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Title

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 42(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/F7421051076

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Colonial Modernity: Progress, Development, and Modernism in Nigeria

Chris Hall

Abstract

This article reshapes modernist study through a historical approach. In a move to decenter and decolonize modernism, I focus here on its emergence in decolonizing Nigeria of the 1960s, specifically in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, contending that modernism is an aesthetic movement that must be understood in its relation to colonialism, imperialism, and coloniality. I sketch out the coloniality of knowledge and being in Nigeria, or the ways in which colonialism has continued to impact Nigerian governance and political life, long after the country's nominal liberation from British rule. I approach coloniality by examining notions of progress and development and the western standards to which these concepts are bound. Okigbo's work, and its critical reception, form the centerpiece of my analysis. Like Nigerian economics, Okigbo's poetry has been overdetermined through neocolonial notions of progress and development. I posit Okigbo's poetry instead as a modernist negotiation of colonial history and western art, one consistently engaging with an ongoing colonial presence. From this perspective, a modernist study emerges that is comparative but not assimilative. The importance of postcolonial literature for the study of any modern art is thereby demonstrated in a decolonizing move that dwells upon the local rather than the marginal.

I. Introduction

The scholarly field of modernist studies and its attendant artistic works, under the canonical conception that continues to be prevalent in the Western academy—what I call, adapting Gwendolyn Wright's term, orthodox modernism¹—is a strictly regulated area of study. Like other fields of its kind, modernism has a generally

agreed-upon temporal domain (c. 1890-c. 1950). It also has a dominant body of primary texts, virtually all of which were written in English by individuals from or residing in America or Europe—particularly western European countries like England and Ireland. None of this is new to any scholar with a passing interest in turn-of-the-century Western literature. The artists—mostly white, mostly male—who penned these texts are understood to have a cluster of overlapping aesthetic concerns. These concerns might loosely be classed as experimentation with form and reinscription of classicism, in the never-ending quest for the “new,” as Ezra Pound famously urged. In individual texts, these qualities frequently resulted in works dense with allusions and neologisms that explore nontraditional poetic and narrative practices.

In recent years, however, what canonical coherence could be claimed of the field of modernist literature has begun to crumble as questions of the stability of its temporal and geographical boundaries have been increasingly posed. Reevaluations of modernist scholarship, like those described by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz in “The New Modernist Studies,”² have proposed new and promising questions for the field: Do those writing during the modernist period but not in a Euro-American setting, or not in English, still have some relationship with the orthodox movement? Can artists working in worldwide contexts after 1950 be engaging with projects of Western modernism? A growing critical fascination with these possibilities has led to a proliferation of modernisms: alternative modernism, postcolonial modernism, world modernism, etc.³ This growth calls attention to ways in which the boundaries of modernism, as an area of literary study, are particularly vulnerable to erosion. The movement is not tied to a historical era that would put the onus of temporality at a remove, but the time-frame for modernism is also not so vague as to be essentially nonexistent. If modernism is tied to a set of unique historical circumstances, it is to those of a particular iteration of modernity, but modernity is subjective, uneven, and ongoing in ways that, for example, the Renaissance is not.⁴ Not wanting to leave modernism open to purely subjective determination, those who have taxed themselves with managing its scope in the face of globalized scholarship have often puzzled over how to redraw

disciplinary lines in ways that productively connect the periphery with orthodox texts.⁵

II. Modernity and Comparative Modernism

What I explore below is the potential of a field of artistic modernism that embraces the dislocation of its temporal, geographical, and aesthetic center, while retaining its unifying moniker—keeping the title of “modernism” while decolonizing it through the decomposition and decentering of its Euro-American core. My aims here intersect with the work of critics like José Luis Venegas, who, in his comparative assessment of James Joyce’s relevance for literature in Latin America, highlights a “decolonizing attitude” that “incites us to look at reality afresh and to dispense with the abstractions of ‘disinterested’ aesthetics and the weight of tradition.”⁶ I focus on the conditions of modernity in Nigeria and on Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, who was writing during the decolonization period that followed the country’s emancipation from British rule in 1960.⁷ As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have written, “[t]he legacy of modernity is a legacy of fratricidal wars, devastating ‘development,’ cruel ‘civilization,’ and previously unimagined violence.”⁸ This article dwells upon this paradoxical modernity by demonstrating that an essential aspect of modernist art is its reaction to the ontological and epistemological conditions of colonial modernity.⁹ Modernism, in this sense, arises wherever economic and political situations founded in imperialist exploitation—and their consequent discourses of progress and development—culminate in art that responds to and from within those forces. As Wright puts it, “modernism came into being in a world framed by colonialism.”¹⁰ This formulation includes the transatlantic modernist canon, as writers like Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner all wrote about a world-economic situation created through colonial exploitation of the majority world. I reject, however, the place of the Western orthodox canon as a standard of comparison for what is to be counted as modernist art. Like modernity itself, modernism in the West was built on the backs of the colonies, and the emergence of modern art in those colonies is no less entrenched in this relationship.

The decentering I propose is a flattening of modernist primacy allied with the work of scholars like Wright and Firat Oruc, both of whom have endeavored to explode the orthodox construction of modernist studies while retaining a healthy skepticism about the appropriative potential of such undertakings. Oruc, for example, has embraced a, “new modernist studies aim[ed] in particular at the rerouting of modernity through a set of alternative texts and traditions that might initially appear outside official borders of the unarticulated, yet powerful cartographic paradigm.”¹¹ As Oruc acknowledges, a new global approach is promising, but carries its own set of problems, including a tendency to frame global texts as “alternatives” to the orthodox canon. Wright, in particular, focuses on, “labels such as *alternative modernisms*, *other modernisms* or *peripheral modernisms*,” making it clear that while, “[t]hese terms originally implied a pervasive openness and experimentation. . . all too often they serve to reinscribe Western hierarchies.”¹² If the new modernist studies embrace the global while still parsing non-western sources as “alternative” or “peripheral,” a clear sense will be created that non-Euro-American texts are disposable, or that they are at least secondary to those genuine, indispensable Western sources on which modernism has long been founded. Alternative modernism is in danger of becoming the sort of scholarly “tourism” that Chandra Mohanty’s feminist pedagogy warns against, making “brief forays. . . into non-Euro-American cultures,” while clearly reinforcing a baseline of Western sources as a standard of measurement.¹³

Oruc and Wright reveal that, despite tentative moves in the right direction, recently developed approaches to modernist studies often remain problematic. Rather than participate in these approaches and their ongoing colonization of world literatures, Oruc and Wright have carved out separate methodologies for new modernism. Wright’s approach seems especially promising, as she calls for, “comodernities and respectful dissent about the term that carries modernism ahead into new terrains.”¹⁴ Comodernity, however, seems a slightly idealistic term for approaching modernism, precisely because the movement has historically been inextricable from unequal power relations and from the colonial devastation that Wright herself points to.¹⁵ While the proliferation of terms surrounding new modernism hardly seems to cry out for another addition, I parse the discussion that follows as a comparative

modernism, an engagement with texts across temporalities and spatialities.¹⁶ My work here is allied with the description of comparative literature put forth by Domínguez et al.: “Comparative literature appears when the literary history of particular nations begins to seem limiting or inadequate: it considers national literary history as an element within a plural literary history.”¹⁷ In isolation, neither Nigerian nor British nor American literary history is sufficient for accounting for the artistic processes described below. My approach addresses unequal power relations, especially those of imperialism and colonialism. Colonialism is a primary condition for the heterogeneous global experiences of modernity, experiences that modernist art reacts to. There is space for strong dissent and difference in this approach, for acknowledging that the conditions and discourses of colonial modernity were constructed through brutal exploitation and appropriation that was not, in most cases, cooperative at all, but viciously coercive. Comparative study, however, offers a space for discussion of both cooperation and compulsion.

But why keep modernism? Is there a case to be made for preserving a field of study in which there seems to be an essential and inescapable “coloniality”? Walter Mignolo uses this term to signal “a matrix for management and control of the economy, authority, knowledge, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity.”¹⁸ Certainly within orthodox modernism, and arguably within the various new modernisms, there remains an intent to manage knowledge by dictating the range of the field and acceptable areas for its further exploration. The project at hand is intended as a counter to coloniality, this “shorthand for the colonial matrix of power,”¹⁹ and to the ethos of scholarly management. I posit a modernism that is thoroughly removed from centralized control and obstruct prospects for its re-centering by positioning such attempts as essentially colonial and Euro/American-centric; but coloniality is ingrained not only in contemporary scholarship on modernism. As Andreas Huyssen contends, “colonialism and conquest [are] the very condition of possibility for modernity and for aesthetic modernism.”²⁰ Coloniality is an ongoing force, a distinct expression of modern history, politics, and ontology—all of which are inextricable from colonialism.²¹ Likewise, the coloniality of scholarly management that continues in modernist studies is strongly linked with the colonial exploitation and ordering that made the

works of orthodox modernism possible in the first place—economically, epistemologically, and aesthetically.²²

Preserving modernism must therefore be based not in perpetuating coloniality and scholarly exploitation for the advancement of a westernized field, but in empowering those literatures construed as existing on its peripheries. There is a case to be made here for retaining modernism as a field for the platform it provides, if it can operate in such a way as to complicate or subvert, rather than re-entrench, the ossified pillars of scholarly orthodoxy. Modernism as a term especially asserts its utility when it is directly linked to modernity, and, as Huyssen notes, “issues of modernity are now invariably linked to globalization.”²³ In the contemporary moment, modernism has become bound up in both modernity and globalization. Globalization enters the picture as an economic trend with strong ties to colonialism, as well as a scholarly tendency that seeks to incorporate worldwide sources. It is on these grounds that Huyssen makes his case for continued engagement with modernism as a field, at a time when postmodernism and postmodernity have fallen out of critical favor. As Huyssen provocatively inquires, “Can the term [modernity], given its historical and discursive depth, help us ask critical questions about the discourse of globalization that has remained all too presentist”?²⁴ Without being anachronistic, modernism remains an essential frame for scholarly conversation because of how it opens the way for addressing artistic concerns with modernity across temporal and geographical boundaries. In approaching modernism by situating it in terms of artistic reactions to colonial modernity, the discussion at hand adds complications to the current discourse.

There are a number of sites that frequently come up as relevant spaces on the margins of orthodox modernism. Huyssen, presenting the “standard continental European list” of modernism’s geographical centers and “its few Anglo outposts,” notes how this set—Paris, Vienna, Manhattan, etc.—“ignores the modernism of Shanghai or São Paulo in the 1920s, Borges’s Buenos Aires, the Caribbean of Aimé Césaire, the Mexico City of Frida Kahlo.”²⁵ Not mentioned by Huyssen is the artistic movement that took place in Nigeria leading up to and during the country’s decolonization period, what Chika Okeke-Agulu defines as “the emergence of postcolonial modernism in Nigeria during the first

half of the twentieth century and its elaboration in the decade of political independence, roughly between 1957 and 1967.”²⁶ Although Okeke-Agulu’s book is primarily concerned with the visual arts of this period, he builds upon work done in literary studies as well, by scholars like Bart Moore-Gilbert,²⁷ looking to

recuperate and reanimate the critical ambitions of literary postcolonial modernism as a way to give analytical rigor to the work of artistic modernisms in Nigeria. . . [T]he literatures that have been subjected to analyses as exemplary of postcolonial modernism were produced in the same discursive spaces and contexts as the works of art with which I am concerned.²⁸

Below, I return to this literature with the aim of de- and re-constructing modernism as a field.

III. Colonialism and Modern Nigeria

It is first essential, however, to sketch the colonial history of Nigeria in order to frame its midcentury artistic movement as modernist in terms of colonial modernity. “Modern Nigeria,” writes Toyin Falola, “is, to a large extent, a product of violence.”²⁹ In 2011, Amidu Sanni similarly catalogued the violence—which, he argues, emerges especially as ethnic and religious conflict—that characterizes the country’s recent history. This includes “the violence of poverty, collective denial, social exclusion, hunger, youth unemployment; all of which there has never been a shortage of in Nigeria in the past twenty-five years.”³⁰ Like numerous other colonized lands, the history of this African nation is littered with external aggressions, war, and extortion, particularly at the hands of the British, whose occupation began in 1885 after being drawn to the area for its “palm oil. . . palm kernels. . . and enormous resources of peanuts and cocoa.”³¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, the British government asserted political control and instituted Nigeria’s official colonial period, despite numerous local resistance efforts that continued, with varying degrees of aggression and success, throughout the 60-year colonial era. Through the early decades of the 1900s, the British attempted to consolidate their power, snuffing out rebellion and what they

“characterized. . . as ‘barbaric’ acts of violence by ‘primitive’ people who lacked any idea of what they would gain once they were civilized.”³² This cycle of violence persisted through the growingly nationalistic Nigerian independence efforts of the 1940s, into moves toward self-governance in the late 1950s, and beyond, even after full independence was granted by the British Parliament on October 1, 1960.³³

Despite escaping from direct British rule, internal strife continued in Nigeria. “The Nigerian political system was marked by violence when it obtained its independence,” Falola tells us, “and a civil war occurred within the first decade.”³⁴ Colonial modernity in the country was brought about through decades of violence, and the residual impacts of Britain’s gutting of Nigeria for resources, along with ethnic disputes, meant that once the country was free from direct control, the official colonial period was followed by unrest and civil war. Falola remarks how even up to the present day (2009), “[t]hose in power have achieved that power through violence and have used violence to maintain their control of state power.”³⁵ Coloniality continues to shape the state, present in the ongoing exploitation of the general population, which is in many ways a perpetuation of the “colonial conquest and violence” that the British used to regulate the nation.³⁶ In attempts to maintain privilege and power over the population at large, similarly to how the British once coerced such power from the indigenous peoples by force, those in the highest ranks of the Nigerian government have often ruled the populace using force and fear, some “[m]embers of the political class” going so far as to have “effectively co-opted the police and the army to actualize state terrorism.”³⁷ Sanni concurs with this assessment, noting that “the government plays and talks tough by perpetrating state-induced or condoned terrorism.”³⁸

While Falola acknowledges and interrogates Nigeria’s colonial past and the essential role a history of colonial violence has had in shaping the country’s difficulties up to the present day, there are those who take other views. Olayinka Akanle, in his discussion of contemporary (2013) Nigeria, has argued that the country’s ongoing economic shortcomings are to be blamed on problems within its public institutions, as well as on the kinds of violence that Falola points to: “Even as the nation struggles to attract foreign direct investment, terrorism and militancy, weak and unstable

policy regimes, and corruption and inadequate education have made investment climates unhealthy.”³⁹ Most of these issues for Akanle go back in the end to governmental corruption, which is “common and nearly institutionalized.”⁴⁰ Writing in 1983, Chinua Achebe made similar remarks in “The Trouble with Nigeria,” trouble which can largely be traced back to “a failure of leadership,” failure which in his view included widespread corruption and tribalism.⁴¹ Where Falola makes connections between such corruption and a history of violent upheaval in the region that has continued for more than a century, however, Akanle blames the isolated and unfortunate immorality of those who have recently helmed the country and their immediate predecessors. Although he maintains that Nigeria’s leaders “understand that assumption of public office is for personal enrichment and looting of the common treasury for personal aggrandizement,”⁴² this exploitative governing is framed as a recent phenomenon, rather than a current aspect of the ongoing coloniality pointed to by Falola.

The focus of Akanle’s discussion is on answering the question of failed, or at the very least weak, economic development in Nigeria. To do so, he brings development in the country into conversation with that of Botswana. The history of development in both countries is “exceptional” in Akanle’s terms, although Botswana “presents an exceptionally positive picture” of African development, while Nigeria “presents a largely negative picture.”⁴³ Botswana’s history offers a means by which Akanle avoids the implications of colonization (and coloniality) in Nigerian development. He argues that, because “both Nigeria and Botswana were colonized. . . the use of colonial histories as an explanation for African countries’ underdevelopment is a failed and redundant explanation.”⁴⁴ Because Botswana has been able to thrive in a global economic system despite its colonial past, so goes Akanle’s argument, any previously colonized country should be able to do the same, especially Nigeria, with its exceptionally large supply of populace and natural resources. But, as Falola, Achebe, and Mignolo make clear, colonialism—a multifaceted and unfinished process—can neither be identified as the sole determinant of any country’s political/social/economic trajectory, nor ignored as irrelevant.

It is also the case that, within the heterogeneous landscape of African economic history, any attempt to establish an

objective standard for development becomes a problematic oversimplification. This assumption—that development is quantitatively identifiable and universally desirable—goes notably unchallenged by Akanle, who relies upon western neoliberal institutions like the World Bank and its Human Development Index for his “objective parameters” of development and underdevelopment in Nigeria.⁴⁵ The essence of a nation’s development, for Akanle, “depends on how well its people are allowed to excise [*sic*] their fundamental rights through enjoyment of an improved quality of positive public and governance relations and an identical construction of values, ideals, norms, and measures of development.”⁴⁶ Generally speaking, open relations between a government and its people, the capacity for those people to participate in governance, and visible political ideology that is open to question, are all commendable desires for a state finding its way through democracy. But where do these “ideals” and “norms” come from, and with what standards are they to be identical? In Akanle’s article, the standards become those of Western development and of the institutions that have deemed Botswana’s development a success because of its newfound place in the neoliberal free market.

IV. Modernism and the Discourse of Development

Nigeria’s colonial history and its ongoing coloniality are vital to this discussion because the country’s past—and narratives surrounding its development—are closely intertwined with the country’s art. In the present day, colonialism continues to shape the power relations of Nigeria’s rulers, as well as narratives about its modernization—narratives that perpetuate a neocolonial epistemology by assuming the dominance of western standards of knowledge. When Christopher Okigbo was writing and publishing his poetry in Nigeria in the 1960s, it was during a period when colonial modernity had come to a head in the country, with colonial concepts of progress and development taking hold over Nigerian life, even as the visible facets of British colonialism were dissipating.

Among others, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has written about the entanglement of these issues and their effect on Okigbo's life and poetry. Suhr-Sytsma remarks how Okigbo

inherited, along with a British-style education, examples of Nigerian attempts to direct modernization through print toward the development of an 'autonomous African polis' and 'an autonomous African culture'—autonomous in the sense. . .of primary control by Africans over political and cultural representation.⁴⁷

Suhr-Sytsma's use of "development" here, as a process of local creation, is a radical departure from the deficit model of theorists like Akanle and from (superficial) benevolence that revisits the "kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s," which Arturo Escobar has warned against.⁴⁸ As Escobar contends, "the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression."⁴⁹ Against development as an epistemology and politic of external imposition, Suhr-Sytsma posits that Okigbo's writing had the potential to play a major role in a Nigerian cultural empowerment that would take control of modernization's forces and narratives, while he also acknowledges that such artistic possibilities are always connected with their political counterparts and histories. Suhr-Sytsma in this way reappropriates neocolonial development rhetoric, bringing its history to bear on the artists who were raised under colonialism and suggesting that their own deglobalized⁵⁰ development could subvert European control.

Closely bound up with neocolonial notions of development are those of progress. Akanle's vision of African politics is centered around the idea that "[g]ood governance"⁵¹ in Nigeria would mean overcoming the country's "compliance deficit. . .coherence deficit, and. . .democratic voice deficit."⁵² By rectifying these failings to (respectively) act on principle, align government with the will of the people, and make political office universally accessible, it is suggested that Nigeria could "progress" from its currently underdeveloped state into a respected entity on the global stage.⁵³ "Good governance" here requires "effective state administrative frameworks that enable citizens to access resources optimally to build capacities so as to make real progress and achieve a

high-quality livelihood.”⁵⁴ While some of the aims here are promising—such as putting state resources at the disposal of citizens—the rhetorical framing again asserts a westernized norm that situates the majority world as an immature other that is less-than. Even “successful” majority world nations like Botswana are successful here only in Western economic terms. Where a country’s progress indicates the degree of their assimilation with Western ideology and practices, the notion is demeaning, infantilizing, and dismissive of the colonial history that enabled Western countries to achieve their own situations of progress and development.

In aesthetic terms, notions of progress and development arise where work that has been influenced by Western artists is framed as essentially derivative, needing to progress to a state of cultural authenticity. Critics like Suhr-Sytsma have reacted to ingrained narratives of Okigbo’s work and life that all too easily situate them within this trajectory. Suhr-Sytsma situates his own work on Okigbo as a means by which to “question the longstanding critical narrative that divides Okigbo’s career into an earlier, modernist-influenced phase. . .presided over by Eurocentric ideals of the literary, and a later, authentically African phase. . .inspired by oral African resources.”⁵⁵ In looking at Okigbo’s writing, it is not difficult to see how the critical divide arose between an early, derivative Okigbo, and a later, authentic Okigbo. Much of Okigbo’s poetry, especially his earlier work, can appear obviously, even deliberately modernist in comparison with Western poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Scholars like Maik Nwosu have tackled this reductive critical dualism, while acknowledging its allure. Nwosu examines “Fragments out of the Deluge,” a portion of the “Limits” section of Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*, noting therein “an Eliotic constriction and a Hopkinsian ‘sprung rhythm’ ” in some of the lines.⁵⁶ In the section Nwosu refers to, Okigbo incorporates archaic terms, dialect, self-interruptions, and phrasal collision in lines like

Malisons, malisons, mair than ten –
And dawn-gust grumbled⁵⁷

that might fit comfortably in a modernist anthology alongside the work of Euro-American modernists like Pound.

Elsewhere in his poetry, Okigbo alludes directly to Pound’s work. Okigbo’s poem “Lustra,” which eventually became part of the “Heavensgate” (1962) portion of *Labyrinths*, shares its title

with an early collection of Pound's from 1913-15. As Pound defines it in the epigraph to his collection, a *lustrum* is "an offering for the sins of the whole people."⁵⁸ Okigbo's version appropriately meditates on how the

*Messiah will come again
After the argument in heaven.*⁵⁹

There are gestures in Okigbo's piece also to the visceral and concise imagist poems with which Pound was experimenting during his "Lustra" period. In an isolated couplet of Okigbo's "Lustra":

Here is a new laid egg
here a white hen at midterm⁶⁰

there is an immediate access to the object and animal that is deceptively simple. This succinct clarity might be aesthetically linked with, for example, Pound's "Ts'ai Chi'h":

The petals fall in the fountain,
the orange-coloured rose-leaves,
Their ochre clings to the stone.⁶¹

There is an elusive mystery to both poems in their immanence, in the suggestion of relationship between the objects within them that draws together "egg" and "hen," "petals" and "stone," while still preserving the independent, dense qualities of each.

Observations of resemblances like these in Okigbo's poetry are nothing new. In 1971, Romanus Egudu was already making the case that "Okigbo shows the same kind of tendency toward 'image-making' and 'melody-making' that Pound does," even recognizing that, despite this, "it cannot be argued that the former must necessarily have inherited this trait from the latter."⁶² There is a tempting reading made available in these comparisons, indicative of larger pitfalls of comparative work of this kind. Okigbo's returning Messiah and the opening lines of his "Lustra":

So would I to the hills again
so would I
to where springs the fountain
there to draw from⁶³

could be used to construe the poem as a rebirth of Pound's, indicating that Okigbo draws from the same inspiration and aesthetic and writes with the same concerns as Pound. Reading the poem as

being derivative in this way obscures the impetus behind Okigbo's piece. Why does Okigbo's poem call back to Pound? The question offers a reading in which it becomes possible that Okigbo does not rewrite Pound but overwrites him. Okigbo's piece is not a derivation, but an appropriation, his "new laid egg" a poetic gift of possibility to a world that did not exist for the American expatriate; the "*Messiah will come again*,"⁶⁴ and must, in this sense, because on his last coming the Messiah failed. Pound's work, despite his description, was never for "the whole people," but for a minority that for him was the whole. Okigbo's "Lustra" takes up arms against Pound's, using his forbear's own tools to take apart a language and aesthetic and put it to work for local empowerment. "In palm grove," go the closing lines of Okigbo's "Lustra," we find

long-drums and cannons:
the spirit in the ascent.⁶⁵

The battle has arrived, it is close by, and it carries the promise of victory and overcoming.

From early poems like "Lustra"—so goes the critical narrative responded to by Suhr-Sytsma and Nwosu—Okigbo eventually developed a consciousness of local identity and politics as he became increasingly involved in the Biafran war for independence that took his life in 1967. It is, to be sure, highly likely that Okigbo's political interests inflected his work, but Suhr-Sytsma argues that Biafran cultural identity was essential to Okigbo throughout his life as a writer, and that any rigid division of the poet's life and work is an oversimplification: "It is time to admit the analogous complexity of Okigbo's career, to recognize that the political conflicts of the mid-1960s did not cleanly shift Okigbo from alienated cosmopolitan to authentic nativist."⁶⁶ When this shift is posited as a binary distinction, the text often presented as the signal of Okigbo's newly discovered nativism, where the poet "firmly returns to his Igbo roots,"⁶⁷ is his late sequence "Path of Thunder: Poems Prophesying War," written between 1965-7. As Oyeniyi Okunoye has written, this work "must be seen as belonging to that phase of [Okigbo's] poetic engagement marked by a high sense of social responsibility."⁶⁸ There is an oral, public quality to these poems that has led critics to note, with relief, that "[p]urged of strange allusions and private meditation, the poet. . . assumed the role of the traditional town-crier."⁶⁹

In the way that his early work seems to attempt a European modernity, “Path of Thunder,” in a dualistic framing, seems to attempt an authentic locality. The first poem of the selection, “Thunder can break,” begins:

Fanfare of drums, wooden bells: iron chapter;
And our dividing airs are gathered home⁷⁰

There is a reconciliation here, a sense of assembling community within a solidified place of wood and iron that does not sound European. The “break” of thunder in the title might resound in this sense as a celebratory split with the self-indulgent ephemerality critics like Okunoye have accused Okigbo of in his earlier work. There is a directness to “Path of Thunder” in its involvement with the musical and oral sensibilities of the poet’s local community—a directness that is not unlike a redirection of Okigbo’s treatment of the object in “Lustra.” This aesthetic emerges again in the “Elegy for Slit-Drum,” a poem to be performed “[w]ith rattles accompaniment,”⁷¹ and in “Hurrah for Thunder,” wherein Okigbo does in fact designate himself “town-crier” as he offers warnings to hunters: “If they share the meat let them remember thunder.”⁷² These qualities might easily engender readings that point to an “authentically African” poetic voice and construction.

There is a close similarity between such readings, as categorical framings of Okigbo’s work, and the “three stages” of “development in the works of colonized writers,” as detailed by Frantz Fanon.⁷³ “First,” Fanon writes of these stages, “the colonized intellectual proves he has assimilated the colonizer’s culture. . . . The inspiration is European and his works can be easily linked to a well-defined trend in metropolitan literature.”⁷⁴ This is the stage identified with Okigbo’s early writing, the kind of African poetry that Chinweizu et al. criticized by lamenting that “[t]he modernist retreat of our poets into privatist universalism makes it quite easy for them to shed whatever African nationalist consciousness they have.”⁷⁵ Fanon’s second stage represents a transitional move between the inauthentic and the authentic, where “the colonized writer has his convictions shaken and decides to cast his mind back”; at this point, the poet is “content to remember.”⁷⁶ “Finally,” Fanon describes, there is “a third stage, a combat stage where the colonized writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, with the people, will rouse

the people.”⁷⁷ For Okigbo, this would be the “town-crier” phase. Approaching the poet’s work with reference to his coloniality, however, presents a reading of his early work that is more critical and revisionist than sycophantic, and that reveals the “combat” that takes place throughout his oeuvre.

Readings based on artistic “authenticity” must first of all concede that such a thing exists, and that achievement of it constitutes a teleological development of Okigbo’s aesthetic and awareness. Suhr-Sytsma reminds us that “[i]t makes little sense. . .for the invocation of ‘the oral tradition’ to function as the badge of a poet’s authenticity, understood as his or her continuity with the pre-colonial,” because African oral tradition was always in some way intertwined with the written.⁷⁸ To contend that “Path of Thunder” is Okigbo at his most authentic, is also to argue that his other work is inauthentic—that it is characterized by a lack. This is a deficit model of poetic development closely aligned with deficit models of economic development like Akanle’s, a trajectory of Okigbo’s writing in which he overcomes his early imitative work and advances toward an objectively commendable communal engagement. While the standard to be achieved in this sense is purportedly African and artistic, rather than Western and economic, such a standard still arises from a management ethos that asserts a fictional, nostalgic uniformity to which the true African poet conforms. It asserts, as Achebe might describe it, a certain “image of Africa,” an overdetermination, a taxonomy of the “third world” poet whose concerns are meaningful only in so far as they serve to further those of the west.⁷⁹ On the other hand, “[t]he colonized intellectual,” as Fanon notes, “who strives for cultural authenticity, must recognize that national truth is first and foremost the national reality.”⁸⁰ That is, “national truth” is a nation’s being in its becoming; this truth cannot be reified or isolated in a mythic past, but only assessed in its enduring multiplicity.

The narrative of poetic development echoes that of economic development, eliding the entanglement of Nigerian history and the historical presence of the colonizer. The culture of Okigbo’s Nigeria was neither static nor hermetically sealed. The poet’s oeuvre, encapsulated in *Labyrinths*—which spans both extremes of the binary narrative of his work—is not a simple trajectory of rectifying personal shortcomings as an artist in order to move toward a fully realized identity. This sort of neoliberal construction

of artistic selfhood—the idea that the poet’s work is solely the result of conscious and calculated decisions, that Okigbo lifted himself by his poetic bootstraps to an authentic artistic mode—obscures the multitudinous historical, social, and cultural forces that every artist (and being) wrestles with.⁸¹ As Charlotte Farrell writes, in work that moves to counter neoliberalism through dramatic performance, “[n]eoliberal frameworks support and promote the belief that humans are self-contained subjects.”⁸² As consequence of these epistemological frameworks, Farrell continues, “illusions of self-sufficiency and individualism are upheld as a means to deceive the public into believing that the very systems that oppress them are, in fact, their liberation.”⁸³ Okigbo’s poetry is not an ascension to the genuine—a neoliberal narrative that presents the benevolent tolerance of this trajectory as evidence of its enlightened criticism—but a navigation of place within the often-contradictory web of coloniality that formed his Nigeria. If there is any authenticity to be found in the aesthetic, it is in a plural, ineffable, ongoing confrontation with the tenuous situations of being and the social—not in any erasure of the (epistemological, physical, aesthetic) presence of a self-imposed other that shapes those situations. Such a forgetful “authenticity” would be no more true to reality than pretending that colonialism in Nigeria simply disappeared in 1960.

V. Conclusion

To return to the question of modernism, what Okigbo navigated in his writing were the inchoate economic and social questions of development and progress as his country came into its own, as well as questions of what it means to be a previously colonized subject whose world is still insidiously inflected by a coloniality of being. Okigbo’s writing and its shifting aesthetic traverses the conflicted embodiment of the subject of colonial modernity, a modernity that has violently overwritten the local with the westernized global, that has overwritten the knowledge of the Nigerian community with the knowledge of the West. Suhr-Sytsma writes that Okigbo’s “entire career of investment in the literary field can be seen as an instructive example of . . . attempts to negotiate the antinomies of modernity in postcolonial Africa,”⁸⁴ a modernity that is inextricable from that of colonial Africa. Negotiating these modernities, for

Okigbo, meant addressing them at the source in his early work—not shying away from the overbearing presence of Europe and America in his embodied and poetic being. In his later work, it meant re-engaging this presence in the terms of the local, setting it aside and overwriting it. Neither is more or less authentically artistic or authentically African; both the local culture and the Western are constantly at battle in the life of the colonized subject, and Okigbo's poetry fights these battles on its pages with “long-drums and cannons,” seeking insistently for “the spirit in the ascent.”⁸⁵ Neither the Western nor the local wholly defines Okigbo's work; only the ongoing negotiation of self and people in an incomplete history begins to gesture toward such a definition.

Where Nigerian art of the postcolonial period is framed as peripheral to other movements, and where Okigbo's poems are framed as derivative, the standard against which both are posited is Euro-American modernism. To view Okigbo's poetry, as an aspect of Nigerian modernism—not a late-arriving “development” of a deficient African aesthetic but the navigation of ontological, political, and epistemological coloniality—is to recognize that there can be no objective standard of modernism in general. There is no aesthetic norm, the achievement of which justifies a work's inclusion in the modernist canon. The creation of the Euro-American canon was made possible in the first place by the exploitation of countries like Nigeria; this enabled the West to accumulate the wealth that led to the establishment of urban centers that came to define the “universal” standards of modernity, development, and progress. Where artists like Eliot and Pound responded to the issues of colonial modernity they witnessed in these Euro-American environments, Okigbo's poetry navigates the same transition from another standpoint, from the majority world ravaged for the benefit of the west. His work is clearly modernist, because it responds to a set of historical circumstances that arose within a particular crux of modernity: the culmination of imperialism in the scramble for Africa. Yet his writing cannot be *only* modernist, as it is also clearly postcolonial. I move neither to sublimate the (post)colonial within modernism, nor to assimilate Okigbo within a field that continues to be dominated by the Western academy, but rather to demonstrate that Okigbo's poetry makes possible a powerful interrogative approach for any scholarly practice that continues to take modernism seriously. This can only happen

through a decolonization process that constantly unmakes and remakes the field of modernism.

Wright has contended that “[p]eripheral terrains are usually dismissed as insular, scorned as derivative, or excluded as strange, yet they help define the center.”⁸⁶ While non-Euro-American modernism is often construed as peripheral, even in the efforts of scholars attempting to be inclusive, what might be understood in this sense as “the center”—the transatlantic canon—would not exist without a history of colonial exploitation. The modernisms of these peripheral territories likewise come about as tortured negotiations of the conditions that built their worlds, conditions of an aimed-for modernity to which coloniality urges them to aspire. These plural modernisms define each other. Okigbo’s poetry asserts the need for redefining modernism as a movement within and against colonial modernity, but his work does not require acceptance within a “progressive” western canon to justify its value. It calls instead for those of us in the field to collaboratively reassess our evaluation of modernism’s standards, and to ask: If territories on the “periphery” are essential for the creation of the center, are they only peripheral? The modernist art that arises in these territories is as much a response to the circumstances of colonialism, modernity, and its attendant discourses as is that in the Western world. In this lies the decolonization of modernism—the recognition that artists around the world responded variously to the same uneven forces as did Western modernists, and that the work undertaken by these peripheral artists is entirely their own, regardless of the degree of western imposition and influence. Modernism remains tenable as a field of study only if the coloniality of knowledge that continues to shape its hierarchies is made to crumble, and its peripheries engaged as centers of their own.

Notes

¹ Gwendolyn Wright, “Building Global Modernisms,” *Grey Room* 7 (2002): 128. While Wright is primarily concerned with modernism in architecture, her reflections on the scholarship of modernity, history, and art are highly relevant to literary study as well.

² Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008).

³ For an overview of moves of this kind, see Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” esp. 739-40.

⁴ Bruno Latour, in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), writes that “[t]he adjective ‘modern’ designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word ‘modern,’ ‘modernization,’ or ‘modernity’ appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past” (10). By emphasizing colonial modernity in this article, I do not deny that, as Latour argues, the critical standards of the modern are untenable. Rather I attempt to make plain that at present we cannot yet dispense with analyzing the global fallout of these standards.

⁵ E.g., Andreas Huyssen, who asserts the need to “give some coherence to a field of study in danger of becoming either too amorphous or remaining simply too parochial” (“Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World,” *New German Critique* 100 (2007): 199). As an alternative, Huyssen pushes for a “crucial cultural space that feeds off the local, the national, and the global and that encompasses all three as the space of modernity and its imaginative geography” (ibid.). Compare this with Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” esp. 737: “As scholars demonstrate the fertility of questioning rigid temporal delimitations, periods seem inevitably to get bigger. . . . Meanwhile, interrogations of the politics, historical validity, and aesthetic value of exclusive focus on the literatures of Europe and North America have spurred the study (in the North American academy) of texts produced in other quarters of the world or by hitherto little-recognized enclaves in the privileged areas.”

⁶ José Luis Venegas, *Decolonizing Modernism: James Joyce and the Development of Spanish American Fiction* (London: Legenda, 2010), 114.

⁷ Throughout this article, I refer to Nigeria’s “decolonization” and to the “post-colonial” with the recognition that colonialism’s effects persist, both in countries that have ostensibly been liberated from colonial rule and in worldwide power inequities, and that therefore there has never truly been any “post” to colonialism. I attempt to explore this dynamic in my discussion of coloniality that follows, while also continuing to engage with decolonization and the postcolonial as vital, if not unproblematic, sites of resistance, and as historical terms signaling the legal, if not the actual, end of colonial dominance.

⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 46.

⁹ For a similar treatment of “colonial modernity” see Susan Stanford Friedman, “Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies,” *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 483.

¹⁰ Wright, “Building Global Modernisms,” 125.

¹¹ Firat Oruc, “Plebeianization, Un/Bound Seriality, and Global Modernism,” *Criticism* 55, no. 2 (2013): 279-80.

¹² Wright, “Building Global Modernisms,” 130.

¹³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 2 (2002): 518.

¹⁴ Wright, "Building Global Modernisms," 130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁶ Comparative study need not only be between artists, but can also be between places, temporalities, and varying conditions. Following this general approach, I contend that all literary study should be comparative if it is to be open and democratic, which does not mean ignoring or obscuring specific local conditions.

¹⁷ César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Darío Villanueva, *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.

¹⁸ Walter Mignolo, "Decolonizing Western Epistemology / Building Decolonial Epistemologies," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham UP, 2011), 24-5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰ Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," 191.

²¹ Mignolo writes elsewhere (*The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005)) that coloniality "points toward and intends to unveil an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good for every one" (6).

²² Consider, for example, how the metropolis of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was constructed with wealth accumulated through colonial extraction, how—as Juliana Spahr has argued (afterword to *Tender Buttons*, by Gertrude Stein, ed. Seth Perlow, corr. centennial ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014))—Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* can be read "as registering, whether intended or not, the systemic crisis that was imperial globalization" (119-120), or how Pablo Picasso's work in the first decade of the twentieth century was influenced by African art.

²³ Andreas Huyssen, "Introduction: Modernism after Postmodernity," *New German Critique* 99 (2006): 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," 189.

²⁶ Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2015), 1.

²⁷ Bart Moore-Gilbert, "Postcolonial Modernism," in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 551-557.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁹ Toyin Falola, *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2009), 2.

³⁰ Amidu Sanni, "Institutionalising Terror in the Name of Religion and Polity: The Nigerian Youth and the Cosmos of Violence," *Africa Development* 36, no. 3-4 (2011): 47.

³¹ Falola, *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria*, 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 55.

³³ Nigeria remains a member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

³⁴ Falola, *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria*, 174.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁸ Sanni, "Institutionalising Terror," 44.

³⁹ Olayinka Akanle, "The Development Exceptionality of Nigeria: The Context of Political and Social Currents," *Africa Today* 59, no. 3 (2013): 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Chinua Achebe, "The Trouble with Nigeria," in *An Image of Africa and The Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Penguin, 2010), 22. While, like Akanle, Achebe couches Nigeria's economic and political difficulties in terms of local shortcomings, rather than historical processes, he acknowledges that corruption in Nigeria is "not a new phenomenon. . . . It might even be called one of the legacies of colonialism" (*ibid.*, 42). Achebe's approach differs from Akanle's in that, when the former declares that "[w]e have no excuse whatsoever" for the country's ongoing troubles, the solutions reside in the local, rather than in an appeal to a Western measurement (*ibid.*). While Achebe often invokes America or Europe here as partial models (e.g. *ibid.*, 48-9), his solutions do not involve imitation, but rather consideration that might result in the production of an appropriate local change.

⁴² Akanle, "The Development Exceptionality of Nigeria," 34.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43. For an overview of neoliberalism, and the role played in it by organizations like the World Bank, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), e.g. 3.

⁴⁶ Akanle, "The Development Exceptionality of Nigeria," 44.

⁴⁷ Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, "Christopher Okigbo, Print, and the Poetry of Postcolonial Modernity," *Research in African Literatures* 43, no. 2 (2012): 46.

⁴⁸ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Although not without its problems, I use the term here as Walden Bello does, to describe "a retreat from globalized production structures" (*Capitalism's Last Stand? Deglobalization in the Age of Austerity* (New York: Zed Books, 2013), 160); for a detailed description of deglobalization's aims, see *ibid.*, 273-5.

⁵¹ Akanle, "The Development Exceptionality of Nigeria," 37.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40.

- ⁵³ Ibid., 40-3. It might be asked here what state in any part of the world consistently fulfills these conditions.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.
- ⁵⁵ Suhr-Sytsma, "Christopher Okigbo, Print, and the Poetry of Postcolonial Modernity," 41-2.
- ⁵⁶ Maik Nwosu, "Christopher Okigbo and the Postcolonial Market of Memories," *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 4 (2007): 75.
- ⁵⁷ Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths & Path of Thunder* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 43.
- ⁵⁸ Ezra Pound, "Poems of Lustra," in *Personæ: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1990), 80.
- ⁵⁹ Okigbo, *Labyrinths & Path of Thunder*, 25.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Pound, "Poems of Lustra," 111.
- ⁶² Romanus Egudu, "Ezra Pound in African Poetry: Christopher Okigbo," *Comparative Literature Studies* 8, no. 2 (1971): 145.
- ⁶³ Okigbo, *Labyrinths & Path of Thunder*, 25.
- ⁶⁴ Original formatting.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 26.
- ⁶⁶ Suhr-Sytsma, "Christopher Okigbo, Print, and the Poetry of Postcolonial Modernity," 56.
- ⁶⁷ Nwosu, "Christopher Okigbo and the Postcolonial Market of Memories," 80.
- ⁶⁸ Oyeniyi Okunoye, "Captives of Empire: Early Ibadan Poets and Poetry," *African Study Monographs* 19, no. 3 (1998): 168.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 169.
- ⁷⁰ Okigbo, *Labyrinths & Path of Thunder*, 72.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 78.
- ⁷² Ibid., 77.
- ⁷³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 158.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 158-9.
- ⁷⁵ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, vol. 1, *African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1983), 151. Although the authors are right to point out the imperialism of a European scholarship that finds value in Okigbo's work because of its aesthetic similarities to works of high modernism, the criticism is overstated by denying the writer engagement with this very colonizing influence in its educational form.
- ⁷⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 159.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Suhr-Sytsma, "Christopher Okigbo, Print, and the Poetry of Postcolonial Modernity," 43.

⁷⁹ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” in *An Image of Africa and The Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Penguin, 2010). In his examination of racism and Africa as a stereotyped foil for the West in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe argues that Conrad uses the continent “as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. . . . as a metaphysical battlefield. . . into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (ibid., 13). A similar process occurs when Africa is envisioned as having an authenticity identifiable through the presence of a set of tropes. This denies Africa (and Africans) the variability of their being, and keeps Africans and African art at a remove from that of the west.

⁸⁰ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 161.

⁸¹ As Glenn Adams and Phia S. Salter write (“They (Color) Blinded Me with Science: Counteracting Coloniality of Knowledge in Hegemonic Psychology,” in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Oakland: U of California P, 2019)), “Eurocentric global modernity and the individualist tendencies that constitute modern ways of being. . . . are inseparable manifestations of the colonial violence and racial subordination that constituted the modern order of Eurocentric global domination” (275).

⁸² Charlotte Farrell, “Trembling Specters: Barrie Kosky’s *Women of Troy* as Post-Tragedy,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2018): 113.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Suhr-Sytsma, “Christopher Okigbo, Print, and the Poetry of Postcolonial Modernity,” 44.

⁸⁵ Okigbo, *Labyrinths & Path of Thunder*, 26.

⁸⁶ Wright, “Building Global Modernisms,” 127.