OF WORLDS AND ARTWORKS

A Relational View on Artistic Practices from Africa and the Diaspora

Ute Fendler, Marie-Anne Kohl, Gilbert Shang Ndi, Christopher Joseph Odhiambo and Clarissa Vierke

BRILL

AFRICA MULTIPLE

Of Worlds and Artworks

Africa Multiple

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORAS

VOLUME 3

The titles published in this series are listed at *brill.com/afmu*

Of Worlds and Artworks

A Relational View on Artistic Practices from Africa and the Diaspora

Edited by

Ute Fendler
Marie-Anne Kohl
Gilbert Shang Ndi
Christopher Joseph Odhiambo
Clarissa Vierke

BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

The publication of this book was made possible through the financial support of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence.

This edited volume is the outcome of research conducted within the project "Multiple Artworks—Multiple Indian Ocean" that is part of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under Germany's Excellence Strategy (EXC 2052/1–390713894).

Cover illustration: Fishermen and the fish bone, Morjim Beach, Goa, India, 2015. Photo by Subodh Kerkar. (This photo is a part of a series of 'performance installations' on the subject 'Fishermen and the Ocean', in which the inseparability of the fishermen and the ocean is explored.)

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at https://catalog.loc.gov

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 2772-7157
ISBN 978-90-04-68974-9 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-04-68975-6 (e-book)
DOI 10.1163/9789004689756

This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

Contents

Figures

Notes on Contributors

Thierry Boudjekeu
is a doctoral student in Francophone studies, focusing on Trauma and the Slave Trade in Francophone Africa. He works as a research associate for the "Black Atlantic Revisited" project and is a Junior Fellow at BIGSAS, University of Bayreuth. His research interests include Francophone African literature, postcolonial trauma studies, and UNESCO's memory and heritage studies.

Elena Brugioni
is associate professor in Comparative Literature, with focus on African literatures and Postcolonial theory, at the Department of Literary Theory of the University of Campinas UNICAMP, and lecturer at the Graduate Program in Literary Theory and History of Unicamp. She publishes and develops research in the fields of comparative literatures, African literatures, Indian Ocean studies, Postcolonial theory and world-literature.

Chinelo Enemuo
is an urbanist, creative artist, and design educator. She founded Nelen in 2016 to engage Nigerian talents in transitioning from collective ideation to tangible, viable and positive outcomes. Nelen works by forming partnerships with various artists to genuinely capture Nigerian (African) realities through the creative agency of art. Currently living in the UK, Chinelo is relaunching Nelen as a digital offering, penning new stories and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Ute Fendler
is chair "Romance Literary and Comparative Studies" since 2006, since 10/2018 co-director of the Cluster of Excellence "Africa Multiple" Current Research Projects: 2019–2024: "Black Atlantic Revisited" – African and South American UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Kumari Issur
is associate professor at the University of Mauritius, a member of the department of French Studies since 1994. She is a research associate of the research centre DIRE (Déplacements, Identités, Regards, Ecritures) at Université de La Réunion since 2000. She is co-founder and coordinator of ReGIOSH (Research Group for Indian Oceanic Studies in the Humanities) at the University of Mauritius since 2018. She is a member of the research team "Multiple Artworks, Multiple Indian Ocean" of the Cluster of Excellence "Africa

Multiple" at Bayreuth University since 2019. Her research interests include Francophone literature, slave & indenture literature, myths and legends of the Indian Ocean, globalisation, transculturalism, Hindustani cinema and oceanic humanities.

Marie-Anne Kohl
holds a tenure-track position in Historical Musicology (with a special focus on mobility, (forced) migration and cultural transfer) at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. She is member of the Cluster of Excellence Africa Multiple at the University of Bayreuth, where she also worked as research associate and managing director of the Research Institute for Music Theatre (fimt) up to 2023.

Samuel Ndogo
is alumnus of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), University of Bayreuth, Germany, where he graduated with a PhD in African Literature. Currently, he is a senior lecturer at the Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages and Film Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Moi University, Kenya. His research interests include literary theory, literatures in African languages, popular and cultural studies, translation, aesthetics and performance. His other research interests include life writings (auto/biographical writings), prison narratives, diaspora and postcolonial studies.

Christopher Joseph Odhiambo
is professor of Literature and Applied Drama/Theatre at Moi University's Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages and Film Studies. He is spokesperson for Arts and Aesthetics at the Africa Cluster Centre Moi University and the National Chairman, Kenya National Drama and Film Festival Committee. He is an arts adjudicator and facilitator. He has written and directed plays and has published widely in the fields of LITERATURE, APPLIED DRAMA/THEATRE, POPULAR CULTURE AND FILM.

Michaela Ott
is professor emeritus of aesthetic theories at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg/Germany and associated member of the DFG-Research Cluster *Africa Multiple* at the University of Bayreuth/Germany, research section 'Arts and Aesthetics'. Her main research topics are (post)structualist philosophy, aesthetics of non-Western art practices, theories of space, affection and dividuation, questions of artistic knowledge, biennial research, researches in (post)colonial questions, in African film and art.

Sophie Lembcke
is a Junior Fellow in the Cluster of Excellence Africa Multiple at the University of Bayreuth and a PhD candidate at BIGSAS (Bayreuth Graduate School of African Studies). She is part of the collective artistic direction of the Berliner Ringtheater, where she is engaged in experimental performance art and the design of power-critical spaces.

Gilbert Shang Ndi
is a fellow of the Cluster of Excellence - Africa Multiple, University of Bayreuth, working on the Project: Black Atlantic Revisited: African and South American UNESCO-World Heritage Sites and "Shadowed Spaces" of Performative Memory and a member of the Young Colleague Programme of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Bayreuth in Germany (2014), where he recently completed his Habilitation (2022). In addition to monographs and book chapters, his articles have appeared in peer-reviewed journals.

Peter Simatei
is a professor of Comparative Literature. He teaches African literature, African DRAMA, DIASPORA STUDIES, AND AFRICAN CINEMA in the Department of Literature, Theatre & Film Studies at Moi University, Kenya. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Bayreuth, Germany and works in the broad fields of postcolonial studies, Anglophone literatures, diaspora studies, and popular culture and he has published widely in these fields.

Duncan Tarrant
is a research associate in the Cluster of Excellence: Africa Multiple, as well as a Swahili Lecturer at the University of Bayreuth and translator. His PhD research focusses on Swahili Poetic Imaginaries in Zanzibar and Oman. Duncan completed his MA in African Language Studies in 2019; his MA Thesis focused on Form and Social Concerns in Contemporary Swahili Poetry.

Clarissa Vierke
is professor of Literatures in African Languages at the University of Bayreuth. She is an expert of Swahili poetry, Islamic manuscript cultures and has been publishing on texts travelling the Indian Ocean to East Africa – both in Anglophone Kenya and Tanzania and Lusophone Mozambique. Together with colleagues working on Francophone and Lusophone literature and film, she is currently running a research project on literary entanglements in the Indian Ocean across boundaries of nations, languages and media. She is principal investigator of the Cluster of excellence "Africa Multiple. Reconfiguring African Studies" and the spokesperson of the research section Arts and Aesthetics.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Ute Fendler, Marie-Anne Kohl, Gilbert Shang Ndi, Christopher Joseph Odhiambo, and Clarissa Vierke

> … in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.[1]

The present volume brings together contributions which explore artworks – in a broad sense, including literature, visual arts, film and performances – as dynamic sites of worlding. As the form of the verbal noun "worlding" (rather than "world") already suggests, it puts emphasis on the processes of creating or doing worlds, implying interaction and movement as opposed to static geographical delineations and the boundary drawing of area studies. For Heidegger, world is first of all "to world"; existence is being in the world. Worlding puts an emphasis on the constant performative construction of worlds. While the performative notion of "world" is already part of Heidegger's concept of existence as "being in the world," as Michaela Ott surmises in her contribution, poststructuralist critics have explored Heidegger's worlding with an emphasis on entering into relations (different from being). In line with the cluster Africa Multiple's notion of multiplicity, "world" does not presuppose any fixed, coherent unit, a pristine and ontologically anchored reality; and Africa is not a neatly defined world with clear-cut boundaries.[2]

From a point of multiplicity, "world" encapsulates a myriad network of relational poles and subjectivities as well as contingent possibilities: there are many and constantly changing ways of being in the world and shaping it. The

1 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 20.

2 The edited volume builds on a workshop organized by the Research Section Arts and Aesthetics titled "Of Worlds and Artworks,", which was held at both the Research Institute of Music Theater Studies (Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater, styled "*fimt*") in Thurnau as well as at the Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth University from February 10 to 14, 2021. The Research Section is part of the DFG (German Research Foundation) funded Cluster "Africa Multiple. Reconfiguring African Studies" situated at the Bayreuth University in Germany and the Africa Multiple centers at the University of Lagos, the Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Rhodes University in Makhanda (South Africa), and Moi University in Eldoret (Kenya).

world continuously comes into being in a multiplicity of its interrelated versions. In her artist essay, Chinelo Enemuo renarrates the parable of the blind men and the elephant (which stands for "world" in her search for an analogy), where the men, describing the creature from different vantage points, come to different and contradictory but also connected conclusions.

From such a processual perspective, Africa accordingly is not a delineated area, defined by a fixed set of traits, but emerges in a variety of relations, which can reach across the continent, but also the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic or Europe. This emphasis on transnational relations creates synergies with the postcolonial and decolonial motivation of unearthing subversive and hybrid registers, and critiquing long-lasting power inequalities, underlining the postcolonies' right to participate in the world rather than remain its perennial "other." A relational perspective projecting itself onto a plain of infinite horizontal relations cannot but critique the notion of one center defining the oneness of the world. Relationality decenters: The West cannot remain the center and Africa the periphery. Postcolonialism played a key role in adding global perspective, questioning the previously restricted canon of the West while also endowing it with a geographically broader vision, as hardly any zone of the globe has remained untouched by colonialism. Jahlani Niaah[3] connects this perspective to a notion of Africa that defies the strictures of the map and rather connotes the relational outcomes of major phases of the continent's history, however tragic they might have been. To finally dismantle the dichotomy of the West and the rest, Achille Mbembe[4] claims a place for "Africa in the world" rather than "worlds apart." In Édouard Glissant's terms, relations allow us to move away from the "myth of origin," "not to a creation of world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures."[5]

This implies, as explored in the contributions, firstly, a constant critical attention to forms of exclusion, canonization and the reification of the one-world and its colonial legacies, as well as, secondly, a careful search for alternative imaginaries of worlds as found particularly in artworks. The former draws its importance particularly from the questioning of deconstruction as the sole critical force. Under the influence of the poststructuralist/postmodern debates of the 1980s and 1990s, hybridity, notions of composite cultures and selves, and multiple belongings had begun challenging suppositions of

3 Jahlani Niaah, "Towards a New Map of Africa through Rastasafari 'Works,'" *Africa Development* XXXV, no. 1&2 (2010): 177–199.

4 Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-writing," *Identity, Culture and Politics* 2, no. 1 (January 2001).

5 Glissant, *Poetics of relation*, 143.

stability, uniformity, and the fixity and stasis of culture and identity. Early on, Postcolonial scholarship both benefited from and contributed to this process, celebrating the "liberating potential of difference and movement" (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 13).[6] However, alongside celebrations of a more inclusive world of flexible identity constructions, there are ever louder protests against mechanisms of exclusion along the lines of gender, race, and class, which have real-life consequences for marginalized actors and communities: does the sugarcoated de-essentialization of identities undermine political struggle and global inclusiveness? How can communities defend their marginalized identities if identity is dissolved altogether? Moreover, how does the reification of identity also recreate problematic exclusions? Do the new forms of identity politics liberate or call back the ghosts they actually set out to eliminate? Thus, one of the sticking points of postcolonial studies has been to walk the tightrope of a form of subjectivity that is weary of will-to-power and hegemony.[7] However, given the context of marginality from which most postcolonial artworks emerge, this entails a subjectivity which is not devoid of agency but which is at the same time self-reflexive, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of fixed identities that reproduce near-colonial oppositionalities and subjugation. Artwork and artistic practices constitute avenues for the imagination of such subjectivities and alternative worlds. The arts in a broad sense have acquired new prominence, on the one hand, as a field of heated debate about global mechanisms of exclusion and lasting colonial heritage, but also as liberating forms of imagining and creating alternative worlds and breaking through coercive mechanisms and epistemologies.

The contributions in this volume explore the utopian potential of the arts as a privileged site of creating alternative worlds. How can the arts "think" worlds anew? Artworks are hence explored here as enabling ways of making alternative worlds perceivable, stretching the limits of the imagination. In Chinelo Enemuo's essay, the "seldom slept-in guest room" becomes the set of an action "film," the imagined world of the seven-year-old "I" of the storyteller and her nine-year-old brother Nnanna. She only gradually comes to find the white Christmases, the scents of summer, the coffee shops lining both sides of the road—each part of the imagined landscape and enacted script—at odds with the Nigerian lifeworld that she eventually grew into as a writer.

---

6 Bill Ashcroft, "Beyond the Nation: Postcolonial Hope". The Journal of the European Association of Studies on *Australia*, Vol. 1, 2009. 1–22.

7 Tejumoka Olaniyan, "Post modernity, Postcolonial and African Studies," in *Africa Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, eds. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson, (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 642.

This invites us to explore particularly the imaginary potential of the arts. Freed from notions of factuality or representationalism, the arts have been considered to come with a particularly visionary or utopian view. They can surpass constrained lifeworlds, language, and categories, hence "envisioning" the unspeakable: they make alternative existences sensorially perceptible and possible to imagine. It is this aesthetic aspect—this dimension of sensual perception and the imaginary that goes beyond the constraints of the here and now—as well as propositional language that are of particular concern to the contributions: how do artworks, in their own way, construct and relate to worlds? How do changing worlds emerge in configurations of artworks? How do they deconstruct a singular, hegemonic worldview? How do artworks reshape the political and social boundaries of worlds by conveying the experience of alternative worlds?

Artworks are not solid or fixed oeuvres, which merely comment or respond to lifewords, but constantly emerge through and in relation to each other, as well as to the material and social conditions in which they take shape. They are multilayered dynamic configurations that are constantly in the (re)making. Thus, as interrelated processes, both world as well as artworks constitute the focal point of the discussion here, since they help to not presume "Africa" as a specific, well-defined, unquestionable "container"—which in turn enters into "relation" with other containers, like the West or other continents—but rather to examine how it comes into being, is imagined and reimagined in dynamic artworks.

In order to view a world in relations, the contributions to this volume critically engage with Western hegemony and its resultant *global inequality* that maintains Africa "apart from the world", to echo Mbembe. They bring to the fore the artists' *struggle* to be heard, seen, read and be felt which is at once a struggle to be recognized and to be allowed to speak in a world of brutal power imbalances. Emphasis is put on critical views on the politics of definition, production, circulation, legitimation, and delegitimization of artworks in the broadest sense—also echoing Africa Multiple's concern with reflexivity and postcolonial views on worlding. Postcolonial scholars—for instance, Pheng Cheah, Edward Said, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o —remind us to persist in interrogating inert power structures and market forces that have particularly marginalized Black people, their experiences, knowledges, and art practices, from music to literature and visual arts.[8] The "unequal and uneven" world, as

8 See also Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emphatic notion of world literature as "globalectical literature" (2012) that gives form to the "felt experience" of fundamental change related to the haunting colonial encounter ("world fiction as a theory of the colonial").

highlighted by the Warwick Research Collective to which Elena Brugioni refers in her contribution, is echoed in canonic notions of, for instance, world literature and world art (the latter of which is ever more closely linked to a capitalistic art market and the heated debates on restitution).

In recent years, there has been an increasing *global* articulation of Black resistance against the politics of silencing, which in many ways reevokes the discourses of Black identity and liberation, connected across continents assuming a truly global dimension already in the first half of the twentieth century—and again, artistic practices play a key role here. While Ute Fendler draws a connection between the installation and performance of the work *Quaseilhas* and Brazilian Black theater groups of the 1940s, Shang Ndi portrays the poet Jorge Artel, a protagonist of the *negrista* literary movement in Colombia, questioning the dominance of a merely Iberian heritage that continues to silence Black identities. The *negrista* movement, as Ndi shows, has had a transnational perspective from the beginning. Not only was Jorge Artel influenced by Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance, and jazz music, as Leopold Sédar Senghor was, but his poetry probes in search of a Black language, exploring rhapsodic lines and persistent reference to the drum, one of the icons of African cultural heritage in the Americas. Artel celebrates Blackness, and hence difference (a different spirituality and epistemology), as a means to reverse the condescending views and categorizations of the subordinating white Eurocentric class. A world-spanning, transnational spirit of Black solidarity emerges in the search for this collective "possibility of remaking," not merely as a return to tradition, but also as a departure into modernity (as built on Black legacies). Sophie Lembcke also shows this in her contribution, how modern art and African art became synonymous in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century in ways that were quite different from Europe.

There is a forceful and determined element to how the arts—literature in Shang Ndi's study, transmedial performance in Fendler's—are in search of a new artistic "language" as a form of liberating expression, doing away with the previous alienation, the repression and violence of silence, as well as the coerciveness of established forms and genres. Memory, as it reconnects with the past, hence creating relations across time and space, is key to this departure for a new future: not only re-membering the traumatic Middle Passage. By engaging with African ancestry and cultural heritage, memory provides an avenue for overcoming rupture and trauma. In this regard, Fendler discusses Afro-Brazilian author, Diego Araújo's *Quaseilhas* whereby the audience join the performers in reenacting scattered, haunting, draining, and humiliating experiences. The tropes of Afrofuturism and Yoruba *oríkì* performances add liberating visions—a hope for reconnection, but more so, for a new beginning,

echoed in the search for new, polyvocal forms and voices. In a similar vein, Brugioni highlights in her reading of *Mosquito Coast*, Guillaume Bronn's photography project, that ruin—here, with reference to Stoler, the ruin of empire—is not a place of nostalgia, but of starting over.

Against forms of suppression and inequality, there is also hope for healing and reconciliation. Thierry Boudjekeu reads Léonora Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* from the point of view of trauma studies: the novel forces the victims, the African collaborators, and their descendants (in this case, in Cameroon) to confront the repressed trauma of slavery by articulating their memories in order to collectively overcome it. The arts hold a cathartic promise: communities can overcome the past by collectively sharing moments of pity and horror – which also finds an echo in the performance of Diego Araújo and the repercussions of a fragmented memory of slavery in Brazil (Fendler). Samuel Ndogo approaches this through a study of the subversive but self-deprecating and self-reflexive humor of Kenyan stand-up comedian MCA Tricky, who performs on the *Churchill Show*. Tricky's letter to the president and the futility of its delivery stages a breakdown of walls (however temporary) between worlds—i.e., the world of presidential power and the (under)world of the street—through a Bakhtinian approach to worlding that strips power of its official protocol while remaining skeptical and cynical of the intentions of those who pose as alternatives. Christopher J. Odhiambo focuses on Boris B. Diop's *Murambi*, Alex Mukulu's *Thirty Years of Bananas*, and director Nick Redding's film *Ni sisi*—which deal with extreme forms of violence, namely genocide and ethnic clashes. In this study, he argues that worlding offers a transformative experience and a means to overcome a world and a past that seem to lack any alternatives and defy all expression. Only the mimetic re-evoking of the past seems to create the possibility of new futures. In the installation and performance piece *Quaseilhas* (see Fendler), on the one hand, the audience shares traumatic bodily experiences and is pained by its incapacity to understand the Yoruba recitation. On the other hand, the Yoruba sound, after so long a silencing of African languages, reconnects by projecting an ancestry back to the continent. Furthermore, the Afrofuturist elements promise the invention of possible new worlds. While C. J. Odhiambo sees a "peace culture" as a desirable and achievable aim—a world in harmony—Gilbert Shang Ndi and Ute Fendler highlight the open-ended process set in motion. The sea that recurs in Artel's poetry conjures absent worlds, but also, as Ndi highlights, borrowing from the concept of tidalectics—implies the back-and-forth movement of waves between two continents: relations here are constantly in a mode of becoming. This entails that, even when an African identity is underlined, any stable categories dissolve again, instigating the recurrence of the question of

both identity and its very form. The sea and the tides at once represent the abyss of a tragic memory that is unfathomable to the Afrodescendant, a veritable depiction of Antonio Gramsci's reflections[9] on the subject of "historical processes to date, which have deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory."[10] Relationality, considered from this standpoint, is not premised on a self-knowing and fully re-membered subject, but rather one that actualizes itself in the process of novel encounters – primarily created in and through artistic practices. In the same vein, the sea, as found in Artel's poetry, is posited as a topos that can be endowed with poetic potency in order to foreground new ethical imaginaries that underscore the palimpsestical layers of African traces on a planetary scale.

This is also evident in Peter Simatei's focus on the multiple diaspora of third- and fourth-generation South Asian writers who have left East Africa—where their ancestors had arrived in the nineteenth century— in order to migrate mostly to the US and Europe. The often-painful experiences of *multiple belonging* are reflected, for instance, in the writings of Moyez Vassanji, whose characters feel increasingly estranged in the newly independent East African nation-states. After independence, essentializing concepts of the African nation—built on ideas of autochthony and, sometimes, Pan-Africanism—excluded many South Asian communities from East African nation-building. The novels *Vuta N'kuvute* and *By the Sea*—by Zanzibari writers Shafi Adam Shafi and Abdulrazak Gurnah, respectively—that Clarissa Vierke's contribution reads in relation to each other also hinge on the changing world of the 1960s, the political upheavals of the Zanzibari revolution in the aftermath of Tanganyika's independence. With nationalism growing amid the Cold War rhetoric of the 1960s, new boundaries were being negotiated: on the one hand, Yasmin, the Indian female protagonist in Shafi Adam Shafi's novel, experiences moments of freedom in *taarab* music, where relations become fluid and she too becomes "African." *Taarab*, which absorbed a variety of music styles from the Indian Ocean, becomes a potent metaphor: allowing for female self-fulfillment and a class- and race-transcending solidarity, making possible the emergence of new relations. On the other hand, Saleh Omar, the tragic "Arab" character of *By the Sea*—whose personal fate is inextricably intertwined with political turmoil as well as family feuds—ends up as a migrant in the UK, haunted by his past—not unlike characters in Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, who are haunted by the history of deportation and forced migration. Here, the Indian Ocean is but a world of debris, a ruined world, a perspective that Elena Brugoni argues

9 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 25.
10 Said, *Orientalism*, 25.

for, as mentioned above. However, it is not nostalgia that Brugioni sees in Guillaume Bronn's photographs of the ruins of empires, like the Italian Baroque church in Mogadishu, but the chance for a layered consideration of history and, in echoing Mbembe, a bifurcation toward several futures. It is temporality rather than geography that is at stake for her, or rather the flexibility of notions of space. Still, Brugioni adds as a warning: the Indian Ocean remains peripheral in a capitalist world system that is characterized by uneven and combined development. Its marginalization, just like that of other marginalized places discussed in this special issue, is materially grounded, and hence urges us to reconsider romanticist notions of creative encounter.

The horizonality or waves in Ndi's contribution— a positive view of relations—recalls Glissant's *tout-monde*, to which Michaela Ott makes reference: a becoming all-world, *beyond all hierarchies in a composite-culture.* As she argues, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's reaccentuation of Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world, this concept essentially means to become and to become in relations, which also implies "becoming imperceptible, undistinguishable, and impersonal" and "minorizing oneself." Deconstructing sacrosanct individualism, the human being becomes dividual and loses his, her and their boundaries; likewise, taxonomies dissolve, and the boundary between continents—so important to Glissant in conceiving of relations to Africa—becomes fuzzy and open. In the same vein, the boundary between humans and the material and animal world is ruptured, which plays a prominent role in Kumari Issur's readings of Mauritian literature—Ananda Devi's *La vie de Joséphin le fou,* Amal Sewtohul's *Made in Mauritius*—and Krishna Luchoomun's installation work entitled *Humanizing Nature*. For Kumari Issur, who interprets recent political debates about the boundaries of the "ocean state" of Mauritius (which extends over several islands, but also involves the sea), the artwork has the power to reframe ontologies. This view emerges from an analysis of the ecocritical novels, and a performance in which the human body fuses with plant and animal organisms and minerals. In Ananda Devi's *La vie de Joséphin le fou,* Joséphin is half-man, half-eel, and thus, in Issur's words, "a half-terrestrial, half-marine creature." Here, reworlding necessitates a view of the world's material foundations and an environmentalist perspective that, as such, entails rethinking binaries that are deeply entrenched in Western, Cartesian epistemologies: binaries between cultures, but also binaries between land and sea, animal and human being. With recourse to the Mauritian poet and visionary Malcolm de Chazal's concept of *l'unisme*, and in relation to yogic concepts of samsara, she argues for the recognition of an all-compassing "oneness" that is, however, constantly in a process of becoming—reminiscent of Khal Torabully's "coral identities."

While oneness here is a call for empathy and the recognition of interdependence and multiple cultural belongings, Ott—after tracing the intellectual history of the concept of the dividual in Deleuze's thinking—adds a critical note that brings us back to Elena Brugioni's plea not to indulge the *powerful forces of marginalization* by celebrating a sugarcoated version of Indian Ocean diversity that, as one might add, only a privileged class, typically situated in the West, can afford to do. Drawing from Ulrich Beck, Ott sketches out an increasingly dystopian view of a capitalized dividual world (which is not part of the Deleuzian rhizomatic view) under constant economic and political control: where different inequalities intersect, boundary-making becomes more and more diffuse, and all-permeating market forces and digital technologies have the homogenizing and impoverishing effect of violence. In such a context, the loss of individual and specific positions that are not quantifiable seems alarming, and amounts to assimilation. Under capitalism and its technological conditions, on the one hand, repetition is inevitable, yet, on the other, has become an essential part of (post/modern) art production itself, which is conscious of *the impossibility of being independent and new*. Artistic positions thus entail a metacritical view of their own production: while C. J. Odhiambo reflects on the "violence porn" that mediatized depictions of mass atrocities have become, Sophie Lembcke begins her reflection with the parodic gesture of Damian Hirst's copies of the Ife Head, titled *Golden Head* (*Female*), which is part of his fictional museum displaying "ancient" objects, the Treasures of the Wreck of the *Unbelievable*. Meanwhile, in the films of Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Ott finds a mockery of generic filmic conventions as well as the stereotypical depiction of "Africa."

This brings us to another recurring question that appears in these contributions, namely that of form and medium: the notion that art essentially emerges and becomes in a specific medium. Furthermore, given the above-described context of technology and homogenization, how is a *variety of media, genres, and languages* possible? In reflecting upon recent debates on how to decolonize ethnographic and art museums, typically constructed in binary opposition, Sophie Lembcke shows how practices of display—presenting African artwork in, for instance, theatrical dioramas usually found in natural history museums or on pedestals reserved for the unique artwork of the white cube—have played decisive roles in subordinating African art under Western epistemologies. This is done, on the one hand, by perpetuating its "otherness" and making it part of natural history, or on the other, by subsuming it under Western notions of art. Both forms of display do away with the historical and social context and the epistemologies of where the artworks originated. Apart from the debates on returning artworks to their places of origin, an equally

prominent issue is how to create a form of global art history not merely reproducing the West as a center as well as to change museum practices. Both issues have been so greatly dominated by market forces, and hardly allow for various epistemologies of art.

The troubling question of how to think art anew becomes particularly pertinent when the artwork as such is not considered unique—not iconically displayed on a pedestal, in isolation—but as part of a ritual context (Lembcke refers to the example of Mijikenda *vigango*, memorial effigies). How can one account for literature, performance, and music without subsuming them under narrow, Western-centered categories of art? How can one take various epistemologies and languages into consideration? Or, given the all-pervasiveness of the global system of capital and technology, is any alternative position possible at all? Is the reference to local culture and tradition not also a reaction to the same all-engulfing global system, so that, to echo Kwame Anthony Appiah,[11] it becomes a form of nativism, grounded in the same (Eurocentric and colonial) logic that it actually tries to refute? While Michaela Ott finds the recurrent "desire to situate itself in local tradition" with a distance "from any technological reach or very much outside of the art market," one still needs to wonder if such a distance is (still) possible at all.

On the one hand, self-reflexive artworks that reflect upon their own conditions of production, their composite cultural make-up as well as their blind spots, remain strong sites for the negotiation of worlds, pushing aesthetic boundaries. Ott adduces both Med Hongo's *Soleil O*—a film portraying African migrants in 1970s Paris, experimenting with a Nouvelle Vague style to create a "sarcastic portrayal" of French society—as well as Jean-Pierre Bekolo's filmic resistance to perpetuating Africa along the lines of stereotypical tropes, a dividual oscillation between European and US dictates. On the other hand, the reflection upon and inclusion of a variety of epistemologies, languages, and practices has increasingly gained prominence against what Aamir Mufti, in *Forget English*[12] called the "one-world empire" of English. Chinelo Enemuo argues for the inclusion of the diverse perspectives (including all the blind men's views on the elephant in the fable she reports), including an "aspirational, authentic and unapologetic assertion of self, of tradition, of essence." Leaving the re-discussion of an essential identity aside at this point, in the piece *Quaseilhas*, centered on the first African-language performance in Brazil, the

11 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. (London: Mehuean, 1992).

12 Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and world literatures*. (London: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Yoruba *oríkì* is also seen to have a liberating potential since, as a praise-poetry genre evoking genealogies, it literally constructs African ancestry. For now, however, in an almost metaphorical sense, it remains a sound—unintelligible to its audience. While Elena Brugioni argues against the exclusion of Portuguese writers from most Indian Ocean literary debates— which, paradoxically, has followed mostly monolingual (English) trajectories in depicting a multilingual world—Clarissa Vierke juxtaposes the work of the prominent Zanzibari novelists Shafi Adam Shafi, writing in Swahili, and Abdulrazak Gurnah, writing in English, who, though both of the same generation and writing Zanzibar amid wider Indian Ocean worlds, have never been compared. Their works circulate in two different worlds and draw on partly overlapping literary traditions and concepts, but have never been discussed together.

In Indian Ocean literary debates, the notion of literature is largely defined from a Western point of view, in which multilingual heritages and the different concepts of literature in, for instance, Hindi, Malay, and Arabic, have hardly played a role, as if they belonged to different Indian Ocean worlds. How can one include "peripheral" literatures without subsuming them under the critical paradigms that enforce a homogenizing reading, which "blurs and deforms topical specificities?"[13] In describing "Zanzibari Poetic Worlds," Duncan Tarrant shows how Swahili poetry, so ubiquitous and highly valued in everyday life, exchanged on WhatsApp platforms, in spontaneous verbal duels on the street, and organized competitions, makes Zanzibar a literary world in its own right, with its "own interconnected positions," as Tarrant argues with recourse to Pascale Casanova's notion of the "literary space." The Zanzibari poetic networks, linked with other poetic networks all along the coast, is its own world, and draws on long-standing Indian Ocean literary ties while incorporating new literary trends (mostly through the academization of literature at school and universities). And still, differently from the highly canonized Indian Ocean literature such as Gurnah's works which is valued by Western audiences and the Western book market, it is rarely translated. In most cases, it is performed only in the context of local events rather than on the big stages of the prominent and heavily sponsored cultural institutions and festivals that celebrate the cosmopolitan Indian Ocean flavor of Zanzibar.

In its structure, the book reflects the flexible coming into being through relations. As the contributions offer diverse views on worlding processes, the volume can be read in various ways and along different thematic lines,

13 Sara Mazagora. "African-Language Literature and the 'Transnational Turn' in Euro-American Humanities" *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 2015): 40–55.

creating multiple connections also across chapters. It starts with a prelude in which the multi-faceted artist and curator. Chinelo Eneumo shares her work and her reflections of the process of "worlding" through an artistic approach, underlining the precedence of the imaginary which this volume highlights. Active as a literary artist herself, she built, in cooperation with Nelen Studios, a multi-disciplinary creative and performing arts center in Awka, Eastern Nigeria, which offers resources ranging from a recording and video-editing studio to a theater stage, dance studio, and exhibition space. Nelen Studios, where artists of all disciplines are encouraged to find their own artistic voices, has become a major hub for all kinds of critical artistic interventions. It is the dynamic spirit, the belief in inventing new worlds, which her contribution carries into the book.

This first prelude is complemented by the theoretical and philosophical reflections on the intertwinement of historical, philosophical, sociological aspects that are involved in the processes of worlding by Ott. These two contributions bring together different methods of questioning the world we live in by presenting two poles, the artistic as a way of "thinking" through artistic practice and expressed in concrete imagery and the philosophical approach in abstracting concepts from concrete phenomena.

The chapter by Lembcke comes like an upbeat which adds one layer to the spectrum spread out between the two poles by asking questions about how institutions like a museum and academic discourses have an influence on the categorization and therewith the understanding of an artworks (and this might refer to painting, sculpture, installations and writing).

To a certain degree, these three contributions reflect the poles between which the critical reflection on artistic work, on the entanglements of medium, format and narrative, and finally the philosophical theory building draw and combine them in various ways to meet the proposals of artworks for how to see, live, understand the world(s) we live in and try to make sense of it.

Two further parts of the book focusing on the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic respectively reflect the book's critique of area studies which perpetuates a view of Africa as an inert container, instead accord prominence to worlding as a dynamic process. Both the study of the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean have been at the forefront in recent years in unsettling notions of fixed worlds, putting an emphasis on movement, circulation, memory and re(connection).

The first part on the Indian Ocean comprises seven contributions that could be subdivided along three lines: 1- analyses of literary narratives, 2- questions about literary genres and spaces of enunciation (performance, comedy show), 3- contributions that bring together different media like literature and

photography and installations. The second part on the Atlantic focuses on the shared memory of the transatlantic slave trade that connects the Americas and the African continent. Two contributions focus on poetry from Colombia and intermedial performances from Brazil that try to reconnect with this memory. The third contribution is complementary as it deals with literary imagination of the capture and deportation of Africans to the Americas in Francophone literature.

While the two large parts of the book give an insight into various proposals of reading the world in the larger areas of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, the contributions do also connect with and interrogate each other across these parts. Beyond focal points like the above-described struggle against inequality and invisibility, interrogation of ontological boundaries and memory, Simatei, Vierke, Tarrant (Indian Ocean), Ndi and Boudjekeu (Atlantic) all analyse literary texts focusing on how they construct imagined worlds that enable the creation of different understandings of the world, of various epochs and of various connections between Africa and the Americas or Asia. The contributions of Tarrant and Odhiambo could also be read together with Ndogo as exploring notions of genre and how the latter is part of the worlding through narration, be they war narratives, comedy shows or poetic performances. Their contributions invite the reader to shift the perspectives on the entanglement of format, genre and narrative. This approach creates a link to the texts by Issur and Brugioni who connect installations/literature and photography/literature respectively which makes it possible to extend the reading to Fendler's contribution that deals with the combination of music, performance, audiovisual media in the construction of memory. The different reading lines respond to both the worlding and to the concern about the arts' formats and media that also determinate the narrative modes, thus inviting the readers to enter the process of making sense of alternative worlds emerging in artworks from various optional perspectives.

References

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. London: Methuen, 1992.

Ashcroft, Bill. "Beyond the Nation: Postcolonial Hope". *The Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, Vol. 1, 2009. 1–22.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Mazagora, Sara. "African-Language Literature and the 'Transnational Turn' in Euro-American Humanities." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 2015): 40–55.

Mbembe, Achille. "African Modes of Self-Writing." *Identity, Culture and Politics* 2, no. 1 (January 2001): 1–39.

Mufti, Aamir. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. London: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Globalectics. Theory and the Politics of knowing*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publisher, 2012.

Niaah, Jahlani. "Towards a New Map of Africa through Rastasafari 'Works'" *Africa Development* XXXV, no. 1&2. (2010): 177–199.

Olaniyan, Tejumola. "Postmodernity, Postcolonial, and African Studies." In *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson, 637–645. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

PART 1

Openings

CHAPTER 2

Prelude 1: Integrating Essence and Influence in Legitimizing Worlds: an Artist Reflects

Chinelo J. Enemuo

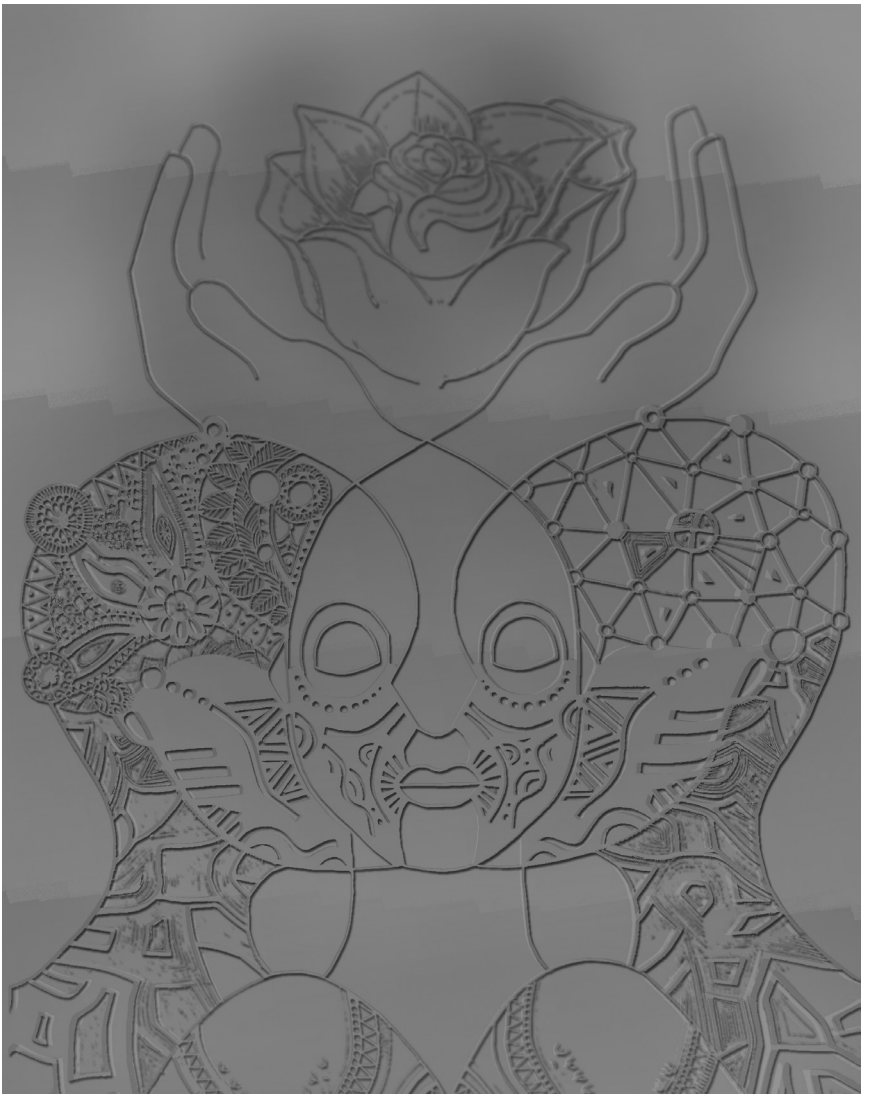

FIGURE 2.1 Cover art

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004689756_003

You …

You were a storyteller long before you aspired to be one. After school and homework and chores, you and big brother Nnanna would occupy the bare, seldom slept-in guest room (also serving as storage for Mama's spillover dress boxes) to act out what you both coined "Our Film." You were 7; Nnanna, 9. "Our Film" cast Nnanna as lead—the unassailable, weapon-savvy black belt—and you as everyone else: villain, victim, sidekick … a random waiter who goes from serving drinks to throwing fists when said waiter is revealed to be an assassin in disguise.

You relished being the brains behind the plot—throwing in twists, paranormal episodes, supporting characters and their substories, all while constantly placating your star performer, whose recalcitrance brewed from wanting more fight scenes.

Most exciting were the transmutations the guest room offered; variations on the ordinary recast into alternate matter, transforming into spaces and scenes where the mind sets action in motion. The six-foot-wide bed marked the homestead where the hero's mother served juicy intel with pancakes on the side. Opposite, the paired reading table and wobbly chair framed the HQ where a sinewy, brooding master assigned missions—his "sock-improvised" eye patch falling on a different eye in every other scene. The villain's lair lurked within the room's clunky couch, its blood-red checkered print fit for the purpose. The double-door wardrobe opened into an armory of deadly cloth hangers that cut like swords and fired like guns.

At seven, you were a triple threat, the writer–director–actor of an action flick with a dedicated following of two younger siblings. Three if you count Mama, who, on occasion, would humor your production with her presence, until that one time she unceremoniously shut it down when Nnanna pulled you in for a body slam.

Certain things, however, remained elusive to that wild imagination of yours: little big things, big little things. You wondered if Nnanna struggled with conceiving these things too. Like the freezing cold of winter or the taste of the syrup spread over his on-screen Mama's pancakes. Misapprehensions prevailed with the sounds and smells you associated with summer—the colors and blossom as it supposedly got warmer. With no connotations to the world in which you lived, your imagined worlds were merely projections from a generous screen time that significantly acculturated you Westward.

FIGURE 2.2 Nnanna and I enacting "our film"

In effect, the stories penned were of men on horses and silky-haired damsels in distress. The heroes penciled were of long capes and body-hugging suits; of blue eyes and strong jaws. In "our film," Christmas was white and—with names like Sean, Jim, and Emily—so were the characters. Bosses donned long coats and neckties, sheriffs flashed gold star badges, their other hand tucked into chunky holsters. Yellow cars with lit "TAXI" signs rolled along paved sidewalks with coffee shops on every block.

At seven, you were oblivious to this disconnect from your reality: the absences of certain little big things, big little things. Like patterned fabric and coral accessories; women in bubus, wrappers, and gallant headscarves like the ones Mama stacked in her many dress boxes. There were no caftans, no oblong

red caps worn by men slapping the back of their hand against another's in greeting. No hawkers roamed streets, selling anything and everything from boiled groundnuts to Celine Dion mixtapes. None of the delicacies served were remotely Nigerian and, with no names like Okwy, Bisola, and Blessing, neither were the characters. Your cities were void of sprawling outdoor markets that smelled of smoked fish and clogged drains, of perspiration and hope. At seven, the worlds you imagined and that which you inhabited were worlds apart.

∴

You …

You were "worlding" long before you would come across the word or attempt to make sense of it. To paraphrase Gail Simon, coauthor of the *Sage Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice*, "worlding" involves formulating and attributing words and knowledge to what we make of the world. "*A learning and becoming process*," Simon adds.[1] Naturally, the speculative fiction enthusiast in you is most inclined to Donna Haraway and her thoughts on materiality.

"*It matters what matters we use to think other matters with, it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with*," says Haraway.[2] But *what* are these matters and stories that matter, and *why* do they matter?

In your quirky way of absorbing complex thought, you look for analogies, relatives—like one tracing the branches of a family tree. The old parable of blind folk encountering an elephant becomes the distant cousin you seek. As the story goes, the blind, positioned at different sides of the animal, deploy words to make sense of this unknown: how it flexes like a rope, sways like fans, spans like a great wall.

If the elephant represents the world, then you are among the blind: hindered by your limited human capacity to accurately discern the planet in its material entirety. And just like the blind, you are left to engage all other senses in communicating your understanding of your side, particularly your connection with, your ideas about, and your dreams for it. Foregrounded in this worlding process are varied responses to questions:

"What is?" and "What should?"
"What if?" and "What could?"

1 Sheila McNamee et al., eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE reference, 2020).

2 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* Experimental futures technological lives, scientific arts, anthropological voices (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

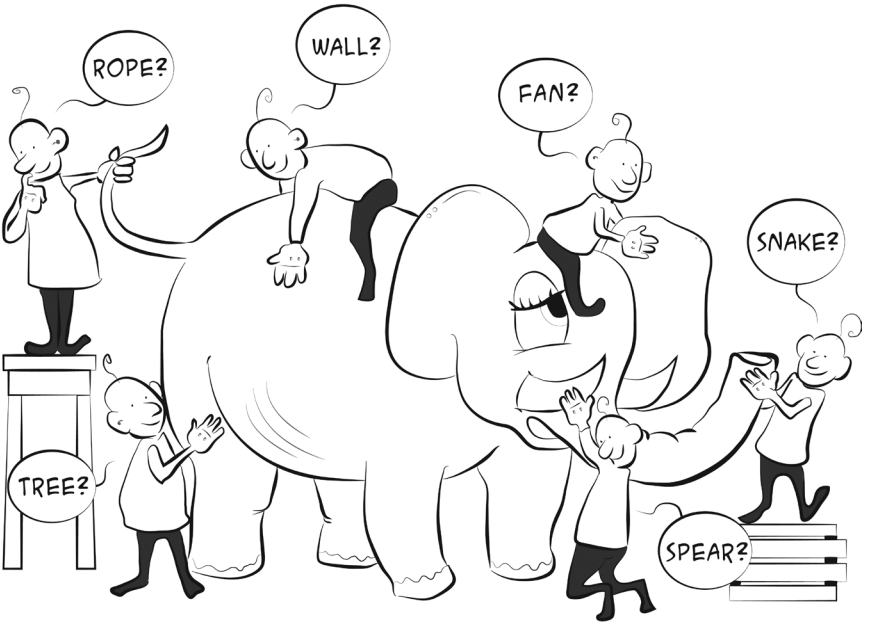

FIGURE 2.3 The blind and the elephant

Ultimately, the authenticity and intent behind the expressiveness from your side (or sides) of planet "Elephant" become the matters and stories that matter. In hindsight, isn't that just what it means to be an artist?

∵

You ...

You were an artist long before you sought to be one. In mapping the possibilities associated with worlding, the elephant parable suggests two aspects to the art. The first is of the self, you as a subject finding the latitude to convey your side of things. This you call essence. The second is of others, of those on all other sides striving to exercise similar rights. This you call influence. The power play between these two aspects, Essence and Influence, is statutory, no matter the scale or context.

Those at close quarters naturally engender a social construct of combined essence, thereby formulating a language and code of conduct to express and preserve mutual knowledge. In this you find family, community, tribe, identity. With these sociocultural clusters rooted on all sides of the metaphorical elephant, it is essential to seek differences and learn from the diversity of narratives. For, as the wise passerby emerging at the end of the

parable reckons to the blind folk caught contending the veracity of their individual speculations over the others, "No one is wrong … No one is right either." The combination of all perspectives is far greater and closer to fact than the mere indication of parts. This is the *why* of the matters and stories that should matter: the learning and sharing fostered through cross-cultural relationships.

Similar to those of your seven-year-old self, stories bereft of essence and charged only with distant influences can create a skewed representation of our world and undermine the plurality of actors needed to define and ultimately shape it. Still extending the metaphor, ignoring Essence is like feeling "rope" but yelling "wall." Or worse yet, not having the liberty to feel at all.

It would take one huge influence—only a quick glimpse of it at the time—to flip the switch on your worlding process. You were 9, and "Our Film" had gone burst after Nnanna traded showmanship for video games. The musical *Umoja* (a name you would only come to know many years after the fact) popped up on your screen in that old-fashioned way TV stations filled the gap between the end of one program and the start of another. This placeholder clip featured an all-African cast belting and clicking in song, leaping and kicking in dance, swaying to the thumping of a giant drum. In the space of five minutes or less, you are catapulted into an otherworldly yet familiar realm in ways you can only describe as magic. With it comes a feeling of being seen, of being celebrated; of people closer to your side of things being portrayed in an aspirational, authentic, and unapologetic assertion of self, of tradition … of essence.

Umoja sparked a recalibration of your choices as to what matters matter. As many other striking influences followed, your content and contexts would slowly take new forms. By your teens, the stories telling your stories had fully evolved. Action stories charge through the infamous Lagos traffic, jumping potholes, colliding into car bumpers and cussing at drivers, crashing into street hawkers and their any- and everythings. Romance trails eloping lovers fleeing an arranged marriage, or perches on the branches of enduring love ruffled by conflicting religious, class, or ethnic forces. Heroes are capeless warriors challenging an unscrupulous governor, or an all-female militia taking on patriarchy and female mutilation practices in the north. Superheroes pay homage to local myths and legends, commemorating the transmaterial ancestral compositions involved in the manifestation of these legends: their powers, their munitions, their cause.

⁘

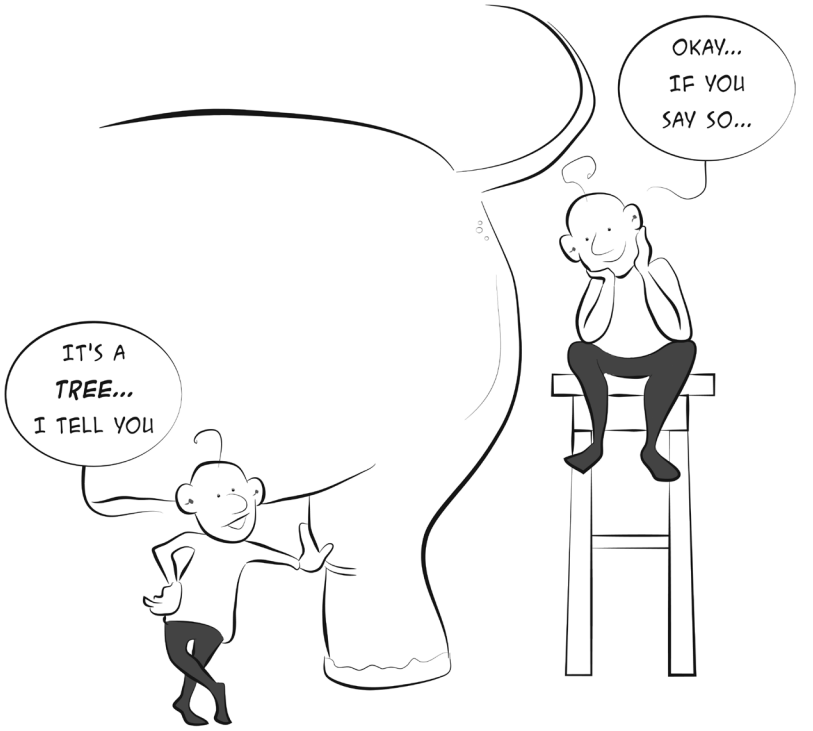

FIGURE 2.4 Two blind at elephant's rear

You ...

You would become an influencer long before you valued its urgency. As an aspiring storyteller, you yearn for a wider reach, beyond siblings and their preferences; beyond Mama and her concerns. You engage with fellow artists—those on your side of things—encouraging them to embrace essence through a genuine synthesis of experiences. Joy finds you worlding and learning with these local artists, the youth especially, daring to expand or challenge the lexicons of accepted ethnography.

You charge them to be inclusive and adventurous in how they remold realities. You ask that they learn from the fables of their forefathers in expanding the spectrum of matter and objects that are awarded sentience, especially the unlikely suspects like hills, trees, wind. You remind them to approach external influences with a curiosity, sensitivity, and eagerness to seek difference—to learn from the diversity and complexity that they live among without supposing a superiority of one over the other. In other words (and worlds), they should be witnesses rather than judges to influence.

You reiterate the necessity for more local influence, more so in an era of New Media that makes the world smaller and influences louder, affecting emerging artists most. You hope to inspire them to contribute to a balance of perspectives; to induce a sense of belonging for those who see their existentialisms represented tastefully in works of art that form pieces of the global puzzle. Ultimately, you hope they create more of the magic that *Umoja* was for you.

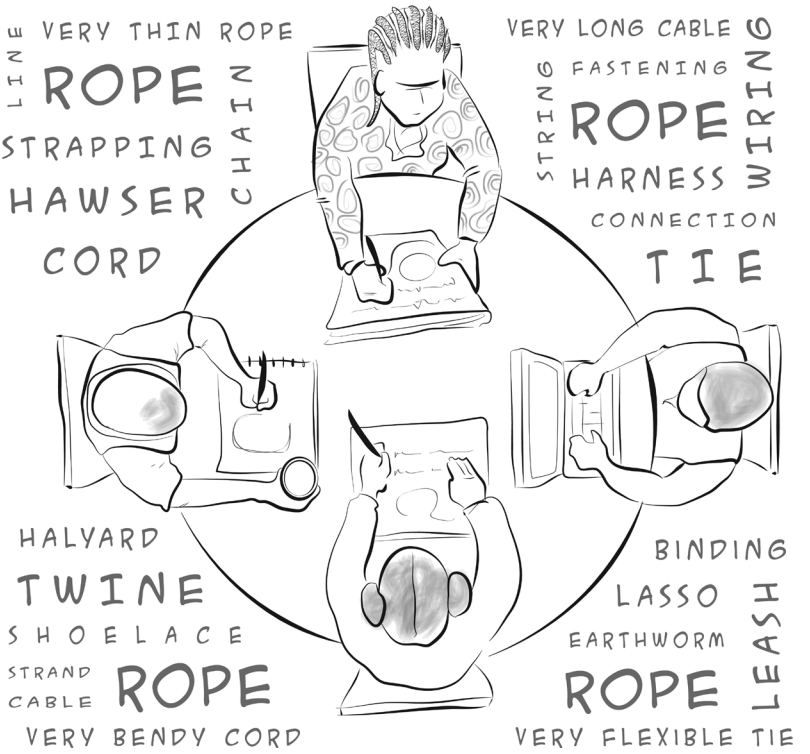

FIGURE 2.5 Synonyms of "rope"

Tonight, you lie awake indulging old habits. Your bedroom may look nothing like the guest room from your childhood, but the same mechanics apply. The full moon of the white bulb casts apparitions on the ceiling. Your feet sink into the crackling dry grass of the field that your beddings have become. At full speed, the ceiling fan whirls in gusty trade winds filled with dust and cotton pollen. Home, a stone's throw in sight, is in the multistory chest of drawers lodged against the wall. Your apartment is on the third drawer, the one with the broken handle where you keep your pajamas. But you can't go home yet. Not until Okwy arrives. Your eyes remain fixed on the room's table, marking the

edge of the highway. The lampstand to its side is the towering streetlight that never comes on. On your laptop is the working first draft of your novel, which now reads "Welcome to Awka" on a large flickering street sign. You hope Okwy remembers to look out for this landmark.

Refreshingly, your other senses are heightened to distract you from what is becoming a long wait. This time, very little eludes the contours of your imagination. You know what harmattan feels like: dried skin and chapped lips. The wind brushing against your face is cold and carbon-heavy from the fumes of cars, generators, and a distant neighbor burning waste out in their yard. The smell of chili curry lingers from the open-fire grill where your ironing board stands. Two men stand behind the grill, staking lean beefsteaks before marinating them and flipping them over the hot surface. Fire casts an orange glow on their long, lean faces, revealing long tribal marks inscribed on their cheeks—an indicator of their roots.

There's a knock on the door, and suddenly, worlds collide. Okwy is here, and you are no longer out in the cold, standing in the middle of a grass field. You are back in your bedroom, cuddled in the warmth of your beddings.

"Good night," Okwy says.

You fall asleep, hoping for dreams of other worlds, holding on to a chance of magic.

FIGURE 2.6 Artist's world

End

References

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Experimental futures technological lives, scientific arts, anthropological voices. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016.

McNamee, Sheila, Mary M. Gergen, Celiane Camargo-Borges, and Emerson F. Rasera, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE reference, 2020.

CHAPTER 3

Prelude II: Dividual Processes of Worlding from Philosophical, Sociological, and Aesthetic Perspectives

Michaela Ott

1 Philosophical Conceptualizations of the Becoming-World

German phenomenological philosophy, in the famous version formulated by Martin Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*] (1927), tells us that, in order to discuss different "images of the world" (*Weltbilder*),[1] we must first unpack the idea of "world" (*Welt*). Since "world" is a constitutive factor of "human existence," the latter has to interrogate its foundation in the "world." Human existence grounded in a "being-in-the world" (*In-der-Welt-Sein*, §12)[2] has to bring about the ontological sense of "worldliness" (*Weltlichkeit*), which in turn presupposes a primordial and unreflected "reliance on world" (*Weltvertrautheit*).

All those elements that are essential for the understanding of this relation between human existence and world are called "existentials." "Being-in-the-world" is an existential, and is the starting point for philosophical reflection, since human existence has always already "discovered a world" (§24); this—nonexplicit—discovery reveals a spatial relatedness of existence through distance and orientation toward the realm of things. As a constitutive "encounter," it gives space; it spatializes, which once again is considered a precondition for a "circumspect taking care of the world" (*umsichtiges Besorgen der Welt*, §24). Asking "who" is in this world, Heidegger explains that this inevitable being-in-the-world is at the same time a necessary "being-with" (*Mitsein*) and a "being-with-others" (*Mitdasein mit anderen*, §26). These others cannot be separated from me; I am not even different from them. I share the world with them: "The world of existence is the world-with" (*Die Welt des Daseins ist Mitwelt*, §26); it has to be explained through the phenomenon of "worry/care" (*Sorge*, §27).

Heidegger's conceptualization of being-in-the-world has been criticized by French poststructuralist philosophers for its anthropomorphic and therefore

1 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 52f.
2 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 53.

reductive understanding of human existence and its being-with-others. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that human existence and existence in general should not be qualified in terms of an immovable being-in-the-world or an abstract being-with. The authors shift the epistemological perspective and insist on temporal rather than spatial factors: human actors and other agents should be read as temporal and manifold ways of becoming, of becoming different and multiple, of becoming related and interconnected, and thus bringing about permanently changing processes of worlding, in unexpected aesthetic articulations beyond the human realm.

In his philosophical work *Différence et Répétition* [*Difference and Repetition*] (1967), Deleuze replaces Heideggers's term of "being-with-others" with the idea of becoming-other and stranger to oneself through processes of temporal repetition and affective intensification in which, at a certain point, repetition catalyzes an immanent differentiation of the same and a multiplication of otherness. The person may then start to lose his/her contours and recognizability, his/her undivided character and individuality. By directing attention to the affects of rhythms, voices, images, or speed—even through these qualities in nonhuman agents—human existences are characterized as self-altering and gradually deindividualizing processes, losing their boundaries and gaining unknown forms of expression thanks to their transversal affiliation with nonanthropomorphic articulations. Becoming-world is linked to the discovery of an "inner outside" of the self, to the loss of individual specificity and a sort of "general" speech, like what we encounter in Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*.

Deleuze and Guattari intensify their research into the rhizomatic relations between disciplines, concepts, organisms, affects, and unusual groupings in their seminal text *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* [*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*] (1980). They describe the aesthetic procedures of mutual capture and nonnatural interpenetration between human and nonhuman agents, which provoke the loss of ordinary language and individual faciality. They set free ways of stammering and unlearning, of refusing to enter "normal" systems of behavior and discipline, like in Melville's novel *Bartleby*. These aesthetic processes are characterized as becoming molecular in the sense of "minorizing" oneself to the point of achieving the "virtues" of "devenir-intense, devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible" (1980, 284–380).[3] "Becoming all-world" is thus conceived of as an unlimited process of becoming a nonspecific multitude and of bringing about a commonality not

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. Mille plateaux:* [*A thousand plateaus. Capitalism and schizophrenia*] (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1980), 284–380.

due to an aesthetic judgment, but due to nonnatural captures between minor entities of different kinds. Processes of becoming-animal are discovered in the novels of Virginia Woolf or Hermann Melville; "dividual" screams are heard in Luciano Berio's musical compositions. All in all, the authors highlight processes of worlding mainly in aesthetic expressions deriving from procedures of deindividualizing and of providing articulations that do not belong to a certain person, to a specific culture, an aesthetic norm, or a recognizable place.

Deleuze and Guattari also discover analogue processes of minorization in areas beyond the anthropological realm, such as in the biosociological sphere. They even claim that art is not a human invention, but began with the occupation of territories by animals and their specific sounds. They call birds the first artists, who can therefore become performers in certain musical compositions of Olivier Messian. Elucidating research in different scientific disciplines, the authors try to prove that there is no such thing as a fixed world, only ever-new processes of worlding according to the chosen epistemological, affective, or aesthetic choice. In order to philosophize new ways of becoming all-world, they search for tendencies to dissolve conventional forms, taxonomies, and epistemological boundaries, instead creating transversal and cross-disciplinary connections and thus highlighting continuous aesthetic creations by undefined multitudes and packs.

Their emphasis on minorizing processes culminates in an analysis of literary texts and filmic examples, in which they eventually diagnose a becoming-everybody of artistic expression, which equates to a becoming-nobody. In direct opposition to Heidegger, they postulate the loss of name, home, and bourgeois attributes and advocate for nomadic existences, for the freeing of a general desire and of creating new processes of worlding, of becoming all-world in (nonin)dividual aesthetic articulations of a countless many.[4]

Deleuze also elaborates a becoming-dividual of film in *Cinéma 2. L'image-temps* [*Cinema 2*] (1986). The image of time in its exposition of fading temporality is similar to the temporal and heterogenous expression of contemporary musical compositions. Because of their incessant auditive (and visual) shifts, their articulations cannot be identified as a durable and representational expression and are therefore denied an "individual" expression. Their becoming-dividual is supposed to set free aesthetic articulations of undetermined ensembles, including nonhuman speakers. Such processes are called "un devenir tout le monde," a "becoming all-world": "Car tout le monde est

4 Michaela Ott, *Dividuationen: Theorien der Teilhabe:* [*Dividuations: Theories of participation*] (Berlin: b_books, 2015/2018).

l'ensemble molaire, mais devenir tout le monde est une autre affaire, qui met en jeu le cosmos avec ses composantes moléculaires. Devenir tout le monde, c'est faire monde, faire un monde".[5] Processes of worlding are thus conceived of as a becoming-dividual and becoming-coequal of all sorts of participants. Nowadays, it would be considered a becoming-world in an ecological sense.

This idea of "becoming all-world" (*devenir tout le monde*) has been taken up by the Caribbean author Edouard Glissant in his work *Traité de Tout-Monde/ Treatise on the Whole-World*.[6] In a reference to Deleuze and Guattari, he brings into play a becoming all-world due to composite-cultural and aesthetic relations, and a being-together-apart in manifold ways. But he also asks for certain reevaluations and reversions of Western terminologies and understandings from a postcolonial Antillean perspective. He agrees that it is necessary to abolish standardized hierarchies and taxonomies, including the distinction between center and periphery, by developing a *Poétique de la relation/Poetics of relation*.[7] In a sort of postcolonial critique, he points at the antecedent, but colonially suppressed relations of repetition and differentiation between the Caribbean islands. In his novel *Mahagony*, he explores the idea of a clandestine subterranean order of earth by emphasizing the unnoticed relations of mahagony trees. Additionally, in a pre-ecological sense close to the thinking of Bruno Latour, he strives for a philosophy of the becoming of planet earth while insisting on the necessity of remaining at home—a nomadic existence while remaining in the very same place: "La circulation et l'action de la poésie ne conjecturent plus un peuple donné, mais le devenir de la planète terre".[8]

From his postcolonial perspective, he underlines the opposite and problematic side of the concept of minorization: the fact that the people of Martinique and Guadeloupe have been minorized by the French colonialists. Minorization therefore cannot be understood as a necessary condition for becoming all-world, in his view. He applies a related critique to the European obligation of enlightenment; Glissant offers, as its opposite, the right to opacity. Notwithstanding this, he interprets minorization as an appropriate tool for the subversion of the French colonial language: changing the pronunciation of the French words and mixing them with words of other origins brings about a creole that is situated between "la multiplicité des langues africaines d'une part et européenne d'autre part, la nostalgie enfin du reliquat caraibe".[9] Diversifying the imposed language becomes an act of resistance in his eyes, bringing

5 Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. Mille plateaux*, 343.
6 Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).
7 Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).
8 Ibid., 44.
9 Ibid., 83.

about dividual expressions and the language's becoming-insignificant and becoming-poetic at the same time. Glissant praises the literature of the Caribbean islands for exposing the different "origins" and the aesthetic tensions between their different cultural layers. Becoming all-world, then, means the actualization of these different heritages by relating not only to the neighboring islands, but even to the languages and aesthetic articulations of the African continent. Together, they contribute to an "emmêlement mondial," a worldly intertwinement and commingling, bringing about a "parole du monde",[10] a world idiom of the kind encountered in music such as jazz, hip-hop or rap.

2 World Society and Social Processes of Worlding

Before elucidating processes of worlding in the contemporary aesthetic realm, I want to question the actuality of these philosophical elaborations by relating them to sociological explanations of world societies and the social processes of worlding today. These explanations reveal different and disillusioned estimations of social processes within the so-called "world society" and the current processes of worlding.

At the end of the twentieth century, German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1997) referred to the concept of world society in order to highlight the relatively recent transformation of sociopolitical processes due to non-state civil cooperation across national boundaries:

> We have long since lived in a world society, and this relates to two basic facts: on the one hand, the totality of non-nation state politically organised social and power relationships, on the other, the experience of living and acting outside of boundaries. The unity of state, society, and individual presumed by the first modernity is being dissolved. World society does not mean world state society—for example United Nations governance—or world economy society like in the WTO, but a non-state civil society, an aggregate condition of society, for which state-territory guarantees of order and the rules of publicly legitimate politics lose their binding character.[11]

This evolution of a transnational form of information exchange and collaboration between different nongovernmental organizations not identified

10 Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, 133.

11 Ulrich Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus - Antworten auf Globalisierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 174.

by territory or national culture is of course fostered and enabled by the shift from analogue to digital communication. The organizations Beck has in mind—Transparency International, Amnesty International, Medecins Sans Frontières—are bottom-up initiatives, operating regionally and transcontinentally, not striving for a world government or aiming to construct a coherent world order like the UN. On the contrary, the world society Beck tries to sketch wants to be a heterogeneous and mobile structure composed of single or group initiatives, of increasingly transcultural connections, and of boundary-breaking power relations—maybe even stimulated by the philosophical demand for molecularized power structures, for independent and culturally transversal associations. On the other hand, these nongovernmental organizations operate on the basis of common interests, affects, and competencies and the willingness to engage and to pursue well-defined political or humanitarian aims in a sort of practiced enlightenment. Beck's enthusiastic description of "glocal biographies of contact and crossing points of human beings"[12] expanding in a growing world society is not only applicable to the global North, but also to the global South. Today, however—some twenty years later—Beck's affirmation of these multidirectional digital connections of persons and organizations have to be read in a more ambiguous way. They realize a world society as an interest-guided and capitalized coherence of many sociopolitical actors and their power relations, contradicting or complementing the global order of nation-states and the world government of the UN; in this respect, they are very different from the kind of limitless rhizomatic connections and composite-cultural ensembles Deleuze & Guattari and Glissant have in mind.

The ones who come closest to the social multitudes appreciated by Deleuze and Guattari are the several billion internet users who affirm the technological offers of association and bring about dense sequences of aesthetic responses in social media and thereby a certain loss of individuality. They are already moving toward a becoming-everybody-and-nobody thanks to their analogue behavior in digital communication, often in the same lingua franca, the English idiom. And yet, in a late remark in *Postscript on the Society of Control*(1990),[13] Deleuze uses the term "dividual" in a negative sense to label this new form of human subjectivation, which was just becoming apparent in his lifetime. In this short text, he states that the processes of worlding no longer depend on the difference between single persons and social masses, but between

12 Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung?*, 178.

13 Gilles Deleuze, "Postscriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle: [Postscript on the society of control]," in *Pourparles 1972–1990*, ed. Gilles Deleuze (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 2003), 3–7.

dividuals and banks, data, and the samples of which they are part, in which they are participating (often without being aware of it). In a general sense, he draws attention to the flexibilization of persons under the digital regime of visibility and control, the compulsion to engage in lifelong learning, the substitution of the human signature by machine codes, and so forth. The fact that the relationships of single persons are captured by abstract and nonpersonal control powers and computing systems—and are registered, directed, and intricately lent enhanced value by them—causes Deleuze to outline new subjectivation modes: "Individuals become 'dividuals' and masses become samples, data, markets, or 'banks'".[14] In this late text, he takes a gloomy view, foreseeing the strategies of registration of the worldwide population by privatized and economicized regimes of control and the compulsion to be fluid, following the model of stock prices and currency devaluations. The persons appear involuntarily dividuated due to their being reduced to statistical values, to participation being imposed on them at all times, and to their abilities and performance being modularized according to market requirements. These dividual processes of worlding now encompass violently minorized subjects; the former positive evaluation of becoming all-world is now substituted for a pessimistic or even dystopian one.

Beck, for his part, also drops his description of a positive world society, pointing at powerful global economic players that render even nongovernmental politics dependent on market dynamics. He now differentiates between macroeconomic transnational operations, encompassing transfers of goods and finances, natural resources, and ecological dangers, from mesoeconomic and involuntary transnational operations, which include labor migration, refugee movements, the exportation of illegal goods, and poverty. He also criticizes the way that active and passive transnationalizations are distributed to different regions of the world. In view of this, he asks for a transnational interior politics. Being aware of the risks of digital control and security measures, of cultural homogenization and excessive management, he nevertheless hopes that, within the contemporary processes of worlding, "contours of a utopia of ecological democracy"[15] will begin to emerge.

In a more recent text (2010), Beck is even less optimistic, accentuating globally accepted social and economic inequalities as part of current processes of worlding. He states that the former territorial, political, economic, and socially established space has been replaced by the "ambivalence of co- and

14 Deleuze, "Postscriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle," 5.

15 Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung?*, 170.

multinational action spaces"[16] and a "contingency of non-congruent boundary constructions." Since these boundary constructions bring about unequal and unrecognized processes of worlding, he aims to examine all movements that penetrate the boundaries of nation-states. This new, expanded perspective results in the insight that the ability and possibility of crossing boundaries has today become a significant resource for survival, for social participation, for access to state welfare institutions, for general security and a better standard of life. However, social inequality may not even be the fault of a specific state, but an incidental consequence of political decisions made elsewhere that have consequences across nation-state boundaries: "Often it is the case that one exports the danger, either spatially [...] or temporally: to the future of unborn generations. One saves money by transporting the risk to somewhere where the security standards are low and the arm of the law does not reach [...] This applies to the export of torture as it does to the export of waste".[17] Here, Beck outlines significant political-economic processes of dividuation of risk and security without using this term. Those responsible for certain decisions are not the ones who bear their consequences; active and "passive transnationalization"[18] are distributed between different persons, states, or even continents: "The distribution of the 'latent incidental consequences' follows the pattern of exploiting marginal, peripheral regions where few rights exist, because in these places civil rights is a foreign term".[19]

For Beck, this does not mean that passive societies are not part of the processes of worlding: "Rather, the reverse is true: they are the worst affected owing to the scant resource of silence that they can offer: a fateful magnetism prevails between poverty, social vulnerability, corruption, and accumulation of danger".[20] He thus draws the conclusion that "the resource and capacity of 'boundary profit,' that is, of crossing nation-state boundaries or instrumentalising them for the accumulation of life opportunities, has become a key variable of social inequality in the globalised world".[21]

In the form of the "average migrant," Beck therefore discovers the consummate contemporary embodiment of the one who benefits from the boundary condition. As an "artist of the border," he explores an existence that, in its multiple economic, political, and cultural orientations and its often clandestine

16 Ulrich Beck, "Risikogesellschaft und die Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheiten," in *Große Armut, großer Reichtum: Zur Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheit*, ed. Ulrich Beck and Angelika Poferl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 24.

17 Ibid., 28.

18 Ibid., 32.

19 Ibid., 28.

20 Ibid.

21 Beck, "Risikogesellschaft und die Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheiten," 31.

movements, can be called the prototype of a becoming-imperceptible and becoming-impersonal, but in an involuntary way. Thus, the becoming all-world in the abovementioned philosophical sense receives a dramatic and endangered connotation today: "In these forms of life that are tested in border-crossing opportunities, different national-state spaces of social inequality intersect and interpenetrate in them".[22] Because of these increased political, economic, and cultural intersections, I would call these persons highly dividual incorporations of current processes of worlding.

From an intersectional perspective, these precarious forms of dividual existence reveal contradictory subject positions even within a single individual. In the lives of both border-crossers and average users of digital technology alike, they may provoke simultaneous experiences of subjugation and empowerment, of self-valuation and devaluation. These experiences depend on social contexts and cultural acceptance, on gender, race, or composite-cultural backgrounds: any of these factors may add to the preexisting forms of exploitative practice, and may thus produce increased personal dividuation and highly contradictory self-estimation in the process of becoming all-world.

3 Aesthetic Processes of Worlding

At this point in my reflections, I would like to turn to questions of aesthetics. The condition of aesthetic articulations and artistic practices is somehow analogous to that of human existences, depending on digital and composite-cultural production and distribution, but also on inequalities concerning their reception and estimation.

Today, we are informed that the media communicability of the artistically in-demand, the increased circulation of artworks, and their digital advertising mean that practically no artistic practice can be understood as fully independent and as an individual creation, unless the desire is to situate it in a local tradition, far from any technological reach or very much outside of the art market. Since aesthetic expressions are digitally accessible and often downloadable, processes of thematic repetition, artistic appropriation, and targeted adaptation can be observed everywhere. Even an art composition conceived with difference production and criticism in mind refers to antecedent forms of expression and necessarily dividuates itself, if only in becoming part of a certain aesthetic tradition.

22 Ibid., 32.

Yet the artistic practices differ in the intensity of their repetition and transformation, depending upon their critical approach: self-reflexive artistic creations enact their temporal conditionality and aesthetic non-concludability, evoke their artistic references, and refer to their cultural situatedness and possible blind spots. In so doing, they set free daring artistic articulations, negotiations of the relation between the (in)dividual and the common, and thereby jolt awake unseen processes of worlding. With regard to this, I would like to quote Okwui Enwezor on the notion that art from the global South, more than that of the global North, consists in composite-cultural expressions and formal amalgamations of art practices from different corners of the world—prompting further aesthetic fractalization and evoking composite-cultural intertwining as a form of becoming all-world in Glissant's sense.

Interestingly, the adaptations of aesthetic expressions and cross-cultural compositions found in film can be observed in two directions: Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo's wonderful film *Soleil Ô*, which portrays African immigrants and their struggle for survival in the French "motherland" in the '70s, their search for work in Paris, and their rejection is dramatized in an experimental aesthetic style. It is a fantastic example of a demanding aesthetic dividuation: it adapts the film style of the French New Wave, with its effects of distanciation, jump cuts, and surprising audiovisual disparities, in order to create a sarcastic portrayal of the self-confident and racist French attitudes of the time.

Prior to this adaptation, another aesthetic appropriation changed the French style of narrating films: Godard's first feature film, *A bout de souffle/Breathless* (1959) was inspired by the film *Moi, un noir*, a 1958 ethnofiction directed by Jean Rouch in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. It depicts young Nigerian immigrants looking for work in the capital. They call themselves Edward G. Robinson, Eddie Constantine, and Tarzan due to their admiration for these cinematic characters. The film itself blurs the line between fiction and reality, narrating the dreams of these young men as idealized movie stars. The main character of Godard's film, performed by Jean-Paul Belmondo, is created in analogy to these dreamy African city strollers, and thereby introduces a completely new dividuated film aesthetic. The New Wave movement is identified with French film aesthetics up to today.

Filmmakers from African countries often complain that filmmaking is still dependent not only on Western technologies and financing, but also on aesthetic choices and norms of narration that claim to be European and prescribe dramaturgies, TV formats, and forms of acting. These obligations have been criticized, for example, in Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film *Aristotle's Plot* (UK, 1995). His filmic and philosophical parody engages in an intramedial game with the

genre conventions that reflect "Africa," while at the same time proclaiming that Africa is no longer to be found solely within a geographic continent. Created on commission for the British Film Institute to mark the hundredth birthday of the cinema, with the idea being that the Cameroonian filmmaker should provide an "African" contribution, the film asks what might constitute the Africanness of a feature film shot in Africa: perhaps folklore-style images with zebras and giraffes?

Bekolo problematizes the action film genre, its stereotypical settings and heroes, and its narrative laws—that is, Aristotle's poetics and their adaptation in Hollywood, the precepts of unity of space and time, and the unfolding of the plot through mounting tension, climax, and catastrophe. He proclaims that these structural elements cannot be translated into the African context. In that context, no linear development can be represented, only stillness, dead ends, or cyclical recurrence.

His film shows young people lounging around and killing time by watching US action movies and projecting themselves onto protagonists such as Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Bruce Lee, and others. The filmmaker, however, an ET (extraterrestrial) displaced to Africa, travels through Africa with rolls of film, seeking to gain adherents for his aesthetically challenging auteur cinema, provoking a misunderstanding of "cineaste" as "silly ass." The aesthetic allusions in this film language include both US genre cinema and the French New Wave alike: the protagonist, calling himself a cineaste, is looking for a specifically African film language. The conclusion that the film inevitably reaches is that the aesthetic of African film is a dividual one, oscillating between French-European and US-American dictates, and the search for its own filmic expression corresponds to its situatedness in nonspecific African surroundings. The film deplores the lack of aesthetic independence and the lag in developing a specifically African process of worlding. Bekolo sarcastically comments that Aristotle is relevant to the African situation in one respect only: because Africa has had more than its fair share of massacres and misery, it is particularly good for the production of sympathy and fear that Aristotle demands; Africa is the continent of catharsis par excellence.

Even Ugandan video artists who work independently in the international film market produce videos that can be considered affirmative reenactments of standardized film genres, of aesthetic conventions and modes of narration in a heightened, dividual way. The film production center Wakaliwood in Kampala, located in a modest area of the capital, fabricates action movies at low costs: these are combinations of US action movie patterns with kung fu scenes, situated amid African scenery, played by local actors and oriented toward a local urban audience. They often have no original soundtrack, but are dubbed

with a voiceover explaining what is shown. In their composite-cultural character, they bring about an aesthetic process of worlding in an act of social and symbolic empowerment. Their undertakings have received high acclaim in the German press. By inventing a small aesthetic difference through accentuating the African context, repeating and exaggerating filmic stereotypes, and thus producing a specific dividuation, a new form of social expression and fan community was born within the urban landscape of Kampala and beyond.

Big art exhibitions can also be characterized as dividual processes of worlding today, since renowned biennials and art fairs have gained international attention and multiplied to the point that their programs and the organization of their displays may unintentionally respond to one another. They are compelled to be aware of each other and to resonate with each other in the art they select, in their aesthetico-political difference making, curatorial presentation, marketing policy, and educational side programs. They have to place the artworks in a relation of responding to the same or related artworks in other exhibitions, which in turn impacts them, the exhibitions, the exhibitions' resonance with others, and the worldwide art scene. They contribute to the processes of worlding in the sense that they intensify processes of aesthetic, cultural, symbolic, and economic exchange, the travel of persons interested in art, digital communication of art practices worldwide, and the becoming-dividual of artistic expressions on all levels. Moreover, they boost aesthetic dividuation: the more the density of the biennials increases, the more a certain aesthetic homogenization of art exhibitions is part of the actual processes of worlding.

A rather modest example of this tendency could be observed some years ago thanks to the voguish exhibition of the artworks of William Kentridge that were encountered at different art institutions of Germany and South Africa more or less at the same time. Kentridge's artistic interventions animated and recontextualized historical German sculptures and paintings in Frankfurt's Museum Liebighaus; they interacted with South African dancers and drummers in his performances in Johannesburg; they changed the atmosphere of the imperial Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin by projecting an impressive brass music procession along the walls and filling the rooms with haunting sounds. By aesthetically connecting these distant places and provoking echoes and even transcontinental resonances in the minds of some visitors, they brought about new aesthetic experiences, insights into the lives of people living in South Africa, and dividual processes of worlding transversal to the bourgeois art institutions of the global North.

In recent years, the artworks of Kader Attia have also been simultaneously encountered in different cultural places: in the German context of documenta 13 in Kassel, in museums in Frankfurt and Berlin, and at Dak'Art in Dakar, as

well as at the La Colonie performance center in Paris and in different places in the Maghreb. While he has been presented and praised as a postcolonial artist, Attia's contribution has been to push artistic research further and to revisit the aesthetico-political claim of "reparation," which in fact changed—though once again partly homogenizing—the atmosphere and self-understanding of art institutions worldwide. Since this claim went hand in hand with Felwine Sarr's and Benedicte Savoy's claims of restitution of non-Western artworks to their countries of origin, it stimulated new and important aesthetico-political processes of worlding across all continents.

In this regard, it is instructive that certain important art events, such as the Sharjah Biennial, the Fespaco film festival in Burkina Faso, and the Dak'Art event in Dakar, try to assert a distinctive character by dedicating themselves to the presentation of specific and "regional"—Arabic and African, respectively—art productions, while nevertheless contrasting them with artistic statements from other regions, mainly regions of the global South. Having observed the Dakar Biennial for several years, I can recount that I saw a certain amount of artwork exposing interesting differences with the aesthetic articulations known in the West. Either they referred to African history—like the paintings of Senegalese artist Abdoulay Diallo, who tried to reappropriate the drawings that German ethnographer Leo Frobenius asked to copy in different African countries at the beginning of the twentieth century—and combined them with actual motives, or the artists worked with minor materials, such as recycled crown caps pieced together to form huge wall tapestries, as seen in the work of El Anatsui; by assembling and combining these disdained objects, he creates a sort of general articulation and an impressive aesthetic work in the abovementioned philosophical sense. This art practice may initiate a new aesthetic experience, like the *arte povera* installation of Ghanaian litter by Ibrahim Mahama at the DAAD-Galerie in Berlin (2019), which evoked the colonial past and ongoing violence toward people from Africa. In so doing, these art practices widen the realm of aesthetic expression and its symbolization of the precarious processes of worlding.

As a sort of conclusion, I would like to add that, in our current epistemological and aesthetic research at the University of Bayreuth, particular interest attaches to African art practices that engage in self-reflexive and composite-cultural statements based on the insight that, thanks to technology-based communication, aesthetic and conceptual repetitions and differentiations are inevitable, thus providing an explicitly dividual character to theoretical statements as well as to artistic works. Nevertheless, we should be cautious and not understand these art practices or philosophical statements as unidirectional appropriations of Western art languages or philosophical concepts. Who could venture

to decide whether an abstract Indian painting is a continuation of US expressionism or a reference to Japanese abstract traditions, or whether it draws on the internet, or on all of these things at the same time? Reversing the direction of the gaze, certain forms of aesthetic expression classified as European could be recognized as borrowings from colonialized cultures; the role of African sculptures in revitalizing modern painting is well known. Aesthetic expressions should thus be decoded as the results of multidirectional orientations and of appropriations from different cultural and media sources.

With this caution in mind, it might be possible to discover that the South African concept of *ubuntu*—which is a compound of *ubu-*, to signify the unfolded entirety of the world, and *-ntu*, to signify its unfolding in human actors' ways of thinking and speaking—is a precursor to the new concept of dividuation. In a general sense, it would be meaningful to amplify our perspective and our historical frame in order to discover and to heighten the long-lasting cultural entanglements in the aesthetic and conceptual realm between the continents. We should not stop searching for ever more complex forms of artistic dividuation so as to include as many speakers as possible. And we should test new articulations and perspectives in order to bring about the intertwined and permanently changing character of our shared worldliness and our necessary reliance on the ongoing actualization of processes of worlding.

References

Beck, Ulrich. *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus - Antworten auf Globalisierung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997.

Beck, Ulrich. "Risikogesellschaft und die Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheiten." In *Große Armut, großer Reichtum: Zur Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheit*. Edited by Ulrich Beck and Angelika Poferl, 19–40. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle: [Postscript on the society of control]." In *Pourparles 1972–1990*. Edited by Gilles Deleuze. Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 2003.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. Mille plateaux:* [*A thousand plateaus. Capitalism and schizophrenia*]. Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1980.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poétique de la relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

Glissant, Édouard. *Traité du Tout-Monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993.

Ott, Michaela. *Dividuationen: Theorien der Teilhabe:* [i2018. Dividuations. Theories of Participation. Palgrave Macmillian]. Berlin: b_books, 2015.

CHAPTER 4

Upbeat: Artwork or Artifact: Reframing Objects in Ethnographic Museums

Sophie Lembcke

1 Unbelievable Treasures: on Decolonizing Museums

In the Western hemisphere, museums are privileged spaces for producing, canonizing, and performing cultural memory. Most of these museums were established in the late nineteenth century—the peak of European nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism—when loads of cultural objects were brought to Europe from the colonies. Most of Germany's ethnographic museums were founded between 1861 and 1911. There are about fifty ethnographic and archaeological museums in Germany; the museums of Berlin alone have approximately 500,000 non-European objects in storage, mostly coming to Europe before WWI. These things usually came to Europe through *Sammlungsmissionen* (collecting expeditions) and colonial war booty. Sacred artifacts were appropriated mainly by Christian missionaries.[1] Many other European countries, as well as the US, also host such museums, which face similar challenges to decolonizing: i.e., clearly stating how they were and still are entangled in colonialism, stepping away from their epistemic authority, involving the source communities of objects, and returning seized objects to museums in African countries. Recently there have been increased discussions in various African countries about how to reimagine colonial-era collections, e.g., in the transnational network MuseumFutures.[2]

Returning objects is a crucial step for decolonization as the colonial translocation of material culture and cultural heritage from all over the world to the Western hemisphere disrupted cultural and ancestral relations and destroyed

1 Sources on illicit acquisition in Germany, e.g., Holfelder, 2019; Hicks, 2020; Aly, 2021; Savoy, 2021.

2 In 2021, these museums participated in exchanges about African museology: Musée national de Guinée in Guinea, National Museum of Kenya, Steve Biko Centre South Africa, Uganda Museum, Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art in Nigeria, Musée Théodore Monod IFAN Ch. A. Diop in Senegal. See Moura, 2022, for a focus on colonial repercussions in the newly founded museum in Dakar Musée des Civilisations Noires (MCN).

local knowledge. This disruption was recently described as "epistemicide."[3] German activists and NGOs, like the Berlin-based groups NoHumboldt21 and Berlin Postkolonial, have placed research into the migration and provenance of these objects on the agenda. They continue to shape the discussion about museums in Germany, which now centers on returning objects and repatriation of human remains.[4] For instance, museums, primarily state institutions in Europe, could contribute through international cooperation and restitutions of objects and knowledge.[5] As a first step in this direction, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy propose to publish museum inventories, as being unable to consult inventories greatly hinders pleas for restitution.[6] It is a call for replacing violent power relations with a "relational ethic"[7] and "conviviality,"[8] a crucial concept of decolonization relevant to museum reconfiguration. Conviviality describes the idea of living together with differences and links various perspectives, human and non-human and thus seek to address the relations between them. Nonetheless, this concept undermines all variants of essentialist politics that aim to assert and define categorical boundaries. Thus, the concept of conviviality is initially

3 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*. (London: Routledge 2018).

4 The debate about restitution took a turn for the better with Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy's report *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage—Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018). This report explores "the chronological, juridical, methodological and financial framework in which the return of African cultural heritage items can be effectuated back to Africa" (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 5).

5 Productive examples of such collaboration are the Invisible Inventories project of the Kenyan Nest Collective and German museums in Frankfurt and Cologne; see their catalogue Nur Goni & Hopkins, 2021. In 2020, Peju Layiwola curated an exhibition of Benin Bronzes as part of the Cologne museum's project RESIST! The Art of Resistance. International cooperation was also at the heart of the Humboldt Lab Tanzania, see Ivanov & Weber-Sinn, 2018.

6 Some of the objects kept in Berlin are accessible online via the Staatliche Museen Berlin, http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus. Museum MARKK in Hamburg, Germany, has published its inventory at this URL: https://markk-hamburg.de/files/media/2020/07/MARKK-AF-bis-1920-Neu.pdf. However, some objects still need to be added to these digital archives because they are heavily contaminated with biocide preservatives like arsenic trioxide. It is neither known precisely what is stored there—and to find out about or digitize objects in such a way that people around the globe can get an idea of the archives, one has to take extensive safety precautions—nor do museum experts know exactly how their collections were brought together.

7 Bénédicte Savoy & Felwine Sarr, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle.* (Paris: Philippe Rey/seuil, 2018).

8 Ivan Illich, *Tools for conviviality*, (Glasgow: Calder and Boyars, 1973). Paul Gilroy, *After empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?*, (London: Routledge, 2004). Rodríguez, Encarnacion Gutiérrez, "Entangled Migrations-The Coloniality of Migration and Creolizing Conviviality," *Mecila Working Paper Series* 35. (April 2021). Viola Milton & Winston Mano, "Afrokology and the Right to Communicate in Africa." Javnost–The Public 29, no. 1 (2022), 33–49.

in tension with concepts of *worlding*, such as those advocated by Édouard Glissant in his concept of *cultures composites*[9] with reference to Gilles Deleuze, and which this volume explores· In a philosophical tradition, they highlight notions of worlding that derive from de-individualizations and are produced through a becoming minoritarian. Deleuze conceived of becoming a minoritarian as an emancipatory practice, pointing to the dominating effects of *Dividuation*.[10] In this sense, worlding also stands for a process in which different aesthetic articulations are remixed and no longer reveal clearly identifiable traces of a specific origin or provenance. Both approaches are reflected in the efforts to decolonize and reconfigure museums.

In recent decades, museums have received renewed attention. Postcolonial States shifted their focus towards nation-building and their cultural heritage, and Europe was globalizing with new momentum. Against this backdrop of global change, European museums advertised that they would house the world's cultural heritage. If late capitalism values the singular and peculiar object as especially valuable, it is no surprise that ethnographic museums then "discover" great artworks within their collections. The debate started to be increasingly about particularly valuable and representative objects and less about material culture. How did colonial museums distinguish a "masterpiece" from a "banal" artifact of material culture? What was the function of a display? Which colonial legacies are transmitted through this distinction between art and artifact, and particular methods of displaying objects?

My research on the link between displays and the distinction of artworks and artifacts started with Damian Hirst's fictional museum of so-called "world cultures"—a model influential in the debate on reconfiguring colonial museums into postcolonial museums. In Venice 2017, Hirst showcased a collection of "ancient" objects as *Treasures of the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. They were displayed at Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, the two private museums of collector François Pinault. This essay takes as its example the displaying methods of three recent exhibitions—in New York 2012, Venice 2017, and Berlin 2017—that juxtaposed objects of African and European provenance.

The extent to which the two approaches–Worlding and Conviviality–are at odds in the debate about the reconfiguration of museums, or complement each other in practice, is illustrated by the debate over the appropriation of an object in Hirst's exhibition: *Golden Head* (*Female*), an appropriation of a famous Yoruba copper alloy casting from the centuries-old African city of Ife (Yoruba: Ilé-Ifẹ̀) in modern-day Nigeria. Only scant visual traces, in need of

9 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1997).

10 Michaela Ott, *Dividuations: Theories of Participation*. (Berlin: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

deciphering, give hints to the object's provenance beyond its remix and reinterpretation by a Western artist, who thus became the author of a (fictional) cultural heritage already situated amid translation and reframing practices—indeed, a very *hypercultural*[11] way of looking at entangled histories and *dividual aesthetics*.[12]

This example allows us to trace one of the trajectories of the controversy: As long as differences are relevant resources in capitalism, stakeholders will exploit them. Furthermore, Hirst's work constantly raises the question of the salability of art—who ultimately benefits financially from aesthetic articulations, how (in)dividual is authorship? What aesthetics are associated with marketability? There is a long tradition and debate about this in the Western art tradition, from the juridification of genius to the appropriations of the avant-garde. Hence, this essay is also about the virulent question of how much of the Western tradition of production and mediation is being smuggled into Global Art. Prolific critics like Okwui Enwezor[13] and Chika Okeke-Agulu[14] have elaborated on how a *globalized art field*[15] should respect differentiated cultural heritage. Okwui Enwezor delineates trajectories like "oceanic lines"[16] and Christina Sharpe promotes "wake work"[17] for the entangled global art worlds in the aftermath of the colonial trade of enslaved people.

Contributing to a postcolonial reconfiguration of museums between worlding und conviviality, this essay points out within the recent exhibitions mentioned beforehand, how objects of non-Western provenance oscillated between the two fields of art and ethnography. These fields are stratified by different institutions, collectors, scientists, and other gatekeepers who categorize these objects and claim the power to interpret them. There is a consensus in social sciences that the separation and differentiation of the art field and the

11 Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperkulturalität*, (Berlin: Merve 2005).

12 Ott, *Dividuations*.

13 Okwui Enwezor, "The postcolonial constellation: Contemporary art in a state of permanent transition," in *Antinomies of Art and culture Modernity, postmodernity, contemporaneity*, eds. Nancy Condee, Okwui Enwezor & Terry Smith (Durham: Duke University Press 2009), 207–234.

14 Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Assessments," in *Is art history global?* ed. James Elkins, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 202–204.

15 Peter Weibel & Andrea Buddensieg. *Contemporary art and the museum: A global perspective*. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007).

16 Okwui Enwezor, Katy Sigel & Ulrich Wilmes, *Postwar: Kunst zwischen Pazifik und Atlantik, 1945–1965*, (München: Prestel Verlag 2016),17.

17 Christina Sharpe, *In the wake: On blackness and being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

ethnographic field are crucial when it comes to placing objects within a system of value and meaning.[18]

Such differentiation is enabled by a particular technology of vision: displays. Displays translate objects and frame their meaning, materialize structural differentiations and make them tangible, thus transmitting them through time and space. By directing the visitors' gaze, displays lock exhibited things and museum visitors into fixed positions and silence a thing's articulation. In museums, an object's meaning cannot be distinguished from its mediation. Hence, contesting displays seems crucial for a reconfiguration of museums.

The discussion of how a non-European object is to be displayed—whether as a representative artifact or as autonomous artwork presented without sociohistorical context—is ongoing, but the very act of displaying such objects in museums is also questioned. For instance, some things were never supposed to be preserved or were sacred and thus only to be shown to an inclusive circle of people. Reconnecting the art field with ethnographic collections could provoke discussions on display methods and the handling of objects in former ethnographic museums, as Modern and Contemporary art is concerned with the many possibilities of criticizing institutions and finding innovative answers to the much larger question of what art is or could be. In addition, recent curatorial or artistic research practices deal with epistemological violence and undoing colonial legacies. By studying the link between the displays and epistemological power, this essay thus considers the sociopolitical outcomes of the distinction between "art" and "artifact," especially in directing the *White gaze*[19] and sustaining White supremacy.

Hirst's exhibition concept was based on a breathtaking fiction: two thousand years ago, the ship Apistos (Greek for "Unbelievable"), laden with objects, had sunk in the Indian Ocean on its way to the private museum of collector Cif Amotan II (an anagram for "I am fiction"). Amotan had purportedly collected these objects for a temple in honor of a sun god named Aton. Damien Hirst was asked to bankroll the salvaging of the treasure and assemble the objects in an exhibition. According to the story, Hirst's crew found ancient statues

18 Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire.* Paris : Ed. du Seuil, 1992; Andreas Reckwitz, *The invention of creativity: Modern society and the culture of the new*. Cambridge/Malden Polity, 2017; James Clifford, *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

19 The term *White gaze* encompasses a Eurocentric normative perspective that produces value and meaning from a White position of power. In contrast, non-White people are placed in a position of the "other,", and their voices are excluded from discourse.

long overgrown with marine fauna on the seafloor and amid the coral reefs. To make the story more plausible, spectacular underwater videos of the salvaging operation were recorded and made available on streaming services. For the exhibition, Hirst employed very advanced sculpting techniques, especially with regard to 3D rendering, printing, and serial production on various scales and with different materials.

Especially prominent became the sculpture *Golden Head* (*Female*). The famous Ife head demonstrates casting on a very high level, bearing witness to a unique artistic sensibility and technological knowledge of processing materials. The exhibition catalogue elaborates:

> Stylistically similar to the celebrated works from the Kingdom of Ife (which prospered c.1100–1400 CE in modern Nigeria), this head may be a copy of a terracotta or brass original. Extraordinarily, it is only a little over a century since the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) was so surprised by the discovery of the Ife heads that he deduced that the lost island of Atlantis had sunk off the Nigerian coast, enabling descendants of the Greek survivors to make the skillfully executed works.[20]

German anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) took pictures of the Olokun Head, one of the sculptures shown to him by a "guardian priest" at Ife in 1910, and published them in his book *Und Afrika sprach*.[21] Hirst's exhibition catalogue essentially perpetuates this gaze. It resonates quite frankly with a colonial assumption about African timelessness and underdevelopment. Already Frobenius "deducted" about the "sunken culture" of Atlantis and the "descendants of the Greek survivors" that African artists could not have created this artwork of "marvelous beauty."

The Ife heads' naturalistic aesthetic and carving techniques contradicted stereotypical European notions of African art from the early twentieth century. Until they learned about the Olokun Head, Europeans considered African art to be so-called fetish objects made primarily from wood and clay. Obsessed with the myth of Atlantis, Frobenius consequently thought that one of the Yoruba heads must represent Poseidon, the ancient Greek deity of the ocean. Moreover, it was produced by descendants of a "sunken" culture from the Mediterranean: "wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrusted with

20 Amie Corry et al., *Treasures from the wreck of the Unbelievable: Damien Hirst*, (Venice: Palazzo Grassi. 2017), 23.

21 Leo Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach*. Originally published in 1912, p. 301; an English translation, *The Voice of Africa*, appeared in 1913. (London: Hutchinson 1914), 301.

FIGURE 4.1
The Ife Head. Head representing ruler (with elaborate headdress) made of brass, 35 × 12, 50 × 15 cm, 5, 10 kg

a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa's Poseidon! Profoundly stirred, I stood for many minutes before this remnant of the erstwhile Lord and Ruler of the Empire of Atlantis."[22] In a racist manner, he denied African producers' ownership of their complex artistry: "I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much classic loveliness"[23] Despite Frobenius's misconception, the Ife sculptures were the first objects from Africa that he did not regard as objects of material culture but appreciated as extraordinary artworks. Through his writings, the sculptures became visible to a broader audience.[24]

Alongside the Ife Head, Hirst appropriated and remixed artworks from diverse sources, creating an intertextual puzzle of visual references to various times, places, and cultures in almost all of the "treasures." William Blake's miniature picture *The Ghost of a Flea* welcomed the audience to the atrium in the form of an eighteen-meter-high statue named *Demon with Bowl.* A sculpture shows Andromeda—daughter of the Ethiopian king Cepheus in Greek mythology—chained to a rock and attacked by Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* jumping out of Hokusai's *Great Wave*. Cultural icons like Mickey Mouse, a sphinx,

22 Frobenius, *voice of Africa*, 98.
23 Frobenius, *voice of Africa*.
24 Editha Platte, *Bronze head from Ife*, (London: British Museum Press, 2010).

and Transformers toys were found alongside the now-infamous *Golden Head* (*Female*). The "salvaged" marble bust of musician Pharrell Williams is based on the golden mask of pharaoh Tutankhamun; a bust titled *the collector*, resembling Hirst himself; and the sculpture *Severed Head of Medusa,* which is a 3D version of Medusa's head as painted by Caravaggio.

Hirst's remixing of cultural objects of all kinds has been criticized for omitting the traces of non-European cultures, especially in the case of the Ife-Head. Given the relevance of visibility in recent decades, especially in political and economic struggles for social participation and resources, as well as for the dismantling of discrimination, this at least shows a lack of sensitivity on Hirst's part to this mechanism of culture. It is precisely the invisibility of traces, which has a tradition in Western art history, that needs to be considered in Hirst's remixes–also with regard to the tension between conviviality and worlding. Hirst's "treasures" raise the question of where the boundary between "art" and "artifact" is drawn today and how this is linked to Western display methods and the White gaze.

Elaborating on the persistence of colonial structures within Hirst's appropriations and cultural remixes, this essay delineates three contributing factors in the signification and valorization of non-Western objects within a Western framework: displays, gatekeepers, and their juxtaposition with other objects.

Curators Susan Vogel and Yaëlle Biro have explained that the categories "art" and "artifact" were instrumental in representing the "other" of Western modernity. In the 1980s, Vogel stressed that display technologies play an essential role in reading objects. In 2012, Biro, a former researcher at the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) and curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, proposed that ethnographic museums and galleries of modern art play a crucial role in distinguishing objects of African provenance as "art" or "artifact.". Focusing on a juxtaposition of an Italian putto and a sculpture of a royal from the Benin Kingdom at the Bode-Museum Berlin in 2017, this essay analyzes reframings of non-European objects as historical works of world art.

2 Art or Artifact? Deconstructing the Power of Displays in the 1980s

In her widely discussed exhibition ART/artifact (New York, 1988), Vogel delineated the historical development of displaying non-European objects: from wonderful trophies in aristocratic *curiosity rooms* (German: *Wunderkammer*),[25]

25 In general, such curiosity rooms had most often been located in Europe, at the homes of wealthy elites and royalty, since the sixteenth century, and are nowadays considered

and as research objects in natural history and anthropological museums, to objects for aesthetic contemplation in art museums.[26] Against this historical backdrop, Vogel curated three rooms where she had installed selected objects in different ways to confuse and disrupt visitors' biased perspectives. To make her case, she purposely "misplaced" an ordinary hunting net from the Zande People (Congo) and a needle case from the Lozi People (Zambia). She displayed them as if they were modern artworks. In contrast to this, Vogel hid out-of-the-ordinary *vigango* (singular *kigango*: memorial effigies, Mijikenda, southeastern Kenya; pictures in Vogel)[27] [28] from Hampton University's African art collection in each of the different styles of room, i.e., both in the *Wunderkammer*-style room and as artifacts in a natural history display, but also in the "art gallery display" and on pedestals in the "art museum display."[29] In this way, Vogel confronted the visitors' assumptions of both African material culture and modern art, highlighting the signifying function of displays—especially to visitors who did not have any background knowledge about the exhibited objects. Vogel's curatorial research on the different displays raised intriguing questions regarding constructing a Westernized and White gaze: To what extent do displays perpetuate or undermine biased perspectives on these objects?

Further studies in the 1980s and 1990s have shown that during the founding period of ethnographic museums, notions of unilinear evolutionism shaped scientific research and their presentation of collections. For instance, Herbert Spencer's theory of Social Evolutionism assumed a hierarchic "Survival of the Fittest" (*The Principles of Biology*, 1864) when allegedly distinct cultural groups clash. Hence ethnographic research in museums supported a hierarchization of cultures based on their assumed stage of progress, from "primitive," "wild," and "traditional" towards a thriving "civilization." I.e., from a chaotic cradle to an organized and electrified assembly line. Accordingly, objects of

---

forerunners to natural-history, art-history, and ethnographic museums (Pomian, 1998; Bredekamp, 2000; Dolezel, 2019). Their encyclopedic inventory represented the knowledge of those days. Vogel explains: "Such 'curiosity' collections rarely separated botanical, zoological, and geological specimens from cultural artifacts, and often mixed together objects from different places" (1988, p. 12). The collected peculiar objects were embedded in a complex system of references, and constantly changed their places within the display following either the mythopoetic or scientific views of their collector.

26 Anna Laura Jones, "Exploding canons: The anthropology of museums," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22, (October 1993), 201–220.

27 Susan Vogel, *Art/Artifact: African art in anthropology collection*. (New York: Center for African art 1988), 146–152.

28 See also Udvardy, Giles & Mitsanze, 2003, and Nevadomsky, 2018 for basic information on their trade to the US and the still ongoing restitution debate.

29 See pictures in Vogel, *Art/Artifact*, 197, 205

non-European provenance were displayed as representative of peoples viewed as less modern than White Europeans. Moreover, colonialism depicted African peoples as locked in a state of "naïve children" that seemed reminiscent of Europe's distant past. Johannes Fabian elaborated in his seminal work *Time and the Other* (1983) that colonial ideology denied non-European people a coevalness, whereas "primitive" tools and artifacts were used as evidence for their "underdevelopment." Hence, museums preferred to collect and exhibit artifacts that appeared "primitive" and "authentic."

Subsequently, ethnographic museums opened their doors and conveyed their biased research to a broader audience. They then quickly adopted some of the display techniques of art exhibitions, such as presenting individual objects on a pedestal, which gave them additional space and dramatic lighting. In his seminal works *The Exhibitionary Complex* (1988) and *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), Tony Bennett explored how museums conveyed colonial knowledge to a broader audience. Firstly, in analyzing mostly British museums around 1900, Bennett found that by displaying objects as representative of such "primitive" modes of production, as well as by superimposing this "underdevelopment" on their producers, their audience was enabled to regard capitalist and industrialized modes of production as progressive and superior to others. Secondly, he stresses that museums shared a distinct display method with department stores established in that same era. Vitrines presented "exotic" objects like goods in a store and in regional, thematic, or chronological order. They thus constructed a strict regime of consumerist "technologies of vision." Moreover, the typical architecture of these places, with their mazelike rows of vitrines and elevated galleries, allowed visitors an overview and orientation and the opportunity to observe fellow visitors. According to Bennett, these places educated visitors on how to behave in an orderly manner—not touching the items in the vitrines and looking at them in a particular way. He argues that visitors would identify with fellow visitors and distance themselves from the exhibited cultures. Eventually, visitors would form a group, a White (petite) bourgeoisie gazing at its displayed "other." By framing the Others as "primitive" and "underdeveloped," museums invited Europeans to regard themselves as White and superior.

Visiting Vogel's exhibition, one might recognize that certain displays emphasize perceptions of coevalness, chronology, and progress. Hence Vogel's curatorial research supports Fabian and Bennett's finding that museum displays contributed to an overall colonial culture of *othering* and *denial of coevalness.* In this respect, museums played a crucial role in enforcing the colonial regime by excluding dissenting voices and enforcing hegemonic positions. It could be argued that their displays are rooted in the colonial project and furthered

approval for the coercive extraction of resources, the enslavement of Black and indigenous people, the exploitation of their workforce in the colonies, and the imperial domination of the African continent.

However, as the victors write history, it is important to stress that this violent economic and political order sparked protests in Europe, especially by socialist parties around 1900: e.g., the German Social Democratic Party (August Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg); at the First Pan-African Conference in London 1900, under the aegis of Henry Sylvester-Williams and attended by W. E. B. DuBois; and left-wing artists, like the surrealists who issued a clear condemnation of colonialism in their letter against the Exposition Coloniale Internationale fair held in Paris in 1931.[30] In the face of anti-colonial resistance, the contribution of museums seems all the more important for colonialism's ideological legitimation.

Nonetheless, ethnographic museums have traditionally been devoted exclusively to Eurocentric and Western worldviews. All other objects that occupy this space are perceived as foreign and different and—detached from their initial social meaning—must have their meaning explained to museum visitors. This perceived foreignness and need for explanation make them utterly subject to the narrative of the exhibitions, the displays' translation and framing, and the biased assumptions of the visitors.

Apparently, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* smuggles colonial worldviews and technologies of vision into a contemporary exhibition and, thus, normalizing them in art discourse. In his fictional story, the ancient cultures have disappeared, and wealthy collectors preserve their cultural heritage in a kind of *savior anthropology.* Colonial techniques than postmodern display experiments much more inspire Hirst's display method. His vitrines contain coins, cups, and corroded bowls, as well as jewelry belonging to the sailors, arranged typologically like ethnographic artifacts. Within the framework of an ethnographic museum of world cultures, this arrangement allows for comparisons of similarities and differences. Within the field of contemporary art, arranging these objects based solely on aesthetic principles like similarity and repetition, the assemblages refuse any logical rationale or discursive meaning but convey a notion of availability to both the gaze of visitors and their wallets. The ensemble resembles those vitrines filled with pills, medical demonstration models, seashells, sharks, and skeletons with which Hirst started his career, already reflecting on the salability of art. Hirst exhibited the "treasures" in a private museum and gallery space, thus as part of the art market: *Golden Head* (*Female*) has an (invisible) price tag, and is available to buyers, like all the other

30 A copy of the letter is available on a website dedicated to André Breton: "Ne visitez pas l'Exposition Coloniale" https://www.andrebreton.fr/work/56600100711050.

objects of remixed cultural heritage. Therefore, Hirst adds to the notion that cultural heritage is up for sale—if you have that kind of money.

3 The Beginning of a New Era: Displaying African Art and the European Avant-garde in the USA

Reflecting on the fact that Hirst's exhibition coincided with one of the most prominent art biennials, the following explores his gatekeeping role in transferring museum exhibition displays to the sphere of contemporary art. Hirst's translation and reframing of the *Olokun Head* lack critical distance from the fact that this *shared history*, exemplified by his "treasures," is constructed from a Eurocentric position. This perspective is embedded in museum displays, as Vogel and Bennet argue. It has been argued that not only do displays reconfigure African objects like the *vigango*, but institutions like galleries and museums, as well as key figures like artists and art dealers, also play a role in categorizing them. To further elaborate on the role of gatekeepers in an object's oscillation between the categories of "art" and "artifact," I revisit Biro's 2012 curatorial research project African Art—New York and the Avant Garde.[31] Mapping the art trade and collecting scene of the 1910s and '20s New York, this exhibition explored what Biro would later explicate in an article on a Parisian art dealer: "During the first decades of the twentieth century, the appreciation of African artifacts in the West shifted dramatically: from colonial trophies and ethnographic specimens, they became modernist icons worthy of aesthetic contemplation."[32] Biro elaborates that this categorization is related to whether an object is traded on the art market or collected by an ethnographic museum, i.e., the field which interprets an object.

Biro divided the exhibition African Art—New York and the Avant Garde (2012) into four sections. These sections were organized chronologically, starting with the aftermath of the famous 1913 Armory Show, where European avant-garde art was introduced to the New York public, and ending with the reception of African objects by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.[33] In Europe, Parisian avant-garde artists were the first to show interest in reinterpreting and

31 The Metropolitan Museum of Art website provides further information on the exhibit: https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2012/african-art-new-york-and-the-avant-garde. Biro also published the findings of her curatorial research in a special edition of *Tribal Art* magazine in 2012.

32 Yaëlle Biro & Smithsonian Libraries, "African art, New York, and the avant-grade: Exhibitions overview," *Tribal Art: Special Issue 3* (2012a), 10.

33 The four sections were: "1914: America Discovers African Art"; "1915–19: Acquiring a Taste for African Art"; "1919–23: A Move Toward Institutions"; and "The Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection and the Harlem Renaissance."

remixing objects of African provenance (collected by the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, established in 1882; today, its collection is hosted at the Musée du Quai Branly). This contact gave the European avant-garde an enormous boost in its search for new and rebellious visual languages. The 1913 Armory Show played a similarly influential role in art history in the US. As the artworks were displayed *salon style*,[34] the Armory Show echoed the historical displays of the late seventeenth century, which had also profoundly impacted the reception and understanding of art. At this early-twentieth-century art fair, Pablo Picasso's painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) was first presented to the American public. This famous painting, adopting styles from abstract African carvings, was widely considered a turning point in the perception of African objects as art, first in Europe and then in the US. In this respect, the European avant-garde has played a contradictory role: On the one hand, they recognized African objects as works of art; on the other hand, they reduced them to the level of inspirational predecessor objects and de-individualized, exoticized, and ignored their producers.

Shortly after the 1913 Armory Show, with the outbreak of World War I, the epicenter of the Western art trade shifted from Paris to New York. Subsequently, African and European modern art was exhibited, sold, and collected in New York. Whereas Vogel emphasizes how objects oscillated between the categories of "art" and "artifact" and the different readings of objects in terms of their exhibition display, Biro found that in the US around 1920, modern European art and African objects were regarded equally as artworks, simply because they arrived at the same time and by the same art trading routes. In the catalogue of Biro's exhibition, Alisa LaGamma notes considerable differences between the reception of African objects in Europe and the US, arguing:

> Whereas in Europe, members of the artistic avant-garde were first exposed to such artifacts in ethnographic displays tied to colonialism, their counterparts in New York City were introduced to them several decades later in contexts that underscored their association with abstract art. Distanced from accounts of their contexts in Africa in favor of those in the ateliers and salons of progressive European artists and connoisseurs, Americans

34 The *salon-style* dates back to the display practices of European art academies in the late seventeenth century. Most notable was the Parisian Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which promoted an *ars liberalis* highlighting the role of the *idea* in art production and seeking independence from the prevailing guilds. At the annual exhibition of graduates, chiefly paintings were mounted in *art wall* groupings, stacked vertically higher and lower than the visitors' eye level, thus allowing the public to compare and discuss the works of art.

> viewed these traditions as ciphers for the conceptual shift that their own art world was undergoing.[35]

Although objects of African provenance were collected and displayed in European natural and ethnographic, both were recognized in the US for their "foreign" visual languages. Thus, Juxtaposing African and European objects "was a relatively common practice among the avant-gardes in the early twentieth century."[36] Based on her reading of letters and essays by some of the most prominent art dealers and collectors of early twentieth-century New York, Biro highlights how "African and modern art often appear to be thought of as one"[37] [38] However, Biro points out that critical distinguishing factors for American art collectors had been "the central role of European connections; the aura of mystery that surrounded the African sources of the European vendors; a constant concern about the quality of the works triggered by a lack of knowledge and comparative corpus; [and] the symbiotic relationship between modern and African art."[39]

The following pages highlight some of Biro's examples from the exhibition's first section, titled "1914: America Discovers African Art." In this section, Biro displayed thirty-six wood sculptures of African provenance and about twenty objects representing the Western avant-garde to support her claim. Biro took the well-known art gallery 291 of collector, art dealer, and photographer Alfred Stieglitz as her example. She displayed pictures of the gallery's exhibitions and many of the objects initially shown at the gallery. Stieglitz, married to famous modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe, began collecting and exhibiting European modern art in 1908 to find a modernist visual language as a trajectory for his agenda, later called "American Modernism."

---

35 Alisa LaGamma & Smithsonian Libraries, "Art from Gabon," *Tribal Art: Special Issue 3*, (2012), 26.

36 Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The power of display. A history of exhibition installations at the Museum of Modern Art.* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 113.

37 Yaëlle Biro, "When, how and why modern art came to New York," *Tribal Art: Special Issue 3*, (2012b), 66.

38 Biro focuses on Marius de Zayas, who wrote the chronicle *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York* in the 1940s, published posthumously in 1996. Zayas had also been in close contact with the Parisians Paul Guillaume and Guillaume Apollinaire.

39 Biro, "modern art to New York," 66.

In 1914, Stieglitz opened the doors of 291 for an exhibition subtitled The Root of Modern Art.[40] This exhibition is considered one of the first exhibitions in the US dedicated exclusively to African objects within the framework of fine art. In the same year, Stieglitz staged an exhibition in which he juxtaposed works of Picasso (*Bottle and Glass on a Table*, 1912) and Georges Braque (*Sleeping Muse*, 1910) with a mask from the Kota people of Gabon, a reliquary guardian figure from the Fang people, and an ordinary wasp nest. In a picture of the exhibition[41] taken by Stieglitz, we can see that the African objects were altered. They were stripped of traces of their former societal function. In her curatorial research project, Vogel also refers to an object exhibited at Stieglitz, a "Fang sculpture seen standing on a pedestal [...] originally attached to a box of ancestral bones." Vogel elaborates further: "Here it appears cleansed of bark and bones, and the dowdy aura of the ethnographic specimen. The impulse to strip African art of its visible cultural context has roots in the desire to make it resemble art of the West and conform to our definition of what art is"[42] Even acknowledging their spiritual function seemed to compromise the objects' status at artwork within a Western context.[43] However, these displays were imposed on the objects, while transformations initially intended for them, such as decay, abrasion, or incineration, were prevented. It seems that reframing African objects as artworks in a Western context came at the price of silencing their production, provenance, and migration, thus disconnecting them from their initial cultural function. This disconnect is a critical point also in the ongoing debate about displays in postcolonial museums of world cultures and art exhibitions.

In Hirst's case, he appropriated and remixed what he deemed fit. According to Modernism and Postmodernism, in translation and reframing by an artist, everything could be art—if an institution backs it up. In addition, specific display methods are used to indicate an object's art status, like pedestals and vitrines. This tension between artists' authority and displays is characteristic of modern art. In the "Treasures" exhibition, for instance, the more giant statues

40 The most prominent art dealers of the time collaborated on this exhibition: Marius de Zayas, who worked for Stieglitz at that time, contacted Parisian art trader Paul Guillaume, who then contributed many works. Later, Guillaume became the source of most African works exhibited and sold in New York until the 1920s.

41 The National Gallery of Art (NGA) provides an annotated picture: https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.35525.html.

42 Vogel, *Art/Artifact*, 13f.

43 LaGamma & Smithsonian Libraries, "Art from Gabon," 33.

were positioned at a distance from the viewer and had their own bases. Smaller ones were either mounted on the wall below eye level or placed on a socle or pedestal, thus perceived as artworks yet disconnected from their cultural origins. Vogel has underlined that in contrast to their presentation in art galleries, non-Western objects, like *vigango*, were neither conceived as coeval to European art nor regarded as achievement of a single "genius," an autonomous author-artist. Instead, they were conceived as collective productions and "traditional" forerunners that were "inspirational" to Western modernism. Their value as inspirational objects became evident in the heated debate over a 1984 exhibition curated by William Rubin for New York's MoMA: "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.[44] [45] Despite using the same display for objects of African and European provenance, it became apparent that African objects were chosen to shed light on modern European art or for their "appeal to modern taste" (MoMA, 1984). Such universalistic approaches add a problematic dimension to the term "Weltkunst" (*World Art*) employed in such exhibitions.[46]

Art historian Susanne Leeb's insights point to a controversial debate since the broader establishment of museums in Europe around 1900: should a museum that shows objects unfamiliar to most visitors provide basic background information? Or are ethnographic museums to highlight visual qualities and focus on aesthetics? Or shall they focus on cultural histories? These questions are still virulent but with a postcolonial twist: Shall they be reconfigured as museums of global art history and thus connected with the globalized art field? Nonetheless, the question is not so much whether but *how* to integrate such information into displays without recharging colonial legacies. Therefore, the primacy of an object's visual qualities needs to be challenged.

Hirst's "treasures" reflected contemporary discussions about global cultural heritage. However, his exhibition also conveyed the idea of a shared history visually marked by cultural "origins" that could be "read" by looking at remixed artworks, like the *Golden Head* (*Female*). This sculpture, thus, is in a double bind: It is a relatively faithful copy of an Ife head, as Hirst's artwork echoes the original's status as a valued and iconic artwork. However, Hirst's juxtaposition categorizes the copy's origin as part of the canon of global art history by

44 The MoMA website features accompanying material, like press releases and pictures from the exhibition: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1907.

45 Jones, "Exploding canons," 201–220.

46 Susanne Leeb, *Die Kunst der Anderen: „Weltkunst" und die anthropologische Konfiguration der Moderne*. b_books, Berlin, 2015.

silencing the original's complex provenance and only vaguely referencing Ife culture to people who do not recognize its visuality. Moreover, by making this categorization, he fully uses his power as a gatekeeper.

Hirst's wreck of the *Unbelievable* plays with notions of transcultural remix and cultures of translation but does not contribute to their postcolonial agenda. Hirst neither sided with contemporary critics nor with historical reappropriations of non-Western objects, e.g., those of the Harlem Renaissance and the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive African Art exhibition (New York, 1927). In an essay about the Harlem Renaissance, art historian Kravagna points out

> the sheer fact that European anthropological museums were founded in a spirit of colonialism at the same time that African collections were established as an instrument of liberation from colonial social systems and racist cultural concepts represents a remarkable counterpoint. Frequently, the same kinds of objects that were in the African collections also entered into "Western" collections at the height of the colonial era, where, however, opposing political meanings were ascribed to them.[47]

In contrast to this, Hirst's exhibition concept points in the direction of the hegemonic and universal formats prevalent in European museums. According to his curator, Elena Geuna, the book project *A History of the World in 100 Objects* inspired Hirst.[48] published in 2010 by the British Museum and its former director and curator Neil MacGregor—who had been part of the founding direction of Berlin's newly opened and controversial flagship museum, the Humboldt Forum.[49] The last decade has also seen many artists becoming

47 Christian Kravagna," The museum of liberation. An excursion into the early history of reconquest," published in 2018 on the blog *How to move on with Humboldt's legacy? Rethinking ethnographic collections*. https://boasblogs.org/dcntr/the-museum-of-liberation/.

48 This catalogue is a compilation of objects from various regions, ordered chronologically, and also features an Ife sculpture. This particular sculpture was excavated from the Wunmonije compound of Ife in the late 1930s. This Ife head shows clear stylistic resemblances to the *Olokun Head*. The radio station BBC4 collaborated with the British Museum on this book project and presented each object in a fifteen-minute feature. The feature in which this sculpture is treated is called "Status Symbols (1200–1400 AD)," It highlights the sculpture's aesthetic qualities, speculates on its representative function for Ife royalty, and recounts Frobenius's perspective on Yoruba culture.

49 The Humboldt Forum was conceived after the Senate of Berlin, and the German government decided to favor the already controversial rebuilding of a Prussian palace—a symbol of the heyday of German colonialism—in the center of Berlin. They had no clear

curators, a role that Hirst has also played. One implication of this is the possibility that contemporary artists who remediate ancient objects also intervene in the distinction between art and artifact. As highly specialized craftspeople fabricated the "treasures," Hirst fashioned himself as the "explorer" and financier of the salvaging operation and figures as the "collector" (as implied by his self-portrait, *Bust of the Collector*). Yet again, a position of power in Western art tradition for interpreting the collected objects and distinguishing their status.

The exhibitions examined so far have provided insights into the legacy of displays of non-Western objects in Europe and the US. It is found that the differentiation of objects of African provenance as "artwork" or "artifact" and the subordination of African art under Western concepts of temporality are manifested in particular displays. In Hirst's exhibition, the sculpture *Golden Head* (*Female*) was stripped of any cultural context beyond the shipwreck, despite obviously being a copy of an Ife sculpture; thus, its hypercultural juxtaposition with other objects seems significant. In effect, these objects served as exoticized and mysterious representations of otherness.

4 Beyond Compare—Recent Reconfigurations of Displaying Objects of Non-European Provenance

Having elaborated on the observation that African objects oscillate between the categories of "art" and "artifact" since colonial times, this essay discusses a more recent exhibition. The exhibition Beyond Compare: Art from Africa (Bode-Museum, Berlin, 2017) provides an in-depth analysis of African objects juxtaposed with objects of European provenance. It was meant as an experimental forerunner to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin's new exhibition space in the Humboldt Forum, which opened in 2020.

When I visited Beyond Compare, I was confronted with the prevalence of conventional displays. The exhibition was dedicated entirely to objects categorized as artworks by curators Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine, and Paola Ivanov. The exhibition took place in Bode-Museum Berlin, which hosts a collection of sculptures from European art history and the Byzantine Empire.[50] They

vision for the palace or the Humboldt Forum. However, the discussion about translocating parts of the ethnographic museum's collection to this place silenced the discussion of the building's complicated history itself. MacGregor became part of the founding direction and developed a concept for the museum's exhibition policy that has been widely criticized.

50 Google Arts & Culture features the temporary exhibition online at https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/unvergleichlich/pgKS3010SaFuLg?hl=de, and the permanent

juxtaposed objects from this collection with objects of African provenance usually kept at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin.[51] The exhibition centered on the act of comparing. The curators stated that this act is never an innocuous means of gaining knowledge but is already inherently tendentious, biased, and leading to valorization. The exhibition addressed colonial power imbalances, which configure visitors' gaze and pose the question: "What motivates comparisons and reveals underlying presuppositions?."[52] The exhibition hypothesizes that a juxtaposition of objects contributes significantly to their interpretation and categorization.

Moving on now to a closer look at some of their examples. The exhibition consisted of two main parts: the first part was divided into six vitrines, themed, e.g., "the Other," gender, and performance. Each vitrine displayed 15 to 20 objects in a vitrine. The second part directly compared 22 sculptures of African and European provenance. Each posed on a socle or pedestal. As shown in figures 4.2 and 4.3 below, one prominent example of this approach is the pair that greeted visitors in the entrance hall, foregrounding the exhibition's overall theme: "beyond compare."

These two pictures show one statue representing European and another representing African cultural heritage: a brass *Putto with Tamburin* by Donatello, from the font of the baptistery of an Italian cathedral from around 1429, and a copper alloy statue by an unknown sculptor from the Kingdom of Benin in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Within a Western museum, one figure is meant to be viewed from every angle, the other only frontally. One has its inventory number (III C 10864) written directly on its back; the other has it hidden discreetly on its socle. Moreover, rectangular vitrines require unruly objects to be put on a socle and thus altered so they can be neatly placed.

Until the 1920s, the exhibition's Benin Bronze had not been displayed on a socle as a unique artwork but in a vitrine crammed with other objects, as seen in figure 4.3. In 1926, the Königliches Völkerkunde Museum in Berlin opened a new building dedicated to present selected objects to a broader audience, see

exhibition at https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/bode-museum-staatliche-museen-zu-berlin?hl=de.

51 Approximately 5,000 objects in this museum were part of the Brandenburg-Prussian Kunstkammer, founded in the 17th century. For the history of Kunstkammer, see Dolezel, 2019. A coordinated collecting activity began only at the beginning of the 19th century when the Kunstkammer was transferred into a museum. Organized collecting activities reached their peak with the foundation of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in 1873, which was dedicated to the scientific study of non-European peoples (König, 2003)

52 Julien Chapuis et al., *Beyond compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum*, (Berlin: Edition Braus 2017), 12. (translation mine)

FIGURE 4.2
Gottheit, Goddess Irhevbu or princess Edeleyo, 46, 5 × 22, 6 × 18, 7 cm, 10 kg
© ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM DER STAATLICHEN MUSEEN ZU BERLIN – PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ/MARTIN FRANKEN

FIGURE 4.3
Dancing putto with a tambourine, 36, 2 × 14, 7 × 16, 2 cm, 8 kg
© SKULPTURENSAMMLUNG UND MUSEUM FÜR BYZANTINISCHE KUNST DER STAATLICHEN MUSEEN ZU BERLIN – PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ/ANTJE VOIGT

FIGURE 4.4 Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. Exhibition Afrika department; Benin. Before 1914

figure 4.4. It redesigned its exhibition space to resemble glamorous museums of art history, with its atmospheric colored wallpaper and spacious rooms. Individual objects were presented on pedestals, in display cases, or hanging on the wall. The display technologies were not changed; only the vitrines were decluttered, and the objects were given more space. Commenting on such changes, James Clifford concludes, "Museums routinely adapt to the tastes of an assumed audience—in major metropolitan institutions, largely an educated,

FIGURE 4.5 Exhibition Afrika department; Benin. After 1926

bourgeois, *White* audience. National sensibilities are respected, the exploits and connoisseurship of dominant groups celebrated" (1997, p. 209).

The putto and the Benin bronze were bought on the British art market in the twentieth century and later entered museums in Berlin. The putto was sold by the renowned art dealers Marks & Durlacher, based in London. It was gifted by Wilhelm Bode in 1902 and went into the sculpture collection of the Neues Museum and, later, into the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, dedicated to European antiquities. The Benin sculpture was acquired by the Kunstkammer von Brandenburg-Preussen (which roughly translates to the "Curiosity Room of Brandenburg-Prussia"). It was later added to the Africa Department of the Museum für Völkerkunde, founded in 1873. This sculpture of goddess Irhevbu or princess Edeleyo was brought to Berlin by collector William Downing Webster around 1900, together with approximately 170 other objects. These objects are part of Nigeria's restitution claim for its cultural heritage.[53]

53 To collect these objects, Webster traveled around Britain and gathered them from soldiers who took part in the infamous Benin Expedition of 1897. In this incident, the centuries-old

Biro's research has underlined that an object's acquisition by an art museum or an ethnographic museum significantly impacts its value and categorization. In the exhibition catalog, Chapuis, Fine, and Ivanov address such distinctions drawn by institutions as their central theme. They provide us with background knowledge about the underlying premises of the exhibition: "Usually, ethnographers are occupied with the cultural context and human interactions manifested in such objects. This way, the objects often represent something much bigger, than they would by themselves. Traditionally, an art museum tries to display the development of a visual art form, like sculpting, by collecting a representative selection on this development."[54] Their juxtaposition of objects illustrated them and explored notions of a shared global art history. For instance, the exhibition demonstrates that the Western art tradition also originates in religious sculptures of sacred figures (Mary, Jesus). Likewise, the exhibition of fetish objects and human remains (reliquaries) is a traditional part of Christian culture and aesthetics. In this context, it should be noted that until modernism, European art showed solid historical links with Christianity and aristocratic representations of political power. However, the exhibition could have been far more profound if the curators had considered that the display was designed for European art objects. This religious context is essential to traditional, premodern European art, similar to African art: a spiritual function compromises their potential status as artworks[55]—and a display highlights and secures their autonomy. This is evident in the case of the putto, which had been taken out of its religious ensemble. A similar reduction of cultural context than with the Kota reliquary mentioned before.

Unfortunately, this exhibition neither included voices from the source communities nor cooperated with curators who could bring in more diverse

---

Kingdom of Benin was annexed by the British colonial army, and its royal palace was looted. Most of the looted objects were auctioned off and are now scattered worldwide. The British Museum owns about nine hundred objects from the Kingdom of Benin. The Benin Dialogue Group, which includes the Royal Court of Benin and the Edo State Government, was founded to deal with the presence of all these objects in museums worldwide. In a 2019 press release, they proposed to build a museum in Benin City (for which star architect David Adjaye has been retained): https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/fileadmin/userfiles/GRASSI_Museum_fuer_Voelkerkunde_zu_Leipzig/Bilder/Allgemein/Veranstaltungen/Benin_Dialogue_Group/Pressemitteilung_des_Treffens_der_Benin_Dialogue_Group.pdf. The government of Nigeria filed two claims for restitution in Germany in 2019. In 2022, Nigeria saw the first returns. Until the Nigerian museum opens, a working group, including Jonathan Fine, will be working on the online platform *Digital Benin*. This digital archive brings together object data from all over the world. The website's launch was in 2022: http://www.digitalbenin.org.

54 Chapuis et al., *Beyond compare*, 9.

55 LaGamma, "Art from Gabon," 33.

perspectives. Hence this approach remained Eurocentric. Notwithstanding these limitations, one exciting approach of this exhibition is its exploration of new temporalities, historicizing African and European art, and making space for African objects. In the same vein, Chika Okeke-Agulu, in his comment on Western art history and globalization, envisions the rise of a global art history:

> The second alternative, the more optimistic one, will be the rise of a global art history constituted not so much through a diffusion of Western art history as through the formation of several, parallel or contradictory, art historical models and methodologies, each a product of specific cultural and political histories and ideologies. Much less certain than the first, but clearly more accommodating of difference, this future art history will mean a true dialogue across intellectual cultures rather than the expectation that only the ones originating from the West could define the parameters and scope of art history across the globe.
>
> OKEKE-AGULU, "Assessments," 207

Bringing these two sculptures together at the Bode-Museum's entrance concealed the decision that objects of European provenance would not find their way into the ethnographic section of the Humboldt Forum. This exhibition was the only moment the putto and the princess/goddess shared a space. However, it was not the first time Donatello's craft was used to reflect on the aesthetic qualities of a sculpture of African provenance. The first time Donatello's craftmanship became a benchmark for African art was in the 1930s when construction workers accidentally dug up more Ife heads at the Wunmonije compound. Eventually, Western art historians learned that the sculptors of the Kingdom of Benin had adopted the lost-wax technique from the Yoruba sculptors of Ife. In 1939, American anthropologist William Bascom, who acquired two heads for himself—one of which greatly resembles Hirst's *Golden Head* (*Female*)[56]—wrote in the *Illustrated London News* about their sophisticated artistry. He compared the Benin Bronze's artistry to Donatello's artistry. The exhibition at the Bode Museum failed to address this colonial tradition of comparing objects of African and European provenance.

In their catalogue, the curators underline how African art should not be regarded within a framework developed with and for European art history. The curators propose to look beyond compare and more closely at characteristics like the object's materiality and the assemblage of materials, participative and

56 "Ife bronzes," *Nigeria Magazine* 37, (1951), 22.

immersive forms of performing the objects, the amalgamation of signified and signifier, and concepts of authenticity and artistry that are not based on single objects but repetitions.[57] These theoretical reflections suggest several courses of action for reconfiguring display practices in postcolonial and future museums. The search for non-representational methods for objects is addressed in the heated debate over a new definition of what a museum is or could be. Nonetheless, the display employed at Bode-Museum did not interrupt or redirect the White gaze but facilitated colonial readings anew. That might have been different from the curatorial team's intention; their approaches, however, overlooked how the legacy of Western display practices also contributed to an object's interpretation.

5 Conclusion

This essay has examined how different exhibition displays in museums frame objects as art or artifact. In addition, it considered the role of artists as gatekeepers and the juxtaposition of objects. Recent reconfigurations of colonial ethnographic museums as places of non-European and global art history are mirrored in Hirst's mocking of a museum of so-called "world cultures." In addition to demanding the return of all looted objects still in possession of European museums, these reconfigurations as world cultures museums provoke a critique of the persistence of epistemological violence in display methods. Further artistic and curatorial research on museum display practices must be undertaken to broaden our understanding of media technologies in translating, framing, and remediating objects. Concerning Hirst's appropriation of non-European objects, this essay looked into the broader context of exhibitions dealing with colonial display practices. Historically, objects of African provenance had oscillated between being categorized as either "art" or "artifact." Artifacts were displayed in particular contexts; in contrast, artworks are displayed stripped of their inherited meaning, context, and function. They were reframed for aesthetic contemplation and pleasure. The Bode Museum's exhibition framed all the objects as artworks, juxtaposing them to shed light on what the curators consider "universal" human themes. However, it ultimately gave insufficient background information on the objects subject to this narration. As Vogel and Biro have shown, both display practices come with a legacy of colonial epistemological violence. They have explored how colonial

57 Chapuis et al., *Beyond compare*, 16.

institutions played a part in the art/artifact distinction and how the idea of the autonomy of artworks consequently ignores the historical and social situatedness of objects. This colonial legacy challenges developing a non-Eurocentric framework for African art and art histories. They have tried to resolve the traditional distinction between display practices for artworks and those for artifacts, to denaturalize these categories, and to deconstruct the White gaze.

This contribution explored how a colonial legacy is manifested in Western display practices and how curatorial and artistic research projects deal with this legacy. The relevance of displays for the dichotomous categorization of objects as either artworks or artifacts is clearly supported by the findings of Hirst, Vogel, Bennett, Biro, Chapuis, Fine, and Ivanov. This study's observations and analyses suggest that reconfiguring museums is linked to reframing and remediating objects, hence challenging colonial display techniques. Undoing colonial displays lead to the question of what art is or could be in a globalized art field and which role art histories play. Therefore, there is a definitive need for future artistic and curatorial research to deconstruct further and disrupt Eurocentric categories and find new categories that can do justice to the many African cultural heritages and aesthetic languages. Unfortunately, being limited to large-scale exhibitions in Western contexts, this study needs African and Afro-diasporic perspectives that address practices for displaying objects of African provenance, which could provide more nuanced perspectives. In this vein and after visiting Black History museums in the US (2019, with Cornelia Kogoj), Kravagna points out how Hampton University's museum has always been a place for reframing objects of African provenance:

> As a crossroads of minority histories and as a space of intelligent linkage of their politics of liberation, the museum produces a wealth of aesthetic experiences, which, in contrast to the promotion of exoticizing gaping at many anthropological museums, actually produces knowledge. Along with a clear political framing of relations between the parts of the collection, the reconnection of all narratives to the place of their narration and its history forms the second foundation of a museum experience in which enthusiasm for great artworks is not always immediately thwarted by the unease that the inequity of ethnographic collections usually triggers.[58]

Hence, it follows that a stronger focus on the display practices of museums on the African continent and Black museums in the diaspora promises to produce

58 Kravagna, "museum of liberation."

interesting findings about possible responses to how displays have been entangled in coloniality and thus to work with that legacy and account for a critical reconfiguration of such dichotomous categorizations as "artwork" or "artifact." I had planned a research trip to Dakar, Senegal, for May 2020, to visit the Musée des Civilisations Noires, which sadly had to be canceled due to the current global pandemic. Hopefully, I will be able to revisit these research questions on another occasion when visiting the numerous museums of the African continent. These new museums amplify the need for the restitution of African objects so that they can draw from vast collections of art and material culture on the continent—and translate pasts into convivial futures.

References

Exhibition catalogues

Biro, Yaëlle & Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY). *African art: New York and the avant-garde*. New York: Primedia, 2009.

Chapuis, Julien, Jonathan Fine, Paola Ivanov, Antje Akkermann, Andrew Sears, Christine Seidel & Verlag Brausdruck, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, & Bode-Museum (Berlin). *Beyond compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum*. Berlin: Edition Braus 2017.

Corry, Amie, Elena Geuna & Punta della dogana. *Treasures from the wreck of the Unbelievable: Damien Hirst*. Venice: Palazzo Grassi, 2017.

Danto, Arthur C. & Museum for African Art (New York, NY). *Art & artifact: African art in anthropology collections*. New York: Center for African Art, 1989.

MacGregor, Neil. *A history of the world in 100 objects*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.

Vogel, Susan. *Art/Artifact: African art in anthropology collections*. New York: Center for African art, 1988.

Works cited

Aly, Götz. *Das Prachtboot: Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2021.

Bascom, William. "The legacy of an unknown Nigerian 'Donatello'." *Illustrated London News* 194, no. 2 (1939), 592–4.

Bennett, Tony. "The exhibitionary complex," *New Formations* 4 (Spring 1988), 73–102.

Bennett, Tony. *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Biro, Yaëlle. *Avant-grade, ethnography, and the 1920s sale of John Quinn's African art collection. Conference booklet, All the Beauty of the World. The Western Market for Non-Europen Artefacts (18th-20th Century)*. Berlin: Bauakademie, October 13–15, 2016.

Biro, Yaëlle and Smithsonian Libraries. "African art, New York, and the avant-grade: Exhibitions overview." *Tribal Art: Special Issue 3* (2012a), 10–21.

Biro, Yaëlle. "When, how and why modern art came to New York." *Tribal Art: Special Issue* 3, (2012b), 64–71.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire.* Paris : Ed. du Seuil, 1992.

Bredekamp, Horst. *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben. Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2000.

Clifford, James. *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Clifford, James. *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Dolezel, Eva. *Der Traum vom Museum. Die Kunstkammer im Berliner Schloss um 1800 – eine museumsgeschichtliche Verortung*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2019.

Enwezor, Okwui. "The postcolonial constellation: Contemporary art in a state of permanent transition." In *Antinomies of art and culture: Modernity, postmodernity, contemporaneity* edited by Nancy Condee, Okwui Enwezor & Terry Smith, 207–234. Durham: Duke University Press 2009.

Enwezor, Okwui, Katy Siegel & Ulrich Wilmes. *Postwar: Kunst zwischen Pazifik und Atlantik, 1945–1965*. München: Prestel-Verlag, 2016.

Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Frobenius, Leo. *The voice of Africa*. London: Hutchinson 1914.

Gilroy, Paul. *After empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?* London: Routledge, 2004.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Encarnacion. "Entangled Migrations–The Coloniality of Migration and Creolizing Conviviality." *Mecila Working Paper Series* 35. (April 2021).

Han, Byung-Chul. *Hyperkulturalität*. Berlin: Merve, 2005.

Hicks, Dan. *The brutish museums: The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution*. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

Holfelder, Moritz. *Unser Raubgut: Eine Streitschrift zur kolonialen Debatte*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2019.

"Ife bronzes." *Nigeria Magazine* 37, (1951), 20–24.

Ivanov, Paola, & Kerstin Weber-Sinn. "Shared Research–Zur Notwendigkeit einer kooperativen Provenienzforschung am Beispiel der Tansania-Projekte am Ethnologischen Museum Berlin." In *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen*

der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte edited by Larrisa. Förster, Iris Edenheiser, Sara Fründt & Heike Hartmann, 143–156. Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2018.

Illich, Ivan. *Tools for conviviality*. Glasgow: Calder and Boyars, 1973.

Jones, Anna Laura. "Exploding canons: The anthropology of museums." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22, (October 1993), 201–220.

König, Viola. *Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*. München: Prestel-Verlag 2003.

Kravagna, Christian. "The museum of liberation. An excursion into the early history of reconquest." Published in 2018 on the blog *How to move on with Humboldt's legacy? Rethinking ethnographic collections*. https://boasblogs.org/dcntr/the-museum-of-liberation/.

Kravagna, Christian & Cornelia Kogoj. *Das amerikanische Museum: Sklaverei, Schwarze Geschichte und der Kampf um Gerechtigkeit in Museen der Südstaaten*. Wien/Berlin: Mandelbaum, 2019.

LaGamma, Alisa. & Smithsonian Libraries. "Art from Gabon." *Tribal Art: Special Issue* 3, (2012), 26–35.

Leeb, Susanne. *Die Kunst der Anderen: „Weltkunst" und die anthropologische Konfiguration der Moderne*. b_books, Berlin, 2015.

Lembcke, Sophie. "Unbelievable treasures: Artworks as intersections of culturalization." In *Situated in translations: Cultural communities and media practices*, edited by Michaela Ott &Thomas Weber. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019.

Milton, Viola & Winston Mano. "Afrokology and the Right to Communicate in Africa." *Javnost–The Public* 29, no. 1 (2022), 33–49.

Moura, Sabrina. "The Museums of Black Civilisations, between History and Utopia DCNtR Debate #3. The Post/Colonial Museum." Published 2022, June 9 on *Boas-blog*. https://boasblogs.org/de/dcntr/the-museums-of-black-civilisations-between-history-and-utopia/

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Nur Goni, Marian, Michaela Dudley & Sam Hopkins. eds. *Invisible inventories: Zur Kritik kenianischer Sammlungen in westlichen Museen*. Bayreuth ; Johannesburg: iwalewabooks, 2021.

Navadomsky, Joseph. "The Vigango Affair: The Enterprise of Repatriating Mijikenda Memorial Figures to Kenya." African Art 51, no. 2 (Summer 2018), 58–69.

Okeke-Agulu, Chika. "Assessments." In *Is art history global?* edited by James Elkins, 202–204. London: Taylor and Francis, 2007.

Ott, Michaela. *Dividuations: Theories of Participation*. Berlin: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Platte, Editha. *Bronze head from Ife*. London: British Museum Press, 2010.

Pomian, Krzysztof. *Der Ursprung des Museums. Vom Sammeln*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988.

Reckwitz, Andreas. *The invention of creativity: Modern society and the culture of the new*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2017.

Savoy, Bénédicte & Felwine Sarr. *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle.* Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018.

Savoy, Bénédicte. *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst: Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage*. München: C.H. Beck, 2021.

Schwarz, Werner Michael. *Anthropologische Spektakel: Zur Schaustellung "exotischer" Menschen, Wien 1870–1910*. Wien: Turia + Kant, 2001.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The power of display. A history of exhibition installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998.

Udvardy, Monica. "The transatlantic trade in African ancestors: Mijikenda memorial statues (vigango) and the ethics of collecting and curating non-Western cultural property." *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 3 (September 2003), 566–580.

Weibel, Peter & Andrea Buddensieg. *Contemporary art and the museums: A global perspective*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007.

Zayas, Marius de & Francis M. Naumann. *How, when, and why modern art came to New York*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998.

PART 2

Indian Ocean Worlds and Artworks

∴

SECTION 1

Literary Entanglements

CHAPTER 5

East African Indian Writing and the Worlding of Diasporas

Peter Simatei

1 Worlding Diasporas

Due to different forms of diasporic experiences and histories, a conclusive definition of the term "diaspora" is perhaps neither possible nor even necessary. However, as Brubaker explains,[1] many diasporic formations would still share certain core elements, such as dispersal, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance, that are constitutive of diasporas. Here I use the term "diaspora" to refer to the contemporary migrations and subsequent transnational social formations and identities of third- and fourth-generation East African Indians,[2] now dispersed across four continents, namely Africa, North America, Europe, and India. These two generations are themselves heir to the old Indian diaspora of East Africa, which arose in the late nineteenth century with the movement of indentured laborers to the region. Of course, the Indian presence on the East African coast predates colonialism. Early Indian settlers in East Africa included merchants with large-scale business ventures across the littoral realms of the Indian Ocean. In their fictional works, this new diaspora affirms the multiple histories to which they are heir. The transnational nature of their present realities becomes fictionalized in their texts, an engagement that maps diasporic politics as a critical feature of their writing.

Also amplified in their writings are the pet concerns of diaspora discourses, i.e. the politics of home and belonging in displacement, the ambivalence of the postcolonial situation, the polyvalent nature of cultural identities and histories within the postcolony, and the coexistence of a multiplicity of cultural cartographies associated with it.

For the Indian diaspora in East Africa, the reworlding of the world involves not only the translation of a national space that is recast by nationalist narratives

1 Roger Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora'," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2005), 6–7.

2 As commonly used in East Africa, the term "Asians" encompasses diverse and distinct communities with different languages, ethnicities, and religious affiliations, and which even come from different regions of South Asia. In this work, I use the terms "Asian" and "Indian" interchangeably.

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004689756_006

as "stable, culturally homogeneous, historically unchanging; it also means writing a de-territorialized diaspora, one that does not return, unbounded category of people not connected with a specific homeland. What is imagined here are individual identities that are malleable hybrid and multiple."[3] In other words, this literature counters two kinds of essentialisms: one is constructed within the nation-state and colonial state (where the national people and territory are understood in homogeneous and exclusionary terms); the other essentialism comes with concepts of diaspora that reify notions of belonging and the "roots" of migrants in places of origin.[4]

Acts of reworlding in East African Indian writings involve the opening up of worlds that (nationalist) narratives tend to close off. But this is also a contradictory process in the sense that, instead of aligning with forces that seek to destroy the colonial world, the Indian community seeks refuge in a rapidly disintegrating empire.[5] In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, for example, the Asian community reacts to African nationalism as a threat to the Asian spaces of privilege guaranteed under colonialism. Asian nostalgia for the "order" and territorial open-endedness once ordained and sustained by the British Empire turns the quest for empowerment in a postcolonial world into a desire for British subjecthood. At this point, the critique of nationalism, voiced through the ordinary Asian's fear of the uncertainties of African independence, is not founded on an epistemological skepticism toward the emancipatory potential of nationalism; it is rather shaped by the lures of a more hegemonic form of nationalism, i.e., British imperialism. But as it is demonstrated in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, most Indians—and this is also a fact of history—were part of the decolonization efforts, especially in Kenya.

It is the remapping of East Africa by nationalist ideologies that opens up possibilities of alternative worlds for the East African Indian diaspora. In the colonial setup, the Indians had occupied an ambivalent position of relative privilege. When this order dissolved amid the collapse of colonial authority—itself long projected as absolute and inviolable—it created a panic that led to

3 Mavroudi Elizabeth, "Diaspora as Process: (De)constructing Boundaries," *Geography Compass* 1, no. 3 (April 2007).

4 Martin Sökefeld, "Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora," *Global Networks* 6, no. 3 (June 2006), 265.

5 Marko Juvan (2019) and Pheng Cheah (2016) argue that Spivak introduced Heidegger's concept of "worlding" to the field of postcolonial studies to critique Western narratives' representation of the colonized as dependent on the imperial cultural mission. Juvan Marko, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

the first wave of departures from East Africa. In Vassanji's two earliest novels, *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*, the elderly characters illustrate the success of the colonial interpolation of East African Asians as subjects of the empire. Made to believe in the colonizer's superiority and the powerlessness of the colonized, they cannot fathom the inversion of authority in the colony. To the ordinary Asian, often represented by the shopkeeper, "the British government, the Queen at its head was absolute ruler, how could the mighty British give way to the African, the servant?."[6] When Uncle Goa, a character in *The Gunny Sack*, decides to leave Dar es Salaam, he justifies his departure thus: "The world has changed so rapidly for us … we have decided to go … we cannot watch our servants turning around and throwing insults on us"[7]

African independence shocks because it reworlds an immutable colonial order, and while this may present possibilities of release from colonial nightmare for the erstwhile African servant (even though, as a whole, independence turns into a neocolonial nightmare), it signals to the pioneer Indian migrants a dissolution of their privileged world: a world that is not only precariously embedded in the colonial one—and therefore falls with it—but is also poised against the African. But Vassanji allows for this initial Indian reactionary attitude to African independence so as to fictionalize the Indian diaspora in East Africa as developing from a regressive diasporic formation, organized around essentialist myths of racial purity, to a dynamic one, premised on a shifting and discontinuous sense of history. While the pioneer Indian migrants are unable to cope with the changes brought about by independence, the new generation of Asians, born in Africa, are beginning to understand themselves as subjects of multiple histories, locations, and cultures.

It is through this generation that a future diaspora—which accepts "contaminated" and "impure" relationships as its defining characteristic—is visualized, and in later novels like *No New Land* and *Amriika*, Vassanji shows the new diaspora as a fulfillment of this. The burden of the hybrid subject—for instance, Salim Juma in *The Gunny Sack*, or Sonia in Siddiqi's *The Feast of Nine Virgins*—is no longer the desire to root oneself in a stable past, history, or home; it is how one can negotiate the multiple attachments one is heir to. Home, for this generation, is "not merely a place of origin but also a dis-placement of movement [where] consciousness is hence predicated on a paradoxical process of home-haunting and home-hunting, in which diasporans may experience a radical discontinuity but, at the same time, they develop a desire for cultural

6 Moyes G. Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets*, (London: Picador, 1996), 264.

7 Moyes G. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 64.

reconnection."[8] In his novels, Vassanji shows, for example, the paradox and even the hopelessness of any attempts by East African Asians to reenact Indian identities untouched by African influences and histories. Hybrid identities that were initially scoffed at as impure and contaminated are envisaged as the defining and celebrated characteristics of an inevitable diasporic community. Salim Juma's other name, Huseni, inscribes the unstable site where migrant history is enacted. He reflects on his fluid identity thus:

> "Grandfather's name first," said the application form, and Uncle Goa asked me.
>
> "Huseni," I said, naming my renegade half-caste ancestor, and became Huseni Salim Juma for ever after.
>
> "The rest of my family ignored the whole question and became Dhanji, even the more classic Dhanjee, a name invoking wealth and respect, while I, under the auspices of Uncle Goa and Mrs. Schwering's glaring eye, became: anybody. No trace of tribe, caste, colour, even continent of origin.[9]

The pain of being nobody, of having no stable roots, becomes less of a problem when, as is shown in *No New Land,* the characters move into the equally hybridized metropolitan cities of the West. In fact, rootedness becomes a burden, and the Asian migrants from Tanzania in Toronto, for instance, prefer the tag "East African" rather than "Asian." Their unique Dar es Salaam identity is replayed as a positive marker of difference from the other Asians, all in an attempt to escape racist attacks directed at Asians, who are now collectively called "Paki(stani)."

> "Aré, man, we are not Sikhs, you know." This from the clown who is always present at such meetings. "The blacks kicked us out, now the whites will do the same.... Where do we go from here?"
>
> "Looks like Pakistan for us."
>
> "There are worse goons there. Did you hear of the two murders – "
>
> A woman cut in impatiently. "Why doesn't someone tell these Canadians we are not Pakis. I have never been to Pakistan, have you been to Pakistan? Tell them we are East Africans!"[10]

8 Benzi Zhang, "The Politics of Re-Homing: Asian Diaspora Poetry in Canada," *College Literature* 31, no. 1. (Winter 2004), 103–125.

9 Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, 168.

10 Moyes G. Vassanji, *No New Lands*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), 103–104.

As Sheng-Mei Ma has noted in the representation of immigrant subjectivities in Asian American literatures, the immigrant's "wistfulness for home converges with the exoticization of the West, where the urge to stay virginal and nativist coalesces with the drive to experience, culturally and sexually."[11] However, unlike in the case of the Asian American literature Ma discusses, East African Asian texts do not articulate the longing for home by the immigrant as nostalgia for a romanticized homeland, because the idea of "home" for the East African Asian diasporic subjects is problematized by their multiple travels and relocations over time. For this category of diaspora, home is no longer associated with a particular territory, say East Africa or India, where one must stage a physical homecoming to connect with it: home is "a space inside (the) mind;"[12] it is memory whose selective reenactments by the diasporic subjects enable them to partake of multiple identities, locations, and affiliations, as we see in the cases of Sonia in *The Feast of Nine Virgins*, Salim in *The Gunny Sack*, and the immigrant community in *No New Land*.

These texts affirm the multiple hybrid and fluid identities in diasporic experiences as the subjectivities that enable the East African Asian migrant in Europe and North America to visualize her/himself as belonging to both East Africa and "elsewhere," or "here" and "there," and in between the two spaces simultaneously. Esther Peeren elucidates the notion of the multiple experiences of diasporic subjects in her deployment of Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to understand the convergence of space and time in diasporic experience. She argues that leaving the homeland need not imply a complete loss of its way of life and subjectivity, since multiple places can share the same organizing chronotope. She writes:

> Diasporic subjects are never wholly part of either the home or the host chronotope; they do not move from one to the other without the inference of memory, but are always in negotiation with both. Their lives and identities are governed by a diasporic chronotope that is inherently split into two (or more) parts that are inflected through each other.[13]

---

11 Seng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 109.

12 Jameela Siddiqi, *The Feast of Nine Virgins*, (London: Bigle-L'Ouverture, 2001), 1.

13 Esther Peeren, "Through the Lens of the Chronotope: Suggestions for Spatial-Temporal Perspective on Diaspora," in *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics*, eds. Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Basser and Yolande Jansen (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 74.

Esther Peeren's conceptualization of diaspora as chronotopical helps us understand how these multiple worlds are produced through a combination of particular types of space and time. Working from Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, Peeren conceives diaspora as "a specific ideological construction of space and time that governs the lives of diasporic subjects in a performative manner."[14] This spatiotemporal reading of diaspora, in which time and space are conceived "as fundamentally interlinked in the production of diaspora subjectivity,"[15] allows us to appreciate the coexistence of a multiplicity of temporal realities and cultural cartographies as markers of diasporic worlds.

In *The Gunny Sack,* for instance, the diasporic (hi)stories of Salim's family, as narrated by himself, are intersections of multiple cultural spaces and periods that have finally given rise to unstable identities like his, "… anybody. No trace of tribe, caste, colour, even continent of origin."[16] Just as in Siddiqi's *The Feast of Nine Virgins*, the narrative of *The Gunny Sack* darts restlessly between continents as it tries to thread together the multiple hi/stories that influence the characters' present. In a moment of self-reflexivity, Salim experiences memory as "cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to a world … Asynchronous images projected on multiple cinema screens," and time "is not a continuous coordinate … but a collection of blots ...."[17] This very asynchrony is emplotted in the text as a narrative strategy for coagulating different, even antagonistic timespaces. It is a strategy that frees the narration from the strictures of teleology and closure, allowing Salim's stories to begin from different times and places (Canada, Zanzibar, India) and travel forth and back across continents already traversed by the Indian people.

Thus, the diasporic perspective adopted by East African Asian writings reworlds the East African nation-state by problematizing the relationship between decentered and hybrid memories of the diasporic subject, and the supposedly stable and homogenous memory formations constituted within the nation-state. In this case, diaspora and diasporic identities work within, against, and/or around national identities to construct plural spaces for enacting the difference of the diasporic subject. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji revisits Indians' ambivalent relationship with Kenya's national history. Unlike in early novels such as *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*—where the concern is the impossibility of belonging to, and the inevitability of departure from East Africa—this later novel demonstrates the Asians' complex

14 Peeren, "Lens of the Chronotope," 70.
15 Peeren, "Lens of the Chronotope," 72.
16 Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, 108.
17 Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, 112.

entanglement with Kenya's equally contested histories. Several trajectories of relating Indian experience to Kenya's history emerge: first, Indians are in Kenya as subjects of the expansive British Empire. Vikram's grandfather, like other Indians, came from British India to work on the Uganda railway. In colonial Kenya, they created a buffer zone between white privilege and black misery. But several years later, African nationalism threw their safe haven into disarray as the British Empire collapsed.

The question posed by the novel is whether or not the perceived collaboration with colonial authorities erased Indians' contribution to the new Kenya; for if the new Kenya is also understood in terms of physical symbols of modernity, like the railway, the shop, and the bazaar, then the appreciation of Asian participation in the reworlding of modern Kenya was inevitable. To legitimize his claims to the land, the narrator rereads aspects of Kenyan history as significant milestones in the formation of modern Kenya:

> We have been Africans for three generations, not counting my own children. Family legend has it that one of the rails on the railway line just outside the Nakuru station has engraved upon it my paternal grandfather's name, Anand Lal Peshawari, in Punjabi script … the railway line running from Mombasa to Kampala, proud "Permanent Way" of the "British Gateway to the African Jewel," was our claim to the land. Mile upon mile, rail next to thirty-foot rail, fishplate to follow fishplate, it had been laid by my father and his fellow Punjabi labourers …[18]

In postcolonial Kenya, the railway would achieve a variety of symbols and significance: it would stand as a symbol of colonial conquest and exploitation, of Kenya's entry into modernity, of Indian affiliation with the land and their role in ushering Kenya into this modernity. In a sense, the fluid symbolic status of the railway mirrors the ambivalent relationship of East African Asian experiences to Kenya's nationalist histories.

But while the concepts of nation and diaspora as worlding tools can act as invaluable analytical tools for understanding identity formations within these spaces, they run the risk of decontextualizing and even dehistoricizing diasporic experiences by focusing on what Radhakrishnan has called diaspora's

18 Moyes G. Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), 16–17.

"perennial liminality," instead of the condition of pain and double alienation that define its condition.[19]

In the introductory chapter to his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, Vijay Mishra plays with the opening sentence of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and comes up with the following statement: "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way." In a sense, this statement reminds us that although diasporas share common prominent characteristics—i.e., the common features in the typologies and taxonomies produced by Robin Cohen[20] and William Safran,[21] for example, or the core elements expounded by Brubaker above—the nature of their character is to be found in such dimensions as differentiation, identity, and historicity. This is all the more so with regard to the Indian diaspora, whose huge size and historical and spatial multi-locatedness resist any form of homogenization. Nowhere are these dimensions better articulated than in the literature of diaspora communities. It is in locating East African Indian writing within the historical circumstances of its production that we begin to understand how this diaspora constitutes a space that is "contextually embedded in other spaces by virtue of constitutive relations they share with other places, things, practices, and persons."[22] In other words, a diasporic space is an intersectional space. This space is, to appropriate Anthias term, "translocational," a term she uses to describe:

> ... the ways in which social locations are products of particular constellations of social relations, and in terms of relationality and experience at determinate points in time ... It points to the existence of contradictory and shifting social locations where one might be in a position of

19 Radhakrishnan argues against the danger of the hyperrealization of diaspora. "The context of diaspora has the capacity to exacerbate the disharmony between utopia realities available exclusively through theory and agential predicaments experienced in history ... To the diasporic sensibility, it is easy to practice a perennial politics of transgression in radical postponement of the politics of constituency". Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic mediations: Between Home and Location,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 74.

20 Robin Cohen, *Global diaspora: An introduction*. (London: Routledge, 2008).

21 William Safran, "Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991).

22 John Paul Jones, Heidi J. Nast & Susan Roberts, *Thresholds in feminist geography: Difference methodology, and representation*, (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), xxvii.

> dominance and subordination simultaneously on the one hand or at different times or spaces on the other."[23]

In a sense, the diasporic subject is caught within intersecting social and even national boundaries. If anything, the diasporic subject is defined not only by the multiplicity of locations and identities it is heir to, but also by the convergence of pluralistic spaces and temporalities. The narrator in Jameela Siddiqi's *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* contemplates this kind of multiple realities thus:

> Born in Bombay, raised in Mombasa, married in Kampala, educated in London, worked in Tehran, lived in New York, then Stuttgart, then Hong Kong, and died in Vancouver. Where was this person actually from? Where is anyone from these days? Where do they live?[24]

In conclusion, I argue that East African Indian writing, as demonstrated here by the fiction of M. G. Vassanji, presents diasporic realities as worlds constituted by intersections of multiple cultural spaces and periods that have finally given rise to unstable and fluid identities marked by different and even antagonistic temporalities.

References

Anthias, Floya. "Translocational Belonging, Identity and Generation: Questions and Problems in Migration and Ethnic Studies." *Finnish Journal of Ethnicity and Migration* 4, no. 1 (2009), 6–14.

Anthias, Floya. "Transnational Mobilities, Migration Research and Intersectionality: Towards a Translocational Frame." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2, no. 2 (June 2012), 102–110.

Brubaker, Rogers. "The 'Diaspora'." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2005), 1–19.

Cheah, Pheng. *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2008.

23 Floya Anthias, "Transnational Mobilities, Migration Research and Intersectionality: Towards a Translocational Frame," *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2, no. 2 (June 2012), 108.

24 Siddiq, *The Feast*, 1.

Elizabeth, Mavroudi. "Diaspora as Process: (De)constructing Boundaries." *Geography Compass* 1, no. 3, (April 2007), 467–479.

Jones, John Paul, Heidi J. Nast and Susan Roberts. *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, and Representation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997.

Ma, Sheng-mei. *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

Marko, Juvan. *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Peeren, Esther. "Through the Lens of the Chronotope: Suggestions for a Spatial-Temporal Perspective on Diaspora." In *Diaspora and Memory: Figure of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics*, edited by Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Basser and Yolande Jansen, 67–77. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Radhakrishnan, Rajagopalan. *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 83–99.

Siddiqi, Jameela. *The Feast of Nine Virgins*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 2001.

Sökefeld, Martin. "Mobilizing in Transnational space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora." *Global Networks* 6, no. 3 (June 2006), 265–284.

Vassanji, Moyes G. *The Gunny Sack*. Oxford: Heinemann International, 1989.

Vassanji, Moyes G. *No New Land*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991.

Vassanji, Moyes G. *The Book of Secrets*. London: Picador, 1996.

Vassanji, Moyes G. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003.

Zhang, Benzi. "The Politics of Re-homing: Asian Diaspora Poetry in Canada." *College Literature* 31, no. 1. (Winter 2004), 103–125.

CHAPTER 6

Zanzibari Poetic Worlds

Duncan Tarrant

1 Introduction

Poetry is ubiquitous and unavoidable in Zanzibar.[1] Poetic structures imbue Swahili proverbs; the popular musical genre *taarab* is essentially poetry sung with orchestral accompaniment;[2] and poems are recited at public events and ceremonies. It would be exceptional for a wedding or a political rally to take place without some form of poetry. Poetry is taught at school from a young age; it is published in daily newspaper columns and aired daily on the radio.[3] Writers' societies and *taarab* musical groups are plentiful, and poetry is shared on social media: e.g., in WhatsApp groups devoted to the exchange of poetry.

Despite this societal appreciation, most poets don't enjoy hegemonic literary success as it is measured in the West—where the emphasis is on "reviews, sales, advance, copies, rights, royalties."[4] This is not for a lack of trying, the vast majority of poets want to have their work published, but fail to overcome the hurdles of financing such an endeavour. Those who do manage to publish, find that their anthologies do not sell well; and even newspapers, in which poetry columns are a long standing tradition, are becoming more reluctant to pay poets for their work.

In the face of this apparent adversity, why then does poetry continue to be so pervasive? In other words, why do poets continue to compose and how does this poetry create a space relative to the wider Zanzibari and Swahili imaginaries?

In order to answer these questions, this work draws on several of the "new units of analysis (or keywords)" featured in the introduction to *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*; namely: "ethnographic, fieldwork-based, humanist

1 Roland Green et al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

2 Flavia Aiello, Traore, "Taarab and Swahili Prose," *Swahili Forum* 8, no. 8 (2001): 123–128.

3 Kelly Askew, "Tanzanian newspaper poetry: Political commentary in verse," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 515–537.

4 Andil Michael, „What makes a good book, and how can authors measure success?" *Medium*, June 1, 2018, https://medium.com/@andilmichael/what-makes-a-good-book-and-how-can-authors-measure-success-c443fde0ea9b

methods" and "place, place-making and quotidian practices", as well as a focus on the "contemporary and contemporaneous":

> We recognize that there are many worlds and plural modes of belonging that constitute the diverse spaces of the Indian Ocean. We are interested in building templates for understanding not only the present of Indian Ocean worlds but also its future through ethnographic, multi- sited, comparative or experimental research.[5]

These different modes and new templates are intended as an "epistemic shift in thinking and writing about Indian Ocean studies", which I also believe, as Brugioni says elsewhere in this edition, will "contribute to dismantling a number of hegemonic and essentialist (mis)conceptions that frequently define critical approaches and theoretical formulations in contemporary literary studies devoted to Indian Ocean writers and narratives."

More specifically, drawing on my fieldwork, I will attempt to sketch out how the "Zanzibari poetic space" works, using Pascale Casanova's theory of the "world literary space", which is based on Bourdieu. However, I will attempt to show how exploring the interconnecting nodes within this literature as a "world" and the differing struggles that playout therein can provide, if not a template, then at least some insight into how we can continue challenging the "oneness" of the world literary space by revealing other multiple, overlapping, interconnected literary spaces, and in doing so move away from existing paradigms of periphery and centre.

2 The "World Literary Space"

In Pascale Casanova's article *Literature as World*, the idea of a "world literary space" is explored: a tool "to be tested by concrete research" (Casanova, 2005). Her hypothesis is intended to help critics "move beyond [the] division between internal and external criticism:"[6]

> Let us say that a mediating space exists between literature and the world: a parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political, and

5 Smriti Sriniva, Bettina Ngweno & Neelima Jechandran, eds., *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 13.

6 Pascale Casanova, "Literature as a world," *New Left Review* 31 (January – February 2005): 71–99.

> dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature. Here, struggles of all sorts—political, social, national, gender, ethnic—come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms. Working from this hypothesis, while trying to envisage all its theoretical and practical consequences, should permit us to set out on a course of criticism that would be both internal and external; in other words, *a criticism that could give a unified account of, say, the evolution of poetic forms, or the aesthetics of the novel, and their connection to the political, economic and social world.*[7]

Her hypothesis is nothing if not ambitious, hoping to provide "an account of the logic and history of literature"[8] which, according to Casanova, is

> not "world literature" itself—that is, a body of literature expanded to a world scale, whose documentation and, indeed, existence remains problematic, but *a* space: *a set of interconnected positions, which must be thought and described in relational terms. At stake are not the modalities of analysing literature on a world scale, but the conceptual means for thinking literature* as *a world.*[9]

This attempt to describe a literary space relationally, i.e., not separating close reading from contextual analysis and analysing the logic of this space, is useful for the Zanzibari case, where poetry is not simply a piece of literature, but rather a crucial part of the language and the logic of the networks of writers and institutions who belong to a specifically Zanzibari literary world. In this space, which Casanova describes as "the bourse of literary values,"[10] writers exchange their works according to a common set of rules in order to gain "literary capital" or "the power and authority granted to a writer by virtue of the belief that he has earned his 'name'."

It is precisely these complicated relations and multiplicity that define the Zanzibari literary space and why I find Casanova's notion of space useful. I hope that this essay will offer a way to use Casanova's theory in a way that begins to recognise, that literature as "worlds" does not have to be conceived as a series of reference points predicated on one main Western centre.

---

7 Casanova, "Literature as a world," 71–72. (Emphasis mine).

8 Casanova, "Literature as a world."

9 Casanova, "Literature as a world," 71–72. (Emphasis mine).

10 Pascale Casanova, *The world republic of letters. Convergences*, (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

Rather, it can be applied as a framework for understanding and mapping out "literary-worlds" which are different from those that Casanova posited regarding how they intersect with politics and society:

> Casanova is careful to note that the 'literature-world's' independence from 'the everyday world and its political divisions' is only relative. '[I]nternational forms of literary dependency are to some extent correlated with the structure of international political domination', she acknowledges; 'literary relations of power are forms of political relations of power' (2004: 81). But she nevertheless seems to us to abstract too strongly from the world of politics: she tends to treat the 'literature-world' and the 'everyday world' a little too much as parallel universes, with the result that questions concerning their intersection – questions as to the terms of their relationship – find themselves being deferred in her study.[11]

By applying this comparatively intersectional lens, the investigation of literary worlds which do not (necessarily and only) relate to the West can be carried out more comprehensively.

This essay gives just a few examples of the ways in which the Zanzibari literary world is not parallel to the 'everyday world', but rather that they are overlaid and intertwined with one another. This is particularly true for poetry and the poetic. The following anecdote exemplifies the latter by exposing how literature is mediated by, and interconnected with, the everyday imaginaries of Zanzibar.

During my fieldwork, one of the poets I interviewed, Ali Haji Gora, took me to see his father, Haji Gora Haji—at the time Zanzibar's most celebrated living poet, who has since passed away.[12] Afterwards, Ali and I returned to the centre of Stonetown in a *daladala* (small public bus). When I paid both of our fares, the *konda* (conductor) took the opportunity to make a jibe at Ali, implying that he was too poor to pay his own way. Ali responded to the jibes in verse composed on the spot—and to my surprise, the *konda* also responded in verse, and a good-natured[13] improvised poetry battle full of irony ensued. Both parties were sing-chanting in the lilted Swahili style that emphasizes the final vowel of

11 Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and uneven development: Towards a new theory of world-literature*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 7.

12 Haji Gora, *Shuwari*, eds. Flavia Aiello & Irene Brunotti, (Paris: DL2A Buluu Publishing 2019). Nathalie Arnold Koenings, "Seeing the world with Zanzibari poet Nassor Hilal," *Swahili Forum* 25, (2018): 186–195.

13 Ali later informed me that they have known each other since they were young and are good friends.

each stanza, which allows the poet more thinking time, but adds to the difficulty and spectacle of the overall performance. I did not understand everything, but the following is what I did glean over the noise of traffic, the monsoon rains, and the laughter of my fellow passengers. Essentially, Ali claimed that allowing me to pay his fare was a sign of civility and politeness. It would be rude and even insulting to reject the offer of a grateful friend, especially when it was little more than a few hundred shillings (400 TZS ≈ 0.20 USD). The *konda* then implied that if it was such a small amount, then Ali should pay for me, because I was a guest in Zanzibar. Ali replied, to the pleasure of the other passengers, that I was not really a guest in Zanzibar, but effectively a native, and that he was even going to find me a Zanzibari wife among his relations. Much to my regret and that of the other passengers, the spectacle petered out after only two or three exchanges, as the *konda* could not keep pace with Ali, himself a well-practiced and respected poet following in his father's footsteps.

While this type of improvisation is no longer as common as it once was, this encounter demonstrates that it certainly remains a living practice within the Zanzibari poetic space; it also begins to reveal the logic of how poetry influences and mirrors the complex socio-political contexts throughout all levels of this world.

3 The Fieldwork

The aim of my fieldwork was to begin capturing and mapping the networks and nodes of the Zanzibari poetic space, with a specific focus on discovering the contemporary logic of this space through ethnographic methods, specifically interviews and participatory observation. In the end I interviewed forty-eight different people and met with many more, I also attended and/or participated in a variety of concerts, meetings, performances and shows.

My interviews were conducted primarily in Swahili and lasted between forty minutes and an hour. The majority of my interviews were one-on-one, but in some cases, I interviewed two or three people in one sitting, while in others I was assisted by the mainland poet Bi. Sikudhani Jalala (pen name: Nitendeje) or Hamad Ali Kombo (pen name: Dr Mshiko), the chairman of a Zanzibari poets' society (JUWACHIZA). The interviews would usually start with biographical questions, which led to discussions of their early involvement in literature or performance (or both) and the practicalities of their work. Wherever applicable, I collected examples of their work; for example, the first poem they ever wrote, their most recent work, or their personal favourites. If time allowed, we moved on to theoretical questions about the purpose and value of poetry/song;

especially against the backdrop of Swahili culture and language; and questions of cultural adaptation, purity, and preservation.

The interviewees came from all walks of life, from fruit sellers to government officials, teachers to fishermen, and as such had widely varying levels of education, as well as differing motives for composing poetry. All were practising Muslims, with all but one being born into Muslim families.[14] Of the forty-eight interviewees, only ten were women, of which only one had not at least begun an undergraduate degree. Compare this to the men, of whom fewer than half had completed some form of tertiary education, and we see the relative freedom that men have when it comes to performing and composing poetry openly. It may be that there are other female poets, both with and without a formal education, whom a male researcher would never be able to meet; women, despite their varying social position in Zanzibari history,[15] are still placed under great pressure to marry and have children. They are thus often afforded fewer opportunities for further education and/or public performance than their male counterparts. Young and unmarried women who, to preserve their reputation, cannot openly write about taboo topics, may also have their work attributed to male artists. The hidden world of female artists is further compounded by husbands who do not want their wives in the public eye, and it is not uncommon to hear of female artists who, at the behest of their husbands, no longer perform.[16]

An important revelation during my fieldwork, was the importance of cultivating a pool of contacts through which one is vouched for and trusted. One's legitimacy in the Zanzibari poetic space depends on one's connections, intellect/knowledge, and speech. Without these, the fieldwork would have been much less fruitful; in my case, my first two connections were critical:

The first contact I only met because my first Swahili professor put in a good word with her aunt: the retired journalist-turned-*taarab* musician Maryam Hamdani. When I arrived, she was the chairwoman of the Zanzibari National Arts & Music Council (Swahili: Baraza ya Sanaa la Zanzibar, or BASAZA). Without her backing (and thus, the backing of the arts council), I would not have

14 Rukia Morris is a singer in the Zanzibari National Taarab Orchestra. Her German father brought her up as a Christian, but she later converted to Islam, before she married.

15 Laura Fair, Pastimes and politics: Culture, community, and identity in post-abolition urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945. Eastern African studies. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001).

16 There is much more to be investigated regarding gender, poetry, and music in Zanzibar. I do not intend to attempt an in-depth discussion here—primarily, because I am ill-equipped to do so, but also because there is already ongoing research on female taarab musicians, such as the Tausi Taarab group, founded by Maryam Hamdani.

been able to obtain a research permit, organise interviews, or make arrangements for a visit to Pemba, Zanzibar's other main island.

Of particular importance was the direct access to high ranking members of the Pemban branch of the Zanzibari Ministry of Youth, Culture, Art, and Sports, including the director, who took me along to a variety of events and meetings.

The second contact was introduced to me by my doctoral supervisor: the aforementioned Bi. Jalala, a well-established poet from the mainland who had already accompanied my supervisor as they met and spoke with several poets in Zanzibar earlier that year. Her prior knowledge of many of the poets brought me into contact with members of two poet-organised (though government registered) literary organisations, namely CHAKUWAZA – the Chama cha Kuendelesha Washairi Zanzibar (Organisation for the Furthering of Zanzibari Poets) - and JUWACHIZA – Jumuiya ya Waandishi Chipukuzi Zanzibar (the Zanzibari Society of Budding Writers). This also afforded me access to the associated WhatsApp Poetry groups (where I had to introduce myself in verse) as well as invites to observe and participate on radio and television broadcasts.

Before moving onto specific case studies and analysis, I will attempt to summarise the findings of my interviews in the next section.

4 What Does "Good" Poetry Do? or, the Logic of the Zanzibari Poetic Space

In any literary space, as outlined above, a set of rules or norms are accepted by the different players as they vie for recognition and literary capital. Poetry is considered important in Zanzibar for many reasons: It is seen as a way of expressing feelings and emotion; a forum for the critical exchange of thought; and a method for the preservation of language and culture. However, among my interviewees there was not always a consensus on these matters. Casanova highlights that perceived importance of literature "rests on judgments and reputations" and depends on "people's opinions".[17] But opinions and judgments change and clash, and they do not tell us much about the underlying logic that gives poetry its power and allows those who control and wield poetry to create and influence the imaginaries around them.

17 Casanova, *Convergences*, 16.

In her essay on Zanzibari novels in this edition, Vierke's aim is to work out which repertoires of imaginaries and narratives the novels she studies draw from and how they create their worlds. She draws on Moser and Simonis, who highlight that "the way literature relates to the world has a deliberately constructive and performative character."[18]

The constructive and performative character of Zanzibari poetry (and thus the rules and norms of the Zanzibari poetic space) was revealed, when I asked poets and critics the question *shairi zuri liwe linafanya nini?* — "what should a good poem do?" Interestingly, by asking for the way in which poetry acts, namely what it does, I almost always received some variation of the following two statements as the first two answers from my interviewees:

a) *mashairi lazima yaburudishe*, "poetry should be relaxing/entertaining," and

b) *mashairi lazima yawe na ujumbe*, "poetry should have a message."

The first of these factors relates to performance and the effect poetry has on its audience. Not only is the composition of poetry a performative act, but Swahili poetry is intended to be recited or sung (Sw. *kughani*).[19] In the case of taarab, poetry is accompanied by an orchestra, where the audience (usually women) dance and tip the musicians to demonstrate their enjoyment. However, even this is a performative and constructive act which I explore further later (see *Tenzi* in Performance). As such, the entertainment factor of poetry is not simply about enjoyment, but rather about affecting one's audience and creating a forum for relational interaction and exchange.

This brings us to the second aspect mentioned, namely that a good poem should have a message. In other words, a "good" Swahili poem creates and constructs meaning with a message that includes "critical, challenging and original thoughts."[20] Whether a poem is intimate (i.e. intended for a lover or a close friend) or for the wider public, the message is the constructed meaning which its audience takes away and remembers. Furthermore, each person may take

18 "Einleitung: Das globale Imaginäre," in *Figuren des Globalen. Weltbezug und Welterzeugung in Literatur, Kunst und Medien*, ed. C. Moser and L. Simonis (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014), 14.

19 The verb *kughani*, "to recite," describes something different from the verbs *kuimba* "to sing" and *kusoma kwa sauti* "to read aloud." The person who recites a poem is called an *mghani*; they use one of many *sauti* ("voice/tune") that rely on the meter of the poem—specifically the syllable count and rhyme—being correct. For the completely uninitiated, *kughani* sounds not dissimilar to the adhan (the Islamic call to prayer).

20 Kai Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and intellectual practice on the Swahili coast. International African library 35*. (Edinburgh: Edinbrugh Universitiy Press, 2007), 71.

away something different, depending on their emotions or their context at the time of reading or hearing the poem, and this is another sign of a "good" poem, which imparts many correspondingly meaningful messages.[21]

These two aspects of poetry seem to dominate the Zanzibari poetic space, giving little room to new forms of poetry, especially when it comes to breaking away from the traditionally very strict metrical and rhyming patterns.[22] In fact, with the exception of perhaps four or five poets, the interviewees gave the two elements of "good" poetry in a very factual tone, as if stating "two plus two equals four" or "Nairobi is the capital of Kenya." Given that many of my interviewees were themselves teachers at varying levels of the Zanzibari education system, I believe that this is, at least in part, due to the Zanzibari school syllabus. Students are taught poetry and composition from a young age and there is a specific, correct answer that one must give in order to obtain a good mark.

The fact that poetry is taught and continues to be taught as a key part of the syllabus is a direct result of the historical importance of poetry all along the Swahili coast, however it should also be noted here, that this poetry is not and has never been apolitical. The book *Mashairi ya Vita vya Kuduhu*[23] examines the poetry exchanged before and after the early nineteenth-century battle of Kuduhu by poets on opposing sides. This poetry helped build identity and unity in the city-states involved (Lamu and Mombasa), and was intended to boost each side's morale while demoralising the enemy.

In the same way, the Zanzibari Revolutionary Government's (ZRG) current choice of syllabus, specifically its focus on poetic heritage and the conservation of culture and tradition, is an important part of their nationalist policy. Yet at the same time, the promotion of poetry also provides a very useful and safe avenue for critics and dissenting voices to express themselves.

Take, for example, the *taarab* songs played during Zanzibari elections, which have at times been used to promote peace and prevent postelection violence[24]

21 Interview with Nassor Hilal, February 2023.

22 This phenomenom is not isolated to Zanzibar, and the discussion about breaking from traditional metrical forms of poetry is ongoing, with two clear camps. A good starting point is Alamin Mazrui's 1992 article *Conservatism and Liberalism in Swahili Poetry: The Linguistic Dimension.*

23 Ann J. Biersteker, *Mashairi ya vita vya Kuduhu: War poetry in Kiswahili exchanged at the time of the battle of Kuduhu. African historical sources 7*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995).

24 Interview with Maryam Hamdani, November 2019.

and at others, "rather than preventing violent discord, [have] often necessarily accompanied and contributed to it."[25]

This is another example of the poetic and political spaces of Zanzibar overlapping and merging, as opposing sides clash over which values should take precedent. As Karin Barber says:

> As well as being social facts, however, texts are commentaries upon, and interpretations of, social facts. They are part of social reality but they also take up an attitude to social reality. They may criticize social forms or confirm and consolidate them: in both cases they are reflexive. They are part of the apparatus by which human communities take stock of their own creations. Textual traditions can be seen as a community's ethnography of itself.[26]

With the logic of the Zanzibari literary space in mind, the following sections will use examples, drawn from my fieldwork, of two different practices or forms of poetry—namely, *kujibizana* and two examples of the *utenzi* genre in performance—to explore in greater detail how literary capital is formed, adapted, and used toward differing ends both by individual and institutional agents.

5 *Kujibizana* or *Malumbano*

The exchange of improvised verse between Ali Haji Gora and the *konda* recounted earlier is a form of the poetic practice known as *kujibizana* or *malumbano* (verbal duelling/poetic dialogue). Almost all of my interviewees said that they had taken part in some form of *kujibizana*, which as a verb literally means "to cause to answer one another." In its most archetypal form, *kujibizana* is the exchange of poems on a specific topic between two poets, which Biersteker calls "composing in dialogues,"[27] because poets continue the

25 Nathalie Arnold, "Placing the shameless: Approaching poetry and the politics of Pembanness in Zanzibar, 1995–2001," *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 3 (2002): 142.

26 Karin Barber, *The anthropology of texts, persons and publics. New departures in anthropology*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press 2007), 4.

27 Ann J. Biersteker, *Kujibizana: Questions of language and power in nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry in Kiswahili African series 4*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996).

rhyming pattern set forth in the previous poem, resulting in a series of individual poems that can be seen to form a greater "whole."

As noted above, great value is placed on the ability to respond and to debate one's point spontaneously, effectively "winning" the argument, as Ali did in the *daladala*; however, the vast majority of *kujibizana* exchanges occur in the form of written poems, exchanged between friends and colleagues, mentors and students, or sent out to be published in newspapers or aired on the radio. At some point, one (or more) of the parties can no longer add to the exchange, and the ideas of the other party (or parties) win out. This conclusion is much more obvious in the case of improvised verse, where the poets have only a very short acceptable time in which to respond. In the case of newspaper or radio poetry, however, the time is extended, and the poets have days or weeks to compose their replies, meaning it is not immediately obvious who has "won." *Kujibizana* is therefore a form of highly relational debate and argumentation which requires (at least) two poets composing with one another, often with a (non)specific audience in mind. The proverb *Chuma hunoa chuma* - "Iron sharpens iron" - came up several times as one of the main benefits of taking part. Namely, that these poetic debates are a chance to spar with the poetic skills and the thoughts and ideas of other skilled poets, thus improving both sides. Having said this, not all examples are so good-natured; poets are not afraid to insult and provoke if they feel that it is necessary.

This practice is ultimately a struggle between two opposing sides, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the aforementioned 16th century war poetry[28] – where *kujibizana* is used as a way to create and bolster national identity, whilst mocking, insulting and instilling fear into the opposing forces; in short, this is an act of imagining, self-identification and group participation which defines and is defined by who is friend and who is foe ("us-against-them").

Today, the stakes may not be as high as before hand-to-hand combat, but successful participation in *kujibizana* remains an act "not just of participation but identity- construction, of positioning in a wider shared world."[29] Not only because the process of composing in this way brings with it a process of constant self-reflection, interaction and repositioning of values and feelings, but also because key issues of belonging and self-determination are also fought in these battlegrounds.

---

28 Biersteker, Kujibizana.

29 Pallavi Sriram, *Marda masti Performing shifting Indian Ocean geographies in Srinivas, Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 219.

The in- and out-groups, such as poetry societies, to which the duelling poets belong, often gossip about and discuss these exchanges. Sometimes these discussions lead to broken friendships, side-taking, rifts in groups or even the ultimate exclusion of one of the poets. Other times, *kujibizana* can also build or rebuild friendships, create unity or ingratiate a poet. These para-discussions can influence the duelling poets because they unavoidably become aware of who is saying what – after all, these networks are highly connected,[30] and stretch not just across the islands of Zanzibar, but further afield, across the ocean and to the wider Swahiliphone world – but also because this makes them very aware of how much their position and belonging can hang upon how they compose their next poem.

One poet who has adapted the *kujibizana* practice to his benefit is Kassim Yussuf Mohd, better known as Ziro Kasorobo. Ziro epitomizes the poet of improvised *kujibizana*; he no longer writes down any of his verses after having lost a manuscript of hundreds of poems in the mid '90s.[31] Ziro found the experience so painful that he vowed never again to put his poetry to the page, choosing instead only to perform on the spot and to enjoy the ephemeral aesthetic moment.

When I first met Ziro, I was surprised to meet a tall, athletic man, sporting a faded green army beret, camouflage trousers, and a tattered Tanzanian football jersey. This was not what I was expecting when the manager of Redio Adhana first told me about a master of *malumbano* and had him compose for me over the phone. Despite his scruffy appearance, he is well known and respected, as demonstrated by the opportunities that being the embodiment of oral *kujibizana* has afforded him.

Ziro appears on four radio shows a week with two different radio stations: the popular culture station, Chuchu FM (90.9 FM), and the Islamic station, Redio Adhana (104.9 FM). Each show lasts about an hour and consists of listeners phoning in and requesting poems on a certain topic, about which Ziro then improvises and recites live on air. This format falls somewhere between Ali's impromptu *malumbano* in the public bus and the battles that take place over days or weeks as poets send their work to radio stations, in which the poetry is pre-recorded before being aired.

30 Interview with Bi. Jalala (Oct, 2019)

31 Unfortunately, this is an all too familiar story. I have heard many accounts of people losing their work in different ways, and I will write more about this at a later date. However, the systematic nature of people losing their written work also reinforces the idea of poetry as something primarily oral.

Despite having no formal musical or literary education, Ziro's talent as a poet and performer has also attracted the attention of Tanzania's ruling party, the Chama cha Mapinduzi (Revolutionary Party). He regularly travels across Zanzibar and to the Tanzanian mainland in order to perform at political events, often composing *tenzi* in front of high ranking members of government. He is also a part of the government funded Afya Theater Troupe, which, under the guidance of the Ministry of Health ("Afya" means health), performs across the country to educate audiences on health concerns like HIV/AIDS and malaria. Many of his performances can be found on YouTube, where he also has his own channel of skits.[32]

In these edited and clearly staged skits, Ziro finds himself in various situations such as at a fish auction or grocer's during Ramadan; these situations offer him a chance to start composing "spontaneously", sometimes in a comedic fashion, but always with a strong social or religious moral, such as in the case of two bao players who ignore the call to prayer in order to finish their game:

Binadamu mwacheni michezo isiyo maana	Children of Adam give up meaningless games
michizo ya mabao ni haipendi na raabana	This game of Bao does not please the Almighty
Mutakwenda safarini mungu takwenda wacho	You'll go on a journey and God will go with you
Binadamu turudi Mungu atupe sitara	Children of Adam return to God's shelter
Tokea na binadamu mpaka kwa mama hawa	Throughout all man and womankind
Sijapata kufahamu na wala sijasikia	I've never understood or heard about
Michezo ya kiharamu na mabao kama haya	Such sinful games like this Bao of yours
Binadamu turudi mungu atupe sitara	Children of Adam return to God's shelter

32 Kasorobo, Z, (@zirokasorobo3832), Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/@zirokasorobo3832/videos.

Watu na akili zenu munasahau mukichwani	People so intelligent yet you forget your heads
Mwapoteza muda wenu kama we mwa duniani	You're wasting your time upon this earth
Hapa ni shauri yenu ila kesho ni motoni	Follow my advice, lest you land in the fire
Binadamu mwacheni mungu atupe sitara	Children of Adam stop and seek God's shelter

Transliterated from Video
"Zero kasorobo Maskani"

After this poem, we see how the admonished bao players change their tune and begin to blame one another, saying that they better head to the mosque and pray. I'm not sure that this format can truly be called spontaneous, but I am convinced that Ziro is not reading the poems, nor has he memorised them. I say this because there are a few small mistakes in the metre – one mistake in the rhyming pattern, and the final refrain in each stanza is short a syllable, but Ziro makes up for this by extending one of the vowel sounds to fit the syllable count as he sings.

Ziro's various poetic ventures allow him to adapt (and preserve) the spontaneous orality of his improvised *malumbano,* but it is evident that it is not only his spontaneity, but also his ability to bring strong and entertaining messages which have earned him this position. In particular, he readily accepts his didactic role in all of his avenues, where he is always pushing for the same political social and religious agenda. As such, verse and performance are not simply a way for Ziro to entertain and inform his audiences; these shows also serve him as "an alternative to financial capital,"[33] providing him with a place of respect and status within the overlapping Zanzibari political, religious and poetic spaces. At the same time, this literary capital and the position it earns him also equates to some financial benefit allowing him to earn his daily bread. As such he continues to self-cultivate the image of the *malumbano* expert, in order to perpetuate and reap benefits from his position within the network.

One of the places where this is quite evident is in the YouTube videos of his performance of *tenzi* in front of the Zanzibari president[34] and at other

33 Baumann, Shyon. "Intellectualization and art world development: Film in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 404–426.

34 UVCCM CCK, "Ziro kasorobo ndani ya kongamano la kuunga mkono hotuba ya Mheshimiwa Raisi wa Zanzibar Dr Mwinyi," retrieved November 29, 2021, from Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0Qr-d--dTY&t=402s.

political events, where he not only says and composes the right thing, but he also dresses the part and plays up his role. While I will not go specifically into his performances of *tenzi*, I would like to highlight that Ziro, too, is heavily involved in this practice.

6 *Tenzi* in Performance

The long history of the *utenzi* (pl. *tenzi*) explains its very prestigious place in the Zanzibari poetic world. The oldest *utenzi* manuscripts date from the early eighteenth century, forming part of a long-standing oral and written tradition that likely stretches back even further.[35] The form is often used for authoritative works on a given topic: e.g., *Al-Inkishafi*, a nineteenth-century religious-philosophical treatise on the fleeting nature of life and pleasure; the *Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona*, a dying mother's instructions to her daughter on navigating nineteenth-century Lamu society; and the *Utenzi wa Vita vya Maji Maji*, an epic retelling of the Maji Maji uprising.

The *tenzi* examined in this contribution, however, are slightly different from those named above; firstly, they are much shorter (38 and 60 stanzas, respectively), and secondly, they are intrinsically tied to the events at which they were performed. The first was written on commission for a wedding; the second, for the opening ceremony of a new government ministry.

The first *utenzi* was written by Mwanakombo, a female teacher at the Haile Selassie Secondary School, one of the most well-known schools in the centre of Stonetown. The *mghani* who performed at the wedding, Aisha, is also a member of staff at the same school. Before looking at the first stanzas, it should be noted that weddings are big and open affairs in Zanzibar; it is not difficult to receive an invitation to one of the different stages. Weddings are famed for their vibrant colours, loud music, dancing, and lots of good food. At the same time, the celebrations are split along gender lines, and this poem was performed at the party where the women were celebrating the married couple, and would have been accompanied by music. This space, then, is both open and closed: there would have been very few men, but at the same time, there may have been guests who did not know the bride personally.

35 Gurdrun Miehe, „Die Perioden der Swahililiteratur und ihre sprachliches Form," *Paideuma* 36, (1990): 202.

Utenzi wa Harusi ya Najib na Salumu (*The Utenzi of Najib and Salumu's Wedding*)

13.	*Hongera mzaa chema*	Congratulations, creator of a good thing
	Huna budi kusimama	Now you must stand
	Sogea Mama Fatuma	Come forward, Mama Fatuma,
	Mwana kumshangiria	and rejoice for your child
16.	*Mama mdogo Mayasa*	Oh, maternal aunt Mayasa,
	Nawe zamu yako sasa	now's your turn
	Hii ni yako fursa	This is your chance
	Mwana kumshangiria	to rejoice for the bride

Poet: Mwanakombo
Mghani: Aisha

Translation: Duncan Tarrant & Clarissa Vierke

After the customary opening stanzas, which invoke God's name and ask for His blessings, greet the audience, and extol the benefits of weddings in the Islamic faith, comes the main block of the poem. The poem's main body (stanzas 12 to 33) is devoted to addressing specific guests at the wedding by name and encouraging them to come forward to congratulate the couple. This "honour roll" gives guests the spotlight for a brief moment, and an opportunity for *kutunza*, the act of giving gifts to someone who has successfully accomplished something. Kelly Askew describes this phenomenon amid the similar setting of a *taarab* performance:

> [women] make their way from the audience to the stage with a stylized, elegant dance [which] enables them to show off skill in dancing or perhaps a new dress. People perform the act of tipping with varying degrees of flourish.[36]

Returning to the context of the Zanzibari poetic world, the entertainment and meaning of the poem are found in this roll call of names. As mentioned earlier, the chance to take the spotlight is not only a chance to enjoy and celebrate; there is more to this performative act; in fact, it is a "highly utilized,

36 Kelly Askew, *Performing the nation: Swahili music and cultural politics in Tanzania. Chicago studies in ethnomusicology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002), 139.

highly effective means of negotiating disputes and social relations in Swahili society,"[37] or as Askew puts it, "an enlightening example of the imbrication of power."[38]

As such, the commissioned poet must have a clear understanding of which of the many family members are important enough to earn a mention. To forget someone important or mention one before another has ramifications, and it is also possible to insult or mock someone, perhaps an ousted suitor, through insinuations, for example, that they should not be jealous (stanza 11).

The poem is also used by the poet and the *mghani,* when, at the end of the poem, they take the opportunity to advertise themselves:

38.	*Mimi nilowasili*	I who came
	Mambo nikayoonea	and sang these words,
	Jina langu ni Aisha	my name is Aisha
	Kwa walo wasoni-jua	for those who don't know me
39.	*Mtunzi wetu BI mwana*	And the composer, Mwanakombo,
	Nyote awapenda sana	whom you all love so,
	Kihitaji kwa mapana	if you need us for whatever,
	Haile tumepokea	we can be found at Haile (Selassie School).

In short, the poem plays out the struggles and relations between the wedding guests, and is once again, an act of meaningful construction, allowing families to reinforce their group identity and values, while also being useful for the poets, increasing their standing and possibility of future employment.

The second poem was written and performed by Fatma Hamad Rajab, the outgoing woman who is the director of the main office of the new Ministry of Youth, Culture, Art, and Sports in Pemba. When I interviewed her, she was also working toward completing a PhD in literature alongside her other duties. She performed the poem during her ministry's official opening celebration in 2019.

37 Barber, *Anthropology of texts*, 128.
38 Askew, *Performing the nation*, 127.

Utenzi wa Tamasha la Utamaduni (*Utenzi for the Celebration of Culture*)

14.	*Mgeni wetu muhimu*	Our important guest,
	Tupelekee Salamu	let all give him our greetings
	Raisi wetu adhimu	Our dearest president,
	Twaomba kumfikia	let's pray they reach him
15.	*Kwa uamuziwe bora*	For the good decision
	Wakuanzisha wizara	to create this ministry,
	Jambo hili la busara	a thing of wisdom
	Alilokutufanyia	that he has done for us
16.	*Pongezi ziso mithili*	Congratulations like no other
	Kuamua jambo hili	for making this decision
	Baba Sheni metujali	*Baba Shein*, you have honoured us
	Wizara kutuundiya	by establishing this ministry
17.	*Vijana utamaduni*	Youth and culture
	Kwa hili hukutukhini	you didn't deny us, [nor]
	Sanaa zilo hewani	heavenly art
	Na michezo namba moya	and the very best sport
Poem: Fatma Hamad Rajab		Translation: Duncan Tarrant

As with the wedding poem, this poem also includes a section in which important guests are honoured. The stanzas above are dedicated to then Zanzibari president, Ali Mohamed Shein—here given the honorific title *Baba*, "Father"—whom the poet praises for the decision to create the ministry. This active praise in the form of a recited composition in front of the audience in attendance legitimises the three main authorities present: a) the president, for having had the wisdom and foresight to appoint such a gifted director. b) the poet's authority within the ministry itself, especially as many of her colleagues would also have been in attendance. As an artist, she is qualified for the role and can make decisions based on her own real experience; and finally, c) the ministry itself, which can and should be trusted to make the right decisions, because the right people are in control.

There is more to be found here than praise poetry reinforcing hierarchies; there is also a wider political purpose, namely, Zanzibari nation-building. Politics in Zanzibar has a complicated history, especially with regard to political

autonomy in relation to mainland Tanzania and within the divided and antagonistic political arena of the Zanzibari islands themselves.[39] The Zanzibari Revolutionary Government (ZRG) takes its name from the violent revolution of 1964, when ethnic African Zanzibaris deposed the Zanzibari Arab ruling class put into power by the British after independence, attained the year before.[40] Along with the wealthy Zanzibari Indian merchant class, they were lucky if they lost only power, land, and property.[41]

All of this resulted in the ZRG's desire to define Zanzibari identity and fortify their efforts to bring about *their* vision of unity (in contrast to other ideas of Zanzibari unity). These intentions (and the tensions they cause) can be seen in the powers of the new Ministry of Youth, Arts, Culture, and Sports. It presides over the government's cultural institutions, including the Zanzibari Council of Arts, Film, and *Censorship* (emphasis mine), which requires that artists of all kinds must pay to register in their books.

This example highlights how within the Zanzibari poetic space, both literary and political power overlap and merge into one another. Hamad claims that the register brings artists and poets under one roof and provides them with government support, but it is also an attempt at creating a monopoly over Zanzibari cultural practices. When artists are forced to register, they are made to conform to the nation's ideals, lest they be defunded and denied access to government-approved public forums, thus losing opportunities to further their creative endeavours.

Throughout the rest of the poem, Hamad constructs a specific idea of Zanzibari culture, which has been handed down since *enzi za asiliya*, "the original times." She reinforces Zanzibari ideals with references to important poets and writers, both living and dead, as well as culturally significant works. On more than one occasion, she motivates her listeners to stay true to Zanzibari customs, which is formulated in opposition to influence from the West and from Mainland Tanzania:

27.	*Utamaduni ni mali*	Culture is wealth
	Ilo bora kwelikweli	of the best kind!
	Kwa hivyo tusikubali	So let us never allow
	Kuwacha ukapoteya	our culture to be lost!

39 Arnold, "Placing the shameless."

40 Harith Ghassany, *Kwaheri Ukoloni, Kwaheri Uhuru" Zanzibar na Mapinduzi ya Afrabia*, (Morrisville: Lulu.com, 2013).

41 Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean. Seas in History*. (London: Routledge, 2010), 94.

28.	*Utamaduni azizi*	Our dear culture,
	Nawaomba tuuenzi	I ask you that we esteem it
	Tuyatumie mavazi	Let us wear the clothing
	Ya enzi za asiliya	handed down through the ages
29.	*Tuyavae ya nyumbani*	Let's wear our own styles
	Tuyawache ya kigeni	and reject foreign influences
	Mume kuvaa herini	A man wearing earrings—
	Siyo jambo la muruwa	this is not respectable

This reinforcement of "Zanzibari cultural ideals" allows the poet, and thus the ZRG, to claim the heritage of Swahili literature and culture; a heritage which was once shared, but was ostensibly taken by force during the aforementioned revolution in 1964.

This attempt at tightening control over poetry shows its importance and power within Zanzibari society, and the way poetry is used as a vehicle to create the government's preferred "Swahili imaginary", an idealised version of events and positions show how poetry and politics intersect in the act of nation-building, whilst still reinforcing the ZRG's position of power.

7 Conclusion

The examples in this essay demonstrate that, within the Zanzibari literary space, poetry is a highly valuable literary form that is used effectively to (re-) negotiate social hierarchies and further agendas. "Good" poetry is simultaneously entertaining and meaningful for its audiences. This dual expectation on poetry is highly performative and relational.

In the case of the intrinsically relational *kujibizana* practice, the importance of spontaneity and wittiness is highlighted in the examples of Ali and the *konda*, and Ziro. These examples show how the audience (and their opinions) play an important part in the constructive process of creating imaginaries, self-reflection and identity building.

The two *tenzi* show us how the poetic intersects with political and social power. In the wedding *utenzi*, the poetic and the social intertwine in establishing, asserting and/or consolidating the social relationships in the room by intentionally including (and omitting) guests; honouring them by placing the spotlight on them. Something similar happens in the *Utenzi wa Tamasha la Utamaduni*, which praises and reinforces the authority of the political players present. In both poems, the poets themselves benefit by promoting and

ingratiating themselves with their audience, but also, in the second example, by reinforcing their own position of power and authority.

Poetry is thus an ever emerging series of exchanges that are constantly creating new iterations (or reinforcing old ones) of the multiple and complex imaginaries and desires of the actors within this poetry-world. Therein lies the power of poetry and also the reason why poetry is also highly political where "struggles of all sorts"[42] are played out. This also explains the ZRG's desire to control and claim ownership of poetry and poetic heritage in their policies on education and culture, for their own political purposes – often to the detriment of any dissenting voices. Through all of this, we see that poetic performance and construction plays out at all levels of society, from among the passengers on a public bus, to the highest levels of government; poetry can make, change, or break anything in Zanzibar.

References

Aiello Traoer, Flavia. "Taarab and Swahili Prose." *Swahili Forum* 8, no. 8 (2001): 123–128.

Arnold, Nathalie. "Placing the shameless: Approaching poetry and the politics of Pemban-ness in Zanzibar, 1995–2001." *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 3 (2002): 140–166.

Askew, Kelly. "Tanzanian newspaper poetry: Political commentary in verse." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 515–537. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.918312

Askew, Kelly. *Performing the nation: Swahili music and cultural politics in Tanzania. Chicago studies in ethnomusicology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Barber, Karin. *The anthropology of texts, persons and publics. New departures in anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Baumann, Shyon. "Intellectualization and art world development: Film in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 404–426.

Biersteker, Ann. J. *Mashairi ya vita vya Kuduhu: War poetry in Kiswahili exchanged at the time of the battle of Kuduhu. African historical sources 7*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995.

Biersteker, Ann J. *Kujibizana: Questions of language and power in nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry in Kiswahili. African series 4*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996.

42 Casanova, "Literature as a world," 71–72.

Brugioni, Elena. *A world(system) of debris: Ruins, remains and self-writing in narratives across the Indian Ocean*. (forthcoming).

Casanova, Pascale. *The world republic of letters. Convergences*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Casanova, Pascale. "Literature as a world." *New Left Review* 31 (January –February 2005): 71–90.

Cattani, Gino, Simone Ferriani & Paul D. Allison. "Insiders, outsiders, and the struggle for consecration in cultural fields." *American Sociological Review* 79, no. 2 (2014): 258–281. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122414520960.

Fair, Laura. *Pastimes and politics: Culture, community, and identity in post-abolition urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945*. Eastern African studies. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001.

Ghassany, Harith. *Kwaheri Ukoloni, Kwaheri Uhuru! Zanzibar na Mapinduzi ya Afrabia*. Morrisville: Lulu.com, 2013.

Gora, Haji. *Shuwari,* edited by Flavia. Aiello & Irene Brunotti. Paris: DL2A Buluu Publishing, 2019.

Green, Roland, Stephan Cushman, Clara Cavanagh, Jahan Rahazani & Paul Rouzer. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014.

Hamdani, Miryam (2019, November 30). Discussions on her Life, Family, and Taarab (D. Tarrant, Interviewer)

Hilal, Nassor. (2023, February 18). Discussions of Siku Zapishana and Nasaha. (D. Tarrant, Interviewer)

Jalala, Sikudhani. (2019, Oct-Nov). Discussions about kujibizana and plagiarism. (D. Tarrant, Interviewer)

Knappert, Jan. *Four centuries of Swahili verse: A literary history and anthology*. London: Heinemann, 1979.

Koenings, Nathatlie Arnold. "Seeing the world with Zanzibari poet Nassor Hilal." *Swahili Forum* 25 (2018): 186–195.

Kresse, Kai. *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and intellectual practice on the Swahili coast. International African library 35*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Mazrui, Alamin. "Conservatism and Liberalism in Swahili Poetry: The Linguistic Dimension." *Research in African Literature* 23, no. 4 (1992): 67–76.

Michael, Andil. "What makes a good book, and how can authors measure success?" *Medium*. June 1, 2018. https://medium.com/@andilmichael/what-makes-a-good-book-and-how-can-authors-measure-success-c443fde0ea9b.

Miehe, Gudrun. „Die Perioden der Swahililiteratur und ihre sprachliche Form." *Paideuma*, 36, (1990): 201–215. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40732670.

Mulrooney, David. „Review of The world republic of letters, by Pascale Casanova." *College & Research Libraries* 66, no. 6 (November 2005): 552–553. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.66.6.552.

Pearson, Michael. *The Indian Ocean. Seas in History*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Petterson, Donald. *Revolution in Zanzibar: An American's Cold War tale*. Cambridge, MA: Westview, 2002.

Sahota, Bali. "Review of Pascale Casanova, The world republic of letters, trans. M. B. DeBevoise." *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2007). https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol6/iss2/5.

Sriniva, Smriti, Bettina Ngweno, & Neelima Jechandra, eds. *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*. London/New York: Routledge, 2020.

Sriram, Pallavi. *Marfa masti Performing shifting Indian Ocean geographies in Srinivas, Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*. London/New York: Routledge, 2020.

Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and uneven development: Towards a new theory of world-literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015.

UVCCM CCK. "Ziro kasorobo ndani ya kongamano la kuunga mkono hotuba ya Mheshimiwa Raisi wa Zanzibar Dr Mwinyi." Retrieved November 29, 2021, from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0Qr-d--dTY&t=402s.

Vierke, Clarissa. *Zanzibari worlds: A relational reading of Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea and Adam Shafi Adam's Vuta n'kuvute.* (Forthcoming)

Yussuf Mohd, Kassim. (@zirokasorob03832), Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/@zirokasorob03832/videos.

CHAPTER 7

Zanzibari Worlds: a Relational Reading of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Adam Shafi Adam's *Vuta n'kuvute*

Clarissa Vierke

1 Introduction: Abdulrazak Gurnah and Shafi Adam Shafi—Two Zanzibari Writers

In this contribution, I will bring together two novels by Zanzibari writers who write in two different languages and whose novels have never been compared. Abdulrazak Gurnah is a widely acclaimed author who has made Zanzibar—the most important East African entrepot in the Indian Ocean network since the nineteenth century—the focus of his literary imagination; Shafi Adam Shafi is one of many other prominent Zanzibari Swahili authors—such as Said Ahmed Mohamed, Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed, and, most recently, Zeinab Alwi Bahroon—who have also narrated Zanzibar's changing social history.[1]

Thus, I am deliberately crossing a border that is seldom crossed, one that holds for most East African novels in Swahili and English: though both languages serve as the dominant written literary languages of East Africa, scholarship on East African literature has largely been divided along linguistic lines.[2] While one might attribute the dearth of comparative readings featuring Swahili literature to a lack of linguistic competence, even in East Africa, where

1 For an overview, see E. Bertoncini Zúbková et al., eds., *Outline of Swahili Literature: Prose Fiction and Drama* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). There have been a few attempts to bring English- and Swahili-language East African literature together, such as, for instance, Mwangi's critical interrogation of postcolonial discourses in East Africa in *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2009), and the volume edited by L. Diegner and F. Schulze-Engler, *Habari ya Kiswahili? What about English? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), which sets out to address this rift in scholarship.

2 For a pioneering critical discussion, see L. Diegner and F. Schulze-Engler, "Habari ya Contact Zone? East African Literature Revisited," in *Habari ya Kiswahili? What about English? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone*, ed. L. Diegner and F. Schulze-Engler (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–22. This largely holds both for East African academia as well as beyond it; in the former case, this might be even more surprising, given that not only are many authors minimally bilingual, but so are the scholars.

scholars (and writers) are minimally bilingual, working across languages is rare, which largely reflects the institutional separation into departments of (English) literature and Swahili literature. As I will examine below, English and Swahili literature have accordingly been framed in different discourses. My main argument is that the multilingual literary production of and about most East African and Indian Ocean literary contexts requires greater attention, reflecting critically on the simultaneity and layered nature of narratives.[3]

The biographies of the two authors have similarities that are also partly mirrored in the novels and already question the notion of a clear dichotomy between the smaller and wider worlds, as I will explore further below. Both Abdulrazak Gurnah and Shafi Adam Shafi were born in Zanzibar Town during the time of late British colonialism and the Omani sultanate in the 1940s. Both experienced the upheavals of the 1960s in their youth, when, driven not only by politics but also by wanderlust, they made their way to Europe, like many other Zanzibari writers. While Abdulrazak Gurnah took a flight to the UK, Shafi Adam Shafi, originally also with the intention of going to the UK, embarked on a long, adventurous journey, crossing the African continent from Kenya to Uganda, the DRC, Sudan, and Egypt to study in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and later Sweden and the US before coming back to Zanzibar as a journalist in the late 1970s.[4] While Abdurazak Gurnah lived through poverty and uncertainty as a displaced migrant, all the while carving out a successful existence both as an academic and in the world of literature, becoming a prominent English-language writer and even a Nobel Prize laureate, Shafi Adam Shafi, who spent two years in prison after the assassination of Zanzibar's president Abeidi Karume in 1972,[5] became renowned as a Swahili journalist, writer, and activist in Tanzania.

Both authors began writing when they were young. Shafi Adam Shafi started publishing his novels in the late 1970s: after *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad* ("Overlord Fuad's Palace," 1978), depicting the Zanzibar revolution, and *Kuli* ("Docker,"

3 See also K. Kresse and C. Vierke, "Swahili Language and Literature as Resources for Indian Ocean Studies," *History Compass* 20 (2022): 1–14.

4 In his memoirs, *Mbali na nyumbani* ("Far Away from Home"), Shafi Adam Shafi gives a vivid account of his journey. As for his intellectual career, see the informative interview in A. Shafi and L. Diegner, "Mazungumzo na Adam Shafi juu ya Uandishi wake wa Riwaya," *Swahili Forum* 18 (2011): 37–68, as well as the YouTube clip "Adam Shafi juu ya Maisha yake na kazi zake" ("Adam Shafi on His Life and Works"): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKTJCBertXQ. For an interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah on his life and works, see T. Steiner, "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah," *English Studies in Africa* 56, no. 1 (2013): 157–167.

5 Many intellectuals were imprisoned without trial at that time—an experience that informed his novel *Haini* ("The Traitor," 2013).

1979), focusing on the anticolonial strike of 1948, *Vuta n'kuvute* ("Tug of War," 2001) is his third novel.[6] Before *By the Sea*, Abdurazak Gurnah had published six other novels starting from the late 1980s; besides *By the Sea*, his novel *Paradise* (1994), focusing on the caravan trade of Tanganyika before World War I, has been the most acclaimed and discussed for its subtle, but elegantly intertwined narrative of shifting maps.[7]

2 Worlds Apart? Reading across Worlds

The two novels were not only written in two different languages, but also seem to belong to two different worlds. They attract different readerships, are published by different publishers, distributed according to different market logics, and discussed by different academic disciplines—with different questions in mind.

Gurnah's English-language novel *By the Sea*, first published by a British publisher and meant for an international, English-speaking audience, has been widely interpreted in Anglophone studies as speaking to postcolonial paradigms of "writing back" and discussions of diaspora identities as well as Indian Ocean studies with its outlook on narratives of transcontinental trajectories decentering the West. To Hofmeyr, for instance, Gurnah is one of the "three prominent writers on the Indian Ocean" next to Amitav Ghosh and Engseng Hong, since their literary narratives challenge the maps drawn by empires and nation-states.[8] Writing "from a position of weakness" against a "dominant narrative, obviously a European and an imperial one," as Gurnah himself describes his work as a writer, entails sharing his perspective on the displaced diaspora subject "from a poor place."[9] His literature comprises a performative act: his postcolonial novel challenges the constraints of the Western novel, so deeply rooted in the narrow epoch of Europe's nationalist and imperialist projects.

6 See also E. Bertoncini Zúbková et al., *Outline of Swahili literature*, 151 and x. Garnier, *Le roman Swahili. La notion de 'Littérature mineure' à l'épreuve* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), 122ff. Later literary works, besides the already mentioned *Haini* ("Traitor," 2003), include *Mbali na nyumbani* ("Far Away from Home," 2013) and *Mtoto wa mama* ("Mother's Child," 2018). *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad* has been translated into French, German, and Russian; *Kuli* has also been translated into Russian. The film adaptation of *Vuta n'kuvute* by the Tanzanian filmmaker Amil Shivji debuted at the Toronto film festival in 2021 and has been internationally acclaimed.

7 It is the only novel of his that has been translated into Swahili in a recent translation by Ida Hadjivayanis.

8 I. Hofmeyr, "Universalizing the Indian Ocean," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 723.

9 Steiner, "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah," 160–161.

Its own literary project is necessarily one of world-making, adding the Indian Ocean to postcolonial narratives of "Entgrenzung,"[10] literally "un-bordering" (i.e., "dissolving borders"), meaning to question the cartographic and epistemic confines of the Western world. It makes the "periphery" part of a newly conceived globality that decenters the West.

Adam Shafi's *Vuta n'kuvute* is an award-winning Swahili novel that has never been translated into English. It is part of the national school curriculum in Tanzania, widely read in Kenya as well, and discussed by scholars of Swahili studies in both East Africa and the West. In Swahili literary studies, which has developed mostly in parallel to a growing literary production in modern Swahili prose from the 1960s onward, writing literature has been considered primarily a performative act of bringing new sociopolitical worlds into being. *Vuta n'kuvute* has been read in terms of *literature engagée*, which became prominent in East African literary criticism after the inception of the socialist state, having been nurtured by a more global Marxist-realist understanding of literature.[11] The novel is viewed as *kioo cha jamii*, a "mirror of society," a major notion in Swahili literary criticism.[12] Its aim is not merely to "mirror" a status quo, but the novel is supposed to have what Barber and Furniss[13] call the "purposive dimension" of many African-language literatures, i.e. the intention to bear impact on specific social realities. As Mlacha has put it, the aim is "to create a new society in accordance with how people see the difficulties their societies have to face. Therefore, literature is like a mirror, and the novel like the shadows of our image in that mirror" ("kuiumba jamii mpya, kufuatana na jinsi wanavyoyaona matatizo ambayo yanazikabili jamii zao. Kwa vile fasihi ni kama kioo na riwaya kama vivuli au picha yetu kwenye kioo hicho [...]").[14]

Accordingly, *Vuta n'kuvute*, whose main protagonist, Yasmin, belongs to the Indian diaspora, has generally not been discussed with regard to its postcolonial position or in terms of the Indian Ocean, constructing larger, transcontinental maps; rather, *ukombozi*—"liberation" through class struggle from the shackles of the dark past of oppression by colonial powers, feudalist structures

10 C. Moser and L. Simonis, "Einleitung: Das globale Imaginäre," in *Figuren des Globalen. Weltbezug und Welterzeugung in Literatur, Kunst und Medien*, ed. C. Moser and L. Simonis (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014), 14.

11 See X. Garnier, *Le roman Swahili. La notion de la 'Littérature mineure' à l'epreuve* (Paris: Karthala, 2006).

12 See also X. Garnier, *Le roman Swahili* and C. Vierke, "'What Is There in My Speaking': Re-explorations of Language in Abdilatif Abdalla's Anthology of Prison Poetry, *Sauti Ya Dhiki*," *African Literatures* 48, no. 1 (2017): 135–157.

13 K. Barber and G. Furniss, "African-language Writing," *RAL* 37, no. 3 (2006): 6.

14 S. A. K. Mlacha, "Riwaya za Visiwani (1970–1980) na Ujenzi wa Jamii Mpya," *Mulika* 16 (1984): 4.

of slavery, or backward, imprisoning customs—has provided a common framework for reading the novel as setting the ground for the new society and independent nation.[15] The initiative of writing modern literature in Swahili—even the term *fasihi* "literature" was introduced only in the 1960s—has been closely linked with imagining the nation-state in East Africa, and thus more profoundly with drawing an imaginary cartography of the territory, i.e. the land, and not the sea. Rooted in a colonial program of border-drawing, after Tanzania's independence in 1961, the modern myth of a new beginning of progress and development was tied to the continuous creation of a primarily written standard Swahili taken from the continuum of spoken varieties and modern literary writing in line with the agenda of creating a better future.[16]

Generally speaking, Zanzibari novelists from the 1960s to the 1980s, writing in the aftermath of the revolution, were especially preoccupied with "the possibility of a radical reversal of social hierarchies."[17] The revolution, depicted in Shafi Adam Shafi's *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad*, and liberation from a feudal society under British rule, starting with the strike of the workers' union in 1948—the backdrop of both Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Dunia mti mkavu* ("The World Is a Dry Tree," 1980) and Shafi Adam Shafi's *Kuli*—became important topics, as did the lingering forms of exploitation and greed.

Thus, in a nutshell, Swahili- and English-language novels have been interpreted according to different paradigms steeped in different institutional logics. For literary scholars, Abdulrazak Gurnah's narratives have provided a crucial lens for zooming in on these entangled histories, while the discipline has mostly ignored the significant tradition and ongoing production of Swahili prose—and poetry—on Zanzibar. At the same time, for Swahili literary critics, the construct of the nation rather than the Indian Ocean has been a prominent way of reading Swahili literature, which, however, also bears interesting Indian Ocean references, as I will show. Thus, the Indian Ocean is not only a matter of the corpus we take into consideration, but also depends on the templates of reading.[18]

---

15 See O. A. Adam, "Kuchunguza Dhamira za Kijamii na Kiutamaduni katika Riwaya ya Kiswahili: Mifano kutoka Kuli na Vuta N'Kuvute" (PhD diss., Free University Tanzania, 2014) and S. A. K. Mlacha and J. S. Madumulla, *Riwaya ya Kiswahili* (Dar es Salaam University Press, 1991).

16 See Diegner and Schulze-Engler, "Habari ya Contact Zone?" and W. Whiteley, *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language* (London: Methuen, 1969).

17 Garnier, *Le roman Swahili*, 17 (translation mine); see also Mlacha, "Riwaya za Visiwani," 4ff. and F. Aiello, "Investigating Topics and Style in *Vuta N'kuvute* by Shafi Adam Shafi," *AAP* 72/*Swahili Forum* 9 (2002), 35.

18 See also J. Verne and M. Verne, "Introduction: The Indian Ocean as Aesthetic Space," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 315.

There has frequently been discussion of Swahili scholarship and writing lagging behind "literary studies proper," as the former, being underdeveloped, is not (yet) able to leave the topic of nation-building and its small, regional perspective behind in favor of more "transnational, transcultural and diasporic dimensions"[19]—a discourse of development that has also been imposed on other literatures outside the West.[20] Criticism has so far mostly come from scholars working on the so-called "literatures in minor languages" of the postcolonies, underlining the importance of taking different literary perspectives seriously, even if, or rather because, they do not easily speak to established categories, since they challenge our lenses of analyses.[21]

In a similar vein, I want to make the differences between the novels as well as their interpretation productive to critically expand our readings of Indian Ocean literature. My essay makes an effort to take Swahili literary perspectives on board, dismissing the notion of a "not-yet" novel. It likewise implies a skeptical look at dominant Indian Ocean readings related mostly to English literature, which have hardly helped to broaden perspectives in recent decades. Although Indian Ocean studies and postcolonialism have celebrated fluid, transnational identities and multicultural and multilingual spaces, comparisons between literary imaginations across languages have rarely been made. Rather, in a paradoxical way, the logic of the monolingual, national philologies of the West, concentrated on former colonial languages, has been emphasized.[22]

Thus, I would like to attempt a relational approach by exploring the coexistence of the two novels' narratives of Zanzibar—each of which portrays a multicultural and multilingual island, drawing on different, but also overlapping repertoires—in an effort to multiply perspectives, which might not only add to and confirm, but also contradict, ignore, or question each other. In this essay, by reading *Vuta n'kuvute* in conversation with Gurnah's *By the Sea*, and hence also as an Indian Ocean narrative, I will further show how Shafi's novel critically interrogates some dominant interpretive patterns in Indian Ocean

19 Diegner and Schulze-Engler, "Habari ya Contact Zone?," 7.

20 For instance, A. Werberger traced similar patterns in discourse on Yiddish and Eastern European languages in "Theory from the East" (paper presented at the workshop Location of Theory, European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder, February 2020).

21 See, for instance, M. Arenberg, "Studying African Literature in the Age of the Global," *Africa Today* 63, no. 2 (2016): 117–120 and S. Marzagora, "African-language Literatures and the 'Transnational Turn' in Euro-American Humanities," *Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (2015): 40–55.

22 See also C. Vierke, "Other Worlds: The 'Prophet's Ascension' as World Literature and Its Adaptation in Swahili-speaking East Africa," in *Vergleichende Weltliteraturen/Comparative World Literatures*, ed. D. Lamping, G. Tihanov, and M. Bortmuth (Berlin: Metzler, 2019), 215–229.

scholarship, also throwing questions back at *By the Sea*. The basic questions are simple: for one, how do both novels imagine Zanzibar? They both depict the late colonialism of the 1960s, an era of fundamental social change with the subsequent independence of Tanganyika (1961), Zanzibar's revolution (1963), and its joining into a republic with Tanganyika (1964). How do they differ in their narratives of this decade, a decisive turning point in the island's history? What do the differences between the narratives tell us? Where do they intersect?

My aim is not to find a more 'authentic' construction of a Zanzibari world: I am by no means trying to argue for one 'genuine' Zanzibari novel, weighing the biographies and languages of the authors against each other to decide who is allowed to speak (as is so often done at the moment). Zanzibar can be equally imagined in English and in Swahili. I do not find the many controversies about Gurnah's 'Africanness' and the question of whether he is an 'African' writer, which emerged virulently after his winning the Nobel Prize, productive or even relevant.[23] Firstly, pigeonholing (African) identities is misleading as a multicultural place like Zanzibar in particular constantly reminds us. In an interview with Deutsche Welle, Gurnah explains, "I know my identity, which is that I am a man from Zanzibar who lives in the UK and I write. This is my identity. I don't say, I'm an African writer or I'm a British writer or whatever. I'm from Zanzibar and I live in the UK. I'm from both of these places in any possible way you can think of."[24] This is a statement one can understand with regard to identity, arguing for multiple and layered affiliations, but also as an invitation to read the literary text as drawing on multiple narratives, imaginaries, and semantics.

In the following, I will first give summaries of both novels.

---

23 Also the Nobel Prize Committee fell into clichés of othering the African continent, viewing it primarily in isolation, as Meg Arenberg has intelligently pointed out in "Abdulrazak Gurnah's Nobel: The Right Award for the Wrong Reason," *New Lines Magazine*, November 10, 2021, https://newlinesmag.com/argument/abdulrazak-gurnahs-nobel-the-right-award-for-the-wrong-reason/9.

24 A. Steffes-Halmer, "Abdulrazak Gurnah on Exile and Literature," *Deutsche Welle*, March 18, 2022,https://www.dw.com/en/nobel-laureate-abdulrazak-gurnah-on-exile-and-literature/a-61154081. In the context of the BARAZA Swahili studies conference in London (October 29, 2022), he said, "I come from Indian Zanzibar." Gurnah, himself of Yemeni descent, described his childhood in the neighborhood of Malindi, each season overflowing with the many merchants who came from across the ocean. As he explained, "You do not leave a place." There are numerous interviews in which he was asked to comment on how representative he is as an African writer; see, for instance, A. Marshall, "Abdulrazak Gurnah Refuses to Be Boxed In: 'I Represent Me,'" *The New York Times*, August, 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/21/books/abdulrazak-gurnah-nobel-book.html.

2.1 *Vuta n'kuvute*

Vuta n'kuvute ("Tug of War") is set in Zanzibar Town at the time of the political awakening of the 1950s and 1960s, right before Tanganyika's independence. The protagonist is the young Yasmin, a Zanzibari Indian from an Ithna-Ashari Muslim family of Gujarati descent, who flees her unhappy arranged marriage with the much older Bwana Reza. Expelled from her strict family, she crosses a racial border, taking refuge with her only "African" friend, Mwajuma, in the former slave quarter of Zanzibar Town, Ng'ambu. Mwajuma, who struggles to make ends meet, shows Yasmin what it means to enjoy life: she takes Yasmin to *taarab* concerts, which Yasmin grows increasingly enthusiastic about. Eventually, she meets Denge, a rebellious Zanzibari who studied in Russia and is now part of the struggle for independence against British rule, translating and smuggling pamphlets of Soviet propaganda to the island. Yasmin falls passionately in love with him and gives birth to their son, but Denge is so dedicated to the political struggle that he cannot marry her: his responsibility toward society is bigger. Denge is the prototypical intellectual activist, who often disappears—for instance, on a meandering journey to Europe—only to reappear after some time. With the help of his friends, he is always one step ahead of the British police inspector Wright, hilariously portrayed through his Anglicized Swahili. When Denge is finally arrested, he struggles under the harsh conditions in prison. But Yasmin and his friends hatch a scheme to allow him to escape on a dhow that takes him to the northern part of the coast. The novel ends with Yasmin getting married to Bukheti, an earlier acquaintance and Swahili merchant, while Denge writes a postcard from China.

2.2 *By the Sea*

In *By the Sea*, the main protagonist, Saleh Omar, a Zanzibari man in his mid-sixties, arrives in the UK as a refugee. An air of tragic secrecy surrounds Saleh, the cause of which lies in the past, and is only gradually revealed—mostly in conversations with Latif, a university lecturer who left Zanzibar in the 1960s and is surprised to be called on to interpret for Saleh, who uses his father's name, Rajab Shabaan. Little by little, the reader learns from suspense-inducing flashbacks about the interlinked fates of their families, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s—approximately the same period as in *Vuta n'kuvute*. Saleh Omar had owned a furniture shop in Zanzibar Town in the 1960s. When Hussein, a Persian merchant, arrives from across the Indian Ocean, he sets a series of disastrous events in motion: he takes a loan from Saleh and, after seducing Latif's brother Hassan, disappears with him. The growing shame of Latif's family is fatally connected with that of Saleh Omar, as Hussein had offered the house of Rajab Shabaan, Hassan and Latif's father, as security for the loan, which he

did not pay back. For Latif and his family, Saleh is the villain who takes over their house. In search of a new future, Latif leaves to study in the GDR before escaping to the UK, gradually finding his path to a mediocre existence as a university lecturer.

On meeting Saleh, Latif not only has to confront his suppressed past, but also learns to see his troubled family from a different perspective. Saleh was not merely the malicious thief of their house, as his family portrayed him: not only did he strive for compromise with Rajab, but his own life was also less fortunate than Latif had imagined. Hardship befell him in the new context of the socialist state: Rajab, climbing the ladder of the new system, moved back into his house, while Saleh was imprisoned, suffering in a series of detention camps. The Zanzibar he finds upon his release in 1979 has changed drastically, his wife and daughter having passed away in the meantime, and he retreats into his store, regarded by others as a "man destroyed by prison and personal tragedy."[25] When the long-lost Hassan returns and threatens to take him to court, Saleh decides to escape to the UK with a false passport issued on Rajab Shaaban's birth certificate.

3 Imagining Zanzibar in Relation

In both *Vuta n'kuvute* and *By the Sea,* which are anything but chamber pieces, Zanzibar is portrayed as a gravitational center entangled in a much wider world in flux. Both novels enforce a relational perspective prominent in studying the Indian Ocean: in *Reimagining the Indian Ocean*, Srinivas, Ng'weno and Jeychandran dismiss the notion of clearly defined areas while highlighting a conceptual and theoretical relationality that sees locations defined by networks and their boundaries as constantly in the making.[26] It is its own fluidity that turns the ocean as such into a potent metaphor, which Datta, for instance, views as a "method of relation, and in fact, as the condition of relation."[27] It is

25 A. Gurnah, *By the Sea* (London: Bloomsbury 2001), 235.

26 S. Srinivas, B. Ng'weno, and N. Jeychandran, "Many Worlds, Many Oceans," in *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, ed. S. Srinivas, B. Ng'weno, and N. Jeychandran (London: Routledge, 2020), 13.

27 S. M. Datta, "Swahili Transmodernity and the Indian Ocean: Abdulrazak Gurnah's Ethic of Community in *By the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *Gravel Heart*," *Postcolonial Text* 14, nos. 3/4 (2019): 4. Not only have Indian Ocean literary studies—see V. Cooppan, "Object Orientation and Circulatory Form in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*," *Comparative Literature* 74, no. 2 (2022): 171–185 and M. Samuelson, "Coastal Form: Amphibian Positions, Wider Worlds,

the Indian Ocean that bodes the "imaginative potential"[28] to think of continents and identities not as isolated containers, and concretely offer possibilities for relations.

While Gurnah has already been characterized as a pioneering figure in representing "East African locations of Indian Ocean relations,"[29] Shafi's novel, too, as I wish to argue here, constructs Zanzibar primarily as entangled in the "competing relations within the cultural hotch-potch of colonised territories," as Gurnah describes it in his essay "Imagining the Postcolonial Writer."[30] In both novels, Zanzibar exists under the broader influences of the waning colonial empire, the grumbling sultanate and Indian Ocean networks, but also that of a changing world order increasingly shaped by Cold War dynamics.[31] While in *By the Sea*, Latif studies in the GDR because there is no other viable option, Denge's studies in Russia and his connections with European socialists have made him a committed activist in the struggle for independence. Zanzibari relations are projected onto the UK and far into the Indian Ocean in *By the Sea*, whereas notions of Russian communism and Pan-Africanism and Indian diaspora communities situate Zanzibar in a broader world in *Vuta n'kuvute*. Both novels portray a changing world with a complex layered history from the point of view of a specific place in the Indian Ocean.

The troublesome layered history of Zanzibar, whose cacophonies mark the characters' present reality, is also echoed in the narrative structure. Suggesting a "liquid reading" of *By the Sea*, Cooppan speaks of the constant proliferation of narratives, creating a network-like structure in *By the Sea*, built, according to her, after the model of the *Tales from the Arabian Nights*:[32] "The stories," as one of the characters in *By the Sea* says, "are always slipping through our fingers,

---

and Planetary Horizons on the African Indian Ocean Littoral," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017): 16–24—widely explored aquatic metaphors, but so too have diasporic studies focusing on the Atlantic (see the contributions by Fendler and Ndi Shang in this volume, making reference to *tidalectics*).

28 Datta, "Swahili Transmodernity," 4.

29 Ibid., 8.

30 A. Gurnah, "Imagining the Postcolonial Writer," in *Reading the "New" Literatures in a Postcolonial Era*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), 85.

31 On Indian Ocean cartographies and the importance of maps in *By the Sea,* see M. Samuelson, "Narrative Cartographies, 'Beautiful Things' and Littoral States in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*," *English Studies in Africa* 56, no. 1 (2013): 78–90 and F. Schulze-Engler, "Africa's Asian Options—Indian Ocean Imaginaries in East African Literature," in *Beyond the Line: Cultural Narratives of the Southern Oceans*, ed. M. Mann and I. Phaf-Rheinberger (Berlin: Neofelis, 2014), 159–178.

32 Cooppan, "Object Orientation," 175.

changing shape, wriggling to get away."[33] Digressions, flashbacks, and stories within the story are typical of both.[34] The narratives, in their constant ramifications of the plot, suggest fluid relations that also characterize the complex interrelationship of characters—like that of Latif and Saleh, but also Yasmin and Denge.

The small and the large worlds are strongly intertwined. The characters' drama is intimately interrelated with the changing political map. The fate of the disintegrating families in *By the Sea* and that of Saleh, who loses everything, or that of Denge, who sacrifices everything for a larger-than-life political cause, independence, and the abolition of feudalism, are potent metaphors for the profound, earth-shattering changes, recalling Fredric Jameson's dictum about the necessarily allegorical relationship between the nation and the individual in the postcolonial world.[35]

In *By the Sea*, it is first colonialism, with its restrictive maps, and later, the revolution and the intrusion of the nation-state that mark the end of cosmopolitan Zanzibar—and coincide with the beginning of Saleh's suffering (he takes over Rajab Shabaan's house the year of the revolution). In an allegorical fashion, Hussein appears in the "blessed musim"[36] of 1960, before independence, and disappears with Hassan beyond the horizon, "when Zanzibar cedes its position as terminus of the dhow trade,"[37] right before the revolution and, later, the formation of the new socialist state.[38] Hussein, "a Persian from Bahrain, as he was quick to remind anyone who mistook him for an Arab or an Indian"[39]— whose stories of his forefathers sketch out a network spanning the ocean; who comes to Saleh's shop, itself an archive of the Indian Ocean, to converse with him in English—conjures the cosmopolitan air of Zanzibar in the 1950s and 1960s, where references to Shakespeare, modern cinema, and a repertoire of Islamic oral narratives like the Mi'raj, the Prophet's night

33 Ibid., 130.

34 For *Vuta n'kuvute*, see Aiello, "Investigating Topics and Style"; for *By the Sea*, see Samuelson, "Narrative Cartographies."

35 F. Jameson, "Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.

36 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 19.

37 Samuelson, "Narrative Cartographies," 10.

38 Samuelson ("Narrative Cartographies," 86) notes the temporal simultaneity as well, pointing out that 1960 is "the year in which Hussein catalyses the personal and familial tragedies of Saleh," while it is also "presented as a watershed one in the history [...] where it coincides with the steps towards self-rule that will culminate in independence in 1963."

39 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 19.

journey to heaven,[40] were "negotiable," as Gurnah underlines.[41] Salih's efforts to integrate into the new nation—he wants to call his daughter Raia, "citizen," in opposition to his wife, who insists on Ruqiya, after the Prophet's wife—fail.

The Zanzibar of Saleh's memories is a Zanzibar of the past. The only possible temporal perspective is that of looking back, which corresponds to the vision of the migrant—for whom the present is but an afterlife of the past, not a new beginning. Like Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," to whom he makes repeated reference, he remains passive and silent, "preferring rather not" to act nor to speak on his arrival. However, Zanzibar constantly re-emerges in memories, not as a paradise lost, but as a continuous source of festering wounds caused by the family tragedies of the past that shape the present. Latif comments on it in a passage that reads like a metacomment on the novel: "It's all history, anyway. None of it matters, really. I am not saying that history does not matter, knowing what happened so we understand what we are all about, and how we came to be as we are, and what stories we tell about it all. I mean, I don't want recriminations, all this family business, all this muttering that stretches further back. Have you noticed the incredible consequences of family squabbles in the history of Islamic societies?"[42] Hence, rather than political forces, it is "family squabbles" that are the drivers of history, as Latif seems to suggest. The larger narrative drama of the revolution, independence, and the politics of nationalization do not cause but rather echo life-shaping forces like love, passion, greed, shame, and honor, which befall the protagonists in a similar way as in Greek tragedy and create bonds over generations. Like in Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), where Yusuf is placed in the possession of Uncle Aziz to pay back an old debt, or in *Gravel Heart* (2018), where Salim has to return to Zanzibar after years in the UK to unravel the secrets of an ugly family affair, time in *By the Sea* is not strictly that of an individual's lifetime, but is defined by relations or networks of kin that the individual cannot liberate him- or herself from—not even when far from Zanzibar. An individual's fate is linked to that of family, extending into the past, and often also crossing the Indian Ocean to other distant family members.

To quite a large extent, *Vuta n'kuvute* provides a complementary perspective to *By the Sea*. While the past weighs the characters down in *By the Sea*, in *Vuta n'kuvute*, Zanzibar's present prevails; the future is full of possibilities.

40 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 42.

41 A. Gurnah, "Learning to Read," in *Habari ya Kiswahili? What about English? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone*, ed. L. Diegner and F. Schulze-Engler (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 29.

42 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 195.

Although the persecution of political opponents like Denge increases in the late colonial regime, rather than a gloomy atmosphere of oppression, misery, and hunger, it is light-heartedness that emanates from the novel, whose tone is markedly different from the melancholy of *By the Sea*. In *Vuta n'kuvute*, the revolution and social change are not the cause of the endless trauma and atrocities, but the hope and goal of both Yasmin, looking for self-fulfillment, able to free herself from her past and her restrictive family, and Denge, a man of action, eager to bring about political change. The novel not only links the political and the individual, but often presents itself as hesitating between the two: political concerns and the everyday affairs and emotions of the individual.[43] There are moments in the novel when the grand ideas of the revolution prevail, like in Denge's speech, in which he tells Yasmin that their love is less important than the political cause: "Everyone has a responsibility in society, and my big responsibility is to do everything I can to see this country become independent" ("kila mtu ana wajibu fulani katika jamii na mimi wajibu wangu mkubwa ni kufanya kila niwezalo […] ili kuona kwamba nchi hii inakuwa huru,)."[44]

In some parts, *Vuta n'kuvute* becomes, according to Garnier, a *roman à thèse*, since the characters are often (not but exclusively) made to embody a Marxist political agenda and ideology of liberation: "Shafi Adam Shafi is without doubt a Swahili novelist who has best managed to directly transplant political discourse into the novel's discourse. His novel features militants involved in a fight, which leaves no uncertainties."[45] Just as many Zanzibari novels of that time, "influenced by Marxist credo," it explored "the proletariat as the 'new man'"[46] and female characters like Yasmin also became main protagonists, struggling to find their way between oppressive family structures and the lures of modernity—like Bahati in the acclaimed novel *Kiu* ("Thirst," 1972), Rehema in Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed's *Nyota ya Rehema* ("Rehema's Star," 1976), Maimuna in Said Ahmed Mohammed's *Utengano* ("Separation," 1980), and Bi Khadija and Zahra in Zainab Alwi Baharoon's *Mungu hakopeshwi* ("God Does Not Give Loans," 2017).

Reading the two novels in relation, *By the Sea*, on the one hand, offers a perspective of the revolution's aftermath that seems to "ask back" about the atrocities and violence of the revolution, which *Vuta n'kuvute* does not picture. On the other hand, Shafi's *Vuta N'kuvute* seems to question the melancholy and

43 See also Garnier, *Le roman Swahili*, 125.

44 A. S. Shafi, Vuta n'kuvute (Dar Es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota 1999), 145.

45 Garnier, *Le roman Swahili*, 122; translation mine.

46 S. A. M. Khamis, "Signs of New Features in the Swahili Novel," *RAL* 36, no. 1 (2005): 95.

the past-oriented view dominant in *By the Sea,* which has been the most dominant mode of reading (and often also writing) the Indian Ocean, bemoaning the birth of the nation-state and the turn from the sea to the land. Likewise, Srinivas, Ng'weno, and Jeychandran emphasize the importance of researching lives in the Indian Ocean with a focus on "the contemporary and contemporaneous," including present-day local memories and conceptions of history and imagined futures[47]; one might ask, what about characters like Denge and Yasmin who did not become migrants and leave Zanzibar after the revolution? How can we take shifting local political maps into consideration, including the nation, which has shaped Indian Ocean communities since independence?

And what about a perspective that celebrates the revolution? For Denge, the revolution does not imply a catastrophe ending a glorious past; on the contrary, it will do away with a past that only exists in the form of ills like racism, feudalism, and colonialism that must be overcome.[48] *Vuta N'kuvute* seems to ask about perspectives on Indian Ocean connections from the point of view of the less privileged, questioning the strict segregation, whose constraints play out chiefly in the character of Yasmin, who manages to liberate herself as a woman. Interestingly, Shafi Adam Shafi, like a number of Swahili writers of the time, chooses women as important protagonists, yet these have often been neglected in Indian Ocean studies, since they do not seem to fit the prevailing narrative of trade relations.[49]

An interesting entry point to further exploring the different semantics of the two novels entails a closer examination of the construction of space, as I will turn to below, as space is a potent metaphor in both novels. While *By the Sea* is significantly set among the houses of Stone Town, next to the sultan's palace that marks the center of the Indian Ocean trade, *Vuta n'kuvute*'s setting, the poor neighborhood of Ng'ambu, seems to ask about the Indian Ocean narratives of those who were not merchants involved in trade, but the descendants of former slaves and other migrants from the African hinterland.

47 Srinivas, Ng'weno, and Jeychandran, "Many Worlds."

48 This figures most strongly in Shafi's other novels, with their prevailing hope that the plantation economy and systems of exploitation and racial segregation will come to an end.

49 See also N. Mahayan, "Seasons of Sail: The Monsoon, Kinship, and Labor in the Dhow Trade," in *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, ed. S. Srinivas, B. Ng'weno, and N. Jeychandran (London: Routledge, 2020), 74; F. Fay, "Women Storying the Swahili Seas: Indian Ocean Feminist Aesthetics and Affective Imaginaries in Lubaina Himid's Political Painting," in *Intermedial Indian Ocean*, ed. U. Fendler and C. Vierke (forthcoming).

3.1 *Relating the City in both Novels*

In the following, I wish to expand the dialogic reading of Gurnah and Shafi through another form of relationality, examining the relations between characters and concrete space and materiality: connectivity is also material and experienced through the senses. In *By the Sea*, the characters are haunted by objects. Though many years have passed since his leaving Zanzibar, Latif observes, "I want to look forward, but I always find myself looking back, poking about in times so long ago and so diminished by other events since then, tyrant events which loom large over me and dictate every ordinary action. Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood."[50] It is particularly the infamous "beautiful table"[51]—which Saleh once sold to the merchant trading in Latif's "beautiful" brother[52]—that distills both a family tragedy as well as far-reaching Indian Ocean routes.[53] The ebony table, "on three delicately bowed legs"[54]—an exquisite accessory of intimate leisure hours wiled away, and an index of elegant cosmopolitanism that Saleh cannot part with—comes with "a vital power, and often an ambiguity," as Meg Samuelson highlights.[55]

The material and the social world are interconnected in the novel, "a story revolving around property and things:"[56] the relationship between Saleh's and Latif's families materializes in the houses they gain and lose, as I wish to stress in the current reading. Digging deeper into the intimate connection between social relations and the house, I would propose, as a thought-provoking entry point, the Swahili term *nyumba*, which refers to the stone houses (in contrast to the mud houses in Ng'ambu as well as their residents, the family, and signal a proud form of urbanity, essentially marked by Indian Ocean trade and Islamic networks, which "made them different from those they despised"[57]—the former slaves, workers, and dependents living in the villages and the quarters outside of town, so prominently depicted in *Vuta n'kuvute*. On Zanzibar, as in many other coastal Swahili towns, urban space (as defined by the architecture of the coral-stone houses) and social relations are interlinked: "relations based upon space, are largely expressed and sanctioned in terms of genealogical

50 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 86.
51 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 19.
52 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 20, 30.
53 See also Cooppan, "Object Orientation."
54 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 22.
55 Samuelson, "Narrative Cartographies," 83.
56 Ibid., 82.
57 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 15.

links [...]"[58] Thus, the actual patrician's house is also more than a dwelling, and does not merely represent, but rather creates social standing, commercial trustworthiness, honor, and dignity (*heshima*). Drawing on Barber's notion of distributed personhood (which she explores in contrast to notions of individualism confined to the consciousness),[59] where the characteristics of objects extend to their owners, the house is part of the inhabitants' social personas. This is why the loss of the house is not only economically catastrophic both to Rajab and later to Saleh, but also destroys their very social existence: they become socially homeless and are written out of history and space. Saleh's only option is to escape, even borrowing the existence of someone else, Rajab, as he arrives in an apartment in the UK stripped of all indexical references.

His new 'home' in the UK is a distorted mirror image of his hometown of Zanzibar—as is the landscape. Saleh frequently draws comparisons with the Old Town of Zanzibar, where he spent most of his life: "I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though for most of it, it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here."[60] There is a sense of alienation in his comparisons: while the ocean in front of his new door is cold and "murky"[61] and obstructs his view of anything else—like the brick wall in front of Bartleby's office in Melville's narrative—the "warm green" Indian Ocean of his memories opened up onto the larger, seamless horizon that Zanzibar had been part of for centuries, a passage for "intrepid traders and sailors" who brought "goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers."[62] Lost and displaced, living the "half-life of a stranger,"[63] he seeks comfort walking through the huge furniture shops in the new "town by the sea," only to be driven away by the "tiny particles of artificial fibres which fill the air and which corrode the lining of my nostrils and bronchials:"[64] the new environment seems toxic. He longs for his shop in Zanzibar Old Town, where he sold mostly antiques that came with the monsoon winds of the ocean, as did "traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa."[65] The

58 M. Horton and J. Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 140. See ibid. on the flexible construction of genealogical categories.

59 K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 112.

60 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 2.

61 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 2.

62 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 15.

63 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 2.

64 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 3.

65 Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 14.

loss of his house and shop epitomizes the loss of transoceanic trade relations as well as the personal tragedy of Saleh and his lost social position.

In *Vuta n'kuvute*, it is not the urban context of Zanzibar—that of the sultan, the patricians, merchants, and the educated employees of the administration—that is in focus, but the commoners' town, Ng'ambu, which literally means "beyond," "the place on the other side," the quarters of the former slaves, workers, and servants.[66] Historically, Ng'ambu refers to the area outside of Stone Town, both architecturally and spatially differentiated from it—there was a creek separating Stone Town and Ng'ambu—comprised of smaller "mud and thatch houses": "In these [houses] live non-patricians, ranging from families of ex-slaves, to high status masharifu of recent arrival, and those who have lived in the town for a very long time, but never gained patrician status."[67] As in his earlier novels, *Kuli* and *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad*, which feature the liberation struggles of the hard-working servants, slaves, and dockworkers exploited and despised by "Arab" overlords and British colonialists, Shafi Adam Shafi draws a picture of a part of society in the shadows of Stone Town.

The urban map is characterized by segregation based on race and social class, and Yasmin, from an Indian Ithna-Ashari background and thus belonging to Stone Town, is described as crossing this line, taking refuge in and becoming part of Ng'ambu, also repeatedly referred to as "Uswahilini" ("Swahili world") in the novel and constructed in opposition to the rich but restrictive city of Stone Town: "Yasmin is not a city person anymore. She is a Ng'ambu person. She is not of that place with wooden balconies and the mansions of dignitaries. Now she lives in the huts of the Swahili world; she has immersed herself in the very foundations of this life here" ("[…] Yasmin si wa mjini tena. Ni wa Ng'ambu. Siye wa kule kwenye maroshani na majumba ya watukufu. Yeye sasa yumo ndani ya vibanda vya Uswahili, amezama katika mizizi katika maisha ya huko)."[68] Ng'ambu entails a "Swahili lifestyle" ("Maisha ya Uswahilini),"[69] full of improvisation, sometimes poverty, but also music and joy, free from the many conventions that trouble Stone Town; here, in Ng'ambu, women like Yasmin and Mwajuma can live alone, enjoying themselves at *taarab* concerts, dance halls, the cinema, and nights of passionate love, joking with (male) friends who come over with bottles of spirits under their arms.[70] Survival is

66 In the novel, the standard word "Ng'ambo" is written as "Ng'ambu."

67 Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili*, 125.

68 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute* , 94.

69 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 42.

70 Mwajuma, for instance, is described as a "girl who did not like to torment herself, and she made use of her freedom to live as she wished. She was ready to do anything that she thought could bring her joy without caring what the others would say" ("… ni msichana

not depicted as a struggle: some coins always find their way into the women's hands, sometimes from outsmarted suitors and tricked police, who try to take advantage of their neediness, but in vain. The elements of honor (*heshima*), associated with property and purity, and shame, linked with alcohol, sexuality, and passion—elements that are dominant in Yasmin's former town, as in *By the Sea*—do not play a role here.[71] As in many other Swahili novels, where "one often falls in love," as Garnier notes,[72] no moral judgment is imposed on passion, while plans of marriage are suspended.[73] The novel is in the "pure present,"[74] like in the love scenes of Denge and Yasmin, taking them into a "world on its own, a world of love" ("dunia ya pekee, dunia ya mapenzi)."[75]

Most captivating are the vivid depictions of the *taarab* concerts in Ng'ambu.[76] If *By the Sea* is a story of "powerful" objects "thick with meaning," as Cooppan writes,[77] *Vuta n'kuvute* is a story of *taarab* music, which creates a powerful aesthetic experience in its literal sense of sensuous perception. Cooppan underlines the importance of an approach to the Indian Ocean that highlights the senses as a form of knowledge that cannot easily be paraphrased, as I also wish to emphasize here. *Taarab* changes Yasmin's life and fosters her experiences of freedom. It epitomizes the spirit of 'Uswahilini' in Ng'ambu and indexes another history of Indian Ocean entanglements. Music thus becomes a way of defining space, speaking to Srinivas, Ng'weno, and Jeychandran's notion of place-making in the Indian Ocean, which is not only a translocal network, but also manifests in specific places.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, *taarab*, originally an orchestral music genre confined to the sultan's court and incorporating various musical influences (most prominently from Egypt, the Middle East, and sometimes

---

asiyependa kujikera nafsi yake na aliutumilia uhuru wake wa maisha kama alivyopenda. Alikuwa tayari kufanya lolote lile ambalo alihisi litamletea furaha bila ya kujali wengine watasema nini," p. 22).

71 See, for instance, the following passage from *By the Sea*: "To drink alcohol in that place, after God's edict against its consumption, was simply to have no fear of indignity, to be foolish beyond recklessness because of the mockery and persecution it invited" (p. 163).

72 Garnier, *Le roman Swahili*, 95; translation mine.

73 See also ibid., 89–90.

74 Ibid., 92; translation mine.

75 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 199.

76 Moreover, the joking dialogues (*utani*), so much a part of everyday conversation, bring in an element of quotidian orality, turning the novel almost into a play. (On the importance of dialogue, see also Aiello, "Investigating Topics and Style," 39.)

77 Cooppan, "Object Orientation," 174.

India), had spread to the parts of town where the slaves and servants resided.[78] For them, *taarab* became the most important music, taking its audiences, dancers, and musicians away from the plight of the everyday. Historically, the *taarab* of Ng'ambu is most closely associated with the legendary female *taarab* singer Siti Binti Saad (1880–1950), who hailed from a humble background in a small Zanzibari village, the first artist credited with singing *taarab* in Swahili instead of Arabic.[79] She captivated Zanzibari society as a whole, not only with her witty lyrics, but also with her voice; she was the first female Swahili singer ever to be recorded in Bombay in 1928. This new wave of *taarab*, incorporating more influences from a variety of African music traditions, also entailed the tendency to replace large orchestras with drum-focused instrumentation, inviting listeners to dance[80] and providing a new and more interactive form of musical experience—in other words, providing the soundtrack for emerging new identities in 'Uswahilini'.

The musical instruments that distinguish the *taarab* of Ng'ambu and produce its typical soundscape are described in great detail in *Vuta n'kuvute*: the fiddle lies on the shoulder of the musician, "who stroke the cords so well, producing a music that would bring a snake out of the cave" ("kuzikwaruzakwaruza nyuzi zikitoa muziki wa kumtoa nyoka pangoni),"[81] while the player of the *dumbak*, a newly introduced goblet drum, "gave the music its rhythm and choruses" ("akuupa ule muziki mizani na vibwagizo)."[82] [83] The swaying women follow along by clapping, while the "rattle" ("kayamba"),"[84] adapted from the dance genres of the mainland, adds an exhilarating effect to the music—"the music rejoiced" ("muziki ukachangamka")[85]—which stirs yet more women to join in, "taken hostage by the joy and delights of that night" ("waliotekwa na raha na starehe ya usiku ule")."[86] In the novel, the sophistication of the singer, the renowned Bakari Shirizi, an important *taarab* singer of the early twentieth century, is depicted with an elegant appearance, wearing a suit,

78 L. Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945* (Ohio University Press, 2001), 169ff.

79 Ibid., 173.

80 J. Topp Fargion, "The Role of Women in *Taarab* in Zanzibar: An Historical Examination of a Process of 'Africanisation,'" *World of Music* 35, no. 2: 109–125.

81 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.

82 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.

83 The *taarab* of Ng'ambu is far more rhythmically pronounced than the more melodic older forms (see also Fair, *Pastimes and Politics*, 169ff. on nightlife in the "African quarter").

84 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.

85 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.

86 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.

tie, and tarboosh.[87] It is another form of cosmopolitan and modern Zanzibar that powerfully emerges in the music here, blending various Indian Ocean and mainland musical influences such that the music itself mirrors Yasmin's boundary-crossing and the flexible negotiation of links and histories involving the mainland.

The *taarab* of Ng'ambu is that of a female world in motion. Historically, Siti Binti Saad played an important role, firstly in encouraging the foundation of woman's *taarab* clubs, giving women the possibility to determine the kind of entertainment they wanted: an aspect that the novel sketches out in a palpable way.[88] As depicted in the novel, concerts take place in quickly improvised spaces, demarcated by the "textile of sails" ("kitambaa cha tanga", p. 62) and "canvas" ("maturubali," p. 62) used to shield the concert from the curious gaze of male "fans" ("mashabiki," p. 62) squatting outside, eager to catch at least a glimpse of the high-spirited women inside, "one more beautifully adorned than the other" ("kila mmoja kajipamba kuliko mwenzake," p. 63). The female world of Ng'ambu, as Shafi sketches out in the novel, draws on memories of flourishing women's *taarab* clubs, host to musical groups with female singers playing for female audiences outside the palace and Stone Town.

In the novel, the *taarab* scenes become a potent allegory of the women's search for liberation. Music accompanies Yasmin's own coming-of-age: she becomes a singer of a *taarab* group. It is the music, more than anything else, that makes her feel at home in Ng'ambu, and, taking hold of her body, makes her conscious of her own femininity and autonomy. In times of intense social change, music, providing a meaningful sensuous experience, gives people an opportunity to "define who they are, who they are not and who they wish to be."[89] The novel portrays what Fair considers the revolutionary potential of the music,[90] since it not only overrides racial boundaries, drawing musically on both mainland African as well as a variety of Indian Ocean influences, but also becomes a means by which women are able to protest against personal and sexual subordination. In its powerful quality of speaking to the senses, music

87 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.

88 Laura Fair (*Pastimes and Politics*, 170) also describes the women's search for "new definitions of femininity, definitions that enhance their autonomy," already echoed in the *taarab* music of the 1910s and 1920s, in which both the lyrics and music played an important role.

89 D. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London: Longman, 1985), 232.

90 Fair, *Pastimes and Politics*, 170ff.

has an existential and empowering dimension, as it nurtures fantasies of possible and alternative lifeworlds. The *taarab* lyrics that Fair highlights as a form of protest do not play a role in the novel; rather, it is the bodily experience of music as such, an uplifting experience of joy and freedom in the music, that the novel underlines: Mwajuma "ululated and moved her body to the rhythm of the *taarab*, which she had begun to rejoice in even before arriving" ("akipiga vigelegele na kujinyonganyonga akifuatisha mdundo wa taarab ambayo alianza kuishangilia kabla hata kufika")[91]. Both Mwajuma and Yasmin "join in the joy that at that time took possession of everyone's mind and made them forget everything of this world" ("[…] walijiunga na furaha ile ambayo kwa wakati ule ilitawala vichwa vyao na kuwafanya wasahau kila kitu duniani").[92] Women are portrayed with turning and swinging bodies as the singing "voices rise high" ("sauti zinapaa")[93] and the men can merely watch and hear, but not intervene—a potent allegory.

The political map is hence an audible or sensuous map. There is a bodily knowledge of a local and a wider world and a bright future full of possibilities that the women acquire through the music. The novel seems to underline a reading of the Indian Ocean as manifesting itself in localized practices and specific sensuous experiences. It thus invites us to include local narratives, sound worlds of music, practices of dancing, narrating, and singing, and all kinds of repertoires of popular culture—not least, as the novel seems to suggest, because they provide key ways of bringing women, former slaves, and others typically in the shadow of Indian Ocean narratives to the fore.

4 Conclusion

In this contribution, I have brought two novels into conversation, allowing them to interrogate each other with the aim of broadening perspectives in Indian Ocean literary studies. Though the novels belong to two different literary worlds (and dominant discourses) and differ in the maps they sketch out, we cannot easily construct the novels along the lines of sheer dichotomy. *Vuta n'kuvute* is a polyphonous narrative, as I have tried to show, and can hardly be unequivocally defined as simply mapping out a narrower—or more narrow-minded—map of its world in dichotomous opposition to the 'wordly' *By the Sea*. In both novels, the intimate world of the characters is steeped in

91 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 62.
92 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 63.
93 Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, 30.

multiple connections, and both draw on multiple narratives and repertoires. Reading *Vuta n'kuvute* in relation to Gurnah's *By the Sea*, whose translocal connections and sensuous maps have been highlighted, one finds, on the one hand, that *Vuta n'kuvute* is more than a nationalist novel, but also part of a wider world of revolutionary endeavors, gravitating around music thick with imaginaries and associations. Shafi's novel is many things—and not as ideologically coherent as Swahili scholarship has often considered it to be. In particular, the vivid scenes in Ng'ambu undermine or relegate politics, in the sense of ideology, to the background, while bringing in another—more subtle and sensual—'political' dimension in the form of imagining alternative ways of being. It combines love scenes with panoramic, Hollywood-like plane crashes, thick descriptions of *taarab* concerts, and slapstick scenes of the police officer's assistant Kopla Matata, the "caricature"[94] of a fat-bellied, sweating fool in uniform, as much as it explores the dialects of class struggle—Shafi highlights Maxim Gorky as a major influence on his writing—while Gurnah's text, full of many languages, also imbues itself with Zanzibari narratives, drawing from culturally and linguistically specific semantics and patterns of narrating the world, as much as it also inscribes itself into English and other literatures. As Gurnah himself points out, looking back on his childhood, "there were many more possibilities of making narrative available" than those found in just one literary tradition, which also holds true for Shafi's writings.[95] Narratives also travel across the boundaries of languages: Melville's Bartleby re-emerges in the figure of a Swahili migrant, while Marxist writings become a major intellectual concern of Denge, the revolutionary, such that both novels can hardly be understood as formulating the notion of a singular literary or cultural identity, but rather as characterized by constant crossings and contradictions. Furthermore, not only *Vuta n'kuvute*, but also Gurnah's novel is steeped in local semantics, as the potent allegory of *nyumba* shows, which also encourages us to explore Swahili terminology as critical vocabulary.[96] "Words in the novel are thingly in the sense that they 'do' as much as they 'are,'" as Cooppan underlines:[97] like objects, they cannot be paraphrased or—as one might add—translated without losing their specific connotations and their way of acting on the characters.

I do think that these observations can have implications for the project of Indian Ocean literary studies at large, which has often favored a one-sided

94 Aiello, "Investigating Topics and Style," 40.
95 Gurnah, "Learning to Read," 39.
96 See also Datta, "Swahili Transmodernity."
97 Cooppan, "Object Orientation," 182.

account of the Indian Ocean. This one-sidedness does not merely refer to the limited number of mostly European languages that have been taken into account; it also refers to the rigid perspective of histories beyond the nation and fluid transnational identities that a novel like *By the Sea* has most often been read for, leaving out its own way of being specifically rooted in local semantics. *Vuta n'kuvute* also references the Indian diaspora and plays with Cold War dynamics, while carving out a national cartography that does not merely mark the end of history. Both novels seem to demand that we pay attention both to their subtle references to local narratives or practices, like music and houses, as well as the multiple cartographies—including the contemporaneous ones—the narratives map out.

We must question the narrow frame of interpretation that excludes many literary works by contemporary authors in and around the Indian Ocean writing in 'minor' languages, like Arabic, Hindi, Malay, or Swahili, that are affiliated with many worlds. What about the narratives in local languages and popular music emerging from the shadows of the unassuming entrepots Shafi explores in *Vuta n'kuvute*? Given the emphasis on historical perspectives in Indian Ocean studies, don't we need to extend these perspectives into the present and also allow for a more multivocal account of Indian Ocean narratives, highlighting the paradoxes and the simultaneity of narratives beyond dichotomies like that of 'local' and 'cosmopolitan,' 'national' and 'oceanic'? What about narratives in which the nation is a genuine concern among others:[98] are they not part of Indian Ocean history as well? Do we not also need to acknowledge the difficulty of sometimes even incongruous narratives, like the rigid plot of class struggle in *Vuta n'kuvute* and its praises of a new nation, that do not easily 'fit,' and hence question dominant, well-established frames, typologies, and expectations?

Thus, instead of reading a limited set of narratives insofar as they speak to established discourses on the Indian Ocean, I suggest heeding the variety of narratives and genres in the Indian Ocean and reading them for how they imagine larger worlds, but sometimes also carve out smaller worlds, in intertextual relation to the specific repertoires at hand, rooted in local semantics. It is an exploration of the multilayeredness of narratives, drawing on various repertoires, stories, and imageries coming from multiple directions, including (but not favoring) the West, as well as their complicated relations, that seems to me the most promising project for a study of Indian Ocean literatures and their worlds. Needless to add that the translation of more Swahili novels into

98 See Marzagora, "African-language Literatures and the 'Transnational Turn.'"

English and more English novels into Swahili would facilitate comparative readings.

References

Adam, O. A. "*Kuchunguza Dhamira za Kijamii na Kiutamaduni katika Riwaya ya Kiswahili: Mifano kutoka Kuli na Vuta N'Kuvute.*" PhD diss., Free University Tanzania, 2014.

Aiello, F. "Investigating Topics and Style in *Vuta N'kuvute* by Shafi Adam Shafi." *AAP* 72/ *Swahili Forum* 9 (2002): 35–41.

Alwi Baharoon, Z. *Mngu Hakopeshwi.* Dar Es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2017.

Arenberg, M. "Studying African Literature in the Age of the Global." *Africa Today* 63, no. 2 (2016): 117–120.

Arenberg, M. "Abdulrazak Gurnah's Nobel: The Right Award for the Wrong Reason." *New Lines Magazine*, November 10, 2021, https://newlinesmag.com/argument /abdulrazak-gurnahs-nobel-the-right-award-for-the-wrong-reason/9.

Barber, K. *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral Written Culture in Africa and Beyond.* Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Barber, K and G. Furniss. "African-language Writing." *RAL* 37, no. 3 (2006): 1–14.

Bertoncini Zúbková, E., M. Gromov, S. A. M. Khamis, and K. W. Wamitila eds. *Outline of Swahili Literature. Prose Fiction and Drama* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Cooppan, V. "Object Orientation and Circulatory Form in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*." *Comparative Literature* 74, no. 2 (2022): 171–185.

Coplan, D. *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre.* London: Longman, 1985.

Datta, S. M. "Swahili Transmodernity and the Indian Ocean: Abdulrazak Gurnah's Ethic of Community in *By the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *Gravel Heart*." *Postcolonial Text* 14, nos. 3/4 (2019): 1–29.

Diegner, L. and F. Schulze-Engler, eds. *Habari ya Kiswahili? What about English? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone.* Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Fair, L. *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945*. Ohio University Press, 2001.

Fair, L. *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-century Urban Tanzania.* Ohio University Press, 2018.

Fay, F. "Women Storying the Swahili Seas: Indian Ocean Feminist Aesthetics and Affective Imaginaries in Lubaina Himid's Political Painting." In *Intermedial Indian Ocean*, edited by U. Fendler and C. Vierke (forthcoming).

Garnier, X. *Le roman Swahili. La notion de 'Littérature mineure' à l'épreuve.* Paris: Karthala, 2006.

Gurnah, A. *Paradise*. London: Bloomsbury, 1994.

Gurnah, A. "Imagining the Postcolonial Writer." In *Reading the "New" Literatures in a Postcolonial Era*, edited by Susheila Nasta, 73–86. Cambridge: Brewer, 2000.

Gurnah, A. *By the Sea.* London: Bloomsbury, 2001.

Gurnah, A. "Learning to Read." In *Habari ya Kiswahili? What about English? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone*, edited by L. Diegner and F. Schulze-Engler, 23–32. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Gurnah, A. *Gravel Heart*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

Hadjivayanis, I., trans. *Peponi* [Paradise]. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2022.

Helff, S. "Measuring Silence: Dialogic Contact Zones in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and *Desertion*." In *Habari ya Kiswahili? What about English? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone*, edited by L. Diegner and F. Schulze-Engler, 153–167. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Hofmeyr, I. "Universalizing the Indian Ocean." *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 721–729.

Horton, M. and J. Middleton. *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Jameson, F. "Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.

Khamis, S. A. M. "Signs of New Features in the Swahili Novel." *RAL* 36, no. 1 (2005): 91–108.

Kresse, K. and C. Vierke. "Swahili Language and Literature as Resources for Indian Ocean Studies." *History Compass* 20 (2022): 1–14.

Mahayan, N. "Seasons of Sail: The Monsoon, Kinship, and Labor in the Dhow Trade." In *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, edited by S. Srinivas, B. Ng'weno, and N. Jeychandran, 73–87. London: Routledge, 2020.

Marshall, A. "Abdulrazak Gurnah Refuses to Be Boxed In: 'I Represent Me.'" *The New York Times*, August, 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/21/books/abdulrazak-gurnah-nobel-book.html.

Marzagora, S. "African-language Literatures and the 'Transnational Turn' in Euro-American Humanities." *Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (2015): 40–55.

Mlacha, S. A. K. "Riwaya za Visiwani (1970–1980) na Ujenzi wa Jamii Mpya." *Mulika* 16 (1984): 4–31.

Mlacha, S and J. S. Madumulla. *Riwaya ya Kiswahili.* Dar es Salaam University Press, 1991.

Mohamed, S. M. *Kiu*. Dar es Salaam: Longhorn, 1972.

Mohamed, S. *Nyota ya Rehema*. Oxford University Press, 1976.

Mohamed, S. *Dunia Mti Mkavu*. Nairobi: Longhorn, 1980.

Mohamed, S. *Utengano*. Nairobi: Longhorn, 1980.

Moser, C. and L. Simonis. "Einleitung: Das globale Imaginäre." In *Figuren des Globalen. Weltbezug und Welterzeugung in Literatur, Kunst und Medien*, edited by C. Moser and L. Simonis, 11–22. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014.

Mwangi, E. M. *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality.* Albany: State University Press of New York, 2009.

Samuelson, M. "Narrative Cartographies, 'Beautiful Things' and Littoral States in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*." *English Studies in Africa* 56, no. 1 (2013): 78–90.

Samuelson, M. "Coastal Form: Amphibian Positions, Wider Worlds, and Planetary Horizons on the African Indian Ocean Littoral." *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017): 16–24.

Schulze-Engler, F. "Africa's Asian Options—Indian Ocean Imaginaries in East African Literature." In *Beyond the Line: Cultural Narratives of the Southern Oceans*, edited by M. Mann and I. Phaf-Rheinberger, 159–178. Berlin: Neofelis, 2014.

Shafi, A. S. *Vuta n'kuvute*. Dar Es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 1999.

Shafi, A. S. *Haini*. Nairobi: Longhorn, 2003.

Shafi, A. S. *Mbali na Nyumbani*. Nairobi: Longhorn, 2013.

Shafi, A. S. *Mtoto wa Mama*. Nairobi: Longhorn, 2018.

Shafi, A. S and L. Diegner. "Mazungumzo na Adam Shafi juu ya Uandishi wake wa Riwaya." *Swahili Forum* 18 (2011): 37–68.

Srinivas, S., B. Ng'weno, and N. Jeychandran. "Many Worlds, Many Oceans." In *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, edited by S. Srinivas, B. Ng'weno, and N. Jeychandran, 1–22. London: Routledge, 2020.

Steffes-Halmer, A. "Abdulrazak Gurnah on Exile and Literature." *Deutsche Welle*, March 18, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/nobel-laureate-abdulrazak-gurnah-on-exile-and-literature/a-61154081.

Steiner, T. "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah." *English Studies in Africa* 56, no. 1 (2013): 157–167.

Topp Fargion, J. "The Role of Women in *Taarab* in Zanzibar: An Historical Examination of a Process of 'Africanisation.'" *World of Music* 35 (1993), no. 2: 109–125.

Verne, J. and M. Verne. "Introduction. The Indian Ocean as Aesthetic Space." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 314–320.

Vierke, C. "'What Is There in My Speaking': Re-explorations of Language in Abdilatif Abdalla's Anthology of Prison Poetry, *Sauti Ya Dhiki*." *African Literatures* 48, no. 1 (2017): 135–157.

Vierke, C. "Other Worlds: The 'Prophet's Ascension' as World Literature and Its Adaptation in Swahili-speaking East Africa." In *Vergleichende Weltliteraturen/Comparative World Literatures*, edited by D. Lamping, G. Tihanov, and M. Bortmuth, 215–229. Berlin: Metzler, 2019.

Werberger, A. "Theory from the East." Paper presented at the workshop Location of Theory, European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder, February 2020.

Whiteley, W. *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language.* London: Methuen, 1969.

SECTION 2

A Diversity of Genres

CHAPTER 8

Artistic Imaginaries of War in East Africa: "Worlding" as an Agency of Peace Culture

Christopher Joseph Odhiambo

1 Introduction

This essay explores artistic imaginaries of war in East Africa, and how they are implicated in the agency and vision of a culture of peace in situations of postwar violence, as found in three works: *Thirty Years of Bananas* (1992), a play based on experiences of war and its aftermath in Uganda by the Ugandan playwright Alex Mukulu; *Murambi, the Book of Bones* (2004), a novel by Senegalese creative fiction writer and journalist Boubacar Diop, dramatizing the Rwandan genocide of 1994; and finally, the film *Ni Sisi* by Sponsored Art For Education (S.A.F.E) Kenya, directed by Nick Redding, based on the 2007–2008 postelection violence (PEV) in Kenya.

The interesting dimension of these imaginaries of war is that they are paradoxically implicated in the agency for peace. The forms of violence encountered in these imaginaries putatively follow Hedley Bull's differentiation of violence and war:

> Violence is not war unless it is carried out in the name of a political unit; what distinguishes killing in war from murder is its vicarious and official character, the symbolic unit whose agent the killer is. Equally, violence carried out in the name of a political unit is not war unless it is directed against another political unit.[1]

As such, the violence dramatized in the artistic imaginaries under inspection is that of war, as it is motivated by a political goal or agenda. Peace, on the other hand, is understood in two ways: negatively, as the absence of war, and positively, as harmony informed by justice and other moral values—as *shalom,* that is, the idea of wholeness in social relations, or as the product of everyone achieving their own inner peace.[2]

1 Nigel Dower, *The Ethics of War and Peace*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 2009), 7.
2 Dower, *The Ethics*, 7.

The three war imaginaries under scrutiny also follow very closely Chinyere Nwahunanya's conception of war texts,[3] which, though referring specifically to the Nigerian Civil War, similarly applies to these texts from Eastern Africa; as he aptly reminds us:

> In its creation and interpretation of history, Nigerian war literature has enriched the existing body of historical writing from Africa, especially historical fiction. In this way, the writers have made literature continue to function as a mirror of society. In the process of mirroring society and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for social re-direction. A didactic function emerges in the process, especially portrayal of death, devastation, avoidable mistakes and sufferings engendered by the war. The ultimate intention of course is to see whether these records of a sour historical moment will enable the modern African to see futility of wars as a solution to national problems which could be solved without recourse to war, carnage and bloodshed. The suggested mistakes of the war initiators and administrators portrayed in these writings thus become invaluable guides to meaningful national growth and a stable and progressive society. If this lesson comes through, then African nations (and indeed the world) would have gained immensely from this harvest of tragedy.[4]

It is this very character of war literature as a compass for social direction—as Nwahunanya has observed—that indeed defines its agency in the process of peace-building, and that constitutes the very idea of "worlding."[5] Therefore, "worlding," in a sense, denotes the process of transforming the lived realities/experiences of war through the power of artistic imagination by investing them with new meanings and alternative possibilities. This concurs with Hegel's argument:

> Art liberates the real import of appearances from this bad and fleeting world, and imports to phenomenal semblances a higher reality born of mind. The appearances of art therefore, far from being mere semblances,

3 See also Ernest N. Emenyounu, "War in African Literature: Literary Harvests, Human Tragedies," *African Literature Today* 26 (2008), xi.

4 Chinyere Nwahunanya, *A Harvest from Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature*, (Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 1997), 14.

5 Nwahunanya, *Harvest from Tragedy,* 14.

> have the higher reality and the more genuine existence in comparison with the realities of common life.[6]

Thus, the concept of "worldings" in these war imaginaries is construed as the vision of a work of art with respect to imagining a world that is chaotic and dysfunctional while imbuing it with transformative alternative futures. "Worlding," as understood in the imaginary work of art, is a process of bringing about or "setting up" a world or worlds. As such, the process of "worlding" is the inauguration of a world (or worlds) that is not already extant through the artistic imagination. It is therefore, in a sense, the process of defamiliarizing the world as we know it by investing it with new meanings and providing it with new visions and alternative possibilities.

2 From Worlds of War to "Worldings" of Peace

It is noteworthy how artistic imaginaries whose impulses are pacifistic or anti-war must concomitantly focus on war; thus the unsurprising dominance of horrifying, dreadful, and eerie images encountered in the war imaginaries under scrutiny. In their conscious quest to set a pacifistic and anti-war and agenda, these war imaginaries invest immensely in victim discourses and the grammar of agency that ostensibly point to a culture of peace. By "victim discourse," I mean the use of language and grammar to depict passive bodies in times of war, more specifically the explicit exposure of dead bodies as well as those wounded and in pain; meanwhile, the discourse of agency is construed as the conscious effort of these war imaginaries to consider, promote, mobilize for and act toward the avoidance of war and the restoration and sustainability of a peace culture. In war discourses, therefore, agency is imagined as the contradistinction of complicity.

For instance, *Thirty Years of Bananas* is a collected and collective memory of the thirty years of diverse frictions, conflicts, violence, and wars that preoccupied postindependence Uganda; *Murambi* takes a backward glance at the 1994 Rwandan genocide and, subtly, the RPF guerrilla war, while *Ni Sisi* rehashes Kenya's 2007–8 postelection violence. All these depictions are simultaneously designed to foreground the destructiveness of wars and project the value of peace. This is well articulated by Phares M. Mutibwa in the foreword to *Thirty Years of Bananas*, where he asserts:

6 Karsten Harries, *Art matters: A critical commentary on Heidegger's "The Origin of the work of Art"*, (Dordrecht: Springer 2009), 8.

> [...] there is the importance of spelling out the tragedies and agonies of Uganda's three decades of "Bananas." There are those who have always claimed that it was wrong to reopen the wounds, to tell the people—especially those who were not witnesses to these events—what actually did happen. But not Alex Mukulu, and he happens to be right. If the past is not told the way it really was, then Ugandans will never be able to prevent its repetition. If we are to redeem ourselves, then , surely, the truth must be told wholesale in order to teach new generations what to expect if they harvest another crop of "Years of Bananas."[7]

Mutibwa's observation indeed clearly spells out how engaging in postmortems of war is in itself an agency for peace. As Giorgio Agamben notes:[8] "in the war novel, the concept of peace represents an inclusion by exclusion." This means that it is not possible to explore peace in the absence of war. Depictions of wars are therefore conscious intervention projects against wars, as they paradoxically gesture toward a vision of peace. This therefore reveals why victim discourses and the agency for peace are entangled (anti)-war artistic imaginaries. Victim discourses or victimization in artistic imaginaries of war depict, in the most explicitly gory ways, wounded bodies and corpses. Victim discourses of war have also been variously referred to as the aestheticization of pain and the pornography of violence. Deploying the aestheticization of pain and the pornography of violence is perceived as a strategy for creating aversion to war and similarly inspiring a longing and quest for peace.

In various ways, the three texts that are the focus of this essay employ victim discourses as a caution to postwar societies on the dangers of sliding back into war. Mukulu's *Thirty Years of Bananas*, as previously mentioned, employs collected and collective memories to lay bare the victims' discourses. This is made possible through the symbolic deployment of the museum as a site of re-memory. For instance, the atrocities of Idi Amin's reign are remembered through the collective voice of the Chorus as follows:

> This is what must be told
> The crucible through which Uganda has been
> Alarms, gunfire, conflicts and quarrels
> The mystic-mystery

7 Phares Mutibwa, "Foreword" in *Thirty Years of Bananas*, Alex Mukulu, (Kenya: Oxford University Press 1993), VI.

8 Elisabeth Krimmer, *The Representation of War in German Literature 1800 to the Present,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), 3.

> Through which Uganda has been
> Shame, shame
> Confrontations, guns, pleas, outcries …
> Orphans born of bullets in many a home …
> Where their parents were forcibly laid to rest.[9]

A more terrifying war experience is remembered and narrated by the character Nakuya:

> In 1979 the world seemed to have exploded. (*Explosions*) I was outside the house when the bang sounded. The next moment I became conscious of myself, I was stuck under my bed and my big toe was bleeding. To this day I don't know what cut me. Later I learnt it was what they called a bomb. That afternoon in 1979, war became a reality to me. Until then it had been a distant grief.[10]

However, the most horrifyingly grotesque and macabre victim discourses are laid bare in Boris Diop's novel *Murambi, the Book of Bones*. As in *Thirty Years of Bananas,* here the victim discourses are rendered by the victims of the genocide as well as through the gory images of corpses at commemoration sites or museums of death. The encounter with the grotesque and terrifying images is made possible by the character Cornelius, who was in exile during the genocide. It is in *Murambi* (as in *Ni Sisi*, as we shall see later) that one encounters *the aestheticization of pain and the "pornography of violence*." For example, Jessica, a female member of the RPF, though a noncombatant, relates the first gory images of the genocide:

> Near Kyiv I see hundreds of corpses a few yards from the barricade. While his colleagues are slitting the throats of their victims or hacking them to bits with machetes close to the barricade, an Interahemwe militiaman is checking ID cards […] All around me are screams coming from everywhere. In these first hours of massacre the Interahemwe surprise me with their assiduity and even a certain discipline. […] A woman they've wounded but are waiting to finish off a bit later comes towards me, the right part of her jaw and chest covered with blood.[11]

---

9 Alex Mukulu, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, (Kenya: Oxford University Press 1993), 23.

10 Mukulu, *Thirty Years*, 60.

11 Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, the Book of Bones*, trans. Fiona McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 32.

Cornelius is confronted with more horrifying images of the victims' bodies in the commemoration museums at the church in Nyamata:

> From Ntarama they set off for the church of Nyamata.
>
> Twenty-five to thirty thousand cadavers were on display in the stately red brick building. Another caretaker led them first to crypt no. 1, a yellow room located in the basement, lit by ten or so electric light bulbs. There too, remains were heaped onto a long table covered by fine sand. At one end stood a preserved body almost intact [...] The young woman had her head pushed back and the scream extracted from her by the pain had been frozen on her still grimacing face. Her magnificent tresses were dishevelled, and her legs wide apart. A stake—of wood or of iron, Cornelius did know, he was too shocked to notice—had remained lodged in her vagina.[12]

We encounter a similarly shocking spectacle in the film *Ni Sisi* when the character Roxana, in a fit of anger, describes to her friends how her mother was raped by four men and a bottle was inserted into her vagina during the violence that rocked Kenya in 2007–8, and how, out of shame, her mother ultimately committed suicide. All these eerie and horrifying images are meant for shock effect. As Kant reminds u,[13] "only an observer who is safe from actual danger can appreciate the phenomenon of the sublime." It is this shock effect that is meant to make those who encounter these artistic imaginaries of war from their safe comfort zones awaken to the fundamental values and virtues of peace culture. These gory, horrifying images of wounded bodies and corpses are laid bare to show the debilitating effects of war, and act in turn as cautionary measures by instilling fear. The images are made as overtly terrifying and nauseating as possible because, as Robert Reimer argues: "If images of war are framed in an aesthetically pleasing form, the beauty of the form may overpower the horror of the content"[14]

Though these texts are replete with victim discourses, and the mere exposition of such horrifying images may induce an aversion to war and evoke an appreciation for peace culture, on their own, they do not constitute agency. Indeed, the desire for a culture of peace should not be reduced to a simple critique of war. As such, for the victim discourses to meaningfully catalyze transformation and to act as an agency, it is imperative that they deliberately be

12 Diop, *Murambi*, 73.

13 Krimmer, *Representation of War*, 4.

14 Krimmer, *Representation of War*, 8.

depicted in complementarity with the grammar of agency and peace (culture). As Krimmer aptly argues: "Even if we are prepared to accept that the representation of the wounded and dead effects a powerful critique of war, we would still have to admit that any pacifist agenda must be subtended by concepts of agency.[15] As such, a critique of war must transcend the affective and appeal to the cognitive; as such, the body/mind dichotomy or the victim discourses and the grammar of agency premised on the Cartesian hierarchy must be juxtaposed against each other to imagine and promote a peace culture. On this symbiotic relationship, Krimmer quite convincingly argues, "If a text subscribes to the Cartesian hierarchy of body and mind while focussing exclusively on the physical side of life, it drastically limits the scope of agency".[16]

Arguably, an artistic imaginary of war that is pacifistic and anti-war in its motive and vision must definitively transcend victim discourses and set the tone for a grammar of agency that inculcates and nurtures peace culture. This too is clearly demonstrated in these war/anti-war imaginaries. For instance, *Thirty Years of Bananas* is in itself a grammar of agency, as it is visibly proactive in its anti-war and peace-building efforts. Besides the shock effect of exposing the wounds of the three decades of war, the play accuses the citizens born before independence of complicity and abdicating responsibility, allowing politicians to perpetuate despondency, chaos, and violence. In the section of the play entitled "City Square," the characters ask fundamental questions that clearly reveal their agency. This is succinctly accentuated by the Chorus:

> Chorus 2: (with anger) What have I done for "God and my country" during the thirty years of my country's Independence? If there is anything I have done, what is it? If I have not yet done anything, what must I do? When and, why?[17]

The motive behind *Thirty Years of Bananas* is obviously to conscientize Uganda's citizens, through a reflection on the past, about precisely what it means to be a nation. Kaleekeezi, a character in the play, unravels how myopic ethnic nationalism and interests undermined the agency of peace culture, since different ethnic identities only perceived the nation-state as a site for eating, even as the country continued hurtling down the path of self-destruction through relentless (un)civil wars. The Chorus once again accentuates this situation quite succinctly:

15 Krimmer, *Representation of War*, 70.
16 Krimmer, *Representation of War*, 70.
17 Mukulu, *Thirty Years*, 3.

Chorus: [...]

We are all clansmen
An axe by the fireplace
Does not kill a dog as they
Share it at the end of the day.
A Langi shouldn't kill a Muganda
We are all kinsmen.[18]

The museum, as a site of the commemoration of memories, interestingly catalyzes the agency of the characters as they engage passionately with their history, asking disturbing questions such as where, why, and how their newly found nation lost its sense of direction and sanity. Through the encounter with the past, these characters gradually realize that the only way to avert future wars and violence in the country is for them to actively participate in the process of writing their country's new constitution. According to Mukulu, it seems that the project of peace-building is the responsibility of all the citizens, and that explains why they must participate in the writing and realization of this new constitution, as it is the most secure guarantee for a peaceful future world. This is brilliantly portrayed in Kaleekeezi's role as a political evangelist.

In this role, Kaleekeezi points out how the leaders who lacked clear vision and ideologies led the nation down the path of chaos, disorder, instability, war, and violence. With Kaleekeezi as his mouthpiece, Mukulu employs the analogy of a football match to dramatize how the leaders created crises. For example, he reveals how Muteesa wants a football match where two balls could be played—that is, a traditional ball made of banana fibers, and a classy one made of leather. He cannot allow himself to let any of the balls be played; thus the game never begins. Obote, on the other hand, wants to use the classy ball, but only with one team; this is not possible. Amin allows both the classy and the traditional balls to be played, but ironically gives each player a ball to play with—obviously, a recipe for chaos. All the captains come up with different ways of playing football that are largely unorthodox; in the end, no football game can be played. Eventually, the citizens (players) decide that the football match must be played according to the rules. This decision of the players—that the football match must be played according to rules written and accepted by all—is what signals their agency and that of the play's text.

18 Mukulu, *Thirty Years*, 35.

In essence, through the analogy of the football match, Mukulu imagines a constitution that will entrench democracy and democratic ideals. Thus, for Mukulu, peace culture is implicit in the writing of a new constitution that will nurture democracy and multiparty politics. This redemptive agency and expiation, according to Mukulu, is automatically instilled in the generation born after Rwanda's 1962 independence.

In Boris Diop's *Murambi*, the grammar of agency and peace culture is counterpoised against the language of violence prevalent during the Cold War period, and consequently during the genocide. This grammar of agency and peace culture, however, is overtly manifest after the return of Cornelius, the character who has just returned home after living in exile for a number of years. His mother, a Tutsi, and his two siblings, a brother and sister, were all victims of the genocide in Murambi, ironically planned and executed by his own father, a once moderate Hutu now turned into a radical one.

In this novel, the language of violence is contrasted with that of peace culture. For instance, during the genocide, the language of violence was mainly relayed orally, through rumors on the radio. It is through the radio that ethnic stereotypes—that is, "thingifying"/objectifying Tutsis—were constructed and circulated for public consumption. Thus, in this novel, the radio is motific for its centrality in mobilizing hate and hostility against the Tutsis, and also in the very project of "othering." Michel Serumundo (Tutsi) makes the first mention of the radio in the novel. He proclaims thus: "Our neighbors' shutters were hermetically sealed. They were listening to Radio Mille Collines, the station which for several months now has been issuing insane calls to murder. That was new. Up to now they had been listening to those stupid programs in secret."[19] Faustin Gesana (Hutu), whose father is a Hutu nationalist, likewise refers to the radio, just after the president's death in a plane crash: "My father is sitting in the middle of the bed. The transistor radio beside him exudes doleful music." Jessica Kamanzi too makes mention of the radio: everyone has a transistor radio glued to his ear. The radio says: "My friends, they have dared to kill our good friend Habyarimana; the hour of truth is at hand!" Then there is some music and games. The host of the program, in brilliant form, quizzes his listeners: "How do you recognize an Inyenzi?" The listeners call in. Some answers are really funny, so we have a good laugh. Everyone gives a description. The host becomes serious again, almost severe: "Have fun, my friends, but don't forget the work that's waiting for you!."[20] There are many more instances where the radio is deployed to circulate the message and ideology of violence in the

19 Diop, *Murambi*, 10.
20 Diop, *Murambi*, 28.

novel. The other strategy is the use of oral history and myths anecdotal of "othering." In these anecdotes, the "other" is objectified. For instance, the Tutsis are referred to as "Inyenzi," which literally translates to "cockroaches." Faustin says of his father: "How well do you know the story of these Inyenzi Rwandan Patriotic Front guerrillas?" It's the kind of question he always asks when he's about to recount one of his numerous anecdotes.[21] These are the kinds of violent messages that catalyze war and end up in the massacre of innocent citizens.

The agency for peace culture in this novel, on the other hand, is conveyed through characters and their language. Three characters take up this role: one is Jessica Kamanzi, who overtly signifies the agency of women in war. Though she is not in the combat zone, she provides a support system for fighters and intelligence. Unlike the women who symbolize the victim discourses, she is described as sickly and sexually unattractive. The other character is the old man Siméon Habineza, uncle of Cornelius Muranganiza, whose agency for peace started much earlier, and finally, Cornelius Muranganiza, the son of Dr. Joseph Karekezi, the planner and executor of the genocidal killings at Murambi Polytechnic. Jessica, for instance, notes how her impulse for agency is closely implicated in Rwanda's violent history, which became manifest in 1959. As she reminds us:

> Ever since 1959, every young Rwandan, at one moment or another in his life, has to answer the same question: Should we just sit back and wait for the killers, or try to do something so that our country can go back to normal? Between our futures and ourselves, unknown people had planted a sort of a giant machete. Try as you might, you couldn't ignore it. Tragedy would always end up catching you. Because people came to your house one night and massacred all your family. Because in the country where you live in exile, you always end up feeling in the way. Besides, what could I, Jessica Kamanzi, possibly brag about? Others have given their lives for the success of our struggle. I have never held a gun nor participated in the military actions of the guerrillas. I stayed almost the whole time at Mulindi to take care of the cultural activities of the resistance [...]
>
> While I am walking I think back on our night watches. We used to sing, "If three fall in combat, the two who are left will free Rwanda." Very simple words. We didn't have time for poetic tricks. These words come back to me like an echo and give me strength. The moment of liberation is at hand. Since this morning our units have been moving to Kigali [...][22]

21 Diop, *Murambi*, 16

22 Diop, *Murambi*, 31

Jessica's agency, as described above, resonates with Krimmer's[23] observations on the role of women as represented in German war literature. Though the women do not go to the front line, they support the combatants, as Jessica does in this novel.

Cornelius Mugaraneza and Siméon Habineza are the other characters who project the grammar of agency and peace culture. As we had mentioned initially, Cornelius did not witness the genocide, and only comes back four years later in an attempt to find out how the members of his family died in the genocide. As the son of a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother, he symbolizes the duality that is Rwanda's contradictory identity. Because of his ambivalent identity, he has a unique vantage point to scrutinize the genocide with less subjectivity. What is significant, however, is the way that the commemorative museums of death catalyze his agency. His kind of agency is, in a sense, implicated in first understanding the self. The omniscient narrator captures this well through Cornelius's self-introspection when he explains:

> In disparate fragments, scenes of the past and the present crossed each other in his mind. He sensed how difficult it was going to be for him to put some order into his life and he didn't like the idea. To come back to one's country—to be happy there or to suffer—was a rebirth, but he didn't want to become someone without a past. He was the sum of everything he had experienced. His faults. His cowardliness. His hopes. He wanted to know, down to the very last detail, how his family had been massacred. In *Murambi*, Siméon Habineza would tell him everything. He had to.[24]

On this journey, he is guided by a number of people who witnessed, and also played profoundly significant roles in impeding, the annihilation of Hutus during that moment of temporary insanity and irrationality. These include his childhood friends Jessica and Stanley, as well as his paternal uncle, Siméon Habineza: his only relative who survived the genocide. It is through this journey that the grammar of agency and peace culture are explicitly laid bare. Through this grammar of agency for peace culture, it becomes increasingly obvious that both the perpetrators and their victims must forgive each other and reconcile for genuine healing to take place. The quest of Cornelius, a returnee from exile, is in itself a form of agency. It is through the painful act of unearthing the truth

23 Krimmer, *Representation of War*.
24 Diop, *Murambi*, 44.

that peace culture can be restored. This involves comprehending the meaning of Rwanda as a nation. He muses:

> It was on that day—in Obock, north of Djibouti—that an idea was born in his mind that would not leave him during the course of his years in exile. He had thought, as he was looking at Zakya angrily, "After all, Rwanda is an imaginary country. If it's difficult to talk about in a rational way, maybe it's because it doesn't really exist. Everyone has his own Rwanda in his head and it has nothing to do with Rwanda of others."[25]

It seems that the agency that leads to a culture of peace can only be crystallized after seriously engaging with the traumatic past. This is the rite of passage that Cornelius and Rwanda must agree to go through. A conversation between Cornelius and Siméon captures this sufficiently:

> He looked all around him and said, pointing to a row of bricks on his right, "That's where the animal pen used to be."
>
> "I saw you head over there a little while ago. Jessica and Stanley also asked about it once."
>
> "And what did you say to them?"
>
> "That it is good to remember certain things. Sometimes it helps to find your path in life."
>
> "Which means … ?"
>
> Cornelius saw in Siméon's face that he didn't want to expand on the subject. But the old man nevertheless answered:
>
> "That's how we know what trials we had to overcome to merit being alive. We know where we come from."
>
> The whole process of going back to the history of Rwanda:
>
> "But I'd like us to talk about the day when I took you to the shores of Lake Muhazi. Do you remember?"
>
> Cornelius looked at him with emotion:
>
> "I remember that child who played the flute. I've never forgotten him."
>
> "I see that you have a very good memory."
>
> Then Siméon listened to Cornelius tell him how twenty-nine years earlier he, Siméon, had driven him to Gasabo Hill and had said to him, as he showed him the shores of Lake Muhazi with a broad sweep of his hand, "This is where Rwanda was born."[26]

25 Diop, *Murambi,* 27.
26 Diop, *Murambi,* 140.

Siméon seems to suggest that for Rwanda to remain a nation, they should have memories that are enchanting. Memories of a pastoral, serene place. According to Siméon, what is important is to "try to think about what is yet to be born than what is already dead."[27] The future is more important than the past. But the past must always be revisited to ensure that the future is protected. This is why, according to Cornelius, it was important not to bury the victims of genocide:

> It was too soon to throw them into the darkness of the earth. Besides, every Rwandan should have courage to look reality in the eye. The strong odor of the remains proved that the genocide had taken place only four years earlier and not in ancient times. As they were perishing under the blows, the victims had shouted. No one had wanted to hear them. The echo of those cries should be allowed to reverberate for as long as possible.[28]

Siméon tells Cornelius that the genocide should not be mythicized because that trivializes its gravitas, and also legitimizes it as predestined act of divine power:

> No, there was no sign, Cornelius. Don't listen to those who claim to have seen spots of blood on the moon before the massacres. Nothing of the sort happened. The wind didn't howl with sorrow during the night, nor did the trees start to talk to each other about the folly of men. It was all very simple. Here in our region one of the prefects had said: "No, none of these barbarous crimes here." They immediately killed him.[29]

Indeed, for Siméon, privileging these myths and premonitions would absolve the perpetrators, because the guilt and responsibility would be transferred elsewhere, as the acts of killing would be justified and legitimized. It is only by accepting the fact of the genocide that there can be accountability and responsibility. This is why people like Dr. Joseph Karekezi must be held to account and bear responsibility for their actions, as there were no other forces behind them. They were conscious of their acts, which were premeditated and influenced by a selfish greed for power and material wealth. The genocide was not fate. Thus by delegating the genocide to forces beyond the orbit of the rational such as

27 Diop, *Murambi,* 143.
28 Diop, *Murambi,* 148.
29 Diop, *Murambi,* 154.

myth, and superstition then the human agency both local and external will be exonerated from responsibility and accountability.

Siméon Habineza is indeed the embodiment of the agency for peace culture in this text. He advocates for forgiveness, reconciliation, and understanding because he has painfully realized that those are the keys to peace culture after many years of hostility, violence, and genocide. When the inhabitants of Murambi want to destroy Dr. Joseph Karekezi's house in revenge for his heinous role in the genocide, Siméon talks them out of such acts of revenge. Such acts, he reminds them, will perpetuate hatred and new waves of killings. As Gerard explains to Cornelius:

> "[…] I want to tell you this: you have suffered, but that doesn't make you any better than those who made you suffer. They are people like you and me. Evil is within each one of us. I, Siméon, Habineza, repeat, that you are not better than them. Now go back home and think about it: there comes a time when you have to stop shedding blood in a country. Each one of you must have strength to believe that that moment is here. If someone among you is not strong, then he's not better than an animal. My brother's house will not be destroyed. It will be a home for all the orphans who hang about on the streets of Murambi. And I am going to say one last thing to you: let not one of you try, when the moment comes, to find out if those orphans are Twa, Hutu, or Tutsi." No one dared to insist. In Murambi, everyone knows who Siméon Habineza is.[30]

With Siméon and Gerard as his mouthpieces, Boris Diop envisions a Rwanda where ethnic identities are no longer the determining categories for privileges, but become merely sociocultural markers, not significations of difference. As in *Thirty Years of Bananas*, the vision of peaceful coexistence is embodied in the agency of the younger generation, as reflected both in their grammar and actions. In *Murambi*, Siméon Habineza, who plays the same role that Kaleekeezi performs in *Thirty Years of Bananas*, believes that peace culture can only be realized if democracy is allowed to flourish.

In terms of the grammar of agency and peace culture, the commemorative sites housing the dead of the genocide not only remind people of those who died and the horrors of genocide, but their presence is to remind the living, to appreciate the value of life. The value of life is embedded in sustained peace

30 Diop, *Murambi,* 164.

culture. This is why these commemorative sites act as an agency for peace culture. As Siméon Habineza reminds Cornelius:

> "There are no words to speak to the dead," said Siméon in a tense voice. "They won't answer you. What you'll learn there is that everything is quite over the dead of Murambi. And maybe then you'll respect human life more."[31]

This resonates very well with Mahmood Mamdani's[32] assertion when declaring his motivation for researching the Rwandan genocide: "I aim to probe that possibility in the hope that life must be possible after death …"

In *Ni Sisi*, the grammar of agency and peace culture is framed through a number of narrative techniques. There is the use of juxtaposition, the environment, music, and dreams. In the film, as mentioned previously, the practices of everyday life, which in fact reflect a harmonious coexistence, are disrupted by political power struggles and machinations of Mr. Mzito and his wife Zuena, whose deeds in many ways mirror those of Iago in Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Othello*. The politician, a là the serpent in the Book of Genesis, acts as a harbinger of the doom that might visit this peaceful community, a synecdoche of postcolonial Kenya. Mr. Mzito uses rumors to create friction, tension, and hostility among various cultural, ethnic, and religious identities that have been living peacefully and in harmony all along. Through the manipulation of media—orality (rumors), radio, and social media—he takes advantage of ethnic stereotypes that have long been suppressed, and uses them to create suspicion and mistrust among the different cultural and ethnic identities in the community. His main aim is to play the different ethnic identities against each other so that he can take advantage of the ensuing violence to insulate and consolidate the votes from his own ethnicity.

Through juxtaposition with his employee, Tall, a salesman at his shop, Mr. Mzito is depicted as extremely insensitive and violent. While his attempt to use poetry to seduce Roxana fails (though he is already married to Zuena) because he uses brutal, violent, and vulgar language to exhibit and perform his masculinity, Tall on the other hand deploys soothing romantic language, full of images of love, to warm his way into Roxana's heart. Roxana eventually agrees to marry him (Tall), to the chagrin and anger of Mr. Mzito, who finally sacks him from his job at the shop. Thus, Mr. Mzito, the aspiring politician, is

31 Diop, *Murambi,* 168.

32 Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001), 39.

already projected as selfish, insensitive, immoral, vulgar, violent, and manipulative. The audience is therefore not surprised when he uses rumours and propaganda to cause friction and tension among the different ethnic identities in his community. However, within the plot of the film, his evil machinations are averted by Jabali's revelatory dream, which acts as a premonition for what will befall this community if they allow Mr. Mzito to continue his evil deeds, intended to polarize the community in terms of antagonistic ethnic identities that are contrary to the previously cordial social and cultural coexistence.

Jabali's dream is significant in our context as it catalyzes the agency toward conscientization and political transformation. The dream acts as a revelation of a possible recurrence of the postelection violence of 2007–8 if no action is taken to stop Mr. Mzito and his wife Zuena—the Iago figure—from their manipulative and evil schemes. Jabali shares his frightening dream with some members of the community, though most of them are initially skeptical about his revelation. Roxana, however, a victim of PEV, convinces them that Jabali's dream curiously approximates what happened in her own community during the postelection violence. It is Roxana's affirmation that drives Jabali to mobilize the community to stop Mr. Mzito from accomplishing his evil scheme to sow the seeds of discord in this previously harmonious community.

It is through Jabali catalysing youth's agency that Mr. Mzito is confronted at the church, where he has gone to spread propaganda to create hostility among the various ethnic identities. His evil schemes are nonetheless exposed by the youth, who has recorded his speeches, full of hatred, calling for violence against those he deems outsiders.

His violent language, which overtly promotes ethnic profiling and polarization, is instructively juxtaposed against the grammar of agency and peace culture in the romantic poetry of Tall, the reconciliatory and didactic language of Jabali, Roxana, and Scola, and the music/songs used in the film, which all gesture to an agency of a peace culture. For instance, Jabali persuades the youth not to allow themselves to be manipulated by politicians like Mr. Mzito for their own greed and selfish ends. His grammar stresses the virtue of hard work toward the project of nation-building and development; in addition, it reminds the community that it is only through fair democratic elections that peace can be guaranteed.

The film utilizes songs and music as an agency for peace. The play begins with the national anthem, which is in fact prayerful and pleads with the almighty God to bless and protect Kenya. Among other songs, there is Eric Wainaina's popular "Daima," which urges patriotism and aspires for Kenyan nationhood, as well as the song "Mbegu Gani" [Which Seed], which solemnly questions the genesis of the friction among ethnic identities that have been

living harmoniously. This film, like the other two artistic war imaginaries discussed, also privileges the younger generation in the agency and vision of a peace culture and a peaceful future.

Unlike the other two imaginaries of war, which deployed physical commemorative sites (museums) to catalyze agency, in *Ni Sisi*, dreams are symbolically deployed as archives, and as such arguably act as catalysts for agency in the realization of a peace culture. An interesting observation is that these artistic war imaginaries are themselves commemorative sites of the wars' effects, and as such are themselves necessarily agentive of the imagination of peace cultures.

3 Conclusion

The artistic imaginaries of war that have been scrutinized here all attempt, in one way or another, to transform their particular worlds by providing alternative "worldings." This is through the selection of their dysfunctional pasts and maybe presents, but more importantly, their acting as interventions by emphasizing transformative alternative futures. It is in this sense, then, that these artistic imaginaries inaugurate worlds that were not yet extant, but imagined. The imagined world in the work of art is what constitutes "worlding," since it bestows new meanings on the world or a slice of the world as we know it. These three artistic imaginaries have, in various and variegated ways, attempted to invest the different war situations with new meanings and possibilities.

References

Bruin, John. "Heidegger and the World of the Work of Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism* 50, no. 1, (1992): 55–56.

Diop, Boubacar Boris. *Murambi, the Book of Bones*. Translated by Fiona McLaughlin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Dower, Nigel. *The Ethics of War and Peace*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009.

Emenyounu, Ernest N. "War in African Literature: Literary Harvests, Human Tragedies." *African Literature Today* 26, (2008), xi–xiv.

Falola, Toyin, and Hetty Ter Haar. *Narrating War and Peace in Africa*. New York: University of Rochester, 2010.

Harries, Karsten. *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger's "The Origin of the work of Art"*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2009.

Howard, Michael. *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War*. London: Profile Books, 2000–2002.

Krimmer, Elisabeth. *The Representation of War in German Literature 1800 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Lamberti, Elena and Vita Fortunati, eds. *Memories and Representations of War: The Case of World War I and World War II*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009.

Lundestad, Geir, and Olav Nolstad eds. *War and Peace in the 20th Century and Beyond*. Oslo: World Scientific, 2002.

Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Mamdani, Mahmood. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2001.

Mutibwa, Phares. "Foreword." In *Thirty Years of Bananas* by Alex Mukulu (Kenya: Oxford University Press 1993).

Mukulu, Alex. *Thirty Years of Bananas*. Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Nester, William R. *Globalization, War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *A Harvest from Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 1997.

Redding, Nick, director. *Ni Sisi*. S.A.F.E Kenya, 2010. 1 hr., 32 min.

Singh, Raj R. "Heidegger and the World in an Artwork." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 3 (June 1990): 215–222.

CHAPTER 9

"Tell Your Neighbor Life is Very Tricky": Performing the City in Swahili Comedy Shows in Nairobi

Samuel Ndogo

1 Introduction

Although stand-up comedy on Kenyan television may be considered as a recent phenomenon, there has been remarkable growth and popularity of this form of entertainment, especially during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Alongside mainstream media like television, talented young comedians have been using various social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok, to showcase their prowess in creating humor from day-to-day happenings that many people may consider mundane or even completely disregard. Nonetheless, such everyday incidents are so important because they are the fodder that sustains comedy. After all, comedy can be considered as the drama of the everyday life, as this essay seeks to demonstrate. Recent studies by, for instance, Kasembeli, underscore the importance and contribution of comedy towards the growth of creative industries in Kenya.[1] Indeed, the popularity of comedy clearly affirms that this genre is not merely meant for entertaining, but it is also an effective means of influencing the audience to reflect upon their own weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. Moreover, stand-up comedy of the sort that this essay analyzes can be considered as a powerful critique of diverse sociocultural and political realities. Some studies, for instance, consider ethnicity in Kenyan comedy in a positive manner, arguing that ethnic-flavored jokes contribute to inoffensive humor.[2] What these studies effectively do is underscore the fact that ethnicity is inseparable from language. However, there are some studies that consider ethnicity in Kenyan comedy negatively, arguing that ethnic-based humor only perpetuates ethnic

1 Serah Kasembeli, "Stereotypes and the Ambiguities of Humour in Kenya: The Churchill Show," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34, no. 2 (2022).

2 Martha Michieka and Leonard Muaka, "Humour in Kenyan Comedy," *A Journal of Linguistics* 45, no. 3 (2016).

stereotypes. Such critics argue that comedy based on ethnic stereotypes causes more harm than humor.[3]

Departing from the view that ethnicity can have adverse effects on audiences, I argue that through comedy, cultural and ethnic diversity can actually be celebrated. This is one thing that Kenyan stand-up comedians like MCA Tricky effectively do, allowing the audience to laugh at their own ethnic differences and idiosyncrasies. To echo African American parlance, Kenyan stand-up comedy therefore becomes a platform where the audience can laugh rather than cry about their day-to-day predicaments. As Rappoport aptly notes, "There is no denying that stereotypes and ugly slurs are the mother's milk of racial, ethnic, and gender humor."[4] Citing the example of the use of the N-word by black entertainers in America, Rappoport demonstrates how a derogatory concept can be appropriated and used in a positive manner as "a token of racial pride".[5] In this regard, ethnic humor can be considered as a framework through which comedians are able to create hilarious jokes without offending the audience. Following Bakhtin's concept of the "carnival," the comedies of MCA Tricky can be read as a form of mockery of the hierarchical order found in the urban space of Nairobi, as well as in the Kenyan political landscape. In this essay, I draw from Bakhtin who employs the concepts "carnival" and "carnivalesque" to denote "the varied popular-festive life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance".[6] During this period, festivals became moments where hierarchical social structures were temporarily eliminated. Indeed, the episode analysed in this essay satirises the ruling class, represented by the president. One factor that renders MCA Tricky's satire effective is the manner the comedian uses subversion throughout the performance. This can be easily compared to the Bakhtinian reading of the subversion in the Rabelaisian novel. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, "explores throughout his book the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial".[7] It is in this fashion that MCA Tricky succeeds in demolishing the hierarchical boundaries between the political elite and the ordinary citizen. He accomplishes this by employing the epistolary form to address the President. As such, the performances of MCA Tricky become

3 Michael M. Ndonye, Phylis Bartoo, and Josephine Khaemba, "The Tyranny of Televised Comedy: Modeling Ethnic Relation Through "Churchill Live Show" in Kenya," *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, 3A (2015).

4 Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 45.

5 Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 48.

6 Michail Michajlovič Bachtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), 218.

7 Ibid., 16.

metonymic representations of the Kenyan society as a whole. This is actually what MCA Tricky dramatizes in almost all of his performances, as illustrated in the episode *"MCA Tricky Writes a Letter to the President."*

Before delving into the analysis of this episode, it is important to note that if tragedy gives us a tragic view of the world through the actions and ultimate fall of the tragic hero, comedy provides an alternative perspective whereby the reality of everyday experiences is portrayed through humor. In so doing, comedy can help to change attitudes and behavior in society. This is because when human weakness or vice is subjected to ridicule, people will laugh at their own folly with little or absolutely no offense intended. It is from this perspective that the stand-up comedies of MCA Tricky can be appreciated. It should also be noted that one aspect of convergence between comedy and tragedy is that the world presented in comedy is the same as the one presented in tragedy. Nonetheless, the fundamental difference between the two lies in the perspective through which that world is portrayed in each of them. In his treatise *Poetics*, Aristotle observes that both comedy and tragedy represent the world mimetically: while tragedy "is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and proposes magnitude set in the world of people of substance, comedy deals with people who are 'low' by nature".[8] The two forms of representation are of equal importance, since they offer a complete image of the nature of humanity as "an amalgamation of two competing facets of character".[9] As such, neither of the two dramatic forms of representation is superior or inferior to the other. Aristotle's view is different from that of Plato, who denigrates comedy in the *Republic*, since his main objective is to cultivate "the ideal person in the ideal state".[10] This notwithstanding, the importance of comedy cannot be underestimated, since comedy presents experiences of the real, everyday world, as the performances of MCA Tricky dramatize.

At this juncture, a brief historical context of stand-up comedy in Kenya is significant to enable us situate the MCA Tricky. The first stand-up comedies on Kenyan television were performed by a group known as Redykyulass. The Redykyulass Comedy Show comprised of three actors namely, Walter Mong'are (Nyambane), John Kiarie (KJ) and Antony Njuguna (Tony). These comedians popularized their performances through their mimicry of the then President, Daniel arap Moi and other political leaders. Founded in 1998 at Kenyatta University, Redykyulass grew from stage performances on campus and other spaces to a full production on Nation Television (NTV). At that time, it was almost impossible to make fun of the president given the prevailing political mood in Kenya that saw artists, journalists, academicians, human rights

8 Andrew McConnell Stott, *Comedy* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 10.

9 Ibid., 20.

10 Stott, *Comedy*, 19.

activists detained for expressing dissenting political views. The 1990s was indeed, the high noon of political activism in Kenya in that multipartyism had been ushered following the repeal of Section 2 (a) of the constitution. In a bid to silence any dissenting voices, the then President Moi-led regime gagged various forms of expression including the media and the arts. Ironically, it is within this context that Redykyulass was born and flourished. Perhaps one reason that made the show escape state censorship was the comedians' use of satire in their performances. The effectiveness of this technique cannot be underestimated because the show continued to grow in popularity attracting audiences both locally and internationally. Indeed, Redykyulass was such a powerful form of political satire in the sense that it even moved the then president Moi – a central character in these stand-up comedies –to laugh at "himself", instead of declaring a ban on the show as many would have expected. In these performances, Walter Mong'are, whose stage name was Nyambane, acted as president, imitating the president's mannerisms in terms of costume, speech, and body language. Overall, the show was an effective mimicry of the presidency and other political leaders. Thus, parody as a form of art has been an effective tool in Kenyan comedy. As wa-Mũngai rightly notes, "Kenyan theatre has reaped tremendous benefits from the introduction of competitive politics in Kenya as artists become bolder in their interrogation of the state".[11] Although wa-Mũngai's specific reference is the period between 1970 and 1980, the comedy that flourished following the introduction of multiparty democracy in the 1990s and beyond paved way for a radical shift in the ways comedians as well as other artists would parody the political class. Satirical television series continued to flourish from the year 2000 onwards. To cite one example is *The XYZ Show*—a satirical puppet show that parodies political class—which premiered on television in May 2009 and run until 2017. In the following section, we look briefly at the persona of MCA Tricky and how he fashions himself to parody the political elite.

2 The Comedian: MCA Tricky

MCA Tricky is a stand-up comedian whose performances appear on the weekly *Churchill Show* program that is aired on Nation Television every Sunday between 7:30 pm and 9 pm. Live performances of this program are recorded on Thursdays at Nairobi's Carnivore Grounds. Recorded videos are available on the Churchill Show YouTube channel. In a 2010 survey conducted by

11 Mbũgua wa-Mũngai, "The Big Man's Turn to Dance in Kenyan Bar-Rooms," *Leeds African Studies Bulletin* 65, March (2003): 47.

InterMedia, *Churchill Show* was ranked as the most popular comedy show in Kenya, with approximately five to seven million viewers. This essay focuses on MCA Tricky due to the unique and humorous ways that he presents his jokes on the *Churchill Show*; the techniques that he employs include parody, paronyms, puns, ellipsis, ethnic accents, facial expressions, and costumes, all of which make his performances hilarious and appealing to the audience.

One outstanding feature of Tricky's performances is the way he manipulates the thinking and expectations of his audience. In so doing, he succeeds in establishing a rapport with his live audience, particularly with his signature phrase *Geukia mwenzako na umwambie tricky sana* (translated as "Turn to your neighbor and tell him/her that [life] is very tricky"). Therefore, from the onset, this dramatic opening line (from which the title of this essay is derived) allows the comedian to initiate a dialogue with his audience, who become both the participants as well as the targets of his jokes. The seemingly casual manner in which he delivers punchlines and surprises throughout his performances is something that elicits spontaneous laughter. One case in point is when he describes the excruciating process of looking for employment in the city. The spectators expect Tricky to say that it is important to have a job in order to survive in this urban world; however, Tricky surprises them by saying that money, and not work, is all one needs in order to make ends meet as a city dweller. Later in this essay, I illustrate how Tricky achieves this. Indeed, this is how stand-up comedy is meant to function, in the sense that things that may look so obvious or commonplace are foregrounded. Rather than relying on a well-rehearsed script, most of MCA Tricky's performances are based on a story line that he improves and improvises upon while on stage.

3 Stage Name and Persona

Popularly known by his stage name, MCA Tricky, the comedian was born in 1993 and grew up in the coastal city of Mombasa, Kenya. "MCA" means "Member of Chokoras Assembly." *Chokora* is a Swahili word used to refer to street boys, whose main means of survival is begging and rummaging for food in dustbins. Clearly, in this context the title MCA is used as a parody of the title of the political leaders known as members of the county assembly (MCAs). These leaders are elected to represent the smallest or lowest region of administration, called a "ward." There are forty-seven counties in Kenya; depending on the size, each county comprises a number of wards. Since the comedian does not explain the meaning of the initials "MCA" when introducing himself, most members of the audience assume that Tricky is using the acronym in the Kenyan political

meaning. This notwithstanding, his stage name suggests that he is the bona fide representative of the other street boys. His real name is Francis Munyao. The last born in a family of three, and a younger brother to two elder siblings, Tricky attended Ikungu Primary School in Makindu, Machakos County. But it was at the tender age of twelve years old that he abandoned school and ventured into the harsh reality of street life. After running away from home, he joined a group of street boys who convinced him to accompany them to Nairobi in search of greener pastures. Although his performances appear spontaneous and improvised, it is these experiences as a street boy that Tricky recreates, becoming the subject of his own comedies. On December 20, 2019, during Kenyatta University's forty-seventh graduation ceremony, Munyao graduated from the institute with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. In none of his stage appearances, however, does the character played by MCA Tricky ever reveal or betray the identity or profession of the actor himself.

Naming is an important element in any creative work, such as drama or narrative fiction. This is because the audience or readers come to know characters through their names. Naming is indeed crucial in the fictional world, just as in the real world, because it is a name that affords the individual a sense of identity. Some names can be symbolic in the sense that they bear nuances of a character's traits and personality. This seems to be the case with the comedian MCA Tricky: in this sense, through his stage name and character, MCA Tricky signifies and ridicules the "tricky" ways of the Kenyan politician known as the member of the county assembly (MCA). Although he presents himself as the streetwise leader of a street gang, he can be considered a trickster who uses all manner of artifice to survive on the treacherous streets of Nairobi, perhaps in the same way the politician (MCA) manoeuvres his way through the Kenyan political landscape. In order to endear himself to and create rapport with the audience, MCA Tricky begins all his performances with the phrase *Geukia mwenzako umwambie tricky sana*, loosely translated as "Turn to your neighbor and tell him/her that [life] is very tricky." For sure, this introductory opening line ushers the audience into the "tricky" urban world that the comedian imagines.

The use of stage names is a common practice among artists. It is actually part of the tradition of this comedic genre. Some of the Kenyan comedians who use stage names on *Churchill Show* include Churchill himself, aka Mwalimu King'ang'i; and Professor Hamo, Teacher Wanjiku, Captain Otoyo, Jalang'o, Jemutai, Mammito, Jasper, Sleepy David, David the Student, MC Jessy, Adhis Jojo, Chipukeezy, Smart Joker, YY, and Njoro. Using stage names allows each of these comedians to create a unique persona and identity that the audience can easily relate. The nick-names also enables them to draw a line between

the real person and the actor, such that whenever one is performing on stage, he assumes a completely different role and identity. It also becomes a way of creating a personal brand, through which many of them have launched careers in other areas such as radio, television, and advertisement.

4 Stand-up Comedy

Before proceeding to the analysis of MCA Tricky's performances, it is important to briefly mention what stand-up comedy entails. Stand-up comedy is essentially meant to be performed for live audiences. Mintz (2005) notes that "stand-up comedy is live performance in which a comedian tells jokes and/or behaves in a manner designed to generate laughter, often ridicule, either directed at the comic persona or directed by the persona at others or at social issues and topics familiar to the audience".[12] Following Mintz, Tricky's comic performances can be read as both critique of and commentary on sociocultural and political issues that his urban audience can easily identify. In stand-up comedy, the comedian stands in front of an audience, performing a one-man show for a short duration, say between five and ten minutes. Basically, the comedian presents a series of jokes based on incidents that the audience can easily identify. A complete performance is referred to as a "set." Usually, this set is rehearsed so that the performer can get acquainted with his or her lines. All the same, it is important to note that during the actual performance, the comedian must allow room for spontaneity. In this way, the performer ensures that the entire show appears to the audience as if it is spontaneous. Other characteristics of stand-up comedy in Kenya include the use of ethnic accents, stereotypes, costumes, slapstick, gestures, and facial expressions. Using ethnic accents, for instance, a comedian may imitate how a renowned politician talks. Other ways in which stand-up comedians imitate politicians is through costume, where the style of dress is used to caricature the country's leaders. The costumes are designed in such a way as to look absurd and ridiculous, something that can elicit laughter from the audience even before the comedian has started talking. This is one strategy that MCA Tricky has perfected: his trademark costume includes an oversized gray coat, a red T-shirt, a knee-length pair of shorts, and open shoes that he wears without socks. The clothes are creased, suggesting that they have been retrieved from a garbage can or that they are donations from a well-wisher. For instance, in one episode, MCA

12 Maurice Charney, ed., *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide,* 2 vols. 2 (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 575.

Tricky suggests that he collected the oversized coat from a garbage can outside State House, the official residence of the president, implying that it might once have been worn by the president himself. His unkempt hair completes the picture of the street urchin that the comedian represents on stage.

As far as language is concerned, Tricky delivers his performances in the Swahili language. But his language is unique in the sense that it is heavily inflected with the ethnic accent of the Kikuyu community of Kenya. The stereotype this is intended to confer on Tricky is that of a streetwise character who is always ready to manipulate the people and situations around him for his own benefit. Tricky uses Sheng in addition to Swahili, giving the performances a unique blend of style and delivery, and making it possible for the audience to easily recognize the jokes. His character is that of a street boy who has little understanding of the English language. For him, competence in the English language not only means that one is educated, but it also marks a certain social category—the middle class, who are often the target of Tricky's jokes. Using caricature and exaggeration, he portrays situations that require wit to manoeuvre his way out of them. In almost all cases, Tricky makes the wrong moves or bad choices, culminating in "tricky" endings that make the audience laugh at both the comedian as well as themselves. Besides hyperbole, other linguistic devices that Tricky uses in his performances include word play and puns. Through such techniques, he is able to play with the mind of the audience, ultimately duping them.

5 The Subject of Tricky's Performances

As I have already indicated, Tricky's jokes are based on story lines or short anecdotes. One feature that makes Tricky's performances so appealing and entertaining is how he recreates real-life experiences, rendering the stories to his audience in hilarious ways. Following Michel de Certeau, one may argue that comedy is derived from the stories and experiences that people encounter every day.[13] Aside from drawing inspiration out of his own experiences, the comedian also researches his content to find out what might appeal to the audience. The everyday experiences can thus be considered as the "foregrounded practices"[14] upon which the satirical performances of MCA Tricky are founded. Using his persona as the bona fide leader and spokesperson of

13 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

14 Ibid., 48.

the street gang, Tricky seems to wield power over them. At the same time, he employs wit as a survival tactic, displaying his prowess as the most streetwise fellow in the entire gang. This is clearly evident from the role he assumes when the gang meets to write a letter to the president. Following the nature and characteristics of stand-up comedy, MCA Tricky's performances are based on a specific story line or theme. He presents this previously rehearsed and memorized sketch to the audience, pausing at given moments to allow for their reactions.

The complexities of the urban world are fodder for Kenyan comedy. Almost all long-running comedy shows on Kenyan television are based on experiences in the city. To cite some examples, *Vioja Mahakamani*, *Vitimbi*, *Papa Shirandula*, *Inspector Mwala*, *Auntie Boss*, and *The Real House Helps of Kawangware* are all set within the geographical space of Nairobi. These settings include the court and middle-class neighborhoods as well as city slums. Mbogo observes:

> "These characters in their quest to circumvent the hustles of a complex and unforgiving urban setting resort sometimes to "rural" habits that are more familiar to them. While trying to better their contemporary urban dwellers who are seen as competitive and better placed to acquire the rewards of understanding the urban space, some of the characters employ trickery."[15]
>
> Reading after Mbogo, MCA Tricky can be viewed as a character who is employing all the tricks in his bag to navigate his way around Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. These strategies of survival come in handy even when he meets other street boys upon his visit to Kisumu, another city located in the western part of Kenya. In order to survive the otherwise hostile city life, Tricky must inevitably go along with the twists and turns of the streets of Nairobi, which Mbogo describes as "an urban setting that is constantly shifting and therefore challenging and difficult to understand".[16]

6 Nine Steps in the Episode *"MCA Tricky Writes a Letter to the President"*

The episode discussed here lasts for a span of nine minutes and thirty-nine seconds. In this performance, Tricky narrates to the audience how he is writing a letter to the president with the aim of applying for a job. To begin with, Tricky

15 Fred Mbogo, "The Profit-Making Template in Kenyan Comedy," *Jahazi* 2, no. 1 (2015): 11.
16 Ibid.

engages the audience in dialogue, explaining why he so desperately needs a job:

Tricky:	*Si mnajua vile ni Tricky kukaa hii Nairobi bila ka—?*
Audience:	*Kazi!*
Tricky:	*Bila kakitu! Unaweza kuwa na kazi na hauna kakitu!* [Laughter and applause from the audience.] *Tumekuwa tukitafuta job huku Nairobi na hatupati.*

Tricky:	Do you know how tricky it is to survive in Nairobi without *ka*—?
Audience:	*Kazi* ["a job"]!
Tricky:	Without *kakitu* ["something small," i.e. money]! This is because you can have a job and still be broke! So we have been looking for a job here in Nairobi, but with no success.

In this prologue, the dominant technique Tricky employs is that of ellipsis. It is a call and response technique, which in itself is a kind of a puzzle because it entails starting a word or sentence, then giving the audience a chance to guess and complete what he intends to say. This conversational device is common, especially among Kenyans, when one is describing an incident, for instance a car accident one has witnessed. Tricky starts the word, pauses, and then turns to the audience to complete it. Nonetheless, in almost all such instances, the audience gets the wrong word, which, in fact, is Tricky's intention, as in the case above.

What does the audience's response reveal? Several things emerge from this style of conversation between the performer and the audience. First, it reveals the expectations of the audience, who anticipate the obvious. They are quick to respond or complete the word without much reflection. At this point, the audience breaks into spontaneous laughter upon realizing that they have fallen into Tricky's trap. In this instance, they are actually laughing at themselves. Secondly, there is an incongruence between the audience's anticipations and the reality of the situation being described, which itself is the punchline of the joke. Tricky's intention is to trick the audience into thinking in a particular direction, then surprise them with the correct word or phrase at an opportune moment. Ultimately, because of their inability to think outside the box, the audience falls for Tricky's trap. After capturing the audience's attention and shifting them to a world of make-believe, Tricky proceeds to narrate how he led the street gang in the exercise of writing a letter to the president of Kenya.

Step 1: The motivation for seeking a job.

It is at this point that Tricky explains why he is looking for a job. He starts by describing the problem of unemployment in contemporary Kenya. He is a representative for other street boys who are jobless just like him. So he starts by saying, *Nimekuwa nikitafuta kazi pamoja na Redde yangu* ("I have recently been hunting for a job together with my *redde*"). *Redde* is a Sheng word derived from the Kikuyu word *kĩrĩndĩ*, meaning a "group of people" or "the masses." In this context, *redde* is used to refer to the street gang. Besides being the bona fide leader and representative, Tricky is the only one in the gang who is literate, which is why he writes the letter on behalf of the others.

Step 2: Why it is necessary to write an application letter.

The second thing MCA Tricky does is explain why it is necessary to write a formal letter to apply for a job. The main reason one must write the letter, according to Tricky, is that someone once told him it is not possible to get a job without applying for one. Here, he pauses, turning to the audience to confirm whether this is true: *Ni ukweli?* ("Is this true?") At this juncture, it is important to note that through use of dialogue, Tricky is seeking the audience's participation in the performance. This technique also helps to confirm whether they are attentive and following the story. Tricky notes that it is Piento, one of the gang members, who has suggested that they should not give up, but should try their luck: *Tukiendelea ndio Piento kakasema tuendelee kujaribu bahati* ("As we were pondering what to do next, Piento suggested that we should continue to try our luck"). At this point, Tricky seems to digress, or so it appears, remarking that the word *bahati* (meaning "luck" or "the lucky one") reminds him of the gospel musician known as Bahati. But he is not really digressing; this is actually an allusion within his narrative to his understanding of writing letters. Incidentally, Bahati has actually composed a song called *"Barua"* (meaning "letter") where he addresses God through a letter. This song becomes an instant inspiration for Tricky. In the song, Bahati addresses God using a love letter, referring to Him as *daddy* and *mpenzi* (meaning "lover"). Taking this rhetorical question literally, Tricky dismisses the musician, claiming that Bahati does not have a clue as to how many letters he has written to God, as indicated in the opening line of *"Barua"*: *Ni barua ngapi nimeandika kwa njia ya muziki?* ("How many letters have I written down in the form of music?") *Na nyimbo ngapi nimeandika zisizo za riziki* ("And how many not-for-profit songs have I written?"). In the song, the persona is asking God the rhetorical question of how many songs he has composed without any financial gain. His music career, he laments, has not allowed him to eke out a living. This is a veiled reference to the numerous challenges

facing musicians in Kenya; such challenges include piracy, resulting in poor remuneration for their music. Taking a cue from Bahati, Tricky observes that he has been forced by circumstance to submit to the excruciating bureaucracy of the job application process. In so doing, however, he subverts all the rules of the process. The task of writing the letter becomes easier, since all he needs to do is to copy a letter discovered in an abandoned suitcase. Inspired by Bahati, he breaks all protocol by taking the liberty to directly address the president in the letter. After all, if Bahati could address God, Tricky can likewise address the president. But one other reason why Bahati becomes important in this episode is that Tricky is alluding to an incident in which Bahati once dared to sit on the president's chair during a public function. This actually happened on September 10, 2016 as Bahati was performing at a political rally for the launching of Jubilee Party. It is this political party that ushered President Uhuru Kenyatta into a second term for the presidency in the 2017 presidential elections. During this event, Bahati unseats the president and instead of requesting him to join him on stage for a jig, as would have been expected, Bahati takes the place of the president. He then proceeds to serenade the First Lady, whose seat was next to that of the President, with his hit song *Mama*. This incident provoked public outrage among Kenyans, with some arguing that Bahati took his joke beyond limit. Some security experts claimed that Bahati's action of unseating the President was a breach of security as well as protocol. As if that was not enough, Bahati went ahead to unseat the then deputy president William Ruto, dedicating the same song *Mama* to Mama Rachael Ruto. Tricky's letter to the President is therefore inspired by Bahati's controversial stage performance. The two actions—Bahati's performance of unseating the Presidency as well Tricky's Letter to the President—can be viewed as ways of poking fun on political power and authority as well as means of unsettling status quo. According to Nyairo, this kind of humour makes the audience laugh for various reasons: "… we laugh with a sense of superiority, when the mighty are deflated and made common in ways that give us a heady sense of power. We laugh for different reasons just as much as we laugh in different ways. That is why we must increasingly question the political work of humour; both its imperative and its efficacy in achieving the essential goals of positive change: a change in the thinking, a change in the status quo …".[17] Reading after Nyairo, one can conclude that both Bahati and Tricky have succeeded, in their own respective

17 Joyce Nyairo, "Scripted Humour in Modern Kenya", *Jahazi* 7, no. 1 (2018): 38.

ways, to deflate the presidency, making this high and mighty political office an object of laughter and ridicule.

Step 3: Why it is important to get a job.

It is at this third stage that Tricky explains the importance of getting a job, saying that it is so difficult to survive in the city when one is jobless; this is where the above-quoted dialogue (p. 8) is spoken. What Tricky is demonstrating here are the vagaries of city life, where it is possible to have a job and yet remain broke. All the same, he says that they have been painstakingly searching for a job in Nairobi, but to no avail.

Several issues emerge from this discourse between Tricky and his audience. First, Tricky is employing ellipsis and word play to create humor—yet at another level, he is doing all this to surprise and catch the audience off-guard because they are anticipating the obvious. Thus, the lingering question is, why do the listeners respond by saying it is impossible to survive in the city without *kazi* ("a job")? Throughout the sketch, Tricky has been talking about a job (*kazi*), so it seems obvious that *kazi* is the right word to complete Tricky's sentence. Just as his stage name suggests, Tricky is able to trick the audience, showing them they are wrong. Tricky challenges the audience's assumption, saying that you can actually have a job, but still remain broke. Thus, Tricky underscores the ironies of everyday life in the city, where one can actually be employed but have no money to meet various financial obligations.

Step 4: Why it is Tricky who writes the letter.

It is Tricky who is charged with the responsibility of writing the letter to the president. He does this on behalf of the entire gang. Given that he is the only literate member of the team that he represents, he subverts all the rules of letter-writing. He decides to indicate the senders' address as "P. O. Box Katunge," which is greeted with laughter and applause from the audience; the letter he was copying from had indicated "P.O. Box 257 Thika." His notion of the English word "box" is derived from the Sheng language, where seducing and winning the heart of a girl is referred to as *kuingiza msichana kwa box*, loosely translated as "trapping a girl into a box." Tricky therefore wonders how the author of the other letter had managed to lure two hundred and fifty seven (257) women into his own "box," despite all of them residing in the same locality, Thika! For this reason, Tricky decides to indicate his physical location as "Tricky Fan Base." This punchline attracts yet more laughter and applause from the audience.

Step 5: What Tricky is requesting in the letter.

Addressing the president as *Prezzo* and *Mtukufu Uncle*, Tricky requests the president to hire his three colleagues. He pleads with the president to hire Piento at the marines or the navy; this is because Piento likes operating *chini ya maji* (literally translated as "under the water"). Tricky recommends Otis to be hired as an undercover agent, since his skin color is so dark that he cannot easily be seen by an enemy; he will only be visible when he comes to collect his monthly salary. Finally, Tricky suggests that Kamasleti, the only girl in the gang, be hired at the high court since—she is always "high"—as a replacement for the presiding chief justice. The name Kamasleti is derived from "slay queen," which is the Kenyan social media parlance for young city girls who enjoy showing off a particular lifestyle that they cannot afford to maintain. As such, they flaunt their beauty in exchange for the support of men (popularly referred to as "sponsors") with the requisite wherewithal. According to *Urban Dictionary*, the term "slay queen" is used to refer to "young and naïve girls who apparently do not date broke men. They spend hours on Snapchat and Instagram showing off things they do not even own." What Tricky is suggesting here is that once the president hires the members of the street gang, they will enjoy a better lifestyle and the trappings associated with state power. It is therefore in the roles that he assigns the street gang members that elicit the humour. This is because he is alluding to the incident where Bahati appeared in a public function to have "taken away" the president's wife. So it is the allusions that evoke the laughter from the audience.

Step 6: Why Tricky does not request a position for himself.

By the time he finishes writing the letter, Tricky has forgotten to ask for a job from the president, saying *mimi sitaki kazi* ("I do not want a job" or "I do not want to work"). What does this suggest? This situation is rather tricky and ironic at the same time. Although Tricky wishes to change his status quo from a life of begging in the streets, he is not willing to work. His wish is that the president, who is the commander-in-chief, make him what he calls the "commander-in-sub-chief." According to Tricky, this position will allow him to become the bodyguard of the first lady of the Republic of Kenya. Clearly, Tricky is lazy, but he doesn't say so. He wishes and longs for a better life, yet he does not want to work. So was the process of writing a letter to the president an exercise in futility? In some way, Tricky helps to reveal the absurdity of the excruciating process of seeking a job in Nairobi. At the same time, his wishes for a better life could also apply to other people who are lazy and would only wish to have a better life without working hard for it. Here, Tricky is not really

talking about the difficulty of looking for a job but he is poking fun at the presidential guards who allowed Bahati to "hijack" the First Lady. That is why he wants that job. These allusions and the ironies that Tricky creates build up to his punchlines.

Step 7: Waiting for the president's response.

At this juncture, Tricky proceeds to explain that they have been waiting for a reply from the State House in vain. Part of the reason is that they entrusted Bahati, the musician, with the task of delivering the letter to the president. They had considered Bahati to be more experienced and knowledgeable in matters to do with letters, since, as I have already mentioned, Bahati had written several letters to God. Incidentally, instead of taking the letter to the State House, Bahati has given it to a fellow musician known as "Prezzo." "Prezzo" – a Sheng word meaning President – is the stage name of a flamboyant and controversial Kenyan musician known as Jackson Ngechu Makini. The reference to "Prezzo" is yet another example of how artists use the stage to satirize the Presidency. At this point, Tricky turns to the camera to address the president directly, since the letter project has not worked.

Step 8: The desperation of waiting turns Tricky to other ways of addressing the president.

Tricky is not sure if the president has actually received the letter. Turning toward the backstage area, Tricky requests "Uncle" Churchill to help him address the president. Churchill does not show up on stage; he is nowhere to be seen. Tricky is alone and he looks desperate. In some sense, this seems to suggest the desperation many job-seekers have to endure as they hunt for jobs in the city. Somehow, Tricky is trying to suggest that one must resort to a relative or familiar network in order to secure employment. Moreover, the fortunes and status of Tricky as a street boy do not change, despite the near-access he has had to the State House, the center of political power, in the form of the letter. The letter thus becomes a subtle way of breaking barriers and hierarchies between formal and informal.

Step 9: The punchline.

Frustrated, Tricky turns to the audience once again and says that Churchill also cannot be seen, since he is too dark, just like Tricky. If both were to stand side by side, one would think that there was a corridor between them; their dark figures would not be recognized—a subtle parody of invisibility. After all, Tricky is suggesting that he is not only voiceless, but also remains invisible. He

is both unheard and unseen, yet he is aware that the president is watching the show—the very reason why he addresses him through the camera.

Ending.

Clearly, the ending of this episode is anticlimactic. What Tricky was undertaking was the futile exercise of writing a letter that was probably lost before it could reach its destination. We are back to where we started. Indeed, as Tricky reminds the audience at the start of the performance, "this life is very tricky!" But it is important to note that it is the series of allusions and ironies, most of which the audience are familiar with that inform the backdrop to Tricky's jokes. That is why Bahati's letter to God ("*Barua"*) and his song *"Mama"* dedicated to his mother acquire entirely different meanings, enabling him to momentarily "hijack" *"Mama wa Taifa"*, the First Lady as well as the presidency when he seats on the president's chair. Following this kind of subversion, MCA Tricky is not really looking for work through his letter to the president. Instead, work in this context is just a dressing for the allusion.

7 Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, we have seen that MCA Tricky sets out to write a letter to the president hoping to apply for a job. In this exercise, Tricky includes members of the street gang that he purports to represent. In this performance, just like in other episodes, Tricky employs several techniques to deliver his jokes to the audience. These include word play, puns, ellipsis, allusions, and imitations of ethnic accents. It is clear that the punchlines of his jokes rest on the incongruence between the audience's expectations and the actual lines Tricky delivers.

Using his signature introduction on stage, *Geukia mwenzako umwambie, Tricky sana* ("Turn to your neighbor and tell him/her that [life] is very tricky"), MCA Tricky endeavors to break the ice and connect with his audience. In terms of language, it has been noted that MCA Tricky performs his stand-up comedy using Swahili as well as Sheng. At the same time, the comedian uses ethnic accents to make his performances more humorous. In the end, along with entertaining the audience, he is also able to convey pertinent messages with sociopolitical relevance to them. As far as content is concerned, the performances of MCA Tricky are based on familiar anecdotes, current affairs, or trending events, often popularized through mainstream media as well as different social media platforms. For that reason the humour in Tricky's comedy analyzed here is not merely based on the hunt for job but on the recklessness

of the presidential guards who allowed Bahati, the writer of the letter (*"Barua"*) to God as well as the musician who sang "*Mama*" to "hijack" the presidency as well as the president's wife. From our analysis here, it is clear that through parodying the actions of the political class and mocking their ways of thinking, Tricky lets members of the audience laugh at their own miscalculations and bad decisions. Moreover, the audience can obtain insight into situations in their lives that are similar to the ones Tricky dramatizes.

References

Bakhtin, Michail M. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide.* 2 vols. 2. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005.

Kasembeli, Serah. "Stereotypes and the Ambiguities of Humour in Kenya: The Churchill Show," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34, no. 2 (2022): 173–185.

Mbogo, Fred. "The Profit-Making Template in Kenyan Comedy." *Jahazi* 2, no. 1 (2015): 10–13.

Michieka, Martha, and Leonard Muaka. "Humour in Kenyan Comedy." *A Journal of Linguistics* 45, no. 3 (2016): 34–59.

Ndonye, Michael M., Phylis Bartoo, and Josephine Khaemba. "The Tyranny of Televised Comedy: Modeling Ethnic Relation Through "Churchill Live Show" in Kenya." *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, 3A (2015): 605–11.

Nyairo, Joyce. "Scripted Humour in Modern Kenya." *Jahazi* 7, no. 1 (2018): 33–40.

Rappoport, Leon. *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005.

Stott, Andrew M. *Comedy*. London, New York: Routledge, 2014.

wa-Mũngai, Mbũgua. "The Big Man's Turn to Dance in Kenyan Bar-Rooms." *Leeds African Studies Bulletin* 65, March (2003): 37–48.

YouTube Videos

"Bahati Becomes the "Shortest Seating" President of Kenya." Video. Accessed January 21, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS-lk17zwHA.

Bahati Kenya. "Bahati - Barua (Official Video)." Video, published April 8, 2014, 3:45. Accessed April 2, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qas9fG9Lxo&ab_channel=BahatiKenya.

"Celebrity Status." Video. Accessed January 29, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJXtd9SgXHE.

Churchill Show. "Churchill Show Sn09 Ep19 (MCA Tricky's Journey)." Video, published June 22, 2020, 40:47. Accessed April 2, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=li5_5pj7WL0.

Churchill Show. "MCA Tricky Writes a Letter to the President." Video, published July 5, 2016, 9:38. Accessed April 2, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04U-GILtOe0&ab_channel=ChurchillTelevision.

Radio Maisha. "MCA Tricky - the Story of My Life." Video, published January 9, 2020, 15:36. Accessed April 2, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiYg1aBKKQ0.

SECTION 3

Intermedial Inquiries

CHAPTER 10

A World(-System) of Debris: Ruins, Remains, and Self-Writing in Narratives across the Indian Ocean

Elena Brugioni

1 Literary and Visual Storytelling across the Indian Ocean

Addressing critical debates within the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies, African literary studies, and world literature/world-literature, this essay offers a reflection on the theme of *ruins, remains*, and *self-writing* as critical and aesthetic concepts through which visual and literary narratives *register* the past and problematize the future, suggesting new critical possibilities to address and analyze African contemporary literary writing.[1]

The starting point of my reflection will be the photography project *Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu*[2] and the literary works of contemporary authors such as Nuruddin Farah (Somalia), Abdulrazak Gurnah (Tanzania), and João Paulo Borges Coelho (Mozambique). The counterpoint between photographic and literary histories points to the possibility to redefine literary and visual forms of narration that, as Ann Laura Stoler proposes, tackle *ruins* and *remains* "not as objects of the post-imperial melancholic gaze but rather as a strategic point of view to rethink imperial formations and their contemporary meanings."[3] Within this critical perspective, the Indian Ocean appears to be a *world of debris*, an aesthetic and conceptual element of "ruination,"[4] re-defining literary writing as an intellectual space for rethinking those "temporalit[ies] that [are] always simultaneously bifurcating toward several different futures, and in so doing [open] the way to the possibility of multiple ancestries,"[5] or rather, highlighting other histories, subjects, memories,

1 This chapter draws on the research developed within the project "*Combined and Uneven* Comparisons. Rethinking the fields of African and Postcolonial literary studies within the debate on world-literature" leads by Elena Brugioni at the University of Campinas UNICAMP, grant 2020/07836–0 São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP). Parts of the reflections developed in this chapter are published in Brugioni 2021.

2 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

3 Stoler, *Ruins and Ruination*. Stoler, *Duress*.

4 Stoler, *Ruins and Ruination*.

5 Mbembe, *African Modes*.

and, therefore, "other modes of self-writing."[6] In this way, the geographical and imaginary space of the Indian Ocean is reshaped as both a strategic perspective for the emergence of private histories and, at the same time, as a "worldling paradigm"[7] by which to redefine literary genres, critical concepts, and cartographies for the study of African literatures.

Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu[8] is a documentary photography project developed by Guillaume Bonn, a prominent contemporary photographer and visual artist born in Madagascar, with a wide international career and numerous photography projects on the African continent.[9] As the project's title indicates, it has openly been inspired by Paul Theroux's popular work *The Mosquito Coast* (1981), set in Central America, originally published in 1981 and later adapted to cinema: a book that quickly became one of the best-selling publications of one of most renowned contemporary travel writers—according to some critics, the true heir of writers like Conrad and Hemingway. However, I do not intend to focus here on any kind of parallelism between Paul Theroux's book and Bonn's photography project; at the same time, what I find curious is that Bonn uses the phrase "Mosquito Coast" itself, as he explains in the foreword of the photo book, as an "irrational reference,"[10] a guiding motif to unite different and diverse places, cities, and countries within the African continent, and, particularly, on the eastern coast of the African continent. As a matter of fact, according to the text of the photo book, *mosquitoes* and *malaria* would be the link(s) that *came to the mind* of the photographer in connecting Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, and Somalia.[11] However, what the title of Theroux's novel most evidently represents is a clear analogy between Bonn's photographic and visual work and the literary genre of travel literature, where the African continent indisputably stands out as a geographical and aesthetic literary paradigm. In this sense—without attributing any value to the work of the American writer—the work of Paul Theroux is a contemporary paradigmatic case of this literary genre, a long-standing tradition that provides fertile ground for problematizing the relation between *self* and *other*, offering

6 Mbembe, *African Modes*.

7 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books 1993). Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2004).

8 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast.*

9 The project is documented in the photo book The Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu, published by Hatje Cantz in 2015. Introduction by Guillaume Bonn; foreword by Jon Lee Anderson.

10 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast.*

11 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

the possibility to analyze the intersection between fiction, documentary, and self-writing.[12] This further applies to what is widely considered a masterpiece of modern Western literature, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1904) and, at the same time, possibly also to Guillaume Bonn's photography project, which offers a visual narrative encompassing fiction, documentary, and autobiography—showing, as Angolan writer Ruy Duarte de Carvalho states, "on the Road, therefore the narrator"[13] and masterfully underlining the inevitable link between self-writing and travel literature. This dimension of Bonn's photographic project becomes particularly interesting from a critical point of view if it is seen in contrast to the personal, memorialistic dimension that explicitly underpins the *Mosquito Coast* project. In this regard, as the photographer states in the book's introduction:

> For many years I have been trying to come to terms with the changes that are transforming Africa into a place that is far removed from the familiar, comfortable Africa I knew as a child. Places that seem frozen in time; places that reminded me of the colonial era houses I had once lived in with my parents.
>
> I am the third generation of a family of Frenchmen born in Madagascar. My father and my grandfather spent their formative years on the island. My first memoirs are of Djibouti, an old French colonial outpost stuck between the Danakil Desert and the Indian Ocean. In my childhood in the seventies, it was still part of France [...]
>
> In time I became a documentary photographer. I lived in Nairobi and traveled to every corner of the continent, witnessing and recording the continent's changes as they took place. Along the way, my own particular sense of Africa emerged as well, an alchemical mixture made up of the familiar—its fading European colonial heritage, architecture, and enduring lifestyle—together with the continent's devastating wars, its dictatorships, and the epic destruction of its natural environment, including its wild-life. I wished to somehow capture all of this visually. The idea persisted. For a long time, I could not imagine how to embark on such a project. I felt challenged by a number of seemingly unanswerable questions. How could I tell stories of my own memories of a world that no longer existed or, if it did, barely survived? How could I come to terms

12 On contemporary travel writing, including Paul Theroux, see Pinto Ribeiro, *África, os Quatros Rios. A representação de África através da literatura de viagens europeia e norte-americana*. (Porto: Afrontamento, 2017).

13 Ruy Duarte de Carvalho. *As Paisagens Propícias*. (Lisbon: Cotovia, 2005).

> with my own family's role in the colonial brutality that the continent has experienced for a hundred years? How to avoid falling into the trap of all the romantic clichés of colonial Africa?
>
> I have been trying to come to terms with the changes that are transforming Africa. We are told that progress is a good thing, that mobile phones and the Internet will make all of us happier and our lives better. Along with those things, skyscrapers, highways, parking lots, and all the other accouterments of consumerism have begun to find their way into Africa and to change it, sometimes disastrously.[14]

Beside the issues of "progress and transformation,"[15] to which I will return in the conclusion of this essay, I would like to focus on how Bonn's visual work seems to achieve another layer of meaning by endowing its photographic narrative with an explicitly autobiographical dimension, which the author recognizes as a visual strategy to link a number of different places and cities—a visual device to build a *world* under a photographic gaze that is at once a language of documentation as well as of self-representation. In this respect, I would like to raise the possibility to address *Mosquito Coast* as a work of self-writing, as well as a work on East Africa as a location within the wider perspective of a world-system.[16] To this end, it is worth quoting a further passage from Bonn's introduction:

> It is strange and difficult for me to see the continent that I love, and that has made me and defined me, metamorphose so drastically.
>
> [...] I decided that I needed to go back where it all began, to the East African coastline, where, over the centuries, newcomers had arrived continuously from distant lands by boat, each bringing new influences with them and together creating the Africa I had grown up with. They came in waves, in trickles, and in different shapes and hues. There were conquerors, explorers, traders, and immigrants, and they included Portuguese, Omanis, Indians, British, Italians, Germans, and French. I traveled from Mozambique northward along the Indian Ocean shoreline to Tanzania,

14 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*. All the quotes by Guillaume Bonn are from the photo book's introduction, which has no page numbers.

15 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

16 Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004)

> Kenya, and Somalia. Subject to the varied forces of their own histories, each was also unique in their modern incarnation.[17]

Therefore, observing some of the images that appear in the project, in line with the feeling of *painful sadness and nostalgia* that the photographer admits in the text[18]—echoing what Susan Sontag defines as the intrinsic elegiac dimension of the act of photographing[19]—ruins and debris take on an emblematic aesthetic and conceptual meaning: a sort of visual chronotope in Bonn's work, pointing, in my view, to Ann Laura Stoler's notion of the *debris of the empires*,[20] and therefore visually "re-signifying the ruins not as an object of the post-imperial melancholic gaze but as a strategic point of view to rethink imperial formations and their contemporary meanings.[21] According to Stoler, thinking the ruin—which in Bonn's case would be visual thought—does not mean regarding the artifacts of the empire as dead material or the remains of a former regime, but is a task that aims at observing how the ruins have been (re)appropriated and therefore assume the strategic and active position of imperial debris in terms of the present.[22] It is exactly from this critical and conceptual perspective that the images of Maputo, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Merca, Watamu, and Mogadishu, among others, can be observed, addressing the human and maritime presence as visual elements of *ruination*, as strategic conceptual and aesthetic elements capable of *ruining the ruins* (cf. to ruin, ruination),[23] thus underlining the vital contemporary reconfiguration of the inert remains of past empires within the present and how the remains of past times branch into different futures.[24]

Particularly emblematic are two images: the first is a photograph of a woman in a red dress climbing the steps of Mogadishu's old cathedral—obviously a ruin of Italian colonialism (figure 10.1)—and the second is of the view from a window of the Al-Aruba Hotel in Mogadishu (figures 10.2 and 10.3).

On the one hand, the human element—the woman in the red dress—and the seascape of the Indian Ocean, on the other, are the two strategic elements that *ruin* the melancholy that potentially characterizes the gaze of the imperial

17 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.
18 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.
19 Susan Sonntag, *On Photography.* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).
20 Stoler, *Ruins and Ruination*. Stoler, *Duress*.
21 Stoler, *Ruins and Ruination.* Stoler, *Duress*.
22 Stoler, *Duress*.
23 Stoler, *Ruins and Ruination*.
24 Stoler, *Ruins and Ruination*.

FIGURE 10.1 Mogadishu's cathedral. Capture from Bonn's photo book.[25] The image and the following ones are also available at the photographer's website (http://www.guillaumebonn.com/mosquito-coast.html).

debris, pointing to its vital (re)signification from a subjective dimension in the present.

I would like to focus on the first image, which, according to Bonn, refers to a real past experience of the photographer,[26] who reenacts the event through the picture, placing the subject of the woman as the primary visual element, dominating and (re)signifying the debris on two different levels: the debris of Italian colonialism, and the traces of the civil war that the Somali state has endured over the last two decades, particularly the city of Mogadishu.

The second image features the Al-Aruba Hotel in Mogadishu, a building of colonial origin, formerly the base of the al-Shabab militia, and later transformed into the military base for the African Union contingent then leading peacekeeping operations in Somalia. The old building appears in the picture

25 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

26 See the caption of the image in the photo book *The Mosquito Coast.*

27 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

FIGURE 10.2 "View from the Al-Aruba Hotel, now a military base for the African Union, Mogadishu, 2013," capture from Bonn's photo book[27]

as a sort of frame allowing the viewer to focus on another level of the image. In other words, the building's windows enable a strategic shift from one social topography to another, determined by the focus on the people in the background, focusing an action that happens beyond and despite the debris. In both images, the gaze of the picture indicates a human landscape that defines the ruin not as a trace of the past but as an index of a possible future. Therefore, observing the photographic project as a whole, we see that it is the relationship between the maritime and the human elements that comprises the fabric of a narrative built through different layers of histories and memories, suggesting an explicit and productive counterpoint with literary writing that, through a different language, builds a memory of the self and of the place following a similar conceptual strategy, and therefore pointing to what Achille Mbembe defines as "African modes of self-writing."[28] In other words: imaginations and strategies that dismantle an idea of authenticity guided by

28 Mbembe, *African Modes*.

FIGURE 10.3 "Al-Aruba Hotel, now an African Union military base, Mogadishu, 2013," author's caption[29]

a relationship between locality, identity, and history, indicating "an intellectual space to rethink those temporalit[ies] that [are] always simultaneously

29 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

bifurcating toward several different futures, and in so doing [open] the way to the possibility of multiple ancestries."[30] This includes, for example, works like *Paradise* and *By the Sea* (2001), by the Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Links* (2005) and *Knots* (2006), by Somali writer Nuruddin Farah; and *Índicos Indícios* (2005) and *Ponta Gea* (2017), by Mozambican novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho. These are authors whose literary projects are marked by a paradigmatic relationship between *time* and *self-writing*, and where the Indian Ocean points to a subjective and transnational geography through which other times can emerge, (re)presenting stories and memories that reveal different selfs, simultaneously dismantling the idea of an identity that is assumed as a substance.[31]

"Relics" and "Liquid City" are the respective titles of the first chapters of *By the Sea*[32] and *Ponta Gea*,[33] two novels that articulate the conceptual constellation of debris, colonial memory, contemporary transformations, and self-writing as matrix(es) of narratives in which the very relation between subject and time, as well as between the land (the continent and nation-state) and sea (the Indian Ocean and the coastline) makes visible and reframes histories that are simultaneously traces and indexes of a world of temporal, spatial, and human plurality and transformation marked by *combination* and *unevennes*.[34] This is also the case of Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect Trilogy*, composed of the three novels *Crossbones* (2011), *Knots* (2006), and *Links* (2001), where self-writing is deeply intertwined with the different historical struggles—from political persecution to piracy—of the Somali nation-state and, from a wider perspective, the entire Horn of Africa. Furthermore, what these literary works seem to put forward is an *idea of the world* that narratives substantiating the definition of an African subjectivity have often neglected or set aside. It is what Achille Mbembe defines as an "Africa disconnected from the world: the crazy dream of a world without others," where *primary fantasies* and the *prose of nativism* lie at the base of the attempt to define an African identity in a clear and simple way and which, over time, has generally failed:[35]

> In African history, it is thought, there is neither irony nor accident. We are told that African history is essentially governed by forces beyond

30 Mbembe, *African Modes*.
31 Mbembe, *African Modes*.
32 Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).
33 João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, (Lisbon: Caminho 2017).
34 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press: 2015).
35 Mbembe, *African Modes*.

> Africans' control. The diversity and the disorder of the world, as well as the open character of historical possibilities, are reduced to a spasmodic, unchanging cycle, infinitely repeated in accord with a conspiracy always fomented by forces beyond Africa's reach. Existence itself is expressed, almost always, as a stuttering. Ultimately, the African is supposed to be merely a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment. Under such conditions, there can be no more radical utopian vision than the one suggesting that Africa disconnect itself from the world—the mad dream of a world without Others.[36]

At the same time, these apparently autobiographical and memorialistic novels can be addressed as literary forms of self-writing that aspire to another conceptualization of the notion of time in its relationship with memory and subjectivity in a postcolonial or rather post-imperial critical framework. Furthermore, they constitute *forms of registration* of the self outside a conception of *time as space* and as *identity as geography*,[37] and where the Indian Ocean is configured as a literary or visual and conceptual device able to cope with the density of the African present and, therefore, the element to tackle time as the only possible subjectivity to be written, imagined, and narrated.

On one hand, Abdulrazak Gurnah is usually considered one of the most prominent writers of the Indian Ocean, and the reading of his novels has been frequently defined throughout the corollary of the postcolonial condition but also within the critical lens of world literature,[38] pointing to a similarity with the critical reception of Nuruddin Farah.[39] On the other hand, as

---

36 Mbembe, *African Modes*, 251–252.

37 Mbembe, *African Modes.*

38 Here I mean the definition of "world literature" as literature that circulates beyond national borders, and approaches to reading it, as it has been defined by David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. ; on this, it is important to clarify that Damrosch's perspective shows fundamental differences from the definition of 'world-literature" proposed by WReC that I draw on in this essay.

39 On this, see:

Mar Garcia, Felicity Hand & Nazir Can. *INDICITIES/INDICES/INDÍCIOS: Hybridations problématiques dans les littératures de l'Océan Indien.* (Ille-sur-Têt: Editions K'A, 2010).

Harry Garuba, "No-Man's Land: Nuruddin Farah's Links and the Space of Postcolonial Alienation." In *Literary Landscapes* ed. A, de Lange, G. Fincham, J. Hawthorn, and J. Lothe, 180–197. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms for Transnationalism for the Global South. Literary and Cultural Perspectives," *Social Dynamics* 33, no. 2, (August 2008), 3–32.

for the reception of João Paulo Borges Coelho, there have been few attempts to include the work of this author within the critical framework of the Indian Ocean or through the perspective of world-literature.[40] In general, both the scholarship on Indian Ocean literature and the perspective of world literature/world-literature seem to fall short in promoting critical readings and comparative approaches that deconstruct the hegemony of dominant languages, as well as the market-driven circulation of literature. Furthermore, the proposal to address these literary works in a more materialistic line of thought, tackling these narratives throughout the concepts of *combination* and *unevenness*, would potentially allow for providing a wider definition of the Indian Ocean literary space, as well as a more material sense of the problem of world-literature. On that account, a number of critical paradigms that usually define the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies—transnationalism, circulation, and hybridization, among others—as well as the those that characterize the perspective of world literature/world-literature—core, periphery, modernity—would hopefully be (re)signified, opening new critical possibilities to read literature beyond the limits of hegemonic critical categories and commodity networks.

Peter Hitchcock, *The Long space. Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

40 On this, see:

Elena Brugioni, "NARRANDO O ÍNDICO. Contrapontos entre paradigmas críticos e representações: João Paulo Borges Coelho e M.G. Vassanji," *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais* 2, no. 1 (June 2014): 35–53.

Elena Brugioni, "Writing from Other Margins. Difference, Exception, and Translation in the Portuguese-Speaking World: Counterpoints between Literary Representations and Critical Paradigms," *Cadernos de Tradução* 37, no. 1 (January 2017): 65–89. http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2017v37n1p65.

Elena Brugioni, "Behind so many names, the sea. Mozambique and the Indian Ocean," In *Fluid Networks and Hegemonic Powers in the Western Indian Ocean,* ed. Iain Walker, Manuel João Ramos, & Preben Kaarsholm, (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Internacionais, 2017) ,65–80.

Ana Mafalda Leite, Jessica Falconi & Elena Brugioni, eds. *Dossiê: Espaços transnacionais: narrativas do Oceano Índico* [*Special Issue*]. *Remate de Males* 38, no. 1, 2018. Paulo de Medeiros, "The Drowning of Time: Ecological Catastrophe, Dialectics, and Allegorical Realism in João Paulo Borges Coelho's Ponta Gea and Água: Uma novela rural," In *A Companion to João Paulo Borges Coelho. Rewriting the* (*Post*)*colonial Remains,* ed. E. Brugioni, O. Grossegesse, and P. de Medeiros, 219–247. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020).

Emanuelle Santos, "Towards a World-Literary Aesthetics of Postcolonial Memory: Rainhas da noite by João Paulo Borges Coelho," In *A Companion to João Paulo Borges Coelho. Rewriting the* (*Post*)*colonial Remains* ed. E. Brugioni, O. Grossegesse, and P. de Medeiros, 203–218. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020).

2 Self-Writing, Indian Ocean Studies, and World-literature: Toward New Theoretical Departures

> A historical study centred on a stretch of water has all the charms but undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure.
>
> FERNAND BRAUDEL

By operationalizing the relationship between space and history, as Fernand Braudel proposes,[41] scholarship in the field of Indian Ocean history and social sciences have been developing theoretical concepts and methodological approaches that define the Indian Ocean as an "interregional arena,"[42] and thus as a network of dynamic and structured relationships[43] whose articulation privileges specific links, contacts, and dissonances between "worlds" that are simultaneously separate and yet contiguous. As Sugata Bose points out:

> The Indian Ocean is better characterized as an "interregional arena" rather than as a "system," a term that has more rigid connotations. An interregional arena lies somewhere between the generalities of a "world system" and the specificities of particular regions.[44]

The relationship between *regional entity* and *world-system* that the definition of the Indian Ocean as an "arena" proposes to promote is based on the need to problematize spatial constructs that seem to project a certain coloniality of knowledge.

> Regional entities known today as the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia which underpin the rubric of Area Studies in the Western academy, are relatively recent constructions that arbitrarily project certain legacies of colonial power onto the domain of knowledge in the post-colonial era. The world of the Indian Ocean, or for that matter, that of the Mediterranean, has a much greater depth of economic and cultural meaning. Tied together by webs of economic and cultural relationships, such arenas nevertheless had flexible internal and external boundaries.

41 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée: L'espace et l'histoire* (Vol. 1). *Les hommes et l'héritage* (Vol. 2), (Paris: Flammarion, 1985).

42 Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6.

43 Kirti Naraya Chaudhury, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

44 Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, 6.

> These arenas, where port cities formed the nodal points of exchange and interaction, have been so far mostly theorized, described, and analyzed only for the premodern and early modern periods. They have not generally formed the canvas on which scholars have written histories of modern era.[45]

In other words, the spatial dimension is a paradigmatic and essential element for the purpose of historical, social, and economic analysis, underlining a number of specificities that characterize the so-called Indian Ocean arena. At the same time, for literary analysis, the Indian Ocean perspective would deeply benefit from a critical approach that allows for observing the Indian Ocean space within a materialist line of thought in order to grasp and analyze the *combined* and *uneven* realities that compose the Indian Ocean world, "if, indeed there is such a thing."[46]

At this point, a further theoretical possibility seems to arise. The *worldling dimension*[47] of time and subjectivity that characterize the literary and visual narratives analyzed in this essay offers the possibility to engage with contemporary debates concerning Indian Ocean studies, or rather Indian Ocean literatures, and more recent developments in world-literature according to the theoretical formulations proposed by the Warwick Research Collective in the book *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015). By this, I mean their discussion of the world-literary system, as well as the concept of (semi-)peripheral novel—and (semi-) peripheral realism—proposed by WReC. In order to do this, I would again like to go back to Guillaume Bonn's photographic work and to focus on a single image (figure 10.4):

The ideas of progress, consumerism, transformation, and metamorphosis that the photographer mentions in the excerpts quoted above are quite evident throughout the entire project; so too are paradigmatic aspects of the literary work usually defined as Indian Ocean writers, particularly in the novels *By the Sea*, by Abdulrazak Gurnah (2001), and *Ponta Gea*, by João Paulo Borges Coelho (2017).[48] Moreover, observing Bonn's photography project, as well as the novels by Gurnah and Borges Coelho, a compelling conception of the

45 Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, 6–7.

46 Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Pearson M. eds, *Eyes Across the Water. Navigating the Indian Ocean*. (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), 82.

47 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. Said, *Humanism and Democratic*.

48 For a reading of Ponta Gea within the critical perspective developed by WReC, see Paulo de Medeiros, "The Drowning of Time: Ecological Catastrophe, Dialectics, and Allegorical Realism in João Paulo Borges Coelho's Ponta Gea and Água: Uma novela rural," In *A*

FIGURE 10.4 "An old telephone still in use, Nyali area, Mombasa, 2014," capture from Bonn's photo book. The image is also available at the photographer's website (http://www.guillaumebonn.com/mosquito-coast.html).[49]

Indian Ocean world seems to arise, offering the possibility to address the discussion of Indian Ocean studies and its narratives within the framework of WReC's debate on the idea of the world in "world(-)literature," and thus, its implications for the fields of literary studies and comparative literature. In lieu of developing a more detailed discussion of the novels—whose density and complexities deserve a more thorough analysis than the length of this essay permits—I would like to focus on the disciplinary implications that *the idea of the world* contained in these literary works seem to suggest in order to put forward some methodological and critical reflections that, in my view, are particularly relevant for the argument I am attempting to draw in the conclusions to this text. These conclusions are allegorically illustrated by Bonn's photograph: an old telephone standing out in the open air, still perfectly functioning, and

Companion to João Paulo Borges Coelho. Rewriting the (Post)colonial Remains edited by E. Brugioni, O. Grossegesse, and P. de Medeiros, 219–247. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020).

49 Bonn, *The Mosquito Coast*.

apparently wired to the Indian Ocean. A "dialectical image[s] of combined unevenness requiring not just simple decoding but creative application."[50]

First of all, according to the perspective mentioned above, it seems to me that the systemic definition[51] of Indian Ocean literatures[52] would greatly benefit from confronting WReC's problematization of the world-literary system as the literature that registers the *modern capitalist world-system*,[53] and in so doing offers the possibility to recognize specific literary forms that are able to give the account of the *combined and uneven developments* of modernity as the spatio-temporal sensorium of capitalism.[54] Quoting from WReC:

> As we understand it, the literary "registration" of the world-system does not (necessarily) involve criticality or dissent. Our assumption is rather that the effectivity of the world-system will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being.
>
> [...] (semi-)peripheral texts' meditations on the world are necessarily performed in the harsh glare of past and present imperial and colonial dispensations, whatever the specific national, trans-national or regional provenance of these dispensations might be.[55]

On that account, the very concept of self-writing—as well as the genres that are conventionally addressed as derivatives of narratives of this type—can be addressed as a paradigmatic literary form of the Indian Ocean and part of a literary world-system. Thus, the Indian Ocean can be defined not as a separate world-system, or rather a system among other systems,[56] but as a (semi-)

---

50 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 17.

51 Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, ed., *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives,* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

52 The systemic dimension was developed by Santy Moorthy & Ashraf Jamal, eds., *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2010. which draws on Andre Gunder Frank's theorization of multiple world-system(s) in order to avoid the supposed dialectic between core/periphery within a single world-system theorized by Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

53 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*.

54 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*. Fredric Jameson, *Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present,* (New York: Verso, 2002).

55 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 20.

56 Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, "The Five Thousand Year World System in Theory and Praxis," in *World System History: The Social Science of Long-Term Change* ed. Dene-

peripheral location and social and cultural space. Within this approach, it would be necessary to focus on the combined and uneven flows of time registered by Indian Ocean literary writing:

> We might then see the "accordionising" or "telescoping" function of combined and uneven development as a form of time travel within the same space, a spatial bridging of unlike times—in Lefebvre's sense, the production of *untimely* space—that leads from the classic forms of nineteenth-century realism to the speculative methodologies of today's global science fiction.[57]

Moreover, considering the debate regarding the Indian Ocean and therefore the theorization of Indian Ocean literatures within the framework of world-system analysis, a critical perspective based on the idea of the Indian Ocean as a *World* as well as a *worldling paradigm*[58]—both being established theoretical perspectives in the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies—will allow us to address the Indian Ocean, and thus Indian Ocean literatures, not as a "level playing field,"[59] and therefore to scrutinize a number of hegemonic and Eurocentric features that characterize the debate on comparative literature and that also need to be addressed and problematized within the field of Indian Ocean literary studies. Among many other facets, I would like to focus on a linguistic question that is also related to the idea of the Indian Ocean as a worldling and transnational paradigm,[60] addressing the rather paradigmatic detail of the marginality of Portuguese-speaking authors and texts within the scholarship on Indian Ocean literature. Reviewing academic publications on Indian Ocean literature from the last decades, it is possible to note that the absence of Portuguese-speaking spaces, subjects, and locations is quite visible, underlining how the few Lusophone authors included are in fact those whose

---

mark Robert A, Jonathan, Friedman, Barry K. Gills, and George Modelski, (London: Routledge, 2000), 3–23. Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

57 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development,* 17.

58 The concepts of World and worldling were some of the main topics discussed during the international workshop On Worlds and Artworks, hosted by the Research Section Arts and Aesthetics at the University of Bayreuth (February 10–13, 2020), where the presentation from which this contribution originates was originally presented.

59 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development.*

60 Elena Brugioni, "Writing from Other Margins. Difference, Exception, and Translation in the Portuguese-Speaking World: Counterpoints between Literary Representations and Critical Paradigms," *Cadernos de Tradução* 37, no. 1 (January 2017): 65–89. http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2017v37n1p65.

novels have been translated into English, as in the case of Mia Couto.[61] Recalling the situation that characterizes comparative literature as a field of study, we can easily notice how the field of Indian Ocean literature needs to engage with its intrinsic multilingual dimension throughout a more progressive and effective idea and practice of writing and translating, avoiding the fetishism of language, and particularly, recognizing the continuum between the practices of writing and translating.

> If to read is already to "translate," then the seeds are already sown for the view that, even if translation is by definition a "political" act, something may be gained by it, not merely something lost. We are further enjoined by this insight to grasp reading and translating as themselves social rather than solitary processes, and thereby to attend to the full range of social practices implicated: writing as commodity labour, the making of books, publishing and marketing, the social "fate" of a publication (reviews, criticism, the search for, creation and cultivation of a readership, etc.).[62]

In connection with this, I will raise a second point. Taking into account the prominence of the literary genre usually defined as "autobiographical" and "self-writing" in the Indian Ocean world,[63] this theoretical perspective will allow us to better qualify *Indian Ocean literary forms* and, particularly, quoting again from the Warwick Research Collective:

---

61 On this, see, for instance, Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms for Transnationalism for the Global South. Literary and Cultural Perspectives," *Social Dynamics* 33, no. 2, (August 2008), 3–32. Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr, & Michael Pearson eds. *Eyes Across the Water. Navigating the Indian Ocean*. (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010). Meg Samuelson, "Coastal Form: Amphibian Positions, Wider Worlds, and Planetary Horizons on the African Indian Ocean Littoral," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 2017): 16–24.

62 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development,* 28.

63 By this, I mean a number of acclaimed and well-known authors from a diverse range of backgrounds and writing in different languages, as well as authors whose works do not circulate beyond national or regional borders. Two paradigmatic examples can be adduced here: the Nobel laureate Le Clézio and the Swahili poetry of northern Mozambique. In this connection, Clarissa Vierke's paper at the abovementioned On Worlds and Artworks workshop is particularly important: "World Literature's Other? A Reflection upon a Swahili Poem from Northern Mozambique," where she analyzes the authorships, publications, and themes that characterize Swahili poetry in Mozambique within the critical debate on world(-)literature. On the relation between world literature and what the author defines as "*small* Swahili literature," see Vierke, 2019.

> To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar—as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies. Any typology of combined and uneven development will offer a catalogue of effects or motifs at the level of narrative form: discrepant encounters, alienation effects, surreal cross-linkages, unidentified freakish objects, unlikely likenesses across barriers of language, period, territory—the equivalent of umbrellas meeting sewing machines on (animated) dissecting tables. These are, in essence, dialectical images of combined unevenness requiring not just simple decoding but creative application.[64]

In conclusion, this critical intersection would enable us to reposition Indian Ocean studies, particularly Indian Ocean literary studies, within the vast critical perspective of the world-literary system not as *world literature, bigger*—as Franco Moretti would say[65]—but as (semi-)peripheral literary forms that register contemporary transformations and changes, and in so doing offer the possibility to rethink the *different levels of historical experiences* and the *unlikely likenesses* of narrations that characterize literary writing in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, this sort of critical and conceptual (re)vision will unquestionably contribute to dismantling a number of hegemonic and essentialist (mis) conceptions that frequently define critical approaches and theoretical formulations in contemporary literary studies devoted to Indian Ocean writers and narratives. Hence, tackling Indian Ocean literatures or, rather, (*visual*) *narrations and* (*literary*) *writing across the Indian Ocean* as forms of registration of the modern capitalist world-system would possibly contribute to a more materialist comprehension of the wide range of *combination*(*s*) and *unevenness*(*es*) that characterize the (Indian Ocean) world (literary system).

References

Bonn, Guillaume. *The Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu.* Berlin and Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2015.

64 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development,* 17.

65 Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*. (London: Verso, 2013).

Borges Coelho, João Paulo. *Índicos indícios: Setentrião* (Vol. 1). Lisbon: Caminho, 2005.

Borges Coelho, João Paulo. *Índicos indícios: Meridião* (Vol. 2). Lisbon: Caminho, 2005.

Borges Coelho, João Paulo. *Ponta Gea.* Lisbon: Caminho, 2017.

Bose, Sugata. *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in an Age of Global Empire*. London and Cambridge: Havard University Press, 2006.

Braudel, Fernand. *La Méditerranée: L'espace et l'histoire* (Vol. 1). *Les hommes et l'héritage* (Vol. 2). Paris: Flammarion, 1985.

Brugioni, Elena. "NARRANDO O ÍNDICO. Contrapontos entre paradigmas críticos e representações: João Paulo Borges Coelho e M.G. Vassanji." *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais* 2, no. 1 (June 2014): 35–53.

Brugioni, Elena. "Writing from Other Margins. Difference, Exception, and Translation in the Portuguese-Speaking World: Counterpoints between Literary Representations and Critical Paradigms." *Cadernos de Tradução* 37, no. 1 (January 2017): 65–89. http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2017v37n1p65.

Brugioni, Elena. "Behind so many names, the sea. Mozambique and the Indian Ocean." In *Fluid Networks and Hegemonic Powers in the Western Indian Ocean* edited by Iain Walker, Manuel João Ramos, & Preben Kaarsholm. (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Internacionais 2017), 65–80.

Brugioni, Elena. *Literaturas Africanas Comparadas. Paradigmas e Representações em Contraponto*. Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2019.

Brugioni, Elena, Orlando Grossegesse, and Paulo de Medeiros, eds. *A Companion to João Paulo Borges Coelho. Rewriting the (Post)colonial Remains*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020.

Brugioni, Elena, Via Atlântica, São Paulo, n. 40, p. 297–332, nov. 2021. doi: 10.11606/va.i40.173605

Carvalho, Ruy Duarte de. *As Paisagens Propícias*. Lisbon: Cotovia, 2005.

Chaudhury, Kirti Naraya. *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Farah, Nuruddin. *Links.* New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

Fawaz, Leila, C. A Bayly and Robert Ilbert eds. *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Frank, Andre Gunder and Barry K. Gills. "The Five Thousand Year World System in Theory and Praxis." In *World System History: The Social Science of Long-Term Change,* edited by Denemark Robert A, Jonathan, Friedman, Barry K. Gills, and George Modelski, 3–23. London: Routledge, 2000.

Frank, Andre Gunder. *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

Garcia, Mar, Felicity Hand and Nazir Can. *INDICITIES/INDICES/INDÍCIOS: Hybridations problématiques dans les littératures de l'Océan Indien*. Ille-sur-Têt: Editions K'A, 2010.

Garuba, Harry. "No-Man's Land: Nuruddin Farah's Links and the Space of Postcolonial Alienation." In *Literary Landscapes,* edited by A, de Lange, G. Fincham, J. Hawthorn, and J. Lothe,180–197. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Gupta, Pamila, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Pearson Michael eds. *Eyes Across the Water. Navigating the Indian Ocean.* Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010.

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Paradise.* New York: New Press, 1994.

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *By the Sea.* London: Bloomsbury, 2001.

Hitchcock, Peter. *The Long space. Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Hofmeyr, Isabel. "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms for Transnationalism for the Global South. Literary and Cultural Perspectives." *Social Dynamics* 33*, no.* 2, (August 2008), 3–32.

Jameson, Fredric. *Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present.* New York: Verso, 2002.

Leite, Ana Mafalda, Jessica Falconi, and Elena Brugioni, eds. *Dossiê: Espaços transnacionais: narrativas do Oceano Índico* [*Special Issue*]. *Remate de Males 38, no. 1*, 2018.

Mbembe, Achille. "African Modes of Self-Writing." *Public Culture* 14, no. 1. (January 2002) 239–273.

Medeiros, Paulo de. "The Drowning of Time: Ecological Catastrophe, Dialectics, and Allegorical Realism in João Paulo Borges Coelho's *Ponta Gea* and *Água: Uma novela rural."* In *A Companion to João Paulo Borges Coelho. Rewriting the* (*Post*)*colonial Remains,* edited by E. Brugioni, O. Grossegesse, and P. de Medeiros, 219–247. Oxford: Peter Lang 2020.

Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading.* London: Verso, 2013.

Moorthy, Shanti and Ashraf Jamal, eds. *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives.* New York: Routledge, 2010.

Pinto Ribeiro, António. *África, os Quatros Rios. A representação de África através da literatura de viagens europeia e norte-americana*. Porto: Afrontamento, 2017.

Samuelson, Meg. "Coastal Form: Amphibian Positions, Wider Worlds, and Planetary Horizons on the African Indian Ocean Littoral." *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 2017): 16–24.

Santos, Emanuelle. "Towards a World-Literary Aesthetics of Postcolonial Memory: *Rainhas da noite* by João Paulo Borges Coelho." In *A Companion to João Paulo Borges Coelho. Rewriting the* (*Post*)*colonial Remains,* edited by E. Brugioni, O. Grossegesse, and P. de Medeiros, 203–218. Oxford: Peter Lang 2020.

Said, Edward W. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Nwe York:Vintage Books, 1993.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography.* London: Penguin Books, 1977.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in Our Time*. Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2016.

Vierke, Clarrisa. "Other Worlds: The Prophet's Ascension as World Literature and Its Adaptation in Swahili-Speaking East Africa." In *Vergleichende Weltliteraturen/ Comparative World Literatures,* edited by D. Lamping, G. Tihanov, and M. Bortmuth, 215–229. Stuttgart: Metzler 2019.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

WReC (Warwick Research Collective). *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015.

CHAPTER 11

Unraveling Dichotomies in the Indian Ocean World

Kumari Issur

In this essay, I explore literary writing and art that converge to rethink binaries between land and sea as well as between the human and the nonhuman realms in the Indian Ocean. Both of these dichotomies translate into issues of rootedness and fluidity that provide an insight into a reworlding strategy that breaks down the othering mechanism. Binary division, which is a so-called "scientific" classificatory procedure, is a rather simplistic mode of ordering reality, while an alternative process may provide the means to capture the infinite potentialities and complexities offered by the interconnectedness of a seamless system. Through a combined ecocritical, cultural studies, and phenomenological perspective, I look firstly at the geopolitical remodeling that Mauritius has undergone before examining the converging discourse emanating from selected pieces of Mauritian literature and visual art. I focus mainly on two twenty-first century Francophone novels, *La vie de Joséphin le fou* [*The Life of Crazy Joséphin*][1] by Ananda Devi (2003) and *Made in Mauritius* by Amal Sewtohul (2012), and one installation work, *Humanising Nature* (2017), by Krishna Luchoomun, while reflecting on the framework provided by the concepts of oneness forged by Malcolm de Chazal (1946) and the coral imaginary by Khal Torabully (2002).[2]

1 Reframing Mauritius: from Island State to Ocean State

In the wake of what has been described as "the scramble for the oceans,"[3] in 2012, the Republic of Mauritius petitioned the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to recognize its rights to an Exclusive Economic

1 All translations are mine.

2 I will not engage here with the concepts of creolization or hybridity, which have been mostly applied to the study of Ananda Devi's or Amal Sewtohul's writings or to Mauritian literature in general, given that both of these concepts, built as they are on the assumption of separate and "pure" original entities, reactivate the very same essentialist paradigm they set out to condemn.

3 According to Elizabeth DeLoughrey, this scramble was triggered by the Truman Proclamation of 1945. See Elizabeth DeLoughrey. "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene." *Comparative*

Zone that comprises a large expanse of the Indian Ocean. It thus recast its status as that of an ocean state.[4]

For the record, the Republic of Mauritius includes the main island of Mauritius, situated in the southwest Indian Ocean, and several other islands and archipelagos scattered across the Indian Ocean, namely Rodrigues, Agaléga, Tromelin, Cargados Carajos, and the Chagos Archipelago. While the area of the main island amounts to 2040 km^2, the country's Exclusive Economic Zone converts its territory to an impressive 2.3 million km^2. In this respect, Mauritius is no longer a small island state, but the nineteenth or twentieth biggest country in the world.[5]

Some thought should also be given to its name, and hence to the common understanding of Mauritius. The country is often considered to be limited to, and is wrongly called, the "island of Mauritius" (especially in French: Ile Maurice) by Mauritians and foreigners alike. This designation favors a conception of Mauritius as an island state rather than a larger and more inclusive entity. In a paper entitled "What is 'Mauritius'?", writer and activist Lindsey Collen illustrates how in the 1960s, i.e., prior to the country's independence, the name "the Mauritius," which was short for "the Mauritius Islands"—analogous with the use of "the Seychelles" to refer to "the Seychelles Islands,"—was deviously reduced to just "Mauritius." In his novel *Alma*, J.-M.G. Le Clézio, referring to the pre-independence period, writes, "A cette époque, beaucoup de gens croyaient qu'il y avait plusieurs îles Maurice" [At that time, many people believed that there were several Mauritius islands][6]—both testifying that the country's name was indeed once inclusive of multiple components, and implying, through the use of the term "croyaient" [believed], that the plural was inaccurate. For Collen, the re-engineering of the name into the singular is the result of conscious and unconscious colonial and postcolonial operations that have facilitated, inter alia, the excision of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritian territory. Citing Frantz Fanon, she asserts that the logic of colonialist supremacy has induced a form of psychopathology that has produced a fractured representation of the nation: "This is the kind of statement that Frantz Fanon rightly considered a symptom of the psychopathology produced

Literature 69, no. 1 (March 2017), 32–44. See also Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity." *PMLA 125*, no. 3 (October 2010), 705.

4 This term was used for the first time by Mohamed Munavvar in 1995.

5 There remain to date unresolved geopolitical disputes regarding the Chagos Archipelago and Tromelin Island, which however will not be addressed in the present essay. For further discussion on this issue, see Kumari Issur, "Mapping Ocean-State Mauritius and its Unlaid Ghosts: Hydropolitics and literature in the Indian Ocean." *Cultural Dynamics* 32, no. 1–2 (February-May 2020), 117–131.

6 Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, *Alma* (Paris: Gallimard 2017), 36.

by colonization."[7] The concept of the ocean state provides the Republic of Mauritius with an opportunity to amend the situation and to mobilize all its islands and archipelagos in an inclusive process. The relationship between the main island and what are still considered its "dependencies" is also impacted by the new designation, given that the Exclusive Economic Zone is calculated as two hundred nautical miles from the baseline of a coastal country. Thus, if Mauritius can aspire to be a major ocean state, it is because of the rights conferred by each and every one of the islands that constitutes its territory. The new appellation also foregrounds its maritime nature, given that the maritime is the most significant fraction of the nation's territory. By establishing itself as an ocean state, Mauritius carves out a new world in the Indian Ocean, which undeniably results in major implications in terms of geostrategy and redefines relationships with other players in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

However, while Mauritius remodels itself as a large ocean state, it does so without renouncing its membership of the SIDS (Small Island Developing States), hence playing it both ways. SIDS are a United Nations cluster of countries facing specific social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities. Of the fifty-seven countries the United Nations has classified as SIDS, Mauritius is considered the seventh most vulnerable in terms of sustainable development. This constant scale shift between a large ocean-state entity on the one hand and a set of precarious islands on the other not only requires a flexible mindset and political strategy, but is also utterly grounded in fact. For countries such as Mauritius which are made up of islands, the danger of sea-level rise resulting from global warming and climate change is bitterly real, hence its uncertain relationship with the ocean, which can turn tragic at any moment.

This permanent threat—this sword of Damocles, as it were—is diversely underscored in literature. In Amal Sewtohul's *Made in Mauritius*, the dream sequence at the beginning of the novel portrays a sea surge that causes flooding of the capital city and displaces the shipping container in which the protagonist Laval was born and where he lives with his parents as a young boy. It floats down the flooded streets of Port Louis, with Laval feeling very embarrassed that everyone should learn about their precarious living conditions. The following excerpt from Ananda Devi's *La vie de Joséphin le fou* depicts an even more drastic prospect:

> et puis la mer, elle n'a qu'à sortir la langue un jour, sans trop se fatiguer, elle a qu'à lécher l'île de cette langue paresseuse et en un rien de temps, elle l'aura ramenée là d'où elle vient. Histoire terminée.

7 Lindsey Collen, "What is 'Mauritius'?" *L'Express*, August 8, 2007, 11.

> And the sea, it has only to stretch out its tongue, without really exerting itself; it has only to lick the island leisurely, and in no time it would take the latter back to where it came from. End of story.[8]

Whether in terms of geostrategy or in terms of imaginary, the interconnection between land and sea is foregrounded. The geopolitical posture aims to consolidate the conjunction of land and sea, but does not overlook the serious threat that the sea and its rising level pose for the land. Devi's perspective on this threat is cynical and extreme, while Sewtohul posits a more assured and smooth association, as we will see later.

2 Fluidity

Joséphin is a hybrid creature, half-man, half-eel: a half-terrestrial, half-marine creature. He stands at the frontier between two biological communities and between two habitats; he spans the human and animal worlds just as he does land and sea territories. To live in the sea as Joséphin does is assuredly viewed by his fellow villagers as unnatural, i.e. contrary to human nature. The question that therefore arises is how to define "human." Humans have always essentially foregrounded their cognitive faculties to justify their place at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy. Devi's novel contends that eels are a species that is equally endowed with cognition and tremendous memory. In fact, for the protagonist, human beings fail to match the genetic capital of eels:

> [...] il y a une intelligence infinie dans les anguilles lorsqu'elles savent qu'il est temps, même nées d'hier, elles sentent en elles que le temps est venu de faire des milliers de kilomètres pour aller pondre loin là-bas, de l'autre côté du monde [...] on sait rien de la plupart des choses qui existent autour de nous, plus vives et plus intelligentes que nous, et notre mémoire à nous va pas plus loin qu'hier, et on apprend rien, rien, on se croit plus fort.
>
> Eels have boundless intelligence. They know when it's time: even newly born, they know that the time has come to travel thousands of kilometers to lay their eggs far away, on the other side of the world [...] We know nothing of most of the things that surround us—eels are more clever and

8 Ananda Devi, *La vie de Joséphin le fou* (Paris : Gallimard 2003), 46.

> more astute than us—and our memory does not go further than yesterday, and we learn nothing, nothing; we believe we are superior.[9]

Eels know their long migratory route, from estuaries to faraway oceans, from a freshwater environment to a saltwater one; they know unerringly how to find their reproduction zone, which is incidentally also their death zone. By highlighting these attributes of eels, Devi invites human beings to be less anthropocentric and humbler in their dealings with other species.

Difference is what is considered problematic or scary: what eludes categorization and specific labels threatens the human order. Joséphin is a liminal creature, difficult to grasp (just like eels); he is rejected by humans, who consider him to be either insane or a monster, a "monster" being that which is contrary to the norm—in this context, the human norm. The figure of Joséphin, which is inspired by popular local folklore, is a fantasy that embodies the fear fostered by otherness. While Joséphin's outright rejection by his human community runs counter to a fluid thought process, i.e. to the openness to difference, he is adopted by aquatic creatures—eels and sharks—at least initially. On first meeting, the eels hug and caress him; however, they become ruthless once Joséphin commits his crime—basically, when his predatory human nature comes to the fore. The reader is thus invited to come to grips with the ambiguous way in which sharks welcome him as if he were one of their own: "tu es l'un des nôtres, me disaient-ils" ["you are one of us," they said].[10] They recognize him as a predator, but it is not clear whether it is his human or his animal component that is identified as such. Ultimately, Joséphin remains trapped by his own conflicts and contradictions; he is capable of love, but ends up destroying the dual objects of his love, Solange and Marlène.

In contrast to Ananda Devi, for whom humans seem to be beyond reform, Amal Sewtohul has a more optimistic stance. In the aforementioned opening dream sequence of *Made in Mauritius*, the scramble to escape the flooding leads those who are stranded in their concrete houses to seek refuge upstairs, while those who live in tin houses climb on roofs that collapse under their weight; others still climb up the royal palms lining the emblematic Place d'Armes, the capital city's majestic boulevard, leading to the colonial-style Government House. However, all those who opt for fixedness or rootedness—exemplified by the houses and trees—end up coveting the mobility of the protagonist's family, whose shipping container valiantly sails through the surrounding wreckage. Lack of stability, which was previously a cause of shame

9 Devi, *Joséphin le fou*, 48.
10 Devi, *Joséphin le fou*, 79–80.

for young Laval, turns into a marked asset. Rootlessness proves to be a means of salvation that enables Laval and his family to transcend geography and habitat. To rephrase the title of Carl de Souza's 1996 novel, *La maison qui marchait vers le large* [*The House Moving Seaward*], the one ready to raise anchor and cast off, who shakes off rootedness, holds the key to survival. The vision of serenity and family happiness that lyrically closes this opening sequence of *Made in Mauritius*—the only time Laval experiences such a blissful family moment—discloses the potentialities of adapting to an oceanic environment:

> ils étaient en haute mer, remorqués par un des bateaux de pêche taïwanais, le soleil couchant embrasait la mer donnant de belles teintes dorées aux doux vallons des amples vagues calmes, et ses parents et lui, assis sur le toit de leur conteneur, dînaient autour d'un réchaud à gaz sur lequel bouillonnait une marmite pleine de bouillon de crabes.
>
> They were in the open sea, being towed by one of the Taiwanese fishing boats; the sunset was setting the sea ablaze, lending lovely golden hues to the soft vales of calm, broad waves, and he and his parents, seated on the roof of their container, were having dinner around a gas stove on which a cooking pot was bubbling with crab soup.[11]

Laval's family's container home, a new Noah's Ark saved from the flood—which is itself an emblem of a new world order—is pitched against the rooted houses, tokens of traditional bourgeois security.[12] This ark narrative destabilizes existing paradigms and parameters and envisions the (re)establishment of an alternative framework. Moreover, in the prevalent context of material culture taken to the extreme, Sewtohul advocates surplus stripping. He challenges the predominant attitude toward the notion of possession and contends that human beings belong to the planet, not vice versa, and that they should be able to travel light throughout life. Though a shipping container is by definition a symbol of neoliberal capitalism, the one in which Laval is conceived, born, and ultimately cremated is deployed in this context as the ultimate metaphor for commodity and minimalism, a sort of snail shell that each individual can carry with him or her and that accounts for the lightest ecological footprint.

---

11 Amal Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius* (Paris: Gallimard 2012), 12–13.

12 Kumari Issur, "Nationalisme, transnationalisme et postnationalisme dans Made in Mauritius d'Amal Sewtohul," *Loxias-Colloques* 3 (May 2013). http:/revel.unice.fr/symposia/actel/index.html?id=449.

3 Binarisms versus Oneness

In spite of their varying levels of optimism, both Devi's and Sewtohul's novels seem to point toward the erasure of the land/sea binarism, a binarism that results from what one may call a "Western" dualistic thought process. At this point, a reflection on the distinction Gilles Deleuze applies to two types of islands—continental and oceanic islands—may be worthwhile. According to his definition, "Les îles continentales sont des îles accidentelles, des îles dérivées : elles sont séparées d'un continent, nées d'une désarticulation, d'une érosion, d'une fracture, elles survivent à l'engloutissement de ce qui les retenait" [Continental islands come into being by accident; they are byproducts: they become separated from a continent; they are born of dislocation, erosion, fragmentation; they outlast the collapse of what was retaining them][13] Oceanic islands are on the other hand "originaires, essentielles : tantôt elles sont constituées de coraux, […] tantôt elles surgissent d'éruptions sous-marines" [islands of origin, by nature: sometimes they are made of corals […] sometimes they are the result of submarine eruptions]. Despite Deleuze's intention to chart out the differences between the two types of islands, he ends up unwittingly demonstrating that there exists in fact an interweaving of the elements:

> Ces deux sortes d'îles, originaires ou continentales, témoignent d'une opposition profonde entre l'océan et la terre. *Les unes nous rappellent que la mer est sur la terre, profitant du moindre affaissement des structures les plus hautes ; les autres, que la terre est encore là, sous la mer, et rassemble ses forces pour crever la surface.*
>
> These two types of islands, inherent or continental, bear testimony to the deep-rooted contrast between sea and land. *The latter reminds us that the sea is also on land, taking advantage of the slightest collapse in the higher structures; the former intimates that land is still there, under the sea, gathering its strength in order to break the surface.*[14]

In this example, Deleuze is unable to capture the interconnectedness of the elements regardless of what his observations report; he is so bent on drawing a distinction between the two configurations that he misses what the structures of his consciousness have otherwise noticed, that there is an ongoing interplay of sea and land. In fact, Deleuze here foregrounds binary thought: looking

13 Gilles Deleuze, "Causes et raisons des îles désertes," in *L'île déserte et autres textes*, eds. Gilles Deleuze & David Lapoujade (Paris: Minuit 2002), 11.

14 Deleuze, "Causes et raisons," 11. The italics are mine.

for oppositionality, this is exactly what he finds, though all the facts point to the exact contrary. It is all therefore a matter of frame of mind, of how one wishes to perceive one's environment rather than what is determined by the very nature of the intentional object. Deleuze's stance here is characteristic of what we may call the Western binary-classificatory mind. Despite the concept of geophilosophy, which he formulated in collaboration with Félix Guattari (1980) and which upholds the notions of flow and unity of dynamic material systems, in the above example, he reverts to a simplistic binarism.

Binarism, however, is not the only available framework for grasping and interpreting phenomena. Alternate perspectives can assuredly be nurtured. In *Made in Mauritius*, the episode where the children browse the atlas and reflect on geographical representations and distances is a good example of contrasting outlooks. Looking at a map of Mauritius island, Feisal, whose imagination does not extend beyond the land, considers the ocean the end of the (his) world, a space impossible for him to conceive of straddling. Unsatisfied by the case made by Feisal, his cousin Ayesha opens the atlas to reveal the map of the Indian Ocean, where Mauritius island is no more than a dot and her finger traces a route through the vast ocean to arrive at Australia's west coast.[15] In her perspective, the ocean is not an unbridgeable space, but one that offers the possibility to create links. This realization fuels her dream to study abroad and spurs her efforts to secure a scholarship, which indeed materializes later on and as a matter of fact enables her to proceed to Australia. The same reality is out there, but the children's respective attitudes make all the difference as to whether the ocean is conceived as a rift or a means of connection.[16]

In *La vie de Joséphin le fou*, the same apparent opposition between land and sea resolves itself in the connectedness of sisters Solange and Marlène. The first syllables of their names seem in the first instance to allude to the sun and the ocean (for example, in Spanish, *sol* means "sun" and *mar* "ocean"), especially since the novel underscores the solar nature of Solange: "morceau de soleil cassé dans des yeux d'ange" [fragment of the broken sun in an angel's eyes].[17] However, *sol* in French refers to the earth; thus the contrast implicit in the names actually resides in each girl's respective connection with land and sea. This ostensible bipolarity dissolves in turn as the sisters embody two facets of the same reality.[18] Despite all their differences—for example, one is considered

15 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, 169.

16 Issur, "Nationalisme".

17 Devi, *Joséphin le fou*, 73.

18 The Solange-Marlène duo is reminiscent of another well-known sisterly pair in Mauritian literature: Anne and Nadège, the twins in Marie-Thérèse Humbert's *A l'autre bout de moi*, where the apparent contrast between the two resolves itself when Nadège dies and Anne steps into her shoes.

to be attractive, the other ugly—together they perform oneness: "c'était un ensemble soudé à faire pleurer leur mère qui pouvait pas les séparer [...] c'était une forme double qui devenait parfaite" [it was a joint body that would make their mother cry, unable to split them up [...] it was a double form that became perfect].[19]

The faculty to divide the world into different units instead of conceiving it as an overall continuity is what Richard Dawkins calls the "discontinuous mind."[20] However, the discontinuous or dualistic mind is not the only possible paradigm by which to make sense of the world in which we live. Malcolm de Chazal, a major twentieth-century Mauritian poet and visionary, upholds the idea of the unity of the biosphere. His family's Rosicrucian and Swedenborgian background allied with his own explorations of Hinduism led him to elaborate the concept of oneness in 1946. Chazal's belief in correspondences between several levels of existence induces him to underscore the unity of the planet. In a short essay titled *L'unisme* [Oneness], he writes: "L'unisme primaire fait de la fleur, du cristal, de l'homme et de la bête des membres d'une même famille de vie à âme universelle" [According to primary oneness, flower, crystal, man, and animal are members of the same family, endowed with a universal soul].[21] It is worth noting that while Dawkins's definition is based on speciesism—i.e., the consideration paid to human beings and animals according to their membership in a particular species—and thus does not include the vegetal and mineral worlds, Chazal's vision is more comprehensive. It is also worth recollecting Malcolm de Chazal's oft-cited visionary experience of the flower that, endowed with the faculty of reciprocation, returns his gaze.[22] The fact that he assigns human attributes to the plant may be considered problematic; however, in so doing, he acknowledges the plant's reality on an equal basis and dismantles the hierarchy between life forms.

4 Interconnectedness

The interconnectedness of all forms of existence is likewise explored by Krishna Luchoomun, one of the leading contemporary Mauritian artists,

19 Devi, *Joséphin le fou*, 73.

20 Richard Dawkins, "Gaps in the Mind." In *The Great Ape Project*, eds. Paola Cacalieri & Peter Singer (New York: St. Martin's Griffin 1993), 81.

21 Malcolm de Chazal, *Correspondances avec Jean Paulhan : suivi de L'unisme* (Toulouse: L'Ether Vague 1987), 91–92.

22 Jean-Louis Joubert, *Littératures de l'océan Indien*, (Paris: EDICEF 1991), 140–141.

FIGURE 11.1 Krishna Luchoomun's "Humanising Nature" (partial view).

who—during the Porlwi by Nature cultural festival, held in December 2017 in Port Louis, Mauritius[23]—presented an installation entitled "Humanising Nature" (Figure 11.1), made up of a series of composite characters in which one segment of each character was human, and the remaining segment was made up of either plant, animal, rock, or coral. In this way, the artist enacted a dialogue between and conflation of humans and their living partners on earth.[24] With this piece of art, he deconstructs anthropocentrism and foregrounds the sharing of the biosphere, as well as the interconnection and interdependence of different life forms.

Moreover, the installation was set up to allow visitors to roam among the figures, most of which were static. One of them, however, was a living human

23 This was the third edition, after Porlwi by Light 1 in 2015 and Porlwi by Light 2 in 2016, of a cultural event designed to revisit and celebrate Port Louis, the capital city of Mauritius, through art.

24 Luchoomun also clads his figures in an array of physiognomic characteristics and cultural attire so as to challenge viewers' perceptions of other boundaries, such as gender, race, ethnicity, status, etc.

being (the artist himself), bearing a pair of antlers on his head (in the background of Figure 11.1), who playfully chose to stay still or to move according to his fancy, often mischievously startling the visitors with an encounter with an alternate life form when they least expected it. The visitors themselves also came to be part of the installation: at first glance, one would not be able to distinguish the exact boundaries of the artist's own work and the mingling of the crowd; in fact, the ongoing flow of visitors made the installation a dynamic and ever-transforming one. The overall postmodern visitor experience generated by the installation was compelling and thought-provoking. By performing a seamless complexity of life forms, the artist pointed toward the dismantling of polarized splits. By allowing the possibility of an "insider's" view of this alternate world, the immersive experience made a deep impact on the imaginary. Furthermore, the participation of the artist unsettled the visitors and mobilized them to reassess the modalities of and potential for the relationship between man and the environment.

I will reflect on one of the installation's composite figures in particular: one with a human body bearing a coral formation in place of a head [Figure 11.2]. Coral is the living organism that, in tropical seas such as those of Mauritius, gives rise to reefs, which in turn stimulate marine biodiversity. Over the last decades, coral has sustained much damage from pollution, overexploitation of marine resources such as overfishing, climate change, and rising temperatures, the direct and indirect results of a lack of respect for the ecosystem. As long as the reefs surrounding Mauritius remain healthy, erosion would be checked, and the island therefore stay physically secure. The beaches too remain undamaged, thus safeguarding not only the country's beauty, but also its livelihood, especially its sustainable tourism economy. Coral, moreover, introduces the notion of regeneration, as it patiently reconstitutes itself as soon as favorable conditions are achieved. It offers the possibility to rectify the imbalance brought about by human activity. Krishna Luchoomun makes a distinction between the head and body of human beings, and it is rather significant that it is the head that is replaced by other elements.[25] The lack of respect for the environment and its unchecked use make human beings act like predators. The human physical needs represented by the body do not account for the overexploitation of their environment; indeed their faculty to think drives them to this, their desires and greed being far greater than their needs. By replacing the human head with coral, plants or animal heads, Luchoomun might be

25 This pattern calls to mind the Hindu god Ganesha, who was beheaded by his father Shiva as a child; an elephant head was subsequently affixed to his anthropomorphic body.

FIGURE 11.2 Krishna Luchoomun's "Humanising Nature" (detail)

suggesting that the nonhuman components of nature are more respectful of the balance of species and more sustainable-development friendly.

There exist several layers of meaning in Luchoomun's title, "Humanising Nature." Does he advocate treating nature with humanism, or giving nature the prerogatives of human beings and allowing it to lead the world? Or is it the other way around: is he suggesting bringing a greater sense of nature to humans? "Nature" being that which renders humans more humane, bringing out the best in them? One is even tempted to reverse the title and read "naturalizing the human"—i.e., surrendering the human to nature, through the dismantling of anthropocentrism and the promotion of ecocentrism, as the only way

to address the issues and challenges of the contemporary world and to counter the dynamics of environmental degradation. Like the discourse on the eel's tremendous memory in Devi's novel, Luchoomun's artwork questions human exceptionalism and the legitimacy of human beings to be considered the most intelligent species or the height of evolution. It takes human beings down from the pedestal where they have positioned themselves and contends that they are part and parcel of nature and not some sort of other vis-à-vis nature.

Luchoomun's installation is also another way to approach the coral imaginary put forward by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully, who writes: "The coral can be both soft, and hard, it can be found in two states, and it is traversed by currents, continuously open to new thoughts and systems. It is a living body with elements which are both vulnerable and solid, it is a symbol of the fluidity of relationships and influences."[26] Coral, which can be both an invertebrate and a mineral, truly encapsulates the fluidity of being—in this instance, between what have been traditionally perceived as antagonistic categories, such as land versus sea or human versus nonhuman. This overarching fluidity is also illustrated by Hindi-language Mauritian writer Abhimanyu Unnuth in his novel *Lal Pasina*. In a short preamble, Unnuth describes the mythical creation of Mauritius island through the metamorphosis of different components of nature, including human beings. His narrative recounts how lava from an oceanic volcano eruption mingled with the ocean water and the flesh and blood of two Buddhist monks who had ventured into the southwest Indian Ocean, to give rise to the entity today known as Mauritius. Admittedly Unnuth's myth is steeped in an ethnocentric identity claim; it nonetheless upholds the interchangeability of human and other natural matter. In Devi's novels, the sea creatures acknowledge that they are of the same origin and essence as Joséphin: "on se respecte, nus ou pas, on est pareils, enfants du même corps, enfants de la même mer" [we respect each other, whether naked or not; we are alike, children of the same flesh, children of the same sea].[27] This quotation evokes the Darwinian theory of evolution according to which life proceeded from the primordial ocean, underscoring the common denominators between sea creatures and human beings and the respect that is mutually due. The reference also suggests, in a subtle manner, that further evolution might take human beings back to the sea, in the manner of Joséphin.

The blurring of boundaries between humans and other life forms (Devi, Luchoomun, Unnuth, and de Chazal), between the terrestrial and the aquatic environments (Devi and Sewtohul), and between the mineral and invertebrate

26 Marina Carter & Khal Torabully, *Coolitude. An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London : Wimbledon Publishing 2002), 152.

27 Devi, *Joséphin le fou*, 59.

realms (Torabully) all reveal converging ideological stances. These postures are in turn informed by the cultural, religious, and life experiences of the artists as well as their ecological consciousness. While Torabully draws on sufi philosophy and his keen observation of the aquatic world to devise his "coral imaginary," which highlights his belief in a nonessentialist world, Devi, Luchoomun, Sewtohul, and Unnuth—raised in the Hindu faith, which is underpinned by yogic philosophy—are all conversant with the concept of samsara, which upholds the cyclicity of existence and foregrounds the idea of a continuum between all forms of matter. Likewise, Malcolm de Chazal's concept of oneness is at least partly inspired by Hinduism, as he openly professes his adherence to its values and thought system.[28] The Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedānta—*advaita* literally meaning "non-duality"—further contends that phenomenal reality may be manifold, but is governed by the same basic principle. At the molecular level, all matter, animate and inanimate, inclusive of humans, is involved in an ongoing recycling process, ergo the biosphere is inextricably interconnected. The concept of *anitya* in Hinduism or *anicca* in Buddhism—which refers to the impermanence of forms, according to which the whole Logos is subject to aging, decay, death, and renewal—underlies Unnuth's narrative as well as Luchoomun's artwork. Elementary particles constantly disassemble and assemble to form new realities in dynamic systems. This permanent "becoming-world" does not differentiate between the organic and nonorganic realms. In fact, according to several Indian religions, the distinction between the organic and the nonorganic does not apply, as all matter is imbued with sentience, though to varying degrees. Needless to say, this cosmovision fundamentally displaces standard Western ontology and its oppositional logic, which dominates the contemporary world's widespread belief system and accounts for human dominion over the environment.

5 Conclusion

The Mauritian contemporary writers, thinkers, and artist whose works are under consideration in this essay transcend the prevailing binary thought and

28 Il n'est un mystère pour personne à Maurice que je prône l'hindouisme. Et la raison en est que l'Inde cherche Dieu dans la vie, parmi les fleurs, les prés, dans les eaux et le feu, sur l'aile de l'oiseau, autant que dans le regard d'un enfant, dans la voix de la femme et la communion humaine" [It is no secret in Mauritius that I advocate Hinduism. And the reason is that India looks for God in life, among flowers, in meadows, in water and fire, on a bird's wing as well as in a child's gaze, in a woman's voice, and in human communion] (Malcolm de Chazal, "L'Inde et moi" [*Le Mauricien* 17 février 1962]. In *Malcolm de Chazal, Comment devenir un génie, chroniques*, edited by Kumari Issur (Port Louis: Vizavi, 2006), 247.

draw up the convergent aesthetics of a continuum. These standpoints in turn tally with new ways of geographical thinking by political leaders and strategists, who have brought to life the concept of the ocean state, and open up new avenues of (re)worlding.

Literary and artistic works alike lead us to reflect on the dichotomy between humankind and the environment, which has given rise to a hegemonic relationship. The disjunctive approach is also prevalent in relation to other components, especially between the land and water realms. The paradigm of the concrete versus the fluid, in which the concrete is the domain of the human and the fluid is constituted as the other, is giving way to a merging of the two. Mauritius as a country has always been multifarious, as testified by its former name, the Mauritius Islands. The multi-insular nation fully embraces its new identity as an ocean state, as it is both insular and oceanic. But while the former perspective was centered on its terrestrial component, the concept of the ocean state has not only incorporated the state's maritime dimension, but has given it preeminence—which is only appropriate, as its oceanic area far exceeds that of the islands it comprises.

Thoughts mold the world in which human beings live. The way they organize, classify, and otherize their surroundings contributes to their experience of reality. Fragmented space can be considered as the direct result of fragmented thought. On the other hand, a nondualistic or complementary stand brings about unity rather than separation. One's everyday individual as well as collective agency translates into ongoing change. The solutions provided for the challenges of today's world in turn redesign the world. The cultural and artistic production of Mauritius unlocks alternative modes of being, as well as the possibilities offered by the notions of fluidity and empathy between the mineral, vegetal, animal, and human worlds.

PART 3

Transatlantic Worlds and Artworks

SECTION 4

Remembering Relations

CHAPTER 12

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Reimagination of Colombian Identity in the Poetry of Jorge Artel

Gilbert Shang Ndi

1 Introduction

The coastal part of Colombia, specifically the port city of Cartagena, was the gateway through which many enslaved Africans entered the Latin American world. From 1580, it became one of the key destinations in Latin America for enslaved Africans. At the time, the trade was dominated by large-scale Portuguese merchants who established many commercial contacts and supplied slave labor across Peru and New Grenada as well as a large part of the Caribbean.[1] Thus, Cartagena carries immense significance in the imaginary of the Afro-Colombian subjects and their sense of being and belonging to the Colombian nation. In terms of the genealogies of the African presence in Colombia, Cartagena is where something ended and something else began, a space of transition, cross-cultural pollination, and the intersection of different cultures and civilizations.

As ironic as it is, Cartagena's relationship with Black voices and bodies is deeply reflective and metonymic of Colombia's relationship with a part of its national history. Antonio Vidal Ortega observes that the slave trade transformed the skin color of the city; in the mid-nineteenth century, the Black population constituted the majority of its residents.[2] However, Cartagena has sought to shroud itself in the myth of being a White city, rendering its African cultural heritage invisible and relegating it to the status of folklore. Art and performance, especially as they relate to the Afro-Colombian population, have thus been used by minoritized Black people as tools for asserting the presence of Black bodies and Black voices, not as a mere excrescence or embellishment of Colombian national heritage, but as an integral force in Colombian history. The sacrifice of

1 Antonino Vidal Ortega, "Entre la necesidad y el temor: negros y mulatos en Cartagena de Indias a comienzos del siglo XVII," in *Negros, mulatos, zambaigos: Derroteros africanos en los mundos ibéricos*, ed. Berta Ares Queija and Alessandro Stella (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 2000), 90.

2 Vidal Ortega, "Entre la necesidad y el temor," 90.

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004689756_013

the Black and Indian populations in the war of independence, of which Cartagena was at the forefront, is hardly ever mentioned, while the memorial iconographies of the city's political heroes hardly reflect its Black heritage.[3]

Afro-Colombian literature from Cartagena constitutes, to a great extent, a critique of the myth of the White city in a White country that accords pride of place to its Iberian heritage and genealogy, while considering the African presence a blotch on that heritage. From the time when the slave trade was formally abolished in Colombia to the mid-twentieth century, the question of racial recomposition has been a major component of political debate in Latin America in general and Colombia in particular. Some of the Latin American nations came to consider their relative backwardness as a consequence of their racial makeup, and proposed various ways of "improving" their races as a precondition for modernization. According to Pietro Pisano, many Colombian intellectuals believed that the racial composition of the country was responsible for various defects, and only immigration could turn the tides.[4] As elsewhere in Latin America, Black and Indigenous presences have been considered a problem, leading to insidious attempts to stymie their continuation. During the presidency of Camacho Roldan, for instance, there were several proposals to attract migration from Spain and Italy to whiten the Black and Indigenous peoples, who were generally considered inferior.[5] Such efforts sought to invisibilize the contribution of the Africans to the economic, cultural, and political well-being of the Colombian nation. Jorge Artel's poetry is inscribed within this dynamic of memory, using memory to resignify and to change the way Cartagena (and generally, Colombia) (dis)regards the African component of her self-identity.

Jorge Artel (1909–1994) was born in the city of Cartagena, where he grew up and later studied law at the Universidad Nacional de Cartagena. Due to his left-leaning political views, he aligned himself with the movement of Jorge Eliécer Gaitan, the political leader who dissented from the Liberal party to champion a popular movement aimed at restoring the soul of the Colombian nation to the common man in a country run by an established aristocracy based on a hegemonic two-party system. Gaitan's movement attracted public intellectuals, writers, and prominent social actors across the racial divide. His

3 Raúl Platicón, "Los Afropacíficos: Herederos de un legado diásporo en un territorio ignoto," in *Conocimiento desde adentro: Los afrosudamericanos hablan de sus pueblos y sus historias*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (La Paz: Fundación Pedro Andavérez Peralta, 2010), 274–75.

4 Pietro Pisano, *Liderazgo político "negro" en Colombia, 1943 - 1964* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2012), 192–93.

5 Jorge Orlando Melo, *Historia Minima De Colombia,* Historias mínimas (Madrid, México: Turner; El Colegio de México, 2018), 150.

popularity among the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian masses is testified by the fact that his supporters were referred to as *negros*, or Blacks.[6] When Gaitan was tragically murdered on April 9, 1948, the country went up in flames, with widespread protests and a witch hunt against his supporters, many of whom went into exile. Artel left Colombia that same year, the beginning of a long exile that took him to Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Mexico, the US, Panama, and many other countries. During those years, he met other Latin American and African American intellectuals, including the renowned poet Langston Hughes.[7] Such encounters not only strengthened his socialist ideology, but equally reinforced his belief in Afro-descendant art forms as the lifeblood of his artistic expression, in much the same way as Hughes and other pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance had built their art around the aesthetics of jazz and other performative genres with direct or indirect African ancestry. In this regard, his works can be inscribed in a lineage of *negrista* poets, including figures such as the Cuban Nicolas Guillén and especially the Colombian Candelario Obeso (1849–1884), generally considered the precursor of Black literary expression in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean region. In the views of Maria Elena Oliva, the *negrista* movement was greatly influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, but also by Garveyism and Haitian *indigenismo*, movements that acknowledged and fostered pride in African cultures as the basis of freedom from oppression for Afro-descendant peoples in the Americas.[8] Though it never coalesced into a literary movement sensu stricto, it remained a constant presence in the works of Black poets in Hispanic America—such as Pilar Barrios (Uruguay), Estupiñán Bass (Ecuador), and Juan Pablo Sojo (Venezuela)—as a means of asserting their African descendance and belief systems.[9]

Though published in 1940, eight years before Gaitan's assassination, *Tambores en la Noche* (*Drums in the Night*) bears imprints of the general frustration of a nation that conceived of itself strictly within a Eurocentric mold, oblivious to those on whose sweat and blood the country's wealth was built, but who were left on the periphery of the national self-imagination and at the bottom of national development agenda. As the poet Oscar Maturana states in his poem "The New History," "Never did the Indians/Talk less of the blacks/cannon

6 Pisano, *Liderazgo político "negro" en Colombia*, 134.

7 Laurence E. Prescott, "Remembering Jorge Artel (1909, Cartagena - 1994, Barranquilla)," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 15, no. 1 (1996): 1, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23054059.

8 María E. Oliva, "Más Acá De La Negritud: Negrismo Y Negredumbre Como Categorías De Reconocimiento En La Primera Mitad Del Siglo XX Latinoamericano," *Revista CS* 30 (2020): 53, https://doi.org/10.18046/recs.i30.3515.

9 Oliva, "Más acá de la negritud," 61.

fodder for the enemies" appear anywhere in the pantheon of national heroes.[10] Jorge Artel's collection deploys the poet's aesthetic and ethical sensibility in defense of the underrepresented African genealogy in the construction of the Colombian nation. He creatively falls back on memories of pain to weigh on the conscience of those who commit the double crime of denying the descendants of enslaved Africans their fair representation in Colombian national history, and to interrogate the official inscriptions of memory in relation to Colombian cultural heritage. His poetry is not only written, but also sung and drummed in an innovative poetic language that deconstructs the Western written tradition and reinscribes the principles of African oral culture in poetic art.

Before engaging in an analysis of *Tambores en la Noche* (*Drums in the Night*) as an attempt to commemorate the slave trade and to accord the Afro-Colombian his due recognition within the Colombian national imaginary, it is essential to understand the complex reality of the invisibilization of Afro-Colombian peoples and their artistic works. The creative production of Afro-Colombians can be placed in the matrix of center/periphery dynamics with regard to Creole/mestizo domination. This reality is best reflected in the difficulty of publishing Afro-Colombian and Indigenous authors in the Colombian book industry, given that their literary models and aesthetic practices are not considered artistic enough and are rather consigned to the realm of ethnographic curiosity, carnivalesque exhibitionism, and voyeuristic exoticism. This is a challenge that prominent and pioneering Afro-Colombian authors like Candelario Obeso, Jorge Artel, and Manuel Zapata Olivella have had to confront. In her book *The Power of the Invisible* (2018), Paula Moreno, Colombia's Minister of Culture (2007–2010), discusses the adverse reaction she faced from the so-called cultural elite (mainly based in Bogotá) with regard to her efforts to publish a mini-library collection of key Afro-Colombian authors:

> The main cultural magazine of Bogotá featured an article titled "The Presence of the Invisible," in which the author questioned the rationale of the project: "Why is there such an investment of state resources in this collection? Will it make the invisible visible? No doubt, it sounds good, powerful, and magical." The entire content of the piece was rather ironic and offensive in nature. The author took out of context the fact that my name was mentioned in the collection's acknowledgements. The question I asked myself was: when the names of other ministers and public officials have been featured in similar endeavors, was that also considered

10 In Platicón, "Los Afropacíficos," 274–75.

> proselytism? In my case, it was frowned upon as politicking. The piece insisted that speaking of "invisibility" was a gross exaggeration. A certain feeling of contempt and disrespect underlined these criticisms …[11] [12]

The political and cultural elite of Bogotá claimed the right to validate any cultural process in the country, and in their estimation, the valorization of Indigenous and Black literatures was not worth the effort. Culturally speaking, Afro-Colombians are faced with a situation that Walter Mignolo describes as an internal colonialism that contradicts the officially stated egalitarian values of these nations, concealing forms of racism overtly—or, in some circumstances, tacitly—sanctioned by the state through its (in)actions.[13]

It is partly thanks to the aforementioned mini-library that several Afro-Colombian and Indigenous authors have gained any degree of critical attention. Jorge Artel's *Tambores en la Noche* (*Drums in the Night,* 1940) has been reedited and published in this collection. Artel's poetry is an eclectic mixture of several trends and tendencies that reflect the poetic potency and depth of the Afro-Colombian imaginary. He attempts to capture the rhythm of everyday life as well as the historical background of his personae, locating them within a history of the struggle for cultural and political freedoms. His poetry can be considered a cartography of African presence that draws on musical genres such as *cumbia* and *bullerengue* as forms of testimony and oral re-memoration of the tortuous trajectory of the African presence in the Americas. One key feature of Artel's poetry is the topos of the sea and the network of significations connected to this geographic trope. The sea is portrayed in his poetry as a space of witnessing, a spatiotemporal pivot on which the tragic odyssey of the ancestor unfolds. The imagination of the sea in terms of history echoes the interrogations of Adam Lifshey in *The Spectre of Absence*:

> Why do so many texts, for example, begin by invoking something that is not there? How many writers are engaged, one way or another, in channeling the dead? How many are mediums? How many are exorcists? Are not all writings works of mourning? But for whom? And in the name of what? How many absent worlds are there to conjure? How many

11 Paula Marcela Moreno Zapata, *El poder de lo invisible: Memorias de solidaridad, humanidad y resistencia* (Bogotá: Penguin Random House, 2018), 149.

12 Translation from the original Spanish. All Spanish-English translations are mine.

13 Walter D. Mignolo, *La Idea De América Latina: La Herida Colonial Y La Opción Decolonial* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2007), 112.

> promised lands? Are not all writings works of conjuration? Can an ocean be a conjuration? Is the Atlantic? Is America? Is absence?[14]

The shores of the Atlantic Ocean constitute a space of memory and moral interpellation that continue to haunt the living on both sides of the Atlantic. In Artel's poetry, the sea becomes personified as a symbol of the difficult relationship between the Afro-Colombian subject and the lost (and now imagined) home, on the one hand, and a new space in which his presence is fraught with discrimination and dehumanization, on the other. The imagery of the sea and the kind of community that it represents in his imaginary is akin to that of the river in most Pacific communities in the western part of Colombia. In analyzing the symbolism of the river, Motta Rodríguez holds that it is an axis on which relational networks are anchored. It is a source of communication between various villages and communities. It symbolizes identity and all that water represents, configuring a sense of home and according symbolic values to daily communal activities.[15] However, while the river in this sense portrays an intra-Colombian identity-scape around which the African communities sought to adapt to their American environment and implant their cultural imaginaries, the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean signify a horizonal space that fertilizes the Afro-Colombian subject's imaginary of his African home. Instead of being the articulation of a center as can be seen in the river imagery, the sea is a space of dissemination and fragmentation. In this sense, Artel's inscription of the sea in his poetry deserves a closer look, and can be related to the concept of dialectics in the poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite and the poetics of horizonality as propounded by Bill Ashcroft.

2 Jorge Artel and Tidalectic Poetry

The sea provides both a source of inspiration as well as a tapestry of tropes and figurative expressions in Artel's poetry. In this light, there seems to be a clear interconnection between the marine imaginaries of Jorge Artel and the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, especially with regard to the latter's

14 Adam Lifshey, *Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absence in Transatlantic Literatures* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 16.

15 Gustavo Motta Rodríguez. "Una mirada a través del arte: vinculación del pasado y el presente del patrimonio cultural colombiano en la educación." (PhD Thesis. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2015), 281.

notion of *tidalectics*—the poetics of the waves and their importance in the subject's coming to terms with his uprootedness from Africa and im-plantation in the Americas. In a critique of Brathwaite's works, Anna Reckin defines the tidalectic imagination as:

> A "trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis" … the movement contained in tidalectics is repetitious and anti-progressive and is not directed towards a finite conclusion in the same way as dialectic reasoning. Second, because of this removal of a conclusive stopping point, tidalectics tends to focus more on the relationships created between the points that the waves of movement travel between rather than a single destination.[16]

In line with Reckin's articulation of the concept of tidalectics, the persona of Artel's poetry conveys an ambivalent and hybrid personality as a complex product of both shores. As antagonistic as the constituent cultures and realities that underlie his personality may be, he is obliged to fashion out a creative existence from the aporias of history. Tidalectics is not a comfort zone, but the constant effort of harnessing the different currents of one's identities into a single relational and intercultural self-identity. Jorge Artel's poetic persona stresses both his Black identity and his appurtenance to Colombia by reminding the reader/listener of the problematic inscription of the Black body into the American space and its demand for recognition. This explains the persona's insistent recall of his history and trajectory, which are embedded in the experiences of his ancestors.

> *"Black, I Am"*
> Black I am, for many centuries.
> Poet of my race, I inherited its pain.
> And the emotion I evoke has to be pure
> In the coarse sound of the cry
> And the monorhythmic drum.
>
> The depth, the shuddering accent
> With the frisking voice of the ancestor,
> is my voice.

16 Anna Reckin, "Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/poetry as Sound-Space," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2003): 2.

> The human anguish I exalt
> is not decoration for tourists.
>
> I do not sing pain for exportation![17] [18]

Artel harks back to his ancestors' pain, as he is heir to their heritage. In other words, the ancestral pain is also his because the plight of the Afro-Colombian has metamorphosed from outright slavery to the practices of exclusion and denigration that plague the multicultural ideology of his nation. In such a context, the reflex of the poet is not to deny his identity, but rather to claim and affirm it. Artel's insistence on his African ancestry elicited strong reactions from some intellectuals, including the editor of *El Sábado* newspaper who, in 1944, criticized him for presenting himself as a Black poet, arguing that in Colombia, there was nothing like a "Black poet".[19] He was writing at a time when certain intellectual figures embraced the official ideology that sought to present Colombia as a mestizo nation, entailing a harmonious fusion of the different peoples and cultures of Colombia. However, what Jorge Artel's poetry underlines is the importance of claiming Afro-Colombian identity—not by negating the Colombian self, but by stressing the racial and cultural complexity of that self, a fact that certain sectors of society seek to obviate in favor of a narrow conception of Colombianness. In other words, his poetry is premised on the fact that being Black and being Colombian are not mutually exclusive.[20] In this regard, Jorge Melo argues that the claim of a unitary Colombianness that obliterates constituent racial identities was in itself flawed: when examined keenly, such an ideology rested neatly on a conception of Colombia as a White and Catholic nation.[21] This argument is inscribed within the dynamics of the *negrista* current in Colombian arts, especially poetry. *Negrismo* was based on the peculiarity of Afro-descendants' cultural formation in terms of their spirituality, epistemology, and cultural practices, and how these were redefined in America, taking cognizance of the various national contexts and the attendant

17 Jorge Artel, *Tambores en la noche,* Biblioteca de literatura afrocolombiana 10 (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010), 49.

18 *"Negro Soy"*/Negro soy desde hace muchos siglos./Poeta de mi raza, heredé su dolor./Y la emoción que digo ha de ser pura/en el bronco son del grito/y el monorrítmico tambor./El hondo, estremecido acento/en que trisca la voz de los ancestros,/es mi voz./La angustia humana que exalto/no es decorativa joya/para turistas./¡Yo no canto un dolor de exportación!

19 Pisano, *Liderazgo político "negro" en Colombia*, 79.

20 Ibid., 102.

21 Melo, *Historia minima de Colombia*, 193.

realities of their invisibilization of non-Creole cultures. It was argued by its proponents, such as Obeso, Guillén, Martan Gongora, and others that these cultural specificities were key to the authenticity of Afro-descendant creativity, and could be harnessed to contest the marginalization of Afro-descendant voices in the political, cultural, and social domains. As hinted above, the works of Candelario Obeso represent a pioneering endeavor in this regard,[22] as a "mulatto" poet who assumed his appurtenance to the Black race and used his poetry to capture the everyday lives and conditions of Black individuals in the Colombian context. He debunked White superiority through a language that was less confrontational but nevertheless laced with sarcasm, irony, and humor.

The quest to understand the historical circumstances of his American presence is underlined in the highly figurative poem "La voz de los ancestros" ("Ancestral Voices"). The voices of the ancestors are said to echo stridently in the conscience of the persona. Though a distant echo from the past, this voice is said to be so resounding as to reverberate in the recesses of his soul:

"Ancestral Voices"
... I hear the winds galloping
In the musical shadow of the port
The winds, a thousand thirsty and dry routes,
Filled with ancestral cries ...
Those voices that speak of ancient tortures
Voices so clear to the soul ...

Their generous voices
From the depths of time
Send me an echo
Of dead drums,
Of lost complaints
In God knows which strange land,
Where the bonfire light disappeared
And with it the notes of the last song.[23] [24]

22 Javier O. Cassiani and Lázaro V. Sarabia, "La actividad intelectual de Candelario Obeso: entre el reconocimiento y la exotización," in *Cantos populares de mi tierra: Secundino el zapatero*, ed. Candelario Obeso, Biblioteca de literatura afrocolombiana 9 (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010).

23 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 50–51.

24 *"La voz de los ancestros"/...* Oigo galopar los vientos/bajo la sombra musical del puerto./ Los vientos, mil caminos ebrios y sedientos,/repujados de gritos ancestrales .../Voces en

The voice is engaged in a quest for the essence of its being, but what it gets is ungraspable evanescence in the form of "an echo," "dead drums," "lost complaints," "bonfire light disappeared," the "last song" left on the island by the invading/retreating tides. This voice seizes the listener in the form of a cry, the cry of the wretched of the earth, the cry for recognition. It is the subaltern's cry, which Nelson Maldonado-Torres captures in *Against War* as "Silence, distorted speech, and the cry of Negro affirmation become different expressions of the black in his and her coping with the condition of slavery, colonialism, and/or anti-black racism".[25] The distant cry, a cry for recognition, permeates the present of the persona. In effect, Artel engages in a back-and-forth tidal movement in his text, triggering an intertextual reading of the historical conditions of bondage and modern practices of exclusion under the oppressive gaze of the White man, as the persona states in the poem "Meeting": "I have learnt to bear the prolonged blue gaze of the White man/Falling over my flesh like a whip".[26] The last stanza of the poem reenacts the conditions of the African ancestor's separation from his mother continent. The imagination is fragmentary, for it is a history that does not avail itself wholly to us. Rather, it can only be imagined in an oneiric and clair-obscure setting: "Where the bonfire light disappeared/ And with it the notes of the last song" ("Ancestral Voices").[27] Here is where art plays a crucial role in projecting a picture, though blurred, of the pain of dismemberment caused by slavery and the slave trade. From slavery to modern times, being Black in Colombia has carried an existential stigma. Ortega posits that Colombia is a pigmentocracy whereby one's color still determines, to a large extent, the potential for sociopolitical and economic mobility: the less Black a person's skin, the better the access to opportunities for an upward climb.[28]

The drum is a very potent trope in this collection, as it represents one of the main artifacts of material culture among Afro-Colombian people. Night drums symbolize the ability to communicate when there is lack of a common

---

ellos hablan/de una antigua tortura,/voces claras para el alma .../... sus voces desprendidas/de lo más hondo del tiempo/me devuelven un eco/de tamboriles muertos,/de quejumbres perdidas/en no sé cuál tierra ignota,/donde cesó la luz de las hogueras/con las notas de la última lúbrica canción.

25 Nelson Maldonado Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity,* Latin America otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=1169845, 132.

26 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 107.

27 Ibid., 50–51.

28 Vidal Ortega, "Entre la necesidad y el temor," 98.

language, to form a community in exile, and to sustain the ethical imaginaries of Black people, even in times of uncertainty:

> *"Drums in the Night"*
> Drums in the night
> Are like a human cry
> Trembling with music I heard them groan
> When these men who carry
> Emotions in their hands
> Snatch from them the anguish of an age-old yearning, of an intimate nostalgia,
> Whence lurks the sweetly savage soul
> Of my vibrant race
> With centuries soaked in moaning
> Night drums speak
> And their voices
> A deep call, so strong and clear
> It seems to resound deep in my soul![29] [30]

The symbolic and existential value of "drums" in this eponymous poem, not to mention the entire collection, can hardly be overstated. Jorge Melo paints a scenario in which the enslaved Africans of the Spanish colony of New Grenada (Colombia) could not communicate among themselves, as they came from different cultures with different languages; thus, music and dance offered an indispensable means of communication among them.[31] Talking specifically about the drum, Raul Caicedo affirms that it "was the best means of communication between the enslaved Africans, taking advantage of the Spaniards' inability to decipher the content of its musical codes".[32] The drum here shifts from being a mere object of entertainment and revelry to one of the various ways in which the enslaved Africans negotiate their existence in a new and desolate space. The poem gestures at certain conceptions that are typical

29 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 57–58.

30 *"Tambores en la noche"*/Los tambores en la noche/son como un grito humano./Trémulos de música les he oído gemir,/cuando esos hombres que llevan/la emoción en las manos/ les arrancan la angustia de una oscura saudade, de una íntima añoranza,/donde vigila el alma dulcemente salvaje/de mi vibrante raza,/con sus siglos mojados en quejumbres de gaitas./ Los tambores en la noche, hablan./¡Y es su voz una llamada/tan honda, tan fuerte y clara,/que parece como si fueran sonándonos en el alma!

31 Melo, *Historia minima de Colombia*, 162.

32 Platicón, "Los Afropacíficos," 331.

of *negrista* poetry, portraying Africans as men that "carry emotions in their hands" just as it describes the persona's soul as "sweetly savage"—an oxymoronic reference suggesting an uncompromising attachment to his African identity despite all the negative stereotypes attributed to the African "other" by European modernity and the Hegelian perception of non-White races. This poem underlines the liberatory impetus at the basis of *negrista* poetry, which some critics considered mere exoticism, more likely to end up entrenching stereotypes in the form of folkloric entertainment for elite White culture than to expose and redress the disadvantaged position of Afro-descendant peoples in Colombia and other Caribbean societies. This aspect is quite important, as Mansour argues that *negrista* poetry was not strictly racial in content, but equally addressed issues that were specific to the respective Latin American countries.[33] Artel foregrounds his aesthetics in Afro-Colombian music and everyday practices, putting these at the service of his critique of a society still engulfed by discrimination and White supremacy. The infusion of African cultural artifacts such as drums and traditional musical forms in his poetry is not only meant as aesthetic embellishment or cultural exhibitionism, but also as elements of the spiritual and cultural reclamation of the African personality that underlies the contributions of African knowledge systems in shaping the ontologies and ethics of the New World.

The theme of mourning in this text requires a reconceptualization, for it does not merely hark back to the past. Rather, mourning becomes a process that releases energy and enables the subject to confront the challenges he faces in the present by virtue of reclaiming his African identity. It is mourning that stimulates the imagination and construction of an alternative ethic in human relationships beyond the master-slave binary. The drum is, therefore, a voice in the dark, and can be considered an interrogation or quest for an effective/affective transmission of the travails and dreams of the lost ancestors. Night drums constitute means of dreaming, of defying the night to sound the belief in the possibility of an alternative future despite the history of enslavement and exclusion. But above all, the mourning drum enacts an ethical interpellation of man's conscience, irrespective of color, as the poetic persona insists in "Poem with neither Hate nor Fear": "Blacks all over the world, those that have not renounced the order, nor disrupted the flag, here is the message: with neither hate nor fear, we are the conscience of America!".[34] By positioning the Blacks as the conscience of America, the poetic persona underlines gestures towards aspects of Afrodescendant cultures that are based on mutual

33 Mónica Mansour, *La Poesía Negrista* (México: Ediciones Era, 1973), 145.

34 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 127.

recognition, ethical conviviality and reciprocity, along the lines of Fanon's concept of a gift. The drum enacts a rapprochement between humans that echoes Fanon's statement: "Man is motion toward the world and toward his like. A movement of aggression, which leads to enslavement or to conquest; a movement of love, a gift of self, the ultimate stage of what by common accord is called ethical orientation. Every consciousness seems to have the capacity to demonstrate these two components, simultaneously or alternatively".[35] The ethical fabric of most colonial texts in the form of a cry is thus interwoven; in Torres's terms, "in the struggle for recognition, with a loving subjectivity who is not able to love. Love becomes the key to articulating a Fanonian account of the colonial condition and of colonial subjects".[36]

As stated above, Jorge Artel's poetry lies at the crossroads of various creative trends and currents, reflected in his changing and subjective rapport with the sea. His relationship with the waves is characterized by a tense harmony. Sometimes, his imagination is enthralled by the flow of the waves, thereby leading him to conjecture a stable identity and the idea of return, be it physical or spiritual. However, his relationship with the waves now and then begets intractable thoughts that lose sight of a clear definition and destination. This reinforces the tidalectic nature of the collection, in which the subject and the waves are neither settled nor stable, their changing nature apt to emphasize the varying facets of slave history. This tidalectic tendency can be discerned in several poems in Brathwaite's *Arrivants* (1967), in which the sea waves play a key role in imagining the memorial flux and identity reconfiguration that underlie diasporic existence, with its tensions, fragmentation, nostalgia, and illusions, but also its creative promise. The case of the poem "The Cracked Mother" is quite profound:

> And why do the waves come here
> riding from allotted lands
> behind the black barbed wire of rock
> the white outworks of their foam;
>
> why do they come as they do:
> white hoofs beating high water on sand
> leaping our smashed-in wish that they halt
> that they keep the boundaries clear?

35 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 28.
36 Maldonado Torres, *Against war*, 123.

quiet at sundown, restless at noon,
land and sea balanced by sky.
But where are these loud gallopers going,
these bright spurs conquering tide and hill,

treaty, how will new maps be drafted?
Who will suggest a new tentative frontier?
How will the sky dawn now?[37]

In this poem, the imagery is that of a stronghold or firm territory (suggestive cognates of an essential identity) constantly invaded by the tides, the wells and beaches that bring back memories of loss and displacement, but compel the poetic persona to perpetually redefine his identity. The space of enunciation in the above poem is intermittently adrift, revealing the identities of the subject as a product of "drafted maps," "tentative frontiers," the "quiet" and "restless," the "leaping sand" and "smashed-in wish." The possibility of remaking and refounding is captured by the gerund of the collection's title—*Arrivants*—for it is not a conclusive identity, but rather one that is reactualized through memory and dreams based on a deeply held faith—a term running through the veins of both the persona and the verses of the poem. The continuous cascade of the waves can be paralleled with the alignment of multiple interrogative verses in Brathwaite's as well as in Artel's poetry, possible attempts to come to terms with a history that has impacted the Afro-descendants' existence without bequeathing them a pristine and unquestionable inventory of its events and definite meanings.

The sea is personified as the only witness of the presence and subsequent absence of the ancestor. She is believed to bear a secret force that can reveal, to the living, the circumstances of the silence-disappearance-death of slave victims. The sea, to echo Adam Lifshey's words, is the incarnated specter of absence, for it represents the present past as well as the past present. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is known to have said "one cannot step into the same water twice." Hence, Artel's perplexity at the sight of the sea, which gives the illusion of grasp, but can only present fluid and evanescent traces of ancestral presence. The sea is thus a site of inherent difference and *différance*, where, as "the ocean seems engaged in an infinite repetition of the same movement over

37 Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 183–84.

and over again, the tide is, in fact, never exactly the same, nor does it re-tract or return to the same place of 'origin'".[38]

In "Canción en el extremo de un retorno" ("A Song in the Extremity of Return"), the persona again exposes his complex rapport with the sea:

> The sky will pull a large moon
> Onto the waters of the quay,
> For it to play with my soul.
> On the corners of the arsenals
> I shall wait for an abandoned song,
> Wrapped in the fishnet like a shad …
> I shall return to contemplate my hundred open routes,
> We need to know ourselves better, the sea and me.[39] [40]

To know the sea, as the persona purports, represents the possibility to know the self through knowledge of his ancestor. Taking up the abandoned song is a form of continuity, continuing to sing in defiance at the point where the singing of the ancestors had stopped due to the tragic circumstances that the persona is at pains to conjecture. The ocean is thus a caesura between three continents, a tragic comma between several worlds, in which the Afro-American writer inserts himself/herself to recapture the breath of the bygone ancestor, in a tidalectic hope of reconciliation with the latter's suffering. *Drums in the Night* is a symbol of resilience, endurance, renaissance, and overcoming. It is a creative will-to-life against the backdrop of historical conditions in which the subject's ultimate spiritual and physical death was the wish of his master, as can be seen in the number of enslaved Africans that were sanctioned and incriminated by the church and the Inquisition in Cartagena.[41]

The rhapsodic nature of Artel's poetry is perceived in his choice of words and the way he characterizes the movement of the sea. The poetry is routed rather than rooted, for even if there is a desire for an imaginative return to Africa, this Africa is not imagined as a pristine space. Rather, it is one that carries the

38 Carmen Beatriz Llenín-Figueroa. "Imagined Islands: A Caribbean Tidalectics". (PhD Thesis, Duke University, 2012), 7.

39 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 77.

40 El cielo tirará una luna ancha/a las aguas del muelle,/para que juegue con mi alma./En los rincones de los arsenales/me estará esperando algún canto abandonado,/enredado en las atarrayas como un sábalo./Y junto a las horas cálidas,/volveré a contemplar mis cien rutas abiertas,/hemos de conocernos de nuevo el mar y yo.

41 Melo, *Historia minima de Colombia*, 162.

sensibilities and the experiences of the route. The insistence on routes over roots pays heed to the process of creolization that resulted from the African subject's encounter with the Americas. Though his practices survived, they have undergone transformation, marked by the imprint of Christian, Hispanic, and Indigenous cultures.[42] The African soul has been exposed to the winds and torrents of the Middle Passage. It is these varied experiences that grant a certain rhapsodic frenzy to the ardent drums, to a life that alternates between living, fishing, suffering, and singing. The singing and the drumming sustain the hopes of the subject and of better possibilities for self- and collective realization. The choice of adjectives such as "chaotic," "insistent," "dense," "vivid," and "ardent" underline the emotions that overwhelm the poet as he contemplates the port city that marks the entry point of his ancestors into the American space, a space that entails economic benefits and territorial acquisition for Western capitalists while bringing untold violence to Indigenous and Black peoples.

> *"Windward"*
> … And in the chaotic torrents of the port
> The insistent emotion palpitates
> The notes, dense savor of the night,
> The vivid light of Africa …
> "Windward Windward
> Land of ardent drums,"
> Like another song,
> Soft, the silhouette of a vigil at a distance.
> The Black man lives his life. Fishes. Suffers. Sings.[43] [44]

The route to Africa, the forsaken home, the forbidden land (given that the African cultural expressions of the enslaved were censored by their masters) is considered the route of pain. Whereas home is supposed to inspire a sense of ideal reunion, the homebound memories of the persona are smitten with pain and agony due to the painful experiences that unfolded on the pernicious voyage from home. The body of the persona bears the scars of the ancestors' suffering, as can be seen below: "Don't you hear sycamores growing in my voice;/

42 Vidal Ortega, "Entre la necesidad y el temor," 102.

43 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 88–89.

44 *Barlovento/*… Y en la tufurada tórrida del puerto/la insistente emoción palpita./Tienen las notas denso sabor a noche, a lumbre viva de África …/«¡Barlovento, Barlovento, tierra ardiente del tambó!…».Como otra canción,/tenue, el perfil de un velero se diluye a distancia./El negro vive su vida. Pesca. Sufre. Canta.

Don't you see on my feet the tiredness of infinite sands/fettering my legs?/In remembrance of the tears, our inherited pains./Don't you see the tattoos of the whip? Don't you imagine distant chains and drums?" In this series of rhetorical questions, the persona invites his interlocutor to consider his body as a body of memory, a mnemotopos that points to the trajectory of an entire race made to undergo the dehumanizing consequences of European modernity and empire-building. It is a body that has been exposed to "horror," "pain," "tiredness," "whip," and "chains," bearing scars of the successive phases of the coloniality of power.

"Route of Pain"
... routes of horror
in whose blue bounds destiny
united the song with the whip
and great pain matures like rum
man of the littoral
my luminous Atlantic littoral
don't you hear swaying sycamores
growing in my voice;

Don't you see on my feet the tiredness
of infinite sands
fettering my steps?
In remembrance of the tears, our inherited pains.

Don't you see in my words
the tattoos of the whip?
don't you imagine chains
and distant drums?[45] [46]

With its complex dynamics of marine spatiality and the dexterous conjugation of memory and vision, Jorge Artel's poetic imagination can be analyzed from

45 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 98–99.

46 *"La ruta dolorosa"*/... rutas de espanto,/en cuyo linde azul unió el destino/la canción con el látigo, y donde un gran dolor madura/como ron alquitranado;/hombre del litoral, mi luminoso litoral Atlántico .../¿No escuchas cimbreantes sicomoros/creciéndome en la voz;/no miras en mis plantas el cansancio de infinitas arenas/atándome los pasos?/En la reminiscencia de una lágrima/ residen nuestros dolores heredados./¿No ves en mis palabras/el tatuaje del látigo,/no intuyes las cadenas/y los tambores lejanos?/

the standpoint of horizonality, a concept introduced to postcolonial studies by Bill Ashcroft. As Ashcroft maintains:

> It is in horizonality that the true force of transformation becomes realized, for whereas the boundary is about constriction, history, the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension, possibility, fulfilment, the imagining of post-colonial place. The horizon is a way of conceiving home, and with it, identity, which escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary. Horizonality is, possibly, the *only* way in which the predominance of the boundary in Western thought can be resisted.[47]

Horizonality is crucial in understanding the realities of resistance and resilience against the strictures of the plantation economy. The enslaved subject's attempts to remember his culture was often met with sanctions and penalization from the colonial master, whose main aim was to turn him into a tabula rasa. Pereachala considers the situation a form of alienation in which the enslaved had to abandon his spiritual and cultural self so as to become an imitation of his master.[48] The enslaved is considered a man-animal, without past or future, at the service of the capitalist machinery of slavery. However, the regimes of prohibition, sanction, and discipline did not succeed in totally eliding the cultural substratum of the ancestral home, which found repose in the deepest recesses of the enslaved subject's memory.[49] The punitive measures of the church and the feudal system had, as a consequence, the strengthening of the subject's daily struggles against oppression by his developing a counterculture that covered all of his living and survival spaces. This sustained mindset of overcoming summarizes the historical trajectory of most Afro-Colombian communities in the face of systemic and in some cases state-sanctioned exclusion in the current dispensation.

Horizonality underlines the ability to transcend one's immediate space, a space circumscribed by the dehumanizing strictures of the slave system. It enables the subject to factor in his current condition as a product of power disequilibrium and to free himself from the immediacy of his slave condition in order to "see/imagine" other spaces that fortify his spirit and fertilize his imagination. Horizonality is where sight meets vision and where promise meets hope. In the poetry of Jorge Artel, Africa does not just represent a

47 Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2010), 192.

48 Rafael Pereachala Aluma, *Del Movimiento Social Afrocolombiano* (Unpublished manuscript, 2003), 2.

49 Vidal Ortega, "Entre la necesidad y el temor," 103.

nostalgic past; it is a space that informs the futurity of the Black subjects of the Americas. The enslaved body and his cultural imaginary constitute an excess, a possibility of transgressing the limits of the spatial strictures of the enslaving system, and of self-affirmation in a dominantly Eurocentric postcolonial space.

The perception of Africa as the horizon in Artel's poetry and his unconditional embrace of his Africanity are captured in "Poema sin odio, ni temor" ("Poem with neither Hate nor Fear"), in which the poetic voice postulates that an imagination of the future of Afro-descendant people entails an acceptance of who they are. He thus indicts those members of the Colombian society who negate their identity:

> If others eschew their human destiny, we, on the contrary, have to find ourselves,
> Intuit, in the vibration of our heart,
> the only wide and deep emotion,
> definite and eternal;
> we are the conscience of America.[50] [51]

In the same poem, the above verse is reiterated to underline the importance of a negated race in the future of its adopted, yet appropriated, continent: America. By virtue of the conditions of displacement and of subjugation in the American plantation system, the Afro-descendant subject must acknowledge his routes and consider his Africanity as a fundamental cornerstone of his multiple identities. In the bakdrop of the troubled past of the enslaved African subject, Artel considers the history of suffering as that which contributes to the fortification of individual and collective character, hence its undeniable place on the horizon of an ethically grounded society.

3 Conclusion

Tambores en la Noche (*Drums in the Night*) is one of the first texts dedicated nearly entirely to the conditions of slavery and its legacy in the Colombian context. The poetry uses memories of ancestral suffering to indict the horrifying

50 Artel, *Tambores en la noche*, 124–25.

51 si algunos se evaden de su humano destino, nosotros tenemos que encontrarnos,/intuir, en la vibración de nuestro pecho,/la única emoción ancha y profunda,/definitiva y eterna:/somos una conciencia en América.

effects of the slave system and its repercussions on the current state of interracial relationships in modern-day Colombia and Latin America in general. The slave trade and its dehumanization of the African other remains a persistent issue in Afro-Colombian sense of (non-)belonging to the Colombian nation. The poetry of Jorge Artel aligns itself with a tradition of Latin American poetry that perceives Africa as a source of existential anguish, but also insists on the importance of coming to terms with one's past and one's pain in order to construct a future that is based on racial inclusiveness and mutual responsibility. Jorge Artel's poetry ignites a persistent quest for knowledge of the ancestors' trajectories and inspiration from their resilience and ethics of relationality despite their historical conditions of bondage, positing the Afro-Colombian subject as the conscience of the nation in which s/he suffers exclusion.

References

Artel, Jorge. Tambores en la noche. Biblioteca de literatura afrocolombiana 10. Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010.

Ashcroft, Bill. Post-Colonial Transformation. London: Routledge, 2010.

Brathwaite, Kamau. The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973.

Cassiani, Javier O., and Lázaro V. Sarabia. "La actividad intelectual de Candelario Obeso: entre el reconocimiento y la exotización." In Cantos populares de mi tierra: Secundino el zapatero. Edited by Candelario Obeso, 11–47. Biblioteca de literatura afrocolombiana 9. Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010.

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. New York: Grove Press, 1968.

Lifshey, Adam. Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absence in Transatlantic Literatures. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.

Llenín-Figueroa, Carmen Beatriz. "Imagined Islands: A Caribbean Tidalectics". PhD Thesis, Duke University, 2012

Maldonado Torres, Nelson. Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity. Latin America otherwise. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=1169845.

Mansour, Mónica. La Poesía Negrista. México: Ediciones Era, 1973.

Melo, Jorge O. Historia Minima De Colombia. Historias mínimas. Madrid, México: Turner; El Colegio de México, 2018.

Mignolo, Walter D. La Idea De América Latina: La Herida Colonial Y La Opción Decolonial. Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2007.

Moreno Zapata, Paula M. El poder de lo invisible: Memorias de solidaridad, humanidad y resistencia. Bogotá: Penguin Random House, 2018.

Motta Rodríguez, Gustavo. "Una mirada a través del arte: vinculación del pasado y el presente del patrimonio cultural colombiano en la educación." PhD Thesis. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2015.

Oliva, María E. "Más Acá De La Negritud: Negrismo Y Negredumbre Como Categorías De Reconocimiento En La Primera Mitad Del Siglo XX Latinoamericano." Revista CS 30 (2020): 47–72. https://doi.org/10.18046/recs.i30.3515.

Pereachala Aluma, Rafael. Del Movimiento Social Afrocolombiano. Unpublished manuscript, 2003.

Pisano, Pietro. Liderazgo político "negro" en Colombia, 1943 - 1964. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2012.

Platicón, Raúl. "Los Afropacíficos: Herederos de un legado diásporo en un territorio ignoto." In Conocimiento desde adentro: Los afrosudamericanos hablan de sus pueblos y sus historias. Edited by Sheila S. Walker, 271–349. La Paz: Fundación Pedro Andavérez Peralta, 2010.

Prescott, Laurence E. "Remembering Jorge Artel (1909, Cartagena - 1994, Barranquilla)." Afro-Hispanic Review 15, no. 1 (1996): 1–3. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23054059.

Reckin, Anna. "Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/poetry as Sound-Space." Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal 1, no. 1 (2003): Article 5.

Vidal Ortega, Antonino. "Entre la necesidad y el temor: negros y mulatos en Cartagena de Indias a comienzos del siglo XVII." In Negros, mulatos, zambaigos: Derroteros africanos en los mundos ibéricos. Edited by Berta Ares Queija and Alessandro Stella, 89–104. Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 2000.

CHAPTER 13

Quaseilhas: a Performative and Transmedial Memory

Ute Fendler

1 Introduction

Quaseilhas ("Almost Islands") is the title of a play written by Afro-Brazilian author Diego Araújo[1] that premiered at Barbalho Fort, Salvador da Bahia (Brazil), in April 2018. Araújo studied fine arts with a focus on theater at the School of Theater at the Federal University of Bahia (Universidade Federal da Bahia, UFBA). Together with performance artist Laís Machado, in 2017 he founded ÀRÀKÁ, a group of artists who work together on various projects (theater, performance, experimental arts, community work) with a transdisciplinary approach linking Afro-diasporic and African artists.[2]

Quaseilhas has attracted considerable attention, as it is the first Brazilian play performed exclusively in an African language, namely Yorúbà. Furthermore, it has also been appreciated for its complex approach to the construction of memory and history in a country with a large Afro-descendant population and the traumatic heritage of slavery and its repercussions in contemporary society.

In the larger context of Afro-Brazilian theater, the valorization of African heritage and its linkages with the African continent via cultural and religious practices has been an important part of the phenomenon from the start, namely with Abdias Nascimento's Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN, "Black Experimental Theater") in 1944. While early troupes adopted a Brechtian approach to the main objectives of raising consciousness about inequality in Brazilian society and transmitting a didactic message, from the 1970s onwards—when troupes were often based in Bahia, e.g. O Bando do Teatro Olodum[3]—more cathartic elements were favored, as well as those integrating

1 Diego Pinheiro is the writer's pen name; his family name is Diego Araújo, which is the name he requested I use in this contribution.

2 ÀRÀKÁ website: https://plataformaaraka.wixsite.com/araka.

3 Christine Douxami, "Brazilian Black Theatre. A Political Theatre Against Racism," *The Drama Review* 63, no. 1 (March 2019): 32, 45. Marcos Antônio Alexandre, *O teatro negro em*

audiovisual and performative elements of the rituals of Candomblé.[4] Christine Douxami underlines how these references were also used as markers of authenticity, as in the case of the play *Ajaká*, as early as the 1970s:

> In this quest for authenticity using Candomblé as an ethnicity marker, Antonio Godi, director of the Grupo Palmares Iñaron (founded in 1973), worked with Mestre Didi to create *Ajaká, iniciação para Liberdade* (Ajaka, Initiation to Freedom, 1978) in both Yoruba and Portuguese. This play narrates an African legend about Ogum, the god of metallurgy.[5]

Interestingly, the articles on *Quaseilhas* do not mention *Ajaká*, the first Brazilian play to be composed partially in Yorúbà. However, *Quaseilhas* is new also in the way it employs Yorúbà, as the texts are translations of stories originally told by the writer's grandmother in Portuguese and recounted in the form of a Yorúbà oral genre, the *oríkì*. The fact that the whole play is in a language the local public does not understand forces the spectator, lost and disoriented, to confront the rupture with cultural and historical knowledge that the slave trade and the plantation system have effected. It is therefore not a matter of authenticity in *Quaseilhas*, but rather that of a fragmented transmission of knowledge in the context of the oppression of indigenous languages and cultural practices, and consequently, the loss of control over the construction of history and identity, and thus, of a positive notion of the future.

The text that announced the play on Sympla, a Brazilian platform for cultural events, offers some approaches for interpreting this very complex play, which is outstanding in several ways:

> *QUASEILHAS: Returning to the future to reinvent the past*
>
> A visit to memories to remember the future. The search to transcend the limits of time. This is what *QUASEILHAS* is made of, conceived, directed, and with *oríkì* by Diego Pinheiro [...] The scenic work makes a transit between the gaps of the Afro-diasporic memory, taking as its starting point the family memories of the creator and his collaborators, Laís

perspectiva: dramaturgia e cena negra no Brasil e em Cuba, (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Malê, 2017). Benita Brown, Dannabang, Kuwabong, and Christopher, Olsen, eds. *Myth Performance in the African Diasporas. Ritual, Theatre, and Dance*. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014). Evani Tavares Lima, "*Um Olhar sobre o Teatro Negro do Teatro Experimental do Negro e do Bando de Teatro Olodum*," (PhD diss., University of Campinas, 2010). http://repositorio.unicamp.br/jspui/handle/REPOSIP/283930.

4 Douxami, "Brazilian Black Theatre," 32–51.

5 Douxami, "Brazilian Black Theatre," 44.

> Machado, Diego Alcantara, and Nefertini Altan, mixing visualities, songs, and performativities. *QUASEILHAS* is the first Brazilian stage play written entirely in the African language Yorúbà. Paying a visit to the memories of the past in order to remember the future. A quest for an exit of the limits of time. Quaseilhas, conceived, directed, and with oríkì by Diego Pinheiro—deals with all of this [...][6]

The text underlines the play's entanglement of past and future, while memory is its basis for imagining and reinventing both the future as well as the past. Past, present, and future are intertwined in such a way that they are always simultaneously present; so the play thus questions the concept of time passing in a purely linear sequence. While the title itself, *Quaseilhas*, highlights the spatial aspect of the play, the concepts it deals with—namely memory, past, and identity—are temporal ones. The "almost islands" refer to the neighborhood of Alagados in Itapagipe, built close to the shore and on the water on the outskirts of Salvador da Bahia, where Diego Araújo's family used to live. It also refers to the Middle Passage and to houses built on stilts, for example those in the neighborhood of Makoko in Lagos (Nigeria). Araúja's family has preserved some knowledge of their origin—namely, the Nigerian city Ilésà—and heritage, as his grandmother still speaks Yorúbà and uses *oríkì*, a Yorúbà oral genre, to tell stories that carry on memories of the community. The texts were translated from Portuguese into the Yorúbà-language *oríkì* genre for the play. Furthermore, Araújo also used photos of his own family in building the play's complex audiovisual narrative, interweaving African origins, memories transmitted since the time of the Middle Passage, and the contemporary impressions and experiences of Afro-descendants in Brazil—which could also be valid for other places in the Americas. The idea that the imagination of the future must be built on the past is conveyed by references to Afrofuturist elements in the play that visualize the entanglement with the past mainly in the ways the actors are dressed.

For this piece, Araújo combines performance, music, and audiovisual techniques with acting; thus it is a very complex artwork, transgressing most of

6 *QUASEILHAS: retorno ao futuro para reinventar o passado*
Uma visita às memórias para lembrar do futuro. A busca por sair dos limites do tempo. É de tudo isso que é feito o *QUASEILHAS*, com concepção, direção e oríkì de Diego Pinheiro [...]. A obra cênica faz um trânsito entre às lacunas da memória afro-diaspórica, tendo como ponto de partida as memórias familiares do criador e dos seus colaboradores, Laís Machado, Diego Alcantara e Nefertini Altan, mesclando visualidades, canto e performatividades. QUASEILHAS é a primeira obra cênica autoral brasileira integralmente em idioma africano, o yorùbá. https://www.sympla.com.br/quaseilhas (last access: 12.03.2021). Translation into English is mine.

its genres to become a transmedial work of art. I therefore suggest speaking of a transmedial work rather than, e.g., a hybrid one, as the notion of transmediality includes the process of negotiating and combining various codes, genres, and themes, as well as references to other works or contexts, within one artwork. The notion of the process is particularly important in this case, as it will not limit *Quaseilhas* to being seen as a combination of cultural references from different cultural and sociohistorical settings, in this particular case Brazil and Nigeria; it would also allow for highlighting the surplus of meaning that the piece generates through a continuous transmedial process that creates a world, a complex universe, speaking to all the senses of the spectators by transgressing the boundary between stage and public, between different genres, epochs, and regions, etc.[7] On the conceptual level, *Quaseilhas* therefore entails the participative process of remembering a past that is present both in its enactment as well as in the experience of contemporary Brazil, stirring questions about the construction of identity based on the absence of history and the suppression of memories that are inscribed in the living spaces of the city of Salvador. As such, the performance creates a chronotopical event that allows one to experience and to participate in the overlapping narratives relating the past, the present, and the future and linking Brazil with Africa. The inextricable entanglement of time and space in the context of the Black Atlantic literally takes form in the set conceived and built for *Quaseilhas*. In order to make the complex arrangement of space, time, narrative lines and acting parts of the play more comprehendible, I will start by explaining the set before dealing with the stories told in the form of Yorúbà *oríkì*.

2 The Performance Space as Space-Time Capsule

In the inner court of the seventeenth-century Forte do Barbalho in Salvador da Bahia, a rectangular wooden shed was built to evoke the appearance of both storage barracks (figure 13.1.) as well as the wooden huts of the slums of Salvador. The house contains four small rooms (figure 13.2.). Three of them are used as "stage" for the actors. The spectators can only enter one room, while the actors can move from one room to the next. All the rooms are dark; just a few bulbs are there to be switched on or off depending on the scene.

7 Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intermédialités/Intermediality* 6, (Fall 2005). Ivo Ritzer & Peter Schulze, *Transmediale Genre-Passagen. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016).

FIGURE 13.1 *Quaseilhas*: the set at Forte de Barbalho. Photo by Shai Andrade
PHOTO COURTESY DIEGO ARAÚJO

At first sight, Camamu looks like a tiny bedroom. To the left is a row of old wooden chairs into which the spectators squeeze for the two hours of the play. In front of the chairs, to the right, a large bed occupies most of the remaining space, while partly behind the bed, opposite the spectators, short films and photos are projected onto a wooden wall. Sometimes, the curtain is lifted to reveal the musicians, who are in the technical booth in the center of the four rooms. On the opposite side is the second room, Quebra Machado, which can be seen when the curtains on either side of the technical booth (situated in between these two rooms) are lifted. The floor is covered with sand, a television set is placed on the lefthand side, and several bulbs hang from the ceiling. The spectators have to line up against the wall facing the window in the wall that links the room with the technical booth. The third room, Pantaleon, is a transitory space, as the room has two doors in opposite corners that link it with Camamu and Quebra Machado. Again, the spectators must line up against the walls. The center of the room is occupied by a bathtub, behind which the wall serves as a projection screen and, when the curtain is lifted, has a view of the technical booth.

It must be added that the windows never open completely; there is always a gossamer veil filtering the light. While the spectators cannot observe any of

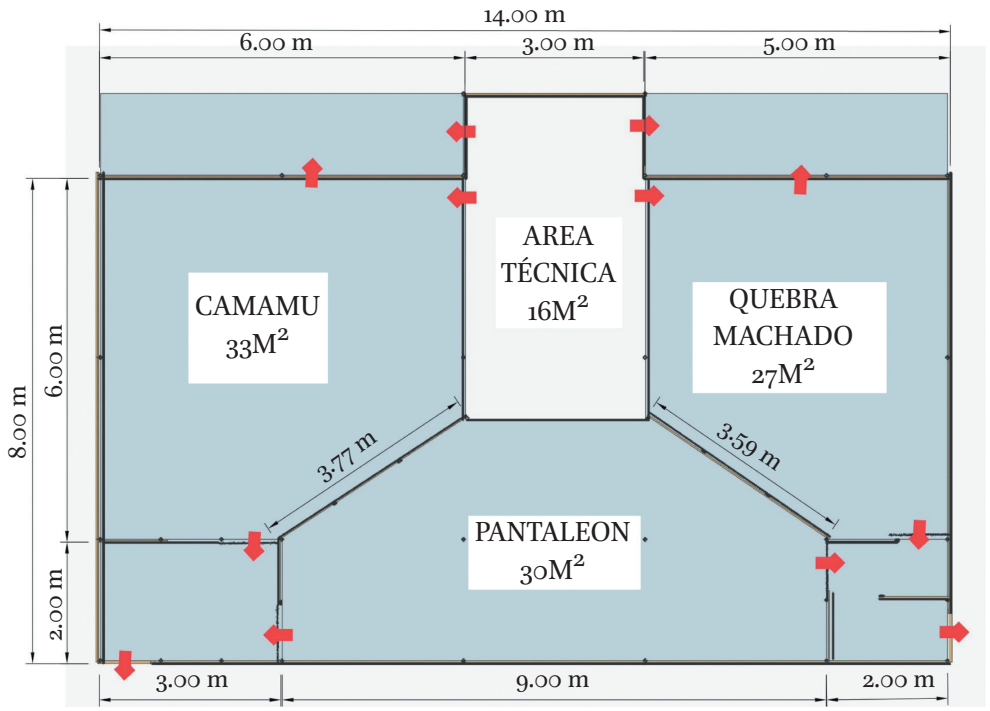

FIGURE 13.2 *Quaseilhas*: the plan of the set
PHOTO BY SHAI ANDRADE

the acting except what takes place in front of them, it is possible to hear music, noises, and the voice of a narrator (Diego Araújo himself, as an omnipresent—hetero- and homodiegetic—narrator; cf. figure 13.3.) throughout the play; thus, the audio track assures continuity in space and time, which refers to the importance of the oral transmission of knowledge and history.

The fact that the wooden structure is situated in the central yard of a seventeenth-century fort evokes the marginal space where the descendants of slaves used to live, and brings this marginalized space to the heart of the slave system, the fort, that was built by the Portuguese. The layout obliges the spectator to enter the court via the central gate of the fort, from which one can see the perishable wooden shed amid high walls of immense rocks and stones. The spectator finds him- or herself in a space that visualizes the confrontation of ephemeral memories from the margins of colonial power, in opposition to the construction of memory by the official history, which is meant to be solid and eternal.

Entering the rooms of the shed means entering these oppressed and marginalized spaces, their stories and memories. The darkness and extremely high

humidity during the rainy season—heightened by the use of water in the rooms during the performance—creates a suffocating atmosphere that conjures associations with the poor living conditions of stilt houses, with dim lighting or none at all. The atmosphere likewise evokes the bellies of the slave ships where the human cargo was stored, or rather locked up, in a dark, sticky, humid space. Neither space can be controlled by its inhabitants; thus, the inability to control the space or even one's own movements is transferred to the spectator, who has to squeeze him- or herself in a row against the walls, sweating in a hot, dark, and humid room, unable to leave or even move for two hours. S/he is exposed to overwhelming sensation of the benumbing, all-pervasive heat and humidity, while the sounds and lights are coming from too near or too far; thus the feeling of being lost is intensified.

One could take the reading of the set's symbolism even further by understanding the sheds as a time-space capsule that is simultaneously in the past, present, and future and in none of them at all. It represents the sensation of being caught somewhere from which one cannot escape, and where one is undergoing the traumatic experience of losing the memories and culture that links them with their origins. The slaves were seen as trade goods, their humanity called into question. The set could also refer to the womb, the eternal return[8] of the question of origins that is linked to the loss of memory and the external definition of identity imposed by the white colonizers. Participation in the performance is therefore meant to be a journey through time and space, not only as far as Afro-descendants are concerned, but also for every spectator who is drawn into the vortex of slave history and its aftermath, social segregation in plantation-based societies.[9]

In the set-up of the stage as a shack in the courtyard of a historical fortress, this play/installation also creates a concrete space of interaction where the entanglement of the past and the future in a specific place like Salvador da Bahia as one of the most important entry points for the trade of enslaved persons. Imagining a multilayered space where the meaning of the place in different epochs is part of the palimpsest of the time-place setting, this play/installation contributes to imagine worlds by making visible their spatio-temporal multilayered nature.

8 Antonio Benítez Rojo, *The Caribbean and the Postcolonial Perspective* (*Post-Contemporary Interventions*), (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

9 Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

3 Telling Stories and Fragmented Memories

The spatial arrangement of the set in the courtyard, and of the set as a space divided into three compartments, separated from but linked to each other, determine the larger context of the memories and the stories that are told, as well as the ability to access, listen to, and understand the stories. Furthermore, there is the fourth room, the technical booth, at the center of the shed, where the director and musicians control the projections, the light, music, and sound. The writer of the play, Diego Araújo, is also present in the booth, like the conductor of an orchestra, controlling the complex interplay of acting, singing, video-clip projections, sound, and light arrangements, as well as the height of the curtains on the three windows linking the booth with each room. Araújo takes his mother's and grandmother's stories about their family's origins, going back to their Yorúbà ancestors who were sold to Portuguese slave traders, and translates them into Yorúbà.

FIGURE 13.3 Diego Araújo
PHOTO BY GUTO MUNIZ

The stories have various layers one has to pierce in order to grasp some of their meanings: behind the official version of history—the walls of the fortress—there is the dark shed, a time capsule that the spectator must enter to access parallel universes of stories and meanings. The omnipresent narrator controls the arrangement of the fragments. While the actors are wandering between

the rooms, entering the scene with talking drums, and songs in Yorúbà, the spectator also experiences the loss of a language that his or her ancestors might have spoken and its unintelligibility. It conveys the difficulty of keeping memories and knowledge alive when the language and the transmission of culture are forbidden to the point of partial or full erasure. The use of *alárinjó*, a sixteenth-century Yorúbà dramatic that combined music, song, mask, dance, and the participation of the audience—as well as the reenactment of mythical past and "cult-related expressions such as incantations"[10] that have evolved over the centuries—allows for the mixing of various elements, as Araújo does in *Quaseilhas*. The basic pattern of the verses is based on the *oríkì* genre. By employing *oríkì*, Araújo adds another, complex layer in terms of historical, literary, and cultural references, as the genre is a short form with a condensed description of a person or an event that allows this knowledge to be transmitted to the next generations.[11] Karin Barber has explained the meaning of *oríkì* in terms of its historical, social, and poetic qualities:

> The project of *oríkì* is not to chronicle events and indeed is not narrative at all. But there is a sense in which *oríkì* are intrinsically and profoundly historical, both in terms of their genesis and in terms of their present-day function. They represent the "past in the present," the way the knowledge of the past makes itself felt stubbornly and often contradictorily today. They represent a way not just of looking at the past, but of re-experiencing it and reintegrating it into the present. This is one of the reasons why *oríkì* are valued.[12]

Therefore, Araújo's use of *oríkì* reflects his objective to make the entanglement of past, present, and future visible, audible, and livable in a participatory dialogic performance, involving all the senses, in order to offer the experience of time-space travel without moving oneself, but being "moved" by emotions and

10 Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju, "From Alárinjó to Arugba: Continuities in Indigenous Nigerian Drama," *African Identities* 11, no. 4 (November 2013), 395–406.
Joel Adeyinka Adedeji, "*The Alárinjó theatre: The Study of a Yoruba Theatrical Art from Its Earliest Beginnings to the Present Times*," (PhD diss., University of Ibadan, 1969).

11 When I asked Araújo if the texts are available in the form of a script, he told me that the texts cannot be read or discussed outside the context of *Quaseilhas*. Therefore, I cannot analyze the text in relation to the performance/play.

12 Karin Barber & Paolo F. de Moraes Farias, "Interpreting Oríkì as History and as Literature," in *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral texts* [*Birmingham University African Studies Series 1*], eds. Karin Barber & Paolo F. de Moraes Farias (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, 1989), 14.

by participating in various spatial and temporal junctures. As Barber explains, the genre contributes to the history of an individual or a community in an associative manner:

> *Oríkì* are more than a mnemonic device for the storyteller, they are the pegs on which the whole narrative is staked out, the teller moving from one "explanation" to another, concluding each episode with "And that's why they call our people such-and-such." One could see *oríkì* as a mnemonic aid for the oral historian; but one could with equal justice see the oral history as an amplification of an essentially non-linear, disjunctive form [...].[13]

In the description of the set, we have already seen the nonlinear arrangement of fragments, disjunctive elements that are combined, repeatedly but differently each time, by the interaction between the actors and spectators, as well as with the fragments of stories injected into the process by photography, sequences of filmed interviews, and song. The intrinsically polyphonic quality of the *oríkì* and its open structure is highlighted by Barber as follows:

> But if *oríkì* are a concatenation of fragments from different times, referring to different things, then they are also a collection of diverse voices. Different bits were composed by different people. The performer of any given realisation of the tradition does put her own mark on the collection. She selects as she thinks fit, strings the elements together, often invents tenuous and temporary links between them or allows them to silt up in certain semi-permanent ways according to a principle of association or thematic drift. She also on occasion interpolates inventions of her own or incorporates materials she has raided from other sources.[14]

Quaseilhas combines the open format of the *alárinjó* with the *oríkì* genre to connect the fragmented bits and pieces of the contemporary experience of Afro-descendant inhabitants of the marginalized neighborhoods of Salvador—and, by extension, other places and spaces, in the sense of the "repeating island" proposed by Benítez Rojo—with fragments of memories from communicative archives.[15]

---

13 Barber & Farias, "Interpreting Oríkì," 17.

14 Barber & Farias, "Interpreting Oríkì," 20.

15 Bill Ashcroft, "African Futures: The Necessity of Utopia," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 8, no. 1 (June 2013), 94–114.

4 Fragmented Stories

Having given an overview of the complexity of the overall concept of *Quaseilhas*, I would like to give some detailed insight into the fragmented stories told via the performances taking place in the three rooms. As the text is not translated, most of the spectators have to make up their own interpretation of the script, the sound, and the audiovisual projections, which are limited to the room to which they are confined during the play.

4.1 *The Story Told in Camamu*

One enters the room to find a large wooden bed, covered with a red sheet, occupying most of the space (figure 13.4). Turning to the left, one can take a seat on low wooden chairs that oblige the spectators to sit in a confined, narrow space, facing the bed and the wall that is partly behind the bed, so that the images projected on the wall sometimes overlap with the acting in front of it. Above the bed are a bulb and a faucet. The remote sound of drums and singing approaches until one female actor enters the room, carrying a white enamel bowl on her head. The cloth wrapped around her shoulders and the bowl on her head conjure images of women in West Africa. She lies down on the bed

FIGURE 13.4 The Camamu room
PHOTO BY GUTO MUNIZ

while the singing and music—also coming from the other rooms—continue and echo each other, creating a larger space than the one the spectators are confined to. The movements on the bed recall the convulsive contractions of a woman giving birth, but could also hint at contorted movements under torture. At a certain moment, the actor opens the faucet so that both the bed and the floor are flooded, as if the room were on a ship whose planks let seawater pour in with every wave. In this way, the spectator shares the actor's experience of being imprisoned in a moving, dark space, without knowing where s/he is headed or for what objective. The suffocating atmosphere of heat, the steam of sweating bodies, the impossibility of moving, and the constant threat of physical pain create an experience of traumatic anxiety. The only moments of relief are the moments when the actor leaves the room and the spectators are limited to experiencing the parallel "events" in the other rooms through the sounds of the music, drumming, and singing. From time to time, projections on the wall bring light into the dark room, showing short clips of the wooden stilt houses as well as of photos of members of Araújo's family, followed by historical footage of Salvador de Bahia; the projections thus create a continuity between official, documentary footage and subjective, personal visual archives. In an interview, Araújo explains:

> The ancestor and the womb are the same thing [...]. An Atlantic womb full of currents and gaps regarding the Afro-diasporic memory. Voids created in the slavery and post-slavery process that took away from the Afro-Brazilian people the right to build their family trees and their memories in a positive way throughout these four centuries of diaspora.[16]

The Camamu room underlines the symbolic meaning of the painful rebirth, the rite of passage, as one of the foundational elements of the diasporic experience in the Atlantic historical context. In this way, the performance in this room serves partly as a synecdoche of the Middle Passage.

16 "'O antepassado e o útero são a mesma coisa,' explica Pinheiro. Útero atlântico repleto de correntezas e de lacunas a respeito da memória afrodiaspórica. Vazios criados no processo escravagista e pós-escravagista, que tirou do povo afro-brasileiro o direito de construir de maneira positiva suas árvores genealógicas e suas memórias ao longo desses quatro séculos de diáspora." Source: https://correionago.com.br/portal/primeira-obra-brasileira-em-yoruba-quaseilhas-ocupa-mercado-iao-em-salvador/.

4.2 *The Story Told in Pantaleon*

In the Pantaleon room, a partly filled bathtub sits in the center and takes up most of the narrow space. From the ceiling and the wall, some bulbs are hanging, there is one water tap (figure 13.5.). At one point, two women and a man enter from the door on the lefthand side, singing, crossing the room, and leaving at the other side. At another point, a male actor enters repeatedly, each time bringing a bucket of water to fill the bathtub. His comings and goings reach their climax when he climbs onto the sides of the tub, standing above the "abyss" with one foot on each side, making the tub move slightly swing like a boat by his movements. Later on, the second female actor enters, switching the lights on and off, drawing very close to the spectators leaning against the wall where the bulbs are hanging. The spectators are drawn into the vortex of light and darkness, of accelerating bursts of coming and going, jumping, and dancing that seem to communicate the rising tide. The male actor is wearing baskets and a black hoodie, as well as long braids (figure 13.6.) that connote African American subcultures. Each of the three characters is therefore linked with areas and cultural phenomena of the Sahara region, with the transatlantic musical rhythms and the subversive culture of rap in a continuous flow linking back to the experience of the Middle Passage. The climax is certainly

FIGURE 13.5 The bathtub
PHOTO BY TAILLA DE PAULA

FIGURE 13.6 The actor standing on the tub
PHOTO BY PATRÍCIA ALMEIDA

the moment when the dancer undresses and lies down in the bathtub, her body covered completely by the water (figure 13.7.). Once again, the symbolic image of the return to the womb is enacted—the return to mythical origins and the painful rebirth after arrival. In between the climactic moments, clips are projected, showing the grandmother of the director as well as his sisters and nieces—the matriarchal lineage on which the transmission of knowledge is based. Having submerged herself in the bathtub, the actor steps out and approaches the projection screen, trying to touch the women's faces, as if they were lost memories that reappeared and that she was trying to capture and reconnect with. The going under the water in the bathtub may be seen as the experience of the Middle Passage, which obliges the individual to start anew, severed from his or her origins and previous bonds. The moment when the actor touches the screen visualizes the process of remembering—how she tries to connect with fragments of memories and sound, being forced to rebuild her world.

4.3 *The Story Told in Quebra Machado*

While Camamu focuses on the belly of the ship, a confined space of pain, loss, and reliving, and Pantaleon on movement between two places—the room

FIGURE 13.7 "Going under"
PHOTO BY TAILLA DE PAULA

having two entrances or exits—and a moving ship/bathtub floating on imaginary waves, the third room, Quebra Machado, is linked with land. The floor is covered with sand, which evokes connotations of sandy beaches as departure and arrival points, but also connotations of the desert, referring to West Africa, spaces of migration, and transition. The male actor is wearing goggles with bulbs attached to them. It seems as if he is trying to find something in the distance, as well as read and understand the traces in the sand. His acting visualizes the search for lost memories in the past, in abandoned countries. It also refers to fortune-telling practices like geomancy, as in figure 13.8. In addition, the TV set in the room accelerates the loss of orientation, showing only visual noise. The bulbs light up the path with only a limited radius of light, so visibility is restricted. The curtailed vision symbolizes the disorientation of losing the knowledge of one's historical and cultural origins and heritage, which includes the effects of the interrupted transfer of knowledge. The disconnect from their own mythology explaining the world obliges Afro-descendants to reinvent their world based on fragments, which are conveyed by the projections (figure 13.9.) of the grandmother, who embodies the transmission of knowledge and the reinvention of the world in Brazil.

FIGURE 13.8 "Reading the sand"
PHOTO BY TAILLA DE PAULA

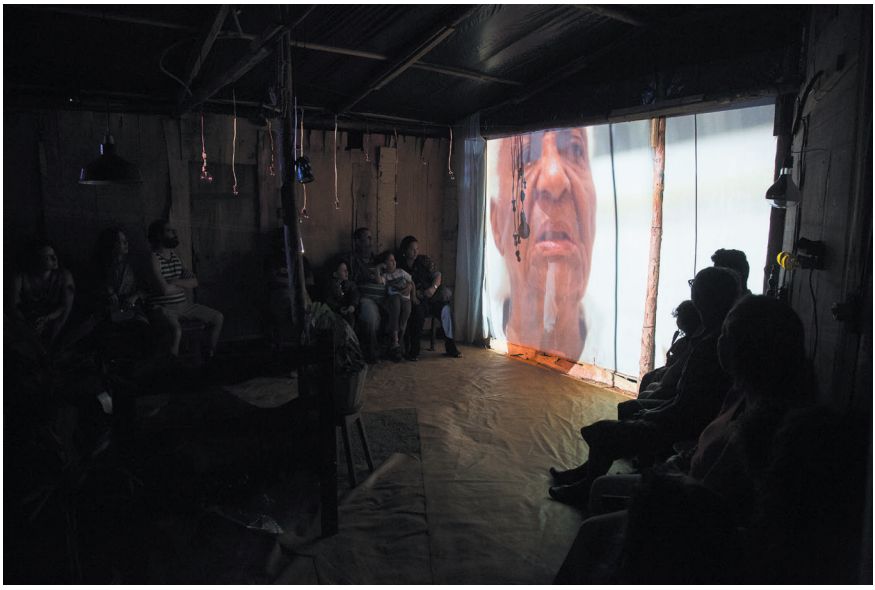

FIGURE 13.9 Projection of the grandmother
PHOTO BY GUTO MUNIZ

5 The In-Betweens: Visual, Sonic, and Symbolic Connections and Ruptures

As the spectator is confined to one room, he experiences only the events taking place in the same room. But there is still sound coming from elsewhere, as well as video projections on the window and wall. With these additional elements, Araújo builds a universe that goes beyond the space of one room. Sometimes, when the curtains of Camamu and Quebra Machado are opened at the same time, glimpses into the other rooms are possible. As the two rooms are opposite each other with the technical booth in between, the view is obstructed, but still allows for observing the shadows moving on the other side. Conversely, the spectators sometimes see the silhouette of the director/narrator behind the slightly transparent fabric of the curtains. In this way, the set depicting the barracks also uses light and shadow to create a space that varies between different grades of confinement and expansiveness by sound and visual fragments added by projections and the use of mise en abyme. Araújo succeeds in visualizing the disturbances of the channels of transmission of memories and knowledge, so that the spectator can experience the loss of meaning for himself; he thus has to make his own effort to combine and arrange the fragments of knowledge transmitted in an unknown or forgotten language, as well as in the unconnected pieces of sound, tales, and images. It seems as if the music and rhythms alone create the continuity between the spatial and temporal elements, and which allow this continuity to resume as part of a larger rhythmic pattern even after interruptions and pauses. Baranzoni and Vignola use the concepts of polyrhythm, tidalectics, and creolization—referring to Deleuze/Guattari, Brathwaite, and Glissant, respectively—in combination with the notion of performance to conceive of locality as a "rhythmic movement":

> Through this kind of rhythmic movement, which originates and is originated at the same time, we become capable of grasping and feeling a concept of locality that is neither fixed in a specific territory nor represents a central and ancient place: rather it is a particular way of *giving* place, continuously becoming something else, and as such proliferating, through different territories, by a singular language, sound, movement. In brief: a certain kind of expression that marks a poetic territory *to come*.[17]

17 Sara Baranzoni & Paolo Vignola, "Rhythms of Locality. A Travel Through Caribbean Performances and Literature," *Rhythm, Chaos and Nonpulsed Man* [*Special Issue*] *La Deleuziana* 10, (October 2019): 167.

Araújo creates this poetic territory with *Quaseilhas*, which is continuously becoming something else with the different reconstructions of memory by each spectator in their respective context. The play allows entry to a locality that must be brought to life by the shared experience of the actors' performance, joined by the spectators to create a poetic time-space that transcends the past, the present, and the future. The play turns into a quasi rite of passage during which the spectators live some of the loss and estrangement caused by the forced and violent rupture with one's origins.

6 Beyond Fragmented Memories: Afrofuturistic Perspectives

While the core of the play focuses on memories and the linkages between past and present, there are elements that go beyond the questions of how to reconstruct fragmented memories in a violent historical context. The Brazilian critic Aldri Anunciação underlines the importance of the references to Afrofuturism in *Quaseilhas*:

> Another disturbance provoked by this performance is the aesthetic dialogue with what we call Afrofuturism (Mark Dery). The antinomy between the object-memory that traditionally tends to throw us towards a narrative of the past, and the Afrofuturism that imposes itself in the scene of *Quaseilhas*, promotes yet another challenge to the audience, who is impelled to re-signify the blackness that is so commonly associated (in the arrogant wing of the analytic contemporaneity) to a primitive and regressed figural. In 2018, the symbolic speed of Afrofuturism [...] crosses the Bahian performance *Quaseilhas*, sealing the complex temporal articulation of the narrative that associates past, present and future through Yoruban oríkìs of his author-director.[18]

Anunciação stresses—en passant—one of the most important aspects of *Quaseilhas*, namely how the reenactment of the past can open up perspectives on futures that might depart from the continuing sociopolitical marginalization of Afro-descendants in Brazil. The hints at imagining the future are mainly embedded in the costumes of the actors: the gowns, hoodies, and black stripes on their arms and goggles seem to evoke outfits from cyberpunk and science

18 Aldri Anunciação, "The Language of Secrecy in Brazilian Performance 'Quaseilhas'," *The Theater Times*, September 30, 2018. https://thetheatretimes.com/the-language-of-secrecy-in-brazilian-performance-quaseilhas/.

FIGURE 13.10 One female actor wearing "enlightened" goggles
PHOTO BY SHAI ANDRADE

fiction films (see figure 13.6, 13.8, 13.10, 13.11), alluding to past and future, African American elements, all used in Afrofuturistic narratives.

Through the aesthetic of both the decor and the clothing, Afrofuturism becomes an integral part of the back-and-forth wanderings in the time-space continuum. The references to Afrofuturism are even more evident in the posters announcing the play. They show faces and heads that are partly comprised of mineral elements, so that the human body seems to be composed of more than just "flesh," carrying connotations of hybrid beings like cyborgs. The collage in figure 13.11. shows a floating being or an island composed of vegetal, human, and earthen elements. The poster turns the Afro-descendant person into an "almost island," a detached island floating on the sea without any orientation. At the same time, the hybrid being also floats in the air, linking it with representations of time travel and the science-fictional imagination of the future (figure 13.12.).

In an article, Kodwo Eshun explains the importance of Afrofuturism to the conceptualization of history and possible futures in the context of the history of slavery and its aftermath:

> In this context, inquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial. The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny

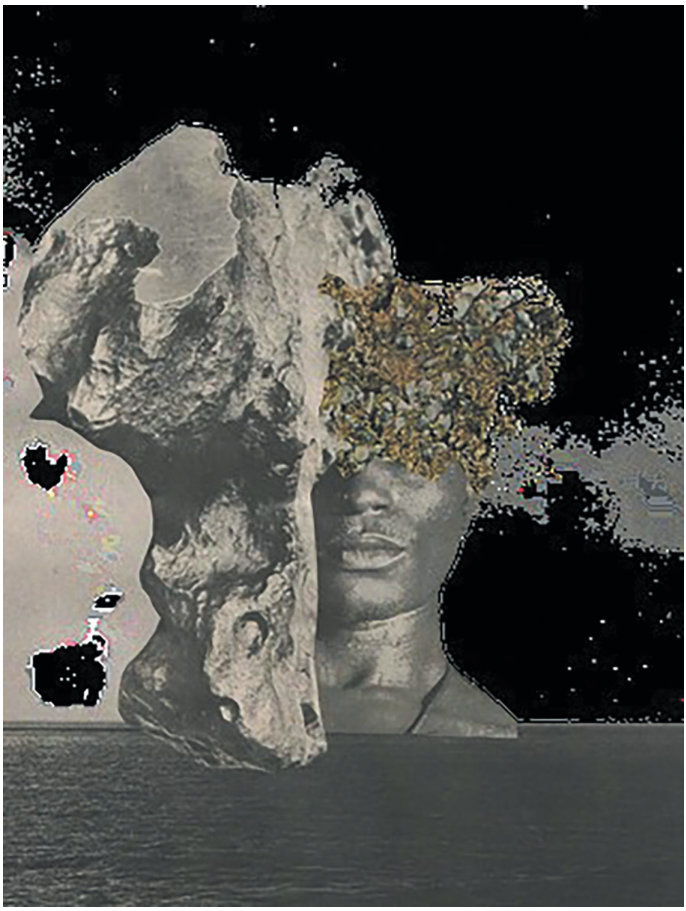

FIGURE 13.11 *Quaseilhas*
PHOTO: DIEGO ARAÚJO, HTTPS://PLATAFORMAARAKA.WIXSITE.COM/QUASEILHAS/FOTOS

> the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.[19]

Araújo tries to bring a proleptic perspective into *Quaseilhas*, as the actors seem to come from the future, reliving traumatic moments in the past. Going back and forth in time and space enables the spectators to question projected

19 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (June 2003), 289.

FIGURE 13.12 *Quaseilhas*
PHOTO: DIEGO ARAÚJO, HTTPS://PLATAFORMAARAKA.WIXSITE.COM/QUASEILHAS/FOTOS

futures of Afro-descendants in Brazil that seem to be limited to the designated marginalized and inferior social spaces. A change in the perception of Afro-descendants as not being predefined by their violent past would be the premise of a changing imaginary for possible futures. Eshun speaks of disturbances of "the linear time of progress":

> By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically

> speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates.[20]

The time-traveling capacity of the three-compartment-shed unsettles the official linear conceptualization of Afro-descendants' history, combining fragments of diverse stories that comment on and question each other, provoking uncertainty that yields open questions at best.

Bill Ashcroft also draws our attention to the construction of time in postcolonial contexts:

> Memory refers to a past *that has never been present* not only because the present is a continual flow, but because memory invokes a past that must be *projected*, so to speak, into the future—not only the future of its recalling, but *the future of the realm of possibility* [emphasis mine] itself. This process deploys a radically transformed sense of the relation between memory and the future: The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, re-figuring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. This leads me to conclude that a proper understanding of the capacity of the creative spirit to anticipate the future requires a rethinking of the nature of time itself.[21]

In this sense, "the future of the realm of possibility" is staged in the Quebra Machado room, where the television set has no picture, indicating that no preconceived images or concepts are there; the actor, meanwhile, is searching for these ideas and concepts while wearing the goggles (figure 13.8.). The search for the future in noisy screens, nonexistent images, and in the sand underlines the uncertainties that have to be answered by the past, but that also leave room for imagining a future different from the past.

The changing perception of the past is also inscribed in the moment when the actor stands astride the bathtub symbolizing the slave ship. The descendant of the slaves controls the movements of the ship as well as the memory

20 Eshun, "Further Considerations," 297.

21 Ashcroft 2013, 100. Ashcroft is referring to Homi Bhabha, *Location of culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 10.

of the passage. By taking control of the vessel, he brings the enduring curse on slave descendants to an end (figure 13.6.).

As Araújo has underlined in an interview, his strategy is to address the "non-time" that Afro-descendants inhabit: "non-time" circumscribes the entanglement of loss of memory, violent disruption with one's origins, and the lack of alternative futures. With *Quaseilhas*, he has created a time-space-capsule that allows spectators to relive traumas in order to escape the repetitive vortex of fragmented history so that new imaginaries of a future world can open up. *Quaseilhas* takes the spectators on a time-traveling journey to parallel universes in the past and present, showing how the future can be reinvented by creating different images and prospects in a process of imaginary worlding of the play/installation as a time-space capsule.

References

Adedeji, Joel Adeyinka. "*The Alárinjó theatre: The Study of a Yoruba Theatrical Art from Its Earliest Beginnings to the Present Times*." PhD diss., University of Ibadan, 1969.

Alexandre, Marcos Antônio. *O teatro negro em perspectiva: dramaturgia e cena negra no Brasil e em Cuba*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Malê, 2017.

Anunciação, Aldri. "The Language of Secrecy in Brazilian Performance 'Quaseilhas'." *The Theater Times*, September 30, 2018. https://thetheatretimes.com/the-language-of-secrecy-in-brazilian-performance-quaseilhas/.

Ashcroft, Bill. "African Futures: The Necessity of Utopia." *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 8, no 1 (June 2013): 94–114.

Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Functions, Media, Archives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Baranzoni, Sara and Paolo Vignola. "Rhythms of Locality. A Travel Through Caribbean Performances and Literature." *Rhythm, Chaos and Nonpulsed Man* [*Special Issue*] *La Deleuziana* 10. (October 2019): 160–177.

Barber, Karin. "Interpreting *Oríkì* as History and as Literature." *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* [*Birmingham University African Studies Series 1*], edited by Karin Barber and Paolo F. de Moraes Farias, 13–23. Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, 1989.

Barber, Karin. "*Oríkì*, Women and the Proliferation and Merging of *òrìṣà*." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 60, no. 3, (July 1990): 313–337.

Barber, Karin. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow. Oríkì, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991.

Benítez Rojo, Antonio. *The Caribbean and the Postcolonial Perspective* (*Post-Contemporary Interventions*). Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge, 1994.

Brown, Benita, Dannabang, Kuwabong, and Christopher, Olsen, eds. *Myth Performance in the African Diasporas. Ritual, Theatre, and Dance.* Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014.

Carter-Ényi, Aaron. "Lùlù fùn wọn. *Oríkì* in Contemporary Culture." *Ethnomusicology* 62, no. 1, (January 2018). DPO_10.5406/ethnomusicology.62.1.0083.

Douxami, Christine. "Brazilian Black Theatre. A Political Theatre Against Racism." *The Drama Review* 63, no. 1, (March 2019): 32–51.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (June 2003): 287–302.

Glissant, Edouard. *Le discours antillais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

Oloruntoba-Oju, Omotayo. "From *Alárinjó* to *Arugba:* Continuities in Indigenous Nigerian Drama." *African Identities* 11, no. 4 (November 2013), 395–406.

Oyeleye, Olayinka Matthew. "Feminism(s) and Oppression: Rethinking Gender from a Yoruba Perspective." *The Palgrave Handbook of African philosophy* edited by Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola, 349–370. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Rajewsky, Irina. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermédialités/Intermediality* 6, (Fall 2005), 43–64. https://doi.org/10.7202/10055.

Ritzer, Ivo, and Peter Schulze. *Transmediale Genre-Passagen. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016.

Tavares Lima, Evani. "*Um Olhar sobre o Teatro Negro do Teatro Experimental do Negro e do Bando de Teatro Olodum*." PhD diss., University of Campinas. 2010. http://repositorio.unicamp.br/jspui/handle/REPOSIP/283930.

CHAPTER 14

The Slave-Trade Trauma in Léonora Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* (*Season of the Shadow*)

Thierry Boudjekeu Kamgang

The drive to uncover the untold stories of the past and the art of crafting a memory of the slave trade from an African standpoint are seen as efforts to reinterpret trauma and expand the world's comprehension of the concept. French-writing contemporary African authors writing in French are committed to bringing to light personal and collective experiences and exposing the obscured aspects of Africa's slave history. They strive to bring to the forefront the lingering impacts of past traumas. This can be referred to as "worlding", the act of writing to create imaginaries portraying the strides of human existence. When traumas are intangible and violence defies expression, novelists find alternative ways of recalling these events through their writing, with the aim of gaining recognition, promoting collective consciousness, and fostering healing. By (re)visiting the atrocious deeds and happenings of the Atlantic slave trade, they represent the traumatic past and subsequently (re)imagine alternative views and avenues to the advent a new world or new worlds. Worlding therefore translates the power of fiction and its revealing and healing power to envision and reconfigure the world.

1 The Promise and Potential of African Narratives for the Study of Trauma

Recent trauma studies emphasize the importance of studying postcolonial literatures in the context of trauma studies due to the colonization-related violence that these literatures repeatedly narrate.[1] In the African context, literature has always been concerned with all phases of African traumatic history. African writers generally feel they have a responsibility or "mission" to respond to trauma. Consequently, African trauma narratives are "goldmines"

1 Anne Whitehead, "Journeying Through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria," *Studies in the novel* 40, 1/2 (2008), 16.

for trauma studies.[2] Throughout the genre of African postcolonial novels, there is strong evidence that the traumatic experiences critically examined generally pertain to works by Anglophone authors (e.g., Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aido, Amos Tutuola, Ayesha Harruna Tatah). The peculiarity of the political and cultural-historical context of societies formerly under French influence makes it intriguing to know how current findings may apply to this context. Examining narratives by French-speaking sub-Saharan writers is likely to consolidate recent results or even bring new perspectives to the study of trauma. In this regard, this contribution sets out to broaden early research by examining the literary modalities put forth by Franco-Cameroonian Léonora Miano to (re) write the slave-trade trauma experience of Africans in *La Saison de l'ombre*. This work of fiction lends itself quite well to the study of the effects of trauma and its expressions in contemporary sub-Saharan literature and displays features that are probably of significance to the expansion of trauma studies as it is today.

The award-winning novel *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013) rewrites the memory of the slave trade and offers a refreshing perspective on one of the most painful episodes in human history. In this historical novel, Léonora Miano tells the tragic story of the Mulongo community and portrays the traumatic effect of kidnappings and deportation on precolonial African societies. This essay examines the modalities of inscribing trauma and explores the postcolonial position toward the slave trade treated in the text under study. The essay further attempts to consider to what extent early models and recent postcolonial approaches to trauma apply to the text. Is the slave-trade trauma uniformly illustrated, or does *La Saison de l'ombre* signal the existence of other explorable aspects relevant to trauma studies? Finally, what are the therapeutic alternatives that the author proposes to overcome this trauma in today's Africa? This essay probes into the untapped Francophone African literature to uncover possible new perspectives for trauma studies.

2 Miano's Origin, Career, and Interest in Slavery

Born in Cameroon in 1973, Léonora Miano left for France in 1991 and is one of the most prolific contemporary sub-Saharan writers. Her work has been translated into several languages, including English, Italian, and German. She has published novels, plays, and short stories, which have earned her various awards from major literary authorities both in France and internationally.

2 J. R. Kurtz, "Literature, Trauma and the African Moral Imagination," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 32, no. 4 (2014).

Through her work, Miano tells the story of Africans and Afro-descendants both on the continent and in the diaspora. Regardless of where they are set, Miano's characters usually experience the tragic history and the traumatic effects of Western imperialism on the African continent. Furthermore, Miano also writes self-reflexive critical texts to present her vision and explain her approach as a writer. She has respectively published *Habiter la frontière* (2012),[3] a conference anthology that develops her "Afropean" thinking about "living in-between," and *L'Impératif transgressif* (2016),[4] which calls for African self-awareness. She sees herself as belonging to a generation of sub-Saharans sufficiently prepared to explore the shadowed spaces of African history. She argues that her generation is ready to reflect on the shameful, outrageous events African history entails. Out of a deep-seated commitment to sub-Saharan Africa and its peoples, she calls for the understanding of oneself, the acceptance of both individual and collective responsibility as the first step toward absolute freedom. To those who challenge her work as a reproduction of the Eurocentric representation of the African subject,[5] Miano replies that not wanting to say what hurts in order to discover oneself is highly problematic. Consequently, Miano suggests that highlighting and recognizing this painful past is a precondition for casting off the specter overshadowing Africa's self-consciousness in order to break this silence. Thus, she exercises her *devoir de mémoire* (duty to remember) in order to record the experiences of Africans and Afro-descendants and to build the memory of those African communities who lived before colonization and whose tragic fate no one has narrated.[6] While actively acknowledging the significant impact of European colonial power in fragmenting African memory, Miano underlines the responsibility of Africans in the slave trade. This is the main focus of *La Saison de l'ombre*, which is analyzed in this contribution from the perspective of trauma.

3 Trauma Studies and the Postcolonial Movement

Early theorizations of the notion of trauma have been heavily criticized for their highly Western approaches and frames of reference. Trauma criticism developed almost exclusively from the Euro-American traumatic experience of the Jewish Holocaust, which captured more attention than any other

3 Léonora Miano, *Habiter la frontière: Conférences* (Paris: Arche, 2012).

4 Léonora Miano, *L' impératif transgressif: Communications, réflexions* (Paris: L'Arche, 2016).

5 E.g. Étienne-Marie Lassi, "Recyclage des discours sur l'Afrique et inscription de la doxa métropolitaine dans les romans de Léonora Miano," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 49, no. 3 (2015).

6 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 246.

event in an unprecedented way. This Western-centered approach significantly undermined the ethical commitment of the traditional, pioneering models of trauma,[7] as it surprisingly ignored other past and present trauma experienced elsewhere with equal, if not greater, regularity and emergency.[8] Subsequent movements associate postcolonial theories with the study of trauma. These postcolonial trauma models are based on the premise that colonization is one of the most tragic events experienced by the non-Western world, and as such, should be approached as a "collectively inflicted trauma and postcolonisation as a 'post-traumatic cultural formation'".[9] The 2008 volume *Postcolonial Trauma Novels* concluded with the great potential for "postcolonizing" trauma studies by examining colonial-specific traumata including apartheid, colonialism, and slavery.[10] Stef Craps develops this theory by revisiting trauma theory from a "postcolonial perspective".[11]

Further criticism, spearheaded by Michael Rothberg's influential work on "multidirectional memory" (2009), has made the case for a comparative approach to memory that examines historical violence through a cross-cultural framework. A comparative and interdisciplinary approach may prove to be productive in understanding the trauma experienced by both non-Western and Western communities. A multidirectional postcolonial memory approach renews the study of trauma and complexifies the already confusing notion of trauma.

Based primarily on Freudian principles, literary models of trauma theory describe trauma as a "late" psychological response to a sudden, overwhelming event that is difficult if not impossible to deal with as the action unfolds. The tragic event dates back to the memory of the traumatized subject. These memories are repressed during their formation, leaving them unavailable for conscious recall. Consequently, they replicate in various ways and take on the form of hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares.[12] When the traumatic event resurfaces, the sudden clash of past and present "violently opens passages

7 E.g. Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, 2. print, A Johns Hopkins paperback (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995).

8 Rebecca Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US; Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 15.

9 Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the novel* 40, 1&2 (2008): 2.

10 Ibid.

11 Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2014), 126–27.

12 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 91.

between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that confuse".[13] The trauma strongly resists the subject's articulation and expression that seek to explain the original "unclaimed" experience.[14] In this regard, Roger Luckhurst suggests that trauma "also appears in a disturbingly transmissible way: it leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients and physicians via the mysterious processes of transference or suggestion, and between victims and their listeners or viewers".[15] While classical trauma theory tends to focus on individual traumatic experiences, the postcolonial model of trauma extends the individual viewpoint to the collective implications of trauma.[16] This collective appreciation of trauma ties in with Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory," which describes how the powerful, often traumatic experience of Holocaust survivors is transmitted to the following generation.[17] In the Black Atlantic context, several authors have acknowledged the fact that slavery as a collective form of trauma still shapes African American identity.[18] References to the abovementioned principles of slave-trade-related trauma are spread throughout *La Saison de l'ombre*, in which several characters, mainly female, display a good number of the traits enumerated above and others.

Furthermore, it should be noted that African tradition boasts of trauma-therapeutic processes. One of them is mourning. This notion plays a significant role in Ngũgĩ's vision for the restoration of memory. Mourning fosters the quest for wholeness in the literary text, "a quest that has underlain African struggles since the Atlantic slave trade".[19] By "struggles," Ngũgĩ means visionary movements like Pan-Africanism, negritude, *ubuntu*, and African humanism. These concepts lean crucially on African social healing resources. "Out of the fragments and the observance of proper mourning rites comes the wholeness of a body re-membered with itself and with its spirit".[20] The fact that Miano's protagonist follows strict spiritual rules during burial is evidence

13 Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 3.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Laura Murphy, "The Curse of Constant Remembrance: The Belated Trauma of the Slave Trade in Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments," *Studies in the novel* 40, no. 1 (2008): 53.

17 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust,* Gender and culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

18 Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, 1. publ., transferred to digital print, Cambridge cultural social studies (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 2.

19 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), 35.

20 Ibid.

of African healing practices. By properly mourning the death all through the novel, Miano makes it possible to honor and acknowledge the loss and "purge oneself of the negative effects of trauma".[21] To grapple with how Miano deals with trauma in her novel and understand her take on the slave trade, it is relevant to examine her trajectory and positionality.

4 Miano and the Slave-Trade Trauma

The slave-trade memory is an obsession for Léonora Miano. She has communicated widely regarding her opinion, her vision, and her literary approach on this subject. This tragic history, which entailed the capture of millions of Africans and their deportation across the Atlantic continues to have a tremendous impact on the identity and future of Africans. However, this enterprise could not have been successful without the active participation, willing or otherwise, of at least some portion of the African population. As a native of the Cameroonian coastal region, Miano points out how victims of the slave trade cohabitate with the descendants of those who facilitated the capture of individuals from various antagonistic tribes.[22] In addition to the shame of having been colonized by former trading partners, this complicity may account for the silence and the current memory vacuum concerning slavery.

This positioning aligns with Achille Mbembe's statement on the inexistence or fragmentary memory of the slave trade in the African imagination.[23] While subsequent critical reactions challenged this provocative statement, it remains a reality in Francophone Africa, where the slave trade is still only sporadically discussed despite efforts to restore the slave trade to public memory. Borgomano (2000) questions the absence of a memory of the slave trade and slavery in sub-Saharan African literature and deplores the lack of *romans-bilans*[24] on this sensitive history.[25] She notes references in the narratives of a minority of

21 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 57.

22 David Caviglioli, "Léonora Miano: ce que l'esclavage a fait à l'Afrique," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 23, 2013, https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20131023.OBS2280/leonora-miano-ce-que-l-esclavage-a-fait-a-l-afrique.html.

23 Achille Mbembe, "À propos des écritures africaines de soi," *Politique africaine* 77, no. 1 (2020): 32.

24 By "romans-bilans" Borgonoma refers to African novel which narrate the entire experience of the slave trade on the continent.

25 Madeleine Borgomano, "La littérature romanesque d'Afrique noire et l'esclavage « une mémoire de l'oubli » ?," in *Esclavage et abolitions, mémoires et système de représentation*, ed. Marie-Christine Rochmann (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

early writers, who have mentioned slavery either in the background, in passing, or as a coded reference. Nevertheless, for some contemporary novelists, slavery forms the backdrop of their work (e.g. Kangni Alem, *Esclaves* (2009);[26] Wilfried N'sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers trois continents* (2018);[27] and Marième M. Ndiaye, *Le Crépuscule des boekins* (2015)[28]). *La Saison de l'ombre* is one of these.

5 The Traumatic Memory of Capture

Miano builds the narrative structure of *La Saison de l'ombre* on the trope of capture. As she puts it, the primary purpose of her literary endeavor is to locate the turning point between precolonial Africa and the advent of a new world. Capture is the radically traumatic event that triggers psychosis in Mulongo village. The novel' configuration around a sudden and brutal abduction in the context of the slave trade reflects one of the principles of classical models of trauma. The effect of capture is depicted right at the beginning of the novel, which features isolated women whose sons disappear during the great fire that precedes the opening scene, as can be read in the beginning of the story, "Les cases n'ont pas toutes été rebâties après le grand incendie" [Not all the huts were rebuilt after the big fire].[29]

In this passage, the women are quarantined to protect the community from the psychological repercussions that their alleged misfortune might have on the entire clan. In their captivity, these women are haunted by the ghosts of their respective sons, whose voices they hear in their dreams. The exchange occurs in a dreamlike fashion that is conducive to communication between the survivors and the missing, between the absent and the present.

> Dans leur sommeil, il leur arrive une chose étrange. Comme leur esprit navigue dans les contrées du rêve qui sont une autre dimension de la réalité, elles font une rencontre. Une présence ombreuse vient à elles, à chacune d'elles, et chacune d'elles reconnaîtrait entre mille la voix qui parle. Dans leur rêve, elles penchent la tête, étirent le cou, cherchent à percer cette ombre. Voir ce visage. L'obscurité est épaisse. Elles ne

26 Alem Kangni, *Esclaves: Roman* (Paris: Lattès, 2009).

27 Wilfried N'Sondé, *Un océan, deux mers, trois continents: Roman* (Arles: Actes sud, 2018).

28 Mariéme M. Ndiaye, *Des hommes et des chaînes,* Collection Roman (Achères: Dagan, 2015).

29 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 11.

> distinguent rien. Il n'y a que cette parole […] *Mère, ouvre-moi, afin que je puisse renaître*.
>
> In their sleep, something strange happens to them. As their minds navigate through dreamland, which is another dimension of reality, they have an encounter. A shadowy presence comes to them, to each one of them, and each one of them would recognize the voice that speaks from a thousand others. In their dream, they tilt their heads, stretch the neck, try to pierce the shadow to see that face. The darkness is thick. They do not distinguish anything. There is only this phrase […] *Mother, open to me, so that I may be reborn*.[30]

Their dreams turn into nightmares, as they can hardly see the faces associated with the voices. They fear this might be the call of a mystical being bearing even more grief. This uncanny situation is completed by the oneiric time setting and the dark cloud covering the distant hut where the women whose sons disappeared are forcibly secluded. Furthermore, these women remain silent even weeks after the tragedy. They are unable to tell their anxiety and never utter the word "loss" or the names of the sons who have not been seen since. They actively fight their grief and suffer horrendously inside themselves, repelling the presumably malevolent voices that resemble those of their missing sons and that emanate from their sleep. "Aucune ne parlera de ce rêve. Aucune ne prendra une sœur à part pour lui chuchoter […] Elles ne prononceront pas les noms de ces fils dont on ignore le sort" [None will speak of this dream. They will not take a sister aside to whisper to her […] They will not speak the names of those sons whose fate is unknown].[31] Precaution is taken under the expectation that the worst is yet to happen. The disappeared might still be alive, and calling their names might ruin any chance of seeing them alive.

As can be inferred from these passages, Miano's characters manifest a variety of the psycho-traumatic characteristics described above: hallucinations, nightmares, repression, and the inability to verbalize the effect of the traumatic kidnapping of their sons. This is how silence comes to cover the wound and the pains associated with it, without healing them. Furthermore, these mothers impatiently await the moment they are free to go back to their everyday lives.

> Elles tressaillent imperceptiblement dans l'attente du jour. Alors elles sortiront. Vaqueront comme si de rien n'était à leurs occupations. Se

30 Ibid., 14.

31 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 16.

> demanderont sans rien exiger, s'il leur sera bientôt permis de rejoindre leurs familles. Elle n'échangeront que des paroles banales, celles qu'on dit en exécutant les paroles domestiques.
>
> They flinch imperceptibly as they await the day. Then they will come out. They will go out as if nothing were happening. They will ask themselves, without demanding anything, if they will soon be allowed to get back to their families. They will exchange only banal words, the ones they say while carrying out their domestic duties.[32]

This sequence recalls the reality of Africans living on both sides of the Atlantic, in anguish over what happened, and their eagerness to come to terms with the vast damage caused by centuries of violence through the slave trade. Moreover, the silence and mystery surrounding the slave trade somehow feed the tensions between ethnic groups on the African continent, as well as between Africa and its diaspora. As long as this painful past is repressed by the African consciousness, it will be almost impossible to build the bonds of solidarity hoped for by Pan-Africanist movements.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, the trope of capture is used to describe the dismemberment of Africa. Ngũgĩ defines "dismemberment" as the fragmentation of the African continent by colonization, globalization, and, most importantly, by the slave trade. He presents the division of the African subject into two entities and his severance from his land, body, and mind. However, Ngũgĩ is primarily interested in the African renaissance and makes little mention of the traumata caused unto Africans by their own brothers or even the psychosomatic impacts of colonial violence. Fanon's work takes this further by providing a psychoanalytic assessment of the devastating impact of colonial violence on the individual and the nation.[33] His work helps to understand the damage to the psycho-emotional balance of the colonized at the hands of colonial oppression. While this approach refers to colonial violence, it can be instrumental in analyzing the slave-trade context in which Miano's novel is set.

Miano builds on this physical, mental, and spiritual dismemberment. She stages the kidnapping of Mulongo men and their delivery by the neighboring Bwele "brothers," with whom they have long-standing economic ties and peaceful social relations through commerce and other forms of exchange. By portraying the decay of the ethical virtues of African tradition, which prevailed before the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, Miano thus reenacts the

32 Ibid., 17.

33 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Paladin, 1967); Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

aggression of Africans toward Africans. The text takes the form of an investigative journey. All throughout, as members of the Mulongo village—namely Eyabe, followed by chief Mukano—continue to look for the disappeared, they discover that their closest neighbors are the main actors responsible for their dismay and sorrow. This is revealed in many instances in the text and illustrated particularly when chief Mukano meets Queen Njanjo, queen of the Bwele. Humiliated as soon as he enters the Bwele territory's gates, Mukano, despite his rank of chief, is stripped and tied up like a captive, then brought with his guards to Queen Njanjo's palace. Once in the compound, Mukano is shocked to meet his brother Mutango, who had previously come on his own and was arrested, tortured, and exposed in the courtyard, surrounded by the queen's relatives. The queen ironically apologizes for her soldiers' manner and welcomes Mukano.[34] To him, the queen claims that she does not know much about the fate of the twelve Mulongo men except that traces of a column of men were discovered between the Bwele and Mulongo territories toward "Jedu," the coast.[35] At the prison where he is brought, Mutango learns from Bwemba, a Bwele soldier who participated in the abduction in Mulongo land, that his kingdom has signed a contract with the coastal people, who are asking for men to guarantee peace to the Bwele. This somewhat unexpected situation reflects the stakes for and constraints imposed on the people and leadership of the time by the dynamics of the slave trade—dynamics that rhyme with and result in lies, conspiracy, and betrayal.

Moreover, trauma is manifested in the treatment inflicted on the captives during their journey from the hinterland to the horrific Atlantic coasts. Miano gives voice to the captives to express the suffering and affliction they endure while crossing the forest to reach the slave port. In a long passage in the chapter "Terre de capture [Land of capture]," Mukudi, one of the abducted sons, confides to Eyabe the inhuman treatment they all underwent: "What we were experiencing was already an inversion of all principles [...] it did not make sense".[36] They walked by night "with shaved heads, tied fists, naked like the children we had ceased to be, our necks caught between branches of *mwenge*",[37] staring forward and forced to advance toward their gruesome common destiny. "These people took everything away from us. All".[38] "At the back of our jail, we

34 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 108.
35 Ibid., 114.
36 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 187–91.
37 Ibid., 187–88.
38 Ibid., 188.

were now dragging metal chains around our ankles".[39] They "looked at us in a way decency forbids to describe." The reader is confronted with the outrageous reality of the slave trade, caught up in violent aggression and dehumanization. Captives are reduced to raw materials, a commodity maltreated and exploited in the name of the trade. The words Mukudi utters are particularly revealing of Miano's concern to expose the ills of man yesterday and today. This violent system results in the complete destruction of African society and its perennial submission to the power of its oppressor. It moreover emphasizes the active involvement of Africans in the outrageous economy of the slave trade. Through highlighting the suffering of the victims and the atrocity of the executioners, Miano reconstructs the backdrop of the painful and shameful history of trafficking. She thus breaks taboo and invites us to reflect on this very controversial subject, still to be adequately tackled in Francophone Africa.

La Saison de l'ombre revisits not only the responsibility of Africans in the slave trade, but also crucial questions raised in classical slave narratives. The extreme suffering of human beings that projects the deported to the shores of the supernatural recalls the great novels of Toni Morrison (cf. *Beloved* (1987)).[40] Like the American icon, Léonora Miano resonates with female voices, doubly deprived of the right to speak by the oppressions suffered, and yet spearheading a renaissance. This feminine gaze is an essential reading grid of African identity and memory. Female novelists from the 1990s to today evoke—without taboos—the body and desire of African women, but also their suffering, as evidenced by the works of Mariama Bâ, Fatou Keita, and Calixte Beyala, among others. However, Miano takes a new perspective and gives a different role to her female characters. Miano not only aspires to emancipate women, but also, and above all, has a vocation to contribute to the emancipation of the community as a whole. This aspect is highlighted in the concept of womanism, which corresponds to Miano's literary aspiration. Indeed, it is the entire Black community that the womanist activist wants to emancipate.[41] As such, female protagonists in *La Saison de l'ombre* bear all the misfortunes of the Mulongo victims of the slave trade. Women with their maternal, empathetic, and vulnerable nature enable Miano to materialize the pangs of capture. In addition to the fear and pain of the loss of their sons, the twelve women are presented as witches. They live the pain of loss in their flesh. They lose their sons and their village is wiped from the map by the slave raids. Their conditions reflect

39 Ibid., 189.

40 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987).

41 Sylvie Laurent, "Le «tiers-espace» de Léonora Miano romancière afropéenne," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 204 (2011): 772.

a state of abjection, such as Kristeva describes it in these words: "Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you"[42]—in Miano's novel, a brother who sells or kills you. This is the case of Ebeise, the village midwife turned village gravedigger, who will have to bury the lifeless bodies left by the kidnappers after a second fatal attack on the village. With her sister Eyabe, Ebeise also bears the heavy task of transmitting their remaining values and traditions to posterity. This burden can clearly be felt by the reader as Ebeise recalls the tragic episodes she has sadly witnessed. As her feet sink into the moving mud of the mangrove, Ebeise sings a song to build and boost her courage:

> […] un air sans joie, comme ceux que les femmes ont créés pour dire la nuit du grand incendie, la disparition des leurs, la réclusion des dix mères éprouvées dans une case isolée […] Elle se souvient d'Eleke sa plus-que-sœur […] L'ancienne pense à son fils aîné, dont elle a dû arracher la tête à une poule. Elle pense à son mari, le maître des mystères qui ne s'est pas manifesté. Elle convoque le chef, interroge les sages de la communauté qu'elle a dû enterrer.
>
> A song void of joy, like those that the women composed to depict the night of the great fire, the disappearance of their sons, the seclusion of the ten grieved mothers in an isolated hut […] She remembers Eleke, her more-than-a-sister […] The elder thinks of her eldest son, whose head she must have torn off from a hen. She thinks of her husband, the master of mysteries who does not know how to manifest. She summons the chief, questions the elders of the community she was forced to bury.[43]

The status, trajectory, and fate of the female character Ebeise make her a major player in Miano's literary approach to staging the effect of trauma on Africa. Ebeise is positioned by Miano as a metaphor for Mother Africa. She embodies Africa as having been traumatized and bruised by numerous successive tragedies. Firstly, Ebeise is one of the direct victims of the fire that ravages the village. She loses her husband, who served as the spiritual guide of the Mulongo community. She then assumes the responsibility for spiritually guiding the chief Mukano and the elite in their decision-making. Despite her

42 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* European perspectives (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 4.

43 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 234–35.

grief, she must inspire strength and hope in the traumatized women. She only allows herself to express her feelings and fears to her sister Eleke, who later dies in her arms. As the midwife who delivered the sons and daughters of the clan, she witnesses the carnage that decimates the whole village. These painful and upsetting events keep unfolding. She is puzzled by the unprecedented brutality of the Bwele neighbors against the Mulongo and questions the fate of her own people. Ebeise's fate explicitly symbolizes a tormented Africa that has seen her children tear each other apart and whose future depends on their ability to pose the right questions. "Let it be given to him to say the horror".[44] Telling this horror would allow us to reconnect with its deep history, inglorious but necessary to overcome the trauma of the slave trade and bring about a new Africa.[45]

These different forms of trauma and many others, such as the trauma of the Bwele kidnappers, which is not mentioned in this analysis, connect to give the reader the purview and scale of a practice that deeply affected Africa and continues to compromise the future of the African people dispersed throughout the world. All the same, one question remains: what alternative(s) does Miano concretely propose to face the trauma of the slave trade?

6 Trauma Healing, Mourning, and African Renaissance

Three criteria summarize the healing models that trauma theory offers to overcome the effects of trauma: "(1) establishing a place of safety and groundedness, however provisional, for those caught up in trauma, (2) the acknowledgment by trauma victims of their losses, along with an understanding of the causes of their trauma, and (3) the forging of new connections and relationships that can ultimately result in a transformed sense of purpose, meaning and identity".[46]

In *Something Torn and New: Towards an African Renaissance*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o talks about the need for acts of re-memberment to deal with the painful slave past. After presenting the practices of dismemberment exercised by the colonial system, he advocates for the retrieval and exchange of African memory. Ngũgĩ underlines how, in this retrospective effort, literature plays and must play a central role to reconstitute, or to "re-member," the fragments scattered by colonial powers. The notion of remembering can therefore be understood

44 Ibid., 229.

45 Cf. Birgit Pape-Thoma, "Léonora Miano: «Pour créer une nouvelle Afrique, il nous faut accepter notre passé»," http://afrik.com/article10935.html.

46 Kurtz, "Literature, trauma and the African moral imagination"

in two ways. First, as the need for retrospection, revisiting previous chapters of African history in order to address the pains and traumata repressed by the effect of greed or by simple reluctance to speak out. The second part concerns reconciliation. To reunite Africa is to reunite the sons and daughters of the continent divided by the slave trade and slavery. The novel puts forth Ngũgĩ's principle of retrospection. Miano's work uncovers the untold and painful stories of millions of Africans abducted, maltreated, and deported, some of whom died in the Middle Passage. *Season of the Shadow* is a tale in which Miano questions hidden history and forgotten memory. The novel has been analyzed as an initiatory narrative that reveals the desire to lift the veil on the African memory of slavery,[47] and also as a historical thriller that explores the meanders of the slave trade from the interior.[48]

The notion of re-memberment is further exemplified in Miano's novel by female protagonists; reconnection with the past is materialized by tradition and ancestral beliefs, but also in the characters who embody the victims of trafficking. Eyabe, the main character, embodies this desire for freedom and to unravel the mystery. Like a great rebel, she stepped out of the isolation hut to shed light on the fate of her missing son and others. The heroine of the novel, in her new capacity as investigator, worthy of a detective novel, embarks on an initiatory journey in search of the missing in order to free herself from maternal grief and the trauma that overwhelms her. Through this initiatory journey undertaken by Eyabe, Miano shows the way forward toward self-awareness. It is crucial to turn back and unveil the tragic and shameful past so as to understand what happened in a bid to redefine our identity and eventually reconcile Africans as a whole.

This initiatory journey acts as post-traumatic therapy aimed at helping the traumatized subjects come to terms with the resurgence of the devastating and unbearable past. The author's approach is in line with LaCapra's notion of "working through," which requires the affected person or group to recognize the anteriority of the event, even if the event in question may have repercussions for the present.[49] Eyabe's energy and virtuous qualities allow Miano to take a fresh look at the history and sub-Saharan memory of the slave trade.

---

47 Christiane Chaulet-Achour, "La force du féminin dans «La Saison de l'ombre»," in *L'Œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano: Fiction, mémoire et enjeux identitaires*, ed. Alice D. Tang (Paris: L›Harmattan, 2014).

48 Yvonne-Marie Mokam, "Polar historique et mémoire de la capture des esclaves, in Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine," http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx10.08/960.

49 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma,* Parallax (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 22.

As mentioned above, mourning is an integral part of the trauma-therapeutic process in the African context. The novel is strewn with several occurrences of burials, necessary to not only pay proper homage to the dead, but most importantly, an eminent way to subdue the pain of losing someone and heal from the trauma death comes with. In the text, mourning rituals are organized and respected at all times, making the novel a form of mourning therapy; each and every dead body is celebrated and given due honor, as is the case with Mutimbo, who is accompanied to his final resting place by songs and funeral orations harmonized by the men and women of Bebayedi.

> La femme dont l'appel a fait venir toute la population, s'est mise à chanter. Comme les autres voix féminines de la communauté se mettent à l'accompagner, répondant en chœur aux phrases qui ponctuent les couplets, Eyabe sait que Mutimbo sera dignement conduit de l'autre côté [...] Tout est bien. Mutimbo ne marchera pas seul vers l'autre côté.
>
> The woman whose call summoned the whole population began to sing. As the other female voices of the community began to accompany her, responding in chorus to the phrases that punctuate the verses, Eyabe knows that Mutimbo will be led with dignity to the other side [...] All is well. Mutimbo will not walk alone to the other side.[50]

For Eyabe, the funeral ceremony symbolizes life in the afterlife. The therapeutic effect on her can be seen in this passage, in which her tears are both a relief and a recognition. "Elle pleure. Ses sanglots s'amplifient à mesure que croît sa gratitude: Nyambe et les esprits ne l'ont pas abandonnée à sa solitude [She cries. Her sobs increase as her gratitude grows: Nyambe and the Gods have not abandoned her in her loneliness]".[51] Miano's characters follow strict spiritual rules during burial: evidence of African healing practices. "Out of the fragments and the observance of proper mourning rites comes the wholeness of a body re-membered with itself and with its spirit".[52] By properly mourning death all through the novel, Miano makes it possible to honor and acknowledge the loss and "purge oneself of the negative effects of trauma".[53]

50 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 146–47.
51 Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 146.
52 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something torn and new*, 35.
53 Ibid., 57.

7 Conclusion

This essay aimed at exploring the slave-trade trauma in the work of one of the most prominent contemporary African writers in French, Léonora Miano. Miano succeeds in depicting the physical and psychological harm inflicted on sub-Saharan communities by the brutal inhumanity that constituted the transatlantic slave trade on the continent. This essay has investigated how different forms of trauma are inscribed in Miano's novel to account for the destructive effect of an outrageous past that marred and continues to jeopardize Africa's renaissance. Miano draws from both canonical and postcolonial models of trauma in a way that throws light on the interactive approach to slave-trade trauma. Her peculiar inscription of trauma in the slave-trade context underlines the potential for non-Western literatures to enrich trauma studies. With this novel, Miano succeeds in entering the African past to tell the story of trafficking and the effects of this violence on the lives of Africans and Afro-descendants. It is also an opportunity for her to question the responsibilities of African actors of trafficking to break a taboo and restore the African subject to its full awareness and voice.[54] This controversial position accounts for the fact that she is very often denied her own African authenticity.[55] As a transatlantic African novel in itself, *La Saison de l'ombre* is a form of world literature. As Yves Clavaron accurately states, it is "writing-between-worlds" that cannot be firmly rooted in one place, transcending national boundaries to embrace transcultural and translinguistic perspectives.

References

Borgomano, Madeleine. "La Littérature Romanesque D'afrique Noire Et L'esclavage « Une Mémoire De L'oubli » ?" In *Esclavage Et Abolitions Mémoires Et Système De Représentation*. Edited by Marie-Christine Rochmann, 99–112. Paris: Karthala, 2000.

Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Edited by Cathy Caruth. 2. print, 1–9. A Johns Hopkins paperback. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996.

54 Miano, *L' impératif transgressif*, 63.

55 Léonora Miano, *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (Paris: Grasset, 2020), 11.

Caviglioli, David. "Léonora Miano: Ce Que L'esclavage a Fait À L'afrique." *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 23, 2013. https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20131023.OBS2280/leonora-miano-ce-que-l-esclavage-a-fait-a-l-afrique.html.

Chaulet-Achour, Christiane. "La force du féminin dans "La Saison de l'ombre"." In *L' Œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano: Fiction, mémoire et enjeux identitaires*. Edited by Alice D. Tang, 17–28. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014.

Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2014.

Craps, Stef, and Gert Buelens. "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels." *Studies in the novel* 40, 1&2 (2008): 1–12.

Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. 1. publ., transferred to digital print. Cambridge cultural social studies. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Paladin, 1967.

Fanon, Frantz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K. Bhabha. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.* Gender and culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Kangni, Alem. *Esclaves: Roman*. Paris: Lattès, 2009.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* European perspectives. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982.

Kurtz, J. R. "Literature, Trauma and the African Moral Imagination." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 32, no. 4 (2014): 421–35.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma.* Parallax. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001.

Lassi, Étienne-Marie. "Recyclage Des Discours Sur L'afrique Et Inscription De La Doxa Métropolitaine Dans Les Romans De Léonora Miano." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 49, no. 3 (2015): 443–57.

Laurent, Sylvie. "Le «Tiers-Espace» De Léonora Miano Romancière Afropéenne." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 204 (2011): 769–810.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008.

Mbembe, Achille. "À Propos Des Écritures Africaines De Soi." *Politique africaine* 77, no. 1 (2020): 16–43.

Miano, Léonora. *Habiter la frontière: Conférences*. Paris: Arche, 2012.

Miano, Léonora. *La Saison de l'ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 2013.

Miano, Léonora. *L' impératif transgressif: Communications, réflexions*. Paris: L'Arche, 2016.

Miano, Léonora. *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste*. Paris: Grasset, 2020.

Mokam, Yvonne-Marie. "Polar Historique Et Mémoire De La Capture Des Esclaves: Revue Critique De Fixxion Française Contemporaine." http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx10.08/960.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1987.

Murphy, Laura. "The Curse of Constant Remembrance: The Belated Trauma of the Slave Trade in Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments." *Studies in the novel* 40, no. 1 (2008): 52–71.

Ndiaye, Mariéme M. *Des Hommes Et Des Chaînes.* Collection Roman. Achères: Dagan, 2015.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. New York: Basic-Civitas Books, 2009.

N'Sondé, Wilfried. *Un océan, deux mers, trois continents: Roman*. Arles: Actes sud, 2018.

Pape-Thoma, Birgit. "Léonora Miano: «Pour Créer Une Nouvelle Afrique, Il Nous Faut Accepter Notre Passé»." http://afrik.com/article10935.html.

Saunders, Rebecca. *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US; Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Whitehead, Anne. "Journeying Through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria." *Studies in the novel* 40, 1/2 (2008): 13–30.

Index

The present volume brings together contributions which explore artworks – including literature, visual arts, film and performances – as dynamic sites of worlding. It puts emphasis on the processes of creating or doing worlds, implying movement as opposed to the boundary drawing of area studies. From such a processual perspective, Africa is not a delineated area, but emerges in a variety of relations which can reach across the continent, but also the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic or Europe.

Contributors are: Thierry Boudjekeu, Elena Brugioni, Ute Fendler, Sophie Lembcke, Gilbert Ndi Shang, Samuel Ndogo, Duncan Tarrant, Kumari Issur, CJ Odhiambo, Michaela Ott, Peter Simatei, Clarissa Vierke, Chinelo J. Enemuo.

UTE FENDLER, Ph.D. (1992), University of Bayreuth, is professor of Romance and Comparative literary and cultural studies, at the University of Bayreuth. Her publications are on Francophone and Lusophone Literatures and Films.

MARIE-ANNE KOHL, Ph.D. (2014) holds a tenure-track position in Historical Musicology (with a special focus on mobility, (forced) migration and cultural transfer) at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna.

GILBERT SHANG NDI, Ph.D. (2014), University of Bayreuth, is fellow of the Cluster of Excellence – Africa Multiple, University of Bayreuth, working on the Project: Black Atlantic Revisited: African and South American UNESCO-World Heritage Sites and "Shadowed Spaces" of Performative Memory.

CJ ODHIAMBO, Ph.D. (2005), Stellenbosch University, is professor of Literature and Applied Drama at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. He has published widely in the fields of Literature, Applied Drama/Theatre, Popular Culture and Film.

CLARISSA VIERKE, Ph.D. (2010), University of Bayreuth, is professor of African Language Literatures at the University of Bayreuth. She has published on Swahili poetry, manuscript cultures and the Indian Ocean.

ISBN 9789004689749

9 789004 689749

ISSN 2772-7157

BRILL.COM/AFMU