugar).

In one scene, Dieng breaks off pieces of his own bread to share with his supplicants: his shrinking baguette, his share of which (let alone his wives' and children's) grows smaller and smaller as each guest receives a piece, serves as an ominous reminder of the erosion of their material security. The baguette itself serves of course as a potent symbol in its own right, one that economically expresses many of Sembène's concerns about the relationship between foreign food and dependency in Africa (a theme he will explore in more depth in his 1992 feature *Guelwaar*). As well as representing an overdetermined expression of how foreign (French) culture and material commodities penetrate the home and body and undermine the investment wealth of African economies (in a way that is insidiously invisible, unremarked—the bread, in this scene, seems taken for granted by the characters as a part of everyday life), the baguette provides little more than empty calories, a pleasurable “luxury” that holds little nutritional value: a wasteful expense in a context where every meal must be made to count.

This anti-alchemy, the production of scarcity out of excessive credit, is intensified by the gift economy that organizes social life in the poor section of town. Despite his protestations, Dieng is unable to convince his neighbors that the money “is not mine” and, it must be said, consents without much persuading to the barrage of advance loan requests, even though he has yet to cash the money order, evidently enjoying his new

status as dispenser of gifts and creditor to the neighborhood. And while this sort of generosity and openness to surprise requests for hospitality and assistance reflect the profoundly ethical basis of Senegal's Islamic and traditional social relations, in this film their effects, in a context of radical scarcity *and*, more crucially, in the face of a hegemonic capitalist economy and individualist ethos, are called into serious question.

Dieng's "guests" rapidly become parasites, camped out at his doorstep waiting for the promised loans to materialize despite his insistence that the money does not belong to him. The desperate woman he helps on the streets of Dakar turns out to be a professional beggar, who hits him up for a second gift less than an hour after he gave her 20 francs—and is defiantly unashamed when he recognizes her ("I am a decent woman," she insists).²⁶ And while Dieng increasingly acknowledges and deplors the ubiquitous beggary he sees around him, wondering "When begging becomes a trade, what will happen to this country?," he of course fails to acknowledge his own complicity in this culture of dependency.

²⁶ In fact, when Dieng recognizes the woman and attempts to shame her by insisting on declaiming this recognition, shaking her by the shoulders and loudly accusing her of fraudulent appeals ("you're wearing the same clothes!" he fumes indignantly), she turns the tables on him. "Stop making advances on me," she says, and, conscious of others within earshot who might overhear this potentially shameful accusation, Dieng has no choice but to release her. The shameful have become the shameless—and the shaming—in the city's individualist ethos, while the mutual recognition on which social and subjective coherence depend (see Kojève) is undermined in a context where appearance, masquerade and deception—counterfeit—impede the gaze of the other. As Jacques-Alain Miller notes, shame itself is a feeling of being under "the gaze of the other": when that gaze is withdrawn or rendered unrecognizable, the ethical posture represented by a feeling of shame becomes an impossibility. In this event, "a gaze castrated of its power to shame" gives rise instead to *enjoyment*, as in the humiliations of reality television. See Jacques-Alain Miller, "On Shame." *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, ed. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.

This episode, in which the woman alternately assumes the figure of beggar, actress, and prostitute, also prepares us for the fuller investigation of the relationship between monetary and erotic exchange undertaken by Sembène in *Xala* and *Guelwaar*:

The food itself, the wastefulness of its consumption, and the social economy of expenditure into which it inserts Dieng, together make this brief scene a crucial summary of the broader themes expressed in *Mandabi*. In any event, the result is once again a net loss for the family. Within a few days, the rice, water and other consumables—cooking oil, canned tomatoes, charcoal, and direct cash loans—that they have acquired on credit from the grocer are gone, leaving only the debt, a line of writing in the grocer’s ledger book, as a trace. The money order as text or writing, itself a transubstantiation of Abdou’s hard-earned francs into a (further) textual representation, then transfigured through credit into these material commodities, has turned back into writing once more, the mark, as Derrida reminds us, of absence and lack.

Maty and Aram at least soon recognize the threat this gift-economy poses to their own family’s sustenance, and they conspire to hide bags of precious rice from their prodigal husband and his rapacious guests. By blocking the flow of food and other gifts through the community, and resisting the culture of dependency that they recognize is springing up around the money order—and although as we saw they themselves initially fell under the seductive spell of luxurious consumption—the women ultimately lay claim to, and stridently defend, the autonomy and integrity of their household. They recognize that their dignity, their social “worth,” can only be sustained if they impose a limit on their indebtedness and carve out a space, however infinitesimal, outside the demands of the social marketplace. “Property protects us only from dishonor, not

death," Aram says, as she gives her necklace to Dieng to pawn, warding off the shame of being unable to pay his sister her share of Abdou's money order.

At this point, we should perhaps pause to reflect upon the origins of these francs that are so rapidly being 'eaten up' by these variously pleased bodies and mouths. Although the fetishistic structure of the money order, as of all money, invites us and its recipients to forget that it has a history, the funds are in fact marked with the sweat and tears of migrant labor. As in *Xala*, Sembène is concerned here with articulating that history and exploring some of the consequences of its repression. We learn through a flashback sequence, with voiceover narration provided by Sembène himself (appearing in cameo as a professional letter-reader employed by Dieng—on credit, naturally—to read the note that came with the money order), that the money order represents the savings of Dieng's nephew, a young Dakari who has gone to Paris to find work, "because there are no jobs in Dakar." Abdou is the voice (uttered, we should emphasize, in Sembène's own physical voice) of unwavering self-reliance in the film—unlike so many other characters, including his family, he rejects the culture of dependency that he identifies as pervasive in the country. "Do not think that I came here to France to be a bum," he proudly insists, describing in glowingly positive terms what must surely be a life of extreme hardship, self-denial and loneliness. "I cannot remain day in, day out, all my life without a job," he tells his uncle, who apparently does just this, "waiting for handouts or leftovers from others."

Abdou has gone to France hoping to “make some money and learn a trade” in order to provide him with the financial security he needs to get married and start a family. In the meantime, he endures a solitary bachelor existence, devoid of even the erotic pleasures available to more fortunate young men. He works all day and studies at night, and yet somehow manages to deny himself any enjoyment of the presumably microscopic returns on his labor, which are instead accumulated, gathered together, fragment by fragment, and sent home, in his stead. Superfluous to the modernizing economy of independent Senegal, and unable there to escape what he regards as the indignities of dependency and charity, Abdou ironically finds himself sweeping the streets of Paris, steering its dirt, trash and other useless matter along the gutters, down into the sewers and back out to sea, where they presumably enter the circuits of Atlantic tides and perhaps eventually wash up on shore back home in Dakar.

Trading on this trope of monetary circulation as a liquid economy, we can say that his remittances, too, function as a kind of waste matter, the excess or surplus value he has extracted from his own labor as a manager of waste in the metropolitan center, in order to send payments home to his mother and uncle.²⁷ This is the closest we come to truly productive labor—and to a genuine altruistic spirit—in the entire narrative, and it is notable that the marginal profit in this case is derived almost exclusively from the

²⁷ International remittances by migrants to poor countries totaled some \$167 billion in 2005, according to a recent study by the World Bank. Once “unrecorded remittances” are included, the figure is estimated to exceed \$250 billion. *Global Economic Prospects 2006: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2005), xiii. See also Jean-Paul Azam and Flore Gubert. “Migrants’ Remittances and the Household in Africa: A Review of the Evidence.” *Journal of African Economies* 15(2): 426-462, 2006; and an interesting journalistic feature, Richard Boudreaux, “The Seeds of Promise.” *Los Angeles Times* April 16, 2006, A1.

circulation of waste and superfluity, from moving things around, rather than making something genuinely new. The connection between money and excrement that Freud identified finds literal instantiation in this glimpse behind the money order's gleaming exterior: waste matter is alchemically transmuted, through labor, into gold—or, at least, into paper credit.

It is also, of course, a capitalization of repressed libidinal energies, a representation of pleasure not enjoyed²⁸ (“not a drop of alcohol will pass my lips”), and a proud public statement of his individual worth, his status as gift-giver, in the symbolic economy to which his identity is staked. Abdou and his unpleasured body are the point of origin for the 25,000-CFA money order that generates the film's plot, but they are also its secret, the dis-remembered material ground of the fetishistic credit economy into which Dieng is plunged.

He asks Dieng to keep a portion aside for him, offers his uncle a gift of several thousand francs (“because I know you don't have a job”), and asks him to give the rest to his mother, a harpish woman who seems to have no reservations about living lavishly off her son's hard-earned money. Abdou is committed to saving enough to buy a home and eventually marry, and has therefore sacrificed his present enjoyment for the future security he envisions. The dignity accorded Abdou is therefore that of the proprietary

²⁸ See Sigmund Freud, “Character and Anal Eroticism.” Vol. 9, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson. 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–74) and “Dreams in Folklore,” vol. 12, *Standard Edition*. Abdou's invocation of moral abstemiousness as the basis of accumulation (a practice that Sembène's ascetic Marxism seems to admire) also of course recalls Max Weber's famous analysis of capitalism and Christianity, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: see *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002).

individual, one who possesses himself by living not only within his means, but well below them: capable of mastering his appetites to such an extent that he is able to extract surplus value from his own labors. Although his life in Paris is unquestionably nasty, lonely, and likely short, Abdou in this way serves as Sembène's representative of the ideal sovereign subject, one who can rationally envision, plan for, and work to achieve his own ideal future—a future of absolute autonomy and self-determination.

So although the money order is addressed to Dieng, the money it represents is, as he constantly reminds those who would claim a share, “not mine.” The film's title is a Wolof transliteration of the French “mandat,” and indeed the “money order” serves in this case as a kind of demand or authorization, a “mandate” that alienates and transfers Abdou's authority over his funds to his uncle. The money is not, in other words, a gift, but has been transferred to Dieng in trust. His interest in the money order is not even “proprietary,” except in his capacity as executor of Abdou's instructions, as his elected representative, if you will. He is subject to it, rather than master of it—a “monetary subject, but without money.”²⁹

This gap between representation and concrete reference, a form that is inherent to the money form and thus to credit and other forms of “fictional capital,” is elaborated in *Mandabi* into the structure of identity itself in a modern, monetary economy. As in the shrinking baguette scene, we find that being subject to the money order not only

²⁹ Neil Larsen, “Poverties of Nation: *The Ends of the Earth*, ‘Monetary Subjects without Money,’ and Postcolonial Theory,” *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London; New York: Verso, 2001), 56. Larsen derives the concept of “monetary subjects without money” from Robert Kurz. See his *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung: Vom Zusammenbruch des Kasernsozialismus zur Krise der Weltökonomie* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1991).

proliferates Dieng's debts and his destructive enjoyment, but also eats away at the security and stability that underwrite his sense of self. The postman tells the family that they can cash the money order at the post office, a task he expects to take no longer than an afternoon. Once again trading on the promise of riches to come, Dieng borrows money from the grocer, Mbarka, and sets out into Dakar to cash the order. In order to do so, he is told at the post office, he needs an identity card, "something with [his] picture on it." He does not have one. In order to get an ID card, he needs a birth certificate, three photographs, and fifty cents. He does not have a birth certificate, and the officious City Hall clerks will not issue one without a specific date of birth—Dieng only knows that he was born "sometime around 1900." The money order has set off a cascade of textual deferral, a provisionally comic reflection of what we could call the *différance* of identity under pressure from a social and economic order based on credit.

In the more traditional community he is used to, Dieng occupies a position of some importance, where his word and his face, his recognizability, are enough to guarantee exchange and other social transactions. In the eyes of the urban, French-speaking and resolutely "modern" bureaucratic functionaries, by contrast, he lacks both credibility and, by extension, creditability. His physical face is not enough—his identity needs to be confirmed, ironically, with a representation: a photo attached to the official identity card. Similarly, his "word" (such as, for example, his claim to have been born "sometime around 1900": his claim to be who he says he is) is meaningless here: as an

oral form, it is quite literally illegible and therefore unverifiable in the eyes of the state, rendering his very existence a matter of doubt (that is, incredible).³⁰

His credit-worthiness, his creditability, is in this economy a direct extension of his credible existence as an official member of the polity, and this status, the very basis of participation in the modern economy itself, is consequently denied to him. He cannot attain material wealth (“property”) until he has established his status as a “proprietary” individual, a political citizen in full possession of his rational faculties, as symbolized by the granting of documents like a passport or, in this case, an identity card.³¹ But this proprietary status in turn depends, in this modern milieu, on his ownership of property, as demonstrated by his inability to deal with the bureaucracy that yields readily to the efforts of his wealthier intercessors. Where his identity “at home” was based on something like “honour”, his status as an elder, a religious man, a giver of gifts and hospitality, and his authority as a patriarchal sovereign in his household, the city is what Lacan would call a milieu in which there is “no longer any shame,” where categories like “honour” no longer pertain.³²

³⁰ In *The Economy of Character*, Deidre Lynch refers to “character’s changing conditions of legibility” in a nascent monetary economy. This seems to be what Sembène is sketching here. See Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

³¹ For a brilliant account of the relationship between “property” and “propriety,” see J.G.A. Pocock, “The mobility of property and the rise of eighteenth-century sociology.” *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³² See Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, tr. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006). In his analysis of Lacan’s Seminar XVII, Jacques-Alain Miller describes honor as a kind of personal debt or obligation: “you owe something to yourself” (26). For Aristotle, according to Miller, honor is expressed and measured through the subject’s “magnanimity”; for Descartes, his “generosity” is the mark of the honorable man’s excess over brute materiality, his simple survival instinct (“*primum vivere*”). “The disappearance of honor instates the *primum vivere* as supreme value, the ignominious life, the ignoble life, life without

Certainly we see a great deal of shameless behavior on the part of Dakar's insiders. "Credit" here (on both literal and symbolic levels) is based not on inherent personal worth—what Kant would call "dignity"—but rather on one's inscription within a set of juridical and economic relations that characterize the "modern" polity. Being a "citizen" means being recognizable by the state, and therefore commensurate with other citizens, equivalent, predictable, and ultimately exchangeable.³³ Of course this kind of "recognition" is in fact not recognition at all, but rather a kind of willed refusal to see individual difference or singularity, that which precisely makes one non-equivalent and incommensurable with other individuals. Dieng's paradox points to the contradiction between the demands of the market, and of the liberal polity that underwrites it, and more fundamental claims to the dignity and self-determination of individual human beings.

Returning to the plot, Dieng rapidly runs out of cash even as his debts are piling up at home, and must ask his Westernized nephew for assistance. This nephew, who apparently has some contacts in the bureaucracy, intervenes on his behalf at City Hall and generously helps him out with gifts of some change and a check, which of course only poses new problems for Dieng when he tries to cash it at the bank. Unfamiliar with the ritual procedures associated with a credit economy (like cashing a check), he is swindled by a broker who lurks at the bank's entrance, evidently waiting for naïve

honor" (Miller, "On Shame," 18). To live according to one's selfish desire to keep on living, to discount the value of the Other as witness to one's own life, is to live, in this view, without shame.

³³ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, tr. T.M. Knox (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

customers like Dieng to fall into his hands. This man, who wears a Western suit, speaks French, and has friends among the cashiers at the bank, is another none-too-subtle representative of Senegal's new "native bourgeoisie," and a bleak expression of the unproductive profiteering, verging on outright plunder, that characterizes this rentier class.

Though Dieng regards the broker's assistance in cashing the check despite his lack of identity papers as an altruistic service, rendered by one citizen to another, he must ultimately pay a usurious "fee" of 300 francs, and realizes that he has been robbed, albeit in the most polite way possible. He then tries to secure the required photographs for his ID card, but is duped by con artists who pretend to take his picture, demand payment in advance, and then feign ignorance when he arrives to collect the pictures. Another successful speculative venture for Senegal's new informal financiers, and another humiliating failure for Dieng, who ends up hunched over on the street, blood dripping from his nose into the dust, after he attempts to defend his investment, and his honor, against these thieves.

He is, as this experience makes painfully clear, a "man without papers," an unofficial subject who cannot be recognized by the state and is consequently rendered invisible to them, as demonstrated with irritating frequency by his long and patient waits at bureaucratic counters while employees chat (in French) and pretend not to notice his presence. The con-men's empty camera, whose formalizing (recognizing) gaze turns out to have been a sham, is yet another symbolic expression of the blank stare of

the liberal state, which surveys its subjects but, in Sembène's view, fails to recognize them. Whereas for Lacan, as for Sartre, shame is a function of one's situation within (and hyperawareness of) the gaze of the other, here it is by contrast the failure of the other's gaze that is experienced as shameful. "A man like you without papers," sneers one of his antagonists. "Shame on you." And in fact each deferral, each time he sets out from his home for the city and returns empty-handed, becomes increasingly shameful to this man who once radiated a comically excessive sense of his own dignity. His sovereignty, predicated on his subjective, symbolic and material autonomy, is increasingly eroded from the inside out by the excess of credit that has been extended to him.

The grocer, Mbarka, publicly refuses to extend him further credit but behind the scenes brokers a usurious loan from one of his backroom cronies, who are, as it turns out, conspiring to acquire Dieng's house. When he learns of their designs on his home, Dieng is outraged and even gets into a scuffle with Mbarka and his fellow speculators. "To be poor, I can accept," he cries, "To be homeless, never!" The pride of homeownership is explicitly associated, in this scene, with the question of a man's "dignity," understood as his capacity, as sovereign, to rule over himself and his passions, his interfering wives, and his property—to manage his debts by managing his symbolic authority, the creditability, on which his solvency is grounded. Being a homeowner is the frame within which this dignity is articulated; to surrender his independence, his sovereign authority over his domestic space, is for Dieng the ultimate humiliation—a moment that allows Sembène to make a broader allegorical point about

the political indignity of African dependency and its implications for national sovereignty.

Confronted by a vertiginous proliferation of missing documents that interpose between him and the payout promised in another document (the money order), Dieng becomes increasingly bewildered, to the point of physical vertigo, and, desperate for guidance, eventually turns to Mbarka's associate, the suspiciously helpful but sinister Mbaye Sarr, who invites Dieng to visit him at home. During their meeting, we overhear a telephone conversation confirming that Mbaye is only interested in acquiring Dieng's house, but because they speak in French, which Dieng cannot understand, he remains ignorant of the falsity of Mbaye's genial exterior. The dramatic irony thus established, in which thanks either to subtitles or our own cosmopolitan polylingualism, we have access to knowledge that is denied to our monolingual hero, serves to disrupt our identification with Dieng and to establish him as an object, rather than a subject, of our gaze. From this point forward, we pity him, or fear for the inevitability of his undoing, but we no longer truly feel *with* him.³⁴

³⁴ And here the genre confusion raised by Western critics' frequent description of the film as a "comedy" takes on thematic significance. Aristotle's classification of genres according to the social status of protagonists helps us see how understanding a text's generic status depends on point of view. *Mandabi* offers at least two points of view, depending on whether we identify ourselves with Dieng or regard him as an object of our gaze. Reading it as a comedy succeeds only, I am suggesting, if the viewer effectively participates in the regime of shaming to which the hero is subjected over the course of the film—only if, that is to say, we *enjoy ourselves* at Dieng's expense. Our discomfited squirming as he enjoyed his meal, in the early scene with which we began, has given way (if we consent to the film's "comedic" effect) to our sadistic enjoyment of *his* squirming, as he writhes pitifully, humiliatingly, in the dust upon learning that the money is lost and that he is ruined. Most painfully, the film doubles this possible effect by depicting Dieng's own subjective development from the unmediated subject of his own internal gaze to the shameful object of his regard. The moment at which he attains full "knowledge" of the predatory system into which the money order has flung him, the end of his naïve self-presence, is ironically (or tragically) the moment at which he is fully dispossessed, when he loses the "property" on which his proprietary subjectivity depends. He

At any rate, Mbaye's double-crossing duplicity is here prefigured in his fluid ability to switch between Wolof and French, while the sunglasses in which he always (oddly) appears function as a kind of reflection of his refusal to engage ethically with others, the fundamental mis/ (or non-) recognition that underlies his instrumental exploitation of people like Dieng for his own acquisitive ends. He arranges for Dieng to sign a document giving him power of attorney over his affairs³⁵ (once again, we witness credit's power to alienate proprietary subjectivity: in the interest of acquiring more property, Dieng here signs over his sovereign authority and becomes, in a legal sense, a minor—a dependent) and promises to cash the money order on his behalf. When Dieng returns the next morning to collect his money, Mbaye is at breakfast (imported coffee and croissants), which we cannot help noticing that he fails to offer to share with Dieng. More odiously, though, he reports that he was pickpocketed on his way from the post office, and that the funds are gone. It is clear that he has concocted this story, as Dieng's wives did the previous day, to avert suspicion on himself; it is plain that he has simply stolen the 25,000 francs. Despite Dieng's desperate, abject pleas, hands clasped, on his knees, incredulously imploring the thief to confess the truth, reminding him that "the

recognizes the alienating effects of the monetary economy only at the moment when he is fully alienated, when he signs away his right to make decisions for himself. Self-recognition, as Lukàcs suggests in describing class consciousness, is an effect and symptom of alienation, even as it provides the basis for its overcoming. In reading *Mandabi* as "comedy," then, we recognize Dieng's shameful lack of self-recognition even as we misrecognize our own status as proprietary modern subjects. We are entertained rather than moved (or vicariously shamed) by his fumbling forays into monetarized modernity, a context in which we, as world-wise urban filmgoers with disposable income to spare, are entirely at home. But if we insist on recognizing in Dieng's humiliations, as Sembène seems to expect, our own corruption by the seductions and necessities of modern monetary life, then we cannot help but read *Mandabi* as a tragedy, a sad yet edifying lesson in the dangers of excessive enjoyment.

³⁵ For a powerful—and seminal—deconstruction of the signature, see of course Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context." *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

money isn't mine," Mbaye is studiously unmoved and deposits his victim back at his compound, tossing a token bag of rice into the dusty street behind the car as a sort of compensation for the misappropriated funds before driving off.

Once again, food is the material and symbolic nexus through which social, economic and political relations—in this case, relations of dispossession, deceit, dependency and consumption—are mediated. As Dieng sits abjectly in the street, his head in his hands, contemplating his disgrace, a throng of women with bowls descends on the rice like scavengers. Their hands greedily reach into the bag, grabbing what they can before Maty and Aram arrive to drive them away. Once again, the women police the boundaries of personal dignity and rescue their husband from his shamefully dirty condition and position. They raise him to his feet and take him inside, where he shares the news with them. When the women wail at the loss of the money, he angrily rebukes them by pointing out that the money was never theirs to begin with. The more fundamental loss, he insists, is that of his faith in the honorable ground of social relations in contemporary Senegal, not to mention the loss of dignity and security that he has suffered as a result of this experience. Decrying the fact that “decency has become a sin in this country,” he resolves to become a “wolf among wolves. I, too, will become a thief and a liar.”

The Hobbesian turn taken by Dieng at the film's conclusion is only appropriate, for it seems likely that he will soon be evicted from his home, cast out of the social and political community that has hitherto sheltered him (and, it must be said, depended on

him), and that he will be forced to make his way in the dog-eat-dog economy of the modern city that so resembles a Hobbesian state of nature. The final realization of the non-negotiability of his debt, that he now inhabits something like debt as the state of his being, spells the end of his status as sovereign individual, the master of his body, family, and property. We are invited to read Dieng's fate as a cautionary tale about the prospects for Senegalese independence in a context of foreign debt.

As the loss of home that attends Dieng's final dispossession (and his full transformation into a monetary, though penniless, subject) suggests, being "at home" in a credit economy necessarily means being homeless—that is to say, deracinated, uprooted, and sent forth on the uncertain waters of finance. Monetary subjects need to be mobile, flexible and mutually exchangeable; they must be set free from the limitations of (especially landed) property. As *Mandabi* makes painfully clear, this kind of "freedom" is however incompatible with dignity in the Kantian tradition: having passed through capitalism's digestive machine, Dieng has become subject to the money he once desired, and now forms part of the system's abject remainder—its waste product. His desire for enjoyment has become his productive capacity itself: by facilitating the circulation and expansion of speculative wealth, his aspiration to share in their sovereign excess keeps men like Mbarka and Mbaye in business, while perpetually (and ironically) preventing the full realization of his ultimate goal—propertied, dignified self-possession. In this way, the figure of Ibrahima Dieng, comic fool and tragic hero, reflects Sembène's assessment of the postcolonial state and its leaders, and his all-too accurate

vision of the path that would be taken by his country and other African nations in the decades ahead.

The film suggests that this fetishistic sovereignty—the absent center on which postcolonial nationalism rests—is a source of great shame, a register that Sembène uses here to illuminate the condition of indignity that attends the subject constituted by indebtedness and the waste economies it subtends. Like *Xala* and *Guelwaar*, *Mandabi* scrutinizes the physical body, its openings, closures, presences and absences, as a means whereby to articulate the penetration of socio-economic relations into the process of subjectification itself. “Shame” is here the subjective effect of the individual’s failure to appropriately discipline the body, to be caught “pleasuring oneself,” as it were (and here the masturbatory language is revealing, for Sembène is as concerned with erotic excesses as with other forms of consumptive pleasure. It also, of course, raises the specter of sterility, which Sembène certainly associates with unproductive expenditure of the sort stimulated by the excess credit in *Mandabi*.) The shaming weight of the camera’s gaze, which so insistently brings to light the corruption and duplicity from which individual citizens so readily avert their eyes, rests finally upon his viewers themselves, who are invited to stop “swallowing” the stories they are fed by their rulers and to become, precisely, more careful consumers in the political and economic marketplace.

Although reviews of the film tend to characterize it as a “comedy” in the absurdist tradition,³⁶ and despite a somewhat puzzling last-minute attempt at a “happy

³⁶ In his review for *Film Quarterly*(23:4, Summer 1970), John Frazer calls *Mandabi* “a comedy about a pompous old bumbler living in Dakar and his misadventures following the receipt of a money order...” and

ending," the plot of *Mandabi* is undeniably tragic, a narrative of its sacrificial hero's fall from proud and dignified independence into homelessness, dependency, and cynicism. It is a painful story, if we have sympathized at all, however briefly, with the protagonist, and so the marketing and reception of the film as a comedy is noteworthy. So let's pursue this disjuncture for a moment. As an account of a shameful fall into modern political, economic and social relations, where Dieng is drawn under the gaze of bureaucratic officials and predatory lenders in order, ultimately, to be rendered invisible by them, *Mandabi* offers at least two points of view, each of which renders its own generic interpretation. If we align ourselves with Dieng, and subject ourselves vicariously to the humiliations he suffers as he struggles to fulfill his commitment to his nephew, we must lament the loss that remains at film's end. We are, to some extent, invited to read this way, despite Dieng's admittedly foolish arrogance and comic naivete: the filmic discourse employed here might be characterized as "free indirect", shot largely from Dieng's point of view and even offering glimpses into his inner thoughts and sentiments through voiceover soliloquy. As occasionally unsympathetic as he is, the camera offers Dieng as a screen on which to project the viewer's own desires and expectations, along with our more or less conscious sense of alienation from the modern milieu into which he is drawn over the course of the film. He is our representative, the figure onto which we cathex our libidinal energies.

notes that "the film resembles a French farce" (48). A 1969 review in *The New York Times* describes the film as a "comedy"; though it does recognize that what initially seems "funny" —Dieng's difficulties—eventually "by sheer accumulation [...] turn sour, and terrifying" (Roger Greenspun, "Film Festival: 'Mandabi'. *The New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1969, 41.) In a follow-up review, a year later, Greenspun calls *Mandabi* a "bitter comedy" ("Mandabi, Bitterly Comic Film, Returns." *The New York Times* Mar 27, 1970, 22).

And yet full cathexis proves impossible. The gap between our desire to identify ourselves with Dieng—that is, to desire his desire—and the undeniable excess of our desires over his own, interrupts the process of identification and produces a shocking estrangement. At certain moments in the narrative, dramatic irony reminds us that we know much more than he does, a realization that is both pleurably reassuring and disturbingly distancing. For example, in the scene where Dieng visits the broker Mbaye at his home, we overhear a telephone conversation confirming that Mbaye’s goal is the acquisition of Dieng’s house. But because they speak in French, which Dieng cannot understand, he remains ignorant of the falsity of Mbaye’s genial exterior. He patiently works through his prayer beads in blissful, trusting ignorance,³⁷ as his fate is being sealed. The dramatic irony thus established, in which thanks either to subtitles (for non-francophones) or our own cosmopolitan polylingualism (we understand French as well as Wolof), the viewer has access to knowledge that is denied to our monolingual hero, serves to disrupt our identification with Dieng and to establish him as an object, rather than a subject, of our gaze. From this point forward, we pity him, or fear for the inevitability of his undoing, but we no longer truly feel *with* him.

It is at moments like these that *Mandabi* comes closest to “comedy.” Reading it as a comedy succeeds only, I am suggesting, if the viewer effectively participates in the regime of shaming to which the hero is subjected over the course of the film—only if, that is to say, we *enjoy ourselves* at Dieng’s expense. Our discomfited squirming as he

³⁷ The atheist Sembène here offers a snapshot criticism of the passivity and dependency fostered, in his view, by imported religious forces in Africa.

enjoyed his meal, in the early scene with which we began, has given way (if we consent to the film's "comedic" effect) to our sadistic enjoyment of *his* squirming, as he writhes pitifully, humiliatingly, in the dust upon learning that the money is lost and that he is ruined. The moment at which he attains full "knowledge" of the predatory system into which the money order has flung him, the end of his naïve self-presence, is ironically (or tragically) the moment at which he is fully dispossessed, when he loses the "property" on which his proprietary subjectivity depends. He recognizes the alienating effects of the monetary economy only at the moment when he is fully alienated, when he signs away his right to make decisions for himself. Self-recognition, as Lukacs suggests in describing class consciousness, is an effect and symptom of alienation, even as it provides the basis for its overcoming.

In reading *Mandabi* as "comedy," then, we recognize Dieng's shameful lack of self-recognition even as we misrecognize our own status as proprietary modern subjects. We are entertained rather than moved (or vicariously shamed) by his fumbling forays into monetarized modernity, a context in which we, as world-wise urban filmgoers with disposable income to spare, are entirely at home. But if we insist on recognizing in Dieng's humiliations our own corruption by the seductions and necessities of modern monetary life, then we cannot help but read *Mandabi* as a tragedy, a sad yet edifying lesson in the dangers of excessive enjoyment.

2.4 *Xala: the remnants of desire*

Six years after *Mandabi*, the year before his *Man is Culture* address, Sembène returned to the problem of monopolistic consumption, this time as a specifically political issue. In perhaps his best-known film, *Xala* (1974), he takes direct aim at the corruption of Senegal's nationalist ideals by those who, in his view, consistently place their individual pleasures—their enjoyment—above the needs of their constituents. While the earlier film, and the short speech, would suggest only that inappropriate consumption results in a net loss, an economy of destruction, *Xala* by contrast demonstrates that a failure to circulate enjoyment across all levels of the socius—its overaccumulation in the libidinal hands of a few—is, in its way, productive; or, at least, that the destruction wrought by this excessive enjoyment always leaves some telling remnants behind.

Though, like *Mandabi*, the film is variously received and indeed marketed as a comedy, in its concern with facilitating a “return of the repressed” by revealing—to its characters and to its audiences—the horrific material effects and the excremental remainders of corrupt dealings, *Xala* more closely resembles a gothic tale of fetishes unveiled and secret histories brought to light. As a “grotesque gothic,” *Xala* shows that the “gleam”ing façade³⁸ of postcolonial sovereignty, prosperity and dignity in fact rests upon a hollow foundation—the disavowed secret of dispossession, abjection, and grotesque indignity.

³⁸ See, once again, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

The film is structured around a succession of secrets, concealments and absences, giving visual expression to the linked themes of fetishism and corruption that are unfolded through the plot. It opens, famously, with a theatrical staging of the takeover of the white-dominated Chamber of Commerce by black businessmen. Dressed in traditional boubous and serenaded by drummers and bare-breasted dancers, the businessmen kick out their white predecessors and the symbolic trappings of French colonialism. The insurgents proclaim this moment as the final step toward full “independence,” defined (once more) according to property as the basis for self-determination: “We must take what is ours, what is our right,” they declare, “Take in hand our destiny.” Although the businessmen invoke “African socialism”³⁹ and present themselves as unmediated representatives of the people (as their use of the first-person plural in this declaration of independence suggests), the scene that follows reveals the disjuncture between collective interest and individual ambition. When we next enter the Chamber’s board room, we find the businessmen dressed in the dark Western suits in which they will appear for the remainder of the film. Clothing represents a key example, for Sembène, of the ways in which identity is disguised, constituting what Laura Mulvey has called, in a reading of the film, a “carapace” under which the bourgeois’ vulnerable, disavowed and rotting corrupt flesh can be concealed.⁴⁰

³⁹ Another explicit indictment of Senghor: see his *On African Socialism*, tr. Mercer Cook (New York and London: Praeger, 1968).

⁴⁰ See Laura Mulvey, “Xala, Ousmane Sembène 1976: The Carapace that Failed.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). “The carapace doubles as a mask behind which the ruling elite camouflages itself, adopting the clothes, language and behaviour of its former colonial masters. The carapace also evokes the social structure of neo-colonialism, The entrepreneurial bourgeoisie live the life of an upper-crust, floating and parasitical on the

The change of clothing is only the first example of concealed materiality in the scene. After the crowd outside the Chamber has been dispersed, one of the expelled white members comes back inside to assume his “advisor” position. He presents each of the new black members with a briefcase, one of which is opened briefly to reveal the piles of crisp banknotes within. This hidden money, concealed within the dark interior of the crypt-like briefcase, is the filmmaker’s cipher for political and economic corruption in the new nation; the mystery that organizes the plot is ultimately concerned with opening those briefcases and tracing the origins and final destination of the illicit cash they contain. The film’s conclusion will reveal not only the naked flesh beneath the carapace of Western clothing, but also the fleshly, odorous truth that lies behind the hieroglyphic mystery of the money-form.

After the meeting, we follow the businessmen and their briefcases as they leave in their Mercedes Benzes for the wedding of one of their members, El Hadji Abdoukader Beye, a prosperous importer who is taking a third wife. Cross-cuts between the procession of businessmen’s Mercedes and the wedding procession taking the veiled bride and her husband to their reception draw our attention to the relationship Sembène is looking to trace between El Hadji’s business dealings and his private erotic life. Certainly, it is clear that the wedding represents a significant financial event. The party and the wedding itself are wildly extravagant, with a sickening abundance of food, imported drink, expensively-dressed guests and piles of wedding presents, including El

lives of the people. In *Xala* the carapace conceals not simply vulnerable flesh, but flesh that is wounded by class exploitation and rotting away with corruption.” (519)

Hadji's gift to his new wife of a ribbon-decked motor car. This is an occasion of conspicuous consumption at its plainest,⁴¹ an event calculated to impress the groom's colleagues and to raise his social standing through his impressive display of wasteful luxury. Once again, food serves as an emblematic visual figure for such consumption. A towering white wedding cake, topped with miniature figures of a European couple in traditional Christian wedding wear, occupies center-stage, bringing together in a usefully condensed image the themes of consumption, cultural (and indeed monetary) alienation and erotic economies that *Xala* investigates.

The symbolic importance of food in this situation is revealed most strongly by El Hadji's first two wives, Adja Astou and Oumi, who subtly express their opposition to the marriage by refusing offers of food and drink; Adja sucks instead on a stalk and Oumi chews the arm of her sunglasses, refusing to accept the new bride's mother's repeated insistence that "you're at home here" by eating, as it were, without consuming. They refuse to enjoy themselves, refuse to engage in conspicuous consumption or excessive intake, and therefore set themselves pointedly apart from the economy of enjoyment that the party, and the wedding, represent.

This economy finds its apogee in the wedding night, when the elderly El Hadji expects to exercise his enjoyment on the beautiful body of his teenage wife, N'gone. (He confides that each of his wives has been a virgin on their wedding night, and happily endures his friends' envious teasing about the pleasures that await him.) As the

⁴¹ Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) is of course the classic work on the notion of "conspicuous consumption."

expensive presents indicate, she is his gift to himself, an appropriation of sexual pleasure that takes her out of general circulation and increases his monopoly (he already has two wives that he can barely support, either financially or sexually). But when the climactic moment arrives, he is unable to enjoy his gift appropriately: he finds that he is impotent. Once again, this episode is organized around a secret, in this case a visual gap. We see the couple preparing to consummate their marriage, and then the narrative cuts to the next morning, when we find them sitting disconsolately in their bedroom. "What happened?" asks N'gone's mother. "Nothing," El Hadji responds. "I just couldn't." This "nothing," the missing scene of erotic enjoyment, forms the empty center of the film and the object of the quest narrative that organizes the subsequent plot: why has El Hadji become impotent, who is responsible for the "xala" curse that has befallen him, and how might he "fill in" the gap in the narrative he has constructed for himself? This discontinuity is the "secret" that the film is concerned with unearthing (the President of the Chamber of Commerce, to whom he appeals for advice the following day, muses that "This is a secret," simultaneously cautioning El Hadji to keep this failure quiet and pointing out that the cause, the history that has led up to this anti-climactic moment, is hidden from view).

These two secrets—the cash inside the briefcases and the failure of El Hadji's "manhood"—therefore establish parallel problematics that the film gradually reveals to be intimately related. Though they are separated, at least initially, in the plot, the film's story follows a linear historical narrative that shows how they are causally and

symbolically connected at a hidden point of origin. El Hadji's quest to discover the cause of his *xala* is thus, like all detective stories, a process of reconciling plot and story, as well as a kind of psychoanalytical recovery of the repressed histories on which his present social and subjective status are constructed. The gap between this fetishistic identity and the historical processes that this identity conceals are symptomatically expressed in *Xala* through the figure of the grotesque, the indigestible remnant of the corrupt consuming machine.

The morning after his wedding, El Hadji heads to his downtown office, where he stores the crates of imported soda, liquor and other potables that are his trade. (Once again, with this important detail, Sembène reminds us that *liquidity* is a basis for accumulation in the new monetary economy.) Before his arrival, his secretary raises the heavy metal shutter (a feature that establishes the office as another encrypted space—another façade that conceals a secret⁴²) and, announcing that “it smells bad in here,” lavishly sprays the surrounding pavement and a nearby washerwoman with perfume. Apart from the extravagance of using French perfume as an air freshener, this episode prepares us for the unfolding battle between bourgeois sensibilities and the grotesque, odorous and ugly bodies of the poor who surround them—a conflict that centers around El Hadji's business dealings.

⁴² On the theoretical nuances of encryption, see Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, ed. and tr. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994). On the play of surface and depth in the gothic novel, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel.” *PMLA*, 96: 2 (Mar., 1981), pp. 255-270.

The secretary's nausea at the washerwoman's "stinking water" prefigures El Hadji's disgust at the cripples, blind and other beggars who haunt him throughout the film. They first appear at the gates of his wedding reception, where he cheerfully throws coins for which they scramble in the dust. (In a scene that recalls a similar moment in Sembène's first film, *Borom Sarret*, a soldier steals a coin from a beggar by standing on it with his heavy boot—a clue to the secret theft, and its history of violence, that El Hadji must face up to later in the film.) The next morning, they gather again outside his office, where their song drifts across his conversation with the President about the mysterious curse that has befallen him. Though we retrospectively realize that this aural collision holds the key to the mystery, El Hadji's response is once again repressive, to disavow the connection between his curse and the beggars that he has already once "forgotten": "Mr President, for hygiene's sake, can't we get rid of this human rubbish?" he demands. The President makes a phone call and the beggars are rounded up and removed from the city to a barren rural landscape many miles away. With the silent stamina that characterizes this group for most of the film, they immediately set off on the long journey back to the city and El Hadji. Repressed, oppressed and removed from view, the beggars refuse their abjection and insistently return, patiently waiting to be recognized by El Hadji when he can no longer ignore their presence on his doorstep.

The presence of the beggars is nauseating to privileged elites like El Hadji and his secretary, a source of disgust, like the washerwoman's water. This "human rubbish" represents an offence to bourgeois aesthetic sensibilities, which are predicated, as

Dominique LaPorte suggests in his *History of Shit*, on the Kantian assertion that “the beautiful does not smell.”⁴³ The African bourgeois’ obsession with “hygiene” and aesthetic integrity is satirically emblemized in *Xala* by the chauffeur Modu’s careful washing of El Hadji’s white Mercedes (he cleanses it with Evian, no less—the colonizer’s water doing its work of purification), a Sisyphean task in the face of Dakar’s omnipresent dust and debris, but one undertaken with the utmost seriousness and care.

The forced removal of the beggars and their ugly bodies is a similar work of political hygiene, cleansing the body politic of a contaminating waste product. In this sense, they are both symbolically and, we eventually discover, literally the excremental remainder of capitalist accumulation. Beauty, like “civilization” and indeed ego-development for Freud,⁴⁴ is defined against excrement and the excremental, the earthy trace of man’s animal life and the physical pleasures to which it gives rise. Examining the sixteenth-century regulation of French cities and their wastes by autocratic sovereignty, LaPorte argues that such “purification” of urban space was in fact constitutive of the commodity accumulation, exchange and alchemical transmutation that gave rise to modern capitalism (26-48).⁴⁵ This symbolic link between shit and gold—

⁴³ Dominique LaPorte, *History of Shit*, tr. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), 38. Also see 85-87.

⁴⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, tr. James Stracey (New York: Norton, 1962), esp. chapters 3 and 4; on anality, excrement and ego-development, see Freud,

⁴⁵ “The creation and acceleration of the division between town and country—a dichotomy that enfolds the fundamental head/tail reciprocity of shit and gold—is an effect of what is thus aptly known as primitive accumulation.” LaPorte, 39. In this respect, it is worth noting that, in *Xala*, “much of the motion after the wedding scene involves traveling to the village from the city and back. [...] here is an outer life that is carried on in Dakar and an inner mystery that drives the symptom of failure and that is to be discovered in the village,” where, it will be remembered, the beggars are sent at El Hadji’s insistence. Kenneth W. Harrow, “The Failed Trickster.” *Focus on African Films*, ed. Françoise Pfaff (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 133.

money as deodorized excrement—identified by Freud and elaborated in other psychoanalytic investigations of economic life, is established in *Xala* through the figure of the beggars and the secret to which they give voice in the film's final, cathartic scene.

Along with concealment, to which it is evidently related, such dirt and defilement form a consistent trope through the film. Early on, when El Hadji arrives at his first wife's house to collect her for the wedding reception, he argues with his daughter Rama about polygamy and her belief that marriage is a patriarchal institution based on property. The argument reaches a climax when Rama says scornfully that "Every polygamous man is a liar" and "All men are dirty dogs," which provokes her father to strike her. Though this seems at the time an empty comment uttered in the heat of conflict, her statement returns in surprising form later in the film. Having lost almost everything in his obsessive quest to discover the source of his *xala*, bouncing checks and denied a loan from the bank, El Hadji is called before the Chamber of Commerce to discuss his behavior. Turning their accusations against his former colleagues, he points out the hypocrisy of their condemnation, refusing to maintain protocols of etiquette that they regard as the basis of their "dignity" ("Let's discuss this with dignity!" they cry). He returns the pointed fingers leveled against him, reminding them that each of them is as guilty of embezzlement, theft and accepting bribes as he is. "Each one of us is a dirty dog," he says bitterly. "I repeat: a 'dirty dog'." Rama's indictment of patriarchal marriage thus returns in the context of corrupt business and political dealings, identifying the taint of corruption as a lingering "remnant of earth" that cannot be fully

expunged. In language that recalls Fanon's description of the "native bourgeoisie" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, El Hadji dispels the members' delusory image of themselves as real bourgeois: "We only distribute leftovers. We are the dirt grubbers of the business world!"⁴⁶

The term "leftovers" is particularly appropriate here, in light of the specific accusations leveled against El Hadji. Aside from his bounced checks and the collapse of his business, which are said to cast all of them in a bad light, he stands accused of misappropriating and selling on the black market 100 tons of rice intended for famine-struck villagers in his district. "Dirt grubbing" indeed: stealing the rice that is likely a "charitable" gift from foreign countries eager to dispose of their agricultural surplus, El Hadji has made the distribution of leftovers into a highly profitable venture. Most shockingly still, it is alleged that the profits from this illicit transaction were used to finance his extravagant wedding to N'gone. In a kind of magnificent narrative unity, the stolen rice is therefore, at least indirectly, identified as the cause of his current plight: the hunger of the villagers, alchemically transformed into lavish enjoyment for the bourgeois celebrants, returns in the form of El Hadji's impotence, which leaves him shamefully incapable of "enjoying" the erotic gift he gave himself. His absent erection is the real "leftover," the smudge of dirt or "clinging remnant of earth" that he worked so

⁴⁶ "The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket." Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 151-2. *Xala* can be seen as an extended discussion of Fanon's chapter, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," in which this passage appears.

hard to wash away with his imported water: the trace of his repressed primitive accumulation and the resulting empty bellies of the rightful owners of the rice.

Expelled from the Chamber of Commerce, stripped of his now-empty briefcase, his business shuttered and his assets confiscated, having lost his second wife and N'gone, whose mother returns his gifts and the bridal clothes, publicly humiliated and still impotent, El Hadji takes refuge in his first wife's house. For a second time, the beggars appear at the gates to his house, but this time they are not content with a few coins tossed casually in the dust: they invade the interior and pillage the contents of the family's kitchen (though the frightened maid initially fears rape, the beggars are interested only in gustatory pleasures). They grab the imported sodas and yogurts that stock the refrigerator and share them out, gobbling and spilling the foods in an orgy of destructive consumption. But though El Hadji reads this as "robbery," still unable to see beyond the property relations that underwrite his social status, the beggars' leader, Gorgui, corrects him: it is not robbery but "vengeance" — payback for the originary crime that is the real point of origin for his *xala*. Although El Hadji refuses to recognize Gorgui ("I don't know you," he insists uneasily), the beggar insists on revealing the final secret: that the beggars are in fact his relatives, whom he swindled out of their inheritance. "You falsified our names and our property was seized," Gorgui reminds him. "I am of the Beye family. Now I'll get my vengeance." Once again, the secret concealed by El Hadji's prosperous, corpulent exterior is unveiled to reveal a primitive dispossession, a founding theft on which his subsequent accumulation was based.

The shocking news that the original injustice has been “bound in the hidden history of the family, where greed for private ownership made its first appearance,”⁴⁷ serves to reiterate the entanglement of erotic and material economies that gave rise to this injury: the ties of kinship that once joined El Hadji and his half-brother Gorgui have been corrupted by the former’s greed, his desire to monopolize enjoyment even at the cost of his family’s life and security. What connects them now is a cash nexus—the bond of unequal exchange that Gorgui’s “vengeance” aims to redress.⁴⁸ Even justice is here understood as the enforcement of a debt, a philosophical point that is complicated here by the fact that the original crime was, in fact, a theft. Thus economic relations and the economy of pleasure have corrupted El Hadji’s family at many different levels. His first family, the Beyes, are homeless beggars. His second wife is a mercenary harridan who treats her husband as a personal bank, steals the first wife’s rightful *moone*, or sexual rights, and leaves El Hadji as soon as his bankruptcy and disgrace become public knowledge. His third marriage, the greedy self-gifting that was funded by his corruption of another gift economy (the charitable provision of food aid to starving villagers) and symbolized publicly by an extravagant theater of consumption and further gifting, was in turn destroyed by the physical corruption that represents the symptom of this secret material base.

⁴⁷ Harrow, 135. Harrow is here implicitly invoking Freud’s account of the incest taboo in *Totem and Taboo*. In Freud’s description, and worth emphasizing here, the original greed that leads to the violent dismemberment of the family, is an overweening desire for *pleasure*, specifically sexual enjoyment. See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, tr. James Strachey (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1989), esp. 182-200.

⁴⁸ The revelation of primitive theft as the primal injustice, and of vengeance as economic redress, recalls Nietzsche’s discussion of guilt and debt in *On the Genealogy of Morality*: Friedrich Nietzsche, “‘Guilt,’ ‘bad conscience’ and related matters.” *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

The grotesque behavior of the beggars in El Hadji's kitchen, smearing yogurt and spilling drink, mocking N'gone's wedding veil and destroying his precious possessions, can then be read as a reenactment of the grotesqueries that lie behind the "dignity" so valued by bourgeois like him. Lavish eating, waste, destruction and profanation of social and familial bonds—all of these characterize El Hadji's corrupt dealings, and the beggars' comical performance is intended to bring these shameful realities back into conscious view. Their laughter is both an act of ridicule that strips aside the dignified façade of bourgeois restraint and respectability, and an expression of the grotesque, deformed and desiring body that is the cause (El Hadji's) and abject effect (the beggars') of capitalist accumulation.⁴⁹ Stripped naked and positioned at center stage of Gorgui's strange ritual, exposed shamefully before the gaze of his family, El Hadji abjects himself before the beggars. To "be a man," he must accept the absolute indignity of being spat upon by the beggars, who thereby (re)connect his impotent body with their own crippled, starving and ugly forms. What he earlier called "this human rubbish" thereby claims the businessman as one of their own, recapitulating his recognition of himself as a "dirty dog" whose excessive appetites have left others with empty mouths. The ritual spitting "digests" El Hadji back into his disavowed family even as it symbolizes and

⁴⁹ Dominique LaPorte describes how rich and poor each attribute corruption and stench onto the other: "a capitalist dynamic locks each in place as the other's filth" (40). This translates into class terms the racialized economy of waste described by Fanon in the "native town" section of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

On laughter and the grotesque, see M.H. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, tr. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). This is a trope that Mbembe discusses in "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity" (op cit) in the context of popular relations to extravagant sovereignty. For a fascinating and provocative engagement with Bakhtin and Mbembe on this topic, see Rita Barnard, "On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*." *Novel* 37:3 (summer 2004): 277-302.

justly returns the excremental effects of his corrupt selfishness. *Xala* is thus revealed as a family romance beneath its gothic exterior: a restoration of kinship ties based on blood (of which the spittle serves as a symbol) and thus of the individual dignity that depends, the film argues, on such collective belonging—and the equitable access to food and other pleasures that such collectivity promotes. (We have already seen the beggars sharing their meager food and money, and welcoming strangers into their community, in pointed contrast to the selfish duplicity of the bourgeois.) The film's conclusion suggests that social justice and genuine dignity can only be achieved when access to enjoyment *and* responsibility for its wastes are shared equitably across the social and political body.

Though the corpulent bourgeois portrayed in the film, including its hero El Hadji Abdoukader Beye, happily enjoy the fruits of their corrupt dealings in willful ignorance of the effects of the processes that enabled their accumulation, or those that result from their luxurious consumption, *Xala* brings these consequences to light, giving powerful visual substance to the displaced populations, maimed and impotent bodies, wasted rural lands, economic dependencies and political failures that corruption leaves in its wake.

2.5 *Guelwaar: the corrupt body politic*

This theoretical connection between enjoyment and indignity is further elaborated in Sembene's 1993 film *Guelwaar*, in which a social wrangle over a corpse provides an occasion for deeper meditations on dependency, dignity and political agency in the African postcolony. A portrait of Senegal under structural adjustment, plagued by drought, famine and corruption, *Guelwaar* offers a stirring critique of foreign aid (specifically food aid) and the culture of dependency it fosters, and an indictment of the "native bourgeois" who promote and profit from this indirect colonization. More vividly than in either *Mandabi* or *Xala*, Sembène here establishes that the two sides of corruption—ethical compromise for personal advancement, and the "destruction...spoiling...putrefaction"⁵⁰ of the physical body—are in fact deeply interconnected, and that the second is at once an index for, and an aesthetic effect of, the first.

The film centers on the death and would-be burial of Pierre Henri Thioune, known as Guelwaar ("Noble One"), a patriarch and influential Catholic community leader, who has died of injuries sustained during a beating by unknown assailants on his way back from a political meeting where he spoke out against the nation's dependence on foreign aid. His family and friends have gathered from Dakar and France to observe the required mourning rituals, which are shockingly interrupted, minutes before the funeral, when the corpse is found to have gone missing from the mortuary. Rumors and conspiracy theories abound, including the possibility that the body has been stolen and sold to fetishers; at any rate, the funeral proceedings are

⁵⁰ "Corruption." *Oxford English Dictionary*

suspended as mourners await the corpse's return. The police are brought in, and the officer assigned to the case, Warrant Officer Gora, discovers that a bureaucratic error has in fact released the body to a Muslim family, who (it transpires) have already buried it in a Muslim cemetery in a rural village outside the city. Despite the family's pleadings, Gora's authoritative insistence and the legal documents he brandishes as evidence of the mix-up, even the intercession of the local imam, the Muslim villagers refuse to surrender the interred corpse, which they maintain (in the face of contrary evidence) is that of their kinsman, Meyssa Ciss. Tensions flare between the contending families and religious groups, and violent conflict seems inevitable until the local mayor and party representative intervenes, promising the villagers a new round of food aid in exchange for their cooperation. The imam himself laboriously exhumes the decomposing corpse, whose face identifies him as Thioune, and returns the body to the Christian mourners for "proper" burial. As the family makes its way back to the city, the procession encounters a truck bearing sacks of donated food, destined for the Muslim village they have just left. Inspired by Guelwaar's rhetoric of autonomy and self-reliance, the mourners set furiously upon the convoy, spilling the grain and sugar into the dusty road where it is trampled underfoot by the funeral procession. The film closes with a freeze-frame shot of the corpse being driven over the spoiled food.

This closing symbolic collision between death and food, mourning and consumption, psycho-sexual and economic life, serves as a visual articulation, a

dialectical image,⁵¹ of the broader political arguments advanced by Sembène in *Guelwaar*. As in many of his previous films, Senegal is here held to account for its failure to defend itself (the individual and collective bodies of the country's citizens) against the depredations of foreign capital, international political pressure and domestic powermongers (for whom, significantly, food serves as an instrument of social control, as well as a commodified source of profit). It is Thioune himself who articulates this perspective most explicitly, through a series of flashbacks in which he passionately defends the "dignity" and autonomy of the Senegalese people against the "humiliating" and "disgraceful" effects of their dependency on food aid. In one powerful scene, recalled by a policeman who "knew him well," Thioune hijacks a public meeting intended to celebrate the generosity of foreign donors, whose gifts of grain, sugar and other "*aide alimentaire*" lie stacked ostentatiously around the arena. Condemning the self-congratulatory spirit of the event, Thioune invokes the language of autonomy to "shame" the audience for their uncritical enjoyment of foreign food and the dependency that it fosters:

"And our leaders preen themselves and strut about as if this aid were the fruits of their labour. What a disgrace! And we, silent people with no voice and no shame, dance before this aid. What humiliation!"

"This aid affair has been going on for 30 years here and elsewhere. This aid they're distributing to us will kill us. It has killed all our dignity and pride. We are without shame. Nobody has any dignity left."

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann; tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard UP, 1999).

“They laugh at us back in their homes. And our sons and daughters who live abroad among these people feel terribly humiliated. They can’t even look anyone in the eye for shame.”

“We have problems, but we should be dealing with them ourselves. We, on our own.”

“If you want to kill a proud man, supply all his everyday wants, and you’ll make him a slave,” he rails. “Any pride we had left has been consumed by this aid.” The cannibalistic effects of the food-gifts, which are here figured as themselves turning “consumer” against those who consume them, recall Sembène’s own language in *Man is Culture*, and serve as rhetorical extensions of the devastating drought and famine that have occasioned the donations in the first place. Senegal’s dependency on food aid not only threatens national pride and dignity, he insists, but poses a more serious threat to its very survival as a sovereign space: the nation and the autonomy that underwrites it are being eaten from the inside by the insidious effects of foreign food.⁵²

Sembène also challenges the putative “necessity” that is invoked to justify the aid. Although the conditions of scarcity and drought described by officials at the gratitude ceremony seem to be supported by the film’s mise-en-scène, especially in the rural Muslim village where barren, sandy wastelands surround a dusty settlement, Sembène invites us to question the causal connection between such “natural” misfortunes and the country’s dependence on foreign gifts. Whereas the sterile

⁵² Recall how, in “Man is Culture,” Sembène described neocolonialism as “gnawing away” at modern Africa, and its economic, cultural and psychological well-being, “the results of which can be seen in the psychiatric hospitals, in the banditry, in the greased palms of the civil servants, in the coups d’état, in the moral and physical prostitution.” *Man is Culture*, 10.

landscape might seem to justify the necessity of aid from outside, by the film's end we begin to wonder whether this iconographical sterility instead perhaps serves as a symptom, rather than a symbolic cause, of such dependency.⁵³ There is a striking contrast between the uncluttered, even bleak *mise-en-scène*, in both the rural village and the bourgeois home of Thioune's family, with its simple religious adornments, and the baroquely complex scenes that include the donated food, as Sembène incorporates his thematic concerns into the deep visual structure of the film. The excessive visual presence of the white sacks in the film, piled up in towering heaps at the donor celebration, blocking the funeral procession on the road to the capital, impeding the progress of "law and order" as Gora's police van must wait for the passage of an aid convoy, suggests the troubling impact of these external gifts on the local economy (both material and symbolic) as well as political life in the country. The bags of food aid seem to proliferate unnaturally in scene after scene, and despite their often-unremarked ubiquity (Gora simply waits patiently for the convoy to pass, as if this is an everyday occurrence), their bright white, geometric appearance, along with the bold French and English lettering along their length, seem pointedly out of place in the busy scenes of African life in which they appear.

That these are for the most part ultimately "luxury" goods (sugar, wheat and imported rice), rather than strictly necessities or locally traditional foods, further

⁵³ This seems to be Sembène's implicit invocation of Glauber Rocha's "aesthetics of hunger": in a 1965 manifesto, Rocha insisted that "hunger in Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom: it is the essence of our society." Glauber Rocha, "The Aesthetics of Hunger", tr. Burnes Hollyman and Randal Johnson. *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael Chanan [London: British Film Institute Books, 1983], 13.

emphasizes their association with waste and destruction and suggests that the people's growing dependency on such commodities in fact represents a kind of addiction, an artificially induced need for pleasure above and beyond the physical need for nourishment that might result from drought and other natural disasters. Once again, *contra* the philosophical account of enjoyment as the basis for man's transcendence of his animal nature, described above, Sembène insists that enjoyment beyond necessity represents a kind of death drive, a dangerous indifference to the future that threatens the very basis of the nation's autonomous existence.

The corruption that "gnaws away" at the country's sovereign self-reliance, symbolized in *Guelwaar* by the food aid that becomes a black-market commodity, a political bribe, and an instrument of ideological pacification, is both consumer *and* an object of consumption, something to be enjoyed. This is demonstrated most powerfully in a scene that resolves the stand-off between Muslims and Christians over the issue of the interred corpse. The admirable, if exasperating, defiance of the Muslim villagers, who refuse to allow outsiders to trespass on their sovereign territory (even when this trespass seems justified) and are prepared to defend their position with violent resistance, are easily overcome in the end by their "mayor"'s promise of delicious foreign rewards: "Go home and wait for the food aid I've obtained for you," he orders grandiosely. "Sugar and milk! Oil and rice!" Enjoyment is explicitly here rendered as a bribe, a force of corruption that not only enriches and empowers public officials (who control its circulation and distribution for their own purposes, whether political, as in

this case, or financial, as we saw with El Hadji in *Xala*) but which also functions metonymically to highlight the ideological processes by which citizens are encouraged to surrender their legitimate political rights. After this grand gesture, the villagers consent to the profanation of the sacred space of their cemetery—the territory over which they have thusfar claimed a historical and inalienable right. Once they accept the charity food and put themselves in a dependent position, they can no longer maintain the façade of sovereign authority, however local and provisional. The disinterment of the rotting corpse that is facilitated by the promise of the mayor’s gift, and the stench that repels those who work to recover it, serve as Sembène’s reminder that profiting from corruption in this way leads inevitably to the “spoiling” of the body politic.⁵⁴

The rhetorical association between consumption and death made by Thioune in his speech at the aid celebration, where he posits aid as the real, cannibalistic consumer of African pride, is extended across the film’s symbolic economy. Long before we reach the final scene, and the corpse’s journey over the spilled food, we have been prepared for this association by a series of episodes in which food and death are closely aligned. As mourners arrive at Thioune’s compound in preparation for his funeral, each presents an offering for the communal feast, from prepared dishes and bottled drinks to live chickens and goats. Given Thioune’s scathing critique of those who subsist on gifts from others, it is highly ironic that his funeral provides an occasion for a massive movement of consumable gifts from the outside community into the homestead. But this is more

⁵⁴ See James Roy MacBean, “The Missing Body and the Body Politic in Ousmane Sembène’s *Guelwaar*.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 12:1 (Spring 1996).

than simply ironic for comic effect: the irony in fact reveals a complex series of contradictions between the political ideals of independence and the social customs that organize collective life. In the eyes of the community, the death of the patriarch has left his wife and children without a breadwinner and plunged them into dependency, shattering the (apparent) sovereign integrity of the household.

The ritual gift-giving that accompanies funeral proceedings is thus a symbolic expression of the family's newly diminished status in the eyes of their neighbors, as well as a kind of reassurance that the community will assume the role of providing for their welfare once occupied by Thioune.⁵⁵ With their gifts of food and drink, the guests express their claim of benevolent sovereignty over the widow, Nogoy Marie, and her three adult children, a new familiarity that is further established by the constant procession of visitors moving into and around the once-private space of the family homestead. The line between hospitable support and unwanted trespass is thinly drawn, and the funeral rituals in *Guelwaar* serve to highlight this ambivalence. Like charity food organizations and other NGOs circling the failing postcolonial nation-state, the guests at Thioune's funeral appear more like vultures, exploiting the weakness of the bereft family, than like genuinely sympathetic fellow mourners.

Though they are ostensibly present to support the widow and her children, virtually all of the funeral guests we encounter are motivated by their own various self-interests, and see the occasion as an opportunity to advance their agendas. Once again,

⁵⁵ For a useful discussion about gift economies and transitional social experiences like death or birth, see Lewis Hyde's account of "threshold" gifts in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1983), esp. chapter 3, "The Labor of Gratitude."

Sembène uses the exchange of food as an emblematic figure to express this point. The pledges of solidarity and support supposedly represented by the gifts of food are ironically undercut by the greed and indulgence displayed by guests at the funeral feast. Their enthusiastic consumption of the donated dishes disgusts Nogoy Marie, who points out the irony of the situation in an apostrophic address to her husband: “your friends were supposedly supporters of your stand on foreign aid, yet they’re here today, calmly stuffing themselves.” Apart from her distaste at their avid enjoyment of the funeral foods, Thioune’s widow rightly recognizes the gift economy represented by the charity food as a claim on her autonomy, an attempt by her husband’s family to continue his domination of her. She pointedly refuses to eat anything during the long day of waiting, and remains stonily silent when mourners arrive to “pay their respects.” The Catholic priest, Abbé Leon, is the only one who seems to share Nogoy Marie’s respectful restraint, eating a minimal amount before excusing himself to perform his ablutions and continue to mourn for the dead. He also refuses an offer of expensive bottled beer, insisting that he is content with water, and serving as a striking counter to the other community elders, who took offence when they were not offered “drinks” on their arrival at the gathering. While these elders insist on seeing access to food—particularly “pleasurable” goods—as a sign of social power, Abbé Leon upholds the Christian principle—presented with surprising respect by the famously atheistic Sembène—of moderation and restraint despite his superior position in the community.

The film is organized according to a double temporal logic: the linear plot, which unfolds slowly and regularly over the course of two days, is punctuated on several occasions by a flashback sequence that disrupts the present continuity with memories of moments from the past. Though these are not exactly traumatic memories, being recalled consciously and deliberately by the characters to illustrate specific points, the temporal and spatial disjuncture that they introduce does mean that they serve in a sense like dreams: as ciphers that help us understand the suppressed contradictions underlying the seamless continuity of the film's "waking" surface. Like *Xala*, *Guelwaar* is concerned with articulating the hidden labors and repressed injustices on which the façade of prosperity and autonomy have been constructed. In *Guelwaar*, the economies of pleasure that characterize phallogentric sovereignty are revealed to depend on the bodies and labors of women—a dependency that is formally disavowed but unconsciously recalled in the film's temporal dissynchrony.

We learn through a series of flashbacks (depicting the memories of two police officers) that Guelwaar has been a controversial figure, strident and uncompromising in his opposition to dependency in all its forms and his proud public insistence on self-determination, whatever the cost. His rhetorical zealotry is complicated, however, by the family situation that is gradually revealed over the course of the film. The importance of family relations and symbolic economies to the issues that Sembène is exploring in *Guelwaar* is indicated early in the film, in the first flashback. After Nogoy Marie hears the news of her husband's brutal death, she looks down at the gold ring on her finger,

which now represents a sad trace of the dead man and an emblem of her loss. A reverse-shot close-up of the ring dissolves into a brief sequence showing the couple's wedding ceremony, with close-ups once again drawing attention to the exchange of rings that precedes the exchange of kisses between bride and groom. Though this is a quick and easily overlooked episode, its visual parallels draw narrative attention to the ways in which erotic relations—marriage and reproduction—are both formally and thematically entangled with economic relations. As scholars from Claude Levi-Strauss to Gayle Rubin have shown, kinship practices (and specifically the “traffic in women”) reflect, express and help generate symbolic and material ties among men; the physical and reproductive labor of women represents the keystone of social and indeed political life, though this is the ultimate form of “hidden” or undervalued labor.⁵⁶

This issue emerges again later in the film, when we learn of two separate cases of adulterous enjoyment. In the Muslim village, where Thioune's corpse was mistaken for that of a village elder, Meyssa Ciss, who has recently died, the two widows sit patiently and receive visitors. We overhear a hushed conversation between the younger wife, Oumi, and Mor Ciss, the dead man's brother and the leader of the burgeoning resistance against efforts to reclaim Guelwaar's body from the Muslim cemetery. It transpires that Mor and Oumi had been engaged in an illicit sexual relationship, one that has produced two sons, though she is now determined to end things between them. When Oumi tires

⁵⁶ See Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, tr. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham, ed. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975).

of playing the patient widow, she defiantly casts off her mourning gear and departs for her parents' village, leaving her children behind despite her senior wife's demand that she take them along. The children are quite evidently seen as a liability, rather than an asset.

On the other hand, in another narrative parallel, we discover in another flashback that Thioune and Nogoy Marie once lived among these very Muslims, where he worked as a teacher. His friends reminisce about the adulterous affair he had with a wife of the village muezzin, in which he disguised himself as an "old woman" in order to gain access to the wife's hut. The story takes a comic turn when the couple is betrayed to the woman's husband, who arrives with some thugs determined to punish the offending lover. Thioune must escape through the back of the hut and flee, completely naked, leaving behind his crucifix. As the narrator of this story sees it, this trace—the cross as a token of the stolen embraces—accounts for the Muslim villagers' continuing hatred for Christians and thus, ironically, for their current recalcitrance in turning over the body. Thioune has brought this final indignity on himself, his friends seem to think, by his earlier inability to restrain his appetites.

As John Mowitt points out in his essay on the film, these episodes share an interest in the "traces" of adulterous erotics, which he reads (drawing on Levi-Strauss's description of kinship relations as a system based on the exchange of women) as "taking for oneself a gift that was given to someone else."⁵⁷ Mowitt continues:

⁵⁷ John Mowitt, "Guelwaar: Politicizing the Aesthetics of Hunger." *Edebiyat* 8 (1998): 129-136, 131.

But, just as the receipt of a gift places one in debt by taking from him or her the freedom from obligation, adultery takes from the man what he hoped to gain in giving himself the other man's woman. In Mor Ciss's case this gain was clearly pleasure and prestige. What he discovered was that in a kinship system where woman is reduced to the status of a gift, the male adulterer gives himself only debt. (131-2).

While Mor's succession to his brother's position as leader of the community was anticipated by his usurpation of Meyssa's right to the enjoyment of his marital pleasures, Mor's new claim to sovereignty (however impotent) is shown in this case to be eroded by the dependency that is its inevitable consequence. His village is in trouble because it cannot feed itself, which leaves them vulnerable to the manipulations of their "representative" and his political ambitions. The "two extra mouths to feed" that are the product of Mor's adulterous union with his brother's wife represent the loss that results from the acquisition of unearned pleasure; when Oumi defiantly sheds her mourning garb and returns to her parents' home, she leaves her sons behind to place a further burden on the village's already-scarce resources. (Mowitt notes that the illegitimate children represent the "economic and alimentary pressures placed upon communities by adulterous sexual reproduction" [133].) Once again excessive or illicit enjoyment is shown to be the undoing of sovereign autonomy: an addiction to erotic pleasure, with the surplus and inassimilable bodies it produces, is just as threatening to the villagers' independence as their addiction to luxurious foreign food.

Thioune himself also turns out to be a sovereign whose authority rests on the invisible labor and suppressed enjoyment of women—and one, therefore, whose very sovereignty rests on shaky ground. Another flashback, to an argument between Thioune

and his wife on the night he was killed, reveals that his unremunerated political work (his “selfless” efforts on behalf of his people) puts enormous financial pressure on his household, which Nogoy Marie is left alone to deal with. (Before this argument, we found her working at her sewing machine, implicitly capitalizing her domestic skills to earn the income that her husband’s “work” fails to provide.) Once again, we see that Fanon’s ideal of economic autonomy is not compatible with the political organization of global liberalism, a disjuncture that leads to a permanent state of indignity for those caught in between. Thioune, for his part, will not entertain any discussion of the question of his household economy. “Just do your housework,” he barks when she challenges his departure for yet another political speech. His dictatorial manner only serves to compensate for—or to cover over—the contradictions that his wife identifies between his public, Fanonian rhetoric of self-sufficiency and his private dependence on the labor of others. “What kind of self-sufficiency are you talking about,” she scornfully retorts, “when you can’t even support your own family?” Specifically, she reproaches Thioune with the fact that his work on behalf of economic independence is ironically supported by his daughter Sophie’s work as a prostitute in Dakar. We later learn that Sophie has in fact financed his pilgrimage to Jerusalem as well, and that the family relies almost entirely on her labor for its survival.

Thioune appears, however, willfully blind to this hypocrisy and insists on seeing the situation in terms of Sophie’s own independence: “I would rather she was a prostitute than a beggar. I’d rather see her dead than begging.” Her work as a prostitute

is therefore reframed (one might say ideologically obscured) as his gift to her, the gift of autonomy, despite the evident unidirectional flow of the familial gift economy. He refuses to acknowledge Nogoy Marie's point that the family's "dignity" is undermined by their reliance on their daughter's shameful profession. This indignity derives not only from the work itself (though Nogoy Marie might see it that way), since Sophie is receiving payment for what she might otherwise be expected to provide for free, but more strongly from the fact that the receipt of these "gifts" puts Thioune in a dependent position. He is the perverse ruler who enjoins his subjects to curtail their enjoyment, while reaping the advantages of power to their fullest. Most perversely of all, his enjoyment is facilitated by his hypocritical sponsorship of the economy of erotic enjoyment in which his daughter circulates as an object. Once again, it is the hidden (erotic) labor and the undignified commodification of women and their bodies that facilitates the phallocratic sovereignty emblemized in Thioune's authoritarian rule over his family; in this case, we see that both sides of masculine power in Africa—tyrannical domination *and* nationalist liberationary rhetoric—depend on women, their labor, and their repressed enjoyment.

This secret corruption is indexed by Sembène in the figure of Thioune's contested corpse, to which we will finally turn. The missing body of the political activist here certainly stands in, as James Roy MacBean suggests, for the absent or repressed body politic,⁵⁸ and it is tempting to read the successful exhumation of the buried corpse as a straightforwardly optimistic reclamation of political agency by a newly mobilized

⁵⁸ MacBean, "The Missing Body and the Body Politic in Ousmane Sembène's *Guelwaar*."

people. But the film's closing dialectical image, in which a rotting corpse encounters spoiled food on the road to the capital, exceeds the symbolic bounds of this conventional allegorical interpretation. What kind of political body is this, after all? By this point in the narrative, it has become a (literally) corrupt and repellent object that is insufficiently distinguishable from the maggoty dirt in which it has been interred: the men working to exhume the corpse turn aside and cover their mouths and noses when the stench of decay reaches them. The indignity of absolute dependency is signified here through the unavoidable, unsignifiable fact of the body's mortal materiality. And yet, as the "quest" narrative that organizes the film suggests, this body remains, at the same time, a powerful object of desire, a site of ethical attachment that cannot be relinquished and which must, in the end, resurface. It is treated reverently and "honor"ably⁵⁹ even as it is exposed to the shameful gaze of the living.

The allegorical valences of Sembène's political vision find concrete expression in the scene at the graveyard: reading Thioune's body as a symbolic body politic, we understand the filmmaker's argument that the postcolonial state has already died and begun to decay, a morbid victim of lascivious self-interest and the dependency it fosters; nevertheless, the utopian aspirations of anticolonial resistance live on, and the state-as-political-body remains a potential vehicle, an object of desire, for realizing the claims of ordinary Senegalese to the autonomy and dignity of independent citizenship. The

⁵⁹ The Christian elder Gor Mag commends the Imam for his labors: "Imam, your behavior honors all men." The Imam responds with a parable that (inevitably) conceptualizes ethical behavior in the language of consumption: "Gor Mag, when a vulture attacks your enemy's body, remember it could be you and chase it off."

beautiful/ugly ambivalence of the corpse at the center of this film can thus be said to encapsulate the political dilemma confronting those like Sembène who remain attached to the desires of anticolonialism even as they indict the failures of postcolonial nationalism. What Neil Lazarus follows Gramsci in identifying, in his discussion of Armah's excremental vision of postcolonial Ghana, as "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will"⁶⁰ is figured in *Guelwaar* according to a thematic of mourning, melancholia and a decidedly non-exquisite corpse.

In light of *Xala's* concern with visibility and concealment, it is worth emphasizing the ways in which the contested ethics of mourning are played out in this scene of *Guelwaar* in terms of looking or averting one's gaze. Though the grave is carefully hidden from view by screens as the digging progresses, the face must be exposed to confirm the deceased's identity and the body's rightful claimants. The Muslims' failure to properly regard the face of the deceased, and the dark night in which they conducted the prescribed ablutions, were partially responsible for the misappropriation in the first place; the state's failure to recognize its subjects, to match a specific face with its bureaucratic documents, is of course equally liable for the error. So, much is made of the exposure and scrutiny of Thioune's face: "come and see," calls the Imam once the body is unearthed, "all of you look." The need to undo the indignity of bureaucratic misrecognition, which exposes any one body (alive or dead) to the risk of substitution and exchange with another, ultimately trumps the anxiety of undignified

⁶⁰ Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990). See especially chapter 3, "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born: Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will" (pp. 46-79).

exposure that attends the exhumation. The dead man's *face* as a basis for recognition is thus structurally opposed to the rest of his decaying flesh, which is too closely associated with the dirt (and thus the universal equivalence of vulnerability to decay) that still clings to it. What mediates these apparently competing aspects of human dignity, in this scene, is the Levinasian gaze-beyond-the-gaze: what the Imam calls "God's sight." Scolding the diggers when they recoil in disgust from the smell of decay, he reminds them, "The man lying here is just like you and me in God's sight. We all have to die. So dig."

Wrapped in a cloth that subtly invokes the red, yellow and green of the Senegalese national flag, Guelwaar's body is placed reverently on a cart and borne like a sacred relic back toward the city; the procession of mourners resembles a religious pilgrimage, an association that is strengthened by the Christian crosses that are carried by the young people at its head. Having died a martyr's death on behalf of his political principles, Thioune has been made to participate in a passion play of sorts, with flashbacks depicting stages on the path toward his murder, a descent into the hell of blasphemous Muslim burial, and resurrection into the light and air of his Christian family. Such Christological imagery serves to intensify the association drawn by the film between food and death: the mourners' enthusiastic consumption of the funeral feast can now be understood as a ritual communion, an expression of their commitment to live in faithful adherence to the lost object of Guelwaar and his principles. In consuming the breads, meats and expensive drinks offered at the funeral, the mourners "do this in

remembrance of" the departed man, signaling their pious attachment to his body and ideals by taking his flesh symbolically into their own.

VI. Conclusion: the aesthetics of hunger and the politics of style

The ethical and political injunction to restrain destructive appetites that Sembène articulates in his films also finds aesthetic expression at the level of style. By deliberate contrast with the Indian melodramas and kung-fu action thrillers that dominate African theaters, Sembène's films refuse many of the visual and stylistic pleasures he identifies with dominant cinema. Set dressing and *mise-en-scène* tend to be spare, utilitarian, and determinedly realistic of its subjects' impoverished urban lives; editing and narrative "tricks" like flashbacks, lap dissolves and even cross-cutting are rare, and the stories usually unfold according to a linear and even Aristotelian unified logic. This is a conscious strategy on the filmmaker's part: an expression of his strongly held resistance to "First" cinemas and their exploitation of their audiences' libidinal desires for profit.

This "aesthetics of hunger"⁶¹ has occasionally brought him into conflict with his financial

⁶¹ Although Sembène does not seem to reference it directly in interviews or otherwise, his use of the language and thematics of food, consumption and hunger to describe conditions in the postcolony shares many features with Glauber Rocha's 1965 manifesto "The Aesthetics of Hunger," considered one of the founding documents of the Third Cinema movement. It is here that Rocha (who, like Sembène, was a filmmaker and writer as well as theorist) argues that "hunger in Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom: it is the essence of our society." (Rocha, "The Aesthetics of Hunger," 13.) Like Sembène, Rocha uses hunger as both a metaphor and a metonym for underdevelopment, "dependency" and economic deprivation in his native Brazil, while also signifying, more optimistically, the desire and creativity (the "tragic originality" [13]) that emerge out of this desperate condition.

The Cinema Novo movement that Rocha led attempted to direct this creative energy to achieve political effects in its audiences. Just as starving men resort to violence, he suggests, in order to assuage their hunger,

backers, whose primary goal is to realize a return on their investment by finding ways to make the films “enjoyable” for viewers trained on foreign film fare. In his early years as a filmmaker, Sembène was forced to accept outside funding in order to make his pictures. *Mandabi*, for example, was produced by the French Centre National du Cinéma, which had previously only supported French films of the New Wave. As Manthia Diawara describes in his *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*, Sembène was required, as a condition of the funding, to accept a French producer, Robert Nesle, who controlled the budget for the film. In an ironic repetition of the issues thematized in this and later films, such financial dependency inevitably undermined Sembène’s artistic autonomy and made it difficult to achieve the ideological efficacy to which he was committed. Though Sembène initially wanted to shoot the film in black and white, for instance, “because he was worried about the sensational effect a color film would bring to his story,”⁶² *Mandabi* was eventually made in color. He had to go to court to defend his refusal to include “sexual and erotic scenes” in the film. After this experience,

Cinema Novo deploys visual and technical “violence” in an attempt to “make the public aware of its own misery” (14) and confront oppressive political and aesthetic forces with a negating refusal. “[O]nly a culture of hunger can qualitatively surpass its own structures by undermining and destroying them,” he writes. “The most noble cultural manifestation of hunger is violence” (13). (See Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: From the ‘Aesthetics of Hunger’ to the ‘Aesthetics of Garbage.’* Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, New York University (1982). See also Xavier’s *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazil* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997].) This “violence” takes the form of stylistic resistance to what Rocha sees as the seductive and pleasurable techniques of Hollywood cinema: Cinema Novo is characterized above all, in Rocha’s view, by its uncompromising rejection of “commercialism, exploitation, pornography and the tyranny of technique” and its insistence on filming “the truth” (13). More even than thematics or narrative content, cinematic resistance to imperial domination is therefore understood by Rocha and his followers as a question of *style*. Rejecting the economy of visual pleasure that structures mainstream (“First”) cinema, the Cinema Novo and Third Cinema filmmakers who applied aesthetic substance to Rocha’s arguments presented their audiences with spare, strictly realist and cerebral pictures like Jorge Sanjines’s *Blood of the Condor* (1969), Solanas and Getino’s *La Hora de los Hornos* (Hour of the Furnaces, 1968) and Rocha’s own *Terre am Transe* (Land in Anguish, 1967).

⁶² Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 32.

Diawara relates, Sembène decided not to accept any more aid from France and to produce his films in Africa with “African money” (32).

The financial challenges facing African filmmakers have been extensively documented, and I will not linger on this here. But it is useful to point out the ways in which the material and financial contexts of aesthetic production on the continent mirror many of the issues addressed by Sembène in his films. In this instance the determination of aesthetic production by economic infrastructural relations assumes direct and explicit form: material poverty, “hunger” and dependency find almost unmediated expression in cinematic texts that engage, at the level of both style and content, with these pressures. If “corruption” in political and social life is reflected cinematically through grotesque, excremental and other “ugly” forms, then we can see how questions of aesthetics, of beauty and ugliness, in fact constitute a critical point of engagement with the material relations thematized in the films.

Sembène’s longstanding insistence on aesthetic restraint—a rejection of the excess, inutility and sublimity identified by Western philosophy as the essence of aesthetic value—identifies him with a long tradition of Marxist aesthetic theory that seems only appropriate to his political philosophy. In the next chapter, we will see how other African artists tackle the question of aesthetic beauty and its relation to political corruption rather differently. The magical realism of West African novelists like Ben Okri pushes literary representation beyond its limits, seeking very different formal

solutions to the intractable and often incomprehensible financial and political crises that result from economic surplus.

Chapter Three. **Remnants of modernity: petro-magic-realism and inflationary culture in Ben Okri's *Stars of the New Curfew***

Even the good things in life eventually poison you.

—Ben Okri, “What the Tapster Saw”

Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies.

—José Ignacio Cabrujas¹

In eleven brief pages, Ben Okri's 1987 short story “What the Tapster Saw” offers a complex literary account of oil's transformative effect on Nigeria's ecological and subjective landscapes. Paying homage to Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, often cited as an antecedent to Okri's work, the story follows a skilled palm-wine tapster who falls from a tree and spends seven days in a coma before reviving. While he hovers between life and death, the tapster wanders through a devastated “unchanging landscape” populated by “terrible inhabitants” and “monstrous shapes,”² haunted by prophetic visions and memories of childhood and “ancient heroes” (189).

Finally brought back to life by the irritating ministrations of a herbalist named Tabasco, who informs him that he was to be buried the next morning, the tapster realizes that many of the characters and landmarks he encountered on his travels—from a soapstone icon to the glassy-eyed turtles who torment him—correspond to objects in

¹ Cited in Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1997). 1.

² Ben Okri, “What the Tapster Saw.” *Stars of the New Curfew* (New York: Viking, 1988), 187.

the room where he has lain, and that his “dream” has as much to do with his real surroundings as with any hallucinatory unreality. The story suggests that this disjunctive sensibility, the confusion, alienation and abjection produced by an encounter with a fundamentally irrational reality, ultimately represents the death of the subject itself—a necrontology that Okri identifies directly with the oil exploitation that he sees as laying waste to Nigeria’s environment and its socius alike.

On the morning of his accident, the tapster is drawing palm-wine from trees in a forest now owned, as a billboard announces, by the “DELTA OIL COMPANY.” His anachronistic presence, as an actor in an economy based around palm oil rather than petroleum, is marked by the “thick cobwebs” he must cross in order to reach the few remaining palm trees in the forest.³ After his fall, he notices features of the landscape that recall the ecological effects of oil drilling—a “viscous,” stagnant, iridescent river (185); wounded trees; foul-smelling smoke that irritates his eyes and skin; and “thick slimes of oil” that coat everything (189). Though the wandering tapster is unable to identify the source or reason for these sensations, which appear to him as semi-autonomous actors in their own right, the reader’s eyes, free of cobwebs, recognize the landscape of degradation described most memorably by Ken Saro-Wiwa,⁴ and understands the tapster’s travels through what Tutuola called the “deads’ town” as a prophetic vision of the fate of the forest.

³ See Jennifer Wenzel, “Petro-magic-realism: toward a political ecology of Nigerian literature.” *Postcolonial Studies* 9:4 (2006), 449-464, esp. 452-3.

⁴ See Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1992)

The ecological disruption effected by the oil industry is thus closely associated, in “What the Tapster Saw” as in Saro-Wiwa’s writing, with death, both symbolic and bodily. The undead tapster is both an exemplary figure for what happens to the subject in this context, and one who bears witness to the necropolitical economies of waste that characterize the petro-underworld.⁵ Neither wholly dead nor fully alive, the tapster here wanders through a violent, burning landscape haunted by visions of “coups, ... secret executions, ... armed robberies” and deadly bullets (189). He sees “the employees of the oil company as they tried to level the forests” and drill for oil (187, 188-9), using tactics that include employing witch-doctors to “drive away the spirits,” attempts to interfere with the weather, and finally exploding the forest with dynamite, an event that leaves behind a “thick pall of green smoke” and a “weird spewing up of oil and animal limbs from the ground” (189). The oil economy’s destructive power is here figuratively embodied in the fragmented bodies, ecosystems and spiritual landscapes it leaves in its wake—and in the profound, lingering gap between the tapster’s desire to make sense of the events he witnesses and the absolute, inescapable limitations of his perspective.

This disjuncture is reiterated in the temporal logics that govern this “deads’ land.” Most of the disorienting quality of the tapster’s wanderings in this space derive from the way in which all experiences are condensed into what Mbembe calls an “indefinite present,” constituting a scene in which past and future are reversed or confused, and “where events continually take place that never seem to congeal to the

⁵ On the necropolitical, see of course Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” tr. Libby Meintjies. *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003) 11-40. See also Mbembe’s “Life, Sovereignty and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola.” *Research in African Literatures* 34. 4 (Winter 2003): 1-26.

point of consolidating into history.”⁶ The vision of the destruction of the forest, for example, seems likely to represent an event that has not yet actually taken place, but which is already inevitable once the “DELTA OIL COMPANY” property lines have been drawn. When he sees “people being shot in coups, in secret executions, in armed robberies” (189), it is unclear—to him and to the reader—whether this is a memory or a premonition, a telling confusion in a country where violent histories repeat themselves with exhausting regularity.

For the tapster himself, however, all such events and experiences are encountered as if in the present continuous, an eternal contemporaneity that he resents impatiently. The passage of time is marked only by the successive blows he receives and by the disembodied voices that insistently announce each day of his “death.” There is no day or night in a world where “the sun did not set, nor did it rise.... The tapster was never allowed to shut his eyes” (186), a condition that refuses him the soothing amnesiac effect of sleep. The night before his accident, he had managed to forget a traumatic dream—a disturbing premonition of the fatal accident that was to befall him the following day—by drinking his “way through a gourd of palm-wine” and succumbing to sleep (184). In the underworld landscape determined by petro-oil, rather than palm-oil, by contrast, he finds it impossible either to forget or to imagine a future as a work-in-progress: the undead tapster is a subject of absolute vulnerability and contingency, unable to cognitively organize his experience in ways that would help him determine his own path.

⁶ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty and Terror,” 6.

This cognitive dislocation is intensified by the impossibility of distinguishing between hallucination and reality in the tapster's undead world. Apart from the apparent materiality of fantastical figures like talking turtles or metamorphosing dogs, the tapster is haunted throughout his wanderings by fragmented and incomplete bodies, as well as features that have become detached from their referent. The wounded, bleeding trees that entrap and torture him, and his rape by a creature whose only characteristic is its stench of "rotting agapanthus," serve as vivid examples of a device that frequently appears in Okri's work, wherein sensuous qualities, like color or smell, and metaphorical figures, like these wounded trees, assume a life of their own and address the human subject directly. Such reliance on literalization or demetaphorization has been identified (by, for example, Wendy Faris) as a characteristic feature of magical realism as a representational mode in which metaphors "too take on a special sort of textual life, reappearing over and over again until the weight of their verbal reality more than equals that of their referential function."⁷ At the same time, this stylistic innovation is more than literary virtuosity on Okri's part: in this story, it is clearly associated with the author's attempt to make sense of—and to represent his characters' attempt to make sense of—a radically changing historical context, a new "reality."

In Fredric Jameson's influential account of magic realism, this activation of sensuous qualities is associated specifically with the dematerialized finance capitalism that characterizes the postmodern phase of accumulation (including the oil economy

⁷ Wendy Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 170-1.

intruding on Okri's Nigeria), but more generally with moments of historical transition in which conflicting modes of production coexist within a shared physical and imaginative space. Magical realism itself, he insists in an influential argument, "depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features"⁸: the very kind of transitional moment explored in Okri's story. (As Jennifer Wenzel notes, "What the Tapster Saw" details the "superimposition of a petroleum economy over a palm economy in the Niger Delta."⁹)

In such contexts, Jameson argues, the subject's lack of distance from its historical circumstances makes it impossible to achieve the "narrative unification"¹⁰ that enables rational understanding. Rather, the "permutations of the gaze" are the only mode of perception available to the subject trying to make sense of experience, resulting only in what Jameson calls "history with holes," "perforated history, which includes gaps not immediately visible to us, so close is our gaze to its objects of perception."¹¹ This "close-up" view includes a tendency to regard phenomenal qualities and perceptual features as independent actors that have come to seem "semi-autonomous," leading independent cultural and psychic existences from the objects and substances they once served to represent.¹²

As Ato Quayson notes in his account of Okri's experimental style, "the esoteric disruptions of the narrative are shown to have material correlatives in the squalor and

⁸ Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1983): 301-325, 311.

⁹ Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism," 449.

¹⁰ Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," 305.

¹¹ Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," 303.

¹² Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital." *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 151.

terrible brutality of” the historical context in which it is situated.¹³ When the tapster awakens from his coma, and understands that the acrid smoke, the turtles, soapstone shrine and herbalist that have haunted his underworld landscape were in fact subconscious displacements of objects and figures in his sick-room, Okri establishes a close correspondence between “magic” and “reality” —and thus, in Quayson’s view, “raises fundamental questions about narrativity as well as about the relationship between literature and what it purports to represent.”¹⁴ The story is characterized, we might say, by a structural tension between its “surreal texture,” with its talking turtles, shifting landscapes and temporal disjunctures, and the narrative’s grounding in a profoundly, even brutally material reality.

This epistemological crisis identifies narrative and narratology as crucial components of political as well as subjective agency. The only element of “What the Tapster Saw” that can be considered a “story” appears on the first page, when Tabasco the herbalist tells the tapster of a hunter who pursued an antelope that turned into a woman (a well-known Yoruba myth that also appears in Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*); otherwise, the events, visions, and lecturing voices that haunt the tapster’s journeys are characterized by the disjointed, discontinuous, and contingent relationships that link them together. The short, declarative sentences that define Okri’s style here, frequently beginning “He saw” or “He heard,” or featuring inanimate objects in subject

¹³ Ato Quayson, “Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri’s Writing.” *Essays on African Writing: 2, Contemporary Literature*, ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah (Oxford, Portsmouth, NH; Ibadan: Heinemann, 1995), 150.

¹⁴ Quayson, “Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System,” 140.

positions (“Thick slimes of oil seeped down the walls”; “Noises were heard below”), create an environment in which the senses are assailed by one new thing after another, with few transitional modifiers to help us make connections between or among these experiences. Though the story itself has a beginning and an ending, that is, this “realist,” narrative frame is substantially complicated by the dead-ends and confusions that characterize its main narrative “episode.” Such fractured temporality identifies the tapster, once again, as Mbembe’s “wandering subject”: in Okri’s “ghostly paradigm,” as in Tutuola’s,

there is neither reversibility nor irreversibility of time. There is only *unfolding* and folding over anew [*dérroulement/enroulement*] of experience. If stories and events have a beginning, they do not necessarily have an end, properly speaking. Indeed, they may be interrupted. But a story or an event may continue in another story or in another event, without there necessarily being a causal relationship between one and the other. Conflicts and struggles may be taken up again at the point they were stopped. But they can also be interrupted or resumed without the need for continuity. Furthermore, the same event can have more than one distinct beginning...¹⁵

The magical-realist style deployed in “What the Tapster Saw” and throughout *Stars of the New Curfew* therefore serves to thematize, as well as to express formally, the subjective, social, and semiotic disjunctions of Nigerian life under pressure from an oil-based economy. The experiential effects of the oil economy complicate and undermine the capacity of traditional narrative forms to seamlessly represent such experiences. Reading Okri’s story, and the volume as a whole, in light of Mbembe’s discussion of Tutuola, we begin to understand some of the ways in which what Quayson sees as “the radicalisation of narrative form” — Okri’s magical-realist vision — serves as “a means of

¹⁵ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty and Terror,” 23.

rendering the acute sense of bewilderment at the incoherence of the socio-political domain. The experiments with form have a literary as well as socio-political dimension."¹⁶

A reading of Okri's stories points to magical realism as the emblematic mode of the oil era, a mode of representation that is itself determined by the sort of representational crisis that is, we will see, precipitated by oil capitalism and its pervasive social effects. In *Stars of the New Curfew*, Okri presses the limits of literary realism against what he sees as the "fantastic"¹⁷ realities of a culture and economy predicated on oil. Focusing on two of the stories collected in the volume—apart from "What the Tapster Saw," I consider "Stars of the New Curfew"—I suggest that we read Okri's magical realist vision as an attempt to bear witness to the oil economy's radical disruption of the bond holding signifier to signified, representation to reality, and the signs of value to its substance—what I will contend represents a pervasive "inflationary culture" that characterizes all levels of social and political life—and as a formal mechanism by which the author looks to memorialize the wasted bodies, social relations, landscapes and modernist dreams cast off in its wake.

Identifying this oil closely with excrement and other bodily wastes, Okri works through the paradoxical structure of value in an inflationary context: the more oil is extracted, the more wealth accrues, the more money there is, the less and less value pertains to interpersonal relations, to concepts like beauty, truth and "authentic[ity]"

¹⁶ Quayson, "Esoteric Webworks as Nervous System," 156

¹⁷ Ben Okri, "Stars of the New Curfew." *Stars of the New Curfew* (New York: Viking, 1988), 84.

(143), and to nature, certain regions, individual people and indeed entire populations, who are ultimately rendered, in the volume's most chilling insight, genocidally disposable. The monetary economy of excess, and its deconstructive effect on the modernist dreams and aspirations precipitated by the oil boom, underwrites an aesthetic and political economy of waste, which Okri looks to figure through a stylistic turn from naturalism to magical realism.

In Nigeria, the horizon of modernity was illuminated by oil, which had been discovered in commercially viable deposits by Shell in the late 1950s. The rapid rise in oil prices that followed the 1973 embargo and supply-cut orchestrated by the Organization of Oil-Producing Countries (OPEC), of which Nigeria was a recent member, meant an astonishing rise in national income from oil exports, a development heralded, as Andrew Apter observes, as a "blessing from Providence."¹⁸ As the price of oil rose steadily through the decade, eventually peaking in 1980 at around 3,600 percent above its 1973 level, cash poured into the country. Nigeria's oil revenues increased during the 1970s by 2,200 percent (from £170 million in 1966-7 to N7,650 in 1977-8¹⁹), positioning petroleum firmly at the center of the country's economy and radically transforming its socio-political, as well as its physical, landscape.

It also effected profound changes in the psychic and imaginative lives of Nigerians who were thrust into the newly monetarized economy and polity, a

¹⁸ Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 22.

¹⁹ Karin Barber, "Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 20:3 (September 1982), 431-450. 434n1.

development thematized by Okri in “What the Tapster Saw” and especially “Stars of the New Curfew,” the volume’s title story. On the one hand, the new wealth brought about by the influx of “petrodollars” stimulated a period of wild optimism, a speculative frenzy in which everything and anything seemed possible for the newly endowed nation-state. After four years of devastating civil war, and over a decade of postcolonial disillusionment, the world’s “oil shock” was initially experienced in Nigeria as a miraculous windfall, an unexpected gift that presented an opportunity to completely reimagine—and indeed remake—the country as the very representative of African modernity. As Apter describes in his seminal study of the cultural effects of the oil boom, this mental picture initially seemed to be realized in the country’s material transformation:

an ambitious national development plan invested in parastatal industries, education, hospitals, and mass media, matched by a boom of imported commodities ranging from staple foods and raw materials to expensive technology and luxury goods. An ever expanding public sector bringing schools, clinics, piped water, and electricity to the rural areas developed the national landscape from ‘above’ while well-connected contractors amassed private fortunes through business deals.... The clutter and cacophony of new construction intensified as sports stadiums, national monuments, bridges, highways, and palatial hotels modernized the nation. Nigeria’s oil boom was a spectacle to behold.²⁰

The translation of oil money into spectacular buildings, infrastructural improvements and social services gave tangible form to the otherwise vertiginous unreality of figures like “\$9.1 billion” —the country’s income from petroleum exports

²⁰ Apter, *Pan-African Nation*, 22.

during 1976 alone.²¹ The grandiose scale of the monuments, factories and social programs being implemented with these petrodollars reflected the sublime hyperbole of money counted in the billions, the skyscrapers sprouting overnight from the earth offering a real-world homology for the dizzying wealth that was apparently being conjured alchemically from thin air (or, rather, from the earth itself). What Apter calls the “magic of Nigeria’s nascent modernity” (8)—the popular vision of the state as a conjuror or alchemist, turning the “devil’s excrement” of black oil²² into shiny naira bills and sparkling new clinics and hotels²³—was thus at least initially experienced as a certain magical *reality*, as a social and physical landscape that was daily being transformed by the power of magical money. This spectacle of wealth and modernity, the set of visual images through which the oil boom and its marvelous effects were mediated, must be understood, however, as profoundly ideological—as, both, a fetishistic misrecognition of the social and ecological relations on which the wealth was founded, and a political project in which legitimacy and authority were entirely constituted on the basis of illusion and display, the spectacle of sovereignty without any reference to an underwriting content.

The buildings and bridges, roads and clinics, that is, served as the signs and substance of the state’s sovereignty (increasingly based on its control of the petro-dollar

²¹ John Darnton, “Oil Riches Unleash a Major Boom in Nigeria.” *The New York Times* January 30, 1977, p. IES44.

²² “I call petroleum ‘the devil’s excrement’. It brings trouble.... The [oil money] hasn’t brought us any benefits.... We are drowning in the devil’s excrement.” Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso, founder of OPEC, in 1976. Cited in Michael J. Watts, “Oil as Money: the Devil’s Excrement and the Spectacle of Black Gold.” *Money, Power and Space*, ed. Stuart Corbridge, Nigel Thrift and Ron Martin (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 406.

²³ See also Coronil, *The Magical State*.

pursestrings) through a spectacle of expenditure, a simulacral symbolic economy that deflected popular attention from its otherwise distinctly shaky legitimacy.²⁴ In his account of Venezuela's oil boom, Fernando Coronil identifies this feature of political life in oil states as a kind of "petro-magic," a term that describes not only the state's turn to modes of magical capture but also the investment of every aspect of life in such contexts with an unreal quality. The state not only "bought" legitimation, that is, through its new role as distributor of oil incomes, but also deployed a "magical performance" of authority that served to dazzle and divert ordinary Nigerians, to

astonis[h] through the marvels of power rather than convinc[e] through the power of reason.... By manufacturing dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress, it casts its spell over audiences and performers alike. As a 'magnanimous sorcerer,' the state seizes its subjects by inducing a condition or state of being receptive to its illusions—a magical state."²⁵

As Coronil's work suggests, this reliance on "political cosmology" tends to typify oil-boom states more generally, and thus seems tied in specific ways to the particular qualities of this commodity:

[Oil's] power to awaken fantasies enables state leaders to fashion political life into a dazzling spectacle of national progress through 'tricks of prestidigitation.' State representatives, the visible embodiments of the invisible powers of oil money, appear on the state's stage as powerful magicians who pull social reality, from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat.²⁶

This vision of the oil economy's "petro-magical" effects is the thematic concern and, we might say, the chief protagonist of the titular "Stars of the New Curfew," to

²⁴ See Achille Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity." *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001)

²⁵ Coronil, *Magical State*, 5.

²⁶ Coronil, *Magical State*, 2.

which we will now turn. In this story, Okri takes us on a dizzying tour of a Nigerian society being transformed by the excess of petrodollars flooding the country during the 1970s oil boom. The protagonist is a salesman of quack medicines, small translucent bottles of “green liquid” that recall uneasily both the sewage-ridden “green” waters of the lagoon at the center of Lagos, and the other liquid commodity—petroleum—whose commodification, circulation and frenzied consumption constitute the story’s allegorical subtext.

The phantasmagoric effects of the liquid commodities that circulate through the narrative are what interest Okri most profoundly. The narrative trajectory of “Stars of the New Curfew” implicitly links these phantasmagorical or “petro-magical” qualities of oil-commodity politics and culture to the brutal devaluation of human life. At story’s opening, the protagonist exemplifies the logic of semblance and spectacle that governs all levels of social and political life in oil-boom Nigeria. He prides himself on his work as a theatrical salesman, performing dazzling routines, dances, songs and other “tricks” to attract potential customers and persuade them of the miraculous, transformative powers of what he cynically acknowledges to be “rather dubious locally-made medicines” (84). Where other salesmen play on customers’ jingoistic pride or plant friends in the audience to testify to the drugs’ efficacy, the unnamed protagonist abandons all pretence of rational forms of persuasion and relies (at least initially) exclusively on the power of spectacle itself:

all kinds of methods for attracting people’s attention. I dressed like a clown. I set off fireworks. I developed the most sensational dances and songs to accompany

my sales talks. I spent all my energy thinking up new tricks. I practiced always.
(84)

His major challenge is retaining the “shock” value of his performances in an urban culture where what George Simmel²⁷ identified as the “blasé” outlook predominates: people “get used” to his methods and are less easily persuaded as the initial impression wears off. But rather than adapting his product or conceiving new relations between producer and consumer, the salesman responds by increasing the affective impact, finding “new tricks” and increasingly intense techniques to punctuate the nervous exhaustion of overstimulated Lagosians. Though the quality of his product, and his performance, remains stagnant, that is, he uses quantitative inflation—more and more of the same—to obscure and mystify the reality of this qualitative lack.

The connection that Okri identifies and stylizes here between sensation, spectacle and inflationary devaluation helps illuminate some of the “petro-magical” features of social and political life during the oil era. In Nigeria, the oil “boom” was experienced simultaneously as a period of monetary inflation. The flood of petrodollars that entered the country, and which so radically transformed its social, political and cultural landscapes, made for a 300 percent increase in the money supply between 1970 and 1976, an average annual increase of 43 percent.²⁸ In a period when the average rate of economic growth was only around 9 percent, and when the onset of the “Dutch Disease”

²⁷ George Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 330.

²⁸ Yahya K. Adamson, “Structural Disequilibrium and Inflation in Nigeria: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis.” Unpublished manuscript; available at <http://alpha.montclair.edu/~lebelp/CERAFRM007Adamson1989.pdf>

led to the gradual and irreversible wasting of other productive industries like agriculture in the face of the oil-export sector's dominant presence, the inflationary effects of this monetary increase created an ultimately devastating ironic cycle, in which the very source of prosperity itself laid the structural foundations of the nation's economic destruction. As Okri noted wryly in "What the Tapster Saw," "even the good things in life eventually poison you."²⁹ Between 1972 and 1975, the annual rate of inflation climbed from 2.8 percent to 33.5 percent,³⁰ destabilizing the value of the new currency, the naira, which had been introduced in 1973 to replace the British pound, and which increasingly came to serve, as the earlier discussion suggests, as the denominator and determinant of all forms of value—social, subjective, and cultural, as well as economic—in "modern" Nigeria.

The "fantastic" and "unreal" quality of the oil boom exacerbated by the immateriality—and in fact invisibility (underground, in pipes, behind barbed wire or even offshore³¹)—of the commodity on which it depended, characterized Nigeria's anticipated modernity as what Benjamin describes as a "dream-world": a world predicated symbolically upon the appearance of perpetual newness, the seductive dazzle of the surface, and the occlusion of histories and conditions of production. Values and meanings derive, in this context, exclusively from appearances, and from the collective frenzy of mass desire, not from any substantial quality. And here we arrive at

²⁹ Ben Okri, "What the Tapster Saw." *Stars of the New Curfew* (New York: Viking, 1988), 191.

³⁰ Adamson, "Structural Disequilibrium and Inflation," 5.

³¹ Karin Barber notes that very few Nigerians participated in the actual labor of extracting and distributing the country's oil, another reason its profits were "not seen to be produced by work." See Barber, "Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira," 435-6.

the inflationary character of the petrodollar culture for which I will be arguing.

Benjamin's earlier essay on the inflation that ravaged Germany in 1922-23 suggested that a similar "degeneration of things," the phantasmagorical displacement of things by their images ("all things ... are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity"), served as a cultural correlate of the currency devaluation-by-inflation that represented the era's dominant economic mode.³² Inflation is a process by which the presumed nexus between signifier (monetary value) and signified (material commodity), representation and "reality," becomes strained or even broken altogether. In the case of the German mark during the 1920s, monetary value as a "representation of abstract equivalence (ie, its price) ultimately lost virtually all (stable) reference to a material referent (ie, a commodity), becoming something of a shadow without substance, form without content, or an appearance without a corresponding essence."³³

As the value and meaning of money spirals further and further away from any material referent (whether gold or bread), the value and meaning of commodities and other objective features of everyday life comes to seem similarly fantastical. In the face of the imminent starvation confronting most Germans, for example, the "reality" of luxuries seems so fantastical as to defy even visual comprehension: Benjamin tells us that the "luxury goods swaggering before us now parade such brazen solidity that all

³² Walter Benjamin, "Imperial Panorama: A Tour of German Inflation." *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 58-59.

³³ David C. Durst, *Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics and Culture in Germany, 1918-1933* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), 76.

the mind's shafts break harmlessly on their surface."³⁴ The "air is full of phantoms," while the press reinforces the "illusory" understanding of the inflationary crisis, a tendency that "helps no one uncover the dark powers that hold his life in thrall."³⁵

As Bernd Widdig similarly argues in his account of the 1920s inflation, "uncontrolled circulation, the anxiety that the shockingly new causes, the horror that the 'real' and the 'fake' are uncomfortably close to each other—these are deeply rooted ingredients of the chaos that is characteristic of the inflation."³⁶ The inflation reveals—and yet paradoxically universalizes—the "illusions and volatile assumptions" that underwrite the monetary system that serves as the basis for social communication in a commodity culture, serving in this sense as a "giant deconstructive force."³⁷

In Fredric Jameson's terms, the emphasis on perception and illusion that Benjamin locates at the heart of inflationary culture is simply an intensification of a more general characteristic of this stage of capitalist development. "If [exchange value and the notion of monetary equivalence] had once announced and provoked a new interest in the properties of objects," Jameson writes in "Culture and Finance Capital," "now, in this new stage, equivalence has as its result a withdrawal from older notions of stable substances and their unifying identifications." Phenomenal qualities and perceptual features, he suggests, have in this stage become "semi-autonomous," leading

³⁴ Benjamin, "A Tour of German Inflation," 60.

³⁵ Benjamin, "A Tour of German Inflation," 56.

³⁶ Bernd Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 201.

³⁷ Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, 239n.14

independent cultural and psychic existences from the objects and substances they once served to represent.³⁸

This semi-autonomy takes the form, in Okri's story, of signs that skew dramatically away from their referents. As his business grows, the salesman decides to focus his attentions on captive audiences of bus passengers as they travel the streets of the baroque city, their precarious existence on its dangerous roads and enforced collectivity making them easy targets for cure-all commodities. His boss, a "man of our times" who "understood the spirit of city business" (90), develops increasingly "powerful" medicines that promise cures for a growing range of ailments and "three times the energy" of previous formulations; the salesman intensifies his sales pitches accordingly, bombarding his fellow passengers with what can only be called exercises in discursive inflation:

I made extraordinary claims for [the new drug]; I said it could cure anything from headaches to elephantiasis, that they could either drink it, bathe with it, rub it on their skin, or sniff its essences in boiling water. I said it was good for children and old people, that it gave more power, more iron, than any existing drug. (104)

Beyond the benefits to be enjoyed from the drug's chemical substance, the salesman presents the drug's *sensuous* qualities (its smell and other "essences") as themselves having salubrious material effects. Its perceived ability to act on the world in ways that exceed its material substance is what makes the new "Power Drug" such a powerful and profitable commodity, heralded by the boss as the "ultimate money-

³⁸ See Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital." *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 151.

making machine" (97)—a metaphor that itself tends toward and invokes a certain demetaphorized literalism: a counterfeit economy with inflationary consequences.³⁹

In "Stars of the New Curfew," the trade in deadly quack medicine and other "occult economies" helps Okri explore the question of magical money and its relationship to representation. This particular commodity—a mysterious liquid with unknowable properties—establishes an intermediary step between legitimate, commodity-based wealth production and the "magical money" that was associated with witchcraft and corruption. If, as Karin Barber has shown in her "Popular Reactions to the Petro-naira," legitimate wealth creation was seen to depend on the intermediary commodity (Marx's $M - C - M'$) and thus on a certain productive economy based on (someone's) labor, then "magical money" was feared and despised precisely for its fantastical elision of materiality through the "breeding" of monetary wealth from itself (a popular view that corresponds to Marx's $M - M'$).⁴⁰ The overnight wealth that catapulted many Nigerians into the upper classes was widely regarded with suspicion by those less fortunate: these were seen, accurately, as riches acquired without labor,

³⁹ See Andrew Apter, *Pan-African Nation*, 42-44, for a discussion of a 1970s Nigerian advertisement for Saxon Photocopiers that plays on a similar demetaphorized metaphor: the machine as "The Money Maker." "Anyone in your office can make money," the ad proclaims, "simply by pressing two buttons."

⁴⁰ See Barber, "Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira," esp. 434-438. The question of "magical money" is also discussed in Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, tr. Mary Harper, Christopher and Elizabeth Harrison. (New York: Longman, 1993); Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997); John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony." *American Ethnologist*. 26:3 (1999): 279-301; John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Millennial capitalism: first thoughts on a second coming." *Public Culture* 12.2 (2000): 291-343; and *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. H. West and T. Sanders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)

without a real foundation in the physical labor regarded by Yoruba tradition as the only legitimate basis of personal wealth.⁴¹

The “Power Drug” is a commodity, to be sure, but its source is unclear and its effects dangerously unpredictable, qualities given substantial form in its liquid state and semi-opaque color (a color that additionally, we should note at this point, invokes the naira banknotes flowing around the country). This commodity, like its allegorical correlate, cannot be known or valued based on its appearance alone—only from what the salesman says about it and in a context of collective speculative mania.⁴² Even what Marx might call its “use value” is questionable, and perhaps even negative: the medicines cause more health problems than they cure, even as petroleum contaminates and corrupts those it appears to enrich, yielding environmental degradation and other forms of violence to those who would interrupt its underground flow. In this sense, the very form of the commodity itself—whether drug or petroleum—gives rise to the inflationary discourse that circulates around it, and to the forms of fantastical wealth and value that emerge from their intersection.⁴³

This magical money has its dark side, however, and the protagonist is plagued by nightmares in which everything is put up for auction and given a price, from the stars to the man himself. Crowds of bloated rich men from every nation throng the

⁴¹ Barber, “Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira,” 434-435.

⁴² The salesman notes with satisfaction that “we brought in surprisingly excellent profits on the days when we were bold enough to auction our drugs to the highest bidders” (91), a reminder of OPEC’s artificial scarcity that initiated the 1970s boom.

⁴³ Like Michael Watts, “I take seriously the idea that the biophysical properties of nature, of a natural resource, matter in both material and analytical ways.” Michael Watts, “Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity.” *Violent Environments*, ed. Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 2001), 189.

nightmarish market, their “indifferent eyes” and “acutely wise and callous” expressions (93-4) filling him with fear as he finds himself an object of the “calculating” mentality that now defines modern monetarized life.⁴⁴ Along with the devastated streets of the city and the “smell of burning tar and charred flesh” that emanates from children wandering madly in the forest (92), the man’s nightmare describes a cultural landscape in which the value of human life itself becomes subject to the vagaries of the speculative market. Just as “the people who bought [the stars] paid either with huge sums of money, a special part of the human anatomy, or the decapitated heads of newly-dead children” (93), the bids offered for the man on the auction block range wildly from “a miserable price” to “a thousand naira for my head”; “ten cows”; “the heads of three children”; “the thighs of a famous wrestler” (94). One army general even offers, portentously, a “machine for making money—a machine secretly approved by the nation’s cabal of power” (94).

In the event, once he is sold to an unknown bidder, the man finds himself branded by the monetary form to which he has been reduced, marking him as one more commodity in a vast and teeming marketplace: “As they led me from the constellation to a familiar world the sunlight would cut through the holes in the zinc ceiling and would burn a copper coin in the middle of my forehead” (95). The dreams are so vivid that they begin to invade his waking life, such that “on a given day I couldn’t tell whether I was in real life or in one of my dreams” (95). The commodification and inflationary devaluation of human life that so terrified him in his sleep are of course the basis of his everyday

⁴⁴ See Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 327.

business, a commerce in which the physical health, economic security and sanity of customers are daily sacrificed to the profit-motive.

Okri reminds us repeatedly that, underlying this entire economic and psychic complex, flows the liquid commodity on which all depends. In one daytime dream, as he falls into unconsciousness, the man “felt [him]self falling into a void. At the bottom of the void there was a still, green sea” (101). The stench of excrement rising from the green lagoon that his bus passes as he drifts away once again reinforces the association between the oil economy, commodification, waste, and the resulting degradation that he had seen played out in his dreams. After his final sales pitch on behalf of “Power-Drug,” his fellow passengers and their driver are so intoxicated by his inflated rhetoric, and the effects of the drug itself, that they constitute a frenzied mob falling over themselves to pay for the wondrous product. The bus driver, high on an overdose of “Power,” steers the vehicle in a mad race against another bus, a headlong and suicidal stampede toward disaster that lands the bus in the very area of the lagoon where nightsoil is regularly dumped (an ironic allegory, we understand, of the eventual fate awaiting the ship of state at the hands of its intoxicated leaders). The vertiginous experience of the crash— “For a moment I saw nothing but sky. Then I saw the city tumbling, turning, upside down. I saw the bridge spinning above me. I heard the molue splash mightily into the lagoon. The air rushed up to me. Then a surge of green water rose to pluck me from the air” (108)—recalls and simply materializes the upside-down, disorienting quality of everyday life in the inflationary economy for the protagonist and his customers. The

“green” lagoon, seen through window glass, and the contaminated waters that threaten to drown ordinary Nigerians, once again suggests a symbolic nexus between the inflated commodities, suffocating excrement and the oil economy that flows beneath the events of the story.

After the crash, and after his eyes are “opened to the madness I had been living with all those years” (96), the man escapes Lagos for his hometown of “W.,” which he seeks as a premodern refuge but finds to his surprise has also been radically transformed by its abundance of oil wells and the attendant cultural and social formations that have sprung up around them. Here fantasy, falsehood and performance define interpersonal relations as much as political life, where spectacle and style (particularly in the realm of conspicuous consumption and destruction) substitute entirely for rational discourse or material action. Political contests between the town’s two strongmen take the form of exaggerated potlatches, with airconditioned banknotes distributed from a Rolls-Royce and silver coins cast like rain from a hovering helicopter on the desperate crowds below.

Once again, “in a moment of hallucinated illumination,” the man identifies this phantasmagoria—the ideological spectacle of commodity culture—with the inflationary economy it serves to conceal. The “miracle” by which politicians retain sway over their publics is, he realizes, precisely the dark magic of “multiplying currency,” of money produced apparently from thin air.

it struck me that all those present—the market-women from the creeks of dark rivers, the clerks from remote bureaucracies deep in the delta villages—had one

thing in common. We needed modern miracles. We were, all of us, hungry. We had all abandoned our private lives, our business lives, our leisure, our pain, because we wanted to witness miracles. And the miracle we had come to witness, which seemed to comprise the other side of ritual drums and dread, was that of the multiplying currency. We had come to be fed by the giant magicians of money, masters of our age. (136)

What Okri is describing here is the phantasmagorical form that mediates the economic and political realms in oil-boom Nigeria, the way in which “petro-magic” and its simulacral logics effectively describe both the creation of wealth and the spectacle of power. For Walter Benjamin, the concept and figure of “phantasmagoria” helps explain the relationship between commodities and the way they are experienced and understood culturally, and it offers a useful trope for understanding the oil-commodity-culture of Okri’s Nigeria as well. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin identifies the phantasmagoria as the “expressive form taken by the products of a 19th-century commodity culture” and, simultaneously, as a central conceptual element in his critical methodology.⁴⁵ In the 1939 essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” he identifies it as the defining feature of modernity itself: “The world dominated by its phantasmagorias—this, to make use of Baudelaire’s term, is ‘modernity.’”⁴⁶ Drawing on Marx’s description of the phantasmagorical character of the commodity, in the “Fetishism” section of *Capital*,⁴⁷ Benjamin explores the relationship between commodity

⁴⁵ Margaret Cohen, “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria.” *New German Critique* 48 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 87-107 (89-90).

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century (1939).” *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press, 2003), 26.

⁴⁷ “This fetish character of the commodity has its origin in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces commodities.... It is only the particular social relation between people that here assumes, in the eyes of these people, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, tr.

culture, spectacle, ideology and history through the lens of the “magic lantern” — the original “Phantasmagoria.”

In Benjamin’s view, the structure of the commodity itself gives rise to a mode of experience in which surface appearance, and its aesthetic, affective power, conceals and substitutes for intellectual understanding, for material and historical substance. In the passage cited above, Okri’s narrator recognizes a similar effect in the inflationary frenzies of the oil boom, as he watches even educated, “rational” modern subjects (like the narrator himself) caught up in the frenzy of desire for “miracles” during the political spectacle in W. In “petro-magical” Nigeria, illusion is rendered as, in itself, reality, not its representation—and this conflation of illusion and/as reality is in fact an object of desire for the inflationary subjects represented here.

As an organizing concept, “phantasmagoria” therefore allows Benjamin (and Okri) to press Marx’s preliminary thoughts about ideology beyond the rationalist limitations of the earlier thinker’s approach. If Marx’s analogy of the *camera obscura* (in which “reality” appears inverted) suggests a simple binary of real/false, light/dark, in which the critic’s work entails the simple telling of things “as they are,” then the phantasmagoria analogy to which Benjamin turns offers by contrast a more philosophically and politically complex approach to the problem of “false consciousness.” Where the audience for the *camera obscura* is simply duped by a false representation, as Margaret Cohen describes, the “observer of the phantasmagoria is

Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (1887; rpt. New York: International Publishers, 1967), 76-77. Cited in Benjamin, “Convolut G: Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandville.” *The Arcades Project*, 182.

both participant and dupe, caught up in the pleasurable frisson of its machinations even while knowing them to be fraudulent.”⁴⁸ The visual spectacles of commodity culture are pleasurable, even if they are understood as illusions, and the critical examination of ideology demands, therefore, that such “irrational” realities be taken into account.

This point has two facets: in the first place, we must recognize what Okri and his narrator clearly identify (albeit retrospectively) as the ideological function of this new “petro-magical” reality in constituting a certain mode of state sovereignty; and, second, less voluntaristically, we can understand such phantasmagorias as fundamental formal expressions of the nature of the commodity on which the economy is organized—qualities that come to characterize all levels of social experience, not just political performance. The work performed by the phantasmagorias of Nigerian modernity is, in short, and as Theodor Adorno argues in his discussion of phantasmagoria, to produce and to generalize “the absolute reality of the unreal.”⁴⁹ The rhetoric and semiotics of petro-modernity depend on a mystificatory emphasis on radical newness, a break from history based on “clean” money elevated from the grimy world of labor and production, and thus a “magical” transcendence of materiality and historicity.

In Okri’s account, however, the phantasmagorical inflation of political value in this context leads inevitably to a radical devaluation that leaves the political itself emptied of content, predicated on a series of illusions and performances that are

⁴⁸ Cohen, “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” 228. She continues: “While the *camera obscura* does not attempt to fool its audience into mistaking its two-dimensional inversions of reality for the outside world, the phantasmagoria endows its creations with a spectral reality of their own.” (94)

⁴⁹ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 79.

ultimately revealed to be bankrupt. Though the people gather excitedly to participate in the ritual spectacles, to give themselves over to the promised “miracles” of magical wealth, the narrator finds himself unable, in the face of so much symbolic and monetary excess, to feel appropriately impressed: “It went on like that, one spectacle on top of another, leaving us perplexed by the mindless excess and drained of any possibility of wonder” (139). The phantasmagoric organization of political life has, this suggests, evacuated it of the affective quality necessary for genuine political embodiment, leaving the political body as a serial assemblage of increasingly devalued individual actors who are becoming more and more extraneous to the health of the body as a whole. He subconsciously recognizes this later that night, as he walks the streets of the town and notices how its abject spaces have been constituted—and ideologically obscured—by the banknotes over which the people had fought, banknotes that turn out, unsurprisingly, to conceal a counterfeit logic of value.

Everywhere we went that night we saw that the naira notes had fallen over the graves of the dead, over the market stalls, on the huts of the poor, on stationary cars, on heaps of garbage. It was only when I began to pick up the notes on my way to the hotel that I realized we had all been the victims of a cruel prank. When I turned the notes, wet in my hands, the ink began to run. Then I saw that one side of the currencies was authentic, but the other side washed away and became blank. We had been fighting for joke currencies. (140)

This counterfeit disjuncture between signifier and signified—between bank notes and the value for which they stand—is of course the very basis of inflationary devaluation, a formal correspondence that spreads across every level of social and symbolic life in an inflationary context. But as the man recognizes with horror when he

understands that the brutal conflict of the day before has been waged over worthless simulacra, the phantasmagorical organization of political life has some direly material consequences, ones that his unconscious represented quite accurately in the charred bodies of children “piled on the backs of trucks” (92). As David Durst, drawing on Simmel and Worringer, suggests, the inflationary devaluation of monetary value has profound implications for subjectivity and psychic life in societies like the one Okri describes here. If money, according to Simmel, is “the most terrible destroyer of all form,” tending to hollow out all intrinsic value and destroy fixed substances, then the soul of the monetary subject, in an inflationary context, becomes similarly debased:

Without an underlying foundation of intrinsic meaning, the soul of the modern subject resembles something akin to...a collage whose hollow background is pasted over by arbitrarily related fragments.⁵⁰

During an inflation, when these general tendencies of monetary culture confront the individual most immediately, this existential fragility tips over into ontological collapse: in Weimar Germany, for example, Durst argues, “monetary devaluation led to a sense of individual self-devaluation.”⁵¹

This most serious consequence of monetary inflation is expressed by Elias Canetti in his essay on “Inflation and the Crowd,” written in the aftermath of World War II:

Not only is everything shaken during an inflation [he observes] nothing remaining certain or unchanged even for an hour, but also each man, as a person, becomes less.... Everyone has a million and everyone is nothing.... An inflation can be called a witches’ sabbath of devaluation where men and the units of their

⁵⁰ Durst, *Weimar Modernism*, 80.

⁵¹ Durst, *Weimar Modernism*, 85.

money have the strangest effects on each other. The one stands for the other, men feeling themselves as 'bad' as their money; and this becomes worse and worse. Together they are all at its mercy and all feel equally worthless.⁵²

Canetti suggests that it is this feeling of worthlessness, of ontological devaluation, experienced by Germans during the 1920s inflation, that was in turn displaced onto the Jews who were associated, as moneylenders and speculators, with the crisis itself. The treatment of the Jews, Canetti argues, "repeated the process of inflation with great precision." From first being "attacked as enemies," they were "more and more depreciated," until finally "they were treated literally as vermin, to be destroyed with impunity by the million" (188).

This genocidal inflation-by-proxy that goes some way in explaining the Holocaust for Canetti is an outcome never predicted explicitly in Okri's story, but one that haunts its narrative subconscious as it haunts its narrator's. The association Okri wants to draw between inflationary economies and genocidal politics, a theme introduced in the Lagos section of the story, is more carefully developed through the events in *W*. The semi-comical excesses of the potlatch competition assume terrifying qualities in the wake of the crowd's mad scramble for the notes and coins. The ruthless and violent "war" of all against all that characterizes political ritual as much as business in oil-boom Nigeria expands into a murderous rampage led by "thugs" but symbolized more generally by the floodwaters that pour through the streets. This dangerous night reinforces, for the man, how the inflationary economy devalues human life — "We were

⁵² Elias Canetti, "Inflation and the Crowd." *Crowds and Power*, tr. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 186.

the garbage carried away on waves of mud" (140)—and operates according to a logic of expenditure, rather than production. The floodwaters sweep through the streets but fail to transform the deep structure of material life in the town, simply "transferring the garbage from one area to another" (129) as "mounds of rubbish, knee-high, formed around me" (130). The ominous "cults" whose rituals blur into more modern political spectacles in *W.* furthermore serve as an expression of the occult economies that are seen to underwrite material and therefore political power in Nigeria.⁵³

The liquid commodity on which these economies are ultimately understood to depend in the story is in fact blood, which the cults are said to need in order to prepare elixirs for their leader (128). This shift in symbolic emphasis between the first and subsequent sections of the story corresponds with a formal distinction, as when the deluge that arrives at the climax of the *W.* section (an event that itself corresponds to the bus crash that ends the Lagos section) transforms the narrative's dominant color scheme from the green that has been associated with oil, excrement and money, to blood red. The moon turns red and the man's soaked shirt is "dyed red by the rain" (130). In some parts of town it is even rumored to have rained blood (as well as lobsters).

But even this, the liquid basis of life itself, becomes a phantasmagoria in the political logic of oil-boom Nigeria. Nominally a symbol of relationality, genealogy and belonging—the very material basis of national community—blood here becomes a

⁵³ See Comaroff & Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction."

fetishistic surrogate for cynical relations of exchange and exploitation.⁵⁴ The morning after the devastating flood and political rioting, the man's friend tells him that "if I wanted to survive in the country, or anywhere in the world, the secret was to join the strongest side and 'pour your blood into the basin'" (133-4). On his return to Lagos, his boss offers to reinstate his sales job at a higher salary, asking "if I was ready to take my measure as a full-blooded national...a man, an African" (141-2). It is neither the abstract bonds of citizenship, nor the material bonds of blood kinship that now constitute the Nigerian "nation," but the shared culture of inflationary excess, the willingness to sacrifice other people's "blood" in order to get ahead.

As Michael Watts argues, this recognition of the oil economy's phantasmagoric power to turn excrement into wealth,⁵⁵ and in turn to transform human life into excrement, is not specific to Nigeria, but a more general feature of oil-dependent societies. Citing Fernando Coronil's study of Venezuela's oil boom, Watts recalls one minister's feeling that the "natural bounty of oil had, in the magical and mysterious process of being transformed into money, become a putrid and toxic waste.... Oil had vastly increased the national appetite and the capacity to consume, yet ingesting petroleum only served to contaminate everything."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ I should note here also Andrew Apter's insight that oil was also figured, during the boom's optimistic early phase, as a kind of life-giving blood circulating around the national body politic. See Apter, *The Pan-African Nation*, 14, 50, 249-255.

⁵⁵ "[Oil] is a filthy, foul-smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money." Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*, tr. William R. Brand & Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 34.

⁵⁶ Watts, "Oil as Money," 407. Watts cites from Coronil, *The Magical State*, 233.

Once again, the illusion of “magical money” derived cleanly and effortlessly from the national soil is revealed as a mystification: a phantasmagorical trick that occludes the real waste product cast off by this wealth production. The siphoning of petroleum from beneath Nigeria’s earth, and the circulatory economy of appearance and fraud that operated above the remaining hollow, in fact left “mounds of garbage” and piles of excrement in its wake—in the form of devalued, disposable human bodies. In Venezuela, according to Coronil, this assumed symbolic form—“the identification of both the nation and individuals with excrement became an ever more common short hand expression for everyday problems... ‘somos una mierda’, ‘es que este es un pais de mierda’ (‘we are pieces of shit’, ‘it’s that this country is made of shit’)”—but in Nigeria, the starving populations and devastated ecological landscapes of the Niger Delta, source of much of the country’s oil wealth, testify to the intensely material reality of this formal correspondence. Although by the time Okri published *Stars of the New Curfew*, the Ogoni struggle had not yet achieved the level of public infamy that it would reach with the arrest and execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, the author had witnessed first-hand the social and ecological impact of oil drilling in the region around his home town of Warri, near Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta (a scene he describes proleptically, as we have seen, in “What the Tapster Saw”).⁵⁷

The aftermath of the oil boom, when the collapse of world oil prices and the effects of the petro-era’s excesses finally put an end to the flood of dollars, saw the generalization of the period’s excremental logics. Structural adjustment policies, foreign

⁵⁷ See Wenzel, “Petro-magic-realism.”

debt, military coups and a growing ecological crisis intensified the political and economic alienation of a majority of Nigerians, for whom the oil boom was seen to have brought nothing but misery and degradation. The decaying infrastructures of Lagos and other urban centers, and the half-completed development projects that dotted the country, provided stark daily reminders of the hollowness at the core of the petroleum economy, and as ironic material monuments to the failures of petro-modernity, the country's rude awakening from its dream of itself as an icon of African modernism and a full participant in global modernity. The infamous Ajaokuta Steel Complex, never completed and continuing to drain state monies, stands, as Michael Watts notes, "as a pathetic monument to oil, to oil politics and to oil money."⁵⁸

If the 1970s were defined, in Nigeria, by this dream of modernist development, then the late 1980s, when Okri was writing *Stars of the New Curfew*, therefore represent the far side of that modernist dream-deferred, a period in which the nightmare of "de-modernization" had, instead, become fully realized.⁵⁹ The "pathetic monuments" and crumbling ruins that define Nigeria's contemporary landscape—features that proleptically haunt the landscapes of Okri's narratives—give physical form to this painful contradiction: the brutal reality of failure and defeat that remains haunted by the crumbling hopes of the past.

This temporal and existential contradiction, the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* or "untimeliness" of post-modernist disillusionment, recalls Fredric Jameson's interest in

⁵⁸ Watts, "Oil as Money," 430.

⁵⁹ James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1999), 255.

historical contexts where “whole layers of the past” and elements of the future survive within the present,⁶⁰ and thereby returns us to the question of magical realism as a literary mode. The term was first used by critic Franz Roh, in his 1925 volume *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (“Post Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the newest European painting”), to describe the German Post-Expressionist movement of the mid-1920s. Linking Roh’s “magical realism” to the recent experience of the “worst monetary inflation in history,” Irene Guenther suggests that these painters were concerned above all with the challenges of representing the generalized state of epistemological, existential and social crisis that characterized the economic emergency. Most importantly, in Guenther’s view, magical realism represents a response to radical disillusionment, to the promise of modernity heralded and then withdrawn. Post-expressionist painting was, she insists, an “art of controlled bitterness that festered as the hopes and idealism of 1918 were dashed by the early 1920s, and the dreams of a better society gave way to resignation and despair.”⁶¹

If the inflationary crisis, with its hourly adjustments in the value of the mark, made it impossible to think about or plan for the future, promoting a culture of cynicism and uncertainty that undermined the very basis of political life, then it was, like post-oil-boom Nigeria, simultaneously haunted by the recent memory of this moment of optimism, when the modernization and prosperity of post-War German society seemed

⁶⁰ Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film,” 311.

⁶¹ Guenther, “Magical Realism in the Weimar Republic,” 43.

tangibly available.⁶² More than simply a representation of semiotic crisis, therefore, magical realism can also be seen as an expression of the doubleness or *Unheimlichkeit* of modernity itself—the simultaneity of modernity as expectation and disillusionment.

In his investigation of urban life on the Zambian copperbelt, where commodity-driven “modernity” was once similarly heralded as imminent but is now instead experienced as a lost object, James Ferguson identifies such contradictory simultaneity as characteristic of experience at the far end of modernity. He suggests that just such a “cynical skepticism has replaced an earnest faith when it comes to the idea of a modernizing, progressing Zambia” —a skepticism that is, nevertheless, haunted by the memory of what might have been, the future anterior that was never realized.⁶³ This double-vision constitutes, we might say, the “magical/reality” of postcolonial Nigeria and Zambia alike, where the confidence and optimism of the earlier moment are, as Ferguson argues, “both absent and, in its very absence, somehow present.... Like a dream, the idea of Zambians [and Nigerians] moving proudly into the ranks of the first class was both vividly remembered and manifestly unreal.”⁶⁴

In a review of Okri’s work, critic Biodun Jeyifo suggests that this paradox underlies the narrative experimentation and stylistic innovation that characterizes later

⁶² For a helpful account of the “time horizon” of inflation, see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, 84.

⁶³ Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 14. It is perhaps worth noting that Ferguson associates Zambia’s economic decline—the failure of its modernist dream—with an inflationary devaluation in purchasing power: “where in 1970 a ton of Zambian [copper] exports would have bought a certain quantity of imported goods, by the mid-1980s it would have taken more than *three* tons to buy the same quantity of goods” (7). Though Ferguson does not make much of this point, it does suggest the centrality of the inflationary experience to the experience of modernity as a magical/reality, a promise or expectation conjoined with its realist dissolution.

⁶⁴ Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 14.

generations of African writers. Realist representation is itself called into question, Jeyifo argues, by the confusing and often tragic experience of material reality in postcolonial Africa: “the work of fiction can no longer complacently proffer a fictional ‘reality’ axiomatically at variance with the socio-historical reality of alienation, degradation, chaos and instability for the vast majority of its living generations.”⁶⁵ In a similar vein, Ferguson points to the epistemological challenges of conducting ethnographic research in post-modernist Zambia, where subjects themselves are unable to make sense of their circumstances, let alone explain these understandings to an outsider: “when I tried to get an insider’s view of their social world,” he recalls, “what I found resembled less a stable, systemic order of knowledge than a tangle of confusion, chaos, and fear.”⁶⁶

In the postcolonial context, with which magical realism is now so closely associated, the question of representation, narrative and even realism itself thus assumes political as well as economic and existential significance. The realization of the dream of postcolonial independence, of human dignity and economic self-determination promised by the anticolonial movements, has in almost every instance come to seem a reality that is infinitely deferred, a dream whose instantiation has been radically called into question by the brute materiality of everyday life in the postcolony.

Once again, this identifies postcolonial Africa—particularly countries like Nigeria where economic prosperity and cultural productivity once seemed eminently

⁶⁵ Biodun Jeyifo, “The Voice of a Lost Generation: The Novels of Ben Okri.” *The Guardian* (Lagos), 12 July 1986. Cited in Ato Quayson, “Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri’s Writing.” *Essays on African Writing: 2, Contemporary Literature*, ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah (Oxford, Portsmouth, NH; Ibadan: Heinemann, 1995), 156.

⁶⁶ Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 19.

attainable—as a kind of “magical” reality, one that calls into question the very possibility of representation itself. For Guenther, the early “magical realists,” artists like De Chirico and his Post-Expressionist heirs, presented a “pictorial vision of man’s alienation and disorientation.”⁶⁷ While landscapes and city scenes (“themes from the modern environment”) were frequent subjects for post-expressionist painters, Guenther insists that their primary theme is in fact “the alienated individual placed in a modern world he could neither fathom nor control,”⁶⁸ and the challenges of making sense of and representing a reality that had come to seem meaningless or even orchestrated by dark spirits and witchcraft.⁶⁹ The return to representation after the fulgurations of Expressionism represented an effort to make artistic sense of the ways in which these crises demanded “new way[s] of seeing and rendering the everyday,” and the sense, induced by the inflation, that the superficial reality and tangibility of everyday objects—their “objectivity”—could no longer be taken for granted.⁷⁰

The fascination with surface, perspective, juxtaposition and temporality that defines post-expressionist “magical realism,” and its postcolonial heirs, can therefore be seen as a stylistic engagement with the problematic qualities of signification in a post-inflationary era. If the inflation radically disrupted ordinary Germans’ faith in the stability of the signifying bond, as the real-world referentiality of the value depicted on each banknote became more and more fantastic as it came to mean less and less, then

⁶⁷ Irene Guenther, “Magical Realism in the Weimar Republic.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), 38.

⁶⁸ Guenther, “Magical Realism in the Weimar Republic,” 43.

⁶⁹ For one interesting account of this association, see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, 204-209.

⁷⁰ Guenther, “Magical Realism in the Weimar Republic,” 36.

this also precipitated a general crisis of value that affected all modes of signification. Bernd Widdig describes how the realization of money's "self-referential" character—the "nothingness" that ultimately underwrites its value in a post-gold-standard era—"provided the framework for a specific mental and psychological experience," a "traumatic" encounter with the "loss of anteriority" and thus the "fiction of representation...the inherently non-referential status of a sign for the absence of other signs."⁷¹

Though this is of course in some senses a description of modernism most generally, the specific link between inflationary culture and magical realism suggests that this mode serves, as Scott Simpkins suggests, as a centrally significant stylistic attempt to represent the "uncertainty" of signification in a context of monetarized (post-)modernity. Emerging out of situations that are characterized by an "awareness of the ineluctable lack in communication," magical realist texts endeavor to "increase the likelihood of complete signification through magical means, to make the text—a decidedly unreal construct—become real through a deceptive seeming."⁷² "Magic" serves as a representational supplement, in Simpkins' view: a tool for addressing the shortcomings of language as a mode of signification, and a kind of insurance to boost the "credit-worthiness" of the text. Believability and referentiality are matters, in these works, consciously of *effect* rather than essence, functions of point-of-view and perception as these are manipulated by the artist: "*I nearly reach the point of believing*':

⁷¹ Bernd Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, 100. Widdig cites Brian Rotman's *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

⁷² Scott Simpkins, "Sources of Magical Realism." *Magical Realism: Theory, History Community*, 148.

that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is *hesitation* which sustains its life."⁷³

This experience of postcolonial modernity as a "real" memory experienced as a "manifestly unreal" reality returns us to Okri, whose works are consistently concerned with the problem of representing, through art, this "gulf between the ideal and the real."⁷⁴ It is my suggestion here that magical realism functions, for Okri, as a mode by which to account for the excesses, expectations, losses and disillusionments that characterize petro-magic-reality, and to memorialize, at the level of form, the broken bodies and spirits of ordinary Nigerians, the devastated natural landscapes and ravaged cultures that continue to haunt its people.

⁷³ Tzvetan Todorov, cited in Simpkins, "Sources of Magical Realism," 155.

⁷⁴ Tom Wilhelmus, "Review: Time and Distance." *The Hudson Review* 46:1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 247-252 and 254-255. (248)

Chapter Four. The Aesthetics of Recycling: Zakes Mda's Prosaic Economies

On Christmas Day in 1991, after twenty years of successful playwriting and production, Zakes Mda sat down at his new computer and began writing his first novel. The first line he wrote, "There are many ways of dying," simply struck him, he said later, as "words that should be in a novel," and three months later the manuscript of *Ways of Dying* was complete. Mda attributes his turn from theater to fiction to the changing political realities of his native South Africa—the end of institutionalized apartheid, in his view, relieving artists of the "pressure" to produce quickly and for public performance, and offering what he called the "luxury" of time to "sit down and write for months on end."¹ But the novel emerged at a similarly (astonishingly) rapid pace and tackles questions of theatricality, performance, and political aesthetics that had animated the writer's work in protest theater long before the "transition."

The apparent disjuncture between the luxurious expenditure of time available to the novelist, and the rapidity with which the text was created, reflects the complicated temporality of the transitional moment itself, a concept that is central to the novel's narrative vision. Like his protagonist, Toloki, Mda was, with this novel, struggling to make sense of a time in South Africa's history when the rapid and violent events on the ground severely strained the limits of such cognitive organization. The difficulty of representing and aestheticizing—that is to say, novelizing—the exceptional temporality

¹ Elly Williams, "An Interview with Zakes Mda." *The Missouri Review* 28:2 (2005), 62-79.

of transition, when the fragmented everyday seems “shot through,” in Benjamin’s terms, with both traumatic, unredeemed past and uncertain future, demanded a reconfiguration of the novel form itself, a new attentiveness to questions of form and genre that challenged the centrality of the social realism that had characterized anti-apartheid “protest” fiction during the 1970s and 1980s. Works like *Ways of Dying*, in which artistic production figures so prominently, were addressed as insistently to the question of literary creation during the transition as to the political crises they documented.

For indeed this difficulty was not only literary but also political. The increasingly violent antagonisms that defined transitional South Africa, and the persistent economic inequities that seemed likely to survive into a post-racist dispensation, raised fundamental questions about the capacity of any new “order” to represent (*vertrete*) the variegated and conflicting social fragments—especially those subaltern populations at the very bottom of the national hierarchy—left over from apartheid’s ordering economies. Even before the 1994 election that brought the African National Congress to power, it was clear that the new regime would likely be unable to redress the massive structural inequalities that had left large numbers of South Africans stranded outside the political and economic community.²

What it takes to become a political subject in the “new South Africa,” and on what basis the political society was itself to be constituted, are questions that Mda takes

² See, for one representative example, Christopher S. Wren, “Even in ‘New South Africa,’ Apartheid’s Legacy Lives On.” *The New York Times* June 23, 1991, Section 1; Part 1; Page 1

up in his transitional novel, which I will suggest locates its political vision at the “unconscious” level of form rather than in its everyday content. Specifically, it is in what Fredric Jameson calls the “generic discordance” of its narrative that *Ways of Dying* registers the social and political contradictions confronting the nationalist project in the “new” South Africa and disrupting its nascent discourses of unity, reconciliation and belonging.³

The novel follows Toloki, a homeless rural migrant in an unnamed South African port city, who has invented a career for himself as a professional mourner. Clad in a threadbare but imposing costume, complete with tights, brocaded cape and top hat, the professional mourner attends the frequent funerals that punctuate the violent city’s everyday routines, offering a spectacle of grief as he sits on the burial mound weeping softly or groaning loudly, swaying his body in specifically choreographed routines, services for which he is sometimes paid a small fee.

Despite his extreme poverty, Toloki insists that his work is not about the money but represents a “vocation,” a kind of spiritual calling akin to the “oriental monks” he has read about in a “pamphlet he got from a pink-robed devotee” on the city’s docks several years before (15). His ragged, “grotesque” appearance, foul body odor and strange costume alternately repel and amuse the people he encounters at funerals, on the streets or in public transportation, but Toloki maintains throughout an unshakeable sense of dignity and independence that is based on his view of his work as a spiritual

³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 371.

intermediary for the dead and for grieving families. He refuses alms and other gifts, though he does partake of funeral meals, preferring to see his payments as a fee for services rendered (and thus his performance as a kind of essential labor); similarly, his frugal existence on the very margins of the urban economy, where he sleeps in a dockyard waiting room and subsists on an “austere” diet of Swiss roll and green onions, showers infrequently at the beach, and forswears sexual and even intimate social relations with others, is reconceptualized and revalued by Toloki as the abstemious life of the “aghorī sadhu,” in which Toloki finds a kind of masochistic pleasure.

Though the trivial dilemmas and crises of his individual existence on the very margins of society, narrated in careful detail throughout the novel, seem strikingly incommensurable with the grandiose political transformations sweeping the country during the period, and although the novel has therefore been accused of evading properly political questions,⁴ *Ways of Dying* poses this contrast as its guiding problematic: what is to be done, in the emergent “new” South Africa, with the ugly, dispossessed, dislocated and disabled bodies left over by apartheid’s various “ordering” economies?

The economy of death within which Toloki and other “survival entrepreneurs” attempt to make a living (others profit more spectacularly from the booming funeral industry, coffin production, and so forth) is a satirical elaboration of the deadly political and cultural economies that were shaking South Africa during the early 1990s. The novel

⁴ See, for example, Grant Farred, “Mourning the Post-Apartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring, 2000): 183-206.

documents the daily train massacres, vigilante raids on squatter camps, arson attacks and criminal assaults that define everyday life for the most marginal subjects struggling to survive (“Death lives with us every day,” observes Toloki [98]).⁵ At a funeral that he impulsively attends one Christmas Day, Toloki meets Noria, a woman from his own rural village who has also made her way to the city, and whose tragic life has reached an apogee in the violent death of her five-year-old son, the object of the day’s mourning. Noria lives in an “informal settlement” on the outskirts of the city, where she invites Toloki to visit her. Their reunion occasions a series of flashback sequences that recount their respective childhoods, journeys to the city and struggles for survival in the urban environment, where material scarcity rivals the political uncertainty and social brutality that characterized the transitional period between the initial dismantling of apartheid in 1990 and the institution of a new “democratic” order in 1994. The platonic romance that gradually develops between the old friends, and Toloki’s recognition of the personal and indeed political power of affection and aesthetic pleasures, helps him reconsider the abstemious life he has invented for himself. Instead, his skills as a recycler, artist and mediator help him find a new “home” with Noria in the “dumping ground” of the shantytown, amongst the other most marginal remnants of apartheid and its nationalist aftermath.

In the novels that followed the successful publication of *Ways of Dying* (to date, he has written six), Mda would continue his interest in the status and function of

⁵ See also Angella Johnson, “The Squalor of a Town Like Alex.” *The Guardian* (London), November 21, 1992, p. 27.

marginal, even abject populations and spaces in the aesthetic and political context of the “new” South Africa. His ongoing exploration of questions of beauty and artistic production, of the temporality of transition, and the work of survival in conditions of deprivation and marginalization extend the themes of *Ways of Dying* into new locations, tracing the problematics of belonging and representation as these are shaped by shifting political landscapes. These are issues that arise in all of his recent works.⁶

Generic disjuncture in these novels is thus, I contend, an attempt to articulate the temporal, social and political contradictions posed for the new national order by those objects and figures for whom a place cannot be found—the “remnants” of apartheid and its nationalist heirs.⁷ If the “new” South African nation was (and remains) popularly presented as an object of aesthetic regard, with its much-vaunted narrative of orderly integration and pleasing harmony (the “Rainbow Nation” envisioned by Desmond Tutu and proclaimed in Nelson Mandela’s inaugural address), then the ugly, impotent, dislocated bodies and sad stories of the homeless poor, the remotely rural, the

⁶ Like *Ways of Dying*, his 1999 novel *The Heart of Redness*, which examines the contemporary legacies of the infamous Xhosa cattle-killing of the 1850s for a small rural village on the historic Cape frontier being drawn into capitalist postmodernity, is populated by variously marginal characters and geographies that seem increasingly out of place in the hegemonic narrative of national development. The political and aesthetic problem of representing such subaltern lives and histories—how to make them “speak”—is once again articulated through generic and temporal disjuncture: the novel’s contemporary plot, which we might call a sentimental romance of development, is repeatedly interrupted and interwoven by episodes that more strictly resemble historical novel, as the narrator recalls, with his characters, the events of that tragic and traumatic self-destruction. And again, as in *Ways of Dying*, this generic binary, and the political stalemate in which it is shown to result, is deconstructed, we might say, by the irruption into the narrative of a third genre form: the captivating power of wordless lyric.

⁷ “Just as the remnant of Israel signifies neither the whole people nor a part of the people but, rather, the non-coincidence of the whole and the part, and just as messianic time is neither historical time nor eternity but, rather, the disjunction that divides them, so the remnants of Auschwitz—the witnesses—are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved. They are what remains between them.” Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books (1999), 163–4.

immigrant illegals and other most marginal populations strike the jarring note of something “out of place” in the officially beautiful picture of transformed postcolony. Their suffering marks these figures as anachronistic residues of the old apartheid experience in the post-apartheid contemporary, while testifying critically to the failure of the new regime to deliver on its promise of social and economic transformation—the failure, that is, for the promised future-perfect to arrive.

Such failures, I will suggest, are articulated as *aesthetic* ruptures—breakdowns in the organizing unity imposed by national narratives of citizenship, belonging and self-possession over the imbalances and indignities of the past. At the same time, the “superfluous” populations of post-apartheid South Africa represent a crisis for what John and Jean Comaroff identify as the “ecology of nationhood”⁸: an inassimilable waste product that can neither be made productive use of nor efficiently eliminated from the system. They are literally and figuratively “out of place” in the contemporary order, offering a material and semiotic challenge to the attempt to consolidate and organize South Africa’s socio-political landscape, its national ecology.

The tension between the impetus toward order and unity represented in the national narrative, and the disorderly, deconstructing effects of these superfluous figures, is formally thematized by Mda through the generic contradictions between sentimental romance and historical novel, elements of which feature in *Ways of Dying* (and in other of his works, which will not be discussed here). In this novel, I will

⁸ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27:3 (Sept., 2001), 628.

suggest, the lyrical force of physical affect—the irruption of bodily emotion into the fictional narrative—signals and deconstructs this generic disjuncture and thereby marks some of the ways in which the politics of excess continue to challenge the ground of liberal citizenship in the new South Africa.

The South African “transition,” the period between the final breakdown of apartheid rule in the late 1980s and the instantiation of the new “democratic” government in 1994, thus represents in many ways a belated moment of messianic expectation, a time when the decay of the old raised both utopian hopes for a transformed society, *and* apocalyptic anxieties—on both sides—about the violent process by which this transformation, for good or ill, would take place. Certainly this was historically a tremendously violent period, with crime and political conflict spiraling well beyond the repressive capacities of the police and military, and random death stalking the streets of townships, the rapidly expanding urban “squatter camps,” city centers and rural hamlets alike.⁹

⁹ “More than fifteen hundred people were killed in the second half of 1990 alone. The scale of the violence was truly horrifying. On average the police collected eight bodies each day. Between June and October 1990 approximately 550 people died in a single township, all virtually on or around the infamous Khumalo Street in Tokoza. One hundred and forty-three people were killed in just one day.

Violence remained high until the first democratic election in 1994. About a thousand people died in 1991 and double that number the following year. The violence peaked in 1993, when more than two thousand people were killed in fighting. Thousands were injured or fled and were displaced. Thousands of houses were destroyed, and hostels were razed or severely damaged. Rail lines were uprooted, train stations burned down, and businesses firebombed. Massive damage was inflicted on the municipal infrastructure. Entire areas effectively became ‘no-go’ zones, especially near or around hostels. In Katlehong, the army eventually built a special road to the hostels at Buyafuthe and Kwesini so that residents could leave the area. The details are gruesome, and even the figures above are unreliable since the army admitted losing count of the bodies they found on morning patrols. Many were unceremoniously and anonymously buried or cremated.” Ivor Chipkin, “Nationalism As Such: Violence during South Africa’s Political Transition.” *Public Culture* 16(2): 315-335, p.317.

What Salman Rushdie called the “old gramsci chestnut” — the recognition that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born,” and the “morbid symptoms” that arise from this suspended time — pertained with material immediacy in transitional South Africa, which for many was experienced less as a moment of finding (to borrow Mda’s terms) “new ways of living” than as an everyday encounter with the endless variations on “ways of dying.” If newness was entering the world, it was experienced on the ground, from the point-of-view of the migrant or squatter camp, as an ever-expanding ruin, an exhausting parade of atrocities, funerals and everyday injustices. Toloki finds that “death and funerals continued to dog his way” (66), and his status as perpetual outsider means that he functions as a *witness* to these abject rituals. As a representative of all those who have been “taken out” of the political community, he is in Agamben’s terms a remnant, one who is neither fully alive nor dead but who stays alive, “so that he can mourn for the dead” (96).¹⁰ By turning this involuntary witnessing into a profession, a means of making a living, Toloki ironically illuminates the prosaic quality of such exceptional experiences: the way in which the necessities of survival demand even the renovations of creative productivity to be found in wanton destruction. As Agamben notes elsewhere, of other states and spaces of exception, the years between 1989 and 1994 were a context in which, simultaneously, anything seemed possible, and nothing

¹⁰ Agamben (1999), *ibid.*, 17.

seemed possible: a suspended time in which newness haunted the horizon but appeared, in many ways, wholly unattainable.¹¹

This experience of death as “ordinary” or prosaic, and the persistent contradiction between destruction and possibility, continuity and rupture, that characterized everyday experience of the transition, was seen to demand not only new forms of subjectivity and political organization, but also a new aesthetics, new modes of narrativizing and symbolically articulating not only the new conditions but also, most importantly, the crisis of historicism precipitated by this experience. Does “newness” come into the world as a *deus ex machina*, as Benjamin’s “divine violence,” something radically discontinuous with—and therefore potentially destructive of—the “ordinary” everyday that has gone before? Or, in a society where violence, destruction, death and indignity *are* the everyday, in which each turn on the streets of the city represents a potentially transformative encounter with radical alterity (to put things euphemistically), does “newness” instead represent a kind of *practice*, a way of engaging productively precisely with that everyday reality, and thus of turning the ruins and despairs of the past and present into the raw materials of the future?

We can identify Mda’s turn to fiction as a turn to *prosaics*, a term that critic Rita Barnard invokes to describe his novels’ interest in the ordinary and everyday.¹² Drawing on Bakhtin and his commentators, Barnard sees “prosaics” as a usefully ambiguous

¹¹ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 37.

¹² See Rita Barnard, “On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 37:3 (Summer 2004), 277-302.

term, signifying what she calls “a new kind of thinking about narrative (a *prosaics* as a counterpart to a *poetics*) and a new kind of thinking about the everyday, the customary, and the *ordinary*” (282). As she notes in passing, this conceptual conjunction is particularly relevant (as in fact Bakhtin himself insists) to a transitional context like the one Mda depicts: such periods of rapid historical change are “times when neither narrative form nor the form-shaping practices and ideologies of daily life can be taken for granted, but are, for this reason, matters of great importance” (282).

Bakhtin scholar Gary Saul Morson describes the term he coined as “first of all, a way of thinking about human events that focuses on the ordinary, messy, quotidian facts of daily life—in short, on the *prosaic*.”¹³ As the OED, once again, tells us, though, “prose” and the “*prosaic*” represent more than a descriptive mode: their common etymology invokes the *future*, suggesting a “turn forward” or a “rolling on,” a historicist form rooted in the present (the everyday) but looking toward tomorrow. This puts pressure on Morson’s definition, as Clare Cavanagh points out: “messiness” and the “ordinary,” the categories Morson associates with *prosaics*, are not synonymous, she recalls, but in fact contradictory, “ordinary” being rooted in “order,” not mess: it comes from the Latin *ordinare*, “to arrange.” The “ordinary” is therefore, like “economy”, fundamentally concerned with “*nomos*” or partition, organization—the law, rather than its breakdown.

¹³ Gary Saul Morson, “Prosaics: An Approach to the Humanities.” *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1988), 515-528 (516).

This question of the “ordinary” and its place in a time of revolutionary transformation, was a crucial concern in the world of South African letters at the time of Mda’s turn to fiction. As early as 1984, critic and author Njabulo Ndebele had argued for a critical reassessment of the role of national literature once the struggle against apartheid had freed writers of the moral and ideological responsibility to write “political” works. In his influential essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” Ndebele enjoins his colleagues to recognize the “unproclaimed heroism of the ordinary person,” to turn in their writing away from the “spectacularly” Manichean divisions and epic themes according to which protest literature has hitherto been organized, and to consider the more quotidian, everyday struggles and ethical dilemmas in which the majority of South Africa’s people are engaged.¹⁴ Anticipating the criticism of disengagement that was sure to be leveled against this argument, Ndebele insists that this attentiveness to “ordinary” lives, rather than turning away from properly political questions, will in fact represent a crucial element in the transformation of both material reality and “subjective capacit[ies]” (56) that the revolutionary movement was working to bring about. “If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa,” he affirms, “then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live” (55). While the macrocosmic sweep of revolutionary thinking—including its literature—was an essential component of the struggle, Ndebele reminds his audience that the work

¹⁴ Njabulo Ndebele, “Rediscovery of the Ordinary.” *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: Congress of South African Writers, 1991), 53.

of creating a new society depends for its success on a “disciplined and rigorous attention to detail” (57): the scale on which the new “ordinary” literature is to be composed.

In his reading of Ndebele, Ashraf Jamal emphasizes the temporal aspect of the “ordinary” understood as the quotidian. Perhaps paradoxically, in Jamal’s reading the ordinary represents *both* an engagement with the everyday *and* a mode of exceptional temporality in which linear time, developmental time, comes to a standstill. It is a moment between the time of revolution and the atemporal resolution of peacetime:

In keeping with a supplementary logic the ordinary emerges as that which is neither a call to arms nor a call for accord. Instead, as I understand it, the ordinary marks a call to *stillness*, a call for a time beyond the state of siege and unquenched longing, a time outside the riven and churning world.¹⁵

Whereas, in Jamal’s view, Ndebele fails to fully appreciate the “extraordinariness of the everyday” (96), the later critic’s Benjaminian reading of the “ordinary” emphasizes the radical potential that inheres in this temporality. Although this is in some respects an abject time, “a third space or a time of the now that is unrecorded, unheeded, and uncared for” (86), it simultaneously represents for Jamal an *ekstatic* time, a “fusion of the quotidian and the numinous” (100). Just as everyday life, particularly in a tumultuous context like transitional South Africa’s, is risky, unpredictable, and resistant to grand planning, “ordinary” time is one in which neither the past nor the future is fully determining or determined in advance. This future is inherent in the ordinary, but is—like everyday life itself—necessarily a matter of improvisation, performance, and negotiation: what Graham Pechey, invoking Bakhtin, calls “the many-

¹⁵ Ashraf Jamal, *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press; Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 85.

voiced discourse of an *ekstasis* which frees us from the future of hopes and fears and admits us to a sphere of 'unexpectedness', of 'absolute innovation, miracle' ..."¹⁶

There is therefore an intriguing ambiguity in this notion of the "ordinary" that inheres in the identification of Mda's work with the prosaic. It certainly represents, as Jamal and Pechey would have it, a radical openness to an unknown future, as well as a mode of practice, an orientation, that works to transform (as Ndebele intuits) both the material and subjective conditions through which experience is mediated. In this sense, and although he does not use the term, this orientation toward the "ordinary" greatly resembles the "third politics" that Homi Bhabha locates in the untranslatable, inassimilable presence, the irremediable Difference, of the migrant. In "How Newness Enters the World," Bhabha identifies migration and translation as metonymic of "historical transformation" more generally, with the experience of crossing borders (both physical and linguistic) representing a temporal as well as a spatial encounter. The experience of the migrant and the "space of translation" lie on the threshold of past and future, as well as of "here" and "there," displacement and belonging. They are "something else besides, in-between" (219). Theirs is, in other words, a fundamentally transitional status, a characteristic that helps us understand how Mda's protagonists, migrants from the country to the city or vice versa, are exemplary figures for the social and political transitions sweeping the nation as a whole. At the same time, these are

¹⁶ Graham Pechey, "The post-apartheid sublime: rediscovering the extraordinary." In *Writing South Africa : literature, apartheid, and democracy 1970-1995*, ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63. The citations are from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, tr. Vern W. McGee; ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 167.

profoundly marginal figures, out of place within the national order, who are represented—and who understand themselves—as the country’s ugly waste products: in every sense, they are “something else besides.”

Mda’s novels are therefore, in Bhabha’s terms, concerned with articulating the presence within the national space of “incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks” (219), and with showing how this presence disrupts not only the imagined smooth- and seamlessness of the nation-space, but also the cohesive synchrony—what Benedict Anderson identifies as the “simultaneity”¹⁷—of the national narrative. The squatter camp and other abject urban locations of *Ways of Dying*, and the historic rural frontier village in *The Heart of Redness*, are chronotopes that symbolically condense the temporal, geographical and political contradictions of nationhood in transitional South Africa. The foreign voices of the migrants, traditionalists, displaced peoples and other minorities who populate these spaces testify to their untranslatable, “ekstatic” superfluity. These voices—exemplified, as I will show, in the wordless, bodily outcries of lyrical song that punctuate both novels—articulate what Bhabha identifies as a fundamental breakdown in both the geography and temporality of nationhood (219), signifying a “sudden disjunction of the present” (217) that infuses the nationalist everyday with both unredeemed past and emergent future. The time of the migrant is a time of *survival*, an orientation of the present toward a future that is not based on a

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2003), 188 *et passim*.

“Utopian dream of modern progress” (226) but rather on the contingencies and necessities of getting by or making do.

Zakes Mda is deeply concerned with the status and function of the remnant, the useless or ugly, in cultural and political life, and his political and aesthetic philosophy turns, I suggest, on a notion of recycling that potentially offers a different mode of economy, ecology, aesthetics and historicism than either the “accumulated time” or the “messianic time” described by Benjamin. Newness, for Mda, enters the world through recycling—a mode of finding economic, ecological, symbolic and indeed aesthetic value, as Mda himself attempts to do, in the abject waste products of colonial and postcolonial modernity.

As an emblematic migrant figure, we find Toloki perpetually in motion, in transit from one uncertain, tenuous site to another, crossing or even violating borders as he roams the country, wandering from his birthplace in a remote rural settlement, through small *platteland* towns and on to the city (a journey that itself violates apartheid strictures against black urbanization). Once in the city, he continues to wander, from township to city center, shopping mall to squatter camp, sometimes choosing where he goes but more often forced to keep moving by the social, economic and indeed military logics that organize the flow of racial bodies across urban space. He is, willingly or unwillingly, a *flâneur* in the city he “loves” but which evidently has no love for him, a wanderer with no fixed destination or point of origin. His first home there, a shack in an illegal shanty town, was repeatedly bulldozed by the apartheid city planners and finally,

permanently, burned down by their vigilante collaborators, leaving him without even this most contingent place of belonging. Now the closest things he knows to a “home,” the places he sleeps at night and where he stores his meager possessions during the day, are themselves transitional zones: a bus station and a dockside waiting room. Even the dogs and “dirty” children of the shanty town regard him as a comically grotesque outsider, one whose appearance, pungent body odor and transient status mark his abjection even from the itself-abject space of the “informal settlement,” with its pools of dirty water and human waste (48-49).

Homeless, unemployed and effectively cast out even from his hereditary kinship community (which has, in any case, always regarded him as an “ugly” and “useless” child), this migrant has become, quite literally, “matter out of place” in the changing social space of the city. As Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger*, this being “out of place” is an excremental being, and certainly in Mda’s novel this association between dis/placement and dirt is carefully articulated. Toloki is, symbolically and indeed materially, associated throughout the novel with dirt—specifically, the dirt of the grave or the corpse. His mourning work is staged on a pile of earth “that will ultimately fill the grave” (16); an earlier job involved hiding in cemeteries “among marble tombstones” waiting to catch grave robbers (132), on one occasion being left for dead after confronting some thieves. In fact, his body itself has assumed some of the sensuous qualities of this association: despite the “sacred” perfume he so liberally applies, he still reeks of dirt and decay. “Just because your profession involves death,” Noria points out

gently, “it doesn’t mean that you have to smell like a dead rat” (98). The tattered costume he wears for his professional mourning jobs, moreover, resembles a Dracula outfit or at least an undertaker’s, further enhancing Toloki’s symbolic identification as a “living dead,” a revenant or an “angel of death,”¹⁸ one who refuses to stay in his proper place—which is to say, under the ground, in the dirt.

Once a purveyor of tasty meals to the city’s working class, Toloki has been transformed into its waste product, its excremental remnant. The novel suggests a view of the city as a vast digestive tract, with the “human waste” of squatters and other homeless figuring—quite self-consciously—as those who have been “chewed, and then spewed” (144). As we follow Toloki on his routes across the city, its contours are mapped according to a geography of consumption and its excremental consequences. In the upscale shopping mall, we see well-dressed citizens enjoying expensive meals as the eyes of the poor—Toloki’s, in this case—watch hungrily.¹⁹

The squatter camp, similarly, is the site of a political-symbolic conflict over food, when the settlement’s women are chastised by the men for feeding visiting dignitaries on bread and cabbage. Meanwhile, in his dockside waiting room, Toloki “feasts” alone on his “austere” meal of Swiss roll and green onions. Even at funerals, the “ranked strata” of society are coded through a differentiated geography and economy of consumption. At some funerals, especially in the squatter camps, mourners share

¹⁸ See Paola Splendore, “Vagrants and Angels of Death in Two Contemporary South African Novels.” In *Cross-cultural encounters: literary perspectives*, ed. Silvia Albertazzi and Claudia Pelliconi (Rome: Officina, 2005).

¹⁹ See of course Charles Baudelaire’s poem “The Eyes of the Poor,” from *Paris Spleen*, a work that, like Mda’s novel, considers the troubled connection between aesthetics and the economies of consumption in a modernist city.

equally in the samp and beef provided by the hosts. At others, “especially in the townships where there are better-off people,” diners are positioned differently, and receive more or less luxurious food, according to their relative “importance” (161). The “meat and rice people” are distinguished geographically and aesthetically, at individual houses of mourning as in the city—and indeed nation—space more broadly, from those who subsist on “pap and water” (174) or even less, with social and economic success being measured, as in the case of Nefolovhodwe, not only by the location of one’s house (in squatter camp, township, or white suburb) but also by one’s expanding waistline and ability to afford to give food away (125-129).

The close association developed throughout the novel between food and death, emblematically captured in Toloki’s ethnographic analysis of funeral meals, establishes a more general correspondence between consumption and destruction, pleasurable enjoyment and excremental decay—an idea that forms a thematic substrate for *Ways of Dying*.²⁰ The paradoxical productivity of death, in Toloki’s transitional society, is an extension of this connection: for mortuary entrepreneurs like Nefolovhodwe and Toloki himself, the destructive violence sweeping the country has become a source of profit and thus, to greater or lesser extents, of nutritional survival. More than survival, in fact—even Toloki can afford pleasurable extravagances like cake on days when funerals have been particularly plentiful or affluent.

²⁰ The spectacular (and ultimately devastating) destruction-through-consumption of cattle forms a similarly key element of his later novel *The Heart of Redness*. Through its exploration of the infamous “Xhosa cattle-killing” movement of the 1850s, this work considers, we might say, the long-term consequences, from the point of view of its victims, of Bataille’s celebrated sacrificial excess.

At the same time, the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the city's well-to-do, their wasteful consumption at the expense of the starving remainder, is seen as part of this destructive economy. Nefolovhodwe's "flea circus," which he plays with while the starving Toloki begs him for work, neatly symbolizes the parasitical exploitation that underwrites his suburban mansion and ballooning girth. He not only builds a financial empire on the cheap, mass-marketed "Collapsible Coffins" he invents, but eventually joins the grave-robbers in extracting surplus value from the grave itself, digging up his more extravagant "Nefolovhodwe De Luxe Special" coffins and reselling them to unsuspecting mourners. Money's ability to transmute "dead labor" into living value is here given chillingly literal form: Nefolovhodwe's wealth, like that of his privileged white neighbors, and the luxurious consumption it facilitates, is tainted not only by this condensed "dead labor," but also by the dirt of the graves in which apartheid's many victims lie rotting.

This excremental economy is, furthermore, fundamentally amnesiac, a feature that both predicates and helps reproduce the social and spatial aesthetics that segregate the city. After Nefolovhodwe humiliatingly refuses to recognize him as a "homeboy and a friend of my father's," Toloki "knew immediately that wealth had had the very strange effect of erasing from Nefolovhodwe's once sharp mind everything he used to know about his old friends back in the village" (129). Despite Toloki's pleas for help, the tycoon sends him away, refusing even to raise his eyes from his flea circus to look the

desperate man in the face. Once again, the politics of food mediate the amnesiac violence of exploitation:

Do you know how many miserable souls there are in this city? Millions! Do you think it is Nefolovhodwe's job to feed all of them? Go to the kitchen, and tell them that I say they must give you food. Then go away from here. I do need my peace, you know" (129)

A few months later, when Toloki has embarked upon his new career as professional mourner, he finds himself at the center of another uncomfortable encounter between hungry bodies and those who would rather forget them. Once again, this contradiction is given material shape in the organization of the city, and in Toloki's insistent wandering among its variously coded spaces. The shantytown and the shopping mall are both, though in different registers, sites and fields of desire for Toloki, as well as locations in which the exchange economies that constitute various social relations are illuminated and experienced most strongly. In the upmarket shopping mall, Toloki happens by accident upon a costume store near the food court where "genteel people" are enjoying their lunch. Spotting a "particularly beautiful costume" in the shop window, an outfit meant for Halloween but ideal, in his view, for his newly invented vocation as a professional mourner, Toloki negotiates with the shopkeeper but finds that he "could not afford [the costume] in a million years": "it was expensive, he was told, because it was made of very expensive material: silk and velvet" (26-7). Unable to attain the consumerist subjectivity that the spatial organization of the shopping mall has induced in him,²¹ Toloki returns every day and simply sits outside the store, gazing

²¹ See Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 157.

longingly at the impossible object, literally drooling with unsatiated desire (“inzincwe, the gob of desire” [27]).

The sight of this unsatisfied, leaking body disturbs the enjoyment of the restaurant clientele (“Who would want to eat our food while looking at the slimy saliva hanging out of his mouth?” [27]), perhaps reminding them all-too materially of the millions of unpleasured bodies that after all enable their luxurious enjoyment. In the face of such simple desires, and such profound lack, the excessive pleasures offered by fancy restaurants and upscale stores are themselves revealed as grotesque. The restaurants that are haunted by Toloki during these weeks represent the same sort of fantastic indifference to “reality” that is summoned by the adjacent store, where customers obtain costumes for plays “about worlds that did not exist any more...[or] world[s] that [n]ever existed...or fancy dress balls, or ... New Year carnivals” (26).

This juxtaposition is a powerful expression of the ways in which apartheid’s spatial orders, and the desires and satisfactions they enabled, helped entrench the “loss ... of the reality principle” that Johan van Wyk identifies as the psychic corollary of life in the South African “first world.”²² The restaurant owners eventually buy Toloki the costume in exchange for his promise that he will disappear from view, go back to his “place,” a deal to which he happily concedes despite his longstanding refusal of gifts or charity. Perhaps he sees his voluntary abjection as a kind of valuable labor deserving of payment (which, in some senses, we might suppose it is).

²² Johan van Wyk, “Catastrophe and beauty: *Ways of Dying*, Zakes Mda’s novel of the transition.” *Literator* 18:3 (Nov 1997): 79-90, 80.

Toloki's work of mourning is simultaneously a means of resisting the amnesiac erasure of the dead and the abject from the narrative of national consolidation, and a bold appropriation of such abjection as a basis for an alternative kind of ethical or social solidarity. His particular form of mourning, undertaken through the spectacle of wordless physical anguish, contrasts strikingly with the formal social rituals more customarily associated with funerals. The novel's first words are uttered by a funeral "Nurse," or designated orator, who is charged with relating the circumstances of the deceased's death and providing a narrative framework through which the event might be understood by those in attendance. Traditionally the last person to see the deceased alive, the Nurse functions as a mediator between life and death, and between the dead individual, his or her family, and the broader social community represented at the public funeral.

In the face of the increasingly random, violent and mysterious "ways of dying" of late-apartheid cities, however, the Nurse's role has become more akin to a witness, and even a detective, someone who puts the pieces of the puzzle together and frames each death with a coherent story. In one case, a woman who acts as Nurse at her brother's funeral "went out of her way to seek the truth about his death, and to hunt his corpse down when everyone else had given up" (17). The role of the Nurse, above all, is to be "faithful to the facts" (7).

The role of the funeral "Nurse," the speaker who describes the deceased's last days and the specifics of their death, is to organize these experiences into a linear

narrative, to give shape to the chaotic disorder of transitional society, and thus to assist the mourners in making sense of apparently random violence. Mda's narrative voice here has a similar function, for Toloki's and Noria's tragic lives—to give shape and order, and to render *prosaic* the fragmented and violent experiences through which they have suffered.

But Toloki himself, whose work as a professional mourner sets him in counterpoint to the more formal role of the funeral Nurse, quietly challenges the model of historicism on which these practices rest. If the Nurse's role is to facilitate *mourning*—that is, to enable a libidinal “letting-go” of the lost object—then Toloki works to keep memory alive, to faithfully and repetitively perform the experience of loss in such a way that it punctuates the present and disrupts the ordering labors of historians like the Nurse and even Mda himself. Here the work of mourning is explored through an encounter with the abject body itself, with a view of traumatic histories and memories as fragments of the past, Freud's “worthless fragments” of the everyday.

Toloki's model of mourning is affective, concerned less with epistemological precision than with capturing—and testifying to—the emotional impact that results from the loss. His performance helps “enhance the sadness and pain of the occasion” (134), making “moaning sounds of agony that were so harrowing that they affected all those who were within earshot, filling their eyes with tears” and provoking relatives into “a frenzy of wailing” (17). Rather than helping mourners let go of the dead person and of their feelings, that is, Toloki's work applies an affective glue that in fact prolongs

the connection between living and dead. His utterances therefore serve as an occasionally disruptive counterpoint to the potentially ordering (partitioning), analytical voice of the Nurse. His loud wails and the counter-spectacle offered by his performance atop the burial mound—activities that usually provoke unseemly laughter amongst the bemused onlookers—distract the mourners’ attention from the Nurse’s speech and thereby trouble the ordering effect of his or her attempt to “make sense” of otherwise unfathomable mortality. Toloki’s perch on the mound of earth establishes his close association with the corpses for which he mourns, an effect intensified by his Dracula costume and by his pungent body odor.

Even though Toloki also participates in the economy of death that enriches Nefolovhodwe, his attitude toward the body and its pleasures sets him apart from his gluttonous compatriot. Though he is not able to attain fully to their levels of spiritual “glamour,” Toloki models his persona as professional mourner on the Hindu *aghori sadhu*, who, he has heard, “cooks his food on the fires of a funeral pyre, and feeds on human waste and human corpses[, ... drinking] his own urine to quench his thirst” (15). Julia Kristeva observes in her *Powers of Horror* that “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection,”²³ and what we see in Toloki’s ambiguous “enjoyment” of the “tingling” effect created by his favored meal, cake and onions, is his attempt to claim his own abjection as a boundary-marker of social and

²³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

political belonging—what Kristeva identifies as the performance of *showing* others “what [they] permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3).

Where once he ardently desired the recognition and affectionate welcome of others, like his childhood companions or especially his father, he has now based his identity on his status as an outsider, one who is insistently out of place everywhere he goes. He refuses gifts and even companionship, setting himself apart from the social relations that he has come to view as based entirely on exploitation. The “aura of austerity” that he cultivates as part of his professional persona (15) involves not only the disavowal of consumption as a basis for subjectivity, but also the refusal of sensuous pleasure more generally, from erotic contact to stable housing.

Though he has only a superficial interest in these strictures as elements in the stylistics of austerity that he sees as appropriate to his profession, we can understand his sacrifice of personal pleasure to represent, more fundamentally, a kind of mortification, a performance of penance for his profitable instrumentalization of death and mourning. His hungry, unpleasured body, asleep on a bench in a waiting room he shares with a flatulent vagrant, forms a striking contrast to Nefolovhodwe’s corpulent shape, his luxurious mansion and well-stocked kitchen. As with asceticism more generally,²⁴ Toloki’s denial of bodily pleasures is also, significantly, a mnemonic device, an inscription of memory on the body and its appetites—the very things that drive Nefolovhodwe’s forgetting of his past and the obligations that derive from it. Toloki, we

²⁴ See Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

are told, “is not the type who forgives and forgets” (13), but his refusal to let go of the past is not simply resentment—it constitutes, we come to see, an ethics, a mode of economy, and even, the novel proposes, a politics. The question at hand concerns the connection between this ethics of memory and the politics of consumption and destruction that Toloki variously engages—and what this relationship has to tell us about the work of art itself in a everyday temporality like that of the transitional South Africa of Mda’s novel.

Toloki’s talent is to recognize the value, utility and even beauty of such fragments, the utopian possibility amidst the ruined landscapes of the city. The narrative frequently juxtaposes beauty with destruction or death, as when Toloki comes upon Noria, a “tall and graceful” “poppy-seed beauty,” sitting “in a rubble of charred household effects next to her burnt down shack” (50). The previous day, at Noria’s son’s funeral, the mourners’ departure was delayed by an encounter on the street with a wedding procession, “many cars and buses, all embellished with colourful ribbons and balloons” (10). Though protocol demands that the mourners receive precedence, the wedding guests refuse to give way: “We are a procession of beautiful people, and many posh cars and buses, while yours is an old skorokoro of a van, and hundreds of ragged souls on foot” (11). Only Toloki’s intervention, and the pungent persuasive power of his unwashed body, persuades the “beautiful people” to step aside.

This hierarchy that differentiates what Bakhtin calls a “*first world*” of beauty, order and “taste” from a “*second world*” of ugliness, mess and unwashed bodies, also of

course predicated the urban planning discourses and other dominant ideologies that organize city life under apartheid.²⁵ These hierarchies are carefully inscribed in the novel, where the shantytown's "dirty children" and unpaved streets (a "quagmire of dirty water and human ordure" [49]) contrast vividly with the elegant shopping malls and manicured gardens of the city center. These spaces are, nevertheless, connected by Toloki's wanderings through and across the city that he "loves" (45) and in which he feels a proprietorial sense of belonging, despite his transient status.

If some insist that these fragments (like the human remainders of apartheid who bear bodily witness to these traumas) must be bracketed—that is, buried, mourned, and affectively detached—in order to turn the country's narrative "forward," Toloki's aesthetics suggest that, on the other hand, there might and should be a way to bring them into the prosaic economy of the transitional everyday, to "make use" of them in productive, rather than stultifying ways.

In the face of recurrent failure and the defeat of his grandly productive ambitions to make a living for himself in the hostile city, his new profession exemplifies Toloki's creative capacity to "make do" with his circumstances, no matter how apparently bleak.²⁶ He is a "survival entrepreneur", one who paradoxically finds productive value in the economies of death and mourning that increasingly typify South African daily

²⁵ Discussing the history of urban planning in South Africa, C. M. Rogerson observes that slums, squatter camps and other "informal" settlements, "stereotyped as unsightly, unsanitary or dangerous" (163), conflict with city planners' "visions of a 'city beautiful'" (163). C. M. Rogerson, "The absorptive capacity of the informal sector in the South African city." *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and social change in South Africa*, ed. David M. Smith (New York & London: Routledge, 1992).

²⁶ See Michel de Certeau, "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics." *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

life. This paradox is framed in the novel in terms of the difference between “ways of dying” and “ways of living”: not only the *manner* of one’s death or life, that is, but which of these (foreclosure or possibility, the past or the future) ultimately organizes and determines individual and collective identity.

Though their relationship as children had become somewhat antagonistic, after the beautiful and talented Noria began to rival Toloki for his father’s affections, the couple discovers that they now share a tragic familiarity with death, marginalization and exploitation. This is represented, however, not in terms of shared trauma but rather as a common experience of *survival*, of *living on*—an identification that paradoxically serves as the basis for a tentatively renewed intimacy. Recognizing that each has a capacity for teaching the other “how to live” and, most importantly, how to appreciate the beauty and potential of even the ugliest aspects of everyday life, Noria and Toloki establish a fragile new family, platonically sharing the shack they built together of iron and wood salvaged from the dockyards and serving as surrogate parents and teachers for the orphaned children of the informal settlement.

Toloki’s status as an artist—in addition to his theatrical work, his talents include drawing and interior design—intensifies the novel’s consideration of the political and cultural importance of aesthetics, specifically in a context, like transitional South Africa, where the lines between beauty and ugliness, utility and waste, order and disarray, are so starkly and often violently drawn. His *economical* ability to turn refuse into valuable building materials, home decor, community, and even a professional career—the

epitome of Michel de Certeau's "making do" or what is known in francophone contexts as "*débrouillardise*," getting by²⁷—identifies him as a skilful recycler, a creative scavenger with a knack for recognizing and injecting added value into the fragments and remainders of modern urban life. He not only helps Noria rebuild her shack with scavenged materials but brings old furniture store catalogs and back issues of *Home & Garden* magazines to decorate the walls, along with flowers he finds along the city streets of the CBD. Plastering the walls with "pictures of ideal kitchens," living rooms, bedrooms and gardens, Toloki creates a "wallpaper of sheer luxury," a dream-world of comfort and convenience through which he and Noria wander in their imaginations.

In scenes like these, Toloki brings together economy (and, we might say, a kind of urban *ecology*) with aesthetic production, adding value through imaginative labor to the "ugly" or otherwise disposable refuse that adorns the *mise-en-scene* of his daily life at the margins of the mainstream economy and society. Here his prosaic skills are revealed, as he not only attends to his "messy" surroundings but finds a way, through artistic labor, to "order" these fragments of the ordinary, to turn them into something *beautiful* as well as useful. This is achieved, moreover, without the kind of destructive aesthetic or political partitioning that resulted in the fiery consumption of Noria's son and her original shack: whereas these economies, like the apartheid order from which they arose, depended on tightly-policed boundaries whose trespass marked violators as disposable outsiders, Toloki's aesthetic economy is by contrast predicated on openness

²⁷ See Richard D. E. Burton, "Débrouya pas péché; or, Il y a toujours moyen de moyenner: Patterns of Opposition in the Fiction of Patrick Chamoiseau." *Callaloo* 16:2 (1993): 466-81.

to the unexpected, to the beautiful potential of random combination. He accepts the stack of catalogs and magazines that their owners are able to spare, without concerning himself about any specific content; he takes the pieces of plastic and metal that he is fortunate enough to find at the dockyards, and manages to create a beautiful and useful object with the materials he encounters. His gift to Noria is not only the magnificently decorated shack he helps her construct, but more importantly the gift of teaching her to find beauty and utility in, precisely, the *given*: in the material refuse and abject landscapes of the everyday. The neighbors come, we are told, to

witness the wonder that grew in the night. They marvel at the workmanship and at how the plastic and canvas of different colours have been woven together to form patterns that seem to say something to the viewer. No one can really say what their message is, except to observe that it is a very profound one" (68).

The aesthetic "pleasure" that Toloki provides as his gift to Noria and to her neighbors thus represents a kind of economical consumption that is not ultimately destructive, an enjoyment or "use" that does not result in a loss but rather, in fact, a kind of social profit that exceeds the limited value of the materials involved.

In this, his recycling aesthetic contrasts strikingly, once again, with the other kinds of "pleasure" that are depicted in the novel. As a child, Noria was renowned for "giving pleasure" to the villagers with her infectious laugh, on which we are told they "happily feasted" (31). As a result, Toloki—an "ugly" child who rarely laughs—was cheated of the attention that was lavished on his playmate. Later, her beautiful singing voice, with its monotonous, "never-changing" and "meaningless" song (29), "gives pleasure" to Toloki's father Jwara, the village blacksmith, who is inspired into a frenzy

of artistic creation when she sings, but is wholly incapable of producing art when she is absent. In exchange, he showers her with gifts of food and clothing while Toloki and his mother go hungry. As she gets older, Noria learns, in the narrator's account, that "her influence came from her ability to give others pleasure. She could give or withhold pleasure at will, and this made her very powerful" (72). Inevitably, perhaps, the "pleasures" she eventually sells, now in exchange for hard cash, are the bodily delights enjoyed by bus-drivers and conductors and boys from the town. By her teenage years, Noria's "pleasure" has thus been fully established as a commodity to be exchanged in an economy organized around other such commodities: she "takes things from men" who take things from her.

As Noria's tragic story ultimately demonstrates, however, such exchanges always involve a destructive loss, albeit a loss that is deferred or displaced. The fate of Noria's son Vutha, the illegitimate product of her "giving pleasure" to undeserving young men, provides a grim reminder of the ways in which unrestrained consumption represents a kind of death drive—a point that Mda develops throughout this and other novels.

Stolen away to the city by his alcoholic father, where they barely subsist as homeless beggars, Vutha eventually starves to death, chained to a pole while his father is off drinking, and his abandoned body is partially eaten by stray dogs. Napu, his derelict father, dives deliriously into a sewage dam and drowns, a strikingly appropriate

fate for a man whose life has been given over to the pleasures of bodily consumption without an economical awareness of their material consequences.

Noria's second son, also named Vutha (which means "fire"), who was conceived immaculately without erotic pleasure (and indeed without any physical contact), is also tragically consumed by the deadly economies of pleasure and pain that constitute South African urban life. Lured by the promise of meat and other food to betray the settlement's activists to their ideological enemies, the five-year-old is ruthlessly "necklaced" and burned to death by his young comrades.

Now, Noria excepts herself completely from economies of exchange that put her in a position of debt or obligation. Though she is still young and physically strong, she does not work in the city, but instead volunteers at a "dumping ground" for the settlement's orphaned or abandoned children, and subsists on communal meals and goods for which she barter her services. She "does not take things from men," she reminds Toloki repeatedly, a position that he sympathizes with because of his own proud refusal to accept gifts or charity—especially food—no matter how desperate his need. His "gifts" to Noria of food and flowers, as well as time, kindness, creative energy, salvaged raw materials and money, and which she regards as "sacrifices" (58), are mutually understood to be genuine gifts, without obligation, even though Noria insists that she will eventually pay him back.

As "home-boy" and "home-girl," the two have an existing relationship—a history—that exceeds the exchange economy through which strangers, like Noria and

her wealthy suitor, Shadrack, mediate their encounters. Historical consciousness here facilitates and indeed necessitates an ethical awareness and a responsibility for the other who shares that history: an ethics that underwrites a certain politics. Just as neighbors in the informal settlement are “like two hands that wash each other” (69), Toloki and Noria’s literal “washing” of one another’s bodies and souls, depicted in a movingly sensual scene late in the novel, represents a model of intimacy that is not based on consumption or the instrumentalization of bodies, living or dead, for pleasurable enjoyment. Instead, the circulation of pleasure without “use” – through, for instance, art education – and the creation of aesthetic pleasure through recycling from “useless” objects and bodies, serves as Mda’s model for political possibility and genuine democratic sociality. The language of “washing,” both metaphorical and literal, to describe mutually sustaining relationships in the squatter camp further emphasizes the ways in which such relationships restore order and dignity to those designated as “waste” or dirt – matter out of place – by the formal urban order. The physical, bodily pleasure of washing, as described in this scene, is simultaneously (and, for the Kantian model, paradoxically) an aestheticizing gesture, an emblematic attempt to create beauty from the damaged and stinky matter cast off by urban modernity.

Ways of Dying is therefore deeply concerned with the question of a usable past – of the value and significance of memory, mourning and material residues for the political, subjective and aesthetic projects of the contemporary. The temporal disjunctions of the plot, between the *present-tense narrative* and the *past-tense flashbacks*,

are seemingly reconciled at novel's end, when Toloki is the surprised recipient of his father's "inheritance": hundreds of "strange and sinister-looking" (210) iron figurines that Jwara had forged during his sessions with Noria. Though the figurines seem "useless" and even "ugly" to Toloki and his mother (and, it must be said, to would-be thieves), they prove to have some value as commodities on the modern art market, where their rural anachronism is variously regarded as "kitsch" or "folksy." As marketable commodities, Toloki's inheritance therefore offers an unexpected possibility of future financial security for the couple and their neighbors.

But more important, from their point of view, is the surprising ability of the figurines to "give pleasure" to the settlement's children, who are so fascinated and delighted by them that they fall to the ground laughing. Toloki even suggests that they could alternatively construct a sort of informal museum (what he calls a "big shack") to house the figures, keeping them nearby to "bring happiness and laughter to the children," who "could come and laugh whenever they felt like it" (211). Once again, we see him speaking up for pleasure beyond exchange, offering a sacrificial gift of communal enjoyment whose value exceeds even the immediacy of material necessities like food and shelter.

The figures, which Jwara forged from "idle piece[s] of iron" left over from his work shoeing horses, and which represented the "strange creatures" who visited him in his dreams (30) (recall that Freud called dreams the "remains of the day...worthless

fragments of daily life"²⁸), are thus both literal and symbolic corollaries of Toloki himself, and indeed of all the "ragged souls" (11) and grotesque, earthly bodies for whom he "speaks" with his wails and funereal groans. At the novel's tentatively optimistic conclusion, these "ugly," "grotesque" and "useless" objects, buried for decades in the ruins of their respective sites and actively dismissed as a waste of time and resources, are "excavated," recuperated, and restored to their rightful place of economic and cultural significance, coming, through their association with pleasure and creativity, to offer hopeful, if highly provisional models for future "ways of living" – if an appropriate place can only be found to house them.

The prosaic philosophy that generates the political and aesthetic vision of *Ways of Dying*, and according to which Toloki organizes his "ways of living," can therefore be seen as a mode of recycling, in which the "ordinary" objects, experiences, bodies and relationships that constitute the past and present find renewed value, significance and *purposiveness*. But there is of course more than one kind of value, as there are many "ways of living," and the novel ultimately complicates the idea of recycling and the prosaic itself on which it has (in the reading I have just given) predicated its account of value. This complication emerges, I will conclude by suggesting, through the formal and generic complexity of the novel itself, an arrangement through which Mda looks to represent and interrogate some of the competing models of value and temporality that underwrite variously available forms of political imagination in transitional South

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4-5.

Africa. In the end, the novel offers us a way of making use of the past, and of helping newness enter the world, a mode of national solidarity that draws inspiration from the logic of the gift, rather than resting on the contract model of the social and the exchange relations on which this model relies.

As we have already seen, *Ways of Dying* is organized by a contradictory temporality, with its present-tense, contemporary romance plot interrupted regularly by past-tense “flashbacks” that describe the characters’ variously traumatic histories. These flashbacks, whose tragic stories punctuate and delay the linear progression of Toloki’s and Noria’s growing affection for each other, are narrated in the *past tense*, setting them off from and interrupting the unwavering *present tense* of the main plot’s transitional everyday. Often provoked by the funerals that Toloki attends, the flashback sequences depicting dispossession, displacement, and the desperate struggle for survival represent the traumatic history with which contemporary South Africans must grapple even as they work to imagine a better future.

This generic disjuncture can also be read, however, as a formal correlative of the way in which Mda’s novels interrogate the narrative of national unity that was, even in 1991, assuming hegemonic authority. In his *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti identifies the novel as “the symbolic form of the nation-state.”²⁹ Specifically, for our purposes, he proposes that the novel functions, in the European eighteenth- through nineteenth centuries, as a key ideological tool in the work of identifying and effacing the internal differences and divisions that complicated the process of national consolidation.

²⁹ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (New York & London: Verso, 1998), 20.

More significantly even than external borders, such internal boundaries, with the local identifications and loyalties they delineate, represent obstacles to the national project and the homogeneous contemporaneity on which it depends. At these frontiers, Moretti notes, “the non-contemporaneity of European countries becomes inescapably visible” (39)—particularly in those countries, like England and France, that have undergone especially rapid development.

Whereas other national-symbolic forms, like anthems and monuments, work to conceal such divisions beneath a monologic narrative of unity, the novel “not only does not conceal the nation’s internal divisions, but manages to turn them into a story” (20). It invokes this unevenness, that is, only in order ultimately to abolish it (40). The novel is, in other words, in such contexts an *ordering* apparatus—one whose prosaic form facilitates the “incorporation of the internal periphery into the larger unit of the state: a process that mixes consent and coercion” (40).

Drawing on Bakhtin’s claim that “it is ... the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions,” Moretti describes how novels translate the unevenness of political geography in a new nation into generic disjuncture.³⁰ The exemplary genre of this process in the European context is the historical novel, which Moretti describes as offering a veritable “phenomenology of the border” and of the struggles between local and national identities that are staged there (35).

³⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope.” *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, 84-5. Cited in Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, 35.

This chronotopic contradiction, the “national deconstruction”³¹ effected by the persistent presence of bodies and spaces “out of place” in the political order, is represented in *Ways of Dying* in terms of a contradiction between prose narrative and bodily sound. The novel’s prosaic order is interrupted regularly by aural interjections that serve no signifying function but which simultaneously disrupt and intensify the “ordinary” continuity of the text. For example, while the “Nurse” or orator at public funerals offers a narrative account of “how the [deceased] saw his death,” Toloki does his mourning work through bodily sound and gesture: sobs, wails, swaying and groans whose specific qualities are tailored to the circumstances of each particular funeral. At one funeral for victims of sectarian violence, for example, where he gives a particularly “virtuoso performance,” he

groans, and wails, and produces other new sounds that he has recently invented especially for mass funerals with political overtones. These sounds are loosely based on chants that youths utter during political rallies. But Toloki has modified them, and added to them whines and moans that are meant to invoke sorrow and pain (108).

Toloki’s performance expresses, as the Nurse’s “ordering” narrative cannot, the physical anguish and loss experienced by survivors, their material suffering and singular encounter with the generalized economy of death that organizes life in the shantytowns. This inexpressible singularity is honored by his performance even as its very theatrics, its comically spectacular appearance, seemingly deconstructs the individuality of that experience.

³¹ Michael J. Shapiro, “Aesthetics of Disintegration: Allegiance and Intimacy in the former ‘East Bloc’.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, February 28, 2007. p.4

However, just as Toloki sees his profession as a spiritual and ethical vocation, a way of honoring the dead while comforting the living, a *way of life* rather than just a *way of making a living*, his bodily expression of grief is not wholly theatrical: the grief he portrays is, in many ways, deeply and honestly felt. The non-signifying sounds and physical movements represent his close identification with both the dead and those who live on after them, his attempt to take them within himself and to return them to themselves in an ethical gesture that consolidates a social bond, more profoundly than either the Nurse's "prosaic" narrative or the communal meal, with its complicated hierarchies, ever could.

Other sounds punctuate the narrative too: the "moans and screams" of Toloki's past lovers, who live on in his memory only through these "breathless sounds", these traces of pleasure, long after he has forgotten their faces and names. Laughter, of course, also pervades the novel, whether joyful or mocking (an important trope, though one I won't be able to develop here.) Similarly, we recall Noria's "meaningless song," which inspires Jwara's artistic energies and later stimulates Toloki to a frenzied climax of beautiful drawing. Possessed by her voice, and finally able to draw the human figures that have always eluded him, Toloki

breathes heavily with excitement, and his palms are clammy. His whole body tingles, as he furiously gives shape to the lines on the paper. His breathing reaches a crescendo that is broken by an orgasmic scream. This leaves him utterly exhausted. (199)

The "orgasmic scream" itself expresses the bodily effort that comes from artistic production, as well as the ambiguously aesthetic/erotic "pleasure" derived by both artist

and spectator from the process. The passers-by who stop to view Toloki's drawings are once again struck by their unspeakable "purposiveness": "they say that the work has profound meaning [though] they cannot say what the meaning is" (200).

As in this scene, each episode of such bodily sound is experienced—by the characters and narratively—as a moment of exception, a time when time stands still and listeners seem "possessed" (30) or cast into a dream-state by the haunting sound. They can thus be associated more generally with the strange and "exceptional" temporality of transition.

I suggest that we can read these irruptions of sound as moments of generic difference, when the prosaic order of the novel is interrupted by *lyric*. Though Bakhtin famously deplored the confining form and solipsistic monologism of lyric poetry, as opposed to prose narrative's heteroglossic freedom, lyric—as song—is originally a communal gesture, one that expresses, in some critics' views, the poetic impulse itself. As Clare Cavanagh argues, for example, "lyrics embody neither chaos, nor order, but precisely what Bakhtin calls 'the form-shaping force' that catalyzes creativity both in daily life and in art, and that coincides with the 'craving for the creation of form' that [represents] the impulse generating all poetry."³² At the same time, she points out, the lyric—and she seems to mean *modernist* lyric particularly—accommodates and addresses the moments when form fails, when traumatic wounding, loss, misunderstanding or confusion undermine the capacity of language to signify in a meaningful way. The

³² Clare Cavanagh, "The Forms of the Ordinary: Bakhtin, Prosaics and the Lyric." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 41:1 (Spring, 1997), 40-56. p.42

“immediate grief” of funerals, like the anguish of transition, “comes [she notes] not from a feeling of conclusion, but from a wrenching sense of incompleteness: unfulfilled potentials, words unspoken, conversations left forever unfinished” (52).

While Toloki can now never speak directly to the father who could never appreciate his “beautiful spirit,” he finds a way, through Noria’s song, to identify physically with Jwara, to be possessed by the song and to cry out in his father’s voice (that is, *allegorically*), and thus to forge a kind of ethical connection that prepares him to accept his “inheritance” of the figurines. By inhabiting and giving voice to the indelible gap between living and dead, past and present *but also* present and future, the lyrical sounds of Mda’s novel offer a model of historicism that manages to avoid melancholy, allowing its characters to envision and step tentatively, together, toward the future.

The bodily outcries that signal the lyrical turn in *Ways of Dying* are therefore powerful re-insertions of the material world—and particularly its excremental remainders—into the prosaic narrative of the South African transition. Interrupting what could be seen as the nationally allegorical unity of fiction, Mda offers the disjunctures and ambiguities of modernist lyric. As Paul de Man suggests of Baudelaire, who was himself deeply concerned with the challenges of expressing the crisis of subjectivity precipitated by the ruined modernist city, lyrical voice here no longer represents “the expression of a unity between the work and the empirical person,” a unity the romantic lyricists, for example, tried to achieve (cited 172). “Ultimately,” de

Man writes of modernist lyric, “the function of representation is entirely taken over by sound effects without reference to any meaning whatever” (172).

These lyrical moments not only articulate the unfulfilled yearnings and unmourned losses of the past, but also mark a tentatively Utopian turn. Formed through the confrontation between desire and reality, Mda’s utopian vision—the surprising hopefulness of a novel about despair—highlights the disjuncture between excremental reality and imaginative freedom that Marxist critic Hugh Grady, for one, associates with the lyric mode.³³ Protesting against what Adorno called the “reification of the world,” a process we see being enacted in *Ways of Dying*, lyric “creates the dream of a world in which things would be different” (58, cited 199).

Suggesting a mode of value that does not depend (like commodity exchange) on signification or realism, but one more closely associated, like Toloki, with the riskiness of the *gift*, these moments of lyrical exception provide a ground for a different kind of politics than the one represented by the party bigwigs who visit Noria’s squatter camp, or the young activists who zealously murder her “sellout” son. The party’s leaders urge Noria to remain silent about her son’s death, offering her private consolation instead of the public apology she was promised, and feast on the bread and cabbage prepared by the settlement’s women while flashing their Mercedes Benzes and elegant clothing.

While theirs is fundamentally an *amnesiac* model of historicism, in other words, and a politics based solidly on alienated representation and a mode of speaking that

³³ Hugh H. Grady, “Notes on Marxism and the Lyric”. *Contemporary Literature* 22:4 (Autumn 1981), 544-555, p. 551.

entrenches a gap between public and private discourse, Toloki's lyrical, bodily identification with other people, whether strangers (as at his funerals), living or dead, or intimate familiars, and his performative gesture of speaking *in their voices* (rather than speaking *for* them), destabilizes the notion of identity and its narrative ground on which these hegemonic models of politics depend. History is neither forgotten nor reified but *recycled*, made into something strange and new that bears the physical traces of its mediation through the contemporary artist's body, its *purposive* appropriation.

Though the recycling through which Toloki constructs his world represents in one sense a strongly *economical* and *ecological* approach to the material conditions of life, I therefore want to end by suggesting that it is at the same time a practice that exceeds these paradigms. The mode of valuation that facilitates recycling—whether of material refuse or the “trash of history”—sees such materiality, such *givenness* or *pastness*, as valuable, even beautiful, but not determining: that is, as simultaneously (and constitutively) “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” At a period in South Africa's history when the everyday was itself exceptional, and when the question of how to make productive use of the remainders of apartheid was most pregnantly in play, *Ways of Dying* offers one strikingly beautiful, lyrical suggestion for how newness might come into the world.

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