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Like a Mask Dancing:
Visuospatial Geographies in Nigerian and Afro-Diasporic Literature

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Like a Mask Dancing:
Visuospatial Geographies in Nigerian and Afro-Diasporic Literature

by

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"Like a Mask Dancing: Visuospatial Geographies in Nigerian and Afro-Diasporic Literature" employs African masquerade dance as an analytic category for investigating questions of space, subjectivity, epistemology, and related geographies of meaning in contemporary Nigerian and Afro-Diasporic literature. This project critiques the aesthetics of immobilization prominent in the representation of African peoples' knowledge ecologies, histories, spaces, cultures and identities as static, archaic and primitive, by asking one central question: how can a shift in our approach to analyzing literary spatiality illuminate the dynamic aesthetic, textual, material, historical and political concerns of writers within this literary archive?

The study develops Chinua Achebe's configuration of the Igbo proverb and worldview: "The world is like a mask dancing; to see it well one cannot stand in one place" into a critical reading method that decenters Western theoretical discourse on spatiality and

privileges spatial networks rooted in African indigenous life worlds and cultural imaginaries. I argue that this proverb points to a relational aesthetics of movement that construct places and subjectivity in motion and via motion in ways analogous to the performance of dancing masquerades in African performance settings. Expanding on the ways that this episteme intertwines ideas of movement, spatial traversal, rhythm, embodiment, fluidity, call-and response, and perspective change, I formulate a reading methodology – visuospatiality – that traces the fusion of visual and spatial signifiers as a creative idiom.

Using this theoretical schema, I map how indigenous African thought and worldviews inform the production of literary spatiality in narrative texts such as Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters, Teju Cole's Open City, and Chimamanda Adiche's The Thing Around Your Neck. Through analysis animated by language, environment, and the body, "Like a Mask Dancing" draws insights from performance practices, philosophy, visual art, and literature propose critical mask poetics as a formal principle for theorizing questions of space, history, migration, and identity within Nigerian and Afro-diasporic cultural imaginaries and to make the case for centering African epistemologies as the theoretical basis for reading African literature.

Outline and Table of Contents

Introduction

Dance Here!

> "The world is like a mask dancing; to see it well, on cannot stand in what place." —Igbo Proverb
>
> When he wanted to show that I was many, he would say that I have a right and a left side, and a front and a back, and an upper and a lower half, for I cannot
> deny that I partake of multitude.
> —Plato, *Parmenides*
>
> Both space and motion can be manipulated rhythmically.
> Existence can also be manipulated in like manner.
> —Larry Neal, "Uncle Rufus Raps on the Squared Circle"
>
> Full moon. The goatskin drums/would start to speak,
> stay up and talk/all night. / I listened with/ bare feet.
> Nothing ritual, / nothing festival/ nothing magical./
> Just enough light/ to dance.
>
> When I came to America, / land of electricity, I found so many/ who freely gave/ permission when I asked:
> Is it permitted to dance/ here?
> – Laura M. Kaminsky, *Dance Here*

I begin with scenes of dance. Standing at the edge of an open arena, I see bodies in a flurry of rhythmic movement: coordinated, iterative, creative, oscillating fluidly in tandem. In one scene, the dancing bodies comprise young pre-pubescent girls performing the traditional Ejagham *Moninkim* dance. Colorful fabrics, beads and clay chalk markings

adorn their nubile bodies. Their voices carry in the evening air. In another tableau, the dancers are aged women acting out the *Ebre* dance, complete with the paraphernalia of items considered symbolic of virtuous womanhood such as farm implements, farm produce and cooking utensils. In a third scene, the dance comprises two main figures, a vividly adorned *Akata* masquerade and his chanter[1]. The former steps gracefully to the rhythm of music from a troupe of singers. The latter follows closely, chanting praise songs that inspire the masquerade to heights of acrobatic prowess.

In these scenes, and many others like them, I am a spectator—one of the crowd of onlookers, part of an ever-present audience that the dancer engages in a call-and response dialogue of voice, gait, and spectacle. Without spectators like me, the dancers cannot stage any significant interaction with the communal aegis. There are no physical boundaries between performer and spectator. But each dance scene is structured by the flow of this inter-action. Each space of performance is defined by the ebb and flow of movement through and within which the scene contracts or expands.

Even as a spectator, I am always dancing too. I move with the ebb and flow of the performance(s). In each moment, I am aware of the performative script, the norms of engagement which I must follow to see each dance well: where to stand, when to move, what to say and to whom. Being a young girl, it would be nothing short of taboo to

[1] All the referenced dance performances are indigenous to South-Eastern Nigerian states of Cross River and Akwa Ibom.

respond to the challenge of the Ekpe masquerade, but I can call out song suggestions to the dancing girls and even mimic the dance steps of the older women on the side. It is from this locus of thought, that of an immersed participant-spectator, that I begin weaving threads of discourse that follow the footsteps of the characters that I meet in literature. I am invested in their movements, their mobilities, the con/texts wherein they gain visibility and what such structures of visibility tell us about their construction of place and subjectivity.

My gaze, both on these scenes of performance and on the project of critique which is to follow, is trained on the invitation of one Igbo proverb: "The world is like a mask dancing; to see it well, one cannot stand in one place". In its gesture towards a specific worldmaking and world traversing practice, the implications of this proverb are multi-logical and multi-faceted. The proverb speaks of ***world***, a process of worlding to which I must look in its varied permutations—as social world context, as cosmic totality and as representational practice and diegetic universe represented in literature. I must look to the ***mask,*** as ontological and epistemic frame, as aesthetic paradigm, as cultural practice and as literary trope and figure. I must watch and witness the ***dancing***, with all its variations of movement, perspectival change, performance, and embodiment. I must aim to ***see it well***, visually, representationally, normatively and discursively. I must learn to ***stand***, as a subjective position, an ethical orientation, and a critical perspective but ultimately too, in

my understanding of ***place*** – spatial, relational, temporal, and discursive must remain categorically multiple.[2]

This, therefore, is where I begin, from watching dance in general and the mask's dance. In this dissertation, I begin from this critical locus to trace a spatial analysis of a specific instance of West African indigenous culture – the masquerade performance – to show how ideas of movement, spatial traversal, perspectival change, and inter-action associated with this paradigm are echoed and enacted in literature. In tracing a literary genealogy of the mask as a textual element imbued with a generative spatial consciousness, my goal is to (1) justify what this dissertation identifies as a visuospatial nexus of discourse; (2) trace the theoretical implications that the mask as cultural agent and analytic offers for establishing the contours of a visuospatial reading practice for Nigerian texts; and (3) demonstrate the critical affordances of such a reading method through the analysis of four novels: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters,* Teju Cole's *Open City* and Chimamanda Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck.* I aim to demonstrate how these novels show how visually constructed conceptual registers rooted in indigenous African knowledges inflect placemaking and the construction of subjectivity.

[2] In *The Signature of All Things,* Giorgio Agamben defines a paradigm as a form of knowledge that is : (1) …analogical; (2) replaces a dichotomous logic with a bipolar analogical model; (3) intrinsically belonging to a group, so that it is never possible to separate its exemplarity from its singularity; (4) whose historicity lies neither in diachrony nor in synchrony but in a crossing of the two (p.15). Agamben argues that the multiplicity of meanings that can be signaled by paradigms "make intelligible series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian's gaze" (31). Following but also extending Agamben, I use the term paradigm in this dissertation to reference multifarious system of meanings that the mask, in its varied contextual iterations and re-stagings, brings into the discourse of spatiality in the works of Nigerian and Afro-Diasporic writers.

Danced Knowledges: Visuality, Space and the Kinesis of Being

This research proposes a kinetic theory of action that proceeds from performance art to hermeneutic practice to critical posture discernible but yet to be articulated in African literary scholarship. In *African Art in Motion,* Robert Farris Thompson acknowledges a broad conception of dance in sub-Saharan Africa, wherein dance "is not restricted to the moving human body but can combine in certain contexts with things and objects, granting them autonomy in art, intensifying the aliveness an image must embody to function as a work of art" (xii). Similarly, Chinua Achebe description the Igbo cultural universe as "a dynamic world of movement and of flux. Igbo art, reflecting this worldview, is never tranquil but mobile and active" ("The Igbo World and its Art" *Hopes and Impediments* 62). These scholarly viewpoints point to aesthetic ideas expressed in a number of Nigerian cultures. For example, the Tiv word, *vine* which unites the ideas of dance with further worlds of artistic happening, has similarly expansive connotations as the *Ibibio* verb '*nek',* which covers a range of meanings from literal dancing to discursive convolutions. In these contexts, not only is the dialectic logic of stillness enlivened by motion intrinsic to aesthetic practice, persons and things are "made more impressively themselves by motion" (*African Art in Motion*, xii).

Beyond the aforementioned spatial tableaus of culturally specific scenes of performance, my consciousness and knowledge of dance as inter-action, a multi-logic set of relations constantly iterative and generative in its format, define the way I inhabit other spaces. Wole Soyinka describes scenes such as these as "microcosms created by communal

presence", which collectively comprise a "cosmic totality" in many African cultures. (Myth, Literature and the African World, 3). If, as Doreen Massey suggests, "to travel between places is to move between collections of trajectories and to reinsert [oneself] in the ones to which [one] relates" (*For Space,* 130*)*, then these microcosms, taken together, form an essential part of the thread through which I link to larger spans of relationships: social, aesthetic; material and intellectual. The set of relations that bind these tableaus together produces a spatial consciousness that informs my sense of place and my interactions with my community and others that I both move through and inhabit.

When, by virtue of my journeys to other spaces, I encounter dance steps that are different, songs that speak of faraway places and ideas and the terms of reference that do not promote the call and response pattern of my community, I still seek the mesh of emplacement and inter-action. In these overdetermined spaces, my dance steps falters and my feet almost become leaden. But even in other spaces where one-directional flow of speech and authority from speaker to listeners, educated to illiterate, holy to fetish, modern to primitive, I am pulled towards a particular 'collection of trajectories", the rhythm of relations, the stance of iterative flexibility, the imperatives of juxtaposition and balance, the ceaseless loop between broad overview and specific perspective, part and whole, the individual and communal, singular and multiple.

The boundaries that circumscribe me in boundaried spaces are not only spatial but also visual. The call-and-response rhythms of dance that frames how I see and understand

spaces and places through a dialectical exposition of being does not also align with the discourses instituted in and enforced by the hierarchies of spaces structured by histories and ideologies of coloniality. An aesthetic of immobilization traceable to the intersection of European imperialism, ethnography and anthropology at the turn of the century circumscribes my being. This intersection produced "a visual matrix of exhibition, dissection, and display" that enabled the documentation and argument for African inferiority in a bid to determine "the essence of their difference and the reason for their subordination".[3] Produced within this visual matrix was the gaze of the colonizer, Bertrand Westphal asserts that such a visual matrix "lingers on the spectacle of otherness, to gauge or to judge unworthy, and thus to claim a pretext for legitimating speech destined to reduce the Other to the Same. …a gazing culture focuses on a gazed- upon culture whose status as a "culture" is most often found to be minor or inferior." (*Geocriticism,* 123).

When I turn to literature, I find a textual problematic that echoes this mode of relationality and spatial consciousness. A moment of dramatic action in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* crystalizes such a relationship between visuality, spatiality, aesthetics and literary form. Achebe's text is set in the early days of European colonial invasion in Southeastern Nigeria. The scene is the *Ilo* of Umuachala. Ezeulu's (the village chief

[3] Lisa Gail Collins, "Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth," Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot," Deborah Willis, ed (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 77.

priest's) son, Edogo has just finished carving an Agaba mask for the *Akwu Nro* feast, a communal celebration of regeneration. He is concerned about what the public appraisal of the mask would be and concludes 'that he must see the Mask in action to know whether it was good or bad' (251). The narrator tells us that 'although Edogo could have taken one of the back seats in the *Okwolo,* he chose to stand with the crowd *so as to see the Mask from different positions'* (250). It is through Edogo's traversal of varied spatio-perceptual thresholds 'from one part of the crowd to another' that he is assured that what he assumed as a weakness in the mask actually complemented its features.

Edogho's shifting exploration of the *Ilo* is not without tension: his desire to hear a comparison of his creation with the famous Agaba of Umuagu remains unsatisfied and he wishes he had sat among the elders in the *okwolo*. a more likely place to hear the kind of conversation he was listening for. A similar spatial ethos is expressed by his father, Ezeulu, in another narrative moment in the novel. In this iteration, Ezeulu explains his decision to send his son, Oduche to the White man's school using an Igbo proverb. 'The world is like a Mask dancing', he says. 'If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place." (*Chinua* Achebe, *Arrow of God* 55).

Taken together, the call and response mode of relations intrinsic to my *Ibibio* cultural experience *and* these narrative moments in Achebe's novel foreground a textual problematic prominent in Achebe's writing (and that of a number of other Nigerian writers) that yet remains unexplored in scholarship, namely: the relationship between

visuality and placemaking or what I refer to as *visuospatiality.* The *fusion of visual and spatial epistemes* emphasized in both Edogo's polyfocal sampling of the different perspectives of the mask to evaluate his work and Ezeulu's evocation of an Igbo polyfocal ethos as the justification for sending Oduche to the European school both help us see how the fusion of visual and spatial relations inaugurate alternative forms of ontological worlding. This problematic – a particular modality of looking at and conceiving of place – replicates itself in varied other textual instances in Achebe's writing and that of other Nigerian writers. We see it the descriptions of Okonkwo as simultaneously *Egwugwu* mask and husband by his wives in *Things Fall* Apart. It is also evident in Wole Soyinka's fusing of divergent perspectives to narrate the nation as cosmos in *The Interpreters*, in Julius' restless perambulations through and descriptions of familiar city landmarks in New York and Berlin as well as in Chimamanda Adichie's deployment of a mask as a constellational narrative catalyst in *The Thing Around Your Neck.*

What these textual moments and discursive strategies register is a specific orientation to spatial thinking that foregrounds ideas of mobility and perspectival change as intrinsic to worlding and placemaking. In other words, these texts all express an ontopolitics of movement, a spatial consciousness and narrative practice that conceives the diegetic world in terms of a mask dancing. In this dissertation, I examine how the mask, a ubiquitous aesthetic cultural ensemble in Nigerian (and indeed African) literature and

culture, crystalizes this ontopolitics of movement into a composite image and critical discursive index useful for our understanding of spatiality in literature.

For the purposes of clarity, Raphael Njoku's concise description of what constitutes the mask as a cultural ensemble is worth quoting at length. Njoku explains that:

> The *mask*…is literally a camouflage, covering or disguise used to hide one's physical appearance either wholly or partially during a public performance. Thus, the *masquerade* is the theatrical or performing art form of the mask—that is, wearing the mask and its accessories and costumes… The art of costuming—which usually makes use of fabrics and other items of clothing, ornaments, accessories, and colors adorned by [masked figures] for the purpose of defining and establishing the circumstances of the character's existence in time and space—is the critical tool with which the Igbo and their neighbors literally turned lifeless objects created by humans into mobile spirits and divinities. ("On Origins of Masking" 20)

Located within an aesthetic and epistemic paradigm that intersects subjectivity, ontology, spatiality and visuality, the configurations of the mask gestures towards a space-time paradigm radically different from Western teleological temporality. This maps out these configurations into a critical method for a visuospatial literary analysis. I argue that because modes of thought associated with the mask as aesthetic practice are deployed as textual form, cultural referent and discursive index in the works of Achebe, Soyinka, Cole and Adichie, reading these texts through the prism of the mask *as spatial framework*

allows us to identify an underlying visuospatial consciousness runs through them spite of their different contexts of writing.

A key premise of this dissertation is that the deployment of protocols of discourse associated with the mask, what I call *critical mask poetics*, generates important visuospatial logics in texts, and that attention to such forms of spatial consciousness enables the formulation of a 'ground up' approach to theorizing spatiality in African literature that is sensitive to indigenous knowledge structures. In the texts examined in this dissertation, I argue that the mask functions as a spatialized, visually oriented, and kinetically driven cultural idiom that enables us to see how continuity, change and transformation in African spaces and lifeworlds are represented in literature. By using the mask as a critical analytic, I am suggesting that this approach illuminates forms of visuospatiality tied to indigenous knowledge and crucial to our understanding of the rendition of place in the works of these writers. My exploration of indigenously grounded forms of spatiality in relation to Nigerian and Afro Diasporic texts aims to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of spatiality in Nigerian, and by extension, Anglophone African and Afro-Diasporic literary productions.

My project also aims to read African literature as a world-making project with distinctively visual preoccupations, by highlighting the theoretical, cultural, material, and social questions that writers respond to through their focus on visual enunciations of space. In doing so, I adopt and expand scholarship in world literature and Global

Anglophone criticism which relate to the question of worlding. (Damrosch, 2003; Cooppan 20019; Ganguly, 2016; Cheah, 2016). Aiming to offer a broad perspective on the ways in which African conceptual registers offer new forms of spatial awareness in literature, I focus on how the mask as a dominant aesthetic paradigm and figure of discourse rooted in the oral tradition introduced new ways of envisioning and representing space in literature, both in texts that explicitly reference it and in others that deploy it as a similar epistemic format to suggest the idea of dance as analogous to spatial exploration. Following this discursive trope through a series of textual moments that arc from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* to Teju Cole's *Open City* and Chimamanda Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, I demonstrate how visually constructed conceptual registers inflect placemaking and the construction of subjectivity from texts set in historical moments of intense spatial upheaval and change instigated by the advent of colonial modernity in Africa to contemporary narratives of globalization.

If, as Martin Lewis and Kärin Wigen assert, considerations of human experience inevitably deploy "a set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world" (*The Myth of Continents*, ix), I am interested in exploring, from a comparatist perspective, the ways that indigenous African knowledges participate in the creation of such spatial structures within the imaginary spaces of literature. As this research demonstrates, attention to indigenous modes of seeing and their role in literary placement is important because they provide the grounds for the subversive poetics

through which these writers institute a counter spatial and epistemic imaginary that, challenge "ready-made epistemologies, fashioned and deployed from the West [that] have dominated scholarship in and on Africa"(Jude Forkwang, 327) [4]. Because "representation[s] of space come from a *reciprocal creation*, (italics mine) not simply a one- way activity of a gaze looking from one point to another, without considering other reciprocating gazes (as in Eurocentrism, for example)" (Westphal and Tally 113),Western oriented theories of spatiality that "insist on their capacity to explain all" are particularly problematic in their wholescale application to reading spatiality in non-Western localities. By tracking specific forms of indigenous African epistemology and the mediative roles they play in textual representation, I aim to take seriously the idea of *envisioning space* as a literary practice that emerges from African cultures of placemaking and subjectivity. This approach to spatial literary criticism will illuminate how these texts stage strategies through which looking and seeing communicate alternative worldviews and forms of subjective emplacement and amplify our understanding of spatiality in general.

My approach is comparatist, seeking to locate and determine alternate frames of reading of African literature as a ''space of translation" (Barnard 195n) of the broad historical processes through which dominant forms of spatiality in African literature has been constructed. My alternative reading approach transcends the generational schema often

[4] See Fokang, Jude. "Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd" and the Fallacy of Completeness by way of African Proverbs" in Francis Njamnjoh *(Ed) Being and Becoming as a Permanent Work of Progress.*p.327.

used in categorizing Nigerian literature. Hamish Dalley suggests that the historicizing trend in the Nigerian literary tradition which categorizes texts according to generations, "each of which is presumed to share formal and political qualities and represent a distinct stage in national literary development" fails to account for the complexities of Nigerian writing. Dalley's reading of Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's I Do Not Come to You by Chance (2009) and Teju Cole's Open City (2011) suggests that these novels are shaped around spatio-temporal imaginaries that exceed the national-generational framework ("Third Generation Nigerian Literature" 16). Thus, in place of the 'generational" grouping framework which categorizes Nigerian literature into 'first", "second" and "third" generations, Dalley argues for the enrichment or supplementation of the existing critical discourse on Nigerian literature via alternative perspectives that deviate from or extend beyond its dominant historicizing frameworks. [5]

An interdisciplinary response to Dalley's call, such as is attempted here, bestrides the fields of postcolonial studies, performance studies, visual studies, and literary criticism. Dalley's point appears to be a warning about the dangers of reified temporal frameworks and crisply demarcated historical frames that ignore the *multiple, accumulative,* and *ambivalent* (Dalley 18) process of a text's becoming. I therefore seek to offer as a model open to further modification and an alternative to the dominant historicizing trends in the criticism of African literature. The idea of art (read literature) as a knot, which, once it has been

[5] Dalley makes the point that the nation-generational approach, by merely grouping texts sorely on the basis of their putative affiliation to a nation-state and their location in a historical narrative beginning with foundational figures and proceeding through stages, fails to account for the complex spatio-temporal imaginaries that emerge in these writings. ("Third Generation Nigerian Literature", 2014, p.16)

carefully untied, appears as part of a continuum of tradition is not new[6]. Also, Walter Benjamin the idea of an individual work of art as a fragment of the idea of art, where art is conceived the process through which the subject/ object of knowledge constituted via 'an infinite process' of incremental self-consciousness (*Selected Writings Vo.1*, 125) is useful in tracing the metatext of indigenous knowledge that the mask constellates in these texts.

What do we find when we apply the yardsticks of visual enunciation and spatial practice to particular literatures? For one, I argue that it enhances the conditions of visibility for the disenfranchised subject by calling attention to the tension between African and Western notions spatiality, especially as they manifest themselves in an African literary setting. With regards to Nigerian literature in particular, I propose that Nigerian writers utilize visuospatial logics to emplace their audience in the experiential contexts explored in their writing, giving the text spatial concreteness in ways evocative of a near indigenous equivalent, the folktale, which, as Harry Olufunwa explains, has "content and form [that are] often depend[ent] on the context of storyteller, audience, and the circumstances in which it is being told" ("Achebe's Spatial Temporalities" 52). They thus enact a set of circulations within the social body intent on spotlighting and questioning the (in)visibility of the subject in the state of crisis, represented via complex representational strategies[7].

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[6] See Graeme Gilloch "Immanent Criticism and Exemplary Critique" in *Walter Benjamin-critical constellations* (p.32)

[7] In her essay "Africa, Otherwise: Beyond Crisis" Janet Roitman conducts an extensive exegesis of the concept of crises and its significance in world historical consciousness. For more, see: Roitman Janet. "Africa Otherwise Beyond Crisis." Multitudes 2017 pp. 173–173.

The point, therefore, is that attention to the co-constructive relationship between visual enunciation and spatiality makes legible forms of subjectivity and cultural production that are spatially-anchored and highlights how subjects in crisis participate in the negotiations of space and identity. It also illuminates the ways that contemporary diaspora writers re/enact culturally situated forms of African indigenous thought. Moreover, it spotlights literary worlding practices and situated knowledges that Third World writers incorporate into and interrogate in their writing. This epistemic intervention, which considers literary texts as sources for and elaborations of theory that build on situated knowledges, challenges the aesthetics of otherness invested in assigning theoretical primacy to Western thought.

Dissertation Outline and Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is segmented into Six Chapters. The focus of this introductory chapter has been to outline the stakes of the project. In Chapter One, I establish the justification for a visuospatial nexus of discourse and trace the theoretical implications that the mask analytic offers for a visuospatial reading practice. Chapters Two to Five turn to textual moments that interweave visual registers, spatial epistemes and discursive tableaus into narrative play to show how such discourse takes on textual form. In chapter Two, "Visuospatial Geographies in *Things Fall Apart,* I probe the theoretical implications of Chinua Achebe's emphasis on multi-perspectivism, restless dynamism, visual and kinetic substantiation on his narrative postures and strategies of subject construction in the novel

and argue that the text reconstitutes modes of spatial emplacement and visual perspective operative within the Igbo cultural landscape to capture flux, contradictions and displacements of codes of sociality upended by colonial modernity.

Chapter Three applies critical mask poetics to examine Wole Soyinka's deployment of fragmentation, displacement, situatedness and somatic language in *The Interpreters*. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the text's fusing of divergent perspectives, spaces and temporal vignettes illuminates a dynamic, iterative and relational mechanism of social ordering and ways of being that emphasize poly-spatiality, multiperspectivity and layered time. Chapter Four traces how Yorùbá visual registers relating to perception, subjectivity, and representation provide interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Teju Cole's Black diasporic novel, *Open City* in ways that illuminate the conflicted, contradictory itineraries of the postcolonial African transnational immigrant figure.

Chapter Five pays attention to how Adichie inserts new geographies of imagination and the forms of knowing embedded in them into Afro-diasporic literature in ways that interlink questions of visuality, gender, aesthetics and epistemology. I argue here that beyond the critique of the objectifying visual lens that sees the non-Western woman Other as object, Adichie's short story "Imitation" enacts an even more important modality of thought, namely, the operation of the mask as a valence of resistance, a non-transparent index of obscurity and opacity within which a call and response invitation to seeing differently happens. In my concluding Chapter, I highlight the critical potential of

the visuospatial mode of reading for understanding the reconstitution, intertextuality, and diasporic movements of similar Black imaginative ecologies.

Chapter I

Who Sees Whom from Where: Scopic Histories, Spatial Regimes and Voices from the (Western) Canon

> Questions of who sees and who is seen, and of how certain institutions and social structures can ensure that what was once unseen in relation to Africa…are brought into greater visibility are central to contemporary African literary criticism.
> — Norridge et al. x

A tension between specificity and generalization, between concretization and abstraction often defines the discourse of spatiality in postcolonial writing in general and African literature, in particular. Although the centrality of specific spatial issues and questions in shaping the literary histories that emerge in the wake of colonization and coloniality has been widely acknowledged, scholarship that attempt to answer these questions often recourse to Western scholars for their theoretical inspiration in ways that fail to account for the specificities of spatial orientation drawn from African material contexts. But the Eurocentrism that has come to define the critique of African textual geographies through theoretical frameworks drawn from Western spatial logics and material contexts reduces spatial concerns and the issues that these texts stage to merely diegetic and ignores the

history of erasure, violence and spatial and epistemic denigration to which African writers respond.

When spatial contexts are considered as merely diegetic adornment subordinate to thematic and aesthetic concerns in a text, it is pertinent to ask what sleights of hand such a fill- in-the-blanks reading practice either perform or enable. If spatial contexts and the cultural objects they frame operate as conduits of meaning, what local spatial referents do African writers drawn on and how do such forms of spatial consciousness define literary form and meaning? To what extent do such spatial meaning configurations percolate from oral traditional practices into literary writing? What knowledge hierarchies inform our capacity to decipher or even remain attentive to these configurations?

Representational parameters that have attracted extensive critical attention in recent years converge at the intersection of visuality and spatiality. In arguing for a politics and an epistemology of location, positioning, and situating, where particularity and universality provide co-constitutive dimensions to our understanding of the complexities of place, I initially turn the voices of scholars who centralize the problematics of space and placemaking in their work in my quest for a different understanding of literary spatiality. Over the last twenty-five years, scholarly attention to the way various cultural texts `map' space has led to the emergence of what has been called 'the spatial turn' in theory and criticism, a development which has had a wide-ranging influence on academic history

over the last couple of decades[8]. In *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression,* for example, Bill Richardson points to the interpretative potential of spatial models for understanding diverse cultural phenomena (3) in a text representative of this trend of scholarship. Richardson insists that the centrality of spatial logics in literary analysis is attributable to the fact that spatiality and the related concepts of location and movement play a major role in the constitution of the self (41). [9] For him, human efforts at symbolic self-expression are inextricable from social relations because the awareness of one's spatial location is inextricable from cognitive and emotive processes. Thus, to produce space is to create a reality in which our aspirations can come to fruition, because spatial consciousness impinges upon and often defines the human sense of self (7). As Richardson's edited volume shows, the exploration of instantiations of spatial practice in literature allows for a better understanding of cultural productions that rely on those spatial realities to achieve their end (2).

The upsurge of interest in questions of space and place and the interactions between dominant practices of spatial production as well as its critical resistances resonate in

[8] Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* identify the change in theoretical reorientation as a shift from an absolute conception of space as existing outside human existence, as an inert backdrop against which human experience happens to the perception of space as "a surface on which the relationships between (measurable) things were played out (p.4). The emerging interdisciplinary formation and polyvalent critical phenomenon centered on ascertaining the configurations of the spatial "skein" that interlaces dimensions of modern society and culture has blossomed into ample interest on the problematics of 'space', 'place' and `cultural geography'.

[9] Spatial logics, as I use the term, refers to the formal aesthetic modes through which perception of and engagement with space is filtered in literature. As a system of principles and parameters for *signifying space*, it is constituted via specific relational hermeneutic strategies and structures deployed as primary resources for organizing, registering, and interpreting *spatially-anchored* experience. Although the term is used in mathematics for the analysis of the relationship between geometrical structures and the spatial languages which describe them, K. Arunlal and Sunitha Srinivas C., in adopting the term for poetic analysis, assert that space is much more than a passive geometric concept.

postcolonial studies. One dimension of this critical trend hinges on the critique of the relationship between geographical knowledge and the foundations of cultural epistemology. Edward Said, for example, described his canonical *Culture and Imperialism* as "a kind of geographical inquiry into historical experience" (1). Said's concept of 'imaginative geography' aimed at refashioning spatial sensibilities not only in traditional "geographic" terms but in a broader epistemological sense where the transgression of borders allows for the imagination of new hybrid topographies and realms of experience. Said asserts that history always *takes place,* and that human experience is irrevocably tied to "the struggle over geography", conceived as a tussle over "ideas… images and imaginings" (1). For this reason, he insists that to ignore the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other… as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories enacted in such terrains is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic,* Said similarly anchors the struggle over geographies to literature, asserting that "texts … are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society-in short, they are in the world, and hence are worldly (4).

No conversation about 'the spatial turn' can be considered complete without reference to the founding theorists of this critical tradition. One of such canonical texts is cultural theorist Michel de Certeau's essay "Walking in the City"[10]. This work contributed immensely to igniting interest in the ways in which the city can be thought of as text, and

[10] de Certeau, Michel. "Walking in the City" *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988

the text as a city[11]. In this work, de Certeau explores how the notion of panopticism, developed in the work of Michel Foucault enables a rethinking of the space of the city in relation to the individual. de Certeau identifies the image of the pedestrian as the key figure of urban mobility by mapping the realm of lived experience inhabited by strollers who write the urban text. By utilizing a birds-eye view to transform space in their effort to defy the geometrical discipline imposed by urban development, the city dwellers or spectator, de Certeau argues, "can read in [the city] a universe that is constantly exploding" (91) [12]. This essay's conceptualization of urban space as "text" that city dwellers write through "networks of moving, intersecting writings to compose a manifold story ...shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representation" has defined much of spatial literary criticism and marked it as canonical within spatiality studies ("Walking in the City" 93) . de Certeau postulations on the readable city, among other interventions, have been particularly influential on conceptualizations of space and its relation to literature for African scholars whose works are highlighted in this chapter .

Another canonical work which inaugurated the spatial turn is Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*[13]. Lefebvre's book provides essential insights into the form and

[11] Bryden, Inga. *Working With English: Medieval and Modern Language, Literature and Drama* 5.1 Crossing the Divides, ed. Gibson, Green, King and Lucas (2009): pp. 21-32, p.22

[12] For more on the city as text, see de Certeau, Michael. "Walking in the City" *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p.91

[13] See Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

functions of spatiality as an anchor of social existence. By drawing on wide-ranging critical discourses, from philosophy, economics, history, architecture, literature, psychoanalysis and art, to engage fundamental questions about the spatial practices within social theory, this work revolutionized contemporary discourses on history, architecture, urban planning, the history of the city, the environment, representation and language, art, ideology, and knowledge.

Because Lefebvre devotes much attention to demonstrating the limitations of many concepts and practices with regards to what he refers to as the spatial problematic, his analysis of the production of social space serves as a valuable tool for understanding the theoretical foundations of the bulk of current criticism and interventions on spatiality. Explaining how social space is produced, for example, he conceives it as a set of relations and interactions between objects and products. Lefebvre's delineation of concepts like lived space, representational space, produced space and abstract space has enabled a rethinking of the history and conception of space and contributed to the spatial turn and his elaborations on the subject of abstract space and the ways in which space and violence are integrated within social spheres have contributed significantly to the emergence of spatiality studies as a field of literary and historical interest.

Problematics of Space and Visuality: A Critical Intersection

it is particularly noteworthy that spectrum of scholarly discourse on spatiality often interlinks this field to the critique of visuality and visual cultures. Lefebvre, for example,

understands the articulation of space as a reproducible social product marked by a "visual character". For Lefebvre, space is:

> made with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and of whatever is contained by them. The predominance of visualization …serves to conceal repetitiveness. People look, and take sight, take seeing, for life itself. … We buy on the basis of images. Sight and seeing, which in the Western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap. (*The Production of Space* 75–76)

Lefebvre defines the "logic of visualization" as an operational sequence, a strategy which relies on the manipulation of scales of visuality as strategies for creating different metonymic displays of spatialization. In literature, to which Lefebvre's representational space corresponds, the predominance of visualization is not in doubt, as evident in the emphasis of sight and seeing, especially in realist writing. Representational spaces in texts instantiate kinds of spatial production which draw on cultural and historical resources, the possibility and memory of ways of living in spaces other than those dictated by the dominant order.

The relevance of visual logics as a critical vantage point for expanding insight into literature has been attested to by different scholars who have examined the mechanism of sight and its discursive determinations (Lacan, Derrida, Mulvaney, etc.) Tracing the recent genealogies of visual culture studies, Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith define visual culture studies as "an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that has the potential to *create new objects of study*" in relation to varied "subjects, media, environments, ways of seeing and practices of looking" (*Visual Culture,* 16). For Morra and Smith, the "counter-

or anti-disciplinary impetus" of visual studies, "its drive to worry or problematize other Disciplines" enables the "engendering new objects or mobilizing more established things in new ways" (*Visual Culture,* 15). Their position is echoed in W. J. T. Mitchell's conception of the field as "an indiscipline", defined by its "turbulence," its "incoherence," its "chaos," or its "wonder" as an "indiscipline": the "anarchist" moment of "breakage or rupture" when "a way of doing things … compulsively performs a revelation of its own inadequacy" ("Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture" 543).

An important implication of visual studies' capacity to bridge disciplines and mobilize new ways of questioning established ideas is that it enables attention to hitherto taken-for-granted junctures of discourse upon which the visual referent can alight to generate productive inquiry about spatiality. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau sees such junctures a common in modern society, which he argues is "characterized by … a growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey" (xxi).

Similarly, Martin Jay in *Vision and Visuality* echoes de Certeau by describing vision as "the master sense of the modern era" (3). Jay's reading of what he calls the "occularcentricism" of European modernity adopts and reworks Christian Metz's concept of the scopic regime to describe a systematic structuring of visual fields which results in specific practices of spatial production. Jay sees Cartesian perspectivalism as a dominant

field of vision that defined the evolution of modernism.[14] In art, this viewpoint manifested as an "abstract coldness of the perspectival gaze due to a withdrawal of the painter's emotions from entanglement with the objects depicted in geometricalized space." As a result, "the participatory involvement of more absorptive visual modes was diminished, if not entirely suppressed, as the gap between spectator and spectacle widened." One important implication of the development of the occularcentric order in European art was the envisioning of abstract, quantitatively conceptualized space as "more interesting to the artist than the qualitatively differentiated subjects painted within it [and] the rendering of the scene became an end in itself."[15] Because Cartesian perspectivalism viewed the world as "a standing reserve for the surveillance and manipulation of a dominating subject," the visual field depicted on the other side of the canvas was understood "as separate from the viewer [and] could become a portable commodity able to enter the circulation of capitalist exchange."[16]

Further extending the concept of scopic regimes, Derek Gregory defines a scopic regime as a system of 'constructed visibility that allows particular objects to be seen in determinate ways" (" Colonial Encounters" 224). Gregory explains that:

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[14] Jay explains that this perspective was "conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it. Such an eye was, moreover, understood to be static, unblinking, and fixated, rather than dynamic [or] moving … from one focal point to another. For more, see Jay, Martin, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," Vision and Visuality, ed. Foster, Hal (New York: New Press, 1999), 7

[15] Jay, Martin, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Foster, Hal (New York: New Press, 1999), 7–8

[16] Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," 8, 10

> A scopic regime imposes a systematicity on the visual field; a structuring effect on who sees, through the constitution of the viewing subject, and on what is seen, through the production of a space of constructed visibility that allows particular objects to be seen in determinate ways…the visual practices that it shapes and sanctions are further inflected by different media. …Scopic regimes are constituted through grids of power, desire and knowledge, and their visual structures and practices enter intimately into the production of imaginative geographies. ("Colonial Encounters" 224)

Gregory's suggestion that the production of space operates through 'constructed visibility' is important to the current research, for it reminds us that visual regimes constitute important epistemic structures through which social difference emerges. In other words, *scopic regimes are also spatial regimes* that manifest in varied modes of social production, including literature.

On a similar note, Allen Feldman views scopic regimes as referencing "the sum of the agendas and techniques of political visualization: the regimens that prescribe modes of seeing and object visibility and that proscribe or render untenable other modes and objects of perception", which establish the truth claims, typicality and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing ("On the Actuarial Gaze"

224n). Beyond visual arts, Lund Hans and Kacke Götrick in *Text as Picture* argue that similar representational optics emerged in literary texts, featuring as "iconic projection … a well-defined tradition in Western literary history."[17]

On a related note, Aleksander Bednarski, connects the centrality of visual enunciation in literary spatial production to the representational format of literature. Because remembering the past requires the process of investigating and decoding visual material, Bednarski argues that the novel [for example] may be seen as an apparatus enabling the ordering and securing of the visual repository of collective memory. Since language is the building block for the construction of spatial codes (Lefebvre 16) which unites verbal and non-verbal signs by a signifying process (47), the encoding of experience via language operates by regulating hierarchies of spatial habitation, prescribing boundaries of social interaction, and determining embodied action and routes (147).

Writing African Spatiality Beyond the Western Visual Matrix

Perhaps nowhere were the interrelated modalities of visual enunciation and spatial control deployed so systematically as in the enactment of 'Africa' within the European imaginary. Identifying this specific confluence of ideas, David Campbell and Marcus Power, in their examination of colonial visual representations of Africa use the term 'scopic regime' to identify the set of discursive practices, tropes and conceptual

[17] See Lund, Hans and Götrick, Kacke, *Text as Picture: Studies in the Literary Transformation of Pictures* (Lewiston, ME: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 2

categories, which range from literature to museums, exhibitions, cinema and photography through which the colonial imperative was justified. In their view, this visual field extended:

> From natural history museums to imperial exhibitions, from postcards to comic strips, from travel writings to accounts of exploration and missionary activity, from colonial photographs to contemporary cinema, 'Africa' has been consistently (re)produced and enacted across a wide range of cultural sites. … the performance of 'Africa' through various technologies of observation, reproduction and display has been remarkably consistent and enduring. ("The Scopic Regime of 'Africa"167)

The Western scopic regime not only created a repertoire of perspectival practices, embedded in a global visual economy, which established a hierarchical relationship between the [European] observer and the [African] observed, it also produced the constitutive frames for rendering these respective subject positions legible (Campbell and Marcus, 188). To this visual economy can be traced the image of 'Africa' that persists within the Western imaginary as "a place in the world marked by either war and disaster or exotic natives and animal tourism" ("The Scopic Regime of Africa"188). This narrative has been sustained until date through the structure of iteration that is at the heart of performativity, whereby discourse produces the effect that it names through reiterative and citational practices (188).

The visual matrix that Gregory, Westphal, Campbell and Power and Feldman describe above operates in conjunction with and produces distinct spatial logics. When taken together, these scholarly positions point to an intersection between two fields of discourse that not only inform each other but necessitate a critical convergence to account for a burgeoning interest in the critique of space and visuality as interrelated systems of containment and control within which the colonial imperative operated and which still drives the afterlives of coloniality. This critical juncture between *Spatial literary criticism* and *visual culture studies* is particularly important because renders legible the interaction between and responses to technologies of observation and display used to justify the denigration of African (and Black subjects) and the modes of spatial containment, both physical and discursive, used to limit the mobility of African (and Black) bodies.

Harry Garuba makes this point when he informs us that "colonial mapping rested on the denial of 'migrations of the subject'. He attributes the ubiquity of maps and metaphors of mapping in postcolonial studies to the "surveillance and control of land, body and subject was the object of colonial geographies" which utilized the map "as text, as model, as document and as claim was central to its project" (Mapping the Land/Body/Subject" 87). Garuba sees these modes of containment, both physical and discursive, as geared "to circumscribe the natural mobility of the body (in space) …[and] to define the limits of the cultural (identity) mobility available to the subject" (87). Recalling Foucault's discourse on the interplay between power and surveillance using the concept of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons* and David Spur's analysis of systematic

orders of discourse *Rhetoric of Empire* , Garuba argues that "colonial mapping rested on the denial of "migrations of the subject" achieved through interdependent systems of containment and control, that created "a spatial arrangement in which the observed is firmly placed within the visual power of the observer"(88).[18]

It comes as no surprise then that Rita Barnard attributes the reassertion of the spatial in critical social theory, in the discourse of imperialism, and in colonialism and postcolonial theory to the intrinsically geographic nature of the imperial project (*Apartheid and Beyond* 5). The issue at stake is the extensive deployment of the interrelated modalities of visual enunciation and spatial control deployed in the enactment of 'Africa' within the European imaginary which African writers' critique in their writing. Garuba identifies the underlying linear logic in question as "conceptions of the subject and representation premised on Cartesian perspectivalism", tracing the origins of this spatial economy to an Enlightenment logic that subordinated the world to the frames of representation designed by the (European) Subject." (88) To examine the implications of and literary responses to this spatial economy, postcolonial theory and geo-spatial criticism increasingly showcases the imperative to not only deconstruct the mimetic claims of the Western scopic regimes but to also excavate spatial orderings that such claims occluded and to examine the domains of knowledge that they embody within African literature.

[18] Garuba, H. "Mapping the Land/Body/Subject: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies in African Narrative." *Alternation: Journal of the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2002, pp. 87–116. (p.87)

Significantly, African visuospatial negation is not just a fading vestige of colonial history but a tangible reality that defines contemporary intertextual spaces of the visual (Campbell and Power, "The Scopic Regime of 'Africa" 168). Binyavanga Wainaina critiques such negating frames of representation with brutal irony in *How to Write About Africa*. By the same token, Achille Mbembe opines that "the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation" (*On the Postcolony* 1). Mbembe suggests that a deconstruction of *negative interpretations* (italics in original) of Africa must involve examining "how the world of meanings thus produced is ordered" and paying attention to "the use of visual imagery and discourse" (*On the Postcolony* 103). For him, such a critical stance is warranted because within the field of visual perception:

> the pictographic sign … expresses itself, not only … as a mode of describing, narrating, and representing reality, but also as a particular strategy of persuasion. (142)

Because visual enunciation allows for "the transcription of a reality, a word, a vision, or an idea into a visible code", it institutes a manner of speaking of the world and inhabiting it". (142) deployable for the denigration of marginalized societies.

This perhaps explains why Zoe Norridge, Charlotte Baker and Elleke Boehmer, in their introduction to the special issue of *Research in African Literatures, (In)Visibility in African Cultures,* describe the act of looking as "intricately intertwined with the search

for both knowledge and understanding" in African cultures and suggest that such a critical practice becomes available through astute observation of the visible world and imagining the world in response to visual stimuli (v). Their astute point is that because their commitment to 'to look for what would otherwise remain unperceived' (v), tropes of visibility enable creative artists to approach invisible subjects who not only perceive new aspects of the world around [them], but also relate to them as complex systems, as elements that influence each other, and as networks of relations.

The visuospatial configurations of meaning that this dissertation considers are informed by a similar critical engagement with complex life worlds and relational networks articulated in Nigerian Literature. My examination of visual enunciation as a relevant register of spatial representation intersects with Judith Butler's view of the visual as an important frame that enables the recognizability of certain figures of the human. Butler argues the visual is a vital avenue for transmitting norms that establish the conditions of possibility for an ethical response to the Other. For one, it is critical to establishing what she calls a 'field of perceptible reality' where "the notion of the recognizable human is formed and maintained over and against what cannot be named or regarded as the human, a figure of the nonhuman that holds the place of the human in its unrecognizability" ("Torture and the Ethics of Photography" 951). Because visual cues are essential in sense-making, not only in real life but also in literature, they function as a means for orienting the self in both the real and fictional worlds. John Berger's assertion that "seeing which comes before words, …can never be quite covered by them" articulates the

intrinsic dialectic relationship between vision and literary representation (*Ways of Seeing* 8) [19]. It is therefore pertinent to ask how paying attention to the systematic manipulation of visual signifiers to achieve specific spatial effects can amplify contemporary critical practice in African literature.

The interactions between spatiality, visuality and narrative form traced so far offer a point of departure for reconsidering how and why African writers harness the problematic question of literary representation to those of spatiality and visuality in their texts. As Norridge, et al acknowledge:

> Questions of who sees and who is seen, and of how certain institutions and social structures can ensure that what was once unseen in relation to Africa—issues of pain, suffering, discomfort, and humiliation—are brought into greater visibility are central to contemporary African literary criticism. (Norridge et al. x)

The visual hermeneutics imposed by negating scopic regimes flattens the modes of knowing central to my construction of personhood into an undifferentiated mass labeled as "quaint ritual" (Soyinka 7). Within this frame, I am a stick figure, the uni-dimensional target of a flattened, distant, aestheticized ideology. I am bounded by straight lines of perception from which there is no flight. My propelling impulse of inter-action and my rhythms of moment not only diminish, but they also fade out of sight.

[19] Berger, John, and Michael Dibb. *Ways of Seeing*. [London]: BBC Enterprises, 1972. p.8

Against this backdrop, it becomes relevant to examine if and how Western scopic regimes have instigated a response on the part of African writers. Consequently, the task of identifying the modes of visual enunciation that African writers deploy to spotlight different spaces and the subjects who inhabit them is the focus of my dissertation. If, as Barnard asserts, 'the inadequacy of European landscape iconographies to the task of describing new colonial territories, and the production of new, locally defined and strategic identities' propelled the review of colonialist literature and cultural practice by postcolonial scholars, it would be fruitful to re-examine not only the spatial logics that contemporary postcolonial writers utilize to render legible contemporary 'locally defined and strategic identities' (8) but also the formal strategies that enable such rendering. Since language always negotiates a kind of gap between the word and its signification (Ashcroft et al. *Postcolonial Studies,* 165), investigating the ways in which visual and spatial signifiers interface to map the dynamics of postcolonial African subjectivity would help to illuminate the gap between the lived experience of the African postcolonial world and the modes of visual signification available to capture it in literature.

Western Theory of Spatiality and its Afterlives in African Literary Discourse

Attention to the nuances of space and visuality as intersecting expressive media offers new possibilities for understanding not only the histories informed by interrelated systems of containment and control that African writers respond to but also, even more importantly, shed light on the total canvas of experience as apprehended in the African conception of the world, represented via literature. Abiola Irele expresses this latter point

when he suggests that critical readings of African literature should 'conform with the mode of vision that determines the structure of the work itself, the general referential code of its constitution as imaginative expression (*The African Imagination* 96). If, as Irele' argues, African oral cultures utilize complex symbolic schemes to imbue their semiotic systems with spatial resonance, such a preoccupation would inevitably also inform the works of contemporary African writers who often mine the expressive potentials of the oral tradition to construct their creative visions.

Against this background, an upsurge of interest in the possibilities offered by the spatial turn has drawn scholarly attention in African literary and cultural studies. [20] Literary scholars, in particular, focus on the different configurations of space as a signifier of meaning, using this frame to explore pertinent theoretical, cultural, material, social and economic questions about literary geographies, sites of contradiction and resistance to colonial power as well as the spatial intersections of traditional African cultures, literature contemporary experience.[21] However, a dominant trend in this field of scholarship is the recourse to theoretical views associated with the discourse of place,

[20] An emerging corpus of Africanist research centralizes space as a critical construct for understanding society. With varied emphasis on the physical, social and ideational configurations of space, the scope of this body of spatially-oriented criticism ranges from exploring the dynamics of colonial space making to surveying the spatial undercurrents that shape contemporary postcolonial subjectivities – from the differential relationships within the postcolonial city to the relationship between literary expression and lived experienced as marked in space.

[21] A brief survey of recent works highlights this trend. Examples include AbdouMaliq Simone's Improvised *Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South;* Justin Crowley's Africa's *Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies*. Ato Quayson's *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itinerates of Transnationalism*; Noyes John's *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884–1915* and Madhu Krishnan's *Writing Spatiality in West Africa.*

space and geography from Western scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Doreen Massey and others.

A brief survey of spatially focused readings of African literature illustrates this point. For example, John Noyes in *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884–1915*[22] seeks to show how the control of subjective, signifying, and physical spaces in colonial texts functions to establish colonial power through a synthesis of historical, literary and spatial research. Noyes turns to colonial sources and literary texts produced and set in German West Africa to argues that the production of space in literature was instrumental to structuring the experience of the colony and its afterlives in the context of German West Africa. However, although this work illuminates the interplay between subjective experience, colonial policy and the production of colonial texts the exclusively Western provenance of the schools of theoretical opinion that frame Noyes conceptions of space – Aristotelian, Kantian, Hegelian and Lacanian conceptions of space as well as the works of poststructuralists Derrida and postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi drown out any possibility of critique of spatiality invested in indigenous African conceptions of place. His reliance on psychoanalytic and Marxist theories, Michel de Certeau's theorizations of space, as well as the works of Deleuze and Guattari, exemplifies the dominance of European theory on African spatial discourse.

[22] Noyes John, *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884–1915*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)

Similarly, Madhu Krishnan's work *Writing Spatiality in West Africa: Colonial Legacies in the Anglophone/ Francophone Novel* adopts a colonial approach to reading to the question of African urban spatiality and its intersection with literature and history[23]. *Writing Spatiality* unpacks both the significance of space to conceptions of the (post)colonial world and the extent to which literature itself is shaped by and constitutive of these forms of spatiality to argue that "space has become a primary category through which the full reach of imperialism's work may be exposed, analyzed and contested" (*Writing Spatiality in West Africa* 1)[24]. Nevertheless, Krishnan's unpacking of the significance of spatial conceptions to (post)colonial worlding[25] retains a Western theoretical underpinning. Despite her important arguments that "the very ethos of postcolonial criticism remains inherently intertwined with spatial precepts" which in literary texts "enacts a worlding of the (post)colonial world, while simultaneously registering the worlded nature of the text itself", her work fails to account for how such spatial precepts are traceable to forms of knowing that emerge from African cultures. [26]

A third contribution with a similar spatial interest is Dustin Crowley's *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies*[27], a

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[23] See Krishnan, Madhu. *Writing Spatiality in West Africa: Colonial Legacies in the Anglophone/Francophone Novel*. (Woodbridge (GB): James Currey, 2018)

[24] Ibid, p.1

[25] Ibid, p.2

[26] Ibid, p.2; Ibid, p.2

[27] Crowley, Dustin. *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

volume which invites readers to envisage how real and imagined geographic relations shape the spatial dynamics of African literature. An important addition to the corpus of scholarship that ties together African literature, postcolonial studies and spatial literary criticism and history, Crowley's text examines the configurations of space and identity in the works of canonical African writers like Ngũgĩ' wa Thiongo, Bessie Head, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Nurridin Farah and Chris Abani. Yet, while it suggests novel strategies for exploring the geographies of African spaces through a reading of some canonical works by African authors, a similar emphasis on Western theorists, such as Edward Soja, Sara Upstone, Bertrand Westphal, Andrew Teverson among others, defines the work.

One more example will suffice. Niall McNulty's *Reading the City: Analyzing Literary Space in Selected Postapartheid Urban Narratives*[28] homes in on the cities of Durban and Johannesburg, and in particular the inner cities, to uncover how major transformation in the use and representation of space are captured in literature. McNulty asserts that the city as depicted in these novels is a site of intersection where previously spatially-restricted racial groups can now freely mingle. Yet, McNulty's drawing from literary criticism, critical theory, geography, sociology and economic history to analyze urban space falls short of including Indigenous South African thought as critical frame.

A number of threads can be identified as connecting these instances of spatial criticism in African literature. Firstly, there is the general focus on understanding how real and

[28] McNulty, Niall. "Reading the city: Analyzing Literary Space in Selected Postapartheid Urban Narratives." (2005). Retrieved from https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:142835099

imagined geographic relations within urban contexts intersects with coloniality, politics and capitalism in ways that highlight "the extent to which literature itself is shaped by and constitutive of …forms of spatiality." (Krishnan, *Writing Spatiality in West Africa* 2) Nevertheless, the multivalent indigenous frames of thought that form an inevitable co-constitutive part in the production of space, spatial knowledge and its modalities of representation in African literature often remain effaced in the scholarly focus on Western theory as the dominant frame of reading. Thus, although this scholarship has been generative in the crucial insights it has provided on African textual geographies, its Eurocentric theoretical emphasis often forecloses the possibility of a critical spatial practice that takes the role of African indigenous worldviews seriously as definitive frames for the spatial analysis of African literature, as is attempted in the current work. The problem is not with the theoretical cannon from which these scholars begin their reading of African spatiality, it is rather the fact of what Water Mignolo calls the "universalization of Western universality", which fails to show "the entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential" (Reiter x). Such wholescale application of Western oriented theories of spatiality that "insist on their capacity to explain all" are particularly problematic in their application to reading spatiality in non-Western localities because, as Foucault acknowledges, "we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault, Heterotopias.3).

Towards Visuopatiality: A "Ground-Up" Critical Methodology

Within the array of voices on the discourse of space, Doreen Massey proposition on spatiality stands out to me. Massey proposes that we understand space as:

> as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny, … Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity, … predicated upon the existence of plurality. (*For Space* 9)

Massey's suggestion that we read and imagine space as "a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices … never finished; never closed. … as a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (*For Space* 9) resonates with the idea of inter-action, the ebb and flow of movement and the call and response rhythm of danced knowledges that I privilege. I hear an echo of recognition in her argument that the real import of space is "the coeval multiplicity of other trajectories and the necessary outward lookingness of a spatialized subjectivity" (*For Space* 59). Moreover, Massey's association of a particular mode of 'lookingness' with spatialized subjectivity is important. It points to dual dimensions of subjective constriction that I encounter: the visual technologies of observation and display used to justify the denigration of Black subjects like me and the modes of spatial containment, both physical and discursive, used to limit the mobility of Black bodies.

Given what you have just been critiquing, is there a way that you could find an African theorist who says much what Massey here says, however sympathetic her propositions are to your argument?

Conceiving of spatial representation as *inter-action* denotes two main ideas. On the one hand, it registers the shifting aspirations of correspondence between discursive cultural 'texts' that the writer isolates and collates into a signifying ensemble through which a vision of his/her society is expressed. On the other hand, it is also the view that this collation process makes visible a landscape of human activity within which the presence of interacting objects and subjects are inscribed. These representative landscapes are imbued with particular forms of relationality that determine possible interactions within it, often echoing the constituent elements of the cultural landscape in question.

In this dissertation, I use the term 'visuospatiality' to refer to the intrinsic connectedness of visual and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature, the fusion spatial and visual signifiers as co-constitutive elements of literary representation. The term "visuospatial" denotes the visual perception of the spatial relationships of objects. The *Merriam-Webster Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines it as referring to thought processes that involve *visual and spatial awareness*.[29] Visuospatial ability refers to an individual's capacity to identify visual and spatial relationships among objects, measured

[29] "Visuospatial." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam webster.com/dictionary/visuospatial. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020

in terms of the ability to imagine objects, to make global shapes by locating small components, or to understand the differences and similarities between objects.[30] The etymological origin of this term derives from medical psychology, where the visuospatial function is understood to involve the capacity to identify the spatial facets of a shape or item in multidimensional ways. Visuospatial consciousness facilitates the visual idealization of components of the environment as they are oriented in space from multiple viewpoints. The visuospatial function an essential element of learning and information acquisition and environmental navigation through visual symbolizations and spatial associations[31]. The term is used in this work heuristically to reference a co-constitutive interaction among visual and spatial components of texts, a coherent, systematic combination of visual symbolization and spatial indicators fused into a carefully structured concrete whole within narrative form to account for the which human beings perceive, structure and navigate the surrounding world. The idea of 'visuospatial deficit' is employed in cognitive medicine and psychology as a diagnostic concept for describing cognitive dissonance that diminishes a person's capacity to interpret spatial information perceived visually.

But rather than focus on the specialized meaning of the term as it applies in medicine, what counts for this research is the fact that *visuospatiality* expresses the co-constitutive

[30] https://library.neura.edu.au/schizophrenia/signs-and-symptoms/cognition/visuospatial-ability/

[31] N., Pam M.S., "Visual-Spatial Ability" in PsychologyDictionary.org, April 29, 2013, https://psychologydictionary.org/visual-spatial-ability/ (accessed November 15, 2020).

formulation of visuality and space in literature. Parsed into a critical framework, the term is apposite as an analogical schema for examining the role of the visual in the construction of space as formally constitutive literary categories and is useful for of exploring the intersection of spatial components and visual attention in unraveling diegetic topographies in African literature. Building on Achebe's idea of the mask as a *visualizing and spatializing* locus of knowledge as well as Campbell and Power's view of writing as "visual technology"("The Scopic Regime of 'Africa" 168), I take the idea of 'visuospatiality' to be an important heuristic category through which to understand how contemporary African writers challenge and subvert Western scopic regimes. Not only do these writers exploit visual enunciation through discursive practices that illuminate different forms of spatiality, but such representational strategies are also successful in subverting the (still) homogenizing metaphor of Africa as the 'dark continent'. In other words, I trace how these writers 'program' their audiences to see space differently in ways that contest colonial and imperialist imaginaries.

While enquiry into the dialectics of seeing has extensively amplified the critique of literature and culture, visuospatial thought expands such debates to explicitly account for the ways in which the visual referent shapes our understanding of place. This work attempts to chart how visual logics are yoked to questions of spatial articulation in African literature; how they function as building blocks to establish fields of perceptible spatial reality through the medium of representation. By paying attention to how texts incorporate visual scrutiny of space and place as modalities of representation, I aim to

identify multivalent possibilities for interpretation and critical analysis through a 'grounds up' approach to reading place that builds on African indigenous knowledges. As Massey acknowledges, "places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space" (Massey 130). Thinking from *my place in the world* warrants close attention to this juncture of visuality and spatiality as co-constitutive elements of discourse that produce a specific signifying practice in African literature. Focusing solely on spatiality as a frame of discourse fails to account for the nuances *showing place differently* intrinsic to the project of counter-spatialization that derive from co-constitutive processes of visual representation and spatial production.

Of Masks and Masquerades: A Visuospatial Method

Soyinka argues that a definitive code of the African worldview is …" an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality, as signifying no more than mere reflections of the original coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality" (Soyinka 53). In order to make sense of spatiality in ways that align with my worldview, I must reach for a different frame in order relocate myself within an "affective social principle which intertwines multiple existences …and multiple worlds [as] an expression of its cyclic nature" (Myth, Literature and the African World 10). My first move is towards the mask as a specular frame, a densely packed matrix of relationships within which spatiality and visuality collide to center me differently. In many African cultures, the mask is considered as the quintessential art form. Raphael Njoku indicates that "across the continent in the precolonial era, diverse African communities deployed masks and

masquerades for [a variety of] similar functions" relating to social control "in a world fraught with disorder and chaos" ("On Origins of Masking" 21). In cultures that have produced varied forms of this cultural repertoire, the act of looking involves "culturally determined activit[ies] of visuality with … expectations, limitations, capabilities, and epiphanies varying from one community to another.[32] Verbal-visual configurations and visual regimes often invite audiences "to look upon, gaze within, and see beyond in myriad ways that signal transitions of identity, experience, perception … potentialities and possibilities."[33]

In *Myth, Literature and the African World,* Wole Soyinka identifies the traditional mask-drama is representative of the "fluid approach to African ritual space". He indicates that the ritual theatre within which the mask operates "establishes the spatial medium, not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelop within which man…exists" but rather as the attempt to manage the immensity of man's spatial awareness that "makes every manifestation in ritual theatre a paradigm for the cosmic human condition" (41). Intrinsic to this epistemic worldview is a spatial system of meaning making that is iterative, constellational and oscillational, a kaleidoscope of tempo, movement and rhythm imbued with the potentiality and innovation. It operates within a radical set of kinetic energies capable of bringing forth

[32] Roberts, Mary Nooter, "The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in *African Arts,*" African Arts 50.1 (Spring 2017): 60

[33] Roberts, "The Inner Eye," 60

alternative time frames that exceed Eurocentric linear teleology and unsettling the logic of superimposition, engulfment and elimination that are intrinsic to coloniality in its varied manifestations.

An important point of note concerns the gap that exists between the conception of masks as material art objects within the global imaginary and the composite ensemble of material forms, aesthetic practices and epistemic positions that intersect in the masquerade in many African cultures. African masks, as art pieces in the flows of global capitalist markets are often presented as inert museum pieces devoid of motion, vibrancy, animation or transformative potential and often diminish into static collector's objects. Dunja Hersak, in his study of Songye masquerades from Democratic Republic of Congo, associates this attenuation with the "static analysis of collectable objects" that remains the focus of "collection and exhibition" histories which nourish the desired view of the private sector and formal Western institutional doctrines ("On the Concept of Prototypes, 3). Hersak acknowledges the challenge, in Western contexts, of conceiving the wooden mask sculpture as merely one component of a multidimensional cultural repertoire that comprises the dance, the song, the rhythm and the costume[34] and that masking as a cultural repertoire " begs to be viewed from the perspective of multiple sense-scapes and expressive forms". Zöe Strother in her study of masking among the Pende of South-Western Congo makes a similar point that the term "masks" is hardly limited to

[34] Cited in Strother, Zoë S. 1998. *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (p.30)

referencing the face or headpiece of a masquerader. Rather, it also encompasses "the theatrical persona created through headpiece, costume, and dance" (*Inventing Masks* 30). The complete mask repertoire is therefore a dynamic ensemble of varied and intersecting, visual, sonic, corporeal and performative aggregates of meaning.

Far from being a static tradition, "the purpose, utilities, or needs of masks and masquerades change as new ideas and other forces change society" ("On Origins of Masking" 21). Soyinka opines that ritual theatre as a site of spatial definition…must be seen as an integral aspect of man's constant efforts to *master the immensity of the cosmos with his minuscule self*" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 40). Due to this essential dynamism, a multitude of visuo-spatial configurations become operative in texts that either evoke the mask as signifier of a wider system of contradictions that "that characterize Igbo culture in the moment of colonial domination" (Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 52) or articulate a more general epistemic position that centers a polyfocal spatial consciousness.

Gikandi attests that beyond its dimensions as a signifier of ritual space, the figure of the mask at a hermeneutical level functions as critical template that "…characterizes key moments of interpretation in [Achebe's novels]," and marks the writers "deeper involvement with the Igbo aesthetic and its modes of interpretation" (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 51). To further explicate the aggregates of meaning associated with the constitution of the mask as cultural paradigm of cosmic proportions and how this cosmic paradigm gets translated into hermeneutic practice, my discussion of this paradigm will

advance through six difference valences of meaning, as follows: (1) as an ontological index; (2) as a normative frame; (3) as an aesthetic ; (4) as a temporal filter; (5) as a spatial analytic and (6) as a representational strategy.

The Mask as Ontological Index

In Igbo culture (and many African societies), the mask spotlights an ontology invested with an otherworldly driven kinetic energy expressive of multiple orderings of reality. Chike Okoye pinpoints the central ontological index within which the mask operates. He explains that in Igbo culture:

> The masking or mask institution is one of the most haloed, revered and sacred because it involves ancestral spirits. These ancestral spirits are seen as concrete manifestations of the otherworldly existence and are held in spiritual awe, regard, respect and deference. The Igbo ontological underpinnings lend substance and credibility to the ancestral mask tradition because the dead, the living and the unborn are in mutual proximity and coexistence. Therefore, ancestral masks every now and then are called up or on their own accord, visit the land of the living in covered or shrouded forms, loaded with ancestral wisdom and spiritual mannerisms during festivals (communal or individual) that range from harvest, community communions, ritual feasts, funerals, burials, dance festivals and remembrances. ("History, Aesthetics and the Political in Igbo Spatial Heterotopias" 1)

The ontology behind a masked figure is both relational and pluriversal. Considered to be an ancestral spirit manifesting among the living, the mask is a being simultaneously human and more than human, a concrete manifestation of otherworldliness that creates a relation of proximity with the more than human world. Recognized as the visible manifestation of an elaborate eschatology and symbolic order, the mask performs functions ranging from "executive village/community policing by ensuring law and order, to socialization through initiations and entertainment via dance, play and mimicry" (History, Aesthetics and the Political in Igbo Spatial Heterotopias" 2).

Consequently, the evocation of the mask figure in texts evokes and gestures towards this symbolic order, which, as Okoye notes, was always at odds with colonial forces. In both performance practice and textual enactment and referent, the mask crystalizes a subversive epistemic position, a valence of resistance, and a non-transparent index of obscurity and opacity within which a call and response invitation to seeing differently happens.

The Mask as Normative Frame of Ritual and Social Inter-action

Soyinka's description of the ritual essences that the Mask-drama as communal, performative inter-action propagates is worth quoting at length to articulate the implications of understanding the mask as a normative frame of ritual and social inter-action. For Soyinka, the scene of mask performance is:

> A symbolic struggle with chthonic presences; the goal of the conflict being a harmonious resolution for plenitude and the well-being of the community. …The moment for choric participation is well-defined, … The…audience is itself an integral part of the arena of conflict; it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must first be conjured up and established, defining and investing the arena through offerings and incantations. The drama would be non-existent except within and against this symbolic representation of earth and cosmos…within this communal compact whose choric essence supplies the choric energy for the challenger of chthonic realms. (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 38–39)

Thus, ritual theatre, viewed from a spatial perspective, aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces". Mask-drama, even when translated into literature, "can be interpreted as a mundane reflection of this essential struggle". As a frame for determining sanctioned norms of social relationality, the ritualistic sense of space associated with the mask's scene of performance "…is intimately linked with the comprehensive worldview of the society that gave it birth". Within this context of performance, "sound, light, motion…[all combine to] validly to define space, and ritual theatre uses all these instruments of definition to control and render concrete, to parallel …the experiences or intuitions of man in far more disturbing environments which he defines as void, emptiness or infinity."(*Myth, Literature and the African World* 39–40)

The Mask as Aesthetic and Spatial Analytic

Achebe articulates how we might understand the mask potentiality as a spatial analytic with a wider framework of aesthetic meaning in Igbo culture in his canonical essay *The Igbo World and its Art.* He identifies aesthetics of the masquerade as an index that marks what he calls "the kinesis of being" in Igbo culture. In his view:

> What makes the dance and the masquerade so satisfying to the Igbo disposition is… [the] artistic deployment of motion, of agility, which informs the Igbo concept of existence. The masquerade … not only moves spectacularly but those who want to enjoy its motion fully must follow its progress up and down the arena. This seemingly minor observation was nonetheless esteemed important *enough by the Igbo to be elevated into a proverb of general application: Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmuo*, "You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade." You must imitate its motion. The kinetic energy of the masquerade's art is thus instantly transmitted to a whole arena of spectators. So potent is motion stylized into dance that the Igbo have sought to defeat with its power even the final immobility of death. (*Hopes and Impediments* 62)

For Achebe, mask aesthetics is defined by 'artistic deployment of motion' as an existential impulse of transformation and relationality. The imperative 'that *Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmuo'* expresses is that the communal audience 'imitate the motion' of the mask in order to inter-act with the varied perspectives that each observatory locus

enables. Victor Ukeagwu affirms this idea when he explains that "meaning in Igbo society is framed by sacral, social and *geographical* circumstances and whether symbolic or literal, dance is more than choreography and involves the ability to improvise within existing patterns" of discourse (Italics mine).[35] Thus, moving from aesthetic index to discursive posture, *Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmuo* becomes an iteration of what Quayson calls "general cultural discursivity" (*Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* 15) which articulates an epistemic stance that refutes universalist assumptions. The proverb exemplifies a "'logocentric' linkage between language and being" (Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 32) and details a world order where "knowledge production and social reality are 'dependent on the interconnections, relatedness, open-endedness" (Francis Nyamnjoh, *Being and Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress* 329).

Because the mask as mode of cultural thought is invested with such a dynamic, processual, critical posture which defies finite compartmentalization or categorizations and universalist assumptions, it constitutes an object of knowledge that crucially generates new ways of knowing through an iterative, relational and polyfocal ethos. As an aesthetic paradigm, the mask is thus located within a relational cosmological frame that combines subjectivity, ontology, spatiality and visuality all undergirded by an acknowledgement of the ceaseless, iterative force of change. Achebe makes this point when he indicates that Igbo aesthetic value is defined by a "tense and restless dynamism"

[35] Ukaegbu, Victor Ikechukwu. The Composite Scene: The Aesthetics of Igbo Mask Theatre. N.p., University of Plymouth, 1996.

and “an outward, social and kinetic quality” that privileges “process rather than product”. He explains that:

> Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore, the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and kinesis of creation. (Hopes *and Impediments* 63-64)

Because the mask is invested with a dynamic, processual, critical posture , which “defies compartmentalization or categorizations that are finite and, in so doing, provides space for a more enriching and rewarding intercourse between knowledge systems and ways of being” and instead “embrac[es] fluid worlds where structures are resilient only insofar as they are products of agency and improvisation by social actors” (Nyamnjoh, *Being and Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress* 331), its iterative, relational and polyfocal nature constitutes an object of knowledge that crucially generates new ways of knowing.

Critical Mask Poetics: A Rationale

As an important aesthetic configuration that recurs in Nigerian literature in particular and African literature in general, the mask consolidates the call-and-response and solo-and-circle modes of relation as discursive terms that structure representation. Such inter-actions, as Robert Thompson indicates, ‘far from solely constituting matters of structure.,

are in actuality levels of perfected social interaction" (*African Art in Motion* 28). Consequently, Thompson describes the oral traditional canon as "a danced judgment of qualities of social integration and cohesion" (p.28). This point is important, because a mask poetic is not solely a reactive discourse evolved as a response to Western hegemonic ideologies but also crystalizes an epistemic position in terms of spatial relations distilled from oral indigenous knowledge and performance into African literature. As such, this critical frame provides us with a handle on how questions of space and place are intertwined to enable a meditation on contingent forms of knowledge, emplacement and habitation.

Although the conceptual examples central to this current project are drawn from Yorùbá and Igbo cultures, these knowledge bases can be understood as representative of what Quayson calls "a larger set of relationships which cuts across texts from other cultural standpoints" (*Strategic Transformations* 10). Quayson makes an important point that, although pursued by various critics and writers, the question of possible paradigmatic shifts in the various literary uses of orality in the face of changing socio-cultural and political realities has only been sporadically formulated because the relationship between writers and their indigenous resource base is often taken for granted and rarely rendered explicit.(*Strategic Transformations* 3–4). If as Ken Harrow's opines, "change [is] a key preoccupation of African writers [that] shows itself in …the intertextual relationships between texts"(cited in Quayson, *Strategic Transformations* 7), then critical mask poetics affords us a key perspective from which to trace the textual configurations and inter-

textual relationships through which such change is conceptually mapped across socio-cultural borders from the work of continental African authors in Nigerian (Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka) to instances of Afro-diasporic literature by Nigerian authors (Teju Cole and Chimamanda Adichie).

Critical mask poetics therefore elucidates the essential role of the mask in marking the relationality of spatial perception in ways that tie together the ontological, ritual, sacred, metaphysical, social, physicial and representational spaces. The mask therefore becomes a quintessential idiom, a primary textual figure that both challenges European notions of spatial hierarchy and ushers in an idea of spatial location grounded in indigenous aesthetics and thought. What ties together a critical mask poetic, whether at its aesthetic, performative, narratological, discursive or figural levels of articulation, is this emphasis on the relational and continual regeneration of the kinesis of creation on the one hand, and what Donna Haraway calls "an epistemology of partial perspectives" on the other.

Acknowledging this point, Simon Ottenberg describes Igbo masking practice as imbued with "an aesthetics of movement". He explains that the masks and costumes are viewed, "not as stationary objects, for they are never so displayed, but as part of an active moving masquerader… an aesthetic that emphasizes action, … which …comes out of doing rather than being". (*Masked Rituals of Afikpo* 210). It is such a spatial consciousness invested in an aesthetics of movement that this dissertation extrapolates as an instance of visuospatial practice useful for reading literary spatiality which I refer to as critical mask

poetics. This aesthetic approach and discoursal posture proceeds through a spatial cataloging system insistent on shifting subjective positions and the rejection of linear, fixed, unitary position. As a critical approach, it would construct places and subjectivity *in* motion and *via* motion. It would operate within a dynamic space-time continuum that features elastic, embedded spatial scales and center more-than-human entities. It would centralize embodied modes of thought, emphasize intersubjective relations and privilege the enactment of micro histories. It would remain attentive to fusion, fragmentation and pluralism-in-unity as forms of perspectival consciousness.

As a spatial imaginary invested in sabotaging universalist assumptions, a critical mask paradigm converges ideas of movement, iterativity, spatial traversal, subversion, invention and improvisation, call-and-response, perspectival change and inter-action definitive of African masquerade dance performances into a literary problematic echoed and enacted in literature. Because texts depict real social and geographical spaces while allowing readers to gain their bearing within represented landscapes, understanding this peculiar space/time construct within which African literatures are embedded and the visual dimensions of its expression demands that we look beyond Eurocentric spatial models and theories of space to understand the kinetically animated spatial imaginary from which these worlds derive their form and discursive tangents.

The mask as a critical method offers generative implications for theorizing a processual understanding of space that is attentive to the contingencies of changing landscapes and

subjectivities. On a formal level of textual analysis, the mask operates as a narrative anchor that links together both in texts that explicitly reference it and others that deploy a similar epistemic format to suggest the idea of dance as analogous to spatial exploration. What the textual perambulations that revolve around critical mask poetics cue us into are the epistemological and ontological movements operative through the deployment of mask as trope and dominant narrative focal point. When critical mask poetics as a discoursal paradigm is applied to the analysis of spatiality, it illuminates a sense of space and ways of being in the world that emphasize poly-spatiality, multi-perspectivity and layered time. In privileges what Donna Haraway calls "points of view, which can never be known in advance, [but] that promise something quite extraordinary", the dancing mask paradigm bespeaks of "commitment to mobile positioning", which, as Donna Haraway argues, produces "knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" ("Situated Knowledges" 585).

Contrary to the linear, immobilizing perspective of Cartesian perspectivalism, the representational optics cathected by the mask, as a living, micro-cultural system in motion, proposes a radically different conception of visuality, one defined by an empathetic, intersubjective self, constituted through its embeddedness in a social network. On the basis of its subversive epistemological approach, the mask institutes spatial thinking, temporal relations and formal strategies as a method of inquiry. By thinking through the mask, Achebe, Soyinka, Cole and Adichie insert new geographies of imagination and the forms of knowing embedded in them into African and Afro-diasporic

literature in ways that interlink questions of visuality, gender, aesthetics and epistemology.

For Achebe, Soyinka, Cole, Adichie and a wide range of Nigerian, Anglophone West African and Afro-Diasporic writers, the implications of the kinetically driven literary imaginary that these authors articulate extends beyond specificities of performance to incorporate broader questions of aesthetics intrinsic to the project of literary representation. As a spatial idiom, the mask allows these writers to simultaneously subvert European assumptions of spatial and cultural hegemony in their project of writing Africa beyond the Western visual matrix and incorporate and restage elements of oral indigenous knowledge across different geographies.

This project aims to explore how this spatial idiom frames itself as an object of representation in literature. Building on these theoretical foundation, relevant questions that I examine in the subsequent discussion include: how does imagining the world "like a mask dancing" dislodge spatiality and temporality from the strictures of hegemonic, Eurocentric norms of space and time? What political and aesthetic work does such dislodgement perform in and for literary criticism? How does attention to such a kinetically animated idiom illuminate wider aesthetic and political concerns within African literature? What modes of visual enunciation do writers deploy to mark its usage as a space-constructing and place making index of representation? What reading methodology would render this idiom legible? To what extent can careful attention to the

embodied and spatialized performance practices that coalesce around the dancing mask spotlight alternative orders of relations and imaginative practices of worlding resistant to the paradoxical logic of indigenous opacity and transparency that underpins colonial ideologies built on what Leigh Patel calls the laceration of knowledge from place? In what ways can this critical analytic suggest an intersection between visual studies and spatial literary criticism, a discursive confluence capable of more fully accounting for the embodied, relational visuo-spatial imaginary that undergirds the depiction of place in Achebe's writing?

In his review of Robert Thompson's text *African Art in Motion,* Robert Armstrong suggests as essential the approach to a work of art as "a configuration of being conscious of the world and/or the self within it" (77). Armstrong emphasizes the need to recognize an artistic work as "a *vital* formulation…lit from within", capable of illuminating the "existential radiances within which the work abides as a cultural and human phenomenon" (77). Although speaking in a different context, Zakiyyah Jackson asserts that "iteratively grounded modes of being/feeling/knowing have the potential to rupture the current order's consolidated field of meanings, …behavior-regulating schemas, and order-replicating hermeneutics". If, as Simon Gikandi asserts, "we must probe the function of African literature as an instrument that wills new African realities into being, that imagines alternative configurations of our 'real histories' to either affirm or transcend them." (*Reading Chinua Achebe,* p.2), how then should we understand the discursive operation of the mask as figure in a literary text? This dissertation identifies the mask as

one of such important discursive fields, as epistemic index, aesthetic figure and narrational trope allows us to see important configurations of being and spatiality in African literature[36]. The idea of narrative as both discursive dance and performance imbued with a "quality of active potentiality" informs this dissertation, which is conceived both as a critical kinesthetically grounded project, an itinerary of textual exploration and spatial exploration cathected as dancing[37].

Dance, as Thompson affirms, "can complete the transformation of cryptic object into doctrine; dance redoubles the strength of visual presence; dance spans time and space" *(African Art in Motion* xii). Soyinka similarly asserts that within the integrated matrix of cultural forces that is African literary representation, we see "a code of meanings …established through rhythms, movements and tonal-specific harmonies which instantly create their territories of reality… [a] framework of motion and stylized conflict, all obeying a finely regulated rhythm of relationships". (Soyinka 56). Following these discursive traditions in this dissertation, I 'dance' through specific sites that recur in Nigerian Literature in order to demonstrate how embodied and spatialized performance practices that converge around a critical mask paradigm in Nigerian literature are crucial to understanding black creative ecologies of being, their intertextuality, and their diasporic movements. My understanding of literary critique as dancing foregrounds the

[36] In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", Spivak defines 'discursive fields' as a system of specific axiomatics discernible as part of the "systems of signs" at play in a particular society. See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, 1985, pp. 243–61.

[37] Thompson, p.xii.

multiple valences encoded in the term with respect to movement, flux, action and counter action, transformation, contradiction, (dis)continuity synchronicity, dynamism, and sequentiality. The metaphor of dance provides me with the language for exploring with the different forms of visuospatial engagements which I argue are central to understanding how the literary imagination operates discursively in the texts analyzed in my work, rendering legible what Sylvia Winter calls 'demonic ground' or "the epochal threshold" (Beyond Miranda's Meanings 335)[38] and Zakiyyah Jackson describes as "a mode of being/feeling/knowing with the capacity to rupture the current order's consolidated field of meanings, …behavior-regulating schemas, and order-replicating hermeneutics" ("Theorizing in a Void" 620) "[39]

In what follows, I illustrate how the spatial, temporal and formal dynamics that constitute this complex reality lend themselves to a visuospatial reading method. In its critical functionality, the mask, as an interpretative template in the works of Achebe, Soyinka, Cole and Adichie is understandable variously as (1) an index of spatial traversal that provides us with a handle on how questions of space and place are intertwined to enable a meditation on contingent forms of knowledge, emplacement and habitation; (2) a literary motif through which an elastic, cosmic spatial logic is rendered in texts; (3) a valence of resistance, a non-transparent index of obscurity and opacity within which a call and

[38] Wynter, Sylvia. 1990. "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground 'of Caliban's 'Woman.'" Afterword in Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, 355–70. Trenton, NJ: Africa
World Press. P 356

[39] Jackson, Zakiyyah I. "``theorizing in a Void": Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. 117.3 (2018): 617-648, p.620

response invitation to seeing differently happens; and (4) a counter logic of visuality through which a different construction of personhood emerges.

In my subsequent analysis of Achebe, Soyinka, Cole and Adichie's novels, I conceive these texts as iterations of a *critical mask poetics* that operates on these valences of meaning. Moreover, as these varied articulations in *Things Fall Apart, The Interpreters, Open City* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* illustrate, the mask, as a wider discursive paradigm and logic in Nigerian and Afro-diasporic writing also functions as: (1) a signifier of an iterative, polyfocal idiom that critiques universalist assumptions of spatial hegemony; (2) a shorthand for evoking indigenous epistemic resources into the political project of African and Afro-diasporic writing; (3) a politically subversive, world-building strategy that challenges the aesthetics of immobilization often deployed in the representation of African peoples and cultures; (4) an approach to de-scribing space and the power hierarchies subsumed in its production within the postcolony; (5) an intertextual template for incorporating *elsewheres* into transnational spaces.[40] My concern in this dissertation will be to show how this paradigm is deployed for conceptualizing a larger sense of self, place and identity across textual genres and literary, generational boundaries.

[40] My use of the term *else/wheres* implies particular spatially rooted discursive contexts that are drawn into a hegemonic sphere from Othered places, in ways that inflect, destabilize, and disrupt assumptions of a cohesive hegemon. For more, see Inyang, U. (2022). "(In)Sights from Àwòrán: Yorùbá Epistemologies and the Limits of Cartesian Vision in Teju Cole's Open City". *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 9*(2), 216-236.

Chapter II

"To Locate a People in the World": Visuospatial Geographies in *Things Fall Apart*

> Mbari has analogies for this process of displacement, too: it is manifested in the mask, the figure of duality, the kernel where the contradictory forces of a culture, its self-assertion and dissimulation, are all represented.
>
> — Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*

> But then, if you can, visualize a large number of ever-widening circles, including all, like Yeats's widening gyre. As more and more people are incorporated in this network, they will get different levels of meaning out of the story, depending on what they already know, or what they suspect. These circles go on indefinitely to include, ultimately, the whole world.
>
> —Chinua Achebe, *The Paris Review*

In this chapter, I want to argue for a more capacious understanding literary spatiality and placemaking in African Literature that the dancing mask paradigm as subversive spatial imaginary renders legible using textual examples from *Things Fall Apart*. My contention is that understanding the spatial logics of *Things Fall Apart,* a text which seeks to locate a people in a specific lifeworld, to show "where the rain began to beat them", requires a careful reading of the interactions between spatial and power relationships and also

consideration of the energies of change at work in these interrelationships. Reading the mask as both worlding practice and critical method, I will henceforth use textual examples to illustrate how a construction of space based on what I call critical mask poetics emerges in Achebe's work. I argue that Achebe's novel operationalizes the mask idiom to produce an overarching narrative fulcrum of iterative movement and change that structures Achebe's Igbo cultural worlding project. I also demonstrate how this call and response thematic format defines subject construction and placemaking in ways that center the iterative restlessness of a mask in motion as a constellational narrative catalyst. I conclude that *Things Fall Apart*'s interweaving of a distinctive visual language and different spatial contexts spotlights characters in specific ways, not only to stage public and private tragedies but also to illuminate the relationship between spatial displacement and the collective loss of identity instigated by colonialism.

Achebe's Textual Cartography: Spatial Revolutions of the Dancing Mask in *Things Fall Apart*

The mask is an important anchor in the universe of meanings that comprises the cultural context of Achebe's writing. Scholars have variously affirmed this point. In Victor Uchendu's view, the mask dance, as one of Umofia's central sign systems, signifies such a cosmology… operates as 'an explanatory device and a guide to conduct' and 'an action system'; as an explanatory system, [that] theorizes about the origin and character of the universe. Similarly, Gikandi points to the dance of masks in *Things Fall Apart* as an example of the "ideological symbolizations of a cultural order and its spirit of things" in the novel. Constituting the "very grammar of the Igbo world", the mask as spatial

formation and sign system "function as objects of knowledge" which express naturalized meanings recognizable to the whole community and "signs [that]… signify… a cosmology" (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 32*).*

If, as Simon Gikandi asserts, "*Things Fall Apart* is a narrative of a community where 'everyone speaks from somewhere", then in [41]Achebe's textual cartography, the various sites in *Things Fall Apart*: the *Ilo*, market square, the farm, the *Obi* (broadly conceived as the homestead), and other related sites can be understood constitutive spatial locations from which specific subjective voices speak from, are framed within and are sometimes contested. To echo Foucault, "[T]he fundamental codes of a culture … governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices - establish for every man … the empirical order … within which he will be at home.[42] Taken together, the various sites in Achebe's novel represent a collective "empirical order" within which subjects in *Things Fall Apart* operate from 'at home', comprising the world-historical, epistemological and gnoseological context of Igbo society at the moment prior to and shortly after its encounter with the forces of colonial modernity.

The idea of dancing as narrative frame is established in the text, when the narrator explains the radical policies of the new preacher in Umuofia and inflammatory impact of

[41] In making this assertion, Gikandi is evoking V. Y. Mudimbe's views in "What is the real thing? psychoanalysis and African mythical narratives," Cahiers d'etudes Africaines 1071108 (1988), p. 316.
[42] See Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. xx.

his rhetoric with "a saying in Umuofia that [stated], as a man danced so the drums were beaten for him. Mr. Smith danced a furious step and so the drums went mad" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart 165*). The different narrative contexts in the novel that I subsequently explore can therefore be understood as re-stagings of a dancing mask poetics, in varied contexts where a crisis of meaning warrants the quest for alternative epistemic strategies. These locales therefore mark and inform our understanding of characters emplaced within them and assessed by the social demands that define subjecthood in each location. They provide specific spatial parameters through which to understand the shifting relationship between the known and the unknowable which Achebe centers as dominant narrative posture in *Things Fall Apart.* Because the mask (or its ontological echoes in terms of subjects, practices and rituals) is often visible in these sites, reading these locations through the narrative logic of a dancing mask allows us to see Achebe's production of a different spatial imaginary that refracts together varied aspects of Igbo culture and aesthetics to stage the dialectics of change and continuity.[43]

My approach here follows Edward Soja's suggestion to "see the text as a map, a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial … logic (Soja, Postmodern Geographies p.9). I also follow Foucault's proposition in his *Heterotopia* that "Our epoch is one in which space takes… the form of relations among sites" (Foucault and Miskowiec 61). Tracing the relational, spatial itineraries of the mask

[43] The Igbo Mbari aesthetic, for example, is understood to embody such a dialectic of change and continuity through its process of communal narration and regeneration.

with specific focus on Achebe's protagonist, I consider how Okonkwo comes into ascendancy as a quintessentially strong and courageous Igbo man within **the Ilo**, the site of sociality; how his prominence in this central cultural site is mediated by actions framed within **his Obi** or homestead; how the failure and laziness that defines Unoka, Okonkwo's father, which denigrates him as an effeminate man, is especially tangible within **the farm** setting; how **the cave of agbala** operates as a site of contradiction and balance where the gendered hierarchies of Umuofia's society are inverted and critiqued; and how **the evil forest** functions as a spatial counterpoint to the *Ilo* and the *Obi* as sites of sociality and habitation and how human actions within the former locale precipitate the eventual collapse of Umuofia's religious eschatology. My reading aligns, on the one hand, with Foucault's views about contemporary spatial dynamics, which defines "a thing's place [as] … point[s] in its movement" and a site as "defined by relations of proximity between points or elements (Foucault and Miskowiec 61), and on the other with Achebe's expression of Igbo ontology, which holds that: "A man's life from birth to death was *a series of transition rites* which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (*Things Fall Apart* 100). Thus, at each spatial stop within this critical tour through Achebe's fictional world, my focus remains pinned on the logic of the mask a spatialized and spatializing idiom through which a different understanding of the landscape and its role in constituting the subject emerges.

Within the social cartography of the *Things Fall Apart*, these sites function as multilectic pivot points where the writer's task of cultural critique, reassessment, and reintegration

takes place. Because they are revolving sites of transition where the integrity of the society is constantly reviewed to ascertain what practices are relevant and sustainable and what must evolve, be altered or abandoned, these sites function as essential pivot points in Umuofia's empirical order; they offer critical vantage points for understanding the Achebe's contestation of European visuospatial negation in its multiple expressions as well as the fragmentation of a community and its culture, resulting from the spatiotemporal consequences of his society's encounter with British colonialism. I therefore read these sites as spatialized loci of meaning where the movements of the 'dancing mask' emerge into full view. Taken together, they can be understood as vantage points within a spatial cataloging system insistent on shifting subjective positions.

The Ilo: The Site of Sociality

Things Fall Apart opens with a clear delineation of the spatial contours of Okonkwo's fame, 'the nine villages and beyond", thus emphatically placing him as a prominent figure in the Umuofia's social imaginary (p.1). This emplacement is deftly mapped through tangible spatial coordinates, one of which is his dethronement of Amalinze the Cat, who had been well-known from "Umuofia to Mbaino" (1958:1). In his book, *Topographies*, Hillis Miller opines that 'names make a site already the product of a virtual writing, a topography'(3f), suggesting that landscape may become a virtual text when a place and a narrative converge in its naming. By immediately introducing the reader into the spatial context comprising Umuofia and its neighborhood villages, Achebe deftly marks the geographical scope within which the novel's immediate frames of reference are to be

drawn. Also provided is a social compass for measuring Okonkwo's fame, which extends beyond the nine villages. He had risen to prominence for beating a famed wrestler, "Amalinze the Cat" in a wrestling match proclaimed as "the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (*Thing Fall Apart*:2)

The narrative techniques which Achebe adopts underscore a sense of the spatial as central to meaning-making. In this sense, the constitutive power of place in his text is intricately implicated in the formation of the cultural geography of Umuofia in particular and Igboland in general. As such, a general reference to the scope of Okonkwo's fame is insufficient, given his role as the protagonist of the novel and Achebe's response to the Conradian representation of Africa as the "heart of darkness", a place of illegible geography and consequently, illegible subjectivity. The scene of the wrestling match is at the *Ilo* of Umuofia. Stanley Okoye describes this village site as:

> An open space shared by a cluster of compounds, … used for various activities including as a forum for meetings, a space of semi-local performances, and as a space for a more localized, often subsidiary market. In this space, moreover, may also be located an ancestral shrine connecting members of the village group, in addition perhaps to serving as a temple to the villages' ancestors, and to any specific deity to which the group might owe allegiance ("History, Aesthetics and the Political" 79).

That Achebe's protagonist comes into being as warrior and victor in the *Ilo* is only fitting. To further Okonkwo's legibility as a subject through spatial emplacement, the narrator reenacts the scene of the epic wrestling match in real-time to place the reader into the visuospatial contours of the *Ilo* as a constitutive spatial frame:

> The drums beat and the flutes sang, and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat. (*Things Fall Apart* 1)

Because within this spatio-temporal world, 'the world of nineteenth-century European imperialism is yet unknown' (Emmanuel Obiechina, "Narrative Proverbs" 137), Okonkwo apparently occupies center stage in Umuofia, a positionality further registered by two visuospatial embeddings into this scene.

The first, a historical gesture, links Okonkwo to a primal genealogy that predates the founding of the town, aligning both that initial moment of primeval history in antiquity with the current scene of action to suggest that both moments encapsulate revolutionary vignettes in Umuofia's continuous encounter with the dialectics of change. This narrative juxtaposition is both visuospatial and historical, because, as Ainehi Edoro-Glines notes, "the scene of combat between a cat and a fish suspends Achebe's realist and novelistic discourse, even though momentarily, and clears the space for another story to be told—an

etiological narrative about the clan's origin" ("Achebe's Evil Forest 171). As a sole victor in a fight that reenacts the clan's primordial scene of combat, Okonkwo becomes "a symbolic receptacle of the village's central doctrines" (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 39).

Achebe's positioning of the wrestling scene in the opening paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* offers a number of clues about the configuration of spatial logics operative within the novel on literal, metaphorical and symbolic levels. On the literal level, the vivid enactment of the wrestling scene through sounds: music of the drums and flutes; sights: the taut muscles of the wrestlers and tactile nuances, 'slippery as a fish in water' grounds this event through tangible affective registers in an effort to capture the complex and multisensory feeling of being in this particular place at this particular time. More importantly however, the shift in focalization from a generalized narrative perspective that incorporates Umuofia and its environs to specificity of the immediate world in which the action of the wrestling match unfolds spotlights Okonkwo visuospatial as a major operator within the precipitating conflict scene of the text. It also hints at the notions of social entrenchment and rootedness that would emerge as defining issues that drive Okonkwo's internal conflict in the course of the novel.

As Simon Gikandi acknowledges, the value of the dancing mask idiom as a representational index lies in its transformative potential, its capacity to "institute a revolutionary break" from what Stewart Garrett ''inherited and hierarchical time' defined by the linear teleology of modernity and coloniality ("Dickens, Gance and Blanchot"

147). Gikandi's incisive reading of the opening scene of *Things Fall Apart* emphasizes the forms of temporality that Achebe calls into being through narrative" to show that the Umuofians are a people with a history". Yet, when Gikandi evokes what he fittingly calls "a central question of Igbo epistemology", namely, "where did the Igbo come from", his focus on "problems of genealogy" in temporal terms limits an engagement with the *spatial* dimensions of Achebe's genealogical project (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 29). If, as Gikandi identifies, Okonkwo is a cultural hero who doubles as "a surrogate founding father, comparable to the original founder of the village", (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 29), it is equally important to recognize that the text's delineating of *where* the Igbo came from is done through the refraction of this important subject figure through the varied spaces of the Umuofia to produce composite picture of the cultural landscape and epistemic lifeworld of which he is representative emerges.

The opening scene of the novel can therefore be further understood as one spatial vignette or vantage point in the series of narrative tableaus that is the novel. By its inscription, Achebe gestures towards a juxtaposition of multiple spaces, both literal and discursive: the primal locale of Umuofia's establishment as a clan; the early colonial localities of Igboland undergoing radical changes by colonization, and even the social landscape of Nigeria from where the author writes in the 1950's. Within these multiple sites of upheaval and change, Achebe marks *"*a sense of things …*taking place*", to show not only "a signifier of the culture's sensitivity to the process of time", as Gikandi indicates, but also sustained attention to the culture's placemaking practices. What emerges then is a

discourse on the nature of place and its meaning to the people who *within* it. Placemaking is therefore not isolated from temporality and history but offers the very fabric against which and within which events and the subjects who participate in them emerge as history and as subjects.

The novel's use of the wrestling scene as the genesis of Okonkwo's social ascendancy is further expanded at metaphorical and symbolic levels in the text. One pointer to such discursive oscillations is that this event takes place at the *Ilo*, the village square, which is a central location in the organization of Umuofia's collective social life. The *Ilo* is the space where the annual wrestling match is staged. A symbolic function of the *Ilo* is articulated in the novel, when, describing the festivities to welcome the new year, the sounds of distant drums announce the preparations for another wrestling match at "the ilo, the village playground" and the narrator explains that "Every village had its own *Ilo* which was as old as the village itself and where all the great ceremonies and dances took place" (*Things Fall Apart* 1-3). The *Ilo* can thus be understood as the center of Umuofia's social life, a place imbued with mythic significance through its narrative linkages to the origin stories of the founding of the town. As the pivotal space of sociality around which other spaces revolve, the *Ilo* can be read as the crucible from which the novel's 'widening gyre' turns[44].

[44] The epigraph to *Things Fall Apart*, as well as the novel's title, is drawn from W.B. Yeats' poem. The lines read: "The Second Coming' (1919), reads: "Turning /Turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/ Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".

By overthrowing /uprooting Amalinze at the *Ilo,* Okonkwo plants himself firmly on the path of upward mobility through the rungs of Umuofia's social ladder. Having established himself as an affirmed subject in a site of Umuofia's social integration, his coming into being as a recognized member of the clan is validated in distinctively spatial terms. Many years later, the aural stimulus of the sound of the drums coming from the *Ilo* is capable of generating in him an insatiable hunger for conquest: "it filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth. He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue." (*Things Fall Apart* 37). Okonkwo's conquering impulse is indulged, not only in his homestead, which he rules with an iron fist, but also in his efforts to dominate other scenes of sociality in Umuofia in general, like the instance when he effeminizes a man who had contradicted him at a kindred meeting.

In the varied scenes of sociality, therefore, the kinetic impulse of a dancing mask poetic registers in *Things Fall Apart* as a narrative force that propels represented subjects against inertia, [and] its spin from a … center, is imbued the possibility redrafting all history ("Dickens, Gance and Blanchot" 147). Achebe evokes this spatializing centrifugal force, a kinetically driven social imaginary called into task in the inscription of space in his choice of W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming' (1919) as the epigraph and source of title of the novel. As its evocation of the successive revolutions of 'turning and turning in the widening gyre' in Yeats' poems suggest, *Things Fall Apart*'s intersecting arcs of subjective emplacement, spatial logics and discursive configurations can be considered analogical to the whirling dance of a masquerade, shifting incessantly in the multiplicity

of perspectives and discursive templates called upon to reimagine Igbo life worlds and ground the author's dominant vision of change. By this intertextual gesture, Achebe places his novel in conversation with a wider Eurocentric knowledge genealogy that operates by imagining non-Western knowledge traditions archaic, antiquated and static. The interaction of the Dancing Mask paradigm in this regard aims to counter these forms of attenuation by emphasizing multi-perspectivism, dynamism, visual substantiation and cultural vitality.

In a synecdochic move, Achebe insists that Okonkwo is 'well-known', a gesture of affirmation that expands the discursive role of the *Ilo* as a spatial element in the novel such that it stands in for the whole of Umuofia, even functioning as a metaphor for the anticolonial scene of writing that seeks to disrupt the negating function of European scopic regimes. It is within this visuospatial scene that Achebe's protagonist comes into being in a combat of epic proportions.

But beyond the diegetic world of the novel, Okonkwo's epic struggle with Amalinze can also be read as mirroring Achebe's discursive wrestling match with the entrenched voices of the Western canon, representable by writers such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary in their negation of Africa. Resonant in the opening wrestling match scene are the discursive echoes of Achebe's systematic challenge to the assumptions of paradoxical hypervisibility and invisibility in texts like *Heart of Darkness* and *Mr. Johnson,* which couched the African as both totally known and definable yet also faceless and mysterious.

Instituted then is a double entendre where Okonkwo's wrestling with Amalinze echoes Achebe's tussle with the denigration of Africa within the European cannon.

Given the interplay of spatial rootedness and dislodgement, centrality and marginality, balance and imbalance that governs the novel's opening scene, it is not surprising that Achebe exploits this spatio-morphological configuration to track Okonkwo's descent into marginality as a member of his clan, especially the ways that his individualist leanings slowly unravel him from this communal center. These configurations speak to the generative links between self, place, movement and visuality that Achebe weaves together in the novel. As a foundational pivot point in Umuofia's social cosmology,[45] the *Ilo* then becomes a defining site of sociality from where the dance of the mask intervenes to review who counts as a relevant, constituent voice in Umuofia.

The wrestling matches that happen here can also be read as metonymic of the iterations of social contestation through which Igbo society determines the indices of cultural evolution most suitable and necessary for its communal advancement and survival in the aftermath of colonization. From one of the first explicit markers of Okonkwo's gradual displacement from the social center of the clan, when he is exiled from Umuofia, to its ultimate manifestation, when he commits suicide and must be buried in the evil forest by

[45] The Encyclopedia Britannica defines cosmology as: that branch of learning which treats the universe as an ordered system…. [a] framework of concepts and relations which man erects …for the purpose of bringing descriptive order to the world as a whole, including himself as one of its elements… (Vol. VI, William Benton, London, 1963, p.582)

strangers, *Things Fall Apart* collages other instances of Okonkwo's presence in communal gatherings at both the *Ilo* and the market to mark the discursive oscillations in his journey of alienation from Umuofia's cultural ethos. Besides the initial wrestling match scene where he enjoys the spotlight, Okonkwo also appears in the *Ilo* at successive moments, but it is important to note that the visuospatial dimension of each subsequent tableau is different. While the opening scene places Okonkwo in the thick of communal action as the principal flagbearer of the idiom of contestation and communal struggle that the wrestling match implies, his capacity to operate at this center as part of the communal aegis diminishes as the novel's narration progresses. In a second mention of his presence at the *Ilo* during another wrestling match in chapter six, Okonkwo is displaced from central contestant to spectator, and we are told that he sits among the elders. Although he briefly assumes center stage again at the *Ilo* as one of the ancestral spirits of the clan in a subsequent moment of narration, it is notable that he does not participate in this role as himself but rather as an *Egwugwu*, the ultimate judiciary council of the clan.

Achebe further mines his protagonist's appearance in the *Ilo* as a member of the clan's highest ruling authority to register his visuospatial placement in the novel. Being both human/contemporary and ancestral/ancient, the masquerade bestrides multiple spatio-temporal registers that resist incorporation into a linear teleological imagination. Aghogho Akpome explains that in many parts of Africa, "the masquerade … is believed in traditional religion to involve the temporary incarnation of certain spirits and/or deities by whom the human host of the mask is possessed" ("Dancing Masquerades" 139). More

importantly, Akpome references the essential polyfocal impulses that the masquerade performance inscribes, indicating that:

> the supernatural performer is not bound to one location but usually moves about in all directions, making it necessary for the audience also to change locations constantly…characterized as they are by multiple subjectivities and sensibilities as well as ever shifting, kaleidoscopic contexts ("Dancing Masquerades"139)

As a chronotope, the mask at this textual moment allows "ancestral past, human present, the spirit realm and the human world [as] temporal and spatial categories [to] seamlessly intersect and merge in the person of an individual in an all-encompassing harmony. Considering the fact of the mask speaks to a heterotopic engagement with multiple worlds that coalesce in the masked figure, Okonkwo's alienating individual traits are subsumed as he performs a transcendental role at the moment of his embodiment as one of Umuofia's nine *Egwugwu.*

Interestingly, the visuospatial dynamics of this scene also marks Okonkwo as already operating within a space of dissonance in relation to the other masked spirits. The narrator states:

> Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *Egwugwu*. had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *Egwugwu*. But if they thought these things, they kept them within themselves. The *Egwugwu* with the springy

> walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns. (*Things Fall Apart* 32)

Obviously then, Okonkwo's recognizable role as husband to his wives intervenes in and complicates the sanctity of his role as "one of the dead fathers of the clan". The reader is simultaneously presented with the image of Okonkwo as recognizable husband and as embodiment of the dead father[s] of the clan:

> He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns". (*Things Fall Apart* 79-80).

Rather than seamlessly represent the returned ancestors which the *Egwugwu* as a group embody, Okonkwo's springy walk marks him out as an identifiable human subject who is one of the ancestors at this moment in time, and yet is also not. His attempt to metamorphose into an ancestral deity is impeded by the ready recognizability of his idiosyncratic walk. This textual moment therefore foreshadows his "being banned from the company of the ancestors" ("Chinwe Nwoye, "Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview" 309), a subsequent disqualification that his eventual suicide initiates. In this moment, the 'purity' of the mask in signifying the continuity of time and generational connections is threatened, not only with unseen forces, as Gikandi suggests in his reading of *Arrow of God* (*Reading Things Fall Apart* 76) but more so by the contentious hubris

and existential anxieties consolidated in the identity of its wearer. Okonkwo's idiosyncratic walk gestures to his other foibles that would eventually tilt his society towards the brink of mayhem.

The Obi: Seat of the Patriarchy

The *Obi,* (broadly conceived as the homestead), is another pivot point from where the dynamism of mask's dance rotates. In *Things Fall Apart,* this site stages what we might call the crises of gender disequilibrium that is definitive of the protagonist's subjective trajectory in the novel. In traditional Igbo culture, the term *Obi* is specifically used to refer to the patio, often located in a central position within the familial compound. It is the symbolic center of the compound, where the personal altar and various traditional ritual and religious paraphernalia of the head of the family are housed and where he receives his guests ("OBU: The Sacred Homestead" 469). This building is usually made or constructed with mud with a thatch roof and "strategically positioned in the center of the compound …surrounded by other houses … usually belong[ing] to the many wives of the titled man". (("OBU: The Sacred Homestead" 468). In more general terms however, the *Obi* as a philosophical and architectural concept extends beyond just the singular house where the head of the compound lives to signify "a compound, family, or the human beings that constitute it" (Chinedu Ene-Orj, "Traditional Igbo Architecture" 80). My usage of the term follows this understanding.

In *Things Fall Apart,* the *Obi* constitutes a series of spatial meaning loci that operate in tandem with other sites in the community. Chinedu Ene-Orji's view that "traditional African architecture is the pragmatic, conceptual, and aesthetic manifestation of man's ideals in time and space in reaction to his personal, psychic, social, and physical milieu. ("Traditional Igbo Architecture" 80) hints at just this sort of spatial logics that intersects the philosophical, aesthetic and subjective dimensions of meaning that I aim to trace here. The shifts in manifestations of these meaning constellations allow us to see characters in specific oscillational ways.

For example, the description of Okonkwo's homestead initially cements his relevance as an elder of Umuofia by the trappings of wealth showcased within this locale. We are told that:

> Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half-moon behind the obi. The Barn was built against one end of the red walls and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to hers for the hens. Near the barn was a small house, the medicine house or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of

> kolanut, food, and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives, and eight children (*Things Fall Apart* 11–12).

What we immediately encounter is Okonkwo's unequivocal status as patriarch inscribed by the architectural layout of his homestead. Not only is his prosperity clearly visible in the multiple huts of his wives, but this perception is also confirmed by yam barn with "long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it" *(Things Fall Apart* 11). Notable is also the fact the central location of the Obi[46] in the family compound approximates in its structure Igbo notions of achievement and leadership which represent the greater ideal of the village community of which it is a part. ("Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview" 311). While the huts where Okonkwo's wives live huddle together in a half-moon circle behind Okonkwo's compound, the *Obi* stands imposingly behind "the only gate" in the red walled fence. This spatial situation, with its direct physical and spatial link with the family entrance (*Mgboezi*) positions the Obi as "the connecting point between the family space as an inner social reality and external space, which is the village as an outer social reality" ("Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview" 311). It is clear that, as head of household whom we are told rules his homestead with an iron first, Okonkwo controls the comings and goings within this space.

Therefore, in its spatial layout, the Obi not only "symbolizes Okonkwo's pre-eminence as family head and protector", but also operates as the threshold of the homestead. As an architectural space, it "elicits an acknowledgement of its owner's status from all who go

[46] The Obi also referred to as Obu in some Igbo dialects.

through it to enter and to leave". (Olufunwa, "Achebe's Spatial Temporalities" 58). Not only does the spatial layout of Okonkwo's compound symbolize his authority over this space as well as control over the quotidian dimensions of his family life, but its constituent architectural elements also seem to replicate a set of spatio-cultural relations operative within the larger Umuofia community as a whole. The different buildings in Okonkwo's compound: the barn, the medicine house or shrine and the living quarters, all have domestic, economic and religious functions similar to those of other places like the farm/market economic spatial binary, the varied communal shrines such as the cave of Agbala and the wider network of compounds that constitute the village as a whole. In this way, Okonkwo's compound can be seen as a smaller microcosm of the larger geographical layout of Umuofia.

Consequently, it becomes imperative that the goings on within Okonkwo's homestead reflect a balance of norms with the larger social landscape with which it must remain in sync as part of the larger formal system of values and matrix of ideas "which gathers together house units into compounds, kindred groups, and quarters and carving out communal open spaces resulting in the village matrix (Ene-Orji, "Traditional Igbo Architecture" 77). This spatial matrix extends beyond the physical terrain to incorporate spiritual realms. Although writing in a different context, David Chidester signals to this co-constitutive, relational logic between the homestead and the community when he explains that:

> The homestead was a symbol of the world, a central arena in which the symbolic relations of persona and place were negotiated. The home was the nexus of symbolic and social relations among the living and between the living and deceased relatives of the household who continued to live as ancestor spirits. (Cited in Madukasi Chuks, OBU: The Sacred Homestead" 467) [47]

As such, it becomes reasonable that the *Obi* is the site where we initially notice the disjunction between Okonkwo's 'dance steps' and that of the larger Umuofia community in response to the rhythm of change instituted by colonial modernity. Within this space, the initially inscribed referent of Okonkwo as a prosperous elder and staunch contributor to the development of Umuofia's communal aegis of transformation and development begins to shift. Although Okonkwo's conquering impulse is indulged, not only of his homestead, which he rules with an iron fist, but also his efforts to dominate scenes of sociality in Umuofia in general, the deviations that emanate from his compound increasingly mark Okonkwo's house as a site of anomie. It is to Okonkwo's *Obi* that Ezeudu, the oldest man in Umuofia, comes to warn him of the imprudence of participating in Ikemefuna's killing, a socially sanctioned instance of violence, which nonetheless has important ethical restrictions arising from the exigencies of parenthood because "that boy calls [him] father" (Achebe 1958: 49). It is here that his

[47] See Chidester (1992). Religions of South Africa. London: Routledge. Cited in Madukasi Francis Chuks "OBU: The Sacred Homestead for Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion" *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* (IJRISS) |Volume V, Issue I, January 2021, p.467

outbursts of violence and aggression – his wife beating episodes and the instance when he almost shoots his wife for talking back at him, etc. become habitual practice.

The narrative framing of the later incident is interesting. We are told that "*in spite of this* [near murder] incident, the New Yam Festival was celebrated with great joy in Okonkwo's household" (Achebe 1958: 33). But what might be read as a mere narrative hiccup is actually a hermeneutic signaling of the growing dissonance between the happenings at Okonkwo's compound and the norms of peace, complementarity and balance proposed as the foundations of Umofia's social order. Although the dance of the mask initially proceeds and retains its agility 'in spite of' these moments spatial dissonance at Okonkwo's Ilo, they signal that this essential pivot point in Umuofia's empirical order is out of joint with the rest of the community.

Furthermore, the forms of spatial dissonance operative within Okonkwo's *Ilo* interrupt and disrupt the cosmic call and response spatial logic considered essential to the cycles of change, growth and transformation that determine the survival of Umuofia as a society. When Chielo, "the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves", asks Ekwefi about the incident: "Is it true that Okonkwo nearly killed you with his gun?". Ekwefi's response: "I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story" (Achebe 1958: 33) is an indication of a normative impasse that constrains the very capacity of language to express it. Okonkwo's recurrent anormal behavior strains the boundaries

between individuality and community, especially the interdependence of both poles in the dynamic construction of an acceptable subject figure.

This boundary rifts when Okonkwo beats his wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace. This week is a period within the wider Umuofia community in "which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor" (*Things Fall Apart* 26) when engaging in any kind of violence is forbidden. The duration is considered a sacred time for celebrating the peaceful co-existence of the clan in honor the earth goddess, Ani, whose blessings the Igbos believed essential for the crops to prosper. Okonkwo's beating of his wife merely continues the process of transgression already established as norm within his compound, but this time, his sacrilegious crime against the earth goddess places him in conflict with his community.

Although Okonkwo performs the necessary sacrifices for engaging in taboo actions, this incident has far-reaching debilitating consequences on his trajectory as a character in the novel. It is becoming apparent in the text that the excesses in Okonkwo's *Obi* are in conflict with the cosmic spatial logic of Umuofia. Iterating this point, the priest of the earth goddess Ezeani tells him:

> Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her…. The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. (*Things Fall Apart* 26).

Okonkwo's actions are considered *nso ani,* an abomination committed against Ani, and he is rebuked by Ezeani who stipulates hefty propitiatory sacrifices that Okonkwo must perform to cleanse the land, but no longer can Umuofia ignore the forms of spatial dissonance operative within Okonkwo's *Ilo*.

It is important to note how Okonkwo's sacrilegious act is brewed from a seemingly minor spatial location. His confrontation with Ojiugo, his third wife, happens when Okonkwo realizes that she is away from home because her "fireplace was cold" (*Things Fall Apart* 25) when he checks her hut. Ojiugo's absence from the fireplace is linked to the wider celebration of the Week of Peace, the occasion for which she had gone to "plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal" (*Things Fall Apart* 24).Although the fireplace in Ojiugo's hut (indeed the huts of his wives in general) might initially appear quite marginal to the action of the text, this seemingly marginal spatial locations comes into play in propelling the larger narrative arc of the text.

The comments of Uchendu, Okonkwo's Uncle help us understand why. Reproaching Okonkwo for his sorrow about having to come to live with his mother's clan during his exile from Umuofia, Uchendu says:

> It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in

> his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme" (*Things Fall Apart* 120).

Since Umuofia is a society where hospitality is privileged during periods of communal celebration like the new yam festival or private ceremonies like Akweke's wedding, the woman's hut and the fireplace are, on the one hand, centers of operations, a site of production from which the culinary energies necessary for the celebration of Umuofia's communal consciousness is generated and maintained. One the other hand, however, the woman's hut represents an oasis of female autonomy within the otherwise patrilineal layout of a man's compound. It is a haven of care, a sanctuary that has a corresponding spatial echo in a man's motherland. The primacy of female energies invested in a woman's hut is evident, for example, when investigating Ezinma's cycles of *Ogbanje*, the medicine man informs Okonkwo no longer to sleep with his Ewefi in her hut, but "in future call her into [his] *Obi* (*Things Fall Apart* 69).

Moreover, in the tense dialectic between collective and individual interests that resonates throughout the novel, Ojiugo's cold fireplace becomes symbolic of a self-serving preference for personal adornment at the expense of the well-being of her family. In her absence, the capacity of the fireplace to function as the site for familial/communal integration and care is diminished. Thus, the action that begins at the cold fireplace is intrinsic to the narrative development of *Things Fall Apart* and forms an integral element of the novel's thematic unfolding. Events precipitated from this minute space assume drastic dimensions capable of propelling the plot of the text.

What becomes apparent is the fact that space in the novel is gendered through and through and the contradictions of gender relations become the motor of both change and catastrophe. Okonkwo's hypermasculine rigidity is at odds with the fluidity and ironic double vision that allows other characters to negotiate those contradictions and ambiguities. In these textual moments, we see a crises of gender disequilibrium that arise because Okonkwo celebrates the social dominance of the men that is unequivocally asserted in Achebe's novel, without acknowledging what Abiola Irele calls "the parallel valorization of women in the symbolic sphere" an ontology which sets up a countervailing cultural and moral force to balance "the massive investment of the social sphere by the men" (*The African Imagination* 132). Irele explains that "the male-female dialectic serves to maintain an affective and ideological balance in the group… correspond[ing] to a certain primary perception of a felt duality of the cosmic order as a principle of the universal imagination" (*The African Imagination* 132). Consequently, paying closer attention to textual action operative between Ojiugo's hut and Okonkwo's *Obi* brings to the fore the subtext of matriarchal power that Okonkwo ignores to his own detriment.

Okonkwo's sacrilegious actions in this incident is merely one in a series of instances where the ongoings in the *Ob*i distorts the rhythm of communal life due to his extreme individualistic ethos. Although, as Achebe indicates, the individualist impulse expressed in the Igbo culture by the Chi or personal god, "postulate[s] an unprecedented uniqueness

for the individual by making him or her the sole creation and purpose of a unique god-agent", this conception of individuality "is balanced by limits which subordinates the person to the group in practical, social matters" (*Hopes and Impediments* 56-58). Okonkwo's downfall arises from ignoring the Igbo balancing principle of (Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, 94).

The countervailing impact of these spatialized contestations gradually displace Okonkwo from Umuofia's center of sociality which he occupies at the beginning of the novel. His exaggerated sense of self results in a gradually expanding circle of spatial displacement. For example, we are told that the two emissaries who attempt to heal this rift by visiting Okonkwo's Obi to warn him – Ogbuefi Ezeudu, during the Ikemefuna episode and Ezeani, during the week of peace episode – both refuse to share a meal with him. (*Things Fall Apart* 49). Ezeani, in particular, refuses to accept Okonkwo's gift of kola nut, declaring "I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." (*Things Fall Apart* 26-27). The Chief Priest's rejection of the kolanut, a revered cultural marker of acceptance, cooperation and solidarity, and symbol of "Igbo sacramental communion" ("The Historical Significance and Role of the Kola Nut" 300) renowned for its "ritual powers for peace, long life, prosperity, and unity" (Unya 293) further underscores Okonkwo's increasing disconnection from the communal aegis.

In an ironic twist, the penultimate act that finally ostracizes Okonkwo from Umuofia for seven years is the accidental killing of Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son when his gun goes

off during the old man's funeral rites. When Okonkwo's Obi is burnt down as punishment for the accidental murder, this moment can be read as signaling an excision of the site of spatial dissonance that is his compound from the confines of Umuofia. The narrator recounts:

> As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend Obierika was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman (Achebe 1958: 99–100).

As Ene-Orji dully notes, "the consequent ritual demolition of [Okonkwo's] compound serves as a deterrent and ablution—reparation to men and a sacrifice to Ana the Earth deity for the desecration of the land" ("Traditional Igbo Architecture" 66). In registering the accidental killing of the son of Ezeudu, Achebe seems to suggest that the regime of (unsanctioned) violence that had been holding sway in Okonkwo's Obi, was beginning to seep into and infect the wider Umofia society in threatening ways. The ethically objectionable pattern of 'dance steps' that have been happening in Okonkwo's Obi threatens to disrupt the synchronicity of the dance of his society as a whole, which demands that the activities from that site be suspended and excised.

The Farm: Center of an Agrarian Economy and Subjectivity

Although ample scholarship exists on the relationship between an agriculturally-grounded social culture and the political economy of Igbo identity in general and *Things Fall Apart* in particular, much of this scholarship often focuses on the products of agriculture (yam, cocoyam, etc.) and on the forms of sociality that such products enable (feats, festivals, rituals, etc.).[48] Little attention has been paid to how the farm, as dominant nexus of Umuofia's social economy, is constituted as an important spatial juncture that functions in constellation with other locales in the constitution of the main character's subjectivity. But 'tarrying at the farm', as it were, spotlights how the visuospatial dynamics in this locale demonstrates Achebe's point that "the Igbo aesthetic values process rather than product". In other words, focusing our attention away from the yam as primary farm product to the intricacies of farming as a process of change, transformation and adaptation alerts us to how this site participates in translating the impulse and kinesis of creation central to Igbo regenerative sensibilities and worldview.

To begin with, the farm in *Things Fall Apart* is the site where the structural tensions between the dialectics of work and play that Ainehi Edoro-Glines suggests as countervailing temporal orders in Achebe's fictional world both spotlights and

[48] For examples, see: J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada "The Influence of Igbo Metaphysics on the Writings of Chinua Achebe"; Victor Chikezie Uchendu, "Ezi Na Ulo: The Extended Family in Igbo Civilization"; Chima J. Korieh, "Yam is King! But Cassava is the Mother of all Crops: Farming, Culture, and Identity in Igbo Agrarian Economy; Olufunwa, Harry. "Eating with Kings: Food and Ambition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.*" *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2000, pp. 69-71. Ramone, Jenni. "Transforming Hunger into Power: Food and Resistance in Nigerian Literature." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food*, edited by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien, Routledge, 2018. Highfield, J. B. Food and Foodways in African Narratives: Community, Culture, and Heritage. New York: Routledge. (2017).

reconfigures itself. Edoro-Glines identifies these temporal orders as "the time of productive labor…[and] the time of leisure and rest and their primary figures as the farmer and the musician respectively" ("Achebe's Evil Forest 184). In his seminal reading of these temporal configurations in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, Achebe identifies what is at stake in the way this dialectical relationship is marked on the farm locale thus:

> [a] moral universe in which work and play in their numerous variations complement each other. The good life . . . is that in which business and pleasure, striving and repose, giving and receiving, suffering and enjoyment, punishment and reprieve, poverty and wealth, have their place, their time and their measure. We give work and struggle; and in the end we take rest and fulfillment. ("Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard" 103)[49]

The temporal dialectics between work and play are clearly spatialized and differentiated, with the farm operating as the site for work, struggle, striving. Other social activities "depend for their value on their being tethered to an economy of agricultural labor" ("Achebe's Evil Forest" 185). The farm is the place where any man worth his mettle as an Umuofian establishes himself. In this dominantly agrarian society, farming is the main source of livelihood and the use-value of farm produce - yam for men and cocoyam for women - constitute prime indicators of social success. The capacity of an individual to

[49] See Chinua Achebe, "Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard," Hope and Impediments (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 103.

succeed at the farm determines the level of his/her acceptance as a viable member of the community.

The space-time dynamics of the farm as a dominant site of production plays an important role in enabling the ascendancy of Okonkwo in the clan. We are told early in the text that Okonkwo "was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams" (*Things Fall Apart* 5). The protagonist's success on this site is well-earned, having been achieved through a lot of hard work and tenacity. Not only does Okonkwo "work…daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost" during the planting season, but he is also renowned for his stamina, being "a very strong man [who] rarely felt fatigue." (*Things Fall Apart* 11). Such stamina is required for clearing the fertile virgin forest with the best soil and from where a rich harvest can be expected. The implications of such success are enormous because farm produce, such as yam, "doesn't just sustain the biological life of the community, but also functions as currency for the distribution of wealth, class, and gender divisions" (Edoro-Glines, "Achebe's Evil Forest" 185)

Okonkwo's agricultural prowess contrasts sharply with that of his father's, Unoka, whose undoing begins with his failure at the farm. Unoka is "known in all the clan for the weakness of [his] matchet and [his] hoe" (*Things Fall Apart* 14). Rather than prove his mettle along with his neighbors who "go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests" and "cross seven rivers to make their farms", "[he] sow[s] [his] yams on exhausted farms that take no labor to clear" (*Things Fall Apart* 14). Unoka is roundly denounced by

Chika, priestess of Agbala, when he attempts to gloss over his inadequacies as a lack of divine support. His preference for easy-to-reach farm sites disqualifies him, not only from the bounties of a good harvest, but also the privileges associated with the wealth and prestige that they bring. He is called an *Agbala*, a woman, a disparagement which forever haunts his son and would drive him to extremes to distance himself from his father's shameful legacy, "indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death" (*Things Fall Apart* 15).

It is also within the farm space that Okonkwo undergoes the epic test of will between his desire for success and the curtailing forces of his father's legacy. We are told that:

> With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father's lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful (*Things Fall Apart* 15).

The foundations for a prosperous future that Okonkwo builds is through a system of credit available within Umuofia. Sourcing seed yams from Nwakibie, a wealthy man in his village, he begins the slow and arduous process of wealth building that the farm space enables. The narrator discloses that "share-cropping was a very slow way of building up a barn of one's own. After all the toil one only got a third of the harvest." (*Things Fall Apart* 19) Okonkwo "thr[o]w[s] himself into it like one possessed" (*Things Fall Apart* 15), but even then, the constellational pull between intersecting locales, in this case, his

father's poor compound and his budding farm is still at work, mitigating and diminishing his results. The narrator recounts that:

> What made it worse in Okonkwo's case was that he had to support his mother and two sisters from his meagre harvest. And supporting his mother also meant supporting his father. She could not be expected to cook and eat while her husband starved. And so, at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through share-cropping Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house. *It was like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes*. (Italics mine) (*Things Fall Apart* 19).

It is the call and response demand between the farm and the *Ilo* that diminishes Okonkwo's efforts, dwindling his results, which is comparable to pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes.

Okonkwo's will to succeed at the farm is further tested by the unforeseen violence and fickleness of natural weather circles and patterns on which Umuofians depend for their agricultural enterprise. This is an initial instance when an aspect of the unknown, of contingency that Achebe refers to as the "Powers of the Events", showcases itself in the novel. In this instance, the farm becomes a threshold where the forces of change "whether as improvement or as catastrophe – [are] at its most imminent" (Olufunwa, "Achebe's Spatial Temporalities" 57). Okonkwo's budding sharecropping project is threatened by terribly weather as the year turns out to be "the worst year in living memory".

> Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that had appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown... the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed. (*Things Fall Apart* 19).

In the dismal turn of events, the farm becomes the site where the forms of knowing and practice relevant for sustaining the individual and collective futurity of Umuofia are reevaluated. The convergence of these specific spatial and temporal circumstances brings unexpected inversions to the norms of agricultural practice in Umuofia. The weird weather developments work against the established wisdom of "all good farmers [who] had begun to sow with the first rains". Conversely, "the lazy easy-going ones who always put off clearing their farms as long as they could" now seem to be "the wise ones… inwardly they were happy for what they took to be their own foresight" (*Things Fall Apart* 19). We can take overturning of taken-for-granted farming wisdom at the farm, the very foundational site of Umuofia's economy, as a pointer to other world-changing upheavals yet to come.

As an important vantage point that constitutes "the crossroads of cultures" (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 67) in the text, the farm is therefore a juncture that allows us to see how "disparate paths inevitably meet to create something new. … a place from

which a judicious viewer may [stop] in order to see a canvas steadily and fully" (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation* 68). As such, the catastrophe staged at the farms in Umuofia may be read as a harbinger in a series of space-time thresholds through which Okonkwo must pass as character definitive of the society's struggle with radical change, transformation and continuity. We are told that the harvest that year "was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams". Unable to cope with the disaster, a man "tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself". Although he is severely tested, Okonkwo survives this initial onslaught of contingency. He puts his survival down to his "inflexible will". His father however concludes otherwise, suggesting that Okonkwo overcomes this instance of change because it is "a general failure …such [that] does not prick [a proud man's] pride". It is much more dangerous "when a man fails alone", Unoka warns.

We are also told that "Okonkwo remembered that tragic year with a cold shiver throughout the rest of his life". This traumatic memory is the catalyst of hope with which he assures himself of future successes. "'Since I survived that year," he always said, "I shall survive anything'" (*Things Fall Apart* 21. What he fails to recognize is that it is his willingness to adapt to contingency, his flexibility and adjustment that enables him to get over this challenge, rather than his inflexible will. Unoka's warning that individual success and survival is best secured when aligned and in step with the general communal trend fails to register with his son. The drama in the farm thus foreshadows the rhythms of change that Okonkwo ultimately fails to navigate along with his community and the revolution of the dancing mask at the farm inserts an important curve into the narrative

schema of Things Fall *Apart*. Achebe's etching of the singular importance of the farm as a site of social critique, which begins in *Things Fall Apart* (Unoka's laziness, Okonkwo's prowess, Nwoye's laziness,) reaches a heightened dramatic, manifestation in *Arrow of God* where the farm and its produce becomes the pivot point through which the twin shafts of colonial modernity/ Christianity anchor itself more firmly in Igboland.

The Cave of Agbala: Gender and the Gateway into the Unfathomable Sacred

Perhaps nowhere is the shifting relationship between the known and the unknowable which, as Gikandi suggests, Achebe borrows as a central thematic from the Igbo aesthetic (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 57), as spatially marked in *Things Fall Apart* as it is in the cave of Agbala, the oracle of the hills and caves. The narrator introduces us to this deity through an extensive description of the place of its worship:

> The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it…The way into the shrine was a round hole at the side of a hill, just a little bigger than the round opening into a henhouse. Worshippers and those who came to seek knowledge from the god crawled on their belly through the hole and found themselves in a dark, endless space in the presence of Agbala. No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. But no one who had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power. (*Things Fall Apart* 13)

The cave of Agbala is an expanse of unfathomable darkness presided over by its priestess. To visit the cave is a humbling experience, requiring a crawl on the belly as small as the round opening into a henhouse. Famously known from far and near, it is the place where visitors in the quest for explanations about past events "or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers", present ills, "when misfortune dogged their steps" or future presentiments "to discover what the future held for them". In its believed capacity to transcend time and to offer insights into the past, present and future, Agbala is reminiscent of a primordial womb space, a focal point not unlike the dancing mask, which embodies the ancestral spirits, current leaders of the clan who are by themselves regarded as future ancestors.

As a place where the role of the spiritual in "mediating… between old and new" and "between accepted norms and extravagant aberrations"(Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 57) is centered, Agbala is a referent that marks the possibility of identifying, interpreting and hence controlling "new forces are liable to appear without warning in the temporal and metaphysical firmament", because "anything against which the door is barred can cause trouble" (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 57). Although this space of religious surveillance and mediation, like other outposts of social critique, is not intended to achieve harmony due to the heterogeneity of human experience, its utility is marked as simultaneously transformative and stabilizing by Achebe's comments that "the dangers of an open rupture are greatly lessened by giving to everyone his due in the same forum of social and cultural surveillance". (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 57)

Yet, although Agbala is established as one of the core bedrocks of Igbo religious tradition that stretches into antiquity, it is in no way alienated from the potentialities of critique, change and transformation that Igbo aesthetic thought embodies. The narrator's representation of individuals' interactions with the deity suggests this idea that Agbala "was not above question and even resistance", especially in issues related to normative authority and bonds of blood and family, when the said individual can be legitimately considered to be in the right. For example, in an incident when the priestess, Chielo, takes Ekwefi's daughter, Ezinma, to the shrine for communion with her god, Ekwefi, whose life has been blighted by the loss of countless children who died at birth, swears an oath "that if she heard Ezinma cry she would rush into the cave to defend her against all the gods in the world" (Achebe *Things Fall Apart* 97). In spite of her warnings and formidable aspect, Chielo is followed by both Okonkwo and Ekwefi when the priestess takes Ezinma from their home, justified as parents invested in the wellbeing of their child. Similarly, another character, Nwakibie tells the story of Obiako who questions the oracle's pronouncement that his dead father "wants [him] to sacrifice a goat to him". Obiako's rejoinder that the oracle "ask [his] father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive" (Achebe *Things Fall Apart* 17). is suggestive of the perceived unfairness of the ancestor's incommensurate demands.

The ambiguities of meaning within which Agbala is shrouded is represented in the novel through the literal unfathomable darkness that shrouds the shrine and cave. Interestingly,

the narrative consciousness that recounts the scene of the shrine expresses it in terms of received knowledge, widely known but not verifiable from personal experience: “it was said”. The vague visuospatial dynamics of the site are couched in similar terms: “His priestess stood by the sacred fire which she built in the heart of the cave and proclaimed the will of the god. The fire did not burn with a flame. The glowing logs only served to light up vaguely the dark figure of the priestess. ((Achebe *Things Fall Apart* 13). As an index of Umuofia’s unfathomable sacred, Agbala cannot be described in tangible terms.

Considered “the owner of the future, the messenger of earth, the god who cut a man down when his life was sweetest to him”, Agbala’s presence is rendered legible by the vaguely lit figure of the priestess whose form the sacred fire serves to underscore her role as human medium who connects the realms of the known and the unknowable. As Edoro-Glines acknowledges, “Agbala’s cave is clearly an extramundane space”. Yet, in spite of its sacrality as a juncture between the metaphysical and human planes of existence, it remains as a space that is continuous with the sites of everyday life”. Edoro-Glines points to the fact that Chielo is able to carry Ezinma from her mother’s hut to the cave and back to her mother’s hut to make this very point, “that there is some kind of continuity between both spaces in spite of their apparent difference” (“Achebe’s Evil Forest 178).

It is important to note that on this night, Chielo carries Ezinma on her back as she walks with almost superhuman strength through the length of the entire clan all the way to the farthest village before she makes her way back to the caves. Being a personification of

the Igbo principle of duality, which balances female autonomy (mother is supreme) within an otherwise patriarchal social structure,

Chielo's movement through the varied clans of Umuofia can be read as yet another iteration of the mask's dance, which must traverse varied spatio-temporal thresholds and subject positions as a nod towards the heterogeneity of human experience. Although an ordinary village woman and a good and generous neighbor, - "in ordinary life Chielo was a widow with two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi, and they shared a common shed in the market" - Chielo becomes transfigured into a dreaded personage with "no humanity" when she assumed the role of Agbala's priestess (*Things Fall Apart* 95). In this capacity, the priestess, although woman, evolves into a communicative channel through which the gendered hierarchies of Umuofia's society are inverted and critiqued. For example, she roundly criticizes Unoka for resorting to sacrifice rather than hard work. Okonkwo is similarly cautioned when he attempts to prevent the woman from taking Ezinma in the night: "Beware, Okonkwo!" she warned. "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!" ((Achebe *Things Fall Apart* 89). In this moment, the protagonist, with all his protestations of patriarchal masculinity, must bow to the force of power that Chielo, operating as priestess, embodies.

The Evil Forest: Counterpoint of History and (Dis)order

The evil forest in *Things Fall Apart* is an important counterpoint of disorder against which habituated spaces within Umuofia's political economy derive their order, form, functionality and meaning. Edoro-Glines reading of the novel, which adopts the evil forest as a spatial paradigm with which to understand the construction of order and form in Achebe's fictional world, exemplifies this idea. Cautioning against the reading of this locale merely as a "cultural and anthropological fact of Achebe's fictional world" Edoro-Glines suggests instead that we see it as an "organizing principle" that structures the narrative logic in Achebe's novel ("Achebe's Evil Forest"177). Edoro-Glines argues that the evil forest marks a series of foundational political protocols that underwrite Umuofia's existence as a clan, such as the clan's originary moment, its instruments for judicial and territorial ordering, as well as its mechanisms for transforming violence into power, and ascribing political value to life and objects ("Achebe's Evil Forest" 177–78).

This formulation, which presents the evil forest as an emblematized spatialization of the clan's founding violence retained as grounding force for the validity of the order visible in clan life, is important. However, Edoro-Glines acknowledges that the evil forest serves as the "context on which incidents in the lives of characters can be made intelligible" ("Achebe's Evil Forest 184), her on just one spatial index in the novel falls short of addressing an important point, namely, how the evil forest stands in relation to other spaces in defining Okonkwo's evolving trajectory as character. In other words, her singular focus on this spatial context erodes the possibility of reading the evil forest in

relation as a symbolic and literal heterotopic space that intersects the other spaces where varied polyfocal aspects of the protagonist's identity are constituted[50].

But how does the evil forest function as a constant spatial undertone that shadows the varied identities of Achebe's protagonist from the moment of his emergence as a character in the text to his demise? How are Okonkwo's varied frames of identity as champion wrestler, son, father, husband, clan elder, wealthy famer all refracted through spatial referent of the evil forest? Again, looking at the shifting relationship between the known and the unknowable that the mask is emblematic of provides an answer. Because the mask is a fundamental index of Umuofia's empirical order, a sanctioned instrument of social control and "legal violence" (Edoro-Glines, "Achebe's Evil Forest 191), its notation remains a constant in Umuofia's schemas of perception, exchange and use value systems, social hierarchy, juridical values and symbolic universe. It is the spatial counterpoint that underlies characters capacity to function (or not function) successfully in all other spatial categories/contexts within which these values operate.

To illustrate, Okonkwo's initial ascendancy within the clan at the *Ilo* is narrated in terms of the clan's origin, a history deeply implicated with the spatiality of the evil forest. His defeat of Amalinze is considered a reenactment of the defeat of the spirit of the wild by the clan's progenitor, a historical action "by virtue of which the clan is constituted as a

[50] Foucault describes heterotopias as "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." (See Foucault and Miskowiec 65)

zone of collective life" (Edoro-Glines "Achebe's Evil Forest 182). In the temporal frame described by the wrestling match referent, Okonkwo is *the* contemporary conqueror of the spirit of the wild – an index of chaos that is symbolized spatially within the clan as the space of the evil forest. He is the victor whose defeat of Amalinze reaffirms Umuofia's political ascendancy as regional sovereign power.

By virtue of this victory, Okonkwo is set on the path to political relevance as an elder of the clan. Within this identity frame, he is similarly aligned with the spatial referent of the evil forest as one of the nine *Ewgugwu,* the premier judicial council of Umuofia. The narrator explains this link when we are told:

> Each of the nine *Egwugwu* represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head. The nine villages of Umuofia had grown out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan. Evil Forest represented the village of Umueru, or the children of Eru, who was the eldest of the nine sons (Achebe 1958:79).

Thus, in his role as a constitutive member of the clan's instrument of judicial power and executor of sanctioned violence, Okonkwo remains in close proximal relationship with the evil forest as symbol of juridical order within which Umuofia functions as a legally-regulated society. The leader and spokesperson of the masked spirits is called "Evil Forest", whose unfathomability is repeatedly emphasized in a call and response interaction with members of the clan. "Uzowulu's body, do you know me?", the masked

spirit asks? “How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge,” Uzowulu replied (*Things Fall Apart* 80).Yet, as the text reveals, Evil Forest is simultaneously unknowable and knowable when, few moments later in this scene, the narrator diverges from detailing the proceedings of the judicial scene to reveal that “Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well” possibly knew the identity of one of the *Egwugwu.* The juxtaposition of the familiarity of Okonkwo’s body and gait and the bonds of recognition that they enable and the image of the fearsome *Egwugwu* impinge upon the sinister embodiment of the evil forest which the *Egwugwu* represent, allowing Achebe’s narrator a moment for visuospatial transevaluation between the eschatology of Igbo culture and the European knowledge economy within which the author is writing. This textual moment attempts to create an equivalence between both epistemes, which as Rey Chow succinctly notes, “is precisely what intercultural translation may endeavor to enunciate even as it apprehends, as it must, the undeniable existence of cultural limits and incompatibility” (“Translator Traitor; Translator, Mourner” 573). What becomes evident is that following the evil forest as a foundational spatial trope traceable from Umuofia’s historical founding to its current socio-political circumstance allows us to see where, to follow Bakhtin’s formulation of the chronotope, time and space intersect and fuse in *Things Fall Apart*. Explaining the formally constitutive category, Bakhtin notes that it marks how “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin 84). As a spatial counterpoint to the community’s sites of sociality, the Evil Forest’s inscription within Umuofia’s mythic and symbolic imaginary warrants a

parallel framing of the protagonist subjective trajectory in relation to this site. But it is in this locale's framing of Okonkwo as both son and father that the dynamicity of the evil forest as a symbolic space 'responsive to the movements of time plot and history' is most evident.

We learn early in the novel that Unoka, Okonkwo's father died of the swelling disease and that his body, becoming an abomination to the earth goddess and unworthy of a burial, is discarded in the evil forest. As such, on a personal, familial level, the evil forest marks the site of an ominously threatening patrimonial history that Okonkwo's whole life is dedicated to overcoming. His ascendancy in the clan, role as a leader, exploits in war, success as a wealthy farmer, and approach to fatherhood are all haunted by the fear of becoming like his father and being engulfed by the Evil Forest. We are told that:

> Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father

> was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, but it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so, Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (Achebe 1958:10-11).

It can thus be said that the evil forest functions as a constant spatial undertone that shadows Okonkwo, a negative spatial referent that refracts his identity. One of the most egregious of his actions, the killing of Ikemefuna, is understood as "the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (*Things Fall Apart* 10-11). Despite being a sanctioned ritual killing by the Oracle of the hills and caves on whose "authority and the decision [Ikemefuna is declared to] …die" (Achebe 1958:58), Okonkwo is cautioned against taking part in the killing, due to the bonds of blood. Because the boy "calls [him] father", (Achebe 1958:49), the Umuofian moral economy frowns on his participation in inflicting such violence one who has effectively assumed the status of a family member.

When Okonkwo insists on being the messenger of the god, his actions signal yet another dissonance between his definition of masculinity and the principle of balance and complementarity that the clan espouses. This incident can then be identified as a narrative catalyst that tips the trajectory of Okonkwo's relationship with norms of the clan, and its spatial counterpoint, the evil forest, into a negative downward spiral that culminates in his suicide. He becomes one of the discordant elements that threatens the moral cohesiveness and the security of the tribe, and thus has to be cast out. True to the axiom

that “as a man danced so the drums were beaten for him” Okonkwo’s relationship to the constitutive shadow cast by the evil forest remains dynamic and changing. In the end, he comes full circle and like his father before him, has to be buried there.

What comes to the fore in following the mask in motion as a constellational narrative catalyst through an epistemology of partial perspectives that cumulatively paints a striking tableaus of Igbo lifeworld and culture-scapes. In tracing these spatial parameters within Achebe’s worlding project enables us to ‘see the world well’ and thereby understand more fully the changing stakes of experience and how characters attempt to navigate the relationship between the known and the unknowable heightened during the advent of European colonization.

More importantly however, as the final paragraphs of *Things Fall Apart* demonstrate, following the footsteps of the mask in a visuospatial exploration of Umuofia intimates us to a different conception of spatiality. In this textual moment, Achebe flips the script to show us the mental process of the District Commissioner, the representative European voice, who ponders about the extent to which he might include a sliver of Okonkwo’s story in his soon to be written book.

> As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out

> details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (*Things Fall Apart* 185)

This textual moment is often read as expressing the indifference of British colonial administration and history to African cultures and perspectives. However, as the foregoing reading of *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates, the District Commissioner is also the agent of an overriding imperial global optic, a constricting, objectifying lens which views Okonkwo and his community as merely an inconsequential speck in a regional whole labeled within this gaze as "the primitive tribes of the Lower Niger". Achebe's text, however, subverts this domineering, universalist vantage point by introducing a countervailing visuospatial viewpoint. Without this alternative spatial consciousness, we cannot see Achebe's indigenous world well. The novel's revolutionary turns through the Umuofian landscape can therefore be read as a project of recentering, one that repositions the discursive prism to foreground constitutive spatial contexts of Igbo society relevant in our understanding of Okonkwo's subjectivity. In doing so, Achebe produces a resounding counter story achieved precisely through the illumination of his cultural landscape. By pointing his creative searchlight into the locations hitherto narrated as the 'heart of darkness', Achebe radically subverts European assumptions of spatial and cultural hegemony and accomplishes the goal of writing Africa beyond the Western visual matrix.

Chapter III

Suturing the Cosmos: Mask Poetics and Black De/Fragmentational Practice in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

> Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny impressions gleaned from one another, they created a sense of belonging.
> — Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

> My intimations of all these presences have been too momentary and they come in disjointed fragments.
> —Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*

In Toni Morison's *The Bluest Eye,* we find a moment of subject construction quite daring in its imaginative, subversive and recuperative potential. The character in question is Cholly Breedlove, whose family struggles futilely for some form of self-coherence within a society where their hopes and aspirations for a better life are rented apart by racial exclusion. Caught up in a spiral of dysfunctional relationships, Cholly is a character metonymic of the psychological and social impacts of such fragmentation. Yet, in an unexpected moment, Morrison's narrator describes an unusual process of imaginative suturing and fusion through which Cholly becomes coherent as a character:

> The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black and white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life. Only they would know how to connect the heart of a red watermelon to the asafetida bag to the muscadine to the flashlight on his behind to the fists of money to the lemonade in a Mason jar to a man called Blue and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom. (*The Bluest Eye* 159)

Inserted in the midst of a family saga in which Morrison details the devastating social and psychological consequences of division as an ontological spilt, the radical, suturing process that produces Cholly as a legible character can be read as analogical to what Andrea Brady calls the move "from textuality to embodied performance to ritual commemoration" (*Poetry and Bondage,* 462). [51] As Morrison suggests, it is only a musician's (read creative artist's) imagination that could 'give true form' to Cholly's life. Only they would understand how to suture together such disparate fragments: 'the heart of a red watermelon; the asafetida bag; the muscadine; the flashlight; the fists of money; and the lemonade in a Mason jar' and come up with an image of a man that is Cholly Breedlove.

[51] Andrea Brady, *Poetry and Bondage: A History and Theory of Lyric Constraint*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. p.462

Philip Page in *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* succinctly captured the representational implications of this aesthetic strategy thus:

> Instead of creating impossible dissonances or contradictions, these modes of pluralism-in-unity combine to give Morrison's fiction its power. To experience that power, readers are encouraged to abandon the old either/or logic and simultaneously to encompass the both/ and, the neither/nor, and the either/or. Readers must hold the binary oppositions in abeyance, embracing open-endedness and the coexistence of fusion and fragmentation. They must be patient, waiting for a detail or an image, …, to be revisited and clarified. To absorb the complex factors behind characters' actions and conditions, readers must not jump too early to conclusions, must wait for more details to be revealed. Such "holes and spaces" both allow and force readers to participate fully in Morrison's fiction, as the usual distinctions between author, narrator, characters, and readers are called into question. (*Dangerous Freedom* 34) [52]

Morrison's radical act of imaginative de/fragmentation in *The Bluest Eye* recalls a similar work of radical fusion in M. Nourbese Philip's "Wor(l)ds interrupted: The Unhistory of the Kari Basin" where the later embarks on a project to de/historicize and scramble teleological narratives of history. The text of Philp's work, like that of Morison, is a fragmented ensemble riddled with "gaps, surpluses, waste products and drifting

[52] Philip, Page. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, p.34

phonemes that Philip exhumes from her source text."[53] From these shards of meanings, Philips welds together a series of imagistic and textual fragments that, by their proximity on the page, produce a forcefield of relations that is both subversive and unsettling. This kind of work, she explains, emerges from a place of "inter/ruption…of eruption and irruption…from explosion and plain ole ruckshun". In the final words of Toni Morison's *Jazz,* the theoretical implications of this representation strategy become explicit when the narrator confesses her secret love for the reader and urges the reader to "make me, remake me" (229), that is to say to (re)make the novel.[54]

I begin from the strategic, embodied interruption of "a logical linear script" that Morrison and Philips perform to spotlight the disruptive potential of nonlinear and fragmented discourse that I aim to exemplify as an instance of critical mask poetics identifiable in the work of Black writers exploring their social dynamics in the wake of coloniality. This representational strategy, an aspect of critical mask poetics which I describe as De/Fragmentational, centers fragments as key to re/presenting Black life and experience. A discussive method that emphasizes permutations and proximities, De/Fragmentation reflects the impulse to pull together and combine bits and pieces of experience to express the condition of blackness and of being black in the world.

[53] For a discussion of Philip's fragmentary poetics in *Zong*, another of her work, see Andrea Brady's *Poetry and Bondage*, p.

[54] Philip Page. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, p.34

In what follows, I point to textual examples in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* to illustrate the visuospatial dimensions of a Black De/Fragmentational practice. I propose that like Morrison and other Black writers, Soyinka's narrative protocols exemplify discourses that suture together discrepant elements culled from a complex web of alignments to produces an ecology of transformative energies and discourse that is at once creative, disruptive, proleptic and emancipatory. In its instantiation in *The Interpreters*, the *de/fragmentational* mode of representation utilizes the body politic as analytical frame and representational template for critiquing the postcolonial condition[55],

[55] This term (defragmentation) is employed in computing to refer to the process or an act of defragmenting a file or disk (OED). The process of defragmentation involves running a program "which reduces or eliminates the fragmentation of (a file or disk) by bringing together parts of files stored in separate locations to a single continuous location on the disk" (OED). The meaning of the term in computer is analogical to the discursive positioning that I trace here in that is expresses the impulse to mitigate fragmentation through the re-location of disparate units into a cohesive and readily accessible format.

Eva Gyetvai similarly adopts defragmentation as a reading frame to identify a "critical–theoretical context intrinsic to African American cultural traditions for the reading of Toni Morrison's fiction" and argues that "Americans' overall fragmented state demanded a constant dialogue with the past relics and present scraps of their texts and selves in order to maintain a loose cultural and textual continuity, a frail sense of belonging, and self-respect [which] Morrison's storytelling epitomizes dialogism in time and space, point of view, character, technique, and composition. While Gyetvai's isolation of defragmentation as a metaphor from computing coincides with my work, her extrapolation of the term is limited and does not register my use of the slash to index the disjunctures, linkages and attention to iterative kinetic flux between contested, and paradoxical positioning that the de/fragmentation implies in my work. Moreover, Gyetvai's analysis remains focus remains on "the narrative technique of defragmentation" in *Sula* and does not encompass the understandings of space and place as well as the cosmic, mythic imaginary that I argue *de/fragmentation* identifies in Black writing. In her paper "The Figure Sula Makes: The Narrative Technique of Defragmentation" See: Gyetvai, Éva. Parallel, 17, 1-17, (2006)

In subsequent work not included in the current dissertation draft, the metonym of defragmentation is further defined into the concept of de/fragmentation, a grounding force to be reckoned with in Black creative writing and scholarship. Following decolonial scholars like Anibal Quijano and Kakali Bhattacharya who utilize the slash as an index of both disjuncture and linkage, my use of the slash draws attention to iterative kinetic flux between contested, and paradoxical positioning that the defragmentation implies. For example, Kakali Bhattacharya uses the term de/colonizing with a slash "to denote the lack of a pure utopian decolonizing space by being in an always already relationship with colonizing discourses and materiality. For her, de/colonizing denotes a movement within, in between, and outside colonizing discourses and decolonizing desires. Similarly, Quijano uses the slash to connect his ideas to create new articulated concepts. The slash is meant to function as a bridge over Eurocentered categories that mean to divide, thus creating a conceptual apparatus for connecting both "colonial" and "modernity," rendering it *colonial/modernity*. See https://politicaltheology.com/anibal-quijano/. Building on the idea of defragmentation as a constitutive logic, I am interested in tracing how focus on the poetics of the fragment enables us to decern the ways in which Black writers, coming from sites of "massive interruptions…for the most part fatal", jam together places, discourses, scripts, images, and histories in an effort to both re-define epistemic fault lines and to an effort to "fix History and free the future". See: M. NourbeSe Philip. "Wor(l)ds interrupted: The Unhistory of the Kari Basin".

one that tied together questions of fragmentation, displacement, situatedness and somatic language intersect to facilitate writing the self into legibility. Specifically, I demonstrate how attention to a de/fragmentational poetic spotlights a dynamic, iterative, and relational mechanism of social ordering and ways of being that much like mask aesthetics, emphasizes poly-spatiality, multiperspectivity and layered time. By braiding together an ensemble of discursive texts and identities and fusing of divergent perspectives, spaces and temporal vignettes, *The Interpreters* renders legible a mode of representation similar to the mask's polyfocal worlding paradigm.

My reading of Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* demonstrates that an investment mask poetics enables us to see how (African and Black) writers offer us a way of thinking about the '(im)possibility of making meaning' from conditions of subjective dissolution and chaos that often follows in the wake of coloniality. Simultaneously the work of dismantling and reconstruction, critical mask poetics warrants attention, not only because of its subversive potential but also its radical inscription and centering of micro-histories, its evocation of contradictory conditions of being in the world and its promise of the possibility of imagining alternate futures. This mode of thinking, creative practice and knowledge infrastructure, interlinks divergent subjective trajectories, storylines and ways of knowing to map a temporally, spatially, and conceptually grounded interplay of subjects and movements. As an approach to representation and analysis, it critiques both the subjective impairments introduced by the postcolonial condition and the ontological attenuations imposed by the Western imagination. Examining Wole Soyinka's narrative

postures in this way allows us to spotlight alternative approaches to representing spatiality that *The Interpreters* expresses within post-independence Nigeria. The novel's decomposition, and recomposition of textual and imagistic collages thus produces a representational politics analogous to a dancing mask to write alienated subjects and knowledge into legibility.[56]

Metal, Concrete and Drink Lobes: De/fragmenting the 'Body Politic' in *The Interpreters*

Written in 1965, the plot of *The Interpreters* follows a group of young, educated Nigerians, Egbo, Sagoe, Dehinwa, Lasunwon Kola, Sekoni, Bandele based in the towns of Lagos and Ibadan who meet together regularly at nightclubs as they navigate life within the newly independent nation. Dehinwa, is the only female in the group. All university graduates who have returned from overseas to work, this composite group of protagonists are now disillusioned with the social challenges of living in post-independence Nigeria. Egbo is a civil servant who has renounced a hereditary chieftaincy in the creek town of Osa in favor of a job in the Foreign Office; Bandele is a university lecturer; Sagoe is a journalist who is frustrated by his futile quest to draw attention the rampant corruption and poverty in the society; Kola, an art teacher, is preoccupied with painting a pantheon of the Yorùbá god; A brilliant engineer tortured by the ineptitude and corruption around him and his introspective tendencies, Sekoni's death in an accident in

[56] Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Cambridge University Press, 1976.
---. *The Interpreters*. André Deutsch, 1996.

the second part of the novel imposes a somber mood on the rest of the text. We encounter this group of interpreters first as strangers in a bar in Lagos, Nigeria, but soon come to realize that they are as close friends whose lives crisscross the university, common-rooms, offices, and night-cubs of Lagos and Ibadan, where the novel is set.

Soyinka's first novel has been the subject of intense scholarly interest at once pejorative and laudatory. Bruce King's review for Black Orpheus, which praises the text's immediacy of experience and poetic texture is disappointed by "a number of technical flaws," including "the absurdity and violence of the imagery" and a failure to explore the themes in depth is representative of the novel's negative criticism [57] *The Interpreters* has attracted a label of the poster child of obscurantist African fiction ("The Interpreters by Wole Soyinka" 55). Mark Kinkead Weekes, for example, acknowledges that the text presents "problems of structure and style" and has been "labelled 'difficult'" by critics (The Interpreters: A Form of Criticism" 219) ; Derek Wright applauds the novel's resonantly beautiful moments but condemns its " opaque, hermetic, word-mongering…thought-fogging abstractions of diction and…and convoluted, clotted hypotaxis" (*Wole Soyinka Revisited. Wole Soyinka Revisited.* 118); Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* dismisses the novel as having no real claim to artistic merit due to "a dominant impression … of tedious formlessness" (*An Introduction to the African Novel* xii-xiv) [58]. Ben Obumselu attributes the novel's critical misperception to a

[57] Bruce King, "The Interpreters by Wole Soyinka." Black Orpheus, vol. 19, 1966, p. 55.

[58] Eustace Palmer. *An Introduction to the African Novel*. Heinemann, 1972, p. xiii–xiv

perceived "lack of imaginative unity; and L.R. Early testified to critics' regard of the novel as "an anomaly among African novels.[59] On a laudatory note, Obumselu's description of the novel as a rich, amusing, original and audacious representation of the Nigerian national project in the early 1960s is exemplifies positive critiques of this work[60].

Although lines of opposition remain drawn between those against and those for the critical acclaim of the text, there nonetheless is a consensus that *The Interpreters* is a complicated text. Its convoluted plot, dense, cryptic language, compact, intense imagery, flights into metaphysics, and complex cosmological background combines to suck readers into a flux of vital, energetic narration and restless style that makes for a challenging read. David Attwell sums up the scholarly turbulence which the novel continues to leave in its wake:

> The complexity of … *The Interpreters* may have led some of us to assume that within the novel's genesis certain conditions prevail with which we are not familiar. We may be tempted to believe that the work has significance chiefly for some circles of initiates, whose identity and terms of discussion elude us. We may also be drawn to this novel, however, if by

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[59] See Mark Kinkead-Weekes "The Interpreters: A Form of Criticism" in James Gibbs: *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka,* p. 219; Derek Wright. *Wole Soyinka Revisited.* P.118; Palmer, Eustace. An Introduction to the African Novel. Heinemann, 1972, p. xiii–xiv; Ben Obumselu. "Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: The Literary Context", p.167; L.R. Early. "Dying Gods: A Study of Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters", p.162. For more examples of scholarly censure of the novel, see James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*. Princeton U. Press, Princeton, N. J., 1973, p. 291; and J.P. O'Flinn, 'Towards a Sociology of the Nigerian Novel', African Literature Today, 7 (1975), pp. 47-8, 51.

[60] Ben Obumselu. "Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: The Literary Context", p.180.

> nothing else than its extraordinary density. How do we proceed beyond the initial stage of baffled fascination? ("Wole Soyinka's 'The Interpreters'" 59–71.)[61]

In answer to Atwell's question, this chapter suggests that critical mask poetics offers us a relevant vantage point for engaging with the 'baffling complexity' of *The Interpreters.* The justification for this mode of reading arises from a central aspect of the author's creative imagination: a radical aggregation of perspectives and subjective positions which centers the mask as a normative ritual frame for understanding both social interaction and the artistic enterprise rooted in Yorùbá cultures and mythology.

In the introduction to *Critical Perspective on Wole Soyinka,* James Gibbs identifies this posture in Soyinka as encompassing at least "five points of view: as a Yorùbá; as an academic; as a man-of-the-theatre; as a political activist, and as a writer". Gibbs acknowledges that "these five categories do not aspire to cover even cursorily the whole man—since his patron god is Ogun [he] would expect Soyinka to have seven parts" (*Critical Perspectives* 3) [62] which includes the varied caps he wears as the poet, playwright, and novelist [63]. The *Interpreters* dramatizes its author's multivalent disposition, as Eldred Jones explains, by "mirror[ing] in its energy the vitality of its

[61] Attwell, David. "Wole Soyinka's 'The Interpreters': Suggestions on Context and History." *English in Africa,* vol. 8, no. 1, 1981, pp. 59–71.
[62] James Gibbs, *Critical Perspective on Wole Soyinka,* p.3
[63] Karen L. Morell. *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor and Soyinka,* (Seattle: Institute of Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, University of Washington, 1975), pp. 113-14.

setting, and its restless style the agonies through which the immediate society and the world must go if it is to produce some kind of solution to its myriad problems" (*The Writings of Wole Soyinka* 166). This agonistic impulse, a consciousness almost emblematic of Soyinka's creative consciousness in general in *The Interpreters* and elsewhere in his drama texts such as *The Dance of the Forest, The Road* and *The Strong Breed,* renders mask poetics as a relevant critical from for analyzing his work.

We find an elaboration of the agonistic creative drive in Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World,* published in 1976. This text, often considered his artistic manifesto, details the Nobel laurates explorations into "African mythic prototypes, [often] forged alliances with the old Greek gods" and conducted through "the fusion of the mythic with the social, in a language of fierce erudite intensity" (Ben Okri. "Wole Soyinka: A Celebration") [64]. As Ben Okri explains, it is an aesthetic produced by:

> Weaving continuities, bridging the gaps between the turbulent world of human being and the numinous world of the gods has made it possible for [Soyinka] to express lyric comedy, the confrontations between history and reality, and great dread. [Soyinka's] personal patron is Ogun, Yorùbá god of war and creativity. His exposition of African religions as valid paradigms of existence had led many underground organizations to embrace him. [65]

[64] Ben Okri. "Wole Soyinka: A Celebration". https://literaryreview.co.uk/a-celebration-of-wole-soyinka
[65] Ben Okri. "Wole Soyinka: A Celebration".

The Nobel laureate's investment in probing "the activity of the creative imagination and its power not only to refresh and enrich experience, but also to transform life"[66], his attention to the confrontations between reality and history and his championing of African paradigms of existence all justify the choice of critical mask poetic as analytical frame for reading *The Interpreters.* This approach allows us to understand his staging of (im)possibility of social re-integration within the pervasive structure of disorder that is the Nigerian postcolony.

But if the mask as representational symbol, worlding practice and critical method provides the narrative schema and ontological frame from which Achebe's cultural worlding project derives its formal and thematic force in *Things Fall Apart*, such a cohesive worlding frame can no longer be discernible in Soyinka's postcolonial project. No longer can the mask as an ontological center produce an overarching narrative fulcrum upon which a story seamlessly revolves. Because 'things have fallen apart', in all the possible connotations of the phrase to reference the varied (dis)placement of colonization, postcolonial upheavals and neocolonial impositions, the call and response logic of the dancing mask is no longer operative as cohesive, *spatially categorizing* social ethos in this society. The production of space no longer involves functionally designated locations which frame characters differently, both on an individual and composite level.

[66] Ben Obumselu. "Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: The Literary Context", p.169

Consequently, spatial consciousness in *The Interpreters* has been rendered fluid in the most extreme sense. Worlding is therefore the attempt to weave together a shadow of unities, the urge to form a tapestry for interpretation, the imperative to create a patchwork of knowing and identity. Within this oscillating and unstable landscape of meanings, each sliver of time and place is called upon to contribute to the constant project of becoming. Yet, it is precisely because of this condition of social flux that mask poetics still illuminates Soyinka's de/fragmentational endeavor.

Applying critical mask poetics to *The Interpreters* enables to see how epistemic fragments from such instances of cultural disintegration are reconfigured into an artistic, albeit tentative, interpretative format. It alerts us to how a text collages together an epistemic frame of being that is splintered and cracked, still capable of expressing a people's chaotic, evolving and tumultuous place in the world; how postcolonial subjects imagine a mode of *interpretation* attentive to the epistemic strategies reconfigured from (in)validated oral traditional knowledges. As such, the iterative framework of movement, change and transformation intrinsic to critical mask poetics, its re/definitional stance as a spatializing idiom through which a different understanding of the landscape and its role in constituting the subject emerges remains useful in reading *The Interpreters.* Through the fragmented psyches and bodies of his characters displayed as a collage against a background of arbitrarily related spatial, temporal, and mythic fragments, the novel metaphorizes the regenerative task of epistemic suturing that Black writers imagine into being in the wake of epistemic violence.

The Postcolonial Agon: Visualizing the Chaos and Uncertainty of History

The Interpreters is set in Nigeria in the 1960s, a time of great change and upheaval. But beyond the exploration of physical and temporal landscapes, the novel maps closely the psychological landscapes that the different characters inhabit. Applying a critical mask analytic which follows and 'imitates the motion' of the mask in order to inter-act with the varied perspectives that each observatory locus enables illuminates *The Interpreters* in specific ways. Firstly, it allows us to read Soyinka's text as a relational cosmological composition that intersects subjectivity, spatiality, visuality and embodied knowledge, all undergirded by an acknowledgement of the ceaseless, iterative force of change.

The opening sentence of *The Interpreters*: "metal on concrete jars my drink lobes" conjoins material, affective, gastronomic and corporeal registers in a dense, cinematic layering that defines much of this work. An often-cited reference to demonstrate Soyinka's perceived obscurantism, Bu-Buakei Jabbi explains that Sagoe uses this sentence to express his hypersensitivity to all jarring sounds and loud bangs, often further aggravated when he is drunk (Mythopoeic Sensibility in *The Interpreters* 44). [67] But critical mask poetics invites more attention to the functions that this narrative fragment, and the opening scene in general, performs in relation to other interrelated spatial fragments that comprise the entire text. For one, it calls attention to the complex web of alignments that the novel will call fort to produce an ecology of meaning both

[67] See Bu-Buakei Jabbi. "Mythopoeic Sensibility in *The Interpreters:* An Horizontal Overview". *Obsidian* (1975-1982), Summer and Winter 1981, Vol. 7, No. 2/3 (Summer and Winter 1981), pp. 43-74

reminiscent of the how the conditions of postcolonial disorder are often marked on bodies and capable of encapsulating a sense of turmoil with a representational matrix.

The opening scene of the first chapter begins with a violent downpour of rain that fills the dance floor of the Cambana nightclub with puddles of water and sends the patrons scurrying for shelter. Thrust headlong into what seems to be a very chaotic scene, the reader is confronted with the evocation of multiple somatic registers that present the central characters as metonymically fragmented bodies.

> 'Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes'. This was Sagoe, grumbling as he stuck fingers in his ears against the mad screech of iron tables. Then his neck was nearly snapped as Dehinwa leapt up and Sagoe's head dangled in the void where her lap had been. Bandele's arms never ceased to surprise. At half-span they embraced table and chairs, pushed them deep into the main wall as dancers dodged long chameleon tongues of the cloudburst and the wind leapt at them, visibly malevolent. In a moment only the band was left. (*The Interpreters* 7)

Outstretched arms, a neck almost snapped, fingers stuck in ears and heads "dangling in a void" of suspension. Within this scene of fragmentary, somatic flux, the elements assume virulent malevolent energies: the cloudburst lashes out at dancers with "long chameleon tongues " and the wind "leap[s] at them" (*The Interpreters* 1) [68] The sense of dislocation

[68] Wole Soyinka, *The Inteprters,* p.1

that this narrative moment inaugurates remains throughout the novel and tinges our perception of the central characters in their struggle to evolve viable interpretational matrices for engaging with post-independence anxieties within the Nigerian national project in the early 1960s.

An important aspect of Soyinka's efforts to de/fragment and sieve some form of cohesive meaning from the debris of the postcolonial Nigerian experience lies in the text's spatial manipulations. As Tim Cresswell asserts, "space and place are used to structure a normative landscape [to underscore] ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate" ("In Place/ Out of Place" 8) [69]. Cresswell's view that "spatial structures represent the world as they are held in a 'taken-for-granted' way" ("In Place/ Out of Place" 8) aligns with Pierre Bourdieu view that orderings of space provide a structure for experience because they reflect both "the groups representation of the world [and] the group itself, which orders itself in accordance with this representation" ("Outline of a Theory of Practice" 163) [70] Because the fragments of space and place that Soyinka knots together carry traces of other-worldliness and aspects of indigenous knowledge from which a new national consciousness might be imagined, their juxtaposition in discontinuous aggregates introduces a plurality of perspectives wrought together through an agonistic imaginary.

[69] Tim Cresswell." Introduction", *In Place/ Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression.* P.8
[70] Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.163.

Soyinka associates this aesthetic posture with "an affective social principle [in Yorùbá cosmogony] which intertwines multiple existences …absolutely…. [and deities exist in the same relation with humanity in these multiple worlds and are expressions of its cyclic nature" (Myth, Literature and the African World 11) [71] . If we follow Ben Obumsele's argument that a series of leitmotifs like the sea, the road, the goddess, and the creative artist are identifiable from this opening scene[72], then the rest of the novel can be read as a systematic process of de/fragmentation through which Soyinka collages a dialectical field of spatial references to produce what Christel Vesters describes in another artistic context as "a multisensory, shape-shifting space that can be read from multiple directions" ("A Thought Never Unfolds" 1) [73].

Spatially analogous to the whirlwind dance of a mask, this narrative strategy, produces a curatorial effect in which the text becomes "a spatial and temporal manifestation that is relentlessly incomplete, structured by a logic of unfolding, a program of events that can be experienced at the intersection of *liveness* and display" ("A Thought Never Unfolds" 1) [74]. This narrative format features rapid diegetic shifts in which textual moments are often linked by images with divergent connotations. For example, beer froth floating in the rainwater puddle beside the bamboo cubicles of Cubana Club in one textual moment

[71] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p.11
[72] Obumsele, p.170
[73] Christel Vesters. "A Thought Never Unfolds in One Straight Line - On the Exhibition as Thinking Space and its Sociopolitical Agency. Between the Discursive and the Immersive". Stedelijk Studies 4/2016 (com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/stedelijk- Studies_A-Thought-Never-Unfolds-in-a- Straight-Line_Vesters.pdf)
[74] Ibid

is quickly displaced and replaced by the wake of a canoe trailing in creek water on a journey to Egbo's ancestral creek town. Linked directly to the initial scene without any narrative signal, the switch from bar scene to creek scene in a span of few sentences is at once jarring and vividly visuospatial. The narrator recounts that:

> Egbo watched the rising pool in which his polluted beer dissolved in froth. A last straggle of white clung stubbornly to the bamboo, rising with the water; the rest thinned fast under direct whipping off the roof…
>
> …. Two paddles clove the still water of the creek, and the canoe trailed behind it a silent groove, between gnarled tears of mangrove; it was dead air, and they came to a spot where an old, rusted cannon showed above the water. It built a faded photo of the past with rotting canoe hulks along the bank, but the link was spurious. The paddlers slowed down and held the boat against the cannon. Egbo put his hand in the water and dropped his eyes down the brackish stillness, down the dark depths to its bed of mud. He looked reposed, wholly withdrawn (*The Interpreters* 9).

The journey in question is a return to the scene of a boating accident where Egbo's parents were killed. In Soyinka's visuospatial rendering of Osa, the narrator does not merely recount the incident but places us right at the slumberous geographical ambience of the creeks that is definitive of Osa, the creek town where Egbo's grandfather is the chief.

What this narrative move accomplishes is the spatialization of Egbo's dilemma of identity, his struggle to decide whether to maintain his links with the cultural heritage and its demands on his person, or to distance himself from this history. The vividly painted scene is worth quoting at length:

> Mud-dark stilts, and above them, whites and greys on smooth walls, and over these a hundred nests of thatch roofing. Drydocked canoes in bright contrasts beneath plank flooring, relics of the days when fishes over whom hunting rights were fought fed on the disputants. Now they awaited the annual race and re-enactment of the war of the long canoes. Osa drowsed in hard shadows and sun vapours, in vivid whites reflecting momentary blindness, motionless, until a shallow bark emerged from a hidden inlet and drew up among the row of idle boats. From it stepped a barrel figure, half naked, a soft sheen over his paunch as if oil from his last meal was seeping gently through. Even from that distance they saw no softening corpulence; the boatman grounded his craft easily, heaved a sack over his shoulder and receded into shadows…. The unknown man had broken the crust of time…" (*The Interpreters* 8).

Through a detailed visuospatial rendering of the scene, the reader is made to sit with Egbo's ambivalence and doubts. The unknown man is backlit by the relics of Osa history, which present him as if frozen in time, a formal reflection of Egbo's view of his heritage as antiquated and constricting.

Struggling with his dilemma, Egbo recalls the tragic moments that have defined his life. “My parents drowned at this spot.”, he tells his travelling companions.

> Your Chinese Sages would say that is a lie, of course. How can I say my parents died at this spot when it isn't the same water here today as was here last year, or even yesterday. Or a moment ago when I spoke. Anyway, my grandfather is no philosopher. He buoyed the cannon there to mark the spot, and so, my parents died at that spot. (*The Interpreters* 8).

The forces of change, as imagined in *The Interpreters*, are as rapid and as fluid as the flow of running water. Egbo finds that “the specter of generations [rise before] him …” and that “he would always shrink, although incessantly drawn to the pattern of the dead… waiting near the end of the journey, hesitating on the brink, wincing as he admitted it was it not exhumation of a better forgotten past… he knew and despised the age which sought to mutilate his beginnings”. (*The Interpreters* 11). Faced with the choice between a better forgotten past and the promise of new beginnings emblematic of a newly independent national ethos, Egbo hesitates. But, although he is representative of a generation of young Nigerians eager to discard what is understood to be cumbersome cultural affinities in pursuit of a modernized identity, Egbo is curiously reluctant to part with his past, as the trip demonstrates. His attempts to rationalize his actions do not quite conceal this struggle.

> 'I am trying to explain why memories do not hold me. I have made no pilgrimage to this place since my parents died. Occasionally my aunt brought me here of course just to tell the old man I was still alive. The last time, I was fourteen, and I wish it were still the last time.'(*The Interpreters* 9).

At the root of Egbo's uncertainty is the question of power and its protocols of spatialization. He is transfixed between life in the racy urban environment that city life offers and the rural, archaic context with its trappings of history and traditional power, unable to decide whether to continue working at the Foreign Office in the city or to return to his rural home, Osa, where a chieftainship awaits him.

Although Egbo is drawn toward the promise of power that his traditional heritage offers but is also fully aware of the responsibilities and restrictions that accompany it. He asks:

> Don't you ever feel that your whole life might be sheer creek-surface bearing the burdens of fools, a mere passage, a mere reflecting medium or occasional sheer mass controlled by ferments beyond you?'…'I merely want to be released from the creek-surface.' (*The Interpreters* 13)

We notice, however, that Egbo's dilemma, his desire to be "released from the creek-surface" of a problematic history is not merely personal challenge but echoes the perceived lack of agency that his generation feels. This posture is evident when he generalizes the question to become a critique of his friends: "You acquiesce in the

system. You exist in it. Lending pith to hollow reeds.' When asked: Are we meeting this progenitor of yours or not?', Egbo's response: 'I really don't know,' (*The Interpreters* 12) is summative of the uncertainties of the budding class of elites who struggle redefine themselves as agents within the new political dispensation. The dilemma remains unresolved, and Egbo allows the water to make his decision for him. When he drifts away from Osa "with the tide" (*The Interpreters* 14), the departure expresses the helplessness of his generation in conflict with the relentless forces of change.

On a formal level, the novel's rapid transition from the Cambana Club to Osa, Egbo's creek town hinges on the trope of water that links both sites. Egbo (and the reader) is fluidly transported from the club where he is "having a chat with [a] talkative Puddle" of rainwater to the creek waters of Osa, during his failed attempt at homegoing. From beer froth to canoe wake, narrative leaps in *The Interpreters* are incredibly swift. Such spatialized aquatic tropes are bidirectional in their temporal configuration, at once enabling a temporal projection back in time while simultaneously propelled by prolepsis or futuristic anticipation in that they foreshadow future events in the narrative.

Consequently, as Jabbi Bu-Buakei succinctly notes: A backcloth of rivers and tides helps in articulating Egbo's orphaned childhood, his long-standing challenge of choice or active commitment (8-14), his first real sexual experience (59-60), and his immediate discovery thereafter of an ideal grove for his later animistic and mystical retreats (123-127)

("Mythopoeic Sensibility in The Interpreters" 16-17). [75] Diegetic space is thus dramatized as "a continuous, unfolding, and unceasing live event… the ultimate site of a disordered world, … as territorial and geopolitical disfigurations". The juxtaposition of disparate spaces produces "a fragmented yet connected field of potential relations" … [that] not only refuses but also challenges "confinement within the boundaries" of simplistic linear realism (Okwui Enwezor, "All the World's Futures" 1) [76]

Read through the lens of mask poetics, the stark cinematic scenes, lambent visual imagery and narrative mingling of signifiers in *The Interpreters'* opening chapter become more than a demonstration of "tedious formlessness" as in Palmer's earlier cited assumption suggests. What we see instead is a crucial process of fusing discordant but value-laden and emotionally burdened spatial tableaus to produce a 'quilted' form of spatiality. This strategy of constructing diegetic space attempts to account for and dramatize is the intensity of social argon produced by competing viewpoints, subjective positions and social influences within the postcolonial moment. The myriad constituent elements that the text agglutinates suggest the view of these spatial fragments as amplifiable discursive units capable of operating in tandem with a plurality of other fragments in play. Also acknowledged is the potential of each fragment to be repurposed and modified for new contexts.

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[75] Bu-Buakei Jabbi. Mythopoeic Sensibility in *The Interpreters:* An Horizontal Overview. Obsidian (1975-1982), Summer and Winter 1981, Vol. 7, No. 2/3 (Summer and Winter 1981), p. 44

[76] Okwui Enwezor, "All the World's Futures: Curatorial Statement", press information, La Biennale di Venezia, 56th International 14/14 Art Exhibition (Venice, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2015).

Obumsele's clear articulations of the de/fragmentational tangents that the initial puddle moment metamorphose into is worth quoting at length:

> The puddles open the secret door of memory in Egbo who has a long and wavering sequence of recollections, of the gloomy swamps, the brackish waters of the creeks, toads and sea crabs, smuggling routes, the battles of war canoes, the turbulence and dark energies of the sea, and the death by drowning of his parents in the community to which he belongs. … Sometimes the sea is an invitation to drift with the tides, or to surrender to its gentle peace, or to strike out and struggle against the surging waves. Egbo's thoughts linger on how glorious it would be to have a great harem as of right and luxuriate in sensual pleasure. All manner of associations gather as his consciousness plays on his memories of the sea, associations of quiet submission to chance, the seduction of the deep, the persistence of the past in the present, of fatherhood and sonship, of the despotism of the dead, and the bright lure of freedom. Interspersed with images of the sea and snatches of dialogue that take place in the present in the Cambana nightclub, Egbo also remembers the Osun river, with its quiet murmur and peace, which are an invitation to meditation and prayer, the smiling face of the skies that he has seen from the hanging bridge above the water. ("Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters" 170) [77]

[77] Ben Obumselu. "Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: The Literary Context", p.170

The point is that spatiality in this novel is conceived through the systematic accumulation of legible temporal and spatial traces. Elements from the past and present are rendered contemporaneous through multiple narrative threads that weave through, intersect and inflect each other. Each meaning-embedded shard of reference is the fulcrum for oscillation between disparate worlds, slivers of worldview, worlding practices, textual formats, imaging strategies, and sense-making systems. All these elements are brought into a prospective project of in/coherence by the quilting process of the artist or writer.

Although Obumsele reading of the novel's intersection of variety of discrepant elements taken from Yorùbá creation legends, Homer's Odyssey, and the twentieth-century myth of the artist is useful, his understanding of diegetic linkages as merely as textual leitmotifs reminiscent of James Joyce postmodernist narrative style in *Ulysses* misses the point.[78] Critical mask analysis allows us to see each of these interlinked textual moments as proleptic fragments in the exploratory itinerary of the dancing mask through which each space– the creek, the sea, the sacred grove, the Osun river and club Cambana – is brought into orbit with other related sites of being in order to enabling our seeing this world well. By suturing together these divergent spaces, *The Interpreters* stages the imperative that Egbo, as the other characters, must come to terms with the different spatial contingencies that have defined their lives, thus registering a critique of European

[78] Obumsele, p.180

"cultures which survive by narrowing the cosmic whole" (Myth, Literature and the African World, 4-5). [79]

These fusings, in turn, provide the thread through which the thematic concerns of *The Interpreters* emerge, namely: the social, cultural and political aftermath of an immediate colonial past; the upheavals of post-independence Nigeria and the country's struggle to evolve a viable national identity; the disillusionment and displacement of western educated elites who return to steer the future of the new nation and their quest to redefine their identity in relation to their cultures, histories and society as well as the tensions between tradition and modernity. As the composite set of "interpreters" grapple to establish a sense of purpose and their place in the world, the blend of vignettes that they collectively experience in the text is presented as having emancipatory capacity, potential to speak forth or catalyze unexpected dimensions of meaning at both personal and social levels.

Floods of the Beginning: Mask Poetics and the Mythopoetic Consciousness

Critical mask poetics also functions as a strategy for expressing Soyinka's mythopoetic consciousness in *The Interpreters*. This mythopoeic sensibility, which Jabbi defines as a "psychic force or mode of apprehending reality which … generates myth-ritual complexes as systems of sensibility" ("Mythopoeic Sensibility in The Interpreters 52) [80],

[79] *Myth, Literature and the African World,* p.4-5

[80] Bu-Buakei Jabbi. "Mythopoeic Sensibility in *The Interpreters:* An Horizontal Overview. Obsidian (1975-1982), Summer and Winter 1981, Vol. 7, No. 2/3 (Summer and Winter 1981), p.52

inflects the presentation of spatiality in the novel through an interplay of myth, ritual and the psyche. A mythopoetic consciousness is inspired, in Soyinka's view, by the impulse to manage the immensity of man's spatial awareness through a ritual paradigm, a sensibility that "facilitates man's efforts to *master the immensity of the cosmos with his minuscule self*". (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 40) In his critical writing, Soyinka associates this sensibility and its mastery with the traditional mask-drama, identifying it as an index of a "fluid approach to … space" that "establishes the spatial medium, not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelop within which man…exists". (*Myth, Literature and the African World,* 40-41).

Soyinka's incorporation of a dynamic mythopoeic consciousness in *The Interpreters* enables a polyfocal worlding process that re-centers and legitimizes African lifeworlds and conceptions of the human. Drawn from Yorùbá culture, the thought ecologies upon which the author's mythopoetic consciousness is built produces a spatial imaginary that disturbs neat distinctions between modern and traditional, secular and sacred, human and non-human and other binaries. It also produces a subjective disposition responsive to the currents of life understood as a cosmic totality. Because experience within this worldview is understood as a saturation of multiple layers being, where 'birth and re-birth, the rites of regress and entry are possible from various realms that comprise the living, the dead and the unborn" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 6), Soyinka's creative

sensibility is invested in enacting an aesthetic of proximity that subverts the attenuation of the cosmos and is geared towards resisting ontological compartmentalization.

A brief explanation is necessary to understand Soyinka's deployment of Yorùbá mythology in *The Interpreters*. According to Soyinka, Ogun's centrality in Yorùbá myth is traceable to the belief in his role as the principal deity who created a pathway between the gods and men by crossing the "primordial chaos" which had separated man from the divine essence. He explains that:

> Ogun is the embodiment of challenge, the Promethean instinct in man, constantly at the service of society for its full self-realization. Hence his role of explorer through primordial chaos, which he conquered, then bridged, with the aid of the artifacts of his science. The other deities following through the realm of transition could only share vicariously in the original experience. Only Ogun experienced the process of being literally torn asunder in cosmic winds, of rescuing himself from the precarious edge of total dissolution by harnessing the untouched part of himself, the will. This is the unique essentiality of Ogun in Yorùbá metaphysics: as embodiment of the social, communal will invested in a protagonist of its choice. (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 30)

Consequently, Soyinka describes Yorùbá myth as "a recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration, … a statement of man's penetrating insight into the final resolution of things and the constant evidence of harmony" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 151). He explains that in Yorùbá ritual, the participant in religious rites, often an acolyte

of Ogun, undergoes an experience of dissolution and reintegration of the self, an experience which mirrors the passage of Ogun, which, in turn, produces the experience of ecstatic and visionary energy.

Against this background, what we therefore encounter in *The Interpreters* is a cosmic vision of the world that is invested in conjoining of varied "ways of seeing", alternate worlds of significations and fragmentary essences of being that suggest the copresence of different kinds of imagination traceable to a primordial and primal disintegration of the cosmos. In a poetic passage that reads like an incantation, the narrator recounts:

> And of these floods of the beginning, of the fevered fogs of the beginning, of the first messenger, of the first apostate rolling the boulder down the back of the unsuspecting deity-for they must learn the first stab in the back and keep inferiors harmless within sight-and shattering him in fragments, which were picked up and pieced together with devotion; shell of the tortoise around divine breath; of the endless chain for the summons of the god and the phallus of unorigin pointed at the skyhole past divination. (*The Interpreters* 224) [81]

This primal splintering demands repeated cycles:

> Of the parting of the fog and the retreat of the beginning, and the eternal war of the divining eyes, of the hundred and one eyes of lore, fore-and after-vision, of the eternal war of the first procedure with the long sickle head of

[81] The Interpreters, p. 224

> chance, eternally mocking the pretensions of the bowl of plan, mocking lines of order in the ring of chaos. (*The Interpreters* 225) [82]

The primordial shattering in fragments of the divine essence believed to be formative of being in Yorùbá mythology is considered generative in its capacity to infuse the cosmos with creative and destructive energies. In this passage, the text deploys a number of formal features – a fractured sentence structure, condensed visual associations, dense semantic composition and abundance of connective imagery (shell of the tortoise, endless chain for summons) – to perform and reenact the original fragmentation of the divine essence. This textual moment is illustrative of how the mythopoetic consciousness in *The Interpreters* not only centers ideas of movement, flux, action, counter action and transformation intrinsic to critical mask poetics but also inscribes enacts an elastic, cosmic spatial logic that the mask as a critical analytic embodies.

Because writing and language as performative acts carry the possibility of evoking alternative temporalities and spatialities that can transgress the developmental logic of a continuous, coherent linear trajectory of history, the fusion of fragments in *The Interpreters* underscores an important transformative consciousness. Within the context of post-independence malaise and uncertainties, such a subversive approach to history aligns with the aim of the composite protagonists in the novel, namely, to produce: "Knowledge of the new generation of interpreters" (*The Interpreters* 178). As social and cultural intermediaries whose "principal function is to reinforce by observances, rituals

[82] The Interpreters, p. 225

and mytho-historical recitals the existing consciousness of cosmic entanglement in the community, and to arbitrate in the sometimes-difficult application of such truths to domestic and community undertakings"(*Myth, Literature and the African World* 54), the fledging group of interpreters are depicted as enmeshed in performing this function in their own moments of crisis.

To reflect such enmeshment, the novel features dense stream of consciousness passages, rendered as collages from within the consciousness of different protagonists. Sekoni's daydreams on his return voyage from overseas, for example, is described in mythic terms that confer on him the godlike role of creating original compositions that embody the force of life. The narrator recounts that:

> the sea sprays built him bridges and hospitals, and the large trailing furrow became a deafening waterfall defying human will until he gathered it between his fingers, made the water run in the lower channels of his palm, directing it against the primeval giants on the forest banks. And he closed his palms again, cradling the surge of power. Once he sat on a tall water spout high above the tallest trees and beyond low clouds. Across his sight in endless mammoth rolls, columns of rock, petrifications of divine droppings from eternity. … he opened his palm to the gurgle of power from the charging prisoner, shafts of power nudged the monolith along the fissures, little gasps of organic ecstasy and paths were opened, and the brooding matriarchs surrendered all their strength, lay in neat geometric

> patterns at his feet. Sekoni shuffled them like cards, and they reshaped to magic formulae in sweeping harbours. (*The Interpreters* 26)

Intoxicated with creative power, Sekoni becomes the embodiment of the Ogun principle of creative energy, revolutionary self-assertiveness and combative will. A similar rendering recounts his despair when the corrupt officialdom scuttles his innovative electrification project:

> And the logic of nature's growth was bettered by the cabalistic equations of the sprouting derrick, chaos of snakes and other forest threads by parallels of railtracks, road extravagances and a nervous electronic core. Sekoni rushed down the gangway, sought the hand of kindred spirits for the flare of static electricity, but it slipped with grease and pointed to his desk . . .. (The Interpreters 26-27).

Through a peculiar blend of realistic and other-worldly narration, place emerges in the Interpreters as an expansive landscape with no boundaries between that which is experienced and that which is imagined. The material details of the scene that Sekoni encounters – railroad tracks, gangway, desk, etc – become inextricably entangled with the imaginary elements produced by his anxious mind: snakes, forests, kindred spirits. Soyinka's textual melding is symptomatic of the representational disposition of culture "marked by the lived experience of a microcosm of colonial violence, where paradoxes were abundant and where [life] was deeply entangled with historical and systemic trauma" and where "writing against the tide of the debris of coloniality" often centers

"the paradoxical, simultaneously fragmenting, and pervasively bureaucratized qualities of social life and the radical critiques of claims to truth" (Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, Hospicing Modernity 29; 77) [83].

As a result, the novel foregrounds a de/fragmentational approach to spatiality that carries the potential for thinking otherwise about such paradoxes in ways that produces a combinatory 'what-if' format. Such a representational strategy "play[s] with the ambivalence and dynamic force of meaning" in ways capable of unsettling "naturalizing separations and hierarchies between humans and nature [and] separations and hierarchies within humanity" that coloniality/modernity propagates (Vanessa Machado de Oliveira. Hospicing Modernity, 141-142) [84]. Such a mode of thinking and representation is subversive, not only in its potential to unsettling monologic ideologies and ways of being, but also in its capacity to invite generative solidarities between otherwise dissonant communities of thought.

Many other narrative moments such as this also cue us to the unambiguous correspondence between the characters and the mythic figures in the novel and suggest the potential that characters the hold what David Atwell calls "the possibilities of Promethean action" ("Wole Soyinka's 'The Interpreters'" 70)

[83] Vanessa Machado de Oliveira. *Hospicing Modernity*, p.29; p.77

[84] Vanessa Machado de Oliveira. *Hospicing Modernity*, p.141-142; For more on composite concept of coloniality/modernity, See Vanessa Machado de Oliveira. *Hospicing Modernity*, p.88

deemed necessary for self-actualization at both individual and collective levels. Such tensions between individual potential and collective vision remains constant throughout *The Interpreters.* Although the composite protagonists often fail to attain the cosmic vision necessary for social interpretation, the process of attempting to do so is evocative of kinetic sensibilities of the mask as representational method. In the novel's reiteration of dramatic scenes, explorations of a mood, poetic evocations, and fantasies all comingled with variations of pitch and rhythm to produce a polyfocal presentation of spatiality that centers an interplay of myth, ritual and the psyche intertwined to produce a mythopoetic consciousness.

The dynamic critical mask ethos and de/fragmentational consciousness that the Soyinka ceaselessly recalibrates in *The Interpreters* finds its echoes in the Yorùbá oral tradition. Writing in the context of Yorùbá oral poetry, Margaret Thompson Drewal & Henry John Drewal assert that a similar serial structure of artistic fragments is evident as a "fundamental organizing principle in praise poetry, invocations, incantations, dance performance, textile design, body tattoos, and sculpture" [85]. In this case, the juxtaposition of meaning fragments in narratives form "a discontinuous aggregate, the units of which follow one after the other in space or in time" and echo a wider system of social organization "distinctive of the way Yorùbá compose time and space" ("Composing time

[85] Margaret Thompson Drewal & Henry John Drewal, "Composing time and space in Yoruba art, Word & Image, p.233.

and space in Yorùbá art" 233) [86]. In their cosmological function, Yorùbá oral poetic fragments "work to allow different forces to come forth and speak through the verses at any consultation" and "its texts recognize and acknowledge distinct forces operating and competing in the world for power and rewards" ("Composing time and space in Yorùbá art" 233). Drewal and Drewal indicate that serial structure of the Yorùbá oral fragment ensures that artistic production is "not static, [but] rather interchangeable, substitutive, capable of being expanded or condensed as circumstances suggest and, therefore, adaptable and flexible" ("Composing time and space in Yorùbá art" 233). [87] Consequently, to echo Harold Scheub, the configurations of the fragment in African oral literature ensures that:

> History is constantly made theatrical; it is dissected, its images wrenched from normal environment and placed within new, frequently fabulous contexts. The poet establishes a predictable rhythm in his line, and succeeding lines are measured against it. The audience is thereby led to a new experience compounded of familiar images. That experience has warmth because it is constructed of images reflecting the known world; it has depth because, partaking of imagery passed on through ancient tradition, it redefines those familiar images.[88]

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[86] Margaret Thompson Drewal & Henry John Drewal, "Composing time and space in Yoruba art, Word & Image, p.223

[87] Margaret Thompson Drewal & Henry John Drewal, "Composing time and space in Yoruba art, Word & Image, p.233.

[88] Harold Scheub, "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature", p.46

If, as these scholars suggest, the structure of the African oral tale and its performance are ontologically constituted by the fragment, then the defragmentational impulse would account for more than a reactionary artistic approach evolved to account for postcolonial flux. It would suggest aesthetic affinities with structures of thought and language drawn from oral traditional cultural knowledges, a positionality which Soyinka privileges in his work. It would then appear that being in tune with this cultural sensibility, *The Interpreter's* the impulse towards collaging, remediation and the reconfiguration of texts, images, subjective templates would then be performing a much more foundationally discursive work in subverting assumptions of ontological, epistemic and subjective hegemony or the lure of universalist perspectives. Like the mask paradigm, what is centralized instead is constant engagement with continuity, contingency, change and transformation.

Yet, in spite of the aspirational potentials of fragmentation, a creative imperative remains to attempt to manage and synthesize fragments of being into some sort of narrative coherence. *The Interpreters* metaphorizes this countervailing impulse in the pantheon of divinities that one of the characters, Kola, is painting. Anticipating the unsettling impact of his spatial de/fragmentation project on the reader, Kola, who attempts to capture this cosmic unity in a vast canvas of The Pantheon, says of his creation: "The Pantheon is weight. It will confound the senses, browbeat objective responses[89]. Kola's manic desperation to successfully capture the array of Yorùbá Gods into a single artistic image

[89] Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*, p.228

echoes *The Interpreters'* cosmic de/fragmentation project. Articulated through the Pantheon symbolism is both the interpreters' quest and ultimate failure to evolve a cohesive artistic and social vision as well as Soyinka's wider "search for the relation of the author to the social world" (Appiah, *In my Father's House,* 82). Appiah identifies this quest as "a dialectic of self-as-whole and self-as-part, which he considers problematic in the ways it directs Soyinka's search for cultural grounding "away from the possibility of a Yorùbá or a Nigerian' 'we" to an African, a continental community (Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In my Father's House,* 82).

Although fraught with limitations, the vision of an African conception of community growing out of an African metaphysics that Appiah associates with Soyinka's artistic project is enticing. In a move symbolic of such a project, Kola says of his struggle to corral together divergent elements into a cohesive vision that is the pantheon: "It requires only the bridge, or the ladder between heaven and earth. A rope or a chain. The link that is all. After fifteen months, all that is left is the link. . .." (The Interpreters, p. 225) [90] That this struggle is never fully achieved is evident in Kola's dissatisfaction with his painting. In the conclusion of the novel, Kola reflects on why his panting has "taken so long" demonstrates the generative possibilities that the constellational exploration performed within a critical mask framework holds. He draws consolation from the fact that although "[his] intimations of all these presences have been too momentary and they come in

[90] The Interpreters, p. 225

disjointed fragments", in his canvas, he can: "at least … record, [them]" (The Interpreters, p. 228)[91].

The point then, is not the ultimate future point of synthesis and unities achievable through iteratively reimagining of the cosmos in as varied permutations as possible through de/fragmentational modes of thinking. But within this cycle of iterativity lies the potential of imagining a more human world. The de/fragmentational energies in *The Interpreters* not only function as a structuring principle for the novel but also foreground a proleptic process that ceaselessly generates multiplicity and dialogue between tangentially related spaces.

Through an organization of space and time in ways that filter our understanding of the characters, their motivations, anxieties and aspirations, the novel deconstructs the dichotomies such as human/divine, presence/absence and self/other in ways that resist the closure of their dualities. By privileging polyspatiality, polyvocalism, stretched boundaries, open-endedness, and unraveled binary oppositions, *The Interpreters* stages an iterative, dialectical reworking of the relationships to demonstrate how the body orbits between several layers of social, aesthetic, mythic and political discourse. These constellations of meaning allow us to question the appearance of things, by shifting from the enunciation of voice to the visual and physical manifestations that emplace subjects within spaces, worldviews and identities.

[91] The Interpreters, p. 228

The move from textuality to ritual commemoration to embodied performance that critical mask poetics enables creates space for a radical centering of micro-histories, for the evocation of contradictory conditions being in the world and for the possibility of imagining alternate futures. The closing scene of *The Interpreters* presents a tableau of reflection from the protagonists who have in their respective ways attempted to de/fragment their lives and the consciousness of their society. The narrator states:

> And Bandele held himself unyielding, like the staff of Ogboni, rigid in single casting. And it seemed he was asking of the outwardly composed figure on the statue, *what have you brought us to witness*? Some deceit of expurgation? Bandele sat like a timeless image brooding over lesser beings. And Kola, who tried to see it all, who tried to clarify the pieces within the accommodating habit of time, felt, much later, in a well-ordered and tranquil moment, that it was a moment of frustration, that what was lacking that night was the power to shake out events one by one, to space them in intervening stand stills of the period of creation. …End of interval; and the bell recalled them, distant and shrill like a leper's peal. But they stood unbelieving. But Sekoni's Wrestler Simi waited, Kola poised near her in confusion. Egbo watched her while she walked towards

him, eyes ocean-dams with her peculiar sadness . . . like a choice of a man drowning he was saying . . . only like a choice of drowning. [92]

We are thus urged to read the duration of the novel as a moment of de/fragmentational witnessing, an interval of agonistic, creative, struggle to forge an interpretation of being from the debris of postcolonial fragments. From these varied perspectives, the novel engages with the anxieties of a postcolonial nation by charting the movement from the personal, somatic level of consciousness to cosmic dimensions of being. The interpreters, in their varied approaches, scramble for "the power to shake out events one by one, to space them in intervening stand stills of the period of creation", but ultimately fail to arrive at any neat or simplistic conclusions (*The Interpreters* 244).

Nevertheless, Soyinka's creative and eloquent imagination of their attempts assumes generative dimensions in the novel. Even as the text lays bare the divisions that afflict both the society and its representative cohort of interpreters and critiques these ruptures for their damaging effects, these symptoms are scrutinized as a first step toward a pluralistic perspective and a more profound sense of the play between fusion and fragmentation. Reading Soyinka's novel within the framework of critical mask poetics spotlights how the narrative resists of hegemonic assumptions of African fixity with regards to time, place, or subjectivity. In doing so, it succeeds in producing 'multiple

[92] *The Interpreters*, p.224-251

visions' of the world (Philip Page. *Dangerous Freedom* 35) [93]. By marking and celebrating the disconnections, distinctions and tangential relations through characterization, plot and mythopoetic consciousness, *The Interpreters* provides us with critical insights and "knowledge of the new generation of interpreters" (*The Interpreters* 178)[94] which Soyinka, as author, is also a member. In doing so, the text offers us what can be read as both a ritual mourning of a fragmented society and a dynamic enactment of the ceaseless potential of communal will, power and commitment to change and transformation.

[93] Philip Page. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, p.35; p.55
[94] *The Interpreters*, p.178

Chapter IV

(In)Sights from *Àwòrán*: Yorùbá Epistemologies and the Limits of Cartesian Vision

Teju in Cole's *Open City*

A person is a person because he sees and is seen by others.
—David Doris, "The Unfunctioning Baby"

To be alive [is] …to be both original and reflection,
and to be dead [is] to be reflection alone.
—Teju Cole, *Open City*

In one of the many moments of self-reflection in Teju Cole's *Open City,* Julius, the protagonist of the novel, describes a process of meaning-making through which he interacts with and learns from his former teacher, Professor Saito. For Julius, understanding of the professor's wide-ranging reveries requires "the ability to trace out a story from what was omitted" (Cole, *Open City* 18). Julius's determination to sketch in the elided remnants of his teacher's story is echoed on a metatextual level in a vast network of artistic bricolage through which he attempts to make sense of his experiences as an immigrant "linked to [other] place[s]" (Cole, *Open City* 124) and other moments, which are "present as a trace" in the narrative (Cole, *Open City* 88). In the resulting patchwork of experiences that is the novel, Julius's ability to 'fill-in-the-blanks' of

omitted knowledge/ information by drawing from a catalogue of storytellers and his memories is repeatedly appraised and evaluated.

Julius' systematic quilting project in *Open City* assumes prominence when read against Yorùbá discursive tropes about perception, subjectivity and representation interwoven into meta-text of the novel. Yet, *Open City* is often read as the quintessential Western cosmopolitan novel in a Eurocentric trend of criticism which ignores African cultural antecedents that interrupt the text's narrative flow and loom almost as unacknowledged blanks in the text. It therefore becomes important to ask what "ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond" (Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation", xv) can open up possibilities of meaning outside the cosmopolitan façade of *Open City.* It is relevant to ask how open *City* is to hermeneutics derived from Yorùbá intellectual and critical practices. What can such hermeneutics tell us about the world as visible from the perspective of the African transnational migrant figure whose life is refracted through liminal, conflicted, contradictory itineraries? How would decentering Euro-America as a point of reference amplify critical engagement, not only with this novel, but also other texts by African writers interwoven with undercurrents of African epistemologies?

This chapter traces how Yorùbá visual registers about perception, subjectivity and representation provide interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Cole's novel in ways that illuminate the conflicted, contradictory itineraries of the postcolonial transnational figure. Applied to the restless perambulations of Julius, aesthete-narrator and cosmopolitan man-of-the-world in *Open City*, the mask as visuospatial focal point

spotlights the conflict between two optical fields within which the protagonist's subjectivity is refracted the novel*:* the autonomous, distanced and all-knowing Cartesian Subject invested in the objectification of all within its gaze and the intersubjective self, constituted through its embeddedness in a social network. In my analysis of *Open City,* I deploy *Àwòrán,* a Yorùbá visual episteme which considers looking as a dynamic, multifocal process that co-defines both the viewed and the viewer, as a conceptual register through which critical mask poetics is refracted in the novel. I argue that the concept of Àwòrán and its insistence on intersubjective relations and the visual call of images highlight a hermeneutics of visuality that inflect the construction of personhood in *Open City*. By demonstrating the centrality of Yorùbá optic codes to Cole's project, the chapter concludes that attention to these contesting visual paradigms not only provide interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Cole's and its detailed and philosophically dense conversation with aspects of Yorùbá culture, but it also highlights how visual epistemologies from African cultures might contour Afro-diasporic texts.

Filling in the Blanks: Afro-Diasporic Subjecthood Beyond the Cosmopolitan Lens

Teju Cole's *Open City* is often read as the quintessential Western cosmopolitan novel. But despite the main character, Julius', fixation with European aestheticism, the presence of African antecedents repeatedly interrupts the text's narrative flow, looming almost as an unacknowledged shadow. As such, Eurocentric criticism of the acclaimed cosmopolitan novel not only overlooks how discursive prisms from Yorùbá epistemology structure the text, but also questions the validity of African cultural ethos for critiquing

Western(nized) experience. Yet, Yorùbá visual logics, when considered alongside the vaunted cosmopolitan vision often emphasized in the text's scholarship, produces a more capacious reading of the conflicting visual registers that underpin Cole's insertional poetics. It also provides interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Cole's novel in ways that illuminate the conflicted, contradictory itineraries of the African postcolonial transnational figure.

My turn to Yorùbá visual epistemologies to read Cole's text might seem unfounded were it not for the fact that Cole's novel itself initiates an extended, highly detailed, and philosophically dense conversation with aspects of Yorùbá culture which the protagonist explicitly acknowledges. In arguing for the centrality of Yorùbá optic codes to understanding Cole's project, my contention is that Yorùbá philosophical understandings of vision and visuality illuminate the archeology of knowledge that the novel performs in the process of deconstructing its protagonist and his baffling cultural affectations. Probing a critical blind spot in current scholarship on the novel, this chapter traces how Yorùbá conceptual registers about perception, subjectivity and representation, especially the concept of *Àwòrán,* offer a generative critical and aesthetic framework for engaging with an hermeneutics of visuality that inflects the construction of personhood *Open City.* I argue that, in its insistence on visually-anchored intersubjective relations, *Àwòrán* provides a grammar for understanding the conflict between two optical fields through which the subject is refracted in *Open City:* the autonomous individual constituted by Cartesian rationality and the intersubjective self that is constituted through its

embeddedness in a social network. By demonstrating the centrality of Yorùbá optic codes to Cole's project, the chapter concludes that the text's dialogue with Yorùbá culture demonstrates how conceptual registers from African cultures might contour the archeology of knowledge that Afro-diasporic texts perform.

Despite *Open City*'s aspirations to transnational openness, critical readings of Cole's text locate it firmly within Euro-American cultural boundaries. The transnational itinerary of the protagonist inspires scholars to centralize the text's engagement with the ethical difficulties of cosmopolitanism, racial disassociation, memory, and Eurocentric aesthetic ideals[95]. Julius as a character has been read as exemplifying a bedbug in his parasitic mode of social interaction (Clark 2018); displaying a fixation with musical aestheticism (Epstein 2019); marking an early-twenty-first- century update of the figure of the *flâneur* famously theorized by Charles Baudelaire in *"The Painter of Modern Life"* and Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (Foden 2011, Messud 2011, and Wood 2011) and inscribing a restless and ambulatory automatism masquerading as cosmopolitan virtue (Vermeulen 2013). Within this dominant Eurocentric critical emphasis, however, the fact that ideas from Yorùbá culture contour many of the protagonist's interactions and identity such as the context of his familial relations, his first language and his childhood memories remain unaddressed, like a critical blind

[95] For more on the themes of cosmopolitanity in *Open City,* see Pieter Vermeulen's "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's Open City and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism" *Journal of Modern Literature,* Vol. 37, No. 1 (Fall 2013), pp. 40-57 and Madhu Krishnan's "Postcoloniality, spatiality and cosmopolitanism in the Open City", T*extual Practice,* 29:4, (2015) 675-696.

spot.[96] An exception in this regard is Rebecca Cumpsty's brilliant essay "Sacralizing the streets: Pedestrian mapping and urban imaginaries in Teju Cole's *Open City* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow"* in which Cumpsty argues for the acknowledgement of mediatory indigenous African epistemologies that render sacred what might otherwise be thought of as a secular environment of Westernized urban localities. Ultimately however, Crumpsty fails to articulate what such specific forms of indigenous African epistemology might be and what culturally mediative roles they play in Cole's novel[97].

Yet, the precariousness that often afflicts the migrant African figure in transit through Western transnational spaces has necessitated, in Afro-diasporic writing, the quest for compelling frames of experiential interpretation beyond those offered by Western liberal and capitalist ideals. Literary representation in this context becomes the juxtaposition of a myriad discursive *else/wheres* that bring their epistemological resonances into play to critique the experiences of the migrant subject[98]. Kwame Anthony Appiah's assertion that a critical engagement with modern African writing demands that careful attention should

[96] For example, von Gleich and Soto acknowledge Cole's place in the roster of African authors but remain invested in the dynamics of cosmopolitan knowledge production, transatlantic entanglements in their work. Lily Saint's critique of the facile veneer of global cosmopolitanism in the novel still retains a Eurocentric emphasis on the libidinal economy of the global North (Saint 323). Madhu Krishnan's proposition that the novel be understood as centering "the 'worlding' of the non-occidental world" also stops short of delineating the precise contours of such an epistemic intervention.

[97] See Rebecca Cumpsty. "Sacralizing the streets: Pedestrian mapping and urban imaginaries in Teju Cole's *Open City* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow"*. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 2019, Vol. 54(3) 305–318

[98] My use of the term *else/wheres* implies particular spatially-rooted discursive contexts that are drawn into a hegemonic sphere from Othered places, in ways that inflect, destabilize and disrupt assumptions of a cohesive hegemon.

be paid to "the inscription of the social world out of which one writes" underpins the need to voice these silences. For Appiah:

> talk about the production of marginality by the culturally dominant is wholly inadequate by itself, for it ignores the reciprocal nature of power relations; it neglects the multiform varieties of individual and collective agency available to the African subject; and it diminishes the achievements and possibilities of African writing. (Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism" 174) [99]

Appiah insists that a nuanced engagement with modern African literature "depends essentially on seeing the writer, the reader and the work in a cultural – and thus a historical, political and social setting". The essential point that Appiah makes, which this chapter echoes, is that cultures, exist *dialectically*, and consequently, "conflictual relations…. are the topos of contemporary African literature"[100]. African experiential frames constitute an essential aspect of such topos that inflects Afro-diasporic writing.

Both Appiah's contention and Crumpsty's work underscore an important point that this chapter elaborates, namely: that decentering Euro-America as a point of reference might enable a more capacious critical engagement with *Open City.* We are prompted to ask: to what extent does mediatory indigenous African epistemologies underlie Afro-diasporic

[99] Appiah, Kwame Anthony." Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism" (The Yale Journal of Criticism; Fall 1988; 2, 1) 174.
[100] Ibid, 175

writing? More specifically to the context of this essay, can Yorùbá cultural particularities provide relevant interpretative cues for understanding *Open City*? Considering that the novel is set almost in its entirety in New York and Brussels, with only the protagonist's flights of memory linking back to his childhood days in Nigeria, how open is *Open City* to Yorùbá conceptual registers and to what extent can attention to Yorùbá discursive tropes about perception, subjectivity and representation illuminate the archeology of knowledge that the novel performs? In view of Cole's investment in questions of visuality in his oeuvre[101] and a concern with the problematic of (in)visibility that dominates the *Open City,* what insights can such a reading provide about the world as visible from the perspective of the African transnational migrant figure whose life is refracted through liminal, conflicted, and contradictory itineraries?

Yorùbá Epistemology: Perception, Subjectivity and Visual logics

Cole's subtle evocation of Yorùbá culture and socio-religious sensibilities in *Open City* justifies the positioning of epistemes from this context among the voices of varied "ancestors" that echo in the novel.[102] A relevant point for such examination is the text's tendency to turn visual motifs into discursive social commentaries. Rather than take Julius' explicit musings on different configurations of visuality for granted as merely an

[101] In the postscript to his book *Blind Spot,* Cole describes the book as "the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision."

[102] In his talk "On Carrying and Being Carried: From Translation to Migration and Back Again", Teju Cole, who has a Master's degree in African art history, asserts that the process of translation "makes visible certain realities in a given work" and suggests a link between the translational practices which convey his work to readers in other languages and the varied literary influences that molded his creative imagination" (See: Cole Teju, "On Carrying and Being Carried: From Translation to Migration and Back Again" Keynote Address: the Internationaler Literaturpreis, Jun 18, 2019)

aspect of details that accumulate in narrative flow, attention to these explicit reflections on the sense of sight, acts of looking, seeing, and visual inscription, can productively show how visual epistemologies in Cole's novel map an oppositional critical gaze that "looks to document" (bell hooks, "Black Looks: The Oppositional Gaze" 116)[103] and deconstruct the homogenizing ideologies of cosmopolitanism.

This is because, in African cultures, the act of looking involves "culturally determined activit[ies] of visuality with… expectations, limitations, capabilities, and epiphanies varying from one community to another" (Mary Nooter Roberts, African Arts 60).[104] As such, verbal-visual configurations and visual regimes often invite audiences "to look upon, gaze within, and see beyond in myriad ways that signal transitions of identity, experience, perception…potentialities and possibilities" (Mary Nooter Roberts, African Arts 60). My tracing of the subtext of Yorùbá visual registers in *Open City* draws from Babatunde Lawal's critique of the nature, contexts, functions, peculiarities, and poetics of visual representations and their impact on Yorùbá cultural behavior in his essay "Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art". Lawal's exegesis of the concept of *àwòrán* probes the deployment of visual representation to

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[103] In her work "Black Looks: The Oppositional Gaze", bell hooks centralizes the critical relevance seeing and visual agency, opining that "even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. hooks further asserts that "the "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally... Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see." In this regard, the acts of looking, seeing and showing assume radical dimensions because subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional… the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations-one learns to look a certain way in order to resist." (The Oppositional Gaze, p.116)

[104] Roberts, Mary Nooter. African Arts Spring 2017 Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 60

reinforce the body politic within the Yorùbá epistemological universe. According to Lawal, À*wòrán* is a mnemonic term which doubles as a generic concept for all artistic representation".[105] This concept delineates a work of art "as a construct specially crafted to appeal to the eyes, relate a representation to its subject, and, … [to] convey messages that may have aesthetic, social, political, or spiritual importance" ("Àwòrán: Representing the Self" 522) [106]. Because of the tonal nature of Yorùbá language, a related word, *awòran*, refers, not to a representation but "to its beholder", being a contraction of *a* (the one), w*ò* (looking at), and ir*a*n (spectacle). The meaning of the root verb w*ò* (to look) remains intact in both words, linking the beholder to the beheld ("Àwòrán: Representing the Self" 498) and the same term pronounced with different tones can mean "the beholder of the beheld". In sum, the concept of *àwòrán* gestures to reciprocal dialectical process of looking involved in "bringing a work of art into being" (Roberts, Mary Nooter, African Arts 64) [107] as well as the process engaging with such a product as representative of aspects of experience.

In understanding the beholder as simultaneously the beheld in a self-reflexive bifocal prism, *àwòrán* proposes a radically different conception of visuality from the linear, immobilizing perspective of Cartesian perspectivalism, a point to which I will return

[105] Lawal, Babatunde. "Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art."(*Artbulletin The Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2001), 522.
[106] Ibid, 498.

[107] Roberts, Mary Nooter. (*African Arts*. Spring 2017 Vol. 50, No. 1), 64

shortly. But the discursive contingencies that frame À*wòrán* as a concept within the Yorùbá artistic imaginary posit also entail another significant dimension of difference between these visual paradigms. Lawal states that in Yorùbá art:

> a strong belief in an interface of the visible and invisible,
> the tangible and intangible, the known and unknown …
> makes it evident that the act of looking and seeing … is
> much more than a perception of objects by use of the eyes.
> It is a social experience as well, involving, on the one hand,
> a delicate balance of culturally determined modes of
> perceiving and interpreting reality and, on the other,
> individual reactions to specific images and spectacles.
> ("Àwòrán: Representing the Self" 521-522)[108]

Located within the intersection of perceptual knowledge and social registers of interpretation linked to specific image-making procedures, *àwòrán*, as Lawal contends, "signifies much more than an image that recalls the subject. It also alludes to the creative process, especially an artist's preliminary contemplation (*awò*) of the raw material and the pictorial memory (*iranti*) necessary for visualizing and objectifying the subject" (522). Lawal asserts further that:

[108] Lawal, Babatunde. "Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art."(*Artbulletin The Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2001), 521-522

> Since the face is the seat of the eyes (*ojù*), no discussion of *àwòrán,* (representation)…, would be complete without relating it to *ìwòran*, the act of looking and being looked at, … the eyeball is thought to have two aspects, an outer layer called *ojù òde* (literally, external eye) or *ojù lásán* (literally, naked eye), which has to do with normal, quotidian vision, and an inner one called *ojù inù* (literally, internal eye). ("Àwòrán: Representing the Self" 516)[109]

In its composite optical valence, *oju inu* not only references qualities such as thoughtfulness, insight, and creativity but "is mainly a metaphor for the analytic eye that enables an individual to see beyond the surface, to relate visual to verbal imagery." (Babatunde Lawal. The Gelede Spectacle: 239)[110]. A related term, or *ojù okàn* (literally, mind's eye) is associated with memory, intention, intuition, insight, thinking, imagination, critical analysis, visual cognition, dreams, among others.

For the Yorùbá, these two layers of the eye combine to determine ìwòran, the *specular gaze* of an individual. The stress on the root verb, *wo* (to look at), clearly shows that *àwòrán* (portrait or picture) is a "lure" for the gaze.[111] Located between *àwòrán* (picture or representation) and *ìwòran* (the act of looking), artistic representation within the

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[109] Ibid, 516

[110] Lawal, Babatunde. *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press.), 239

[111] Lawal, Babatunde. "Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art." (Art *bulletin The Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2001), 516

Yorùbá worldview is understood as that which amplifies the specular gaze which individuals project and also receive in the process of constructing themselves as persons. *Awòrán* (representation) function as conduits capable of recalling its referent through this visualizing process. In this instance, *looking* is an activity reciprocal in its format and influenced by a host of factors, such as desire, mood, knowledge, and individual whims and caprices[112]. In their aesthetic intersection, the concepts of *àwòrán* and *awòran* envision a mesh of rhetorical, material and visual and image-making processes that implicate the perceiving subject in the act of figuration and serve as guiding principles of Yorùbá artistic production that interweave visual and verbal imagery.

Furthering the idea that *àwòrán,* as critical and aesthetic construct, David Doris in his discussion of the role of objects and image-making practices in the critique of deviant personhood in Yorùbá culture, suggests the idea of "looking is an act of creation" linked to a generative process implicated in social constructions of personhood in Yorùbá culture ("The Unfunctioning Baby" 120). In this context, the term is a referent simultaneously to creative act of representation, an object's beholder and that person's experience of response[113], all considered co-constitutively formative acts. The view of the self so registered is reciprocally constituted, an idea is echoed in the Yorùbá proverb, *Ọmọ ní àwòràn èrè*, which translates as "a child is an image of success". In other words, because the child, by its resemblance to its parents, embodies and represents them, it

[112] Ibid, 516
[113] Roberts, p.64

becomes a tangible index, or representation, of consolidated parenting efforts. In this sense, *àwòrán* entails the view of Yorùbá subjecthood as "constituted not only in the recognition that one exists within an intersubjective social field, but also in the uncanny sense that one's very subjecthood is structured as an intersubjective social field" ("The Unfunctioning Baby 120). [114] Thus, it is "in acknowledging and embodying… antecedent beings and forces [that] a person is better able to establish [their] own authority within the hierarchies of power that constitute the social world now." ("The Unfunctioning Baby 115)[115]

Understandings of *àwòrán* are also linked to the importance of spectacle in integrating idioms of viewer response. Taking up this aesthetic dimension, Doris identifies the Yorùbá term, àpèjúwe – literally, "that which calls out what the eyes see clearly" –as a concept that suggests the importance of visual engagement wherein certain forms, by attracting the eye, call out for aspects of emotional investment – suffering, fear, etc (David Doris, "Symptoms and Strangeness in Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics" 92). [116] As Abiodun et al indicate, the modern Yorùbá term that references such an interactive viewer engagement most clearly, is *ìlutí* or "call and response," a prominent feature of contemporary music, dance, and etiquette. (Abiodun, Rowland and Ulli Beier, A Young

[114] Doris, David. The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture. *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, (Spring – Autumn, 2006, No. 49/50), 115-138), p.120.

[115] Ibid, p.115

[116] Doris, David. 2005. "Symptoms and Strangeness in Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics," African Arts 38, no. 4 (Winter): 24–31, 92.

Man Can Have the Embroidered Cloth 29). [117] Seen in this relational and invocative aspect, Yorùbá visual aesthetics relating to *àwòrán* suggests "a learned process, acquired from others who know how to look, each situation being defined additionally by the specific contexts of each viewing experience" (Suanne Prestone Blier, *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba Ife* 115). [118]

Read through the modality of looking that *àwòrán* suggests, *Open City* proposes affective visibility as a representational mode that engenders a recuperative, empathic imagination within which persons are co-constitutively constructed with and through others. By affective visibility, I mean the capacity of visual cues to evoke a sense of the disremembered by instigating a strong affective response through specific mental images generated in a text[119]. As a pivotal constitutive force both in the cognitive function and the subjective enunciation of the viewer and the viewed, *Àwòrán* as a critical concept articulates a range of image-making practices that extend from visual arts to narrative practice, all of which cohere in the production of Yorba personhood as an ontological and social formation and speaks to an "hermeneutics of visuality" intrinsic in the

[117] See Abiodun, Rowland and Ulli Beier. *A Young Man Can Have the Embroidered Cloth of an Elder but He Can't Have the Rags of an Elder: Conversations on Yoruba Culture*. (Bayreuth, Germany: Iwalewa Haus.1991), 29

[118] (Suanne Prestone Blier, Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba Ife: History, Power and Identity, c 1300) 115)

[119] Roland Barthes, reading photographs as scenes of culture in *Camera Lucida,* identifies such an affective force as an "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of like an arrow, and pierces [him]". ("Camera Lucida" 26). This emotive force, which he names *punctum*, acts as a "sting, speck, cut, little hole" that nuances his reaction to an image. Barthes writes that "A photograph's 'punctum' is that accident which pricks [him], bruises [him], and is poignant to [him])" ("Camera Lucida" 27). Jacques Ranciere further clarifies the concept of punctum as a photographic scene's imbued with a "affective force" that is "irreducible to transmission of knowledge" (87)

construction of the Yorùbá subject[120] ("The Unfunctioning Baby 115). As Doris explains, this visual epistemology "undermines the privilege associated with notions of unbounded human freedom" because the subject is "called into participation" within a social imaginary "where many things may be empowered to act as subjects". In a process of *visual calling* that *àwòrán* posits, the image also sees its viewer because, as "the index of its creator's intentional acts", it possesses a face that can be seen and eyes that see". Such calling prompts a response to the visual call through a lawful power expressed in objects that embody *oju*, a term which connotes "face", "eyes" and "presence" ("The Unfunctioning Baby 122, 123).[121] Transforming even as it is formed, *àwòrán* alludes to a dialectics of seeing implicated in subject formation.

It is possible to identify within the intersubjective paradigm of *àwòrán,* a similarity with the well-known notion of *Ubuntu* "a South African concept drawn from the Nguni languages but one that resonates with similar concepts in other parts of Africa" (James Ogude and Unifier Dyer. "Utu/Ubuntu and Community Restoration" 206) [122]. Frequently traced to the often-cited proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* — a person is a person through other persons, the defining principles of Ubuntu as a foundational ethos, a

[120] David Doris asserts that *àwòrán* is applied to drawings, paintings, photographs, TV shows, and sculptures alike… [and its] etymology suggests that in Yorùbá culture the image also effects a pivotal cognitive function in the viewer. For more, see Doris, David. The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture. *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Spring - Autumn, 2006, No. 49/50 (Spring - Autumn, 2006), pp. 115-138 p.115

[121] Ibid, p.121; 123

[122] See Ogude, James, and Unifier Dyer. "Utu/Ubuntu and Community Restoration: Narratives of Survivors in Kenya's 2007 Postelection Violence." *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, edited by James Ogude, Indiana University Press, 2019, pp. 206–26.

philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview of African humanism has been widely studied by scholars.[123] As Bhekizizwe Peterson submits, Ubuntu emphasizes the notion that "personhood, identity, and morality are not innate but are achieved in relation to and through social interaction based on ethical conduct with others, especially in conditions that are marked by imbalances in social and personal power" ("The Art of Personhood" 75) [124] The central enunciation of *Ubuntu*, which insists that personhood depends on a meaningful relationship with others, is echoed in the complex articulation between senses of personhood and aesthetic practices that *àwòrán* signifies.

However, due to its emphasis on a critical visual ethos and rootedness in Yorùbá culture, *Àwòrán* as a conceptual register provides relevant interpretative cues for understanding Cole character's conflicted relationship with his cultural antecedents as a posture of subjective navigation between contesting visual paradigms that define subjective legibility on different terms. This critical prism illuminates how Cole's portrayal of distinct modes of visual experience challenge positions of universal subjecthood that ignore the ethical demands of intersubjective acknowledgement. From the narrator's palimpsestic descriptions of sites of memory in New York city to the ekphrastic readings

[123] See Ogude, James, *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*. Indiana University Press, 2019; Van Binsbergen, W. 'Ubuntu and the Globalization of Southern African Thought and Society', Quest 15(1-2), 53-89, 2001.; Vervliet, C. *The Human Person, African Ubuntu and the Dialogue of Civilizations*. London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd, 2009; Ikuenobe, Polycarp. *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006; Battle, Michael. *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim,1997; Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

[124] Peterson, Bhekizizwe. "The Art of Personhood: Kinship and Its Social Challenges." *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, edited by James Ogude, Indiana University Press, 2019, pp. 73–97, p.75.

of paintings and photographs that Julius performs, the text elevates vision into an ethos to inscribe a reality that is not so much beneath the surface as caught between interstices. Read through the lens of *àwòrán*, these instances of visualization register as iterative enactments that link characters to the subjectivities of others, past, present and future. The narrative thus functions a shroud from which the submerged reader emerges with a heightened, more composite awareness of the debris of violated lives that "underwrite monuments of European civilization" (Rebecca Walkowitz, Cosmopolitan Style 158) [125], thus subverting indifference by engendering new consciousness of and empathy for the Other.[126]

In what follows, I will demonstrate how the concept of *Àwòrán* as an aesthetic framework illuminates *Open City* in three specific ways. Firstly, I trace how this aesthetic elucidates an "hermeneutics of visuality" that subverts Cartesian visual logics and introduces different inflections to the grammar of place in the text. Secondly, I explore how Julius' aspirations of legibility as a European aesthetic subject collides with this prism and the implications for his legibility as a reliable character. Lastly, I consider how the character as *àwòrán (*representation) *visually* calls attention to the violences of aesthetic tourism and its attendant colonial histories in the novel.

[125] Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2006.), 158.

[126] Slate Magazine https://slate.com/culture/2017/06/teju-coles-blind-spot-reviewed.html

Lines Vs Mirrors: Optical Dissonance and the Bird's Eye View.

Open City maps a conflict between European Cartesian perspectivism as a scopic regime and the aesthetic sensibilities of Yorùbá hermeneutics of visuality introduced into the text by the protagonist's mnemonic journeys to his past. In his book *Vision and Visuality*, Martin Jay sees Cartesian perspectivalism as a dominant field of vision that defined the evolution of modernism[127]. In art, this viewpoint manifested as the abstract coldness of the perspectival gaze due to a withdrawal of the painter's emotions from entanglement with the objects depicted in geometricalized space. The participatory involvement of more absorptive visual modes was diminished, if not entirely suppressed, as the gap between spectator and spectacle widened". Impacted by the development of this optical order, European art envisioned abstract, quantitatively conceptualized space as "more interesting to the artist than the qualitatively differentiated subjects painted within it [and] the rendering of the scene became an end in itself" (Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" 7). [128]

Since Cartesian perspectivalism viewed the world as "a standing reserve" for the surveillance and manipulation of a dominating subject" (Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" 10) [129], the visual field depicted on the other side of the canvas was

[127] Jay explains that this perspective was "conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it. Such an eye was, moreover, understood to be static, unblinking, and fixated, rather than dynamic [or] moving … from one focal point to another. For more, see Jay, Martin. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality. / Edited by Foster*, Hal. (New York: New Press, 1999), p.7

[128] Jay, Martin. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality. / Edited by Foster*, Hal. (New York: New Press, 1999), p.7

[129] Ibid, 10

understood as separate from the viewer could become a portable commodity able to enter the circulation of capitalist exchange. [130] Beyond visual arts, Lund Hans and Kacke Götrick in *Text as Picture* argue that similar representational optics emerged in literary texts, featuring as "iconic projection… a well-defined tradition in Western literary history" (Hans Lund and Kacke Götrick, *Text as Picture* 2) [131]

In *Open City,* the tensions between the distanced all-knowing Cartesian Subject invested in the objectification of all within its gaze and the demands of a visual epistemology which considers looking as a dynamic, multifocal process that co-defines both the viewed and the viewer clash in the figure of the protagonist[132]. Julius' absorption with a posture of Cartesian detachment is explicitly marked in his fixation with the bird's eye view problematic. The epigraph to Part 1 of the novel: "Death is the perfection of the eye" proposes death "as the route to a kind of visionary fullness"[133] gestures towards a morphology of image texts established through a network of visually grounded conceptual references that Cole's protagonist leaves in the wake of his perambulations

[130] Ibid, 8; 10

[131] See Lund, Hans, and Kacke Götrick. *Text As Picture: Studies in the Literary Transformation of Pictures*. (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 2

[132] Jay reads what he calls the "occularcentricism" of European modernity as a systematic structuring of visual fields which results in specific practices of spatial production. He explains that aesthetic worldview instituted a separation between the observer and the observed.; See also Roberts, Mary Nooter. (*African Arts*. Spring 2017 Vol. 50, No. 1), 64

[133] In his essay "On Carrying and Being Carried: From Translation to Migration and Back Again", Cole admits to a preoccupation with visuality by explaining the efforts of Christine Richter-Nilsson, his translator, to convey the meaning of this phrase into German while fully retaining the exactitude of his intended meaning. For him, text was aimed to an account of what's happening when a person is looking at something—not necessarily an art object, but some sort of object that is somehow removed in time. Cole also admits, the Nigeria section of the book reflects so much [that Julius] is trying not to tell, concerned as the novel is with "the story of the disregarded, a category that immigrants overlap extensively with… in the sense of the ignored, the invisible" (See Cole, Interview with Anderson Tepper. Accessed from https://tinhouse.com/a-conversation-with-teju-cole/)

through New York.

The bird's eye view problematic is one important discursive strategy through which the ensuing conflict of visual paradigms pivots. Julius' visual explorations of the city parallel his hobby as a birdwatcher. Curious about how human life and activities below would look like from a bird's eye view, he wonders "if the two [his walks and bird watching hobbies] are connected" (Open City 5) [134]. Although he attempts to identify different bird species, he finds, ultimately, that they are "impossible to identify" as anything other than "tiny, solitary, and mostly colorless specks [that he sees] fizzing across the sky" (Open City 5). [135] This narrative strategy allows Cole to interrogate the view that human creativity and art have the capacity to double the visible world[136]. This trope also interlinks pictures, art works, and 'image-texts', such as the extended description of the former site of the World Trade Center, into discursive skeins that questions the relationship between visibility and insight.

Since birds are associated with vision, open movement, and forward progress that require no contact, Rebecca Clark suggest that Julius' fixation with the birds "baits us to associate [them] with Julius and his mode of narration" ("Visible in Speech"186)[137].

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[134] Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 5

[135] Ibid, 5

[136] In the postscript to his *Blind Spot,* Cole describes the book as "the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision."

[137] Clark, Rebecca "Visible only in speech": Peripatetic Parasitism, or, Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*" (Narrative, Volume 26, Number 2, May 2018), 186

Operating from this privileged perspective, the protagonist's ability to "pan out to see, read, and map the whole, from a subject position of disinterested omniscience" appears unhampered ("Visible in Speech"186).[138] However, Clark notes that "the bird's-eye view is not just an idealization of a certain sort of freedom, … but also a tool of graphic …circumscription that allows one sort of pen to create another". Although Clark's reference to the pen implies the idea of *écriture,* it is possible to read here the acknowledgement of contesting scripts of legibility that Julius attempts to navigate in *Open City.* It is telling that Clark identifies Julius' "lust for aloof bird-like viewing and his need for others' stories" as the central tension of the novel. While Clark associates the protagonist's posture of "disinterested omniscience" ("Visible in Speech"186) with a grotesque parasitic disposition that feeds off the trauma of others, this reading occludes Julius' antecedents as a Yorùbá man in whose culture, formations of personhood are largely intersubjective and social relations often involve a "communicative process of a visual dialogue, of call and response in which an individual is also implicated as an image to be regarded by others". [139]

Karin Barber amply demonstrates this point in her work on *oriki* (oral praise-poetry) (I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: 249-250)[140]. Considered as names of appraisal that encapsulate the essential attributes of the subject they are called, *Oriki* performances

[138] Ibid, 186

[139] "Visible in Speech"186; Doris, David. "The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture". *Anthropology and Aesthetics,* (Spring - Autumn, 2006, No. 49/50), 115

[140] See Barber, Karin. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yorùbá Town*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991., 249-250).

embody subject reconstitution "at the level of language rendered in the sensuous material of spoken utterance as a disjunctive stream of fragmentary, compressed images") (*I Could Speak Until Tomorrow* 115).[141] What is noteworthy about the composition of Yorùbá personhood through the imagistic compositions of *Oriki* is that, although all *Oriki* mark individuality, they also have "a tendency to float, to be shared by more than one subject". In its format as "a tissue of quotations, a collection of borrowings from diverse sources", the eclectic and incorporative mode of *oriki* (demonstrates that individual subjects "share with others the components that make up their innermost identity, and recognize fragments of it in other people wherever they go" (*I Could Speak Until Tomorrow* 249-250).[142]

The eclectic and incorporative mode of *Oriki* and the image-making practices that constitute it offers an alternative analogue for reading not only Julius's mode of narration, but also the discursive tensions in the novel. Rather than seeing Julius' collaging impulse as parasitic longing, what becomes apparent is the disjuncture that his posture as an immigrant character navigating between contesting visual paradigms with opposing terms of legibility impose. On one hand is the intersubjective view of social relations as a call and response process of visual dialogue and reciprocal regard engendered by his formative Yorùbá cultural background and the other, the Cartesian perspectivalist vision, with its notions of " an isolated bourgeois subject, …that fails to recognize its

[141] Ibid, 115

[142] Barber, Karin. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yorùbá Town*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991.) 249-250

corporeality, its intersubjectivity, [and] its embeddedness in the flesh of the world. (Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" 24). While the former emphasizes a correlation between self and other that Julius repeatedly attempts to establish in his ceaseless journeys, the latter celebrates a distancing, immobilizing optic that impedes his efforts at doing so.

Julius' wrestlings with the alienation caused by the detached, self-absorbed mode of relations that Cartesian perspectivalism encourages provide an overarching thread that runs through the novel. Although he often disavows Yorùbá notions of intersubjective empathy, the text registers the psychological costs perceiving the entire world and other people as a function of the narcissistic self through aporetic moments that recur across the narrative field of *Open City.* This impossibility is inscribed at the level of plot through the elision of key narrative details at critical junctures wherein, as Karen Jacobs points out "Julius's motives and self-understanding are conspicuously withheld, often along with key bits of narrative information" (Karen Jacobs, "Teju Cole's Photographic Afterimages" 92) [143]. The reader is left in the dark, for example, as to Julius' specific efforts to actually locate his grandmother, the primary purpose of his trip to Brussels. In another instance, a pivotal moment of his confrontation with Moji, a childhood friend who accuses Julius of rape, the usually voluble narrator is totally silent about his self-motivations. Not even her desperate pleas: '"But will you say something now? Will you

[143] See: Jacobs, Karen. "Teju Cole's Photographic Afterimages." (Image (&) Narrative 15.2: 87–105), 92

say something?"' (*Open City* 237) [144] can get a response. Instead, Julius turns to a narrative tangent about Camus and Nietzsche, recounting a "double story" about these thinkers reminiscent of what his conversation with Moji would have been had he been capable of intersubjective empathy. While Jacobs reads these moments as a "representational gesture [that] reiterates the scope of the African diaspora's representational impossibility" (Karen Jacobs, "Teju Cole's Photographic Afterimages" 92)[145], *àwòrán* as a critical frame enables us to see the floundering of a subject caught in the disjuncture between the imperatives of intersubjective ideals, on the one hand, and a flattened, distant, aestheticized ideology on the other.[146] J. Epstein puts it succinctly when he says of Julius: if he expects healing from aesthetic identification, he is looking in the wrong place ("Open City's Abschied" 414).

Julius' rebuttal of intersubjective connection has ethical consequences for our understanding of him as a character whose aesthetic approach to the world results in ethical and psychological deformation. For one, his aspirations to project the image of a citizen-of-the-world is achieved at the cost of negating his African origins. We come to see that his carefully curated cosmopolitan identity is a façade which assures him legibility within the global stage where his Nigerianness and Yorùbáness might be looked

144 Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 237

145 Ibid, 92.

146 Cole explains an interview that the Nigeria section of the book reflects so much [that Julius] is trying not to tell, concerned as the novel is with "the story of the *disregarded*, a category that immigrants overlap extensively with—the disregarded in the sense of the ignored, the invisible" See Cole, Interview with Anderson Tepper. Accessed from https://tinhouse.com/a-conversation-with-teju-cole/

at askance. It affords him the assurance that "being Julius in everyday life … confirmed [him of] not being fully Nigerian." (Cole, *Open city* 124). When Kenneth, another character he meets at a bar, enquires about his Yorùbá background, Julius irritation is barely concealed. Linking this second encounter to a previous experience, he says: "I thought of the cabdriver who had driven me home from the Folk Art Museum—hey, I'm African just like you. Kenneth was making a similar claim." (Cole, *Open city* 86). Not only does Julius' cosmopolitan toga demands a disavowal of African antecedents, but this sentiment is also echoed by other characters like Dr. Gupta, who captures his bitterness about and repulsion with everything African, saying: "When I think about Africa, I want to spit" ((Cole, *Open city* 52). For Saidu, an inmate in a detention facility who arrives in America by way of Bamako, Tangier, Nigeria and Liberia, these places exist as part of a narrative memory suffused with images of hunger, violence, war, and death. Within a global imaginary where the idea of the African had become… "a shorthand for murderous." (p. 310), Cole's text thus questions the ethics of a continued inscription of Africa as an index of crisis within global socio-political discourses.

Space, Distantiation and the Dilemma of Legibility

From plot trajectory to important narrative moments, *Open City* repeatedly deconstructs Julius' individualistic posturing. In doing so, the text emphasizes the necessity of subjective embeddedness in an empathic social imagination that privileges the connectedness of human beings as well as the hazards that a dissociative view of the world poses to Others. The novel opens in mid-thought in a stylistic technique that

suggests a sense of continuation, "And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall" (Cole, *Open City* 5)[147]. This intermedial opening moment locates the narrator in a crisscrossing of routes that intersects familiar city landmarks - Morningside Heights, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Morningside Park, Central Park, Sakura Park, Harlem and the Hudson. Julius' plotting of paths that bisects these places coincide with his efforts to evolve a viable narrative about his positionality as an immigrant subject living in New York. On these walks, he fleetingly encounters other marginal subjects like himself, people outside the mainstream, who have arrived in New York via difficult journeys from other places. From these 'arrivants', who include a professor who lived through Japanese internment, a Liberian being held in a detention facility, a Haitian shoe shiner, and a Moroccan student working in an Internet café in Brussels, Julius perceives conflicting and connecting histories that echo his personal experiences. His record of a dizzyingly vast geographic range in the personal histories of his interlocutors connects people from Nigeria, Morocco, Liberia, Rwanda, Belgium, Japan, Haiti, and Central America, all circulating in and through the quintessentially global city of New York.

What stands out in this human ocean of transnational flows is the ease with which the wayfarers can become coopted to serve as a footnote in more dominant narratives intended to overwrite their presence and even legibility. The protagonist spares no efforts in installing himself firmly in the readers' sights through a similar move. For one, the entire text is produced at the intersection Julius' own narration and other people's stories.

[147] Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 5

Although Julius as aesthete-narrator invites his audience to read these encounters as moments of openness to alterity that makes cross-cultural connection possible, this invitation flounders when we pay attention to the imbalances of power between who speaks, who listens and who is spoken for. As Clark succinctly puts it, Julius:

> plays fast and loose—or rather slow and loose—with narrative boundaries. He collapses all of the stories he hears and retells them in his own affectively flat, unhurried, unidirectional univocality. At the same time, he freely and invasively diagnoses, deconstructs, and symptomatizes any and all narratives that are not his own. ("Visible only in speech" 198) [148]

Proud of his 'refined' listening skills and powers of observation, Julius often overwrites the voices of other characters by superimposing his personal interpretations on their experience. He ceaselessly aspires to impress readers with his immense artistic and historical knowledge, detailed descriptions of various aesthetic experiences, and ready analyses of pressing socio-political issues, much of which he unfolds without locally situated anchoring, against what Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider call "a background of a globalized imagination" ("Cosmopolitan Memory and Human Rights" 204). In a posture reminiscent of the colonial overwrite of non-Western histories, Julius dictatorial regulation of voice as aesthete-narrator and cosmopolitan man-of-the-world retains sole control what he considers relevant moments of narratological focus, even when that

[148] Clark, Rebecca "Visible only in speech": Peripatetic Parasitism, or, Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*", *Narrative*, 26.2, May 2018), 189

implies occluding the trauma of others, as the penultimate revelation of Moji's rape reveals.

One does not need to search far to uncover the inspiration behind Julius' "dilettantish cultural elitism" (Epstein, "Open City's Abschied" 418). His immersion in what Vermuelen calls "pseudo aesthetic solutions" and his self-congratulatory intercultural vision that is touristic at best is not isolated from his obsession with European 'high' culture. This posturing frequently prompts Julius to "analogically transform [other characters] … into flat works of visual art", as evident when he imaginatively "produces archetypical stories for the dancing Rwandans and the vacuuming woman" (Clark, "Visible Only in Speech", 193) [149] he sees in Brussels. Such a universalist posture is not dissimilar to the sensibilities of Cartesian perspectivalism, which, Jay notes, "functions in the service of political self-understanding that depend on distantiation, [and] which , argue against the hermeneutic immersion of the self in the world and create at least the fiction of an objective distance from it" ("Scopic Regimes of Modernity" 24). [150]

Staging Disjuncture: Epistemological Implications of An Unraveled Protagonist

As Doris reminds us, visual arts in Yorùbá culture are "crucial components of a complex visual dialogue between their creators, their recipients, and the social forces that bind

[149] Ibid, 193

[150] Jay, Martin. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality. / Edited by Foster*, Hal. (New York: New Press, 1999), p.24

them all together" ("The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful" 7). [151] Etched through a profusion of references to visual art and detailed scenic descriptions, the grammar of visuality in *Open City* is not without epistemological implications, especially considering the detailed visual mapping that the protagonist provides of art objects and monuments linked to scenes of colonial effacement in New York and Brussels. When read within the context of Yorùbá culture where close knowledge (*imo),* of experience, is closely associated with visuality and a person is often believed to *mo,* (to know) of experience they have witnessed in a first hand or in a personal manner, Julius' frequent return to such sites both stages and questions the possibilities of recuperation that narrative ekphrasis as a mode of discourse offers, thus dramatizing the role on visuality in the very constitution of knowledge.

Cole's elliptical sampling of related visual tangents provide opportunities for deconstructing universalist assumptions such as those that attract Julius by emphasizing an agglomeration of individuals' views of the world that conform to and contest the givens of lived experience. [152] The juxtaposition of inner reality and obvious outward experiential circumstance interlinks a collage of repeated image texts in alternating dyads that invoke valences like visible/invisible, public/private, near/far and remembrance/ forgetfulness[153]. In one iteration, for example, an inert figure in a postcard, "[a] small

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[151] See Doris, David T. "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture." *African Arts*, vol. 35, no. 3, autumn 2002, pp. 7+.

[152] Ibid, 8

[153] For further discussion of reconstellated model of the dialectic as critical reading methodology, see Quayson, Ato. *Calibrations Reading for the Social*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

man … whose face is invisible because of the shadow" becomes animated as a "witness, [who] watches [Julius] while [he] works". In another, he is stranded on a fire escape after a concert, with the "street flashing in the visible distance" while "[his] fellow concertgoers went about their lives oblivious to [his] plight" (Cole, *Open City* 248).[154] In yet another instance, he is intrigued by "an air of hermeticism" in John Brewster's portraits of deaf children and although he acknowledges that each of the portraits is "a sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter", Julius feels drawn "deep into their world, as if all the time between them and [them] had somehow vanished" (Cole, *Open City* 154).[155] Such strategies enable Cole, as Epstein notes to "derail narrative linearity, marking something both crucial and disruptive in the passage of time"(J. Epstein, "Open City's Abschied" 413). [156]

Because he is drawn to the possibility of intersubjective empathy that *Àwòrán* suggests, Julius' reflections on art enable him, as it were, to riffle through time to identify resonantly proleptic moments, which in their aesthetic force suggest the suspension of time and its deleterious impacts, both on the individual figure and civilization at large. In a related move, he also turns to the photographic medium to assess its capacity for temporal suspension. His musing on Martin Munkácsi's photograph of three African boys running into the surf in Liberia and Henri Cartier-Bresson's "'the ideal of the decisive

[154] Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 248
[155] Ibid, 38
[156] Epstein, J. "Open City's Abschied: Teju Cole, Gustav Mahler, and Elliptical Cosmopolitanism." (*Studies in the Novel* 51.3 (Fall 2019), 413

moment" presents such moments as recuperative: rendering legible that which would have been engulfed by the "onrush of time" (Cole, *Open City* 147).[157] In these images, paintings and photographs, Julius is drawn to a pattern of elliptical temporality that transgresses the developmental logic of a continuous, coherent linear trajectory of history as teleological progression. At play here is a resistant elliptical temporality that fosters iteration until the conditions of possibility that enable change can be imagined, if not achieved. By fracturing linear homogenous time through elliptical temporal supersession, the novel juxtaposes disjunctive spatial orders in an attempt to fill in the blanks of history. It thus questions the possibility of a finding an adequate medium for affectively and preserving the past as a legible trace.

But such longings are merely temporary flights of fancy for Julius. His rarified sense of self, which is reflective of a society where the maxim "Others are not like us" propels the machinery of exclusion, impairs his ability to connect meaningfully with others, and leaves him adrift and empty, a consciousness echoed in his ceaseless walking. Yet, if, as Doris suggests, "the body and psyche of the individual are images through which the … historical forces they represent continue to establish their authority within the world of the living" ("The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful" 7), then Julius' performative self-distancing aestheticism introduces a disjuncture that seeps into multiple aspects of his life and social interaction and alienates him from family, neighbors, and friends. Proceeding from the individual and private to the public and collective, a counterpoint to this self-

[157] Cole, Teju. *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012), 147

induced alienation is echoed in the recurrent losses and silences to which the novel repeatedly returns. Julius' ruminations about the Native American loss of their collective past, the trauma imposed on African Americans, the negative space of Ground Zero, etc. hint at the legacies of violence that continue to define the very question of minority existence on a global scale. Despite his awareness of these traumas, Julius remains largely aloof to any meaningful affective identification with the victims of these histories, restraining his interests to merely mining such traumas for their narrative novelty.

In deconstructing its protagonist, *Open City* allows for a critique of the vaunted 'productive alienation' (James Wood, "The Arrival of Enigmas" 70) and dissociative notions of objectivity that parodies Cartesian optics in contemporary culture. The thematic sequence of *Open City* can be charted through the dyadic interaction between the visible/legible and the invisible/illegible narrative elements that remain in conflict throughout the novel and function as discursive fields for questioning the legibility of the African subject within the global racial economy. [158] Julius is aware that his encounters with others are hampered by "the persisting visual echo of something that was already in the past" and feels "as though [he] had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus or fallen so far away from it that it had faded away". A similar dissonance is echoed in his conversations, which sometimes feel like "a film in which the soundtrack and the images were out of sync." (Cole, *Open City* 356) Julius' characterization as a

[158] In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", Spivak defines 'discursive fields' as a system of specific axiomatics discernible as part of the "systems of signs" at play in a particular society. See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, 1985, pp. 243–61.

trainee psychiatrist enables Cole to speak to the ambiguities and disjuncture relating to knowledge and knowing that the protagonist both embodies and performs in the novel. The assumptions of the all-knowing subject are subverted when Julius compares the work of the creative artist to "the diagnostic struggle that doctors who struggle to "marry the spirit of the material with its visible form" and acknowledges that the "use external Signs as clues to internal realities", whether in art or in medical diagnostic practices, "remains primitive at best". Explaining his view of psychiatric practice, which he shares with a friend, Julius states: "I told him that I viewed each patient as a dark room, and that the strongest symptoms are sometimes not visible. …and the mind is able to deceive itself" (Cole, *Open City* 548)[159]. Julius' questioning the viability of psychiatry as a frame of diagnosis and knowledge production, coming near the close of a narrative where the reader spends much of the time 'in' the protagonist's mind, betrays the artificiality of the ideals he had long championed.

Also critiqued is the cosmopolitan penchant for summoning and discarding "computationally useful others" (Karen Jacobs, "Teju Cole's Photographic Afterimages" 197) that defines the cultural economy of late capitalism. Simon Gikandi traces this aesthetic ideology to 18th century Europe and identifies its *modus operandi* as a fixation with Others where Otherness is simultaneously, "the taste, and judgment …and the counterpoints or opposites of these conditions" ("Picasso, Africa and Schemata of Difference" 458). *Open City* queries the role of such aesthetics of "otherness" in

[159] Open City, p, 548

producing and unraveling the transnational migrant subject. Farouq, a character who is critical of celebratory terms like “melting pot, salad bowl, [and] multiculturalism” (Cole, *Open City* 548)[160] invokes Said in a discussion of Moroccan literature, as an indictment of the “orientalizing impulse” where cultural appropriation “as orientalist entertainment is allowed”, but not “difference with its own intrinsic value”(Cole, *Open City* 104).

On his visits to Saito’s apartment, Julius observes the “Polynesian masks” and “life-size Papuan ancestor figure,” that the professor collects because he “adore[s] imaginary monsters” (Cole, *Open City* 13)[161]. Along with other similar instances of “the aestheticized exotic”[162], Dr. Saito’s ring of Polynesian masks can be understood as *àwòrán in* the *retrospective* sense in that they *visually* call attention to the violences of aesthetic tourism and its attendant colonial histories. By pointing to these histories while simultaneously occluding them, they introduce an ellipsis in the narrative, as Esptein suggests[163].

However, rather than merely obscuring such traumas, as Epstein asserts, these images produce an indictment of the spaces of their presence as complicitous though their potential to evoke the else/wheres from which they originate. They draw both viewer (and reader) into “an awareness of [their] historical origins, as well as the “institutions, laws of practice, other objects and indeed, people that brought [them] into being”, all

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[160] Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 111-112

[161] Ibid, 13

[162] Epstein, J. "Open City's Abschied: Teju Cole, Gustav Mahler, and Elliptical Cosmopolitanism." (*Studies in the Novel* 51.3 (Fall 2019), 423

[163] Ibid, 104

factors constitutive of the ritual fields in which they are produced and which they in turn, produce place ("Open City's Abschied" 423). [164] In doing so, the dialectic gaze that they project displaces the capacity of the aesthete to meaningfully engage with the cultures they embody, thus being diminished in return. It is therefore unsurprising that, as later Julius observes amidst these artifacts, "All that was missing...were photographs: of family members, of friends, of Professor Saito himself" (Cole, *Open City* 164)[165] Saito's terror of 'real' monsters, hints at the alienation that such encounters produce.

Julius's embodiment of this mode relation, which in Madhu Krishnan's view, "masquerades as a universalism in which everything is connected, and subjects are freed from the imperatives of local attachments" ("Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism" 689) [166] is thus censured as inadequate to the demands of intersubjective acknowledgement that Yorùbá conceptions of subjecthood necessitate. His failure to really *see* others in any meaningful way, in effect, cancels him out and results in his being reciprocally unseen as a participant in the "protective aegis of collectivity" (David Doris, "The Unfunctioning Baby" 123).[167]

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[164] Ibid, 122

[165] Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 164

[166] Krishnan, Madhu. "Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the Open City." *Textual Practice* (29.4: 678–96), 689

[167] Doris, David. "The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture". *Anthropology and Aesthetics,* (Spring - Autumn, 2006, No. 49/50), 123

By the time the reader encounters the aporetic moment of revelation about his rape of Moji, it becomes apparent that rather than filling in narrative blanks to produce a coherent, reliable narrative, Julius's narrative has, in actuality, been revolving around a giant blind spot that all his psychiatry skills fail to plumb. His subjective aporia is dramatized in a moment when, stranded on a fire escape, he finds himself lost in relativity, between distant stars, "giving out light present to [him] as blank interstices and the wailing of an ambulance "reaching me from seven floors below". His confession that the starlight that was unreachable because his "entire being was caught up in a blind spot" (Cole, *Open City* 247-248) [168]does not come as a surprise. From the Yorùbá perspective, he would be considered "having no face" (*kòlójú*) by the end of the novel; that is, his actions reveal him to be no longer a full and trusted participant in the dialogue that structures the human community. Because a person is a person because he sees and is seen by others, we see Julius, but he's not really there (David Doris, "The Unfunctioning Baby" 126).[169] His narrative authority unravels to reveal a performative aestheticism that is nothing more than the callous, empty gestures of a ""the know-it-all" psychiatrist[170] incapable of real intersubjective empathy (Cole, *Open City* 237). In failing to meet the demands of transparent social reciprocity, he becomes an *àwòrán,* a representative object lesson, a palpable image of grotesque parasitism, a diminished spectacle that offers "as an

[168] Cole, Teju. *Open City (*New York: Random House, 2012), 247-248

[169] Doris, David. The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture. *Anthropology and Aesthetics* (Spring - Autumn, 2006, No. 49/50), 115-138), 126

[170] Cole, Teju. *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012), 237

unsettling analogue for an intimately dread urban pest" (Clark, "Visible Only in Speech", 197).[171]

Conclusion

Cole's text responds to the clash of competing scopic regimes which subjects navigate by pointing towards the underlay of violent effacements which lie 'in plain sight' and visible if one cares to look. The novel therefore enjoins its audience to peer beyond the façade of empty cosmopolitan gestures to the material reality and normalized violence that confronts the immigrant subject. *Open City* deconstructs the protagonist's negation African antecedents by subtly centralizing epistemes of Yorùbá origin, specifically the view of art and representation as an ethically charged site of affective visibility. It is important to note, in conclusion, that Julius is symptomatic of a global knowledge economy that remains invested in objectifying, self-distancing and touristic vision, commoditized aesthetism and a voyeuristic fascination with trauma.

This perhaps explains why Wood applauds Julius for being "central to himself, in ways that are sane, forgivable, and familiar". For him, although Julius' "selfish normality, this ordinary solipsism, this lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul is an obstacle to understanding other people", this posture still "enables liberal journeys of comprehension" ("The Arrival of Enigmas" 70). The problem, then, is not only with the

[171] Clark, Rebecca "Visible only in speech": Peripatetic Parasitism, or Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*" (*Narrative*, Volume 26, Number 2, May 2018), 197

àwòrán (picture) but with the lens of its production. As the character himself muses: what are we to do when the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic? If Julius as a character is "marked by a malicious narcissism" ("Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism" 677), what does this inscription reveal about the conditions of possibility that have shaped him? Are these conditions still shrouded in collective blind spot "so broad that it had taken over most of the eye" (Cole, *Open City* 239).

To these questions, Cole offers no easy answers. The global collective 'eye' that Cole's character evokes remains imperfect, incapable of fully registering, acknowledging or even transcending the occlusions of its blind spots, no matter how panoramic some universalist assumptions may be. As *Open City* demonstrates, the inconclusive blind spot into which the novel's ending seems to devolve is the penultimate in myriad moments of narrative suspension and deflection. In the end, Julius, the would-be all-seeing narrator dejectedly acknowledges that "the mind is opaque to itself, and it's hard to tell where, precisely, these areas of opacity are" (Cole, *Open City* 238). By leaving Julius and the narrative threads 'stranded in the Elipsis' of an unresolved plot, the novel emphasizes the need to 'sit with the trouble'. At play here is a resistant elliptical temporality that fosters iteration until the conditions of possibility that enable ethical change can be imagined, if not achieved. But, as the interaction between Yorùbá visual epistemologies framed around the concept of *àwòrán* suggests, it is within the ceaseless dialectic interaction between image and referent, spectacle and essence, viewer and viewed that the ethical

call to an intersubjective subjecthood that is reciprocally constituted emerges. This call, which Julius fails to answer, is *Open City*'s ultimate proposition as the key towards a more human world.

Chapter V

Journeying Through the Mask:

Chimamanda Adichie and Afro-Diasporic Cartographies of Movement

> She cannot remember when her idea of God has not been cloudy, like the reflection from a steamy bathroom mirror, and she cannot remember ever trying to clean the mirror.
> —Chimamanda Adichie,
> *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Of the numerous memorable scenes in contemporary Afro-diasporic literature by women writers, one is particularly resonant in illustrating the concerns of this chapter: the scene of meditation where a Nigerian woman living in the US reflects upon an iconic African mask. The short story titled "Imitation" (in Chimamanda Adichie's anthology *The Thing Around Your Neck)* is one where Nkem, the wife of a Nigerian business mogul who divides his time between Nigeria and America, has just found out that her husband has moved his young mistress into their matrimonial home in Lagos. We find Nkem in the scene in question "staring at the bulging, slanted eyes of the Benin mask" strategically located as a headpiece on the living room mantel when she learns about her husband's girlfriend (Chimamanda Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 27). As the narrator pieces together the story about Obiora's infidelity and the threat it poses to Nkem's marriage and her sense of self through repeated phone calls, flashback episodes and events happening in the present in her home in Philadelphia, Nkem's anxiety is evident in her restless walking through the house, as it also is in her performance of aimless tasks,

such as pouring herself a glass of water which she "leaves... on the table, untouched" (Chimamanda Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 28). Repeatedly, however, Nkem's movements inevitably lead her back to the mask. Whether "star[ing] at the Benin mask, copper-colored, its abstract features too big"; "run[ning] a hand over the rounded metal of the Benin mask's nose"; or "pick[ing] up the mask and press[ing] her face to it" (Chimamanda Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 28), Nkem's fixation with the mask provides a narrative hinge for the short story's plot.

What does it mean to position a mask as the fulcrum of narrative in a story about visual logics, diaspora negotiation and female agency? To what extent can this representational perspective provide us with a useful point of entry into protocols of representation rooted in African knowledge systems that Afro-diasporic writers like Adichie reconfigure in "a transformative process articulated through the body and the imagination" (Amber Lascelles, "Locating black feminist resistance, 227) [172]. What do we see when we pay attention to Adichie's filtering of Nkem's experience through the "the eyes of the …mask?".

In this chapter, I examine how critical mask poetics allows us to follow the worlding process that Adichie sets in motion by deploying the mask as index of subversion, figure of narration, and as a discursive thread in her short story collection. What this approach

[172] Lascelles, Amber, "Locating black feminist resistance through diaspora and post-diaspora in Edwidge Danticat's and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short stories" *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 13:2, 227-240, (2020)

attempts to spotlight are strategies of spatial disruption, dis/placement and subversion grounded in indigenous African conceptions of geography, visuality, and subjectivity that the anthology performs. This chapter pays attention to how Adichie inserts new geographies of imagination and the forms of knowing embedded in them into Afro-diasporic literature in ways that interlink questions of visuality, gender, aesthetics and epistemology.

In reading "Imitation" through the mask as discursive, I aim to illuminate how critical mask poetics emerges in Adichie's work, providing the narrative schema and ontological frame from which Adichie's cultural worlding project derives its formal and thematic force. In this chapter, I argue that the short story structurally and formally operationalizes the mask idiom through an overarching narrative fulcrum of iterative movement and change which shape the short stories in the collection structurally, thematically and discursively. But beyond the critique of the objectifying visual lens that sees the non-Western woman Other as object, Adichie's anthology in general and "Imitation", in particular, also enact an even more important modality of thought, namely, the operation of the mask as a valence of resistance, a non-transparent index of obscurity and opacity within which a call and response invitation to seeing differently happens.

My analysis follows the encounters between random strangers, men and women, and parents and children whose character arc moves from stagnation to dynamism, self-constriction to expansiveness, ignorance to self-consciousness, helplessness to strength,

and silence to voice, to demonstrate how the relentless push of perspectival change arising from the interweaving of people, place and time initiates new horizons of knowledge and raises questions about empathy, gender, race, power, class, sensory experiences and self-awareness. Ultimately, critical mask poetics allows us to see the specific life-worlds which Adichie distills into narrative, thus amplifying our understanding of the role of African situated knowledges in the worlding of Afro-diasporic texts. The ensuing circulation through different spatial contexts traces the fuzzy lines between history and memory and vocalizes an aching undercurrent of dislocation and loss of identity that interlinks varied locations in Africa and the United States.

In reading the itinerary of ideas that coalesce around the mask and the modes of knowing introduced by this trope in "Imitation", I attempt to probe answers to questions such as: What set of relations between the visible and invisible does the text produce to spotlight a composite picture of the "thing". How do the form and thematic composition of these short stories cue us into the ways that contemporary diaspora writers re/enact culturally situated forms of African indigenous thought to address the precariousness that often afflicts the migrant African figure in transit through Western transnational spaces. (Utitofon Inyang, "(In)Sights from Aworan" 2022).

Prisms of the Self: Worlding, Visuality and the Limits of Knowing

Gayatri Spivak, in her seminal essay on the imperialist blind spots in the study of nineteenth-century British literature, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", argues that the role of literature in the production of third world cultural

representation should not be ignored. For Spivak, attention to the signifiers that underpin literary worlding processes fundamentally illuminates how "the Third World" as context emerges within literature.[173] In a similar examination of the relationship between postmodernism and Third World feminist discourse, Rey Chow insists that "the question that feminists must ask repeatedly is: how do we deal with the local?" For Chow, "pressing the claims of the local … does not mean essentializing one's position… instead it means using that position as a parallel for allying with others" ("Postmodern Automatons", 101). Beginning from Spivak's emphasis on probing the underpinnings of literary worlding and Chow's insistence on probing the history of ideas within which 'the local' emerges in its varied articulations is important. I evoke these critical postures here to gesture towards an important trajectory of literary worlding that is often ignored by scholarship on Afro-diasporic writing, namely: the role of African situated knowledges in the spatial worlding project of Afro-diasporic texts.

In her essay "Postmodern Automatons", Rey Chow asserts that "the visual…as a … dominant discourse of modernity, reveals epistemological problems that are inherent in social relations and their reproduction" ("Postmodern Automatons" 101). Chow identifies "the way [women] have been consigned to visuality" as prominent source of female oppression. For Chow, the consignment of women to the status of automatons occurs as a result of an epistemological mechanism "which produces social difference by a formal

[173] Spivak, Gayatri "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", Critical Inquiry, Autumn, 1985, Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference (Autumn, 1985), pp. 243-261, p.243).

distribution of positions" ("Postmodern Automatons" 101). In her view, being "automatized" in this sense:

> means being subjected to social exploitation whose origins are beyond one's individual grasp, but it also means becoming a spectacle whose "aesthetic" power increases with one's increasing awkwardness and helplessness ("Postmodern Automatons" 102).

Chow argues that the automatization of female subjects depends on "on a logic of visuality" that bifurcates "subjects" and "objects" into the incompatible positions of intellectuality and spectacularity.

More importantly however, Chow asserts that the process through which the *Third World female subject* becomes produced as spectacle exceeds the question of her subjectivity because this logic is an epistemic foundation upon which "the production of the West's "others" [also] depends". As a result, Chow indicates that "the concern for women is inseparable from other types of cultural oppression and negotiation" that impact both "women and Third World cultures". The imperative for gender conscious scholarship within the third world visual field, or "the task that faces Third World feminists", Chow argues, is:

> is thus not simply that of "animating" the oppressed women of their cultures, but of *making the automatized and animated condition of their own voices the conscious point of departure in their intervention*. ("Postmodern Automatons" 112). (Italics mine)

What is at stake for Chow is the necessity that scholarship of/on/about/ Third World female subjects make their *intrinsically* automatized and animated condition of legibility within the dominant discourse of modernity *their point of departure.*

In other words, such interventions should begin by probing the terms that constitute the objectifying visual lens that sees the non-Western woman Other as object. But it should do more. It should also take seriously the implications of framing the third world female figure as a speaking subject who speaks, not only "across cultures and boundaries", but also "with the awareness of 'cross-cultural' speech *as a limit*" ("Postmodern Automatons" 112).

Chow's larger discourse of modernism, postmodernism and their implications in the production of the female subject as a Western category is beyond the focus of this chapter. However, her articulation of the relationship between an objectifying visual logic and the production of nonwestern Others, both female and otherwise, is useful for understanding the larger visuospatial discourses to which the worlding processes in *The Thing Around Your Neck* respond through critical mask poetics. Her identification of the capacities and potentials of cross-cultural speech as central to the project of writing Third World female subjects beyond the frame of an objectifying Eurocentric visual lens as a *limited* and *limiting* discourse is useful for the present discussion.

Chow idea of limits references the sense of confinement and constriction in the negative sense of "victimhood" that is "both symptomatic of and inevitably complicitous [in the emergence of subjects] with[in] the First World" consciousness ("Postmodern Automatons" 112). Yet, I want to draw attention to other dimensions of meaning that Chow's argument cues us to: an awareness of cross-cultural translation, and by extension criticism, as *limited* in its capacity center, address and explore conceptual ideas from non-Western cultures due to an "unsympathetic anthropological gaze…quite typical of postimperialist systems of knowledge production" ("Translator, Traitor; Translator, Mourner" 567). In turn, such conceptual *limits* often impede our understanding of literary worlding practices and situated knowledges that Third World writers such as Adichie translate, distill and incorporate into their writing.

It becomes therefore crucial that we probe the relationship between the postimperial anthropological gaze and the tensions between conflicting visual fields which we encounter in "Imitation", especially how the short story performs but also mediates these tensions. Critical mask poetics allows us to trace how this co-constituted visual practice inscribes itself both in the visual perspectives of characters and in the forms of spatial emplacement they inhabit. On the one hand, it alerts us to the critique of the objectifying visual lens that sees the non-Western woman Other as object. But on the other, it spotlights an even more important modality of thought also at play in the text, namely, the operation of the mask as a valence of resistance, a non-transparent index of obscurity and opacity within which a call and response invitation to seeing differently happens.

Intervening in these issues, “Imitation” renders legible a subversive epistemological paradigm through which the mask institutes spatial thinking, and temporal relations and formal strategies which are echoed as a method of inquiry in short stories such as “Imitation”, “Jumping Monkey Hill”, “The Thing Around Your Neck”, “American Embassy” and “A Private Experience”. By thinking through the mask, Adichie draws from varied spatial contexts that span from Nigeria, South Africa and the United States to insert new geographies of imagination and the forms of knowing embedded in them into Afro-diasporic literature in ways that interlink questions of visuality, gender, aesthetics and epistemology. In what follows, I illustrate how these spatial, temporal and formal dynamics in “Imitation” lend themselves to a visuospatial reading method that enables us to examine the role of African situated knowledges in the spatial worlding project of Afro-diasporic texts.

Imitation Wife: Object, Woman and Artefact

In the short story “Imitation”, Adichie deploys two iconic Nigerian art objects, the Benin mask and the Ife bronze head, as the fulcrum of narrative action of a story set in an American suburb. Within its immediate spatial context, ‘Imitation’, the second story in Adichie’s anthology, is told in a third person perspective. The protagonist, Nkem – an upper-middle class Nigerian woman living in the US – struggles to come to terms with the attenuations that her ostensibly comfortable suburban life in Philadelphia imposes on her identity as the wife of a Nigerian business woman. Caught between these drastically different spatial and cultural contexts, Nkem’s aching undercurrent of dislocation is

marked in the text, her sense of self and on her body. The plot of the short story follows, indeed even performs the dissonance that two spatial axes, the distanced spatial context of Nkem's matrimonial home in Nigerian and the US setting, introduce when juxtaposed in the text.

The conflict in "Imitation" revolves around the implications of "cram[img] a year's worth of marriage into two months in the summer and three weeks in December" as well as news about an impending threat to Nkem's marriage in the form of her husband's young girlfriend. The latter development only serves to amplify her anxieties about what it means to construct a wifely identity at a remove from the spatial context from which that identity draws its meaning. This situation essentially renders Nkem an *Imitation* wife because the spatial dynamics of Lagos, Nigeria and Philadelphia, USA and their corresponding demands on Nkem's envisioning of herself as a married woman are constantly in conflict.

Tensions about Nkem's positionality are embodied in the text through the threat that Obiora's young girlfriend poses to her marriage. When her husband violates the bounds of 'decency' by moving the girl into their Lagos home, Nkem's spatial displacement by living in the US is compounded by cultural and locational factors: the intrusion of another woman into her home and her inability to intervene from the US. Nkem's phone calls to Nigeria, then, are an attempt to manage her marriage from a distance, but there is the inevitable failure of communication. When she says, "I love you", she says at the end

of a stilted conversation, “the phone is already dead”. Another call to the Lagos house involves a conversation with a new houseboy. Afterwards, the narrator tells us: “Nkem hangs up quickly. This is what I have become, she thinks. I am spying on my husband with a new houseboy I don’t even know” (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 81).

The forms of knowledge available to Nkem for navigating Nigerian wifehood as an identity frame fails to operate functionally from a distance. Because she had “never imagined this life….”, Nkem initially “sa[ys] nothing” when her husband makes plans for her to remain permanently in the US with her kids. But her privilege as a member of the “Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies league” (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 61) comes at a cost. For example, America “forces egalitarianism” on her in ways she considers problematic. Because she has “nobody to talk to… except for [her] toddlers”, she must turn to her house girl (a paid live-in aide) for friendship. The resulting odd relationship speaks to the isolation and loneliness that Nkem struggles with in America. Her husband, who enjoys the privileges associated with masculinized mobility, escapes such strictures. “Our men like to keep us here”, a friend tells Nkem, “But you know why they won’t move here? Because America does not recognize Big Men. Nobody says “Sir! Sir!” to them in America. Nobody rushes to dust their seats before they sit down” (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 66).

Unlike her husband, whose masculine role as understood within a patriarchal society does not encompass home care and mothering, thus enabling fluid mobility that circumvents

the dictates of American egalitarianism and its aversion to Big Men, Nkem is, by default, the one who remains in the US, though "they never decided that she would stay with the children" because "this is what happens when you marry a rich man." (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 52). The imperative to stay permanently in the US with only intermittent trips to Nigerian not only introduces a growing vacuum in her marriage but also a loneliness and longing for 'home' that is nevertheless ambivalent. Capturing this spatial displacement, Nkem notes that: it hardly feels right, referring to the house in Lagos, in the Victoria Garden City neighborhood where mansions skulk behind high gates, as home" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 77).

As Suzanne Scafe and Leith Dunn assert, the idea of home can operate as an ethical framework, "a concept that implies a move from a state of dependency to an interdependent state, characterized by the loving and liberatory" ("African-Caribbean Women Interrogating Diaspora" 132). Although she attempts to convince herself that "this is home, this brown house in suburban Philadelphia with sprinklers that make perfect water arcs in the summer", (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 77) the narrative poignantly captures her anxieties, dislocation and displacement:

> She does miss home, though, her friends, the cadence of Igbo and Yorùbá and pidgin English spoken around her. And when the snow covers the yellow fire hydrant on the street, she misses the Lagos sun that glares down even when it rains. She has sometimes thought about moving back home, but never seriously,

> never concretely. She goes to a Pilates class twice a week in Philadelphia with her neighbor; she bakes cookies for her children's classes and hers are always the favorites; she expects banks to have drive-ins. America has grown on her, snaked its roots under her skin. (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 82-83)

Scafe and Dunn assert, the idea of home can operate as an ethical framework, "a concept that implies a move from a state of dependency to an interdependent state, characterized by the loving and liberatory" ("African-Caribbean Women Interrogating Diaspora" 132). As America snakes its roots under Nkem's skin, the tensions between her desire to both stay and leave become conflated. She enjoys the privileges that come with living in "a lovely suburb near Philadelphia, sending Nigerian friends "pictures of herself and Obiora near the Liberty Bell". She proudly scrawls "very important in American history behind the pictures and enclose[s] glossy pamphlets featuring a balding Benjamin Franklin" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 56). The short story however undercuts Nkem's attempts to stage her life as ideal through the pictures, because these explanations are merely empty signifiers from a cultural history lost to her friends. What she ultimately misses is not merely a limited spatialized notion of home, but a liberatory, interdependent status as a wife whose agency matters in her matrimonial home.

But Nkem's loneliness is merely a symptom of a more complex issue that she must come to terms with, namely: the power relations and visual regimes that shape her emergence as subject within first world discourse in the first place. In "Imitation", however, we find

both an exploration of how this discourse produces an objectifying visual lens that sees the non-Western woman Other as object and its possible subversions. Given that the itinerary of her migration journey is both controlled by her husband and defined by the economic and class privilege she benefits from as Obiora's wife, Nkem's dependency and its consequent enervation is presented as representative of the social condition of a class of women in the US whose husbands "visit for business and vacations" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 65). Obiora's decision to stay for lengthier periods in Nigeria is linked to global capital flows. After he gets a huge government contract, "he couldn't travel anymore, he didn't want to lose those …contracts". Instead of being physically present with his family, Obiora sends Nkem photocopied pages of *Newswatch* magazine where he is listed as "one of the Fifty Influential Nigerian Businessmen" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 62).

Much like the photocopy images, Nkem's experience in Philadephia is defined by heightened liminality as she struggles to simulate normalcy within a "crammed" marriage. To her neighbors on Cherrywood Lane, "all white and pale-haired and lean", who "Obiora often called "plastic", "her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 56). Nkem is awkwardly positioned between a world known to her through her socialization within Nigerian culture but also rendered as artificial due to her current context of diasporic dislocation.

In the resulting dissonance, she becomes complicit in her own objectification and control. The narrator recalls an instance when Obiora had "ordered wine that tasted sour on her tongue, telling her, "You will come to like it," and so she made herself like the wine right away (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 72). In anticipation of her husband's planned visit, "she has planned to get a relaxer touch-up…, have her hair set in a flip that would rest around her neck the way Obiora likes. And she has planned, on Friday, to wax her pubic hair into a thin line, the way Obiora likes" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 63).

Within the dilemma of an imitation marriage, Nkem must then imagine alternate modes of movement through an inner journeying practice, as the only avenue to maintaining her marriage and family. Thus, even as "Imitation" registers Nkem's status as Spivak's automaton who is eager to accede to her husband's bidding, the short story also suggests the possibility of making this *automatized* condition the conscious point of departure for a different discourse of animation that is agentic. In other words, the short story both spotlights and unsettles the objectifying visual lens within which Nkem is produced as aestheticized object, both by her husband and the first world discourse which his oppression replicates. This it does through the introduction of a different logic of visuality that hinges on the mask as catalyst. The visual modality that Adichie's work then stages is the operation of the mask as a valence of resistance within which a call and response invitation to seeing differently happens.

Touching the Mask: Situated Knowledges, Mobility and the Quest for Female Agency

In the narrative twists and turns of "Imitation", we see the character's attempts to improvise within a contingent, imaginary world and devise a new format of relationship with her husband. This mental exploration is evident in Nkem's continuous returns to the Benin mask and the Ife bronze head, cultural objects gifted to her by her husband. These artefacts, which Lascelles sees as "the repression of Nkem's agency in a tangible form" are important because they:

> Embody (past) tyranny of colonial plunder and violence in pre-colonial hierarchal societies like Benin, and the (present) implicit violence that stifles Nkem's place in the world as a Black woman from the Global South. ("Locating black feminist resistance" 230)

Nevertheless, these same objects become 'think-frames' for Nkem, epistemic gateways through which she reconfigures thought systems that they embody to formulate a strategy of female agency. Emerging within a mesh of creative, contemplative and critical storytelling practice, "Imitation" thus suggests an interrelationship between situated knowledge, artistic practice, and the quest for female agency using a mode of inquiry that proceeds through the parallel critique of objectified female subjectivity and reductive renderings of African art.

More importantly however, what the textual perambulations cue us into are the epistemological and ontological movements operative through Adichie's use of the mask as trope and dominant narrative focal point. On a formal, textual level, the mask operates as a narrative anchor to Nkem's ruminations. Each narrative revolution returns to the mask, which operates as a central hinge of the story. This formal strategy draws attention to and critiques the tension between the often-static presentations of African masks in museum settings and the immersive experience of masquerade performance, as a living, micro-cultural system in motion celebrated within African cultures.

What comes to the fore as we follow Nkem repeated actions of "touching [the masks], imagining the originals, [and] imagining the lives behind them" (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 59) is an understanding of the mask as a dynamic ensemble of intersecting visual, sonic, corporeal and performative aggregates of meaning imbued with motion, vibrancy, animation or transformative potential. This recognition sharply contrasts with the diminishing view of African masks as a static collectors' objects and inert museums piece art piece within global capitalist markets, a framing which Hersak associates this attenuation with the "static analysis of collectable objects" associated with "a traditional Western art historical approach" that props up Western ontology and perpetuates reductive interpretations of African experience ("On the Concept of Prototypes, 3).

The logic of commodified African culture associated with the mask as globally recognized aesthetic object is not distanced from Nkem's entry into subjectivity as an

'exported' wife figure dislocated from the moorings of her indigenous culture. The Benin mask, the narrator tells us, is "one of the best imitations, Obiora had said when he bought it a few years ago" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 58). Although the mask is an imitation, its status as a desirable replica within the global art imaginary is tied to this violent history and its consequent trajectories of cultural dispersal in which both original and its replicas are now recognizable iconic objects displayed in museums all over the world. "Imitation" clearly marks the juxtaposition of both discourses through Obiora's investment in Nigerian masks and related artefacts which he brings to America on most of his trips. Both Nkem's social status in Philadelphia as "part of…the Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America league" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 58) and Obiora's frequent importation imitation of the art pieces that Nkem looks forward to with each trip emerge from a similar socio-economic grounding.

Thus, both character and artefact are caught up in movements of materials and subjects defined by colonial histories, global capital flows and contemporary trends aesthetic tourism. For example, the narrator recounts that "her neighbors call [the mask] "noble;" [and] because of it, the couple two houses down have started collecting African art, and they, too, have settled for good imitations, although they enjoy talking about how impossible it is to find originals (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 54). As Amber Lascelles rightly notes, the Ife bronze head as a diasporic object "represents the vexed mobility of things" defined by violent histories of displacement ("Locating black feminist resistance" 237). Lascelles argues that:

> The mask embodies [Nkem's] reality, the wife of a 'Big Man' shipped abroad like an object. It is a physical representation of her lack of agency and the pretense she wears to perform the role assigned to her by her husband. ("Locating black feminist resistance" 236)

"Imitation" can therefore be read as an inquiry into the intervening threads in the web of (im)mobility that Nkem finds herself as objectified woman figure and imitation (read fake) wife who reassess the conditions of her legibility through the prism of commodified art object. As Gayatri Spivak argues, "the privileged Third World informant crosses cultures within the network …[of] socialized capital" rendered possible "by the commodification of the particular "Third World culture" ("The Political Economy of Women" 221). Consequently, these artifacts provide a generative a site of reflection on dimensions of corporeality, affect, epistemology and ontology that they intersect and refract through their interaction with Nkem as non-Western female subject.

Lascelles suggests an understanding of the marks as a marker of constriction, assert that "its solid and unchanging materiality …caus[ses] a feeling of entrapment for Nkem which is tied to her diasporic condition, despite her relative privilege" ("Locating black feminist resistance" 236). Although Lascelles also rightly acknowledges that the art objects "are the key to Nkem's self-actualisation", she fails to articulate how this process of empowerment between woman and artefact operates. Moreover, her conclusion that the objects offer Nkem "an empowering sense of solidarity" ((("Locating black feminist

resistance" 237) falls short of identifying the larger worlding process that Adichie sets in motion by deploying the mask as index of epistemic subversion.

In the short story, the mask (and its ontological echo, the masquerade) offer conceptual catalysts that intervene in, fill and exceed the displacements of (post) diaspora identity (will return to my use of the concept of post-diaspora shortly. When read through critical mask poetics, the mask as figure of narration does not suggest a sense of constriction. Rather, the mask is the visual bridge that at once enables a dynamic, call and response discussive format relevant for Nkem's reassessment of the strictures that inhibit her aspirations towards agency while also carrying carries the potential of imagining alternate futures. As a 'kept' woman confined by the strictures of her middle-class life, Nkem uses these thresholds of thought to devise an alternative mental map and mode of engagement that exceeds the limits of silence, inertia and subservience that Afro-diasporic experience imposes on her.

Conversely, her reflections on the mask produce a restless, mobile energy analogous to the dance of a mask. The narrator recounts that Nkem:

> walks out into the hallway, up the wide stairs, then back downstairs and into the kitchen. She used to walk like this throughout the house in Lagos, every day of the three weeks she and the children spent at Christmas (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 63).

Nkem's physical perambulations in the short story are therefore an echo of the mental journeys that her reflecting on the history of the mask aspires to replicate. The mask, as she imagines, signifies a yardstick of visual enunciation deeply rooted within an indigenous communal ethos. It embodies a call and response mode of relations insistent on shifting subjective positions, one that functions as an index of heterotopic engagement that conjoins multiple worlds. However, Nkem's initial attempts to establish an affinity with the kinds of agency that the mask promises fail. The mask, when pressed against her face, feels "cold, heavy, lifeless" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 58).

Several possibilities might explain her failure. For one, the ontology of the mask is deeply masculinized and patriarchal in its traditional format and structure. Achebe opines that, were masquerades "not limited to the male sex alone, one might indeed call it the art form *par excellence"* (57). Nkem's understanding of and interaction with the mask is thus initially filtered by the dominating voice of her husband, who is eager to fill in the historical context of the mask's initial looting by British colonial punitive expeditions but neglects to admit his own complicity with violence of patriarchal control is the current source of Nkem's oppression:

> He told her how the British had stolen the original masks in the late 1800s during what they called the Punitive Expedition; how the British had a way of using words like "expedition" and "pacification" for killing and stealing. The masks—thousands, Obiora said—were regarded as "war booty" and were now displayed in museums all over the world. (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 58)

Obiora's attempts to overwrite his role in the current circle of harm with his performative aggrievement – "how passionately he speaks… how his eyes glisten as though he is about to cry" (59) nullifies his capacity to channel the mask's transformative potential in any meaningful way.

Thus, when Obiora tells her that the Benin people who carved the masks used them " at royal ceremonies, placing them on either side of their king to protect him, to ward off evil", and that " only specially chosen people could be custodians of the mask, the same people who were responsible for bringing the fresh human heads used in burying their king", the narrator adds that Nkem "sometimes …doubts Obiora's facts" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 59). The history of the mask as it arrives to Nkem is heavily tinged by colonial violence, hegemonic history and patriarchal dominance, influences that collectively interfere with her attempt to utilize the artefact as a catalyst of change and transformation. What is more, the Benin mask is an imitation, a replica and mimicry of an original ritual object that, while retaining similarities in form, cannot lay claim to a similar ritual field as its original.

But perhaps this detail helps us understand Nkem's radical reimagining project. Although a woman whose capacity for interacting with an actual ritual mask within the Igbo culture would have been limited at best, Nkem is still drawn to principles of change, growth and transformation that the mask eschatology represents. If, as Achebe explains, the mask performance is emblematic of the Igbo view of the world that insists that " No condition is permanent", then the mask is a material reminder of this cosmology, where "even gods

could fall out of use; and new forces are liable to appear without warning in the temporal and metaphysical firmament" and where "the practical purpose of art is to channel a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of that force" (Achebe, "The World and its Art" 56).

Such ruminations might be understood as prompting Nkem to utilize the mask as a prism of thought through which she begins to imagine the threads of history beyond the boundaries of Obiora's voice and control. During her mnemonic journeys to the past, she:

> imagines the Benin people carving the original masks four hundred years ago… imagines the proud young men, muscled, brown skin gleaming with palm kernel oil, graceful loincloths on their waists. (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 55).

Nkem's creative imagining of the possible lives of the mask's history humanizes the artefact by linking it to the forms of labour and cultural practices within which it was produced. This connection is important because it intervenes into the gap created by the severance of the artefact from its contexts of situated knowledge, which echoes and can be considered analogous to Nkem's own cultural displacement. This bridging process is essential because it provides the grounds upon which Nkem can imagine an alternative version of history and futurity. Doing exactly that:

> She imagines—*and this she imagines herself because Obiora did not suggest it happened that way*—the proud young men wishing they did not have to behead strangers to bury their king, wishing they could use the masks to protect themselves, too, *wishing they had a say*. (55). (Italics mine)

The mask as visual bridge and thought prism allows Nkem the space to 'imagine herself' or think independently and evolve a self-oriented narrative for the first time. Thus, the functionality of the mask exceeds its material affordances, setting in motion an ontological journeying process that privileges animacy, movement and mobility. By wishing the custodians of the mask 'had a say', Nkem is also establishing in effect, a possibility of having an agentic voice in opposition to Obiora's relentless control. Her actions are echoes Mary Nooters view that verbal-visual configurations in African art often invite audiences "to look upon, gaze within, and see beyond in myriad ways that signal *transitions of identity*, experience, perception … potentialities and possibilities".[174](Italics mine)

(Dis) Locations of Originals: The Inner Lives of History

The implications of these discursive strategies for Nkem's capacity for agency is nothing short of drastic. From a woman so robbed of voice and agency that "when [Obiora] asked if she would marry him, [Nkem had] thought how unnecessary it was, his asking, since

[174] Roberts, Mary Nooter, "The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in *African Arts*," African Arts 50.1 (Spring 2017): 60

she would have been happy simply to be told (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 72), Nkem gradually assumes a stance of assertiveness surprising in its suddenness and fierceness. Although Obiora loves long hair and believes "long hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife", she cuts her hair, (88), staring at her face in the mirror as "tufts of hair float down, like scorched wings of moths" (65). Within this ambiguously liberating yet mournful moment, it is impossible to decipher what the fire that has scorched Nkem to produce these falling wings is.

The text extends its exploration of what seems to be a co-constitutive binary between imitation and original further when Obiora arrives with a new artefact, this time an original Ife Bronze head. The narrator recounts:

> After dinner, Nkem sits on the bed and examines the Ife bronze head, which Obiora has told her is actually made of brass. It is stained, life-size, turbaned. It is the first original Obiora has brought.
>
> "We'll have to be very careful with this one," he says.
> "An original," she says, surprised, running her hand over the parallel incisions on the face.
> "Some of them date back to the eleventh century." He sits next to her to take off his shoes. His voice is high, excited. "But this one is eighteenth-century Amazing. Definitely worth the cost."
> "What was it used for?"
> "Decoration for the king's palace. Most of them are made to remember or honor the kings. Isn't it perfect?"
> "Yes," she says. "I'm sure they did terrible things with this one, too."
> "What?"
> "Like they did with the Benin masks. You told me they killed people so they could get human heads to bury the king."
> Obiora's gaze is steady on her.

Unlike the previous imitations, the original Ife bronze head carries with it resonances of antiquity that excites Obiora but surprises Nkem. The original artefact is a visual symbol of nuanced mobilities spanning several centuries. As such, it presents Nkem with an opportunity to question Obiora's initial stories and imagine the inner lives of the myriad subjects who might have interacted with the object in its extended historical itinerary.

> She taps the bronze head with a fingernail. "Do you think the people were happy?" she asks.
> "What people?"
> "The people who had to kill for their king. I'm sure they wished they could change the way things were, they couldn't have been happy."
> Obiora's head is tilted to the side as he stares at her. "Well, maybe nine hundred years ago they didn't define 'happy' like you do now."
> She puts the bronze head down; she wants to ask him how he defines "happy." (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 86)

Nkem's questions appear to be driven by the desire to subvert what Adichie calls "the danger of a single story" or the imposition of singular, universal narratives that "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, [until] that is what they become"(Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story).* We hear here an echo of the author's critique of "the single story of Africa [that] ultimately comes, … from Western literature". But in asking if the people who could kill for their king "wished they could change the way things were" for a chance at happiness, Nkem is also sourcing for referents from history with which to navigate her current circumstance. If these people could have been happy, even in a brief re-imagination of their lives, then Nkem, as inheritor of these histories can also imagine an alternative space for herself where happiness is possible, both literally and metaphorically.

Consequently, thinking through the mask affords Nkem what Marsha Pearce calls a "means of languaging …a lexicon or mode of utterance" that generates "transgressive mobilities" ("Picturing Theory, 148). The 'ontopolitics of movement' inaugurated by her encounter with the imitation mask and original bronze head emboldens Nkem to perform another act of rebellion. She tells Obiora, who has just visited Philadelphia that she and the children will be returning to Nigeria.

> In the shower, as she soaps his back, she says, "We have to find a school for Adanna and Okey in Lagos." She had not planned to say it, but it seems right, it is what she has always wanted to say. Obiora turns to stare at her. "What?"
> "We are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back." She stresses the "we." (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 90)

Nkem's newfound assertiveness is nonetheless tentative. "She speaks slowly, to convince him, to convince herself as well" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 90). The narrator also marks Obiora's surprised stare and Nkem's dawning knowledge that "he has never heard her speak up, never heard her take a stand." (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 90). But it is through Nkem's traversal of the pivot points that the mask as agentic figure and think-frame intersects and enables that emboldens her to disrupt the heritage of silencing in which Obiora "speak[s] for both of them" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 90).

In using the mask as the principal modes of focalization through which the short story's exploration of history and aesthetics within the context of diaspora negotiation and female agency unfolds, Adichie underscores competing optical fields that continue to define the legibility of the immigrant African subject within the global racial economy. Her introduction of this radical epistemic motif a discursive *else/where* into the text elevates the Nkem's striving towards female agency, as a Black woman from the Global South to an epistemic question defined by similar trajectories of disconnection, denigration and mimicry as those associated with the cultural history of the mask as artefact within the global aesthetic imaginary. [175]

[175] For more on elsewhere as a mode of spatial discursive interweaving, see Inyang, Utitofon Ebong. "(In)Sights from Àwòrán: Yorùbá Epistemologies and the Limits of Cartesian Vision in Teju Cole's Open City." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 2, (2022) pp. 216–236. (p.217); See also Ibid, p.230.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Situated Epistemologies and the Futures of African Literary Theory

> Each phenomenon stands in relation with countless others, in the way we say of a freely floating luminous point, that it emits its rays in every direction.
>
> —Giorgio Agamben, *Signature of All Things*

In the “Translator's Introduction” to Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination* (1972/1981), Barbara Johnson makes some remarks that foreground what this dissertation has examined. “Every theory starts somewhere”, Johnson states. For her, rather than being a quest for meaning, the task of criticism is a process of outlining the implications of situated knowledges and the presuppositions that arise from them. “The critique does not ask "what does this statement mean?" but "*where is it being made from?* Johnson states (xv). Although Johnson focus is an elaboration of the contours of deconstruction as mode of reading, her view of critique as an analysis of a text’s *grounds of possibility*, or the foundation or basis upon which its meaning making practices and modes of signification are based, assume pressing literal, metaphoric and symbolic dimensions within the discourse of place central to the purview of spatial literary criticism.

Pushing against the trend of criticism in African studies that privileges Western-centered theories of place and spatiality as the bases for analyzing spatiality in African contexts, this dissertation has questioned what it would mean to take seriously Afro-centric

understandings of place as the basis for literary theory. It has demonstrated the imperative that spatial literary criticism, in particular, and African literary scholarship, in general, more fully address the peculiar space/time constructs represented in African literature.

I have suggested visuospatiality as a frame of reading that spotlights the relationship between situated knowledges and our understanding of literary spatiality in the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Teju Cole and Chimamanda Adichie. Because visuospatiality as critical concept marks the inseparability of spatial and visual signifiers as co-constitutive elements of literary representation, attention to this critical intersection between visual culture studies and spatial criticism, I suggest, is crucial for understanding the fields of perceptible spatial reality that African texts establish through literary mediums of representation. Not only is this discursive confluence capable of more fully accounting for the embodied, relational visuo-spatial imaginary that undergirds the depiction of place in the works of these authors, but it also provides an analytic that looks beyond Eurocentric spatial models and theories of space to address spatial imaginaries from which African literatures derives their form and discursive tangents.

My contention in this work is that questions of situatedness are inextricable from the impulse, and indeed the capacity to write the self into legibility, even providing the conceptual hinges upon which to do so, in whatever forms that such legibility may take. Legibility here foregrounds the talking place, (the place from which subject positions are inscribed) in the sense that questions of who speaks (Subject), what is spoken about

(subject), when the speaking is happens (temporality) how the speaking happens (form) and why (thematic considerations) are all implicated in *the question of where* as discursive indices essential to framing the context. Such exigencies elevate the question of space within representation to a central, if not the central one, as it determines not only the formal elements that are called forth in writing but also holds clues as to why they matter and what larger issues of social relevance they express.

Consequently, my analysis of the interactions between spatiality, visuality and narrative form in *Like a Mask Dancing: Visuospatial Geographies in Nigerian and Afro Diasporic Literature* has traced how figure of the mask as signifier and literary referent crystalizes a situated, visuospatial mode of discourse in *Things Fall Apart, The Interpreters, Open City* and *The Thing Around Your Neck.* In following how this ubiquitous figure in African literature – a living, micro-cultural system in motion – through a critical arc that spans from Nigerian to Afro-diasporic texts, this dissertation has focused attention on how the mask institutes spatial thinking, temporal relations and formal strategies as a method of inquiry. It has spotlighted how evocations of the mask figure in texts gestures towards a densely packed matrix of relationships within which spatiality and visuality collide, marking the relationality of spatial perception in ways that tie together ontological, ritual, sacred, metaphysical, social, physical and representational spaces. The mask as an instance of visuospatial practice thus enables us to analyze literary spatiality through a spatial cataloging system insistent on shifting subjective positions and the rejection of

linear, fixed, unitary position and its evocations as textual figure allows us to address questions of spatial location through indigenous African aesthetics and thought.

As my analysis of *Things Fall Apart, The Interpreters, Open City* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* has demonstrated, this figure of discourse cues us into epistemological and ontological movements operative through its use as trope and dominant narrative focal point. What becomes apparent on a formal level of textual analysis is that the mask operates variously as a cultural ensemble, a ritual object, a metaphor, a system of thought and a category of analysis attentive to contingencies of changing landscapes and subjectivities and invested in improvising within existing patterns of discourse. For Achebe, Soyinka, Cole, Adichie and a wide range of West Anglophone African and Afro-Diasporic writers, the implications a kinetically driven literary imaginary that crystalizes in the mask allows these writers to simultaneously subvert European assumptions of spatial and cultural hegemony in their project of writing Africa beyond the Western visual matrix as well as incorporate and restage elements of oral indigenous knowledge across different geographies.

Building on these ideas, this dissertation suggests *critical mask poetics* as a term that references how the mask idiom is inscribed as a figure of discourse both in texts that explicitly reference this cultural ensemble and others that deploy as a similar epistemic format to suggest the idea of dance and iterative movement as analogous to spatial exploration. What *Things Fall Apart, The Interpreters, Open City* and *The Thing Around*

Your Neck articulate are specific tenets that gesture towards the operations of the mask as literary paradigm. As my reading of these suggest, these tenets come into sharp focus as dimensions of critical mask poetics in its aesthetic, performative, narratological, discursive or figural levels of articulation. First is an emphasis on a relational aesthetics of movement that construct places and subjectivity *in* motion and *via* motion; second, a dynamic space-time continuum that features elastic, embedded spatial scales and centers more-than-human entities in texts; third, emphasis on embodied modes of thought, intersubjective relations and the enactment of micro histories; fourth, attention to fusion, fragmentation and pluralism-in-unity as facets of a constellational perspective and consciousness.

When this paradigm is applied to the discourse of spatiality, it points to a different spatial consciousness and sense of emplacement in the world that emphasize poly-spatiality, multi-perspectivity and layered time. As a spatial imaginary invested in sabotaging universalist ideologies that categorize different localities along a hegemonic temporal and spatial scale and continuum that moves from Western center to non-western margin, critical mask poetics draws attention to a literary problematic, one that intersects ideas of movement, iterativity, spatial traversal, subversion, invention and improvisation, call-and-response, perspectival change and inter-action.

In paying careful attention to the embodied and spatialized performance practices that coalesce around the dancing mask, this dissertation has spotlighted imaginative practices

of worlding resistant to paradoxical logic of indigenous opacity and transparency that underpins colonial ideologies built on the laceration of knowledge from place. Moving from aesthetic index to discoursal posture and hermeneutic practice, my discussion of this paradigm advanced through six difference valances of meaning within which the mask as signifier operates in the selected literary texts, as: (1) as an ontological index; (2) as a normative frame; (3) as an aesthetic referent; (4) as a temporal filter; (5) as a spatial analytic and (6) as a representational strategy. These nuances of meaning are in no way conclusive, but they are suggestive as dimensions of *critical mask poetics.* As my analysis of Achebe, Soyinka, Cole and Adichie's novels show, these valences of meaning intersect within an overarching fulcrum of iterative movement from which *Things Fall Apart, The Interpreters, Open City* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* derive their formal and thematic force.

My analysis is, in effect, iterations of *critical mask poetics* that illuminate how these texts stage African visuospatial ecologies of meaning across varied textual contexts. Reading *Things Fall Apart* through the mask as a dominant visuospatial focal point in Chapter Two, we see Achebe's cultural worlding project via placemaking processes that center Okonkwo in relation to spatial contexts where his trajectory as a subject in Umuofia come into view, such as the *Ilo,* the *Obi,* the Farm, the Cave of Agbala and the Evil Forest. These vantage points, in turn, frame Achebe's task of cultural critique, reassessment, and reintegration while also staging the dialectics of change and continuity central to Igbo aesthetic thought.

A critical mask reading of *The Interpreters* in Chapter Three showcases Soyinka's weaving together of a shadow of unities from the debris of postcolonial flux. Mask poetics in this instance alerts us to how a text de/fragments or collages together an epistemic frame of interpretation that is splintered and cracked, still capable of expressing a people's chaotic, evolving and tumultuous place in the world in the wake of postcolonial displacements. Applied to the restless perambulations of Julius, aesthete-narrator and cosmopolitan man-of-the-world in *Open City,* the mask as visuospatial focal point in Chapter Four spotlights the conflict between two optical fields within which the protagonist's subjectivity is refracted the novel*:* the autonomous, distanced and all-knowing Cartesian Subject invested in the objectification of all within its gaze and the intersubjective self that is constituted through its embeddedness in a social network. In my analysis of *Open City*, I deploy *Àwòrán,* a Yorùbá visual episteme which considers looking as a dynamic, multifocal process that co-defines both the viewed and the viewer, as a conceptual register through which critical mask poetics is refracted in the novel. Attention to these contesting visual paradigms provide interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Cole's and demonstrates how visual epistemologies from African cultures might contour Afro-diasporic texts.

Lastly, critical mask poetics points us to protocols of representation rooted in African knowledge systems that Adichie inserts into her writing. As we follow the worlding process that Adichie sets in motion by deploying the mask as index of subversion, figure

of narration, and as a discursive thread in *The Thing Around Your Neck* in Chapter Five, we encounter not only a critique of the objectifying visual lens that sees the non-Western woman Other as object but also the operation of the mask as a valence of resistance within which a call and response invitation to seeing differently happens.

My concern in this dissertation has been to show how this paradigm is deployed by writers to conceptualize a sense of self, place and identity across the generational boundaries often used in categorizing African writing. Although the textual examples here analyzed have been drawn from the works of authors of Nigerian origin, the process of meaning making that critical mask poetics suggests would hold true when applied to discursive paradigms and literary tropes deployed by writers from other literary traditions of Africa due to shared colonial histories that have produced similar traditions of counter-narrative writing, similarities in oral structures of thought, aesthetics and ontological worldviews and well as a range of intertextual conversations occurring in literatures of the continent. Appiah makes this point most succinctly when he explains that:

> This particular constellation of problems and projects is not often found outside Africa: a recent colonial history, a multiplicity of diverse subnational indigenous traditions, a foreign language whose metropolitan culture has traditionally defined the "natives" by their race as inferior, a literary culture still very much in the making. It is because they share this problematic that it makes sense to speak of a Nigerian writer as an African writer. (*In My Father's House* 76-77)

As such, it is plausible to argue that the visuospatial worlding practices that this dissertation has identified in the works of Achebe, Soyinka, Cole and Adichie's writing are representative of an itinerary of ideas that can further be studied in the writing of other Nigerian writers in particular and African literature and Afro-diasporic writing in general.

For example, mask poetics can be utilized as a critical frame for reading poetry by writers of the Global Black Anglophone, such as Christopher Okigbo, Ben Okri, Birago Diop and NourbeSe Philip, who, in their varied texts center performativity as a discursive mode that hinges on multiple, iterative stagings of ideas and subjectivity. This mode of reading would be similarly useful for critiquing drama texts such as Ama Ata Aido's *Anowa,* Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Didan Kimathi,* Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and even the latter's latest intertextual iteration, the Nigerian movie *Elesin Oba* (2022). In all these texts, the critical mask poetics would spotlight a contestatory spatial logics through which contrapuntal, unruly and generative modes of knowing and conceptions of being emerge. It would also bring to the fore how these texts suggest wedge points for unsettling the epistemic hegemony through which coloniality and its structures of discourse operate.

In these textual examples, and others, critical mask poetics also alerts us to articulations of Ubuntu, a relational principle that has come to be identifiable as an African philosophy

of being. Although Ubuntu as social practice and philosophical orientation has been widely studied by scholars, little attention has been paid to how this central mode of social relationality gets translated into textual form in the varied contexts of African literature. But if the central enunciation of *Ubuntu,* which insists that personhood depends on a meaningful relationship with others, is a trans-continental philosophy, what corresponding forms of aesthetic practice would such a consciousness evoke in literature? In other words, to what extent can we identify literary articulations of the complex relationships between personhood and aesthetics practices that that Ubuntu signifies? This dissertation suggests that attention to critical mask poetics as an important visuospatial practice can enable just such transcontinental readings of African literature.

It is important to note, however, that the mask is merely one of a myriad of visuospatial referents that bring their affordances as discursive instruments into the project of African literary writing.[176] In a bid to mark the visuospatial dimensions of continuity, change and transformation in African spaces and lifeworlds, African writers often draw on quotidian material practice from traditional cultures to establish thresholds of meaning between traditional African aesthetic conventions and the modes of discourse and representation inherited from European thought. Taken together, such representative idioms crystalize cultural paradigms, aesthetic philosophies, epistemic positions and ways of being in the world central to African thought. One important example is the Igbo *Mbari* aesthetic

[176] Here I follow Caroline Levine who in her examination of literary form, burrows the concept of affordances from design theory to reference "the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" in her book *Forms: Wholes, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network.*

practice, which has been described as visualizing "a dialogue between a conservative adherence to tradition and a series of breaks with that tradition" ("'Mbari' and the Igbo Concept of Art" 196)[177]. Other examples include the Igbo *Ikenga*, the Yorùbá Divining Chain and *Opon Ifa* divination tray; the Ibibio *Nsibidi* script system and *Akpin* or yellow palm frond; the Gikuyu Kinya or Calabash, etc.[178]. Each of these representational symbols and their related network of epistemic idioms generate what Ruth Finnegan describes as "a multiplex spectrum of overlapping and intermingling modes and media, human usages, temporal moments, and spatial incarnations" ("The How of Literature" 179).

The visual and spatial dimensions that this cornucopia of modes brings into written literature allows for a dialogic exchange between philosophy, literature, dance, visual images, and material artifacts all culled into a play of meaning. These material forms,

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[177] Mbari is an Igbo art form which involves the molding of artistically forged figures such as the Earth Goddess. several other deities and idealities in the Igbo pantheon as well as humans and inanimate objects. all in kneaded special clay. Mbari also is an art/act of sacrifice which embodies both the functional and aesthetic dimensions of African art. This dual junction of the Igbo art derives from the fact that the Igbo traditional artists usually abandon their carefully-designed pieces to the ravages of the elements. and start remolding from scratch in a subsequent season. (See Anyokwu, Christopher. 'Mbari' and the Igbo Concept of Art in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Lagos Review of English Studies, (2019) Vol. 16, No 3 (2008)

[178] For example, Gĩtahi Gĩtĩtĩ demonstrates the significance of the Gikuyu Kinya or Calabash as paradigmatic referent evocative of discursive strategies that accommodate diverse interpretations and points of view in both in Gikuyu culture and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writing. He indicates that there an important parallel to be drawn between the gourd used as seed store and the gĩcaandi gourd as an emblem of people's cultural "wisdom.". The incorporation of the Kinya into texts constitutes a signifying gesture that demonstrates the literary encoding of the requisite strategies for the continuance of gĩcaandi as cultural artistic form. (See: Gĩtahi Gĩtĩtĩ. "Recuperating a 'Disappearing' Art Form: resonances of "Gĩcandĩ" in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Devil on the cross." In TheWorld of *Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o* Ed. Charles Cantalupo. Trenton: Africa World Press: 1995. 109–27.)

which often structure aesthetic experience when they move from the social world into literature, collectively constitute African writers' epistemological subtext. They embody an important principle which Caroline Levine identifies with regards to forms:

> Precisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns are iterable-portable. They can be picked up and moved to new contexts… While its meanings and values may change, the pattern or shape itself can remain surprisingly stable across contexts. …as they move, forms bring their … affordances with them, …no matter how different their historical and cultural circumstances. (*Forms: Wholes, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* 7)

The focus of this dissertation has been to track the movement of one of such central aesthetic forms – the mask – in order to demonstrate how its discussive affordances are restaged across varied literary contexts. This dissertation then suggests generative dimensions of further research where similar aesthetic forms can be examined as the basis for African the critique and theorizing of African literature in all their manifold dimensions. As cultural mutable idioms imbued with the capacity to integrate with and communicatee aspects of experience even when relocated from their original sites of composition, they are intrinsic to a referential system of meaning restaged in varied texts and contexts by African writers. Consequently, attention to the discursive paradigms they embody is essential to theorizing African literature.

And so it is that this critical dance comes to a pause. After an itinerary that begins in the scenes of my childhood in South Eastern Nigeria, gathers momentum in the fictional world of Umuofia, continues into contemporary Lagos and Ibadan, detours to the cosmopolitan localities of New York with a brief stop at Brussels and eventually arrives at a lovely suburb near Philadelphia, this pause is not a conclusion but a tentative halt necessary to survey the journey so far and plot still more routes along which to travel with and through the mask. But the tour through these multiple locations and intersecting forms of situatedness suggests theoretical patterns of relationship and ways of organizing the world privileged within African cultures and capable of amplifying visual and performance studies, spatial literary studies and African literary scholarship. For all these fields and others, the view of the world perceived as a dancing mask, which insists that we remain invested in dynamic permutations of knowing, visually, representationally, normatively and discursively comes to the fore. This critical perspective is invaluable to our collective understanding, both of literary spatiality and of what it means to be human in an ever-changing world.

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